

THE UNHOLY  
TRINITY  
BOOK SEVEN



# MILLA

“THE GODFATHER”

ADRIANA BRINNE

MIA

THE GODFATHER

ADRIANA BRINNE



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# DEDICATION



*For the ones still waiting for their one day in  
the sun.*



# BLURB



## MILA

From a very young age, I knew I was different from everyone else, and for a long time, I was made to believe that being different was something to be ashamed of.

The way I acted and talked got me in trouble most days, but I could do nothing about it. I learned to accept that I was wired this way.

Until him.

Until the boss of one of the oldest and most powerful underground crime organizations in America showed me there's beauty in my rarity.

Rian O'Sullivan.

Some call him Godfather.

The underground king without a crown.

My family's enemy.

Now?

My fiancé.

## RIAGAN

I always knew that one day I would be king. It was just a matter of time.

I lived, breathed, and bled for the title.

The boss of Philadelphia.

It was all I cared about, second to my all-consuming need to make the three crime families of Detroit pay for their sins against my blood.

Revenge burned ferociously in my veins.

Until her.

Until the youngest Parisi princess.

A priceless jewel hidden away in an ivory tower treated as if she were something to be embarrassed of.

The forgotten Parisi, some called her.

To me, she is the star that shines even when hidden in the dark.

The one I never saw coming.

The one I did not ask for.

My future wife.

# PLAYLIST



Listen to the full display on [Spotify](#)  
“That Part” – Lauren Spencer Smith  
“Save This Dance For Me” – Alexander Nate  
“Wildest Dreams” – Taylor’s Version  
“Hero” – Faouzia  
“A Thousand Years” – James Arthur  
“Favorite Song” – Toosii, Khalid  
“Piece by Piece” – Kelly Clarkson  
“Right Person Right Time” – Rachel Grae  
“Be the One” – Bree Runway, Khalid  
“Who We Love” – Sam Smith, Ed Sheeran  
“Rare” – Selena Gomez  
“Darkest Hour” – Astrid S, Keisya Levronka  
“All Of The Girls You Loved Before” – Taylor Swift  
“You Are The Reason” – Duet Version - Callum Scott

# AUTHOR'S NOTE



**M**ila “The Godfather” (Unholy Trinity, #7) is the story of Mila Parisi and Riagan O’Sullivan. The story contains sensitive topics that might be triggering for some. Please keep this in mind before starting the book. I hope you enjoy Mila and Riagan’s story. It is as sweet as their love.

Please keep in mind: This is a work of fiction and I took some creative liberties with the story. Mila’s character was based on someone real dear to me. A beautiful soul who never gives up and keeps his head up even when the world tries to keep him down. To me he is perfect, just like Mila is nothing short of extraordinary to Riagan.

**Trigger warning:** Check for trigger warnings here: [Triggers](#)

# WHAT IS THE UNHOLY TRINITY?



The Unholy Trinity is the most notorious crime organization in the United States of America. It was once run by three crime families who joined forces after a war over Detroit City. They each rule over their own family but only one has full control of the entire organization. Currently, the organization is fair game since the Volpe family was extinguished and the Holy Trinity was taken over by the two remaining families and the Irish (O'Sullivan Family) Now, the Nicolasi and Parisi families hold a small percentage of the city while the other half is fair game to the Irish and Russians.

The Holy Trinity is not pure anymore.

It is Unholy.

The Unholy Trinity is composed of the Nicolasi, Parisi and from now on the O'Sullivan family. The Nicolasi family deals in the gun trade, the O'Sullivan family deals in the drug trade, and the Parisi handles the more legitimate side of the organization including the casinos and strip clubs.

For years, the three most ruthless crime families of Detroit City ruled together in peace. The Capo fell from grace and now the others lead by greed and sin.

# WHO IS WHO IN THE UNHOLY TRINITY?



## **NICOLASI FAMILY**

Andrea Valentina Nicolasi  
Lorenzo Antonnio Nicolasi (Capo of the Unholy Trinity)  
Valentino Alexander Nicolasi

## **VOLPE FAMILY** (No longer part of the Holy Trinity)

Lucan Tomas Volpe (Ex Volpe Boss)  
Cara Mia Volpe

## **PARISI FAMILY**

Arianna Luna Parisi  
Kadra Sofia Parisi  
Mila Areya Parisi

## **OUTSIDERS**

Rian O'Sullivan  
Sebastian Kenton

# THE IRISH-AMERICAN MAFIA

# THE O'SULLIVAN GANG



**CAPTAIN - GODFATHER**  
RIAGAN O'SULLIVAN

**CLAN CHIEF – UNDERBOSS**  
CIANNE KELLY

**WARLORD – ENFORCER**  
CALLAM BYRNE

**REAPER - HITMAN**  
BAIN DALY

**HACKERS**  
MAEVE TOBIN  
CONOR TOBIN



“I could make you happy; make your dreams come true. Nothing that I wouldn’t do. Go to the ends of the earth for you to make you feel my love.”

— BOB DYLAN

# WHEN RIAN MET MILA

## RIAGAN

### *Past*

**T**he fucking piece of shit.

Out of all the things this bastard could've ordered me to do he chose babysitting a bunch of fucking spoiled brats on this stupid fucking night.

*Volpe.*

*Nicolasi.*

*Parisi.*

The children of the three crime families of Detroit and, as of lately, the banes of my fucking existence. The Volpe heir is a cocky little asshole. The psycho twins are just that, fucking psychos. And spoiled, too. And Satan's spawns... the Parisi princesses. Two of them, to be precise. Arianna and Kadra. Those are the worst.

*Rude-as-fuck, and their ugly-ass attitude just throw me off.*

*Sure, they're beautiful, but their mouths are annoying as fuck. Both girls have chips on their shoulders, and who would blame them really with that useless cunt they have for a father.*

*Every last one of them are worthless.*

*They think of themselves as Gods among mortals.*

*Untouchable, so the fact that I, the future leader of the O'Sullivan, managed to infiltrate their families gives me great satisfaction.*

*I'm among them, and soon I'll—*

*Suddenly, I'm thrown back when someone smacks me hard on the back of*

the head.

*Motherfucker.*

*I fight off the urge to pull out my knife and slit the fucker's goddamn throat.*

*"Are you following orders, dog?" I crack my knuckles as I watch Lorenzo Nicolasi pass me by with an evil glint in his eyes and a mocking smile. That fucking idiot is first on my shit list. His brother is weird as fuck and quiet too, but at least he has the good sense to stay out of my way. Can't say the same about his moronic brother, Lorenzo.*

*The punk thinks he's tough shit.*

*God's gift to man.*

*He's more like the plague.*

*Contrary to his belief, he is not a God, nor is he a king.*

*One day soon, I will be more than fucking happy to show him how very wrong he is.*

*I say nothing and stare. The annoying kid laughs, flips me off, and makes his way inside the Nicolasi mansion.*

*I stay rooted in place as the guests begin to arrive.*

*Fuck, this night.*

*Standing here all night as children party and fuck around.*

*How fucking lovely.*

*I could be balls deep inside Cienna, fucking her into the early hours of the morning, but no... I'm stuck doing this shit.*

*An hour passes before I have had enough, and I leave my spot at the back entrance of the mansion and walk until I'm all the way to the gardens. It's All Hollows Eve. There's a full moon tonight and the weather is chilly in Detroit.*

*I grab a cigarette from my back pocket and light it before blowing a smoke ring up at the sky. "Those will kill you, you know." A small, childlike voice says from the other side of the garden. Squinting in the dark, I try to make up who the fuck interrupted my moment of peace and quiet. None of the guests are allowed back here. That's why I chose this place out of the entire mansion, to be alone and not deal with self-entitled brats. Having to deal with the dipshits not only grates on my nerves, but it's getting harder and harder to pretend I am beneath them all. "Smoking can boost the risk for at least thirteen types of cancers. The earlier you quit, the better. Did you know that, sir?" The melodic voice sounds closer now.*

*And sir?*

*So polite.*

*Leaving my spot near the gazebo, I walk toward where the soft voice is coming from.*

*That's when I hear it.*

*The sound of humming.*

*As if my feet have a mind of their own, I follow the humming, and there she is.*

*An angel amongst demons on this unholy night.*

*The girl is hidden by the shadows of the night, but the colorful lights decorating the gazebo cast a low glow and allow me to see her profile better. The first thing I notice is that she is small and thin. Long and curly hair—resembling golden silk, runs down her back, almost reaching the back of her thighs.*

*I find myself transfixed, staring at her because something about the girl feels familiar.*

*The small girl is dressed as a blue butterfly, from what I can tell. Silver and blue wings decorate her back, and tiny butterflies form a crown at the top of her head.*

*Butterflies.*

*How lovely.*

*The strange girl almost looks unreal. Like some of those stunning and ethereal creatures you see in movies or read about in fantasy books, but not in real life. Not in my world. Maybe I'm drunk, and I've made her up. "Who the fuck are you?" I ask, feeling like shit when I notice her tremble. I scared her.*

*Shit.*

*"You're being rude," she whispers softly. "You should always say thank you when someone shares lifesaving facts with you. Also, it's just the two of us. You don't need to shout." There's no attitude in her tone which surprises me.*

*I've gotten so used to the spoiled little shits of the three families and the assholes they surround themselves with that I forgot polite people still exist, and this is the first time I've come across one that doesn't make me want to pull the trigger.*

*This is new.*

*I am not used to dealing with fragile girls who look like her.*

*Innocent.*

*Sweet.*

*After staring at the girl for a long moment, I speak up. I should turn and leave this kid the fuck alone, but I don't. I can't turn away. It's those damn butterflies. "Something will kill me eventually, won't it?" I blow smoke rings her way, hoping she turns away and leaves since I can't find it in me to do so. I'm acting like an asshole, I know, but something about this girl has me on edge. It could be that she looks so small and defenseless inside this den of vipers.*

*Where did she come from? I wonder.*

*"Yes, that is true." For a moment, I think she decided to leave by the silence that follows but then she opens her mouth again and surprises the fuck out of me. "You can die at any given moment. For example, did you know the odds of dying in a car crash are one in one hundred? Or that it is unlikely that you could die in your sleep unless you suffer from heart problems or sleep apnea?"*

*This girl...*

*Something I haven't done in a while happens. I smile. "Huh."*

*"Huh?" From the tone of her voice, I can tell she's displeased with my answer. "I am sorry. I don't understand what that means."*

*The way she speaks.*

*She sounds young, but something about her feels timeless.*

*"Who are—" Before I am able to finish my question and find out the name of this fascinating creature, an annoying and cold voice interrupts me from doing so. "Mila!"*

*Oh, I know that voice.*

*That god-awful infuriating voice.*

*It belongs to Arianna Parisi.*

*Taking a long drag of my cig, I stand back and watch as the scene before me unfolds.*

*"I'm here." The young girl whispers as she moves my way, and I'm able to see her clearer now as she's able to see me.*

*"I told you to stay close." The other girl, Arianna, says darkly while her eyes narrow, shooting daggers my way.*

*"I told you I was bored." The girl with the facts shrugs and keeps walking to where I'm standing, still enjoying my smoke while trying to make sense of this. The Parisi brat said the young girl's name is Mila.*

*Mila...*

*What a pretty name.*

*And who is the polite kid to that god-awful teen brat?*

*“Stay away from my sister.” The frosty voice sounds closer now, coming from my left. I didn’t even notice how close to me she had gotten.*

*She can fuck off.*

*I don’t take orders from her.*

*The only one that gets away with that shit is the Nicolasi Don, and the only reason I obey is for a greater purpose.*

*Without looking at the sweet kid on my right, I turn to her sister.*

*Smiling, I blow smoke rings toward Arianna Parisi, taunting her and making her cough.*

*I have nothing to say to her. I also have no business getting caught in the middle of whatever this is.*

*Fucking kids.*

*I give her my back and silently walk back to my spot to continue my watch duty until midnight.*

*I think of the girl all the way back to the main entrance.*

*The one with the sweet and melodic voice.*

*Blonde hair, butterfly crown, and useless facts.*

*Mila.*

*As it turns out, the youngest Parisi sister.*

*The one I didn’t even know existed.*

*There are three Parisi sisters, not two like I first believed.*

*The youngest one is being kept a secret, and I wonder why?*

*What could possibly make a parent hide the existence of his child?*

*Now I know one of the Parisi secrets and the girl?*

*She has caught my attention, and that’s a very dangerous thing.*

*It’s fucking with my head how a small part of me, and I mean a really fucking small part, felt something towards the kid just by having been in her presence for a few minutes. Something that feels a whole lot like protectiveness.*

*So many questions run through my head.*

*Why haven’t I ever seen her with her sisters before or with her parents whenever they visit the Nicolasi family? Why is the kid hidden away like a dirty secret?*

*She’s young. That was clear.*

*Her mind and soul might be a thousand years old by the way she speaks*

*and carries herself, but she's still a kid, and because of that, I shove the memory of her to the back of my mind. Locked. Forgotten by the following morning.*

*Or so I thought.*

*Life is never that simple.*

*At least not mine.*



## *Present*

*RING, ring, ring.*

The sound of my phone blowing up pulls me away from the memory of her and brings me back to the present.

Fuck.

*What is it now?*

I answer the call after checking the area code.

“I need something from you, *soyuznik*.”

The Russians.

Nothing good happens when the Soloniks call.

“What is it now?” I listen to what the bastard has to say out of courtesy to the bonds between us, but I’m tempted to tell him to fuck off. But then he mentions her name, and that’s when everything changes. “Will you be able to do it, or should I contact someone else?”

“I’ll do it.” I bark.

“You seem very eager to take this one when you’ve been rejecting my offers left and right. What is it about this one job that made you accept it?” The dark and sinister voice would scare any man. It’s like the asshole can see through your soul without being in your presence. I’m afraid of no man, and this twisted son of a bitch knows it, yet he tries to push my buttons every time he calls.

This time is different, though.

This is no ordinary job.

“I’ll be in contact,” I say nothing else and hang up the phone.

*Fuck, kid. What have you gotten yourself into?*

Knowing things are about to change, I make a choice, knowing there’s no



going back from it.

Because she put herself on the line of fire. She put herself on the path of every motherfucker who wishes to see Detroit fall and erase the Parisi name from existence.

Yeah, there is no going back because she's mine.

Since the moment I first laid eyes on her, she stole a part of me for herself, and now that she's all grown up, there's no need for me to keep her safe from the shadows.

The time is now to claim what's mine, and no one fucks with what's mine and gets to walk away with their lives.

No one.

# PROLOGUE

## RIAGAN

*“When you close your eyes, do you dream of me?” - R*

I knock on the black double door once, and a second later, that two-face cunt, Scotty Flynn, answers with a stupid-as-fuck grin on his face. Ignoring him, I step inside Da’s home office and take a seat right in front of him. Cathan O’Sullivan, my father, and ex-boss of the O’Sullivan clan, leans back in his chair with a cig between his teeth as he grins at me. “It’s time, *a sheòid*.” He pulls a folded photo out of the drawer and throws it onto his desk.

Tilting my head, I reach down and unfold the photo of a bland-looking woman and then lay it back down without giving it another thought. “No.”

My old man’s eyes narrow. “No?”

Leaning forward, I snatch the cig from his mouth and put it out on the woman’s photo. “You heard me.” I give my father a dull look. The fuck is he thinking suggesting this shit?

Da sighs, grabs the photo, and throws it in the trash. My father hates messes just as much as I hate being told what to do. A fact he knows well. “The last thing I want is to tell you how to live your life. My priority has always been and will always be your happiness and well-being, even in the life you grew up in. That is all I wish for you, son.”

I don’t doubt it.

Not for a second.

Da has always guided me, but never once has he dictated my life. “Why

now, then? There is no fucking way I'll marry that viper."

Cathan averts his gaze as his smile falters. He won't look at me. Instead, he focuses on his desk. That is how I know something is off. My father has never cowered to anyone. Even in his darkest moment, he holds his head high and looks you in the eye, unafraid, but this is not the case now. "What's wrong?" I bark out.

There's a moment of silence before Da looks up at me and says, "I'm sick, son."

I feel my pulse rise and my knees wobble for the first time in my goddamn life. Leaning forward in the seat, in front of him, I feel like a wee boy again. You see... Cathan O'Sullivan has always been and will always be the most important person in my life. The man who made me. My dark hero.

Not only my father but my friend.

Once, I believed nothing could bring him down.

Fuck, did I witness a lot of people try.

Bullets and bombs included.

Nothing ever did.

He was untouchable.

Fuck.

"How sick?" My voice comes out hoarse. Looking into identical eyes to my own, I try again when he doesn't answer. "How fucking sick, Da?"

My father's mouth turns into a grim line. "Really fucking sick, kid. I'll fight it. I won't ever stop fighting for forever with you, little king, but just in case something was—"

Rising from my seat, I hover over my father's desk. "Nothing is going to happen. You're Cathan O'Sullivan."

Nodding, my father leans back on his chair. "I am, but kid, I can't be all you have. I need you to find someone who will take care of you when I—"

No.

This shit ain't happening.

He ain't leaving me.

Not him, too.

He'll be alright, I am sure of it, but if me finding a wife will make him worry less, then fuck it.

"I am not settling down with that soul-sucking demon," I told him.

"Do you have a better choice than the only female boss in history, son?" My father smiles, all traces of sadness gone for a little while at least. "If you

do, then please, I'm all ears."

Nodding, I stand tall. "I do."

"Who?"

"The youngest Parisi," I say out loud. I've kept the girl's existence to myself for years, but it's time.

"Gabriele Parisi had two children, Riagan."

Taking the cig I had snuck on top of my ear, I light it with my father's zippo, take a quick drag, and expel the smoke upwards. "I've met her. She's real."

Da's mouth twigs up into a smile. "I think it's time I meet her then."

"Soon." I turn and head for the door, but before I exit the room, I throw one last thing over my shoulder. "And quit fucking smoking, and take better care of yourself from now on, yeah?"

My father laughs. "Yeah, kid, yeah."

Shutting the office's door behind me, I grab my phone from the back pocket, unlock it, and type a quick text to Daly. The soldier who is tasked with precious cargo.

Me: All good?

Bain: All good.

That's all I need.

Pocketing my phone, I move.

I did not lie.

I never lied to my father before, and I'm not about to start now.

I did meet the woman I was going to marry, although I thought I had a little more time to ease her into the idea of me.

Of us.

This was not how it was supposed to go down but fuck it.

Divine timing, my mother used to say.

Divine timing, indeed.

I just wish it didn't take my father being sick for me to go after what I always wanted.

What I crave most in this life.

Her.

Now all I need is for all the puzzle pieces to fall into place, but first... I'll need a little help.

# PART ONE

# STOLEN PRINCESS



*"Did you know that the word for butterfly in formal Greek is psyche? No? Well, now you do..." - M*

# MOB BOSS & ORIGINAL GANGSTER



## RIAGAN - PAST



*“Fun fact: Did you know that you could walk from Russia to Alaska?” - M*

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*“You think to lead this family while getting in bed with Detroit?” Scotty Flynn cries from far down the table. He is so far removed from the main branch of the O’Sullivan family tree that he barely warrants a place here, yet Da allows it. When I return his tantrum with silence, he scoffs. “Of course, you would. Your father fell for a...” The fucker has the good sense to stop before he goes there, but it’s too late now.*

*“Don’t stop now,” I tell the whiny old bitch. There’s no need to raise my voice. Da taught me from a very young age that any emotion indicates weakness in this business. I am not a weak man. “What were you going to say, Scotty?” I stand then and begin to walk around the table toward his side. “Go on. Say it...” I dare the motherfucker.*

*Men like Scotty are weak.*

*They whisper shit instead of saying what they fucking mean.*

*Scotty bites his tongue and narrows his eyes when I approach him.*

*I point to Cianne Kelly, a loyal member of the clan, one of my family’s oldest allies for at least two generations. His Da served once as the clan chief before he was gunned down on a job gone wrong. Now his son, Kelly, has the*

honor of being this family's second-in-command.

*"What was he going to say, Kelly?"*

*"Old cunt was about to trash talk your Mum, cap. Cut out his tongue."*  
Kelly looks giddy while leaning back in his seat, playing with his zippo. You wouldn't know the asshole was as cruel as criminals come with his pretty-boy appearance and charming persona.

*Grown men fear him, and bitches go crazy for Kelly.*

*I don't ask much of my men, but one thing I do demand is fucking respect.  
Their loyalty.*

*Two things Scotty has been lacking lately.*

*Perhaps, the fuck is getting too old and reckless.*

The room grows silent when I turn back to Scotty, placing my gun on the table facing him. *"Does anyone have a problem with me doing business with Detroit?"* I ask while looking all of them in the eye. *"Speak up now."*

*They won't. I look left and wait for the men sitting on this side of the table to say shit but as expected, they do not. Then I turn right and do the same. No one utters a word to defy me.*

*I might be young.*

*Much younger than them, but I am something most of them will never be.*

*My father's son.*

*My grandfather's greatest pride.*

*Cathan and Tommy O'Sullivan are the toughest motherfuckers this organization has ever seen. My father was made at the tender age of fourteen, and my grandfather stole the crown from the original gangster of the Irish clan when he was just shy of seventeen.*

*Two thugs with charming smiles and a thirst for chaos.*

*Trigger-friendly fuckers.*

*I am the very best and worst of them, and these men know it.*

*However, it seems as if Scotty doesn't agree.*

*I must give it to the fucker, he speaks up even if it guarantees him a one-way ticket to hell, but at least he has more balls than most men at this table.*

*Scotty and every man who came before him from his bloodline have always been shady as fuck since they used to have full control of the Irish clan until my grandfather stole it from under them.*

*I guess the wound still stings for dear old Scotty.*

*"He is joking, kid." Kyan Daly, one of the eldest members of the family, utters from his spot on the far right of the table.*

*Smiling towards Scotty, I ask. "Is that so? Were you joking, Scotty?"*

*Taking a cig from behind my ear, I place it in my mouth and light it before taking a long drag and expelling the smoke towards the old fuck. I bite a smile when Scotty's knuckles turn white, and his eyes flash with hatred. How my father worked alongside this snake for so long is beyond me.*

*He did teach me that we keep friends close and snakes closer.*

*Scotty offers me a pained smile and nods. "Won't happen again, kid."*

*"Captain." I correct him.*

*His eyes turn murderous, and his brows pull low. There he is. A jealous little prick. "What?"*

*Taking another drag, I smile. "Not kid." I exhale the smoke his way before I say. "Captain."*

*Silence follows.*

*You could hear a pin falling on the floor.*

*One.*

*Two.*

*"Cap—"*

*Weak old cunt.*

*Growing bored, I cut him off before he can finish. "Knife or bullet?"*

*"Ain't that nice, Scotty? Cap is letting you choose." Kelly jokes while looking giddy as fuck. "And people call you heartless." He tsks while disturbingly batting his eyelashes at me.*

*My men might be all levels of fucked up and slightly psychotic, but they're loyal. I can't say the same for this Scotty fuck.*

*"Riagan." A new voice comes from the door behind me.*

*Da.*

*Good.*

*Here's here.*

*Without turning my father's way, I focus on the matter at hand. "You have three seconds to decide, Scotty, before I decide for you, and trust me, you don't want that. I'm not feeling merciful today." I throw the cig into the ashtray in the middle of the table and pick up my gun. "One." I count.*

*Scotty stands, throws his chair back, and starts to panic. Like a sewer rat before it drowns. "You fucking—"*

*"Three." Taking my knife from behind my back pocket, I throw it at the bastard, and it hits him in the neck. Scotty stumbles while grabbing his neck, where blood is pouring out rapidly, and when his eyes meet mine, I smile and*

aim my gun at his head.

“You should’ve held your tongue, Scotty,” I tell him right before I pull the trigger.

One shot to the head, and he is dead.

The room remains silent.

This is not the first time one of our own has been taken out, and it certainly won’t be the last. Looking at the blood on the floor, I smile and then look out the window where a blue butterfly is hitting the glass.

“Clean this shit up,” I order no one in particular.

I hate being questioned by my men, and the second they start questioning your judgment is when you need to take them out before they turn on you. And it’s inevitable that they turn on you. Hungry dogs always want more.

Plus, the fucker sealed his fate when he tried to mention Mum.

I knew then he wouldn’t leave this room with his life, but I wanted to play with him a little longer..

Turning away from the men, I head towards the door. I have shit to do. As long as I have two-faced vipers in my den, she’ll never be safe.

Philadelphia is the start, and Detroit is the endgame.

Reaching Da, I stop. Cathan O’Sullivan doesn’t look a day over forty-five. The fucker could almost pass as my older brother. We look almost identical, aside from my eyes. That I got from Mum.

The same eyes as my younger brother, Lucan.

Thoughts of my mother cause a ripple of pain and anger to spread through my chest. Every time. Every fucking time.

“Good job, stoírín.” Da smiles while tapping my cheek lightly. Lovingly. Shit.

Not even tragedy has hardened my old man, not completely at least.

“Not going to ask me why I blew your friend’s brains?”

He grins. “Scotty’s always did talk too much shite.”

And that’s it.

Da never questions me.

He never judges me, either.

My father is the type that stands beside me whether I’m wrong or right.

“That he did, Da. That he did.” I clap his back and head out the door, tucking my gun back inside my holster.

I got shit to do.

# MESSAGE FROM M



Dear new friend,  
Thank you for taking the time to exchange  
messages with me. You should know that I'm  
not very good at making friends, but if you give  
me the chance, I think I can be a pretty good  
one.

- M

# GOOD GIRLS

RIAGAN



*"I'm not playing. I don't have time for games."  
- R*

S lap.  
A hit to the face.  
Crack.

A punch to my left rib.  
Motherfucker.

I hiss in pain, yet I smile when I taste copper in my mouth. Blood.

"You fight like a bitch, Cap." Byrne, the clan's warlord, grins as he successfully ducks a punch. I wait and when he comes up, I raise my leg and hit him on the head, causing him to stumble. There are no rules in my ring.

None.

I smile wider, teeth stained red as the crowd around us roars in excitement at the brutality they pay so much to participate in, even as watchers.

It never ceases to surprise me how chaos thrills even the most moral of men.

Women, too.

Shit.

Most that frequent this joint are women looking for two types of entertainment.

The fights and the fighters to fuck.

"Since you love talking shit so much, Byrne. You should eat it, too."

With that, I land a blow to his mouth that makes my strongest man fall to the bloody floor with a loud thud as the crowd around the ring screams and shouts, enjoying the fight.

Not many men have the balls to get in the ring with me.

Most, out of respect, choose not to fight their boss, and others out of the knowledge that they won't be stepping out of my ring as the same men they were when they climbed into it. The clan's enforcer is a different story altogether.

The fucker not only has a daily death wish, but he is also one of my best fighters. He is a tank. A long-blond-haired solid mass of muscle. He might not have been the wiriest of my men, but what he lacked in speed, he made up for in brute strength and thirst for blood.

Callan Byrne is one vicious fucker when fighting, that is why many come to see him fight, but I am better.

I never leave doubt about that in the ring.

There is a reason why I am the boss of the O'Sullivan clan, and it has nothing to do with blood lineage. The title of captain and Godfather goes to the most ruthless of the soldiers, and like the two bosses before me, I proved to be the savage worthy of the title.

Worthy of this city.

I prove it every day when I take a life in the name of the clan.

I am proving it now.

With my enforcer down on the ground, covered in bruises and blood. If he were any other person, I would have ended him right here, and given the crowd the show most of them come here for.

Savagery.

A death-match, but not tonight.

Not Callan.

Maybe one day, if he keeps running his mouth.

Instead, I wipe the blood off my mouth with the back of my hand and retreat with a smile on my face towards the crowd.

I am not only this city's Godfather, but they gave me another name.

The Joker.

They never expect my kind of savage brutality. Never from a man who smiles and jokes the way I do.

If they only saw the filth my soul is covered in.

The mayhem my hands have caused.



All the lives I've collected all for the sake of this city.

They only see the charming smile and good looks.

It's all for show.

What hides beneath is much darker.

More depraved.

But tonight, I don't show them that side. Instead, I climb off the ring and head towards my office, wanting— no needing a moment to myself after the day I had.

After all the blood I spilled.

Callan was not the only one.

Entering my office, I walk toward my desk and take a seat, noticing the stack of bills next to my untouched glass of Irish whiskey. I rake a hand down the scruff on my face, tapping the stack of bills together and putting them into the safe under the desk. Another day, another ten-thousand dollars' worth of fighting.

It was a good night.

Most of them were these days. If there was one thing you could count on people paying for, it was brutality and savagery. You could say I'm a piece of shit for capitalizing on the bloodthirsty fights, and you would be correct.

Business was business.

And I took care of my men.

If they wanted to put their bodies on the line in the ring to make some extra cash, why should I care? We lined both our pockets. Win or lose, we all made bank.

The fights brought in as much money as the gun trade and dirty businesses of the clan did.

Dirty business as in drugs.

My men and I have been dealing all fucking night with a shipment of guns that left for Detroit and a cargo container full of drugs that will arrive late tonight. Once my little brother Lucan stepped down as boss of the Volpe boss of Detroit, he handed me a piece of Detroit, much to the dismay of the other two remaining families of that filthy city.

The only reason why the other two families, Nicolasi and Parisi, still stand and I haven't taken them out as I should have is because a piece of my mum's heart is now married to that fuck Lorenzo Nicolasi who also happens to be Lucan's wife brother.

I'm too entangled with those fuckers.

Then there is the Parisi family.

The three women have proven to be thorns in my side.

But one?

The youngest.

That one is different.

That one consumes my thoughts in a way she shouldn't.

Ways that a man my age shouldn't allow.

A good man. A man with honor would leave the girl in the memories of the past.

But I am not a good man, and I know what I want.

Fuck logic.

Fuck age.

Goddamn it, fuck everything that isn't her.

Throwing back what's left of the whiskey, I serve myself some more. After only two hours of sleep, this won't be my last dose of alcohol for the night.

A buzzing sound comes from my desk's drawer. Taking my phone out, I unlock the screen and notice an app notification. The app I forced myself to download because she asked me to. Well, the man who she once exchanged so many letters with.

I scroll through her page more than twice a day like a fucking creep.

Today she posted a photo of a jean jacket. Hers?

It's no ordinary jacket, either. No.

Nothing about her is ordinary.

It's a piece of clothing that she customized.

She painted a wave with the sun peeking from behind and tiny little seashells around it. I smile, ignoring the pain from my split lip, when I notice the peace signs all over the design

Fuck...this girl.

*What is it about you?*

I tap on the photo, and a heart pops up, letting her know my profile likes it.

"Yo, Cap," Kelly shouts, stepping into the doorway of the office. Putting the phone back down on the desk, I glance up.

Taking a sip of my whiskey, I say. "Yeah?"

He steps inside and shuts the door. "There's something you should know."

A deep sigh escapes me. “What is it?” There’s never a peaceful night. Not for men like us.

“There’s word running around that the hit on President Kenton is linked to the Parisi family. The shooter was aiming for the girl.”

Parisi.

My body instantly becomes hyper-aware. Putting the glass down, I stare at my clan chief. “Did Kenton take care of it?”

“They’re keeping it on the low, but yes. The shooter was handled. There’s just not a face to the fucker calling the shots.”

I don’t believe in coincidences.

My brother’s sister, Cara, was threatened and almost killed by a lunatic claiming to be the Nicolasi rightful heir not long ago, and now this?

The capo of Detroit failed when he let the threat escape with his life.

The fucker is not done.

I won’t be making Nicolasi’s same mistake. If I find the fucker, he won’t escape death. “Anything else?”

“Nah, Cap. Just thought you should know.” Kelly shrugs before continuing. “I’m heading out.”

“Go ahead,” I tell him. “If you hear anything else, let me know,” I add as he turned away. “Cianne?” Rarely do I call him by his birth-given name.

My second in command looks back. “Yeah?”

“Not a word about this to anyone.” The threat is there. He knows that anything concerning the youngest Parisi stays between us.

He nods once, and with that, he disappears, turning in for the night.

Reaching for my phone again, I unlock it and call one of the few people I trust with the secret of the youngest Parisi, Maeve. The organization’s secretary by day and genius hacker by night.

Mila Parisi is a secret well kept. Only a few people know of her existence, and that is the three families of Detroit.

And now, me and my team.

This will keep her safe for now.

She was made to believe that as long as she remained in the shadows of her sisters, she’d be alright, and for a while, that worked, but now she needs more than just the shadows.

After a few seconds, the person I need answers the phone. “Morning, Riagan.” A too-chirpy voice sounds from the other end of the line.

Only three people know my birth name.

My father, the clever little sneak, Maeve, and her brother, Conor.

“Maeve.”

“What’s wrong?” She picks up my bad mood instantly.

“I need you to do something for me.” I clear my throat.

“Name it, and it’s done.” I hear movement on her end, and I know she’s moving around at her desk, ready for a challenge.

“I need you to track someone for me. I want to know where they go. Whom they talk to, and all the information on her money transactions. I want to know all their moves and put a man on her, too.”

“The name?”

“Kadra Parisi.”

“Huh.” There’s a moment of silence on her end before she speaks up again. “Detroit’s Consigliere.”

Looking down at my bloody and busted-up knuckles, I ask. “What is it?”

“Didn’t think femme fatale was your type. Although, thinking about it, perhaps someone like you needs a tough woman.”

*Maeve... God-help-her-soul has no filter.*

“Why is that?” I dare ask.

“You’re one scary dude, boss. I don’t think you would know what to do with a sweet little thing.” She says with a serious tone. Maeve speaks the truth. I wouldn’t know what to do with a soft heart. “But... some say ruthless men love the hardest,” Maeve adds.

Rubbing my temple, I already feel a headache rising. “Maeve...”

“Yes?”

“Go to bed. The lack of sleep is making you lose brain cells.” I tell her truthfully.

“Sleep is overrated, my friend. I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” She says seriously.

“With that mouth of yours, that day is not that far away.”

Maeve laughs. “I love you, too, Riagan.”

“Get the job done, Maeve.” I snap.

She scoffs. “When have I not?”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Byeeee.” She exclaims happily before I end the call.

Leaning back on the leather chair, I breathe out as the image of a sweet little thing flashes through my mind. Golden curls and a soft voice come to mind after years of the memory being locked tight in the back of my mind.

Mila Areya Parisi.

The kid with one soft-spoken word made the rage inside of me calm.

She's no longer a kid, but she is still a princess hidden away as if she's a dirty little secret.

Fury overtakes my senses as I think about the kind of life she has lived. If you can even call it that.

Even with her scum of a father gone, her sister has kept her trapped inside that prison she calls home.

Maeve's words come to mind.

*I don't think you would know what to do with a sweet little thing.*

She is right.

I've never been soft.

Never cared to be soft, either.

But for that girl, I am willing to try.

An hour and two glasses of whiskey later, after contemplating how I'm going to handle this shit with the loose cannon who's gunning for the women in the three families of Detroit. I get up, grab my empty glass of whiskey, and deposit it on the rack under the office's bar before making my rounds.

The crowd is gone.

There's no noise.

Nothing.

Just me.

This place is my pride and joy.

It's one of the places that belongs solely to me and not the clan.

My name and my father have given me so much, but this and my many businesses, legit and dirty are mine.

Mayhem had taken a lot of work, it, after all, being the basement to an old, abandoned government facility with cinderblock walls, cement floors, and a perpetually musty smell. Black walls went up, hardwood floors went down, a long dark-lit bar was brought in toward one end with a fully stocked back bar, and taps, tables, and seating areas were set up as well.

I flick off the lights, opening the heavy metal doors that lead to a staircase that goes up into the abandoned government offices or out into the parking lot.

The building is nothing to be desired but having a thriving, illegal business in the basement that gets rowdy at all hours seemed to limit my options for the space. I would figure it out eventually. The lot is empty save

for my lone, sleek blue *Bugatti Centodieci*. I beeped the locks, climbed in, and turned on the engine which comes to life with a powerful roar.

Unfocused bright blue eyes come to mind as I find myself speeding through the busy streets of my city, with a feeling of dread in my gut alerting me that something is wrong.

Something was indeed wrong, and it took me two days to find out exactly what it was.

My father always says that obsessions are dangerous addictions.

And I'm afraid I just found mine.

# MESSAGE FROM C



*Mila,  
What made you smile today? - C*

# LONELY CASTLE



MILA



*"You're a queen, Mila. Never forget it." - A*

*"A*nd the princess fell in love with the frog..." I whisper aloud to the dark, closing the book, wondering how could a pretty princess fall in love with an amphibian? That makes zero sense to me. A dog? I could see that happening. Cats, too. They're pretty darn cute, but a slimy, ugly frog? That's strange.

*But I guess I shouldn't judge.*

*Strange would be my middle name if my father had a say now.*

*Oddly, he gave me my name.*

*Mila Areya.*

*He chose it before he realized I came 'defective'.*

*His words. Not mine.*

*I have been a disappointment to him way before he was made aware of my developmental disorder. Asperger's syndrome.*

*He gave up on me the moment he was told I was another girl and not the heir he was expecting. The boy he still to this day longs for.*

*He even told me so on many instances.*

*Thoughts of my father make me sad, and I don't want to feel sad. Not today. So I try to think of happy things instead.*

*Tapping my chest three times, I think of the color blue, Cactaceae, chubby puppies, and my sisters.*

*That instantly does the trick because my mood brightens enough for me to forget all about my neglectful and cruel father for a little while.*

*Thoughts of my sisters make me start to contemplate the idea of sneaking out in search of them. They haven't been to see me all day, which is odd since they sneak in a visit once or twice a day when they know no one is around to stop them or punish them.*

*Putting the fairytale book down, the same one my sister Arianna gave me once for my birthday, I get off the floor and make my way outside my room in search of them. It's very late. I should be in bed by now, and I know better than to leave my room, but I miss them.*

*I am lonely, and I'm cold.*

*I don't like the cold.*

*Father is cold and cruel.*

*He enjoys making me cry, and so do the men that work for him. He won't like it if he finds out, but there's a funny feeling in my stomach, and I always follow my gut. It usually never fails me.*

*When I'm almost to the first step of the stairs that lead down to the main entrance, shaky hands grab my shoulders, halting my steps.*

*Uh-oh.*

*I've been caught.*

*Dread coils in my belly, and my breath gets caught in my throat.*

*"What are you doing, stelina?!" I release the breath I've been holding and instantly feel better, knowing that it is my sister, Kadra, and not one of my father's mean friends. "You can't leave your room without one of us. You know this..."*

*I bow my head, my curls falling around my face like a curtain, and whisper. "I missed you... I thought you both forgot about me."*

*Kadra sighs. "That's impossible, Mila. You're unforgettable."*

*I feel her gloved hand grab my chin and tilt my head up so I can look at her, and when I do, my breath hitches. She has bruises on her face. Blue and purple bruises are forming around her left eye and right cheek, and her top lip is split open.*

*I lift my hand to my chest, where my heart is, and tap three times. I don't know when exactly I started doing it, but somehow the habit has stuck with me. I only do it when it hurts or when I'm nervous. When my chest aches. My heart.*

*I do it in moments like this one.*

*When I was younger, I didn't understand why my sisters walked funny at times or why they had bruises on their faces and arms, but I do now.*

*Even when they try to hide it from me.*

*I feel their pain because, ultimately, I am mostly to blame.*

*I don't want them to hurt, but because of my existence and their love for me, they do.*

*You see... I am not like most people, a fact our father detests. He also has a serious problem with me not responding to my name when he calls it or the fact that my mouth, at times, has a mind of its own. I am different and my father doesn't like different.*

*To be truthful, he doesn't like me.*

*I never thought or noticed that there was something wrong with me. I am just me, but he didn't like it.*

*At first, my sisters believed I was a quirky child because of my limited facial expressions, odd obsessions, and my compulsive need to touch things three times.*

*As I grew older, I realized that there was something more to me.*

*I don't understand emotions very well, or at all at times. It's difficult for me to decipher sarcasm or other forms of joking. I can't look someone in the eye for too long before I look away at some other part of their body. Attention makes me nervous, and at times, uncomfortable.*

*So many things differentiate me from my sister. My parents know this, and instead of helping me find ways to lead a normal life without shame, they decided to treat me as if I didn't exist. As if I am not their daughter.*

*As if I am not human.*

*They hide me away so no one can see that the Parisi family isn't as perfect as they make it seem. But that's not the worst part. They punish my sisters if I do something wrong in their eyes.*

*For example... breathe.*

*He hits me, too, but not as much as my sisters, something that hurts me more than his fists ever will.*

*Noticing that I spaced out, I look up at my brave sister and I hug her midsection. "I love you, Sirius."*

*It takes Kadra a few seconds to wrap her arms around me. She's not big on affection like I am, and neither is Arianna, but for me, they try their best. "And I love you, little star."*

*Little star.*

*Both of my sisters call me that, but they're wrong.*

*They're the ones who shine.*

*My light in the dark.*

*“Forever?” I hug her tighter as if it’s the last time I’ll get to do it.*

*“Beyond that.” She whispers harshly, pulling me closer to her.*

*I close my eyes and let her words wash over me, reminding me that as long as I have them, all will be alright. As long as we have each other, nothing can truly break us.*

*But something did break us.*

*Tore us apart.*

*That night I came to understand that fairytales were just that... tales, but not even the tragic reality of our life could make me stop believing that one day would come for us.*

*Happy days.*

*Good days.*

*The best days.*



“ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY, MR. PRICKLES,” I mumble to my Ladyfinger cactus before I open the blinds and let the morning sun flood my room, warming the cold atmosphere. Every corner of this mansion has always felt cold and dark, even on hot summer days.

It is how it has always been.

Empty.

I guess a home without love in it would feel cold and reek of devastation.

The minute the sun cuts through the glass, I see it glisten off the black obsidians. The ones that sit on top of my desk at the far left of the room. Given to me by my sister Kadra for transformation purposes.

Most people believe black obsidian serves to illuminate the shadows. That is true, but they do much more than that. For example, the crystal brings to light the dark and hidden aspects of yourself.

As flawed humans, we often tend to feel insecure about the darkness within and our imperfections, but the obsidian empowers the inner strength to explore the nature of destructive behavioral patterns.

My middle sister once told me that the beautiful crystal had the power to ground you to the earth’s center and absorb harmful energy.

At a young age, I found it fascinating as I do all the strange things in life.

Plants, but not the pretty ones like most people are fixated on. No. I prefer the ones the vast majority of the world would consider boring and ordinary, like my cactus.

I am also obsessed with rocks with oddities.

Imperfect things seem perfect to me.

Because of this, and knowing that I love the crystal, Kadra then proceeded to fill my room with it to protect me as a shield from the outside world. As if the crystal had the power to keep the cruel and heartless away.

Still, I am thankful for the rocks and all my sister has given me before she climbed the ranks and now that she is boss.

I am always grateful for anything Kadra gives me because I know how much it cost her.

Both my sisters are like night and day, but as much as they tried to deny it, they share many things in common. While Arianna looks like a classic princess with her timeless beauty, Kadra looks like a badass and exotic supervillain.

One is cold, and the other is like fire.

One is calm, and the other is volatile.

The moon and the sun.

They have both always been on the extreme, but once, they would meet in the middle.

The middle was always me.

Like an eclipse.

It was a beautiful thing to witness.

Speaking of my sisters, I move towards my desk, take a seat and open my laptop, noticing the time on my screen.

11:11.

I close my eyes and make a wish.

I wish for the same thing every single day.

For my sisters to find 'happily ever after', even if it's far away from me.

I never wish for anything for myself.

When I'm done, I look at my screen again, noticing the open chat, and smile when the red bubble pops up, alerting me of an incoming message from my sister.

From Arianna.

Kadra refuses to utter our big sister's name, so it was up to me to keep in touch with Arianna in whatever way it was possible for me inside this

mansion. Three years ago, I overheard Kadra speaking on the phone with someone about our sister and her whereabouts after years of not knowing if she was alright. From that conversation, I found out my big sister was not only shipped off to another state, but she was in the public eye. I still remember the night she looked at me as if I'd broken her heart. I didn't understand anything other than that our father clearly wanted to not only humiliate Arianna but to get her as far away from us as possible.

No one uttered her name after that night. Not even Kadra.

I love my sister blindly, but in that moment and all the moments after, when she refused to tell me where our big sister was, I resented her until she told me that Arianna was alright and that from that moment on she would know only happiness.

Now, years later, I know for a fact, Kadra didn't lie.

Arianna was safe, and she made something of herself when once she was treated like an object.

I always knew my sisters were meant for great things. Things they wouldn't be able to reach while trapped inside this prison we once called home and while our father was in charge.

Clicking on the chat, I feel giddy and excited to see and read all about my sister's adventures. Arianna sends me photos and updates of her life now and even shares stories of her travels. She does that a lot. She is finally seeing all the places she had photos of in her ceiling room.

The only thing we haven't done is talk on the phone, and not for her lack of trying, but I don't want to risk getting caught by my older sister, knowing she can access my call logs.

I don't like being caught in their feud now that they have bad blood.

My excitement grows, and I can't help the smile that takes over my face when I see a photo of her and a cute little girl with dark hair and expressive blue eyes.

Ellaiza.

My sister's daughter.

Not by blood but by choice.

My sister's heart chose to love that little girl as her own.

And to think she once thought she was cold and empty inside. Wrong. I never met anyone with a kinder heart than my big sister. Yes, she might be a little rough around the edges, but when you get close enough, you'll be able to feel all that warmth that radiates from the beautiful light that shines from

within her.

Just like the moon.

Poetic, really.

Reading the email, I find out she's getting married to the sitting President, Sebastian Kenton.

The man who took her from all the pain of our world.

A villain who turned out to be her savior.

Her person.

Good.

I am happy for her.

If anyone deserves a happily ever after, it is her.

She's been at war since the moment she took her first breath and it brings me joy to see she finally has found peace.

It saddens me that I am not there to experience it all with her. She should have her sisters.

How I wish I could be there for her, not just through an email. Maybe if I tell Kadra she will let me attend. I think to myself, but then the hope I feel crumbles knowing that won't happen. There's not even a slim chance that my overprotective sister, who not only has taken full responsibility for me but is now the head of the Parisi crime organization now that our father vanished, would agree to that. Not with how things are lately.

Gabriele, our sperm donor, perished in the chaos he created. My sister's words.

Sighing heavily, I close the computer just in time for a knock to sound on my bedroom door.

The person on the other side knocks three times, which I appreciate.

That's our signal.

That's how I know it's her.

My protector.

My sister.

"Come in." I turn on my desk chair, facing the door, and watch as my sister, Kadra, enters the room. If you didn't know my sister, you would think she was the mistress of death who came knocking on your door to take your soul dressed in all black. A black pantsuit that should make her look businesslike and not sexy at all, but somehow my sister pulls it off.

Black heels.

Black gloves.

Those gloves...Every time I see them, it reminds me of the scars that still bleed in my sister's heart.

"You look very beautiful today, *stelina*." Kadra walks toward where I'm seated. My sister never smiles. Not ever. Not anymore.

My chest pangs.

I had a hard time when I was younger deciphering others' emotions and their sincerity toward me. I learned most people mock me because they don't understand me or don't care to understand someone that doesn't think the same way they do, but my sisters' minds and hearts were always easy to understand because they showed me with actions what they felt for me instead of using words.

Most words mean nothing but actions. Acts of kindness and love? They mean everything.

At least for someone like me, they do.

Touching the brim of my favorite and only baseball cap, I whisper. "So do you, Sirius." I shouldn't have called her the term of endearment our older sister gave her when we were little, but sometimes I find myself wishing that the reminder will make her feel something. Nostalgia.

Happiness.

Even hurt.

I feel guilty knowing, at times, I wish I could hurt her. Hurt her until she gives me something.

Anything but that unfeeling attitude.

But nothing happens.

It doesn't move her.

Nothing does anymore.

Reaching forward, I touch a strand of her dark brown, almost black hair. Since I was a little girl, I used to do it. I like feeling how silky it is.

"I am attending a meeting on neutral grounds with Lorenzo and a few other bosses. You'll stay here." Kadra whispers, her voice empty.

I bow my head, not because she's leaving but because... well, I don't even know anymore. I've gotten so used to solitude that it's become a second home to me. "Mila." I feel the cold material of her gloves tilting my chin up, making me look at her. My sister is truly beautiful. While Arianna and I have blonde hair and golden skin, Kadra has long-to-her-waist dark hair, and eyes the same shade as her skin, like honey. We look nothing alike, if not for the dimple in her chin, the same one I have. That is the only trait we share and



inherited from our father, Gabriele. “Nothing will touch you. No one will get to you. You needn’t worry.”

“I know.” And I do. My sister would take care of whatever threat comes my way in an instant. She’s done it before. It should scare me the lengths my sister would go to keep me safe from the world outside, but it doesn’t.

The darkness inside of her does not scare me.

Darkness has never caused fear in me.

I’ve come to learn that, at times, the most beautiful things are hidden in the dark, and true evil sometimes shines in plain sight.

However, lately...I feel like I’m drowning.

This loneliness is suffocating me.

Before, I didn’t mind the quiet so much, but now... something has changed inside of me.

So many things are happening all at once, and it all started with my sister Arianna leaving Detroit. Nothing is as it was, and maybe... maybe she was right.

We should not fear the unknown.

Because how could the world be scarier than the horrors we faced at home? I don’t believe that.

I believe there’s good, there’s bad, and the world is not evil. I just wish she trusted that I could handle my own against it.

The three of us saw things and went through things no child should go through, but deep down, I know Kadra has seen and experienced far worse.

Maybe that’s why I’ve been so compliant and kept my head down because I know she’s trying to keep me away from the horrors that she went through.

Smiling up at my sister, I grab her gloved hand, interlacing our fingers, feeling my heart race when our eyes meet, and I notice her eyes soften for a rare second. “She’s getting married,” I blurt out. Every time I bring Arianna up, Kadra shuts me down or changes the subject. This time she surprises me by tightening her hand around mine.

“She is.” Her tone is cold and indifferent.

She acts as if she doesn’t care, but I know better. That is why I try again. “One day came for her.”

“It did.” She murmurs, looking away from me and towards the window, where the sun is shining brightly with no clouds in sight.

“Maybe it will come for us, too,” I whisper with my heart on my sleeve

while I look at our joined hands. Looking people in the eye has always been difficult for me. When I was younger, I couldn't look my father in the face while he was talking to me, which made him angry. So angry that he would hit me or worse. He would take it out on my sisters. To avoid his wrath, I forced myself to maintain eye contact with people for as long as I could, even studying and copying other people's emotions and reactions just so I could fit in, but I never measured up.

He found me lacking, while others found me strange.

So they hid me away so I couldn't embarrass them.

It stung.

It hurt my heart because I couldn't understand why I was so unlovable. Until I realized I wasn't the problem.

They were.

The ones who had no compassion or empathy.

They are the problem. Not me.

My sister, Arianna, taught me that.

Kadra's loud sigh reminds me that I am not alone. Then I feel a gentle kiss on my forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow, alright? Be good."

I'm always good. I want to tell her, but instead, I nod once and tap her chest where her heart is three times. I used to do that to her when I was younger, and I was unable to communicate with my sisters. It was a way for me to tell her 'I love you'.

*Come on, Kadra, give me something.*

But she doesn't. Instead, she steps back and moves slowly towards the door, grabs the knob, and opens it wide but before she leaves, she turns to me.

Her stunning face is void of any emotion. I look at her red lips instead of her eyes. "All I do is for you, Mila. Never doubt that. Never..." She pauses, making me look at her eyes, and for a second I think I see a flash of hurt before her eyes look empty again. "Never doubt me." With that, she turns and heads out of my room, closing the door quietly behind her.

I know my sister loves me, and I've never once doubted her.

She had to become this cruel and harden her heart to keep us alive.

Because our world? It's a man's world and a cruel one at that. Kadra had to build walls around her already-broken heart to be able to survive. I just wish she would trust my ability to take care of myself.

I don't wish to be her burden or dirty secret as well.

Turning on my seat, I open the computer once again and type a quick message to my sister, congratulating her on her upcoming nuptials. Suddenly, I notice a light tapping on my window. Looking up from the computer screen, I see a small butterfly flapping its wings against the glass as if trying to come into the room.

The blue morpho.

One of the largest butterflies in the world, with wings spanning from five to eight inches.

How beautiful and how rare.

Oh, how freeing it must be to be a butterfly in this world.

To fly and travel and not be bound to just one place.

How lucky...

But what if...an idea pops up.

I glance at the clock, deciding what I'm going to do next.

Guilt claws at me when I think about what I'm about to do. But I only have one day.

One day... to have my someday with my big sister.

What could possibly go wrong in one day?

I should've known that a million things could go wrong in twenty-four hours.

And they did.

# MESSAGE FROM M



Dear C,  
Your message made me smile today.  
Oh, and my plants.  
They always make me smile.  
What makes you smile when days are dark? -  
M

**BAD IDEA**

MILA



*"Did you know that bad ideas create the best memories? I didn't, but I do now." - M*

Scrolling through my phone, I go over all emails from the last three years and find the ones I've been looking for. I do this until I find one of the last ones.

*Message from: C*  
*Did you know that butterflies can't see their own wings? They can't see how beautiful they are.*

That was it.

One of his last messages to me.

It's been a year and it stings to not know what went wrong or if something happened to him.

My first friend outside of my sisters and the employees.

It still feels like yesterday when Carlotta approached me with the pen pal idea. For years, I exchanged emails with a stranger, who in the end, became my best friend.

It took a few emails before I was spilling my fears and dreams to him, and I got the same in return.

Until one day, he just stopped.  
Out of the blue, his emails stopped.  
It hurt.

It still does, but I guess I didn't mean to him what he meant and still means to me.

I read his intentions wrong.

Maybe I was just someone he needed at the time and nothing else.

Putting the phone down next to me in the seat, I take a deep breath and try to forget about things I cannot change. Instead, I focus on the now.

"Princess, please reconsider this. The boss will have my balls if she finds out I helped you leave the premises." Augustus, one of my sister's men and a good friend of mine, tries to reason with me as he drives us through the busy streets of Detroit.

Augustus appeared out of nowhere like a guardian angel. He is the only person besides Carlotta, one of the few staff members allowed near me, who treats me as a person and not like a piece of furniture in our house. He's the one who sneaks me in all the magazines with my sister, Arianna in them, without Kadra noticing. He's my accomplice if you want to get technical.

He's also very smart and kind, something I concluded the first time we met many years ago.

While most of my family's employees and business associates felt uncomfortable around me, talked down to me, or looked at me pitifully, Augustus didn't. Not even once.

At first, our situation was rocky since I don't cope well with new people. It takes time for me to get comfortable with new people since I've been hidden and kept isolated all my life.

I've been granted more liberties now that my sister has taken our father's place as the boss of our family, yet it doesn't feel like freedom.

Nothing in this city does.

Not really.

Playing with the delicate silver chain around my neck, I twist the star pendant three times, untwist it, and start over again, then I move to play with the brim of my cap, finding the texture of it comforting.

I do this when I am anxious.

Or when I feel nervous and guilty.

The consequences of going against my sister will be catastrophic for Augustus, but I'll protect him from my sister's wrath. Nothing will happen. I

try to convince myself and then him. “Just... just take me to the airport, and I’ll take it from there.” I throw that in, knowing there’s no way he’ll do it.

Any other man would jump at the opportunity to get rid of me even if their heads were on the line but not Gus. “Now, kid...you’ve barely left the house your entire life. There’s no way I’ll let you leave the damn city by yourself.” Gus snorts, and although he doesn’t mean to be unkind, his words remind me how little I know about the world. How little I’ve lived.

All I truly know are the walls inside a cold home and not all that much about this city.

Just the ugly parts.

I don’t mean to be ungrateful because my problems seem so insignificant compared to bigger issues around the world, like poverty, global warming, and everything else that’s slowly killing this planet and its inhabitants. Yet, I can’t help but feel sad, but I push it down like I always do and smile. I smile as I trained myself to do. If I smile, the people I care about won’t worry. “Thank you, Gus.” I look at the rearview mirror, my eyes clashing with his warm brown eyes for a short moment before I break eye contact and look at his bearded cheek instead. Gus is a handsome man with fair skin and inky black hair that is cut close to the scalp on the sides and longish on top. He has a nice build, a strong Roman nose, and big lips. He’s the type of man you would find on a runway somewhere in Europe, if it weren’t for the fact that he is a trained assassin and part-time babysitter for the mob.

“Don’t thank me yet, kid.” He mumbles while concentrating on the road ahead. “Let’s try and get this suicide mission done without me getting my balls chopped by the boss. You and I both know she’ll use them as stress balls.” He shivers, but then a smile breaks free when he sees the look on my face.

I cringe, and suddenly my face falls.

Is he joking? He certainly isn’t. My sister would hurt him when she realized he helped me leave not only the mansion but the city.

Panic takes over me, making me stutter. “T-t-turn around. It’s n-no—” I don’t get to finish my sentence because Gus interrupts me. “Hey, it’s okay. It was a bad joke.”

No.

“It’s the truth,” I whisper. Maybe this is why my sister doesn’t trust me to handle myself out in the world. This is a bad decision I’ve made, and although I pride myself on being a logical person because logic makes sense



to me while emotions do not, this time I acted recklessly. Letting myself be persuaded by my emotions and my selfish need to feel an ounce of freedom that I didn't listen to my gut and brain when they told me this would be bad, not only for me but for my friend too.

"I've seen you smile more in this fifteen-minute ride than I've had in the last five years," Gus whispers, drawing my attention away from my hands to his tattooed ones that rest on the car's wheel. "Whatever punishment comes my way, it'll be worth it." His tone changed. It's gentle, and all humor is gone.

Tenderness.

I know that one.

He's being sincere.

I let his kind words wash over me because that's something I'm not very used to.

Kindness.

So on the off chance it happens, I treasure it.

"I'll protect you," I say matter-of-factly. I will. I will protect my friend.

Gus laughs softly, and I feel his eyes on me, so I do my best to meet his gaze for only a second so he knows I mean business. "Appreciate it, sunshine."

*Sunshine.*

I have a hard time figuring out when other people are genuine and have trouble deciphering insults from terms of endearment because nothing is black and white. Nothing is ever simple.

The mean men that worked for my father would call me names you would think are terms of endearment, but they would turn them ugly with sarcasm and their negative energy.

Turn them ugly with cruelty.

For example, some would call me princess, but with a smile that seemed forced, or they would roll their eyes at me whenever I opened my mouth.

I learned to stay quiet around certain people and people that I do not feel comfortable with.

That is mainly everyone, at first, until I can figure out if they're the good or the bad guys.

I've known only bad guys until Gus.

Gus, I can trust.

He is kind, doesn't treat me like a nuisance, and is patient with me when I

do something that is normal for me but might seem strange to him.

Pressing my nose to the window, I hum the twinkle, twinkle little star song as I watch the city around me as Gus drives and silence falls upon us. I like the silence because some people tend to scream and be loud when they have nothing constructive to say.

Gus and my sister, Kadra, give me that.

A quiet and safe place, and now I'm breaking all the rules.

I am stepping out of the shadows to do something for myself, for once or rather for my sisters.

I couldn't offer them peace when there was only war at home, but I can bring them back together. Because as long as my sisters are away from one another, they'll never find true peace.

Not really.

I haven't, and I am the most positive person they will likely ever know. But I should have known peace is always so out of reach for me.

Life proves it in the next instant when I notice a blue sports car speeding beside us, The driver rolls the window down just enough for me to see it is a man. A man with gorgeous brown hair that looks like silk. Will it feel the same? I wonder.

I like the feel of silk. It makes me feel calm.

I stop humming when I focus on the man driving next to us and his soft-looking hair.

"Oh, shit," Gus hisses at the same time the man rolls his window up and speeds up, leaving our side.

Turning my face away from the window, I look at a now worried Gus, but before I can open my mouth to ask what is wrong, there's a loud screeching sound of tires that makes my ears ring painfully. It all happens so fast that I am unable to register it all. First, I hear Gus screaming profanities like a madman, and then it all grows eerily quiet.

The car doors open, and I'm being rushed out of the car. I feel like my head is about to explode, and my skin prickles with the unwanted touch. I don't like strangers touching me.

Not really.

Just my sisters were able to touch me without triggering an episode.

An episode I feel rising to the surface.

"Mila. Listen to me. It's me. It's me." The burn of his touch fades as I focus on his shoes while listening to the rough sound of his voice when the

ringing in my ears too fades. “We don’t have much time.” A crash sounds eerily close to where we’re standing on a dead-end street. “Mila!” Gus yells, making me whimper. “I’m sorry.” Then his voice softens. “I need you to trust me. You are not safe. I need you to run as far away from here as you can and hide. He’ll find you.”

Shaking my head, I look up at his bearded cheek. “I am not leaving you here.” I don’t know what’s happening. All I know is that Gus has never sounded this worried before and that there is a lot of noise around us.

Cars honking.

People yelling obscenities.

It’s all too much.

Something is wrong.

“If you stay, then we’re both dead.” I play with the brim of my hand absently, contemplating his words. “I can’t take care of them if I have you to worry about. Please, princess, run. Now.”

He gently pushes me forward in the direction he wants me to go, and I do. My feet have a mind of their own as I move farther and farther away from him without knowing where I am headed.

This is my fault.

This is my fault.

I did this.

Stupid, stupid, Mila.

My mind won’t shut off, taunting me with the reality of my selfish decision.

Looking around me, all I see is a dead-end street and a back alley.

A huge dumpster.

I assess it and deduce that it might be the only place big enough for me to hide when I have no options.

I also think of the trash.

The awful smells.

And the germs.

All of that makes me stop dead in my tracks.

I don’t like germs, but I also don’t get triggered by them.

I can do this.

Making a decision I move towards the big, green metal box, but before I reach it, I hear it.

A sound I know all too well.

The sound of a fire machine going off.

Gus!

No.

No.

My friend.

Dropping to the ground, I cover my ears and lie there in a fetal position trying, to quiet the loud noise of guns around me and the whispers in my head, screaming at me for my mistake.

I just wanted to see my sister smile.

I didn't mean for anything bad to happen.

I didn't mean to cost my friend his life.

Feeling tears fall to my cheek, I rock myself like I do when the world is dark and sing to myself. "*Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder where you are.*"

I am so deep inside my head, in my safe place where no one can hurt me, that I don't notice footsteps approaching. Perhaps Gus's friend found me.

How wrong I was.

There's a click sound just before a strange voice says in an ugly tone. "Found her. Yeah, she's alive, but there's something wrong with her." The stranger pushes his boot on my back, and I whimper, afraid and in pain. "I think the bitch is retarded."

*Retarded.*

*Retarded.*

*Retarded.*

I'll take sticks and stones any day over these words. How hard is it to comprehend that cruel words do hurt and cut deep. They have the power to echo in your mind and stab your heart until all it's left is a bleeding mess. They cut holes into your heart until you start believing them. Until you let them take control of you and they change you.

They change how you not only view others but how you look at the world too.

Then it was not enough for him to call me such an ugly and vile word, but the man went ahead and snatched my cap off my head before grabbing a fist full of my hair and pulling me up from the ground as if I weren't human. As if it doesn't chip away a part of my soul when someone looks down at me for the way my mind is wired.

He hurts me just like my father used to.

I try to pry his harsh hands off me, but my attempt is useless. He's much stronger than I am. "Please. Let go of me. Please." But the man does not release me. Instead, he pulls harder on my hair, and that's what triggers my demons.

I lose myself to the painful memories, and I go under.

All I see is black.

I escaped to my safe place, back to the pages of my storybooks, away from everything scary.

Away from cruel men with black hearts.

# MESSAGE FROM C



*Butterflies.  
Butterflies make me smile. - C*

# THE BEST IDEA

## RIAGAN



*“Some say snitch bitches, get stitches.  
Nah, they get buried.” - R*

*“W*ait a fucking second. I must be hearing wrong because ain't no way you want me to work for the filthy Italians. Am I hearing this shit right, Cap?” Bain, one of the few people I trust in the clan, spits over the line. It's three in the fucking morning and I'm parked outside a residence, in the street like a fucking creep, when I should be dealing with the fallout of the three families of Detroit's decision to take over and get rid of the current bosses.

*Benedetto Nicolasi, Gabriele Parisi, and that fucking rat Tommaso Volpe are gone. I should be drinking to celebrate their much-deserved fall from grace. Instead, the night led me here.*

*To the Parisi residence.*

*All paths led me here.*

*To her.*

*For the life of me, I can't quite put a finger on what it is about that young girl that touched something in me that Halloween night months ago.*

*It's so fucked.*

*I'm fucked.*

*She's the youngest spawn of that fucker Parisi. Why the fuck do I care about what happens to her is beyond me.*

*But I do.*



*I fucking care.*

*I have no single fucking clue what it was about her that tugged at the dusty ass strings of my fucked-up heart.*

*Maybe it was the way her eyes, her sad eyes, called to the darkest part of me when she looked my way.*

*The fucking smoking gun fact.*

*Or the damn butterflies. Butterflies that have been haunting me ever since I was a boy.*

*Reminders of my mother.*

*I don't believe in coincidences, you see.*

*That girl crossed my path that night, and there has to be a reason. There has to be a logical reason as to why, after I left the Nicolasi mansion that night, the girl kept popping into my mind.*

*I thought I stashed her memory away like I do everything that means shit to me, but that was not the case.*

*Instead, I found myself wondering why no one utters her name in the three families. Why after working for the families undercover for years, I never, not even once, saw her face. Not once. Just her two oldest sisters.*

*I kept wondering why she was kept hidden, as if there was something wrong with her. As if that fucking family is hiding something.*

*But what?*

*Remembering that I have Bain on the line, I speak up. "There's a girl." I look at the mansion and momentarily wonder which window belongs to her room. "The youngest Parisi. No one outside of the three families knows that she exists, and I want to keep it that way. I need you to keep her safe, and you don't get caught, you got me? There's word that Kadra Parisi will now take her father's place as the boss and will clean house. That's your way in."*

*"Fuck me, Cap, can't believe you're making me do this shit. Those scums..." He breathes harshly, and silence follows his protest before he speaks again. "For how long?"*

*"For as long as I need you to."*

*"What is it about the girl?" he asks suspiciously.*

*How the fuck do I answer that without sounding like a fucking psycho?*

*Not that I give two shits about what others think of me.*

*But I don't even know what exactly it is about the Parisi princess.*

*I tried to go on with my life as if I had never met her, but her eyes kept flashing through my mind. The sadness and loneliness made my chest ache*

*when I haven't felt anything remotely close to sadness since I was a young lad. Nothing but anger.*

*"Just do as I say and keep me updated. I want to know everything there is to know about the girl."*

*Bain sighs. "Sure thing, Cap."*

*Typical Bain.*

*He bitches just for theatrics when he knows he'll end up following orders.*

*I told him the truth.*

*I trust the man, that is why I chose him with her.*

*Bain might be a hothead, but he has a gentle heart.*

*He also has a soft spot for kids.*

*"One more thing." I flicked the cigar out the window. "Don't use your name." Right after, I drive off, knowing there'll be a long while before I'm back in this god-awful city.*

*"Why the fuck not?" Bain barks.*

*"Too Irish." I rub my temple at the same time as I take a long drag of my cig.*

*"What the fuck should I call myself?"*

*"I could give two fucks if you call yourself Augustus or captain dickhead. Just don't use your name." With that last comment, I hang up and speed the hell out of this city with a new purpose. One I don't understand right there. Not until a few years later when I see the little butterfly again.*



## *Present*

IF THERE WAS one thing I'd learned growing up with a ruthless gangster for a father, it was that you were always surrounded by animals. Savages.

Snakes even.

Those are the worst.

I might be a heartless motherfucker, that is true but I don't fuck with people that can't defend themselves.

What I also am is selfish. I never quite liked to share my toys when I was a lad. To be fair, Da never raised me to be generous or kind. He taught me that what was mine was that...mine. To this day, that is the only rule I live

by.

And when someone tries to fuck with what is mine? I get angry. Real fucking angry.

Murderous and trigger-friendly.

Like in this instant.

I pull out a cig and spark it up. I take a long drag and watch the scene before me. One that has my blood boiling. Touching the gun inside my holster, I watch the piece of shit holding his gun to the back of a pretty blonde hair. Hair that I know all too well.

A hair belonging to the sweetest and most innocent creature I have ever met.

An innocent.

Mila Areya Parisi.

The hidden jewel.

The youngest Parisi.

A girl with a hit on her head of ten million to the first hitman that pulls the trigger.

Mila lies on the filthy ground next to a dumpster, rocking herself in a fetal position, unaware that this cunt is hovering over her, ready to pull the trigger.

I notice her lovely white summer dress is stained with what seems like grease, and her elbows have red welts on them.

You know... I was going to drag this motherfucker's death and prolong his pain. That was the plan. What I didn't plan was losing my head in a public space because I sure as fuck don't need this kind of heat on me in plain daylight, but then the cunt mocks her and makes her cry out, in return making my blood boil even hotter. And then the fucker had to reach forward and snatch her hat off, startling her and pulling her hair, making her cry out in pain.

A red mist descends over my eyes until all thoughts are of the fucker covered in bullet holes. That's what I do. Pulling out my gun, I start firing. I run forward, not caring that there are witnesses around us.

I just focus on the screams coming from the sweet girl currently crying on the floor.

Bullet after bullet leave my barrel and slice through red flesh, ripping into the fucker's liver and lungs, dropping the bastard to the ground. I keep firing.

I walk forward, giving zero fucks that the asshole got a bullet in me before he hit the ground. I got as close to the prick as I could, pressing my

barrel to his head, and splattered his brains up the dirty walls of this alley.

I could hear my breath pumping in my ears. Feel my fucking heart pounding in my chest.

Because of the girl.

But I can't think about this now.

She's in danger.

Fuck, if I had arrived a moment later, she would be the one with a hole in her head and blood oozing out of her pretty mouth. She's a target now, and there is no doubt more men like the piece of shit on the dirty ground are coming for her.

Hardening my heart, I step over the dead fucker and move closer toward a now-shaking-uncontrollably Mila.

I know I shouldn't touch her while she's like this. I know this, but I am not risking her safety.

Like my heart has been stabbed with a shot of adrenaline, I grab her and run for my car. "Shhh... sweetheart. You're safe." I whisper and to my surprise, her whimpers calm and her breathing evens out just enough for me to get her inside the car and away from danger.

"I know you..." she says, looking at me with those pretty eyes that have haunted my dreams for what feels like thousands of nights before she falls unconscious.

Shit.

Shutting the passenger door, I run to the driver's side, get in, and quickly rev the engine, speeding the hell out of there.

I never ran from anything a day in my life.

Not once.

Not from a challenge or from danger, but for her I do.

Because there's nothing I wouldn't do for this girl.

For the girl with a kind heart and the most beautiful smile that managed to pierce my dead heart.

There is no doubt that I am interested in her.

There was just something about her. Her sweetness, her softness. It was something that my life had afforded me very little of.

I hadn't realized I had been craving it until it was right there in front of me.

I met her once and she left her mark on me.

The girl that no one saw.

Everyone overlooked her.

It's the woman I can't stop seeing.

The mafia princess with butterflies in her hair and stars in her soulful eyes.

Mila Areya Parisi.

Even her damn name was fucking beautiful, but it would sound so much fucking better if it was followed by my last name.

All in due time.

# MESSAGE FROM M



Dearest, C  
Do you dream at night? Do you dream while  
awake?

I do.

All I do is dream. - M

THE MAN WITH THE BUTTERFLY  
TATTOO

MILA



*“You still smoke? Do you want to die?” - M*

**M**y scalp burns from my father pulling on my hair, and my ears are still ringing from his shouts. My legs are stuck. I tried to move them, to run to Arianna, who was crawling on the floor a few feet away, but I couldn't reach her. My big sister's expressive green eyes widen in fear as she reaches for her throat.

*There's blood.*

*So much blood begins to pour from her throat, her ears, and her mouth. “No! I cry, feeling my heart crack down the center into two broken parts.*

*I try to scream, but it gets stuck in my throat.*

*I am powerless.*

*Useless.*

*“S-sstelina?” I snap my head to the right and watch as Kadra stumbles through a dark fog.*

*Her arms are stretched wide, and her eyes are watery. She's looking for me, reaching out her gloved hand for me to take. To guide her home. She always did say I was the light that guides her in the dark when she feels she's reaching the point of no return.*

*Today, I am not her light.*

*I am helpless.*

*I can't guide her in the dark.*

*I try, regardless of the pain in my head and the heaviness of my heart.*

*“Kadra,” I whisper brokenly, reaching out my hand, but before her*



*fingers meet mine, a knife comes out of the fog and plows right through her chest. Kadra's lips moved in a silent cry for help as she dropped to the ground. I scream at the top of my lungs as she falls, and Arianna's body disappears into a pool of her own blood.*

*Then the fog clears. It clears, and they both are gone. My sisters. They are gone ... they are dead. My throat is raw from screaming, and my cheeks are sore from tears. I couldn't save them. I couldn't save their lives...*

*I failed them.*

*All I do is fail them.*



Do you know that place somewhere between asleep and awake? The in-between. That place where you're aware of your surroundings but can't simply open your eyes because of how heavy they feel— because of how tired you are, and somehow in-between, you feel safer than being awake. I must be there. Except, possibly, a little more asleep than awake. I must be dreaming because there is no way this is happening. I feel myself being carefully shuffled out of a warm car, then nestled against the smooth material of an expensive shirt, the side of my face resting in a neck that smells of man and a smooth, crisp aftershave, with arms under my knees and around my back, strong, but somehow holding me ever-so-gently.

I feel tired. Tired as if I'd been walking the desert for a thousand days with no water or food. My limbs ache, and there's a pounding on the back of my head.

What is happening?

Opening my eyes, I notice the light hurts, only worsening my headache.

Then it all comes back to me. Gus.

The loud noises.

The ringing in my ears.

The pain in my heart for leaving my friend behind, the rough hands of the cruel man pulling on my hair, and his ugly words.

Lastly, the man.

The tattooed giant with kind eyes and a devious smile as he emptied round after round on the man who was seconds away from hurting me more than he already had.

*I know you...* I whispered those words to my savior.

He appeared out of the blue to save the day like most heroes in romance books do.

*But is this man the hero or the villain?*

*Perhaps, both?*

I angle my head up to look at my maybe 'prince charming'. Except he didn't exactly look like a prince charming. True, he was beautiful. In an extremely perfect and rugged way, with his amazing jaw, great nose, strong brows, and full pink lips. His hair was the color of sand after rain, as was the abundance of lashes he had framing his sky-blue eyes. He was a large man. Enormous, really. He's taller than anyone I know, and his arms look as if he could crush me if he held me. He was that big.

Let's not forget the abundance of dark ink that runs from his neck down to his knuckles. I've seen plenty of men with tattoos. Women, too. None with as many as this stranger.

He looks like a gigantic coloring book.

I also noticed his clothes were crisp. That's always good. I like neat clothing. Neat clothes mean he's not messy, and he doesn't look dirty. I like that. I have come to learn that messy people have messy minds.

I don't enjoy messy minds.

Forgetting all about his clothing and his potential tidiness, I concentrate on what happened back in the alley.

The image of him shooting the mean stranger in the chest without any remorse on his face should scare me. Heroes don't look like he did. Giddy. Satisfied. Thirsty for more chaos.

His eyes.

Those blue eyes flash through my mind. There was something in them that made a shiver course through my insides and made me feel just slightly less like I was dreaming. Was he a figment of my imagination? Am I dreaming?

No, it can't be.

He felt real.

Then, as that thought triggered it, sleep pulled backward like a fog lifting, making the quiet numbness seem to wear off.

Feeling overwhelmed and completely not understanding what was going on, I heard my voice say in a very small, very vulnerable way, "My head hurts." My savage-looking prince seems taken aback at either my words or

my tone, his brows drawing together as he watches me for a long moment. “Where are we?” I continue to ask questions until the man gently puts me down on my feet, and that is when I am able to see where we are. It looks like an abandoned plane track. In the distance, I can hear the low sound of what appears to be a plane heading our way.

Oh, no.

I’ve read this scene way too many times to know what this is.

This feels like a scene out of a crime and dark romance.

Villains.

Villains kidnap people. Heroes do not.

Fear should be seeping into my bones right about now, but nothing happens.

The stranger’s rough voice brings me back from my thoughts. “You will feel better as soon as you take something for the headache. Inside the plane, there is aspirin. Are you allergic to aspirin?” He clears his throat, and all I can focus on is that: 1. He has a lot of tattoos on his neck, and I mean a ton. 2. He said inside the plane as if he expected me to go inside.

“Are you kidnapping me?” I blurt out. *Nice one, Mila.*

The maybe villain chuckles. I don’t know why, but I feel a warm feeling in my stomach as if a thousand butterflies like the ones he has tattooed on his neck are flapping their wings erratically, causing havoc inside me. *Huh... how strange.*

I never felt that before.

Sadness? Yes.

Happiness? Uh-huh.

But this strange feeling in my stomach just by hearing this man laugh? Nope.

Again... strange.

And that is a very dangerous path because strange things make me curious and lead me to very bad ideas.

“I am not kidnapping you, sweetheart, but that filth from before sure was.”

“You killed him.” I point out the obvious.

The man grunts as my eyes remain on his neck where the tattoos conceal where his pulse should be, on occasion, my eyes drift up to his face. “I did.”

“How did it feel?” I ask, feeling transfixed with not only the man before me but the situation.

“Pretty satisfying.” He replies without hesitation.

“Pretty satisfying,” I repeat. “How odd. I was not expecting that answer...” I frown, most criminals I know hide their cruelty behind locked doors and pretend they’re good and law-abiding civilians, but this one is... proud?

The man clears his throat, and I follow the movement of his lips. “Does that scare you?”

I think about his question. A lot of things scare me, but watching this man murder the big bully from before doesn’t, and that should scare me. It would scare a sane person. “Not really. I don’t lose sleep over cruel men or what happens to them.” I shrug. It’s true.

I learned a long time ago that pity doesn’t live inside of me when it comes to people who cause others harm.

“Huh.” The man chuckles again, and I force myself to look into his eyes, and there goes that strange feeling again.

“What is it?” I don’t quite understand the look on his face. His eyes look bright, but his facial expression is not happy at all.

“You are just...” I hold my breath knowing the punch is headed my way. This is where my brutal honesty makes people uncomfortable so much that they don’t know how to act, so they choose to hurl insults my way or pretend I don’t exist. The latter hurts less. “A breath of fresh air.”

The silly bugs on my stomach go wild the second the words leave this man’s mouth, and suddenly I don’t know how to act or what to say, which is new to me. Although I may not understand social norms, sarcasm at times, and most human reactions, I do know that this strange man with butterfly tattoos, a perfect face, and a rough tone of voice is also a breath of fresh air to me.

*Don’t be foolish, Mila... Lucifer was a gorgeous angel once too. Besides, you don’t know this stranger.*

Ignoring the very smart and logical voice inside my head, I ask the man instead, changing the subject and steering the attention that is making heat creep up my neck away from me and towards him. “What is your name?” I ask automatically.

I look at the stubble on his face and find myself fascinated when the muscle of his face pulls up in another smile. The bugs in my stomach are taking over my chest as well. How...new. “I thought you knew me, sweetheart.”

My brows pull down. “I know your face. Not your name. If I knew your name, I wouldn’t be asking.” I tell him, as a matter of fact.

“I see there’s sass under all that sweetness.” He steps closer cautiously as if he’s approaching a wild animal and doesn’t want to spook it. “Rian. My name is Rian.”

Rian. What an odd name.

Rian can be spelled as Ryan and Rian. Most people spell it as Ryan, but I guess this man is not most people. He doesn’t look ordinary, and neither is his name.

I like it.

“It’s Rian short for something?” I notice that his smiling eyes lock onto mine for a brief second before my eyes fall to his lips. And what a pretty mouth he has. “Riagan.”

*Riagan.*

“That is an interesting and unusual name,” I mumble, still looking at the man’s lips. He has a pretty smile with straight white teeth.

Riagan laughs softly. “I guess most people would think I’m an unusual man.”

I bet.

If he goes around killing men in broad daylight, being called unusual should be the least of his worries. “What is your last name?”

“O’Sullivan.” I think about it for a second. I heard this name before from my sister. It’s Irish.

His surname is of Irish descent.

Then it comes to me.

Lucan Volpe has a brother. A brother named Rian O’Sullivan.

The big and scary man from that night so long ago is Lucan’s brother.

Does Kadra know him?

Did she send him to come get me?

Is this the man Gus was referring to?

So many questions.

“My name is Mila.” I supplied. “Mila Areya Parisi.”

“I know.” He says with a small smile on his face. I focus on his smile instead of his eyes. He has a pretty smile. Most men and women I know have cruel smiles. Ones that make me nervous because punishment or a hurtful comment always comes next.

“You know my family? Is that how you know me? Did my sister contact

you to take me back home? Where is Gus?” I blabber away, asking question after question. Now noticing the aircraft is visibly heading our way. “Why are we here?”

Bending down, I reach inside my socks for my phone – where I always put it– but find it empty. I left it in the car, but knowing my sister, she had a tracker planted on it. *Do not panic... all will be well. If you panic, then you're already dead.* My big sister's, Kadra, words replay through my mind reminding me of all she has taught me if ever I find myself in a situation where my life is in danger, and she's not there to help.

As the plane stops a few feet away from us, the man comes closer to me. From this close, our height difference can't be missed. The man towers over me, all strength and over-the-top presence. My heartbeat quickens, and my breaths become labored. I've never been this close to a man that hasn't in some way hurt me, but somehow this stranger doesn't make me feel scared or uncomfortable. *Very fascinating...again.*

“I do know your family. Not very fond of them, if I am being truthful, and something you should know about me, sweetheart, is that I am not afraid of the truth, and I won't lie to you.” I am offended on my family's behalf. My sisters to be precise, but I don't argue, knowing that my family is not well-liked.

“Why don't you like Gabriele?” I frown while paying close attention to his neck. I've come to learn that people have a tell when they lie. Most of them swallow hard. This man doesn't have that tell.

“Your piece of shit father was a terrible consigliere and a cunt human being.” He says truthfully.

That is true.

I value the truth. My father was horrible.

“And why don't you like my sisters?” I am curious, even though I know my sisters most likely did something to warrant his dislike. Both Arianna and Kadra have no qualms when it comes to speaking up their minds and making waves. I, on the other hand, hate to be the center of attention, and I would rather run and hide before I engage in any confrontation. The empowered and 'bad bitch' gene skipped me, sadly.

I force myself to look Riagan in the eye for as long as I can. Yes, I will call him Riagan since that is the name his parents chose for him. My big sister, Arianna, taught me that shortening someone's name is rude, but my sister had her oddities, so maybe it is a 'her thing' and other people don't find

it rude.

“Do I need a reason?” He shrugs as if he just doesn’t care even a little bit.

“How can you dislike them if you don’t know them?” I am curious.

“I might not know the core of who they are, but I do judge them based on our interactions. Your oldest sister has a mouth on her, and the middle one? Well, that one gave me headaches the last time we were in a room together.”

That does sound like my sisters. “I guess everyone is entitled to their own opinions.”

“Don’t take it personally, Mila. They don’t. If you ask them, I am positive they will tell you the same about me.” That’s true. My sisters could care less about what others think of them.

I’m deep in my head, thinking of this extremely weird exchange with a mostly stranger, when a slightly accented voice interrupts us coming from the plane. “Yo, Cap. If you’re done chatting with the lovely lass, we need to go.”

Leaning sideways, I sneak a glance behind the giant wall that is Riagan and spot a handsome man with tattoos standing on the plane’s door with a frown on his face. Where are these men from? They look nothing like the men that worked for my sister. The man on the plane looks like the man he called Cap, but with fewer muscles and a ton of tattoos from what I can see all the way here. “Cap?” My eyes find Riagan again.

“We need to leave, sweetheart.” He says, ignoring my question and the man that called him boss. “And to quickly answer your other questions because we’re running out of time. I am here because you’re in danger. What happened earlier is just the beginning, Mila. Your sister pissed off a very important family, and they’re coming for you all. They won’t stop until they spill Parisi blood.”

“Is my sister in danger?” That is all I can think of to ask now.

*Kadra...*

“Don’t you care about your safety?” The man snarls, making me jump. Noticing my reaction, he sighs before speaking again. “Yes, she is safe.” He answers. He did say he doesn’t lie, but I don’t know him, not really, not even a little. “It is your safety you should worry about, Mila.”

I didn’t register the last part.

What did my sister do? I look down at my shoes, already knowing an anxiety attack is on the way because my sisters mean the world to me, and knowing one of them might be in danger causes me severe distress. Lifting my index finger towards my head, I find that my ball cap is missing. No.

No.

“Your cap is gone. I’ll get you a new one.” Riagan says, noticing my state of distress over something as trivial as a clothing item. My cap hides me when everything feels like it’s too much to handle. When I don’t want to be seen or when I feel a panic attack rising. My cap has always been a source of comfort, and now it’s gone.

Lost somewhere.

“I need it... I—”

“Mila, listen to my voice.” Strange how he doesn’t force me or demand I look him in the face like most people would do. His voice is commanding yet soft. I try to breathe and focus on his voice. “I need your help.”

Then he says something that changes everything.

Call me naive.

Call me silly.

My help? No one has ever needed me before. I am always the one being cared for or looked after.

Finally finding my voice, I notice the need to cower and hide under my cap is gone, and all I can hear and see is the man in front of me with the rough-looking exterior and the soft and warm voice. “Help? How can I help you?” I whisper, feeling vulnerable. At times, I wish I were more like my sisters. Stronger and brave. Loud and overconfident.

I am not.

I made my peace with that.

I am confident in who I am, but I am not loud. I am not them.

“I promised someone I would protect you if one day a war broke out in Detroit because of your sister.”

Suddenly, everything fades into the background. The aircraft. The man waiting not so patiently a few feet away.

The noise.

All I can see.

All I can feel is... the man in front of me.

I swallow hard and look up, my eyes clashing with hypnotizing blues for the rarest of seconds. “Who? Who asked you to keep that promise?”

“Arianna.”

*Arianna...*

“Have you seen her?” I feel a bit jealous because this stranger has more contact than I do with my sister.



“Briefly,” he confirms.

Then I remember he said he needed me.

Focusing on his chest tattoo, I ask. “Just a promise? Is that all? Do you need me to come with you to help you fulfill a promise?” When I look up at him, I manage to catch a look that crosses over his face, but it’s gone as soon as it happens. I’m unable to decipher it. Even when my mind tries its hardest to make sense of it. I failed.

“I’ll explain everything in more detail as soon as I get you to safety.” His tone becomes softer, gentler, a total contrast to his harsh exterior. “You can come with me, and I’ll keep you safe until we find this fu—” My brows furrow when he stops mid-sentence.

“You can use profanities. Most people use them when they have nothing useful or nice to say. I figured you don’t know who the man behind this is, so yes, you can call him a fuck.”

He laughs, and what a lovely sound that is.

“So, will you help me get you to safety, sweetheart?”

“Will I get to call my sisters?”

“Yes.” He nods.

I narrow my eyes on his chest. “Promise?”

“I promise, and I don’t break promises.”

“Cross your heart?”

“Cross my heart, Mila.” I noticed his tone changed from humorous to serious.

“I have a knife,” I lie, but he doesn’t need to know that. “If you try anything, I’ll stab you in the jugular.” I try to not sound anxious but instead more confident.

He laughs as if I am joking, and I watch as he lights up a cigarette. “Noted.” He takes a long drag. “And you shouldn’t tell people you have a weapon. If my purpose was to harm you, now I’m anticipating you fighting back with a knife, and my first move is going to be to get it away from you. You want to surprise me with it, not fucking announce it.”

Sighing, I stare at the small heart tattoo below his left ear. “Thank you for the tip,” I say, still eyeing him. “I want proof that Gus is well and alive.”

He grunts, “Is taking you to him proof enough?”

I think about it for a second, “Yes.”

“Then come with me.” He offers me his tattooed hand, and I look down at it in wonder.

“I’m not going anywhere until I have concrete proof that Gus is okay and that you’re not fooling me.” I lean closer and speak loud enough that he can hear me over the plane’s noise. I focus on the silver chain on his neck this time instead of his tattoos. It’s weird. I’ve seen that specific piece of jewelry on another person. This giant’s younger brother. Suddenly he reaches inside his jeans pocket and pulls out a phone, hits a button, and waits for the person on the other side of the line to answer. A few seconds later, a voice I know well sounds from the phone’s speakers.

“Boss.” Gus. I narrow my eyes at the use of the term boss. My sister is his boss.

*What is happening? What a mess, and I greatly despise messes.*

I feel Riagan’s eyes on me, but I ignore him staring intently at the phone in his hands. “G-Gus?” Anxiety creeps in when I realize nothing is as it seemed. My sister didn’t tell me much about the gruesome side of our family’s business, but she did warn me that rats come in all sizes and most traitors hide behind a friendly face. I didn’t dwell on that fact because my sister understandably only sees the bad in every situation and in people. Did Gus fool my sister? Did he fool me too?

Was every moment we shared a lie?

The line goes silent for a long moment before he finally speaks. “Princess...” The way he says doesn’t feel any different from all the times before. “I know this all is confusing, but I need you to know that nothing has changed, yeah? I am still your mate, and I would still walk through fire for you. All will be explained to you, but it’s not up to me.”

*Gus has never failed me...*

*Foolish girl... you shouldn’t trust so easily. Haven’t you learned the hard lessons by now?*

“Are you okay?” I ask, instead of lashing out. I dislike confrontation. I am not good at it. What I’m good at is being kind and understanding. Maybe that’s a fault of mine.

I notice Riagan’s knuckles turn white as his grip on the phone tightens. I’ve read that reaction is caused by anger. Is he mad? Did I say something out of line? I don’t have much time to dwell on it because, a moment later, he hangs up on Gus.

“What is really going on? Does Gus work for you too?” I look over his broad shoulder and focus on the plane behind him. It’s huge. I’ve never flown before. Never thought I would either.

“He works for you.” He answers roughly.

Taken back, my eyes meet his, and then fall to his bearded cheek. “That is untrue.” I frown. Is he trying to take me for a fool? He confuses me tremendously, yet he doesn’t laugh.

“I will tell you everything.” He says fiercely. “But you need to come with me.”

“You could be the bad guy,” I whisper.

A moment of silence passes between us before he speaks again. “I would rather cut my own heart out with pliers, sweetheart, than cause you any harm.”

There’s a weird sensation in my stomach. As if a million bugs are dancing in my stomach, and at the same time, I can’t seem to find my breath. What an odd reaction to words.

To this strange man.

*Do it, Mila.*

*Your ‘one day’ might not be so far out of reach.*

I don’t think, I feel. “Okay.” I nod and take his offered hand. When I grasp it, he effortlessly pulls me closer, and I stumble into his chest. “Okay.” His voice. The sudden closeness. I’m a little breathless. I’ve never been this close to a man before. A boy, yes. But not a muscular, inked-up, wearing sandalwood-scented-aftershave, grown man with hands the size of my head. I should’ve let go of his hand as soon as I was on my feet, but I didn’t. I hold on to it for a few seconds, liking the warmth and the feel of his calloused palm against mine. After a few seconds, he gently squeezes my hand, then pulls it from mine. It’s a tiny, affectionate gesture, that squeeze. But even I know what it is.

A hand hug.

Bad idea.

This is a bad idea.

Something deep down in my soul tells me bad ideas and all... this is where my heart belongs.

I pride myself on being the ultimate bookworm.

I should’ve known the biggest plot twist in my story was yet to happen.

Because Riagan O’Sullivan was not the soft hero in this story but the over-the-top alpha with villainous ways. And a kind heart that no one but me got to know.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*One week.*

*Seven days.*

*One hundred and sixty-eight hours.*

*How the fuck am I going to make her fall for  
the*

*man that I am before she comes  
face to face with the darkness of my world?*

# ZERO APOLOGIES

## MILA



*"Trust your gut, Mila, and when it fails you...  
fuck it. You only live once." - R*

I've read a thousand fictional romances, enough to know that things are not always what they seem. Plot twists. They're everywhere in a good story, and Riagan O'Sullivan is one ginormous unexpected development. One I didn't see coming.

Look, I know what you're thinking. How could I possibly agree to go with a stranger who is currently still wearing the blood-stained shirt he had on when he killed another human being in cold blood barely an hour ago? You must think I'm crazy.

To tell you the truth, I guess I am.

My *nonna* used to remind my sisters and me to always trust our guts and our hearts. Mind you, I'm a logical person. One who doesn't quite understand feelings and all that jazz, but I do trust my instincts, and my instincts are telling me that the man currently leaning back on his airplane seat like a king on his throne is a big part of my story.

I never believed myself interesting enough to have a story to tell.

That's why I spent so much time with my nose stuck in a book or with my head in the clouds.

I also don't understand this feeling in the pit of my stomach. What I do know is that it has never happened until this man.

I feel it now, and I felt it once before when I first met him all those nights ago.

I woke up this morning with the intent of surprising my sister Arianna. I had only good intentions, and then the day took a turn for the worse. I almost got whacked in the middle of a busy street in broad daylight, and no one, not one single person, stopped to help but the man sitting quietly next to me. The man, most people would take one good look at and decide he is a criminal and run in the opposite direction.

Is he a stranger? He is.

Do I know him at all? No, I do not.

Is he a criminal? By the way he looked so smug while he blew another man's brains, I would guess that's a big heck yes.

Am I afraid? Again... no.

Why am I not afraid? I wonder. It is unsettling because what makes him different than all the others?

Every other man who has fired a gun around me made me fear for my life, yet this time it doesn't feel like those times. Riagan doesn't feel like all the ones before.

Maybe it is his eyes.

His eyes remind me of my favorite color.

Light blue.

It also reminds me of a sunny day at the beach.

My absolute dream.

Arianna used to say that you could tell a lot about a person by their eyes.

The eyes never lie, even when our mouths do.

His eyes didn't make me uncomfortable for the short amount of time I held his gaze.

On the contrary, he made me feel things I'd never felt before. Things I've only read in my books.

Then, his words.

*I would rather cut my own heart out with pliers, sweetheart, than cause you any harm.*

I admit that's a bit much for someone who doesn't really know me. He could be lying.

But something tells me he's not a liar.

He looks like a man that says what he means and means what he says.

For my sake, I hope my instincts are correct.

I'm shaken when there's turbulence, making me hold on tightly to my seatbelt.

*Just a few more hours... Mila, you can do this.*

Three hours and forty-five minutes, that's how long Riagan said the flight is.

Three hours and forty-five minutes in this bird box that could fail and lead me to my death at any minute.

But I could also die in a car crash.

Walking down the street.

I can even die at the hands of the man sitting two feet from me.

Sighing, I think, what are the odds he would lend me his phone so I can research or read a good book online to pass the time? Moments like this, when I'm anxious and out of my element, my phone and reading tablet are my saving grace. *Think about something else, Mila.*

*Look at the bright side.*

I gaze out the airplane's window, taking in the thick mass of clouds stretching off in the distance. Now that I'm in the sky and on my way, my excitement is sinking in.

I'm flying. I am actually going somewhere other than looking out the window and feeling envious of everything with wings that gets to fly to other places and not be bound to the same city.

We're headed to Turks and Caicos. Forget for a moment the killers on the loose aiming for my head or stranger danger—the enchanted and magical archipelago has been on my top five places to see before I die.

Now, I'm on my way there.

This morning I was trying to figure out how to stay afloat, and now I'm flying.

Plot twists... I tell you.

When the view of clouds, and more clouds, and oh, look, more clouds, gets boring, I let my mind drift back to when I first met Riagan O'Sullivan. Over seven years ago, on one Halloween night, I came across a giant man with a butterfly tattoo on his throat. The dark night didn't allow me to see much of him, but I do remember the tattoos on his neck and his voice. Rough and manly, letting me know he was much older than my fourteen years back then. I remember how lonely it felt to be outside our mansion in my pretty butterfly costume that I made with old clothes that didn't fit my sisters anymore with no one to share it with. Yes, my sisters were there, but they had appearances to uphold. I, on the other hand, was hiding in the backyard, looking up at the stars, counting them, and daydreaming of a day like today,



and there he was. Looking a bit less rugged than he does right now, but with the same intense energy, smoking a cigarette as if the nasty habit didn't take years off his life. A fact I shared with him to break the ice.

He doesn't know it, but he was the first person to speak to me outside of my family and the employees. The first man to treat me like a human and not an inconvenience or a mistake.

Miraculously, life was less bland after that night.

I didn't see him again until this morning, but things started to look up after meeting him.

I started to paint more, and Carlotta got me all I needed to do it when my parents denied me that much.

She also got me my first computer, which she later convinced my sisters that I needed for academic purposes and that it was our secret. I did use it to learn, but I also used it to write pen pal letters. A program to help anonymous people feel less alone. It worked.

From that night on, I didn't feel so lonely, so I guess this man was my good luck charm back then. I don't know about it now. The jury is still out on that one.

Although he didn't seem threatening then, and he doesn't feel that way now.

Noticing movement from the corner of my eye, I turn away from the window and watch as the man Riagan called Kelly steps out of the pilot's cabin, walks to where Riagan is seated and says something in his ear then goes back to the cockpit.

"That's rude." I blurt out cause the silence and boredom are getting to me. I look at where Riagan is seated, scrolling on his phone.

"What is rude?" My eyes travel from his neck to his face and I watch him smile. When he smiles, one side of his mouth lifts higher than the other. Suddenly, it hits me that I'm in an airplane on my way to a new place with a super-hot, much older guy with ink-covered, tan muscles.

Swallowing hard, I tell him. "Secrets. Sharing secrets in front of other people is rude."

His smile widens, and my stomach does a double flip. I watch as he places the phone down next to his gun without looking away from me. My heart slows for a second as he stays silent. What is he thinking? If he smiled, then he wouldn't be mad at my comment, right? But I've seen men lash out with smiles on their faces. Why must humans be so confusing? That is why I

prefer plants. They're easy to comprehend. They only need water, light, and a gentle touch.

But don't we all?

"You are right," he says.

"I know I am," I whisper.

He laughs again. Why is he laughing? I didn't make a joke. "Secrets are rude. Although Kelly didn't share a secret, sweetheart. He was letting me know that all is set for once we land."

I frown. "You're correct. That is not a secret. He could have just said it out loud."

"He could have. Next time, I'll make sure he does."

"I am sorry." I blurt out again. Jeez. Here we go. I'll start to babble, and he'll get annoyed. Ducking my head, turning my face, and looking out the window again, using it as a shield for what will undoubtedly come next.

"Mila." His voice is commanding, yet hard and soft at the same time. How he does it, I do not know. "Look at me." He commands gently.

It takes me a few seconds, but I do as he says. I try to look at him without bowing my head and letting my hair cover me from view like my ball cap used to do. My eyes meet his long enough for me to find warmth instead of anger or annoyance. That I am used to, but not warmth. Not from people who are not used to people like me. People that don't fit in their perfect boxes.

"Don't ever say sorry. Not to me. Not to anyone. Not for speaking or asking questions. You only say sorry when you hurt someone. Someone who does not deserve it, and sweetheart, you haven't hurt me, so there is no need to say sorry. You want to spit facts all the way to the islands? You fucking do that, I am all ears. You want to stay in silence? We'll do that. But what you won't do is say sorry for being you." After he is done, all I can do is sit there with my heart beating fast and my mind reeling from the words that just left his mouth. The people in my life are used to my quirkiness, and they even encourage me to just be me. But deep down, I know at times, they get frustrated, even if it's just for a second. They're humans, and they're not perfect. I get it, but at times, I felt like they didn't get me either. That I was alone in my uniqueness, and here this man is telling me to fully be myself and to never apologize for it.

I am left speechless.

I panic for a moment trying to find the right words, but I come up empty, so I say the first thing that comes to mind. The easier answer.

“Okay.” I track his movements as he grabs a pack of cigarettes from inside his shirt’s breast pocket, takes one cigarette out, and places it between his lips. Is he going to smoke here? Does he know that secondhand smoke kills?

I watch the cigarette between his lips when he says. “Okay.”

I guess that’s it.

So easy.

Nothing has ever been this simple.

It’s odd.

Before now, he hadn’t said much after we boarded the plane. Yes, answered my questions about Gus but vaguely. He told me all about how Gus, the man who has been my guard for years, is a double agent. I refuse to think of him as a rat, even if my sister will see it just like that. Gus was tasked to take care of me on both sides. By my sister, Kadra’s command, and Riagan.

There’s more to this story, and my mind won’t rest until I find out exactly what is going on.

There has to be more to it.

I’ll figure it out.

My eyes find him again. For a person who has trouble keeping eye contact, I sure find myself wanting to look at him more.

This is all so new...

So exciting and freeing.

I couldn’t do this before.

I was afraid, and now... here with him, I am not.

The plane shakes some more, but my nerves are long gone.

Riagan said he would offer me silence if that were what I wished but I do not.

I don’t mind his voice. I quite enjoy the sound of it and of his laugh.

I notice he is not one of those people who has to fill the silence with a random, basic conversation like what’s your favorite color? Instead, he breaks the silence after a while, “You like plants, Mila?” He mumbles with an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth while pointing at my right wrist, where I have a handcrafted bracelet with a small four-leaf clover charm on it. I made this bracelet for myself and one for Carlotta a couple of years ago.

Nodding, I look his way. “I do.” I brightly smile his way. “Do you?”

Grinning, he flicks a tattooed finger to his left underarm, where there is a

tattoo of a three-leaf clover. “Yeah, sweetheart, I do.”

Interesting.

Giddy, I lean forward in my seat towards him. “Did you know the clover was associated with the Irish people after the druids were driven out of Ireland?” I know all about it. I made it my mission to learn as much as I can in case a day comes when I can’t anymore. Learning was difficult for me because all I knew was taught to me either by my sisters, Carlotta, or the internet since I was deprived of an education. Most people take the privilege of school and learning for granted, but I know what it feels like to look at a book and have no idea what it says or how shameful it feels to avoid conversation because you’re afraid that you don’t know what they do and you’ll get mocked for it.

So, I used the little resources I had because of my parents’ neglect and worked hard. I make it my mission to learn about everything and anything every hour of the day. I am always learning something, and plants? I am already an expert on them. I will toot my own horn.

“I did not know that Mila. Tell me more.” He says in a tone I can’t decipher.

What a strange feeling. My chest feels tight, and my belly flips as if every molecule in my body recognizes him. His voice.

Beaming, I do as he says.

And I tell him more all the way till we land in another place.

A magical place.

With this strange but familiar, at the same time, man.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*Steal my time, rob me of air, but this dream?  
No one will take it from me.*

# PLANTS & SHIT

## RIAGAN



*"I saw a shooting star and thought of you." -  
R*

"I did not know that, Mila. Tell me more." I hate listening to other people speak. It is mainly due to the fact that most of the time, they have nothing useful or of substance to say. Nothing that interests me in any way, aside from business and money.

But this girl could easily talk about literal shit all day, and I would listen patiently and ask for more.

I also lied to her. I said I wouldn't lie to her, but some lies are justified. Little white lies, they're called.

I did it regardless, just so I could listen to her voice and watch as her face lit up while she talked about things she loves. Of course, I know what the clover means to my people. I also know what it means to the Irish clan.

The three-leaf clover was used to explain the holy trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It also represents faith, hope, and love.

In my world, the three-leaf clover represents power, money, and chaos.

A fourth leaf is where we get the luck from.

I don't tell her any of that. Instead, I listen to her explanation of the plant.

While she talks, I look at her.

Fucking insanely gorgeous.

That would be the only fair way to describe her.

And I felt that didn't do her any justice.

There was the slightest hint of exoticness in her features, in her sun-

kissed skin, golden mane of curly, waist-length hair, and in her light blue eyes. Eyes that in the sunlight, looked more green than blue. Her jaw is small, her nose was small too and straight, her lips full, her brows a bit darker than her hair.

Just... too fucking pretty.

It wasn't even fair to the rest of the world.

The Parisi princess was a cute kid back when I first saw her, but the woman before me is drop-dead gorgeous without even trying. A skill most women don't possess.

And her voice.

Although soft, it was just as pretty as the rest of her too. Sultry, one might say. That one being me, who definitely thought it was sultry as fuck.

This girl.

This girl who looks like sunshine in a bottle is a walking contradiction.

She's dressed in a floral white dress that makes her look like a princess straight out of a fairytale. Making her look as if she fell into a time portal that sucked her out of the fifties and dropped her straight into today. I always went for the prom queen type of woman with big tits and fake everything. The complete opposite of this girl. In truth, women were just quick fucks to me. Nothing serious. Just a body I could get lost in and escape the gruesome shit I deal with daily even if it's only for a few hours, but then I met this girl, and with just one smile, I was forgetting my own damn name. I was breaking all the rules. "Riagan." I smile wide when she says my name. Fuck me, but I love the way she says it. Riagan, not Rian. She calls me the name my mother gave me at birth. "Did you know the clover plant is a member of the pea family?"

"No, I didn't." It's true. My knowledge of the plant only goes so far. She gets this adorable look on her face that says she can't fathom the idea of me not knowing that. "Did you know that for every 10,000 three-leaf clovers there is one lucky four-leaf clover?" I offer a fun fact of my own. Am I trying to impress her? I am, and I couldn't give one single fuck if it makes me seem lame. It's worth it.

I watch in fascination as her mouth parts and her eyes meet mine for a brief second before she goes back to looking at my cheek. "That fact I missed."

I hold in the laugh bubbling in my chest. She's not only adorable but funny as hell and she doesn't even realize it.



“Now you know.” I lean back in the seat, cracking my neck as I do. Fuck I hate flying. I kill, lie, and cheat for a living, and I’m afraid of flying. The beauty sitting a few feet from me is the perfect distraction, though. “Might I ask why you like plants so much?” Most women enjoy jewelry, money, and status, yet this girl likes simple things. Like plants. She knows way too much about them.

Mila leans back on her seat and stretches her legs, getting comfortable. The look on her face makes me wish I hadn’t asked the question at all. She’s no longer beaming with excitement. “You don’t have to tell me, sweetheart.”

She sighs but doesn’t look my way. Instead, she looks down at her hands, which are now placed between her legs. “It’s okay,” she whispers, and I hate it. What the fuck happened inside that hellish home that made her afraid of being who she is? That cunt Parisi is lucky his daughter made him disappear, and I can’t get my hands on him. I would gut him like a fucking fish before I pissed on his corpse. Fathers are supposed to care for and protect their daughters. They’re supposed to be the one safe person they can always turn to without hesitation, but that fucker was their nightmare, and there is no doubt in my mind that he is the reason why this young girl has demons in her eyes when she thinks no one is looking. “Did you know that loneliness is an all-too-common feeling experienced by a staggering number of people?”

“Are you lonely, Mila?” I speak up, but I don’t think she hears me until I see her lips pull up in a sad smile.

“Not so much anymore, but I was very lonely at one point. Then I learned about plants and how they help more than just the planet.” The sadness in her eyes is gone. Thank fuck because I can’t stand tears. “Most people like the way plants look in their homes and offices. Their aesthetic. For me, plants gave me something to take care of. When I spend time around plants, I feel deeply connected to them, which to me, is necessary to combat loneliness. It also gave me a purpose.” Mila takes a deep breath and continues. “I find it… difficult to connect with other people, but not plants. They’re easy to love and care for.” When she puts it like that, I couldn’t agree more. Humans are rotten, but plants, and even animals, are easier to care for. To love. I stay quiet, enjoying her talking and sharing with me something she loves even if she doesn’t realize that is exactly what she is doing. She’s giving me pieces of herself and I’m starving for more. “Do you have a favorite plant? A flower?” she asks so sweetly I can actually feel my heart skip a beat.

Leaning forward, I’m so close I can smell her. Sweet. So sweet. She

smells of a mix between coconut and vanilla. Mouthwatering. When I get close enough that I can feel her breath on my skin, I open my mouth to answer her question, but before I can get a word out we are interrupted. At this moment, I feel like throwing the person, who, with their sudden interruption made Mila retreat into herself and look back towards the window, off the plane.

“Would you like something to drink, sir? Or can I offer you something to eat” The flight attendant, Imogen asks.

I don't miss her flirtatious tone and sexual innuendo. I don't fuck where I eat. My employees know this. So where does this woman get off, acting as if I would even consider touching her with a ten-inch pole. She's an attractive woman, yes, but she is not 'the woman.' Plus, she's pissing me the fuck off when she's deliberately ignoring my guest.

Turning my face, I address the girl currently looking out the window and tapping her chest simultaneously. Why does she do that? I wonder. Does her chest hurt? “Mila.” I try my damndest to sound less freighting and more gentle when I speak to her. She reminds me of a baby deer. Incredibly adorable, yet very vulnerable. Mila turns her face, and I have to take a moment to find my breath. This girl has ruined me for all women. “Yes?”

“Would you like anything to drink? Are you hungry?”

She cautiously looks at Imogen, then her gaze returns to me. “Water is fine.” The second the words leave her mouth, a subtle low growl comes from her. Her stomach. Heat creeps up her neck and tints her cheek a pretty shade of pink.

I smile when she ducks her head in embarrassment. Fuck, adorable. I'm so fucked.

Without looking away from her, I order. “She will have a grilled chicken sandwich. No lettuce and no tomatoes. A side of Mac and cheese and an order of waffle fries. A coke for her and a glass of whiskey for me.” When I'm done, both women are staring at me with faces of disbelief. One is looking at me, somewhat embarrassed, and the one I care for is looking at me as if I've read her mind, and now she's freaked the fuck out. Yeah, perhaps I'm pushing, but fuck it, she's hungry. When Imogen doesn't move, I turn to regard her with a frosty and indifferent look. I'm not a piece of shit. I don't mistreat women, but this one thought she was being slick, and that shit doesn't bid well with me. “Go on. My guest is hungry.”

Imogen's face contorts into an angry scowl, but she has the good sense to

keep her trap shut. I gesture for her to hurry, which pisses her off more.

Before she leaves in the direction she came from, she's stopped by the sweetest voice. "Excuse me." Both Imogen and I turn to Mila. "Do you know the death rate for airplanes?" I can't help but smile when Mila directs her question at the flight attendant without looking away from the window.

The flight attendant glares at her, then simultaneously rolls her eyes up to her eyebrows. Before she says anything that might get her ass thrown off this plane, I give her a warning glare. One that says 'say a word to upset my guess, and it will be the last words you speak.' I told the woman. "Leave us," I add.

"She doesn't like her job very much does she?" The littlest Parisi finally looks away from the window and looks my way. She looks at my lips, to be precise. A smirk tips the corner of her mouth.

"What makes you think that?" I ask, enjoying her eyes on me too damn much. She might not look me in the eyes, but fuck, does her gaze burn my skin, and the most endearing thing about it is that she has no idea how much she affects me. None.

"I can sense... attitude," she mumbles.

"Has nothing to do with her job, sweetheart. I pay her well and she gets to travel the world."

"Then I don't understand what her dilemma is." Her brows furrow as she most likely thinks of what could have possibly made the flight attendant act so rude towards her.

"Some people are just petty, butterfly." I shrug. "Petty, rude, and boring, and that's reason enough to pretend they don't exist." I don't tell her that the reason Imogen was rude to her was due to the fact that she can't compare. Her rudeness was driven by jealousy. Plain and simple.

"Butterfly? Why did you call me that? That is not my name. My name is \_\_\_"

Holding back a chuckle, I say. "I know your name. I called you butterfly because you remind me of them. Pretty, delicate, and rare."

Her eyes turn a brighter shade of turquoise, and the corner of her mouth slowly lifts. "My father used to call me retard, so I guess calling me a bug is a step up."

The moment the awful word slips from her mouth, a need to turn this plane around and pay her father a little visit is taking over my senses. That motherfucker Parisi has always been and will always be a cunt, even to the

day he takes his last breath. “Don’t say that shit.” I try to refrain from chastising her.

“You know I am autistic, correct?”

I shrug. Of course, I know.

It means nothing to me.

I watch her watching me back with a frown on her face and her eyes moving at a rapid pace. I don’t need to be a mind reader to understand she’s trying to gauge my reaction to her confession.

“Because of my disability, I will miss subtle clues. You will need to explain things directly to me.” I hear her.

I look only at her. “Whatever you need, Mila,” I tell her, unbothered.

She nods. “Thank you.” she smiles, then says. “I like it. Butterfly. Sweetheart, too.” she clarifies.

“I like it too, Mila.” I like it way too much. More than a man like me should.

“I’m not weak, nor am I stupid.” She whispers shily, surprising me with the sudden change. “Most people find out about my disability and look at me differently as if I am lacking somehow. They’re wrong. I am very smart, and I might say smarter than most, and my disability does not define me. It’s called Asperger’s Syndrome or autism spectrum disorder, and it is a part of me, yes, but it’s not everything. I’m more than a disability.”

She is.

She’s kind when she’s known only harshness and cruelty.

She is brilliant and talented as fuck.

I don’t see her differently, and I never will. I never have.

I nod, looking at her while she looks down at her hands. “I know.”

“I’m tough.” She mumbles so softly I almost miss it.

“You are.”

“I can take care of myself and my people.” She speaks a bit louder now.

“I know you can.” But now I’m here, and I’ll take care of you. I want to say, but I swallow the words, not wanting to reveal all my truths early and spook her.

Her eyes try to focus on my face for a second longer than last time, and even though I had her eyes for less than a minute trained on mine, I could feel her gaze burning my soul. Those beautiful eyes of hers will surely be the death of me because one look from her years ago burned itself in my memory. Just one look, and she made herself my business.

“My assessment of you from before is incorrect.” She says while tapping her chin three times and looking anywhere but my face.

I suppress the need to laugh because I don’t want to make her feel like I didn’t take her seriously. I lean back in my seat and ask with a straight face. “How so?”

“Well, back at the alley, I thought you were a villain who came to hurt me...” Her words sound childlike, and it angers me how such a tenderhearted heart could ever be treated the way she was. Grinding my teeth, I suppress the need to tell her how I really feel about her scum of a family, but instead, I remain quiet, allowing her to continue. “But you haven’t hurt me, and I don’t believe you will.” A breath I didn’t think I was holding escapes me when she says it. Good. At least she doesn’t fear me. In this world, there are plenty of things a girl like her should fear, but not me. Never me, and from this moment on, if I have anything to say about it, she will never fear anything again. Because even when I wasn’t with her, I was present. In many ways. She just doesn’t realize it. She will. “I think you’re a little bit of both.” Her softly spoken words interrupt my thoughts.

Taking out my zippo, I play with the metal lid. “Both?”

She nods enthusiastically as her wild curls jump up and down around her face. “The villain and the hero.” She beams before leaning back on her seat, holding tightly to her seatbelt.

She thought of me as a villain and now as a hero, too.

Something in my chest moves.

There’s pressure, and I have to try hard to catch my breath because her trust in a man like me is admirable, even after the life she’s had. And yet, she saw me murder a man and still sees heroic qualities in me. No one has ever looked at me like she has in just a day.

See me the way this sweet girl has.

Except for two people.

My parents.

So right here, right now, I vow to myself that I will treasure her trust and even in my darkest moment, I will hold on to it. Because a man like me knows a girl like her is too fucking good to be true.

She should have been the last woman I was interested in. Mila is sheltered and kindhearted. She sees light in the darkness. Goodness in the hopeless.

Her skin is perfectly intact, and mine is not only inked but scarred from

the sins I've committed throughout my life.

I enjoy the sound of my gun going off right before I claim a life, and she gets triggered by it.

This hold she has on me is inexplicable, though maybe that was what I liked best about her.

But there was just something about Mila.

It doesn't help that she is a knockout.

And she doesn't even know it. I'd never met a beautiful woman who wasn't at least somewhat aware of their attractiveness.

The light moved higher, taking in the ends of her curly blond hair that was fanned outward around her face.

Fuck.

And what a face.

Full, somewhat oversized lips, prominent cheekbones, a straight nose, somewhat natural brows - which was refreshing. Actually, as a whole, she seemed to have almost no makeup on, save for a little pink to her lips which I think is the natural hue of her lips. Gorgeous.

That night when I first met her, I left the Volpe mansion and tried to push the image of the girl with sad eyes out of my mind, but I couldn't. I failed. I wondered if she was okay. If she was being mistreated in any way. At first, it was just innocent, until years later, when the lines I drew started to blur, and I couldn't stop seeing her. Those damn butterflies in her hair. Those unfocused, pained, light blue eyes looking up at me. And it suddenly became my fucking business.

Yeah... women like Mila don't end up with men like me, but fuck it, if I'm not going to give it all I got.

Twenty minutes later, Imogen arrives with our food and with a new attitude. Then, I spent the rest of the flight nursing a glass of whiskey while Mila stuffs her face and shares a dozen or more scientific facts she learned just this morning.

Without a doubt, I can say these four hours with her were some of my best in a long time. If not the best.

Before, I didn't quite understand my infatuation with the youngest Parisi. I thought it was only pity.

Until I understood what it really was.

What is different about her from the ones who came before.

Mila Areya Parisi feels like home.

She is home.

# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*You came into my life when I least expected it  
& my heart healed when it recognized you.*



**ISLANDS BREEZE & MAGICAL  
DREAMS**

MILA



*"Open your eyes and see. See all that we could be." - R*

**M**y heart picked up as the plane's door lowered, and the breeze touched my face almost like a gentle first kiss. Closing my eyes, I save this moment in my memory for the dark days to come by taking a long and deep breath, then open my eyes once again. I try blinking three times, but I don't wake up like other times, when I've been caught in a dream.

No, I am certainly not dreaming.

This is real.

With the eagerness of a child on Christmas morning, I step out and step down the stairs. The first thing I notice is how bright it is and how tropical the weather feels. Then I take in the huge airport, not far from where we are. With each step I take, I feel the invisible chains my father placed on me break free.

I feel them breaking, and suddenly I am able to breathe without feeling like I'm fighting for my next breath.

This is it.

I am actually here.

This is my first time outside of the country and the first time I am so far from home. Far from all I know and love, my sisters.

Everything is different from Detroit here.

Even the smell.

Like one of those tropical-scented candles mother loved so much.

Ginevra Parisi might've paid zero attention to me and gave little to no affection to my sisters, but she sure did love her happy pills, father's money, and scented candles. I guess being odd is a common trait on her side of the family.

Steering my thoughts away from my absent mother, I focus on the now.

In my excitement to leave the plane behind and explore this magical place, I don't watch my last step, and I stumble forward ready to hit the ground, but before I do, a huge hand grabs me gently by the waist, and I am pulled back into a hard chest.

I prepare for the inevitable. The itching on my skin and labored breaths when I feel the unwanted touch, but it never comes. In its place, there's that tingling sensation in my stomach from before.

From when he looks or talks softly at me.

The contact doesn't last long because, before I know it, I am missing his touch as he releases me once he is sure I am holding on to the railings and steps back.

Missing his touch.

Me, the person who hates not only strangers' eyes on me but their touch, misses the touch of a man whose hands are not clean but guilty of spilling blood, yet I don't mind it. Not one bit. If Carlotta could see me now. She wouldn't believe it.

I hate messes and messy people, and here I am.

One giant mess, and he is witnessing it. I don't hide it like I have with others all my life.

I shared my condition with him, and he just shrugged as if it was nothing. As if me being different from him means nothing at all to him. I didn't know what I expected, but his reaction took me by surprise. Normally, people recoil or get a sympathetic look on their faces as if I've suddenly declared myself brainless. But a shrug? I . . . well, I don't recall ever getting that reaction before.

My brain is in shambles, and every second I spend with Riagan has proven that, maybe, just maybe a messy life, heart, and mind are not that bad after all. This is bad. Very bad. Something you need to know about me is that I have certain compulsions and obsessions. Ones who make sense to me but not to everyone else. When I find something fascinating...I keep it for myself.

I study it, I take care of it until I become attached to it.

Riagan O’Sullivan, with his big, expressive eyes, pretty smile, and weird ability to make me feel things I have never felt before is becoming a dangerous obsession. One I am not sure I can fight.

The wind blows softly, touching my face which in return makes me smile.

I remember that I am not alone when my newest obsession speaks up. “Can you smell the sea from all the way here?” Scrunching my nose, I look over my shoulder and notice Riagan towering over me. The sun is so bright that I have to raise my hand to cover my eyes a bit. I think I’ve never witnessed the sun shining this bright, or maybe it’s just my mind playing games with me. All I truly know is Detroit’s weather—it’s sunny days can’t compare to this.

Without meeting Riagan’s eyes, I mumble truthfully. “I wouldn’t know exactly what the sea smells like.” I assume salt and seaweed. “I’ve never been to a beach before. What I know is from the internet and what Carlotta and Gus tell me.” Frowning, I try not to beat myself up for admitting that aloud. In truth, I feel stupid. What must he think of me? That not only I’m a naive girl but an inexperienced one at mostly everything. Taking a deep breath, I cool my nerves and look straightforward, wondering how it is possible to see the sea from all the way up here.

Feeling braver than I felt moments ago, I give this man that I don’t really know another truth of mine. “I don’t know much about the world aside from what I read on the internet and watch on TV.”

“That’s changing from here on out, sweetheart.” He says in that rough yet soft tone of his that makes me want to listen to his voice for hours. It’s weird how someone’s voice can cause such an unfamiliar reaction in me.

Confused, I turned his way again. “How so?” My eyes trail from his neck to his eyes, and I’m proud that I manage to hold his gaze for far longer than I ever looked at anyone else. What is it about him? Why do I act differently with him, and why do I like feeling his eyes on me when before it displeased me tremendously to have any attention on me? Good or bad. But not him. Not this man. The question is why?

“You’ll see,” he says in a husky tone, different from before, that makes the hair on the back of my neck rise and goosebumps spread on my skin.

“You’re so confusing to me,” I whisper to myself. What an odd day. My life has always been ordinary until now.

Out of nowhere, a sports car—a bright blue Ferrari— pulls up in front of

him with the doors pulled up.

I've seen plenty of expensive cars before, but none ever got my attention. Cars are material things, but this one is too pretty with its color that reminds me of the sea not so far from us.

After a long moment of us standing in silence watching the car, Riagan side-steps me, walks around the Ferrari, and stops next to the passenger side. I'm no longer admiring the car but looking at the tattooed giant. There's a wide grin and an intense look in his eyes. He motions for me to come forward.

"You only get one life, Mila Parisi. Do you want to waste it away wondering what it feels like to truly live and not just exist, or do you want to come with me and see for yourself how beautiful and freeing it could be?"

His words wash over me, reminding me of my reality.

*Living and not just existing...* How does that feel? Because all I know is surviving. If I could just survive and endure one more day in solitude, then perhaps something good would come the next day, but it never did. It got better, yes, but it was always the same.

Lonely.

Colorless.

Even when I stayed positive and did my best to be grateful to be alive.

I was alive, but I was not living.

His words penetrate my mind, and I find myself stuck between my logical side and my curious side.

A part of me tells me this is dangerous, and the other part of me, the little girl who lived in only shadows, craves more.

More from life than lonely castles and cold shadows.

She wants to make her dreams a reality.

What this man is doing now.

Because it must be meant to be, no? Flying. Visiting other countries. This stunning place, Turks and Caicos are all dreams I never thought possible, and yet, I am here.

*One day, Mila...* My sister's voice from when we were young girls dreaming of a better life plays through my mind, drowning all the doubts.

I made a choice.

I listened to her voice and ignored all logic.

Looking at his very expensive car once again, I notice it's a two-seat vehicle. I voice the first thought that comes to mind. "What about your

friend?" I point behind me to where his friend or employee, I still don't know which, stands behind me without saying much. The man looks like someone out of a fashion campaign, but there's an air of savagery and superiority around him. One much like Riagan's. The 'dare look at me in the wrong way and I'll slit your throat from ear to ear, chop you into pieces and make sure your remains never get found' kind.

A shiver runs down my spine.

For a second there, I forgot I was in the presence of criminals, and this is not a fictional tale.

These men are in the same line of business as my sister, and they don't call her the queen of darkness for nothing.

"Kelly can fetch himself a ride and meet us later. Can't you, Kelly?" Riagan reaches his hand out to me again, beckoning me to him.

"Asshole." The man, Kelly, says loud enough for his boss to hear.

"Hey." I turn to him without any regard to my safety. I must be losing it. "That's not nice."

"I'm not nice, love." He laughs, a charming laugh.

Oddly, it's not a cruel laugh.

Jovial.

Friendly, almost.

Huh.

"You should be," I utter.

"I should." He side-steps me and climbs down the plane's stairs heading in the direction of a black van.

I noticed how he tries his best not to touch me.

Which I appreciate, but it has me wondering how he knows?

Did Riagan order him not to touch him? But how would Riagan know? Then the scene at the alley where the mean man pulled my hair and my panic attack comes to mind.

Ah... that is how.

"Mila." Riagan's voice snaps me out of it and I look his way. The smile is gone but the intense look on his face remains.

My eyes travel from his mouth down to his heavily-tattooed hand.

And I moved.

Towards him.

I choose to go with him...again.



## Riagan

“Wow.” Mila breathes out, enchanted with the sight before her. I understand what she must be feeling right now looking at all the beauty around us.

I’m not enthralled with the view of the private mansion nor the beach, but her.

The sight of her always manages to catch me off guard.

How can something as simple as witnessing her experience things for the first time fill me with fucking joy? Fuels me with purpose? But it does. All throughout the entire car ride, she kept looking out the window with her nose pressed to the windshield with this look of wonder in her pretty blue eyes that both saddened and made me want to show her more of this world. I felt something inside my chest start to twinge at the sight of her sweet innocence. “Is this place yours, too?” she asks, while pointing forward.

I follow her gaze to the mansion that was built by my grandfather in the middle of a private beach here on the island. The property was passed down from my grandmother to my Mum in hopes of one day being given to my future wife. My grandfather purchased it as a wedding gift for his wife, my grandmother because she loved the sea, and so did my Mum.

Truthfully, the clan has many properties. Not just here in Turks and Caicos but also around the Caribbean. Not only for privacy and vacation purposes, but also for businesses and to hide money.

“Yes,” I reply while typing the key code to the gates, and I wait for the buzz before it opens, allowing us access to the property.

“Do you own the beach, too?” she asks, still looking at all that surrounds her with childlike curiosity.

I step back, allowing her room to walk in front of me. “I do.”

“I can’t believe you have your own beach. I love the ocean so much!” she whispers in awe, moving further inside and walking up the cement path that leads to the house. “I am going to love everything about this place. I just know it. I feel it.” She takes a long pause and continues. “Victorian doctors used to prescribe their patients a visit to the seaside, rather than traditional medicine. The sea is so good to us.” She then turns and smiles at me. Fuck. I notice her expressions are limited, but she always has a smile on her face

when she looks or talks about something she loves.

It's a thing of beauty.

She is a thing of beauty.

I did an extended amount of research on Neurodiversity. The first time I ever saw this girl, I noticed quickly how she couldn't hold my gaze and how quickly she changed topics. I figured there was more to her shyness and sheltered background. I dug a little and found she is on the spectrum, something that at first, I didn't quite understand because of my poor knowledge of the matter. I didn't think she was any different from me or her sisters until I gradually became fascinated with anything to do with Mila Parisi. Yes, her brain works differently than most, but she's perfect to me just the way she is.

I fucking love how brilliant and honest she is.

It is refreshing nowadays when everyone hides who they are just to fit in or please society.

Not her, though.

That is not an Asperger's thing but a Mila thing.

She's rare, and I can't seem to get enough of her.

"What is it?" I snap out of the witchcraft trance her smile puts me on and find her frowning at me. The sun is setting soon, and the sky is split into colors. An orange and pink hue that is now bouncing on her skin, making her appear even more unreal than normal. "Why do you have that look on your face? Did I say something out of line? Cause I need to warn you. Sometimes words escape me, and I don't mean them to. If that ha—" I interrupt her adorable blabber. That's new now, too. I find shit adorable.

Just her shit, though. Everyone else's ignorance or annoying tendencies make me want to point my gun to their heads and shut them up permanently. "You did nothing wrong," I say before clearing my throat. *You are doing everything right.* I want to say. Instead, I tell her. "I just like your smile." How can a five-foot-one girl turn me into a sap without me even realizing it. Suddenly, the wind rushes and blows all those thick golden curls of hers in every direction, making her look ethereal. I take a second just to look at her. Her cheeks are rosy, and her mouth is slightly parted while her eyes are stuck looking at something in my chest. For a moment, I catch her looking at my face, but then her eyes fall back to my bearded cheek. I caught her off guard. For a girl who has many facts and so much interesting knowledge inside her head, one simple compliment makes her tongue-tied.



I like it. A whole lot.

The ones who know me. Really know me. Know that I am a man who finds pleasure in only three things. Fucking up the people who cross me, making money, and of course, a good old fashion fucking.

Now, I add her to the list of things I find pleasure in because I do find the little things she does fascinating. For example, catching her off guard gives me a thrill I only get when I'm fighting or when I spill the blood of my enemies. And that adorable deer in the headlight look she gets whenever I say something she doesn't quite know what to do with? Fucking addictive.

Feeling triumphant, I nod towards the house and take the lead. "Come, I am sure you're tired."

"I don't think I'll ever get tired of this." She says to my retreating back, meaning the island. *Good. Cause I don't think I'll ever get tired of you.* I think to myself as we make our way towards the front doors. I knew long before now that something about this girl called out to my dark soul, but seeing her in my space and my world sets it all in stone.

Here, surrounded by enchanting turquoise waters, beautiful flora, and the whitest sand on earth, it all fails to compare. For days on end, I imagined her roaming through my place, her aura only adding allure to this land. I wasn't a man capable of softness because my upbringing didn't allow much of that, and I quite honestly never cared to be soft or gentle.

Until her.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*One smile from her and I was gone.*

**JUST PERFECT**

MILA



*“The man is one giant, tattooed teddy bear with sharp claws.” - M*

I like his words.  
I like his smile.  
I like his home.

I more than like his home. All my life, living behind a screen didn't prepare me for the raw beauty of a place like this one. The images of pretty beach houses I saw online or in magazines whenever I was working on my vision board or wanted inspiration for my paintings— can't compare to this place. Riagan's home is something out of one of those luxury beach homes magazines that Carlotta loves so much, and that's saying something because I'm no stranger to grandeur and luxurious homes. The Parisi mansion exudes every essence of luxury, elegance, and over-the-top decor. But Riagan's stunning oceanfront mansion looks as if it's about 6,000 or 7,000 square feet. Balinese-inspired estate hidden away in a private oasis just a few feet from the famous 'white as snow' sand and turquoise waters of Turks and Caicos.

“By that look on your face, is it safe to assume you approve?” Do I catch a hint of amusement in his tone?

“Uh-huh...” *Good job, Mila. You know around a maximum of forty thousand words, and each day you learn a new one, yet the best you can come up with is 'Uh-huh'.* But what is worse is that it is not even a word but a sound. A sound used when people are agreeing with you, when they want to show that they understand what you are saying, or when they are answering

'yes' to a question. It is a less emphatic form of 'yes'.

I don't notice that I spaced out until he speaks again. "I'm glad."

He is glad that I approve.

Why?

Or is his response just a way to continue the conversation?

This is why, at times, I prefer my books over people. Books are easy. Simple. People are not. But I can already tell he's not like most people. That is why I don't feel forced to carry on a conversation with him. I want to. And I think... I think he doesn't mind me speaking too.

"Do you come here often?" I ask as I step inside his mansion. I have lost count of the amount of 'wows' and 'oh my Gods' I've said out loud from the moment we arrived. There's something about this place that feels right, and it has nothing to do with how beautiful it is or how secluded it is, making it the perfect home. It is so much more. Yes, it is a stunning estate, but the serenity I feel here is new to me.

The moment we step inside, I instantly miss the sea breeze, but I get over it just as quickly when I take in my stunning surroundings.

Minimalist yet classy decor with a touch of the sea.

Perfect.

Yes, perfect is the word that would describe it.

Riagan speaks, catching my attention. "Haven't been here for a long time." I frown at his odd tone. He no longer sounds amused. He seems... sad. Yes, sad. He is sad. Turning, I ignore the need to admire the tall ceiling, large glass windows, and beautiful facade. The stunning and colorful decor.

"Why haven't you been here? I would never leave this place if it were mine." I say wistfully. This is my dream house. It would also be the place I would run to escape reality. My safe place.

"This was once a home. A happy one. Now, every corner of this house feels haunted." He shrugs. That I understand all too well. An empty and loveless place doesn't feel like home.

His sad tone makes my chest feel tight. Lifting my hand to my chest, I tap it lightly, trying to ease the ache. *Every corner of this house feels haunted.* I want to know more, but before I can ask what he meant, he moves closer toward the living room area, and I follow.

The house has floor-to-ceiling windows with zero privacy, but the fenced yard remedies that by offering some privacy. *Kind of risqué if you ask me.*

The sun is setting soon, and the sunlight is fading, ready to allow the

moon room to breathe. The events of the day are slowly getting to me. I can't help but yawn, suddenly feeling tired. I haven't had this much excitement in a long time.

But then, a thought comes out of nowhere. With all the excitement, I forgot one of the reasons why I agreed to fly across the country with a complete stranger.

He said he needed me. The thought spiked a curiosity and a challenge in me that will most likely get me in trouble. There is no doubt about that, yet I can't find it in me to care. Not as much as I should. What is going on with me? A few hours. Only a few hours with him, and I'm already losing brain cells.

Before I space out or get distracted by other things, I ask what I've been meaning to do since I left the country with this man. "Earlier you said you needed something from me. What is it you need my help with?" There's a short moment of silence before he speaks. As I look at the tattoos peeking from under his shirt on his chest, I feel his gaze on me.

"You're tired." It's more like telling me than a question. Looking away from his chest, I try to focus on his face, but as soon as my eyes clash with his, I get nervous and look back down to his chest again, but this time I focus on his chain instead of his colorful tattoos.

"How about I give you a tour of this place in the morning. It looks ten times better in the daytime, and in the morning, we'll talk more." I count the visible diamonds on his chain, feeling contempt yet a bit disappointed he didn't clue me in now, but I am tired. "I would love that," I say shyly. Raising my head from his chest upwards, I watch as he nods at me once before saying. "Follow me. I'll show you to your room." He says while climbing the stairs.

*See, Mila. He didn't chop you into pieces. He's not the bad guy.* A little voice inside my brain says.

*There's always tomorrow...* another little voice taunts.

Ignoring them both, I follow Riagan as he guides me up a long staircase that leads to a narrow hallway with blue-painted walls, dim lighting, and a squeaky-clean floor. My heart beats steadily as I walk behind Riagan, noticing how sweet the air around here feels.

Blue.

I notice the color is everywhere. Blue walls. Blue decor.

Even though I know this is not a dream, it doesn't feel like reality. It

hasn't sunk in yet.

"This is where you'll sleep." He stops in front of a shiny and sleek silver door. Stopping, I notice the lack of people. Back home, there were men in suits everywhere, watching my every move, and of course the house staff, but here it's only us. I didn't see anyone else. "Where is the other man? Kelly?" I ask when we reach the door of the room I'm going to occupy during my stay here.

"Kelly will stay in the cottage out back." Riagan steps closer, and I get stuck between the door and his hard chest. He's close, yes, but not enough to touch me. I should feel intimidated, but I don't. "You needn't worry. You're safe here. You have my word."

I feel his hot breath on my skin, and I feel my stomach flip. "I'm not afraid." I blurt out.

"Good." He says gruffly, and I hold my breath when he raises his hand toward my face. Closing my eyes, I wait for his touch. This is too fast. All of these strange emotions are hitting me too fast.

When I think I'm about to discover how his touch feels, I'm disappointed when nothing happens. Opening my eyes, I quickly look up to see a small smile on his handsome face. What a tease.

Riagan opens the door like a perfect, tattooed gentleman.

Feeling as if I missed out on something monumental, I take a step inside the room, and without turning, I whisper, "Goodnight."

"Sweet dreams, butterfly. Until tomorrow." He whispers back before the door clicks shut behind me.

*Until tomorrow.*

Too tired to inspect and snoop around, I walk to the bed and drop like a sack of potatoes. "What in the world have I gotten myself into..." I spend ten minutes going over all the events of the day and going back and forth on every decision I made today before sleep wins and takes me under.

And even in my dreams, my not-so-villain follows me.

I dream of blue eyes, a tattooed neck, and blue butterflies.

# MESSAGE FROM C



M,

Did you know that in the Spanish language your name means miracle, while in Slavic, it translates to favored one? It suits you.

Because not only are you favored by me, but you're my little miracle.

- C



# PUSSY-WHIPPED

## RIAGAN



*"The stars aligned the night I first saw him."  
- M*

I once looked forward to the comfort this place provided, away from the crowded streets and duties of Philadelphia, but after a while, I stopped coming back here. It didn't feel the same. The air was no longer sweet because the memories kept choking me. Because here, in this place, surrounded by only beauty and sea, is where my father was planning to bring my Mum once he got a ring on her finger, but before he could make that happen, a series of unfortunate events happened that led to this moment in time.

My mother is no longer with us, but somehow, every time I visited this place, I felt her spirit here. It's fucking bullshit I know, but I did feel her everywhere, and it hurt. The reminder that was no longer here was painful.

I was being truthful when I told Mila this home felt haunted. It once felt that way because it reminded me of what I lost. What both my father and I lost.

His love. My mother.

Natalia.

The woman who showed me tenderness and love before the world I was born into corrupted my soul and stained my hands with blood. Before that Volpe scum tore our worlds apart with his sick obsession and his greed.

You see, my mother was of both Italian and Irish descent, and that is how she got caught between my Da and Tommaso Volpe, the once boss of the

Volpe family, before his son Lucan took him out and took his place as boss of the Volpe family.

It's one fucked-up tale.

One that broke my old man's heart. Even years later, he can't seem to get over his once-in-a-lifetime love. The one he believes left us to pursue bigger and better things.

Money, power, and greed.

I believed it at one point, too, until her letters.

Letters I found stashed in my baby shit that she kept.

Letters addressed to all of her children.

She was not only forced to abandon her life in Philadelphia and her family but she was forced to marry that piece of shit Volpe and bear his children. My half-siblings, Lucan and Giana Volpe.

Something I learned after she was long gone.

Her body was never found, and she was never laid to rest like she fucking deserved because the secret of her death was taken to the grave with fucking Volpe. I no longer blamed her for the choices she made. Foolish or not, she made them out of fear and love. Her one grave mistake was thinking my father wouldn't have gone to war for her and come out victorious. He would have succeeded.

The three families of Detroit were very powerful back then, more than my father, who was proving himself to his own father and our clan, but Cathan was and still is a savage and clever motherfucker. I know he would have found a way to protect us both, but my mother, in her fear, did not believe him capable, and I also believe that's what caused their downfall.

I've never had a serious relationship in my life. I was the type to fuck 'em'-and- leave-'em' but one thing I do know is that a man in love would go to war for his woman without question Without fear.

My father was willing, but Mum's fear won.

Yeah, it's one fucked-up family tale that connects Detroit to my city.

I still carry a lot of guilt and a whole lot of hatred for that goddamn city, but just as my mother was bound to it, so am I.

Life has a funny way of fucking you over.

I once infiltrated the Nicolasi family in hopes of tearing them down from the inside out, but ended up finding truths I was not searching for, siblings and my first fucking obsession. A goddamn girl.

In truth, I didn't have to do much.

The new blood of the three families took out the old blood, the generation before theirs. I only stood back and watched how their kingdom crumbled, decaying from the inside out. I knew the truth. They didn't. The only thing that could tear down the Holy Trinity of Detroit was itself.

And it is now happening, hence the chaos that erupted today once the little Parisi princess left the safety of her castle and gave not only me, but her family's enemies access to her.

I can't find it in me to feel guilty.

Never when it comes to her.

I always get what I want, and what I want is her.

Every beautiful inch of her.

I am so close to having it all.

I got my title, my city, and now I am aiming for the woman who was born to stand by my side.

Now, she's here, and I'll play every trick in my deck of cards to make her realize that there's no one for her but me and vice versa.

No one.

Walking towards the second master room's balcony, I open the double doors and take a deep breath once I am outside. I was born and raised in a hectic city with loud noise and chaos. There is not a day when the world stops for me. All fast-paced. The total opposite of this place.

My grandfather loved the sea, and he spent all his time after my father took over the business here at this estate, even when his wife left this world. He still came back.

I didn't understand his mysterious draw to the ocean.

Now that I am a man— a man who never has a single moment of peace, I understand.

There is something about it that relaxes both the mind and the soul.

You feel tranquility.

I never felt that before. Now, I do.

In many ways, the girl, Mila, reminds me of the ocean.

When she is near, my mind grows quiet, and so do the demons in my soul.

Sighing, I take in the view before me. From all the way up here, I can see the beach and the line where the moon is now kissing the sea.

You don't get this in the city.

Nothing can quite compare to this.

Placing a cig between my teeth, I take in a long drag and expel the smoke upwards toward the sky. The sky is clear, with no gray clouds in sight. It's filled with stars. Lifting the cig to my mouth once more, I rest my elbows on the railing, looking down at my estate. The mansion is in the center of the most exotic part of the privately-owned island, Blue Bay. This place is a thing of beauty, and it is also secluded from the hustle and bustle of crowds on some of the neighboring islands.

Just like I prefer it.

No one knows my family owns this place. No one I don't trust, at least.

Studying the tropical beauty all around me in detail, a smirk shapes my mouth when Mila's words from before echo in my memory. *I would never leave this place if it were mine.*

*Oh, I'm counting on it, butterfly.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the light being turned on and off three times in her room. I find myself transfixed, curious as to what she's doing. From way over here, I can make out her silhouette behind the silky curtains I knew she would love so much. She hates messes and loves the soft feel of satin. I lean forward on the railing with my cig still burning and watch her as she roams around her room for exactly five minutes before the lights go off.

As I take another long drag of my smoke, I can't help the grin that takes over my face. Nothing about her situation should make me smile the way I've been doing all fucking day. There's nothing remotely funny about a sick motherfucker putting a hit on an innocent young girl. Nothing.

I have my men and Maeve searching for every piece of information they can get about the hit that was put on her head and what the contract entails. I'm going to track down the cunt who gave the order and every fucker that takes the contract. I already have my suspicions, and as much as I would love to be back in Philadelphia hunting the piece of shit, there's nowhere else I would rather be than right here with her.

Nowhere.

My thoughts are interrupted when there's a buzzing sound coming from my back pocket. My phone. Reaching inside my pocket for it, I already know who the person on the other end of the line is. Answering, the first thing I hear is a child's giggle. "Riwriw." The sweet voice of the cutest little brat I know. My baby niece, Allegra.

"Baby girl. It's late as fuck." I really should watch the way I speak

around kids, mind my filthy mouth around her, but I love fucking with her father way too much to stop. Besides, Allegra's first words were not Dada or Mama. No. Her first word was bitch. All thanks to her mother's colorful mouth.

"Uh-uh," My baby niece giggles, finding me amusing as always. "Daddy, Riwriw bad. Riwriw, fuck. Damond now." Most kids her age ask for dollars but not my niece. No. Allegra hustles diamonds out of me.

I hear a shuffling in the background and what sounds like Lucan scolding his daughter gently for saying 'fuck' repeatedly. Taking a drag of my cig, I savor it before I put it out. "You need to stop swearing at my kid. She's gotten too comfortable with using fuck, shit, and asswipe. Andrea is going to have my balls once she hears Allegra's word of the day." Lucan sighs, sounding every bit annoyed.

Good.

"As if she didn't already have your balls in her hands, little brother. Everyone with eyes has witnessed how your wife uses them as stress balls by now."

"Now, I know you're not talking about balls, fucker. You seemed to have lost yours along with your dignity." The little asshole laughs. "How's stalking going for you? Has it paid off, man? If you need pointers on how to get a woman by actually talking to her instead of infiltrating her life—"

Already feeling a headache growing because of this nuisance's big mouth, I cut him off. "Do you have anything useful to say, or should I hang the fuck up?" I say in a bored tone, now looking away from her window and towards the beach.

"Asshole," Lucan says under his breath, making my mouth twitch. Our relationship isn't perfect, and it started rocky, but as the years passed, we've grown closer. Not only because it was my mother's wish for me to look after her other children but because I didn't totally hate the guy. When he had his mouth shut, I could actually tolerate him. "A certain Parisi has gone missing. Do you perhaps know anything about that?"

"No." I look away from the water and find myself staring at her window once again. Has she found sleep? I wonder how she will act once the reality of this situation sinks in when a new day arrives.

"Ah, shit. You." My brother hisses. "I thought your creepy obsession ended with the pen pal shit." He speaks again as I grow bored.

Everything bores me lately. Nothing holds the same appeal. She does.

This fascination grows by the second.

Then I find myself longing for the hours to pass so I can see her again. Fuck.

“I’m hanging up now.” The call lasted more than fifty seconds. This is a new record for us.

“Don’t do anything stupid, man. That girl...” I listen intently to what he says next. Brother or not. One bad word about the girl, and Andrea Nicolasi will become a young widow by tomorrow. “Mila is a good girl. She’s too good for the type of life you lead.” I’ll give it to him. He actually sounds concerned. It still pisses me off.

Pinching my nose, I suppress the impulse to tell him to fuck off and mind his business. “Your point?”

“My point fucker is that she deserves a good life, and if you think you’re the man that can give her that, then fuck, good luck, brother. Just know that there’s a man-eating piranha losing her head searching for her and promising a painful death to whoever had a hand in Mila’s kidnapping.”

I could say many things right now. Like I could care less about Kadra Parisi and her threats and how there was no kidnapping involved. She chose to come willingly, but I chose to say the only thing that matters here. “Mila is mine, and if I need to go to war for her, I will. God help anyone who intervenes and tries to take her from me. That includes you, brother.” With that, I hung up on my brother. Not in the mood for more unsolicited advice and useless chatter.

Not even two seconds after I hang up the phone chimes with an incoming text.

Biological Nuisance: 🖐️👊🖐️👊🖐️👊🖐️👊🖐️👊🖐️👊🖐️👊

*Very mature, little brother.*

Ignoring his message, I scroll down and tap on my conversation with Maeve. I type a quick message and wait for her response.

Me: Parisi?

Maeve: Well, hello to you too, Cap.

Me: Don’t push me, Maeve. Not in the mood.

Maeve: Hasn't left Detroit, and there's still zero suspicious activity on her accounts. My brother is hot on her tail, just in case she makes a move.

Me: Good.

Me: Do whatever is necessary to find the one who ordered the hit. While you're at it, put a message out there to any mercenary that I'm willing to pay ten times more than the original offer for her head to whoever snitches on the fucker.

Maeve: On it.

Maeve: Wow, Cap. This girl must be really something.

The fucker behind all this offered a large sum of money to the first mercenary who pulls the trigger.

Now I'm flipping it on him or her.

I'm offering a larger amount to the first man who snitches on the bitch.

Me: Keep me posted.

Maeve: Yeah, yeah. Will do.

Maeve: And I haven't forgotten how you chose to take Kelly on your getaway. Not cool, cap.

Me: You're more useful to me in the city, Maeve. Nothing personal. Now get to work.

Maeve: 👍 🗨️

Pocketing the phone, I turn around. The sound of the waves crashing as they reach the shore in the background soothes my soul as I keep my eyes trained on her window. The wind blows softly. The moon shines brightly down at the water, giving it a beautiful glow yet I can't seem to look away from that damn window.

Everything and anything falls away around me, and all that exists in this moment is her and this damn feeling I once couldn't put a finger on.

I feel a pressure in my chest, one that makes breathing difficult and one I've never felt before. Lifting my hand up to my chest, I tap it.

Three times.

Three-fucking-times. Like I saw her do before.



My heart beats slowly. Steady.

Strong.

With an unexpected purpose.

At this moment, with her sleeping soundly inside my home, I know, like I know my name is Riagan O'Sullivan, that Mila Parisi is mine, and there is no way in hell she is leaving my side. Ever. If someone tries to take her from me, they will only be able to do it by walking over my cold, dead corpse.

# MESSAGE FROM M



*Dear C,  
Will you ever tell me your name? - M*

# RARE REACTION

## MILA



*“He came out of the blue on a rainy night,  
bringing me back to life.” - M*

A sound I'm not quite accustomed to wretches me away from a deep slumber. The deepest slumber I've had in a while. You see, my mind never shuts off, not even when my mouth does, so on the rare occasions that I do find sleep, I can go on for more than the usual eight hours. Memories, facts, numbers, and questions are ever-present. Let's just say my brain never has a dull moment.

The calming sound of waves crashing and the breeze blowing in the distance remind me that I am no longer home. Never have I heard such a magnificent sound back home.

Cities are too crowded and noisy.

Ever moving, just like my brain.

Back home, I could never find a quiet place, which is why I would sleep heavily for hours, paint and do some gardening to quiet all the noise. It would only help for a little while. The quiet never lasted. Once I was awake, life was harder, not only for myself, but, most importantly, for my sisters.

I quickly found out that if I was out of the way, sleeping, or hiding in the shadows, then I wasn't an inconvenience to our father, who in return, would leave my sisters alone. Even if it lasted only for a little while.

Getting out of my head, I focus on the now.

This brand new day.

It was too dark for it to be morning. I knew as much when I opened my

eyes. The thin and soft-looking curtains swayed with the breeze drifting through the room, a bit warm yet serene. I read somewhere that Turks and Caicos is warm all year. The usual temperature ranges from twenty to forty degrees Celsius with high humidity during the day, dropping at night between twenty to twenty-seven Celsius.

I don't mind the heat like most people do. I even welcome it because, for so long the cold is all we've known.

Shaking off sleep, my mind starts to steer away back to depressing memories, but I don't allow myself to be distracted. Instead, I rub my eyes and open them again, feeling more relaxed than I've felt in years. The tension in my neck from the hectic events of yesterday has faded away, and I no longer have a throbbing pain in my head.

Pulling the sheets, I get out of bed, noticing that I'm still in the same clothes from yesterday. I make a face of disgust when I think about how I shared a bed with the germs I did not wash away before I found sleep. I shiver at the realization. Gross.

Touching my hair, I cringe when I pull on it to find it dry and tangled. It also doesn't smell like coconut and vanilla, as per usual.

I hold my breath for five seconds before I expel the air. I do these two more times until I find myself forgetting all about the dirty germs currently making a home for themselves on my skin. I must've been so drained from all the fear and excitement from yesterday that I must've fallen asleep without showering.

I didn't even get to properly admire this room.

When I do look around the room, I can't help but be amazed. This is no ordinary room.

No.

Wow. Walking barefoot on the carpeted floor, I try not to think of how dirty carpets get when not vacuumed regularly. Instead, I move around the enormous room that looks straight out of a millionaire's beach home.

Everything is white with different tones of blue. From the sheets to the four-post bed to the dresser and floor-length mirror. The curtains that cover the glass twin doors open onto a balcony that overlooks the back of the house, where you get the perfect view of the ocean.

I also notice the lovely fresh flowers all around the room and the built-in bookshelf wall in the corner behind a cream bean bag that looks not only comfortable but like it could hold three of me. It is that big.

My pulse starts to pick up when I move closer to the white bookshelf, which holds various books, and that's putting it lightly. Every shelf holds at least ten to fifteen books, while others are decorated with crystals like the ones I have at home and even a few cactuses. Ones that look just like Mr. Prickles.

Touching one of the books, I check out the cover and beam when I realize these are all some of the stories that I've yet to read and have marked as to be read on my digital book library app.

This is not only my dream room but every bookworm's dream too.

*But how?*

*Who do these belong to?* I don't see Riagan as the type of man who enjoys romantic fiction.

Do these books belong to a sister of his, perhaps?

A girlfriend? Why does the thought of the giant man having a girlfriend leaves a bitter taste in my mouth?

Now I'm curious and won't be able to think about anything else until I get answers. I have so many questions. Many that I didn't get to ask yesterday. I'll ask them today, but first, a shower. Sniffing my clothes, I scrunch my nose up. I won't be able to carry on with the day until I get rid of these dirty clothes.

Stepping away from the bookshelf, I patter toward the bathroom. Turning the light on, the first thing that I see is the white marble tub mounted in the center beside a freestanding rainforest shower. There are two vanity mirrors, white towels, and two white robes. Frowning, I realize this is a couple's bathroom because why two of everything? *How odd.*

I'll add it to my long list of questions to the man that brought me here. But first, a shower, yes.

I spend exactly fifteen minutes there, not only scrubbing my skin to get rid of the pesky microorganisms but washing my hair with coconut-vanilla shampoo.

Wrapping a towel around my body once I'm done, I step back into the room.

The room is quiet. Secluded. But I'm used to it. I'm more comfortable in silence than I am around noise.

I move to my left, there is what looks to be a walk-in closet. Moving through it, I flick on the light to find not only clothes but shoes as well. *Who are these?* I wonder. I can't wear other people's clothes. It is not sanitary.

Besides, there is the fact that it is rude to just put something on that does not belong to you but, to my dismay, I'll have to forget about that and find something to wear. I grab the first thing I see that looks my size.

When I am done getting dressed, I take in my appearance.

Yellow sundress with thin spaghetti straps. Not too loose but fitted enough to show the curve of my hips. My wet hair falls over my shoulders while my face appears far too calm. Then an image of me trapped between Riagan's bare chest and a door comes to the forefront of my mind. *Was it a dream?* I am not sure anymore. What I'm sure of is the anxious feelings swirling in my stomach all of a sudden. I've been trying to keep the man out of my mind because there is no doubt in me that if he remains there for too long, he could make room for himself. As in a permanent one, and that can't happen.

A feeling I can't quite put a name to courses through me, and I find myself looking behind me toward the bed, and when I do, my eyes land on an item that reminds me of home.

*Deja-Vu.* Is it? The feeling of having already dreamed something that is currently being experienced.

The dream catcher.

The lovely dream catcher hanging from the bedpost.

*"Here, stelina. This will catch all your dreams and fight off the nightmares."* The memory of a ten-year-old Kadra flashes through my mind as she gave me my very first dreamcatcher. She swore the item made of lace doily and wood macramé would keep the monsters away. I didn't believe it, not really. My logical mind wouldn't allow me to accept that a common object had the power to catch dreams, but I never told her that. No. I placed the pretty dream catcher next to my bed, and I did the same with all the others she brought me after that.

"Kadra..." How did I forget about her? She must be going out of her mind and most likely burning the city down trying to find me. I want her to be safe. I don't want her to worry about me while she's dealing with her demons, and sadly, she has plenty of those. Riagan's words also flash through my mind. He said she messed with a very important family. Is she at war? Was I unintentionally getting in the way of her finally putting her demons to rest? I don't know. All I know is that I need to let her know I'm alright so she doesn't worry.

Sighing, I slip my feet into white sandals that I grabbed from the closet

and walk towards the bedroom door. My fingers flex around the knob. “You can do this, Mila. For Kadra. For yourself.” I whisper out loud before making my way out of the room.

Here goes nothing.

Hopefully, I won’t get chopped up into tiny pieces and fed to the pretty fishes of the sea.

Hopefully...



I’M SLOWLY WALKING down the stairwell while nervously raking my fingers through my now-wet hair. Somehow, this all feels more real today.

The orange hue of the sunset comes through the glass windows, illuminating the house and letting me know that I, indeed, slept like the dead. It’s sundown... again. As I walk down the staircase, I take in everything around me. A modern design that could be showcased in countless luxurious magazines greets me once my feet touch the marble-white floor.

The living room area.

White, blue, and silver dominate the color scheme, consisting of a huge leather couch and two chairs next to it. A small round table stands in front with several books on it. Classic literature.

My brow furrows, and I get closer, picking up one of the books and opening it, only to cough loudly when the dust twitches my nose. Waving it away, I read the title. “A love that never was.” Romeo and Juliet. Huh...

Flipping through the pages, my eyes widen when I realize this is a first edition of this particular tragic tale. Every detail I discover about this mansion makes me feel as if it was made for me.

From the decor to the choice of reading material.

The odd art and the beautiful and quiet atmosphere.

Putting the book down, I go back to studying the interior around me. My gaze lands on a glass bookshelf, where there are tiny sculptures and antique items of different shapes and sizes, and by the exquisite work, they must be very expensive. He also has unconventional art hanging on the walls.

There’s a painting of a roman warrior drenched in gold paint, and his armor is made of glass hanging right above a huge white sofa. The painting seems like an odd choice when this place has a more nature-outside vibe.



And Riagan doesn't seem like a man who enjoys classic art.

I did read somewhere that the rich love to collect antiques and old paintings for fun.

*How unique...*

*Does he collect antiques and rare things?*

He must because why else keep historical artifacts inside his home? Then I remember that Lucan Volpe is his brother and also a world-known artist who has exhibits of his art all over the globe.

I always found Lucan Volpe fascinating.

Who knew that underneath the blood, chaos, and duty to the three families, there was more to him? More than what his father wanted for him.

Ambition for more than mayhem.

A remarkable talent.

Does Riagan keep his brother's masterpieces here? Are these it? I feel pressure in my chest like before, tapping my chest, I try to make the ache go away as I start to move forward towards what I guess is the kitchen.

I pause in my steps. Riagan is sitting on the kitchen island, chewing gum with a cigarette behind his ear and a bare chest. I knew he was tattooed, but now that he has no shirt on, I can't find a single piece of virgin skin. I'm transfixed by it, and all I want to do at this moment is reach out and trace the black ink. He looks like one of my canvases on a good day.

The room is a bit dark since nightfall is near, but I'm still able to see him. My eyes roam from his chest up to his face. I swallow hard when I find him looking straight at me as if his stare could penetrate my soul.

"You're up." My eyes clash with his for a rare second before I drop my head and look at his feet. Heat rushes through me when I feel the burn of his gaze on my skin. Chewing on my bottom lip, I raise my head, remembering how he said I shouldn't hide my face. I've been hiding from people all my life, and yet I don't want to hide from him even when every molecule in my body is screaming for me to do so. I don't. But I still feel embarrassed for sleeping through an entire day when I'm a guest in his home. "What's wrong?" He barks, and I jump, startled by his tone. I try to silence my mind when it jumps to conclusions. Is he mad? Why did he raise his voice? "Shit. I'm sorry."

That makes me lift my gaze to his. "Why are you sorry? You didn't hurt me." *You say sorry when you hurt someone who doesn't deserve it.* Those were his words. "You did not hurt me." I smile shyly at him.

A small grin appears on his face. “I clearly scared you, butterfly and for that, forgive me.”

“It’s okay.” I shrug, looking at his neck, avoiding his gaze. So I look at his chain instead. It’s pretty, and it sparkles whenever his chest rises. “I’m used to it.” I don’t look away from the piece of jewelry, and at the same time I hear a growl. A growl like I think an animal would make moments before he attacks his prey. But there are no wild animals here. Just Riagan.

“Used to it? You mean being afraid?” I look away as he continues. “You shouldn’t be.” He hisses. “Not with me. I regret raising my voice. Know that it is nothing you did.” Why does he say things that make my heart rate spike? Is he aware that he does it? And why do his words always make heat creep up my neck to my cheeks?

Not knowing how to respond, I nod and step closer to the kitchen, and while the dark room won’t allow me to see it in all its glory, I do notice many cooking devices and a triple-door refrigerator. We have a lot of the same things back home, and the kitchen, like the garden, is one of my favorite parts of a house.

You see... since I was a little girl, I loved to play chef with my sisters, and I would imagine I had my own bakery, and my sisters or Carlotta played my customers. It made my heart happy to pretend to bake them goods and watch their faces light up every time we played. Once Kadra took over the family and my parents were long gone, I was allowed to safely roam the mansion, and one of my favorite places to get lost in was the kitchen. I searched the internet for recipes and watched cooking videos until I mastered the craft of baking. I don’t play pretend anymore. Because of Kadra and Arianna, I didn’t have to hide anymore and was able to learn and do the things that make me happy. In hindsight, baking makes me happy. Do you know what also makes me happy? Knowledge. Right now I know very little about my situation here. This weird arrangement has yet to be explained fully to me. Turning to Riagan, I speak. “I have questions.”

He nods once, rises to his full height in all his bare-chested glory, walks to the garbage bin, spits his gum out, and walks toward me. I stand there watching his every move like a scientist studying the human brain. It’s fascinating, actually. Everything he does causes a shiver of excitement to run through me, and I know this reaction to him is not normal. “Follow me.” He says roughly before passing by me and making his way out of the kitchen towards the back area.

And I follow him.

He could be leading me to my death, yet I follow his every step.

# MESSAGE FROM C



*One day. - C*

# UNUSUAL PROPOSAL

## RIAGAN



*"She gave up heaven to love a man like me." - R*

**A**s a young lad who was raised the way that my father and all the men around me did, I knew what a gun was way before I learned to ride a bike. I also never quite believed in fairytales. Never gave one single thought about magic either. None of that had any room in my life, not while I was being raised to be the future leader of the OSullivan clan.

I learned hard lessons before anything else, so yes, beauty is something I knew very little of. Until I stumbled upon a tiny fairy-like creature with butterflies in her hair on a cold autumn night. If I'm being honest, that was the day I started to give a shit about someone other than myself.

I remember the night as if it was yesterday.

The garden.

The sweet air.

Her.

A night much like this one.

The beach mansion didn't come with a garden, not one of this magnitude, at least. It had small bushes of exotic plants surrounding the pool area, but that was the extent of it. Nothing intricate or of this magnitude. Until years ago when I had the back area turned into a garden for reasons I didn't quite understand. I just knew that it was what this place was missing to truly feel like a home away from home.

Now, I'm glad I listened to my gut and added the garden because the image in front of me is the reason why a man, who has taken many lives and

has lied and cheated most of his life, believes in magic.

Believes in something more than chaos and blood.

Mila walks in front of me, looking in every direction with wonder in her eyes. Those blue eyes of hers shine with not only curiosity but giddiness. And while she takes in the beauty before her, I admire the beauty in front of me. As much as this garden is my pride and joy, it doesn't hold a candle to her.

"This is..." she whispers, and at the same time she spins in a circle with a smile on her pretty face. "I have never seen anything more beautiful. Is this real?"

"Neither have I," I whisper softly, knowing she can't hear me, not with the sound of the waves in the background and her so far away. I take the opportunity and walk closer to her, where she's too busy looking at the tropical hibiscus.

I stand there as the sun sets and watch her while she gets lost in the world she's most comfortable in. Where there's only magic, beauty, and well, plants.

One thing I learned long ago was that Mila Areya Parisi is obsessed with gardening.

Plants, animals and baked goods, to be precise.

This I know.

And the look on her face is worth the hundreds of thousands I dropped on this garden.

It wasn't cheap, but money has never been an issue. Not for me.

It took me a while to find the person who could bring to life the vision I had for the garden.

A Caribbean paradise.

The designer worked tirelessly alongside the landscape architect, and created a paved seating area surrounded by lush foliage and also built an outdoor lounge space. Atmospheric spotlighting and clever planting make the caribbean garden look like a tropical paradise at night. I only had one suggestion for the designer, and that was for her to make the garden look like something straight out of a fairytale book. For that, she added patio lights and colorful plants. Exotic ones, such as Orchids and Birds of Paradise, and many more. There's also a koi pond to add a water feature of some shit like that the lady said when she explained her landscaping plans and design. There's a stone path that leads to the pool with plants and ivy over it that makes it look almost like a jungle.

It is truly beautiful, and by the look on Mila's face, I know she agrees with me.

After a moment of silence she turns to me with excitement brightening her eyes. "Riagan..."

The way she says my name... so pretty. So fucking sweet. It makes me wonder if she would sound the same when I enter her body. When I claim her as mine. Fuck. Clearing my thoughts and my dirty fucking mind, I speak up. "Yes?"

"I doubted you."

Frowning, I step closer to where she's standing, but not too close that it might overwhelm her. "You doubted me?"

"I did." She nods, and I find it amusing how her golden curls bounce with the movement. "I thought you weren't serious when you told me you enjoyed plants. My apologies. You need to understand that I haven't met anyone quite like you, but, in truth I don't know many people." She starts to ramble in that adorable way that makes my chest ache. "You fascinate me just as much as this garden does." She says so softly that, for a moment, I believe I imagine it.

*You fascinate me...*

Fuck.

One thing about her is that she will speak her mind and blurt out truths when she feels comfortable or nervous. I caught that much in our time together so far.

Words get stuck in my throat. I always know what to say and how to act, but I must admit that, for the first time in my goddamn life, I am caught off guard. This girl... this fucking girl with her pretty smile, kind heart, and admirable honesty, has the ability to render me speechless.

"I said something wrong," Mila whispers, pulling me out of my head.

The tremble in her voice snaps me out of it. Clearing my throat I speak up, "Mila."

"Yes?" I look at her in one of the dresses I had brought here for her. A yellow sundress with spaghetti straps and a material that hugs her body in all the right places. Her golden curls fall wildly around her face. Eyes that shine brighter than the stars lighting the night tonight.

"Your honesty is refreshing," I speak. "Nothing you say to me will ever be wrong. That I promise you. Speak freely around me and always speak your mind."



“You don’t look irate or angry....” She points out while biting nervously on her plump bottom lip. While her eyes stare at my chest, I get caught staring at her lips. What I wouldn’t give to taste them. To finally find out if she tastes as sweet as she looks. I bet she does.

So fucking sweet.

“Why would I?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. Most people make faces I don’t understand while I speak about things I enjoy, but they do not.”

“Those people are cunts.” Her lovely mouth forms an ‘O’. “They’re ordinary, and you’re anything but.”

She frowns, and I can’t help myself. I step closer. I stand taller. Much taller and with no shirt on. I bite my lip to hide the smile that wants to take over my face when I catch her licking her lips. She likes what she sees. Good. She also doesn’t retreat or try to hide her face from view like she has done several times before.

I am aware that this situation is insane, but nothing about this feeling in my chest is logical.

I can’t find it in me to care.

When I’m a breath away from her, I reach inside my pocket and hand her my phone. “Tell your sister you are alright.” It’s been hurting not being able to communicate with her sister. I am not a man with morals.

I’ve always done what’s best for me and the clan with zero regard to others’ feelings or wants, but when it comes to this girl, I want to keep my promises. I want to be... better.

Mila lifts her chin and tries her best to hold my stare, and fuck, does she do it. It lasts two seconds more than the last time she did. Yeah, I’m keeping count.

She tentatively reaches for the phone, and when she grabs it, her fingers lightly touch mine, and I feel it. That zap of energy that courses through my body whenever she’s close or when her skin touches mine.

I’m going mad.

I’m addicted.

Before I let go of the phone, I warn her. “The fuckers that are after you might track the call, so to be safe, send a voice message, and you gotta keep it short, sweetheart. For your safety and to not compromise her.” I feel guilt clawing at me when the light in her eyes dims, but fuck, I’m not risking it. “Trust me. I know this is a lot to ask. But I need you to trust me that I’ll get

you out of this alive and back to your sisters. They already tried to take out Arianna and failed. I won't let them get to you." She looks up but says nothing. Instead she nods gently and raises the phone close to her mouth.

I watch as she takes a deep breath before pressing the touch screen.

"Sirius. It's...me, Mila." Her voice breaks as if her tears are not that far away. "Please don't worry. I am alive and I'm unharmed. I know that nothing I say will stop you from searching for me, but I promise I'm okay, and I'll find my way back to you. I... I love you so much." She sighs heavily before carrying on. "One day. Okay? This is my one day, and I just want you to fight for yours instead of worrying about me." Her voice, the sadness in it, cuts me deep. "I'll see you soon, sister. You'll see." With that, she ends the message and hands me back the phone. I quickly type the number and press send. Then I throw the phone onto the ground and smash it with my boot.

After a long moment, I clear my throat. "The last thing I want is for you to feel like a prisoner. You're not a prisoner here, but for the meantime, I need to get you off the radar, and we gotta take some precautions. That means no outside contact and no social media until me or your sister eliminate the threat."

"I-I know." She says absently while she taps her chest three times. She's doing it again.

My own chest squeezes.

Instinctively, I reach forward and pull a golden lock behind her ear. Ignoring her sharp intake of breath, I ask. "Does it hurt?" I watch her face. "Does your chest hurt, sweetheart?"

Her next words undo me.

"Not anymore." Eyes the color of the sky on a perfect day stare right through my soul before looking somewhere else. "How odd..." she mumbles absently.

The look on her face when I share a kind word or I'm brutally honest with her does things to me. It's like witnessing her discover a new feeling or unlocking an old joyful memory that had been suppressed for years and now is coming back to her. It's...touching.

"Ask me your questions, butterfly." I rasp. I know she has a million of them, and I haven't given her clear answers. I know it bothers her. Mila is the type of girl who follows her mind instead of her heart, but somehow, this time around, something tells me she shut her mind off, even if just for a little while, and trusted her heart.

Fuck, I hope that's why she decided to act recklessly and put her trust in me.

"Why am I here? Truly? It can't just be about my safety and the promises you made to my sister. There's more to it. I feel it."

She deserves answers, and I'm going to give them to her along with some little white lies.

Because the truth is I can't tell her my truth just yet.

She's not ready.

But she will be.

In time.



*Mila*

I'm no stranger to heartbreak.

I guess I knew what a broken heart was before most girls my age.

A boy didn't break my heart, no.

Life did.

The pain my sisters were subjected to because of how I was born did more damage to my heart than the insults and neglect. Yet that seems small and insignificant compared to the feeling of despair in my chest just thinking about both my sisters being so far away and possibly in danger, and I can't do anything about it but stay here and let this man keep me safe while the bravest person I know, Kadra, fights demons that have haunted this family for far too long.

She has always been my protector, and in my naivety to find her peace, I got myself into this situation. But the guilt I feel? The guilt is what hurts me more because, even though a part of me hurts for putting her in a position where she will worry about me, another part of me feels free. Free to finally see the world through my sister's eyes and to experience it as well.

To finally live.

"My father is really sick." Riagan's deep voice breaks through my own thoughts, bringing me back to the moment at the same time as a gust of wind comes without warning, causing goosebumps to spread over my skin. Looking up at him, I study not only his facial expression but his stiff

demeanor. I quickly catch his gaze and find darkness there.

“Is he going to die?” I cringe a little when I realize what I asked and how it might’ve sounded to him.

I sometimes forget that normal people don’t wish for their parents’ demise. Most children actually like their parents. I need to be more careful with the way I phrase things around him, to be cautious of not offending him. He might say that could never hurt him or make him mad, and he might say that now, but people change. That I know all too well. Once I open my mouth and say things with no ill intent but are painful truths, people get offended.

And when you offend someone in my world, they get angry. Furious even.

Then...I am the one hurting.

Hurt feelings and sometimes busted up lips or broken skin.

It all depends on their mood that day.

Riagan grunts. “He won’t die.” He clears his throat before speaking up again. “But he did ask something of me, just in case he lost the battle to cancer.”

“What did he ask?” I watch him, standing before me like a stone statue that bleeds fury. Dark and menacing yet soft at the same time.

The man is a mystery.

“He wished to see me marry. He wants me to lead our clan with a queen standing by my side.” A sudden shiver travels down my spine, and it has nothing to do with the cold breeze but with his words.

“I don’t understand.”

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do for my father, and if seeing me with a wife is what he wishes, then so be it. I’ll do it, but I can’t marry just anyone you see. I need a woman who knows this lifestyle. A woman who understands that I do ugly things for the sake of my family. A woman who is not afraid of a little darkness.”

“I am afraid of everything.” I whisper truthfully as I slowly put some distance between us. This man suddenly makes it seem as if he is sucking the air out of an open space. Unreal. Inexplicable.

“That isn’t true.” He steps closer, not allowing any space between us, yet he is not crowding me. I notice that every time he comes close to me, he always stops himself. He stands back.

“You’re not afraid of me when most people are.” He points out.

Looking up at his face, I notice the darkness in his eyes is gone, and now

he looks... softer. Gentle even. "You're kind." I blurt out. At least kinder than most people I've encountered before. He doesn't yell. Since meeting him again, he always has a nice word to say to me, and well...he emptied his gun on a man for hurting me and calling me nasty things. He's not a moral man by any means...but that was nice or heroic in a twisted sort of way.

"I am everything ugly that hides in plain sight, Mila. Don't kid yourself." He sighs when I say nothing else. What can I say? I'm lost for words. "Let's find the logic in this, shall we?" He steps closer while I still feel like I am holding my breath. "I need a wife to make a sick man smile, and you..." Oh he is good... He is using logic and a sick person to make his point. Two things that I just can't deny. Logic and facts? They've always been good to me. His sick father? Well, I am human. I have a heart. A soft one. He has me there.

"And me?" I ask, holding my breath and waiting for what's coming next.

"You have a hit on your head. My last name and my ring on your finger will make them think twice about coming after you, Mila. There's no greater sin in my world than coming after the family of the boss."

*Family.*

*Ring on your finger.*

"They won't dare start a war, and if they do, they're the ones who won't come out on the other side alive. That I can guarantee." There's a threat in his tone. A threat laced in darkness. "Coming after my wife is something the fuckers will think twice about."

Energy cracked between us.

A dark, dark light.

While shock made me stumble back a foot. I was not expecting that. Not even close.

Looking down at my hands, I try to come up with a million reasons why this is a bad idea. I can't marry this man. I don't know much about love besides what I read in my romance novels, but one thing I do know is that fake marriages or marriages of convenience always tend to blur the lines. But logic proves that, on paper, this is a win-win situation. This man can help protect me while my sister annihilates the threat, and well...I can help him make his father's painful journey less...painful, I guess.

Then, a thought comes to mind. One that has me rushing out the next words. "If we're doing this. We need to establish a few things. Please feel free to speak up when you feel like I have overstepped or if I have offended

you in any way. Also know that I don't mean to sound ungrateful. I am alive and here now because of you. I owe you, I know this." I take a breath, still looking down at my hands because I am not sure if I am capable of holding his gaze, even if it's for a second, while having this conversation. "In this arrangement...you can't fall in love with me." There, I said it. Heat creeps in when silence follows. Only the waves can be heard, and I am sure my heavy breathing, too, with how erratic my breath is coming.

I watch as his boots step closer, touching the pretty stone path of the prettiest garden I've ever seen. My eyes look away from his boots, and I find myself looking everywhere but at him. I'm embarrassed, and when I feel this way, I just look at something that makes me less anxious and brings me comfort. Thankfully, I am surrounded by not only the sea but a magical-looking garden.

I counted a dozen exotic flowers I've only seen on the Internet, yet he grows them here. This place is a dream for someone like me. Since I was a child, gardening has been my outlet. I always found it fascinating. To be able to grow and nurture something that is alive gives me a sense of purpose. My gaze slides to the mesmerizing garden, from huge palm trees with the greenest leaves, to the birds of paradise and orchid bushes twining together, with neatly cut grass, presenting a magical picture straight out of a fairy tale. Several benches and alcoves line the perimeter, finishing up the composition, and from the outside, it seems the perfect modern design was chosen, focusing on the fauna of this place and adding personal touches. Bright and fresh colors with a tad of magic. I can almost imagine Riagan roaming through the place, his aura only adding allure to this paradise. "Mila."

"Yes?" I mumble, still looking away.

"This arrangement is strictly business." His tone sounds dry, but not rude, either. Something in my chest aches when he puts it that way. Arrangement. Business. I should feel relieved but why is it that I don't relieved at all?

"What does this...arrangement entail?"

"We'll get married, of course."

"For how long?" I look away from the flowers and look at his face. I notice his jaw looks tight, as if he's not pleased with the turn the conversation took.

"A year."

My eyes grow big. "A year? But what about my sisters? Where would I live? How will it work? Will we have sex?" My brain keeps pinning, and

suddenly I feel lightheaded.

“Mila, breathe.” Soft hands fall on my shoulders. I should fight them off. My skin should be crawling because of his touch, but, yet again nothing happens. I don’t feel repulsed or uncomfortable. Instead, my body does as he says. The anxiety leaves my body, and I am able to find my next breath. All because of his soothing voice and gentle touch. Remarkable.

“For a year, you will stand by my side as my wife, and during that year, you’ll stay with me, of course, back in Philadelphia. You will also get to see your sisters as long as they don’t pose a threat to your safety.” I frown when he says that part. Does he mean Kadra? “You’ll also be under my protection. No one will fuck with you, and you won’t be a prisoner any longer. Not in my world. Not in my city. You no longer belong to the shadows, Mila. Never again.”

Finding my next breath proves to be hard, but I manage to, long enough to get the next words out. “You’re different from almost everyone I ever met, Riagan O’Sullivan.” I blurt out.

“Likewise, butterfly...” There goes that confusing feeling in my chest again.

*How do I tell this man that I can’t offer him anything more than friendship?*

Because there’s a ghost in my heart. Someone that took up permanent residence and has never left my mind, even when he was just temporary, but his words and his sweet and kindhearted nature touched me in more ways than I’ll ever admit. I want to tell this to Riagan, but I don’t. It won’t do any good. Besides, the man from the emails has always been my secret. A dream and never a reality. But how do I explain it to this man? But do I even have to? He agreed this is just a mutually beneficial arrangement, and I don’t think he hopes that love will bloom between us. He needs a pretend wife...

That is all.

*Keep telling yourself that...*

*Have you learned nothing from romance novels? These situations always have a different outcome than the one you’re dead set on, girl.*

“For you.” I look down at his hand to find a yellow Asiatic Lily. I tentatively reach forward and take the beautiful flower from him. “You asked me which was my favorite plant.” *You are in trouble.* The little voice inside taunts. Ignoring the, at times, obnoxious voice, I focus on the pretty flower instead.

I can't help but smile. Yellow flowers never fail to put a smile on my face. There's something so joyful and cheerful about the color that's contagious. "Thank you..." I whisper without looking away from the flower. A lily flower. Why is this one his favorite? What does he find fascinating about this one out of all the pretty flowers that surround us? I wonder, lost in my head. A second later, as if the man has read my mind, he answers me.

"Did you know in Greek mythology, the Lily, was the flower of Hera, wife of Zeus. The legends have it that the lily was formed from the milk of her breast. However, in Roman mythology, Venus, the Goddess of beauty, was so jealous of the flower's white loveliness that she caused the pistil to grow from its center."

Shocked, I look up at him, and my eyes clash with his lovely blue ones. "What is it?"

"It's just that you surprised me, that's all." I mumble shyly. He more than surprised me. He made my night just by giving me his favorite flower and offering a fun fact, and somehow I have that feeling again. *Deja-vu*.

"It's that a good or a bad thing?" I notice he has come closer. So close I can almost feel his breath on my skin.

A good thing. A very good thing.

I want to say, but something holds me back.

Fear, maybe.

Fear of what this all means for me now.

Just a short amount of time with this man has me ignoring all reason and acting on impulse. That is not who I am. Dangerous, I tell you.

He is dangerous for a naive heart.

This is why my heart takes a back seat, and my brain takes over in the next moment.

"We don't cross lines, okay? Shake on it." I extend my arm towards him and wait for him to do the same, and once he does, once his big and rough hand closes around mine, I feel a shock of electricity that courses through my body. A reaction only he incites in me. "Deal?" My voice comes out hoarse.

"Okay..." I ignore the mischievous grin that tweaks at the edge of his mouth.

And that's it.

I'm an engaged woman now.

It also doesn't escape me that he said okay instead of deal, yet I don't dwell on that for long because, in the next instant, he is interrupting my



thoughts. “You like fictional books, don’t you, sweetheart?”

“I do.” I frown, wondering where he is going with this.

“Think of this as a great adventure for as long as it lasts.”

An adventure? I never had one of those. Lies.

An adventure was what got me into this situation.

“Let’s go back inside, butterfly.” Riagan says. Turning with my flower in hand, I can’t shake the feeling that there is no going back. My fate was set in stone the moment we crossed paths. I also swear I hear him whisper something at my back.

Something that sounds a whole lot like, “*You fascinate me, too, butterfly.*”

Oh, no...

I’m in deep.

So deep that I’m not sure if I did the right thing.

Because somehow, I feel like friend-zoning the man I plan to marry will come back to bite me in the butt sooner rather than later.

Of that, I have no doubt.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*My future wife just friend-zone the fuck out of  
me.*

*Who would have thought that I would have to  
compete for her affection with my damn self? I  
sure the fuck didn't.*

# DARKNESS WITHIN

## KADRA



*“T*winkle, twinkle, little star...” I sing softly to my little sister, Mila, trying to soothe her discomfort. “How I wonder where you are.” My baby sister shakes uncontrollably in my arms while we try to escape the sad reality of our world.

*Nothing helps. Not really.*

*But I try with all my might to give her something when she’s been deprived of so much.*

*Comfort.*

*Love.*

*Understanding.*

*She’s getting older now, and that means she wanders by herself when she feels lonely and trapped inside the four walls of her room. Most kids her age have every kind of toy in the market, pretty clothes and a room fit for a little princess, but not her.*

*Not my Mila.*

*My Mila has only known white walls and a cold room. Nothing that shows a little girl with the biggest heart lives there. A little girl who is so smart and so kind.*

*Since the moment she came into this world, our father has been trying to erase her existence by shoving her in the shadows, and yet my sweet, sweet sister has always had a blinding smile on her face and a kind word, even when her heart has been broken time and time again.*

*Tonight, she wandered off in her blue pajamas with her favorite book in hand, searching for someone to read it to her. She’s smart for her age, but there are still words she doesn’t comprehend.*

*Before she could find me or Arianna, she found our nightmare instead.  
Our father.*

*“Arianna...” Mila whimpers and points her tiny finger at our sister’s door.*

*“Shhhh, stelina. It’ll be alright.” I rock her tiny body, wishing someone would take her away from here, even if it broke my heart to watch her leave. I truly believe God made a mistake when he chose this family for her. We don’t deserve her. People who are rotten don’t deserve her pure heart.*

*She deserves better.*

*She always has.*

*I push her curls out of her face and notice tears staining her chubby cheeks. The bruises on her neck are starting to show. Bruises to match my own.*

*“Sing this song, stelina. Sing it when the world gets too loud or when you feel scared.” I whisper.*

*Sing the damn song when someone is unkind or when you get hurt. I want to say, but I don’t. I keep that to myself. There is no doubt that she will face great obstacles when she grows older. I promise to slay every monster that tries to hurt her, but what if I’m not here? What if she finds herself all alone in this world? What then?*

*If I had tears left to shed, I would. I would for the little girl singing quietly in my arms. For our big sister, who is being used as a punching bag for daring to stand up to our father. For being brave and fearless.*

*Looking at the discarded fairytale book my little sister loves so much. The book she wanted someone to read to her before bedtime. That’s all she wanted. She doesn’t ask for much. She stays quiet and tries to blend in as if she already knows that’s her best chance to escape our heartless father. Escape his anger and his cruelty.*

*I stare at the book’s cover, where a pretty princess is wearing a yellow gown and a gold crown and is singing happily to the animals in the forest. She kind of looks like Mila with blue eyes and a gentle smile.*

*Looking away from the book, I stare at my baby sister, knowing the truth she is still too young to comprehend. One day, she will.*

*One day, she’ll wake up and realize fairytales aren’t real.*

*They are just stories.*

*There is no happily ever after.*

*At least, not for girls like us.*

*One day, her little heart will break, and I won't be able to stop it.  
Because one day came for me.  
My heart broke the day my father directed his rage at my sisters, all  
because I disobeyed him.  
I started this.  
It was all my fault.  
While my sisters long for their one day basking in the sun, I can't wait for  
the day I am strong enough to put an end to their misery.  
Happily ever afters in books are only achieved once the princess is free of  
their wicked stepmother, right?  
In our case, it is our own father.  
Our own blood.  
The one person who should have shown us love and protected us. Instead,  
he was the one who showed us how to hurt and how to bleed for sins that  
weren't our own.  
One day won't come as long as he is breathing.  
As long as he still reigns.  
There's only one choice then.  
One way to do it.  
It's quite simple, you see...  
All I need to do is take down the heartless king.*

## *Present*

*“One day. Okay? This is my one day, and I just want you to fight for yours instead of worrying about me.”* The voice message ends, and what was left of my heart—a heart that only beats for my little sister— crumbles at my feet.

*My baby sister.*

My little sister is now in the hands of my enemies, and it's all my fault. I should've done more to keep her safe, but what else could I have done? My need to keep her alive and safe had begun to dim her light. I saw it every day. How the little girl with stars in her eyes and so much goodness in her heart started to slowly fade away, hidden inside this cold mansion that never truly felt like a home.

*More like a prison.*

I failed her, and even when I thought things got better with the removal of our sperm donor from our lives. I tried my damndest to shield her from the cruelty of this sick world, and it was all for nothing. I see it now.

Her voice.

Mila was always easy to read.

She could never fool me until she did.

Until she started to pretend she was satisfied with the life she had here with me. I should've known that she needed more.

But then I did know, didn't I? I just chose to turn a blind eye because, as long as she was here with me, all would be okay. She was safe, but she's not safe now.

Her words replay in my mind, torturing me further.

One day.

Her one day.

Fuck.

Dread, fury, and desolation curl in my stomach, enraging me. Making me see red.

"You lost them," I whisper under my breath, in disgust as Nico shakes his head at me with the decency to look remorseful. "You had one job, Nicolas."

"Boss..." Nicolas, the man who I entrusted with my sister's safety and to keep an eye on Augustus whispers, looking up at me with fearful eyes.

Good.

He is right to feel fear.

I usually enjoy that look in my enemies, but he isn't that exactly. My enemy.

No.

He's my soldier.

A soldier who fucked up, and it puts me in an uncomfortable position because how do I know he didn't betray me like Augustus? How am I certain that he didn't conspire against me?

A rat.

I am quiet for a second contemplating all my options.

We all had darkness inside us.

Some of us feed it.

While others fear it.

I don't fear the dark, no. I feed it. Once I was in the middle, slowly losing my soul to darkness, but my love for my sisters always kept me from going

over the edge until one day I was forced to embrace it.

Now, darkness is my only friend.

My ally.

My safe place.

Choice made, I grab my gun and stare at it for a second before putting it in the holster strapped to my chest. “Phoenix. Does the name ring a bell, Nicolas?” The look on his face tells me it does. His eyes grow big and his nostrils flare.

“I swear to God, boss, I—” I cut him off with a wave of my gloved hand before he fed me more bullshit. There is no God. Not in the land of sinners. Not here where the soulless reign.

Where I reign.

Enjoying the look of dread in his face, I decide what to do next. I slowly move towards the metal table at the far side of my office, where I keep my favorite knives. Oh, how I love to play with them. I always have. They made me strong when my own hands failed me.

Touching each blade, I stop when I land on my favorite one. The butcher’s knife. Picking it up, I turn to face my soldier.

He looks pitiful.

Weak.

He’s on his knees, blood covering half of his face and sweat falling down his messy blond hair.

A memory hits me as I look down at him.

*The head of this family needs to cultivate fear. If you are not feared by your soldiers, then you’re powerless. Yes, you must cultivate respect and gratitude, but your men must fear you.* Gabriele’s words flash in my mind reminding me how I got here.

Not because of birthrights.

Not because of my name.

All odds were against me. I am a woman in a man’s world.

I got to where I am because of fear.

Their fear of what I might do to them is what keeps them loyal and compliant, but someone turned rat, and it got us to this moment.

“Do you wish to live another day, Nicolas?” Knife in hand, I step forward, my heels clicking as I move closer to the man.

Nicolas’ frightened brown eyes meet mine. He reeks of desperation. Pathetic.



Running my knife along his flushed cheek, I enjoy the way he shudders, not in pleasure but out of fear.

“Let me prove myself to you. Boss, I swear to fucking Christ, I didn’t know shit of what they were planning, and I have nothing to hide. I was not behind the ambush or your sister’s kidnapping.”

The eyes.

The eyes always reveal truths, and Nicola’s beady, little eyes tell me he is telling the truth, yet I refuse to reveal that to him.

Let him flirt with the possibility of execution by my hands or my knife, to be precise.

“Find me the name of the one who dared take my sister. Bring me Gus’ head, too. I want a name before the day ends, or it’s your head I’ll have instead.” I point my knife towards the door, silently ordering him to get the hell out. He slowly rises from the floor with wobbly knees and quickly heads towards the door, but before he leaves, I speak up. “And stop swearing to God, Nicolas. Only fools believe there’s such a thing as one.”

Nicolas bows his head and closes the door quickly behind him. Clearly itching to get out of here before I change my mind.

What I said is true.

Only fools believe there’s an all-seeing presence watching over us.

A being of light and love.

That’s bullshit.

There is no such thing because if there was, then how come so many innocent and vulnerable people suffer, and this so-called God of love and forgiveness never steps in?

He lets filth rule this earth, causing havoc as they please, while he sits back and does nothing.

I don’t believe in God.

Nor do I believe in any legends or myths.

I believe solely in myself.

That’s all I’ll ever need.

# MESSAGE FROM K



*Mila,*

*There will come a time in your life where I will have to do whatever it needs to be done to keep you safe. I'm sorry if in the process I clip your wings. I'm trying to keep the flames from getting to you like they did me.*

*• Sirius*

# **SWEETS AND JEALOUSY**

## RIAGAN



*"This love is worth it all." - R*

A sweet smell wafts through the air as I make my way down the stairs toward the kitchen. The delicious smell is compelling and has my mouth watering and my stomach grumbling. I also hurry my pace in search of Mila. She wasn't in her room when I went to check on her.

It's early in the morning, and my body feels tired, as if I didn't get much sleep last night. I didn't.

A certain little tease, blonde bombshell kept roaming through my mind, successfully ruining every attempt of sleep. Fuck, how things change in a blink of an eye. How one day you can be traveling through life alone and only existing, not truly living, and the next well, Mila happens.

Now I'm here.

Not only did I propose a marriage of convenience to the girl, but on the same night, my fiancé friend-zones me. A sane man would feel annoyed at being denied, but the thrill of the challenge buzzes through me.

I was sure this wouldn't be easy.

She wouldn't be the one if she were easy.

And there's no denying that she is the one.

My one.

Fuck tradition.

Fuck "normal" courting.

I've always followed the beat of my own fucking drum. Never cared to follow social norms.

I wanted her, I found a way into her little world, and now I don't plan on ever leaving.

Stalker much? Yes.

Is it too fast? For her, perhaps, but I've been waiting a long fucking time.

This need for her has been bubbling inside of me for years.

Sure, I'd lusted after women before. But nothing had been quite like this. Women fell on my lap the same way dollar bills did. Easy.

Without much effort.

If I wanted a woman, I typically asked her out, took her home. I "got her out of my system," as much as I hated that turn of phrase, and that was it.

Life went on, and I moved on.

But life didn't move on after my first encounter with the little Parisi princess. No, it certainly didn't.

It was innocent at first, then she grew up, and I crossed the fucking line.

Now it's too late.

I'm obsessed.

Poor girl.

Finding my way to the kitchen, I stop when I take in the scene in front of me.

Red.

No, fuck that. Green.

So much green.

Jealousy.

My little butterfly is behind the kitchen counter, dressed in nothing but an oversized cream shirt and no fucking bra on. I would appreciate the perfect sight of her round tits straining under the shirt if it weren't for the fact that my clan chief, my soon-to-be fish food clan chief, is sitting opposite of her with a grin on his fucking face and a plate of waffles — her fucking waffles.

I don't know what pisses me off more. That he probably got a good look at the impressive rack and sweet little poking nipples or that he gets to eat something she made.

Both.

I've never been good at sharing, and I never will be.

Kelly, the pig, doesn't finish a bite before he shoves more in his mouth as if he was raised on a fucking barn.

But what really makes my blood pressure rise is the way Mila beams while she watches him eat. As if the way the asshole chews the waffle and

licks his fingers after each bite gives her joy.

Fuck, her smile.

That perfect smile makes a shitty day better.

She's mine, and so are her smiles.

"Kelly." I bark, startling Mila. Shit. I do my best to control the jealous beast that wants to climb outside my body and throttle one of my most loyal men and friend. A friend, who is grinning from ear to ear as if he could read my mind and is taking pleasure in pissing me off. "The plants need watering." I say through gritted teeth.

"And you, my friend, need to be medicated and perhaps committed." He laughs, rising from his seat and looking at Mila while she looks away from him, concentrating intently on the waffle maker. "Thank you for the delicious waffles, sweetness. Never have I tasted anything sweeter, and I don't think I ever will." He says, working his charm on her, damn well knowing it will get him killed if he takes it any further than that. Clenching my jaw, I fight the urge to choke him with the damn waffles.

Then I notice how Mila's smile widens at the same time as her cheeks flush pink. "You're welcome." She responds shily and so sweetly, it's hard to not get caught up in all that sweetness.

Pure fucking sunshine.

Turning away from where Mila is whispering something about white walls and no colors, I turn to Kelly. I wait for him to reach me, and when he's close enough, I take the damn plate from him. He doesn't get to eat them. "You keep that corny ass charm to yourself, fucker." I warn, but he just laughs. Never taking anything seriously. I don't joke about Mila.

I also don't play when it comes to her.

I'm so fucked.

"How the fuck you ended up with a sweet little thing like that, I don't know..." He taunts me as he leaves the room. I swear I hear him say: 'Good fucking luck' under his breath.

*Yeah, fucker, fate works in mysterious ways.*

"Do you want some? They're my favorites, but I didn't take into account that others might not like them. Do you like waffles? If so, what flavor? Also do you have any allergies?" She rambles adorably, while cutting strawberries into tiny pieces and placing them on the white ceramic plate with a small amount of whipped cream. She's excited, I can tell. She is all bouncy, blonde hair pulled into two high pigtails. Never has a woman damn near knocked the

wind out of me until her. That is what happens every time right she looks up at me with those big fucking eyes the color of the sky. I am left trying to find my next breath.

“These are perfect, sweetheart.” I look down at the plate in front of me. Chocolate chip waffles with bits of bacon as a topping. My favorite. Her favorite, as well.

I shouldn’t know these things about her. I feel guilty that I do, and that’s a fucking first. Never in my life have I felt guilty about anything apart from my mother.

Nothing else.

Didn’t care about anything or anyone else enough to feel guilty, but I do now.

“They’re my favorite. It’s the perfect blend of sweet and salty.” She mumbles softly. I watch her vivid blue eyes. Her eyes are always moving, always darting, and her hands are never still. One is holding onto a spatula as she unsticks the waffles from the waffle maker, and the other is tapping the counter. “Here. Have as many as you want.” She serves me four big-ass waffles, and I don’t mind one bit.

Taking a seat, I grab a fork and dive in, and when the first taste hits my taste buds, I can’t hold back the moan of pleasure that slips from my mouth. I have had these almost every morning since I grew teeth, and not once have I ever tasted waffles better than these.

“I wanted to show you my gratitude for helping me and bringing me to this paradise.” She says while continuing to tap on the counter.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Three times.

She stops.

A long second passes before she does it again.

“You don’t need to thank me, sweetheart.” I bite down on a strawberry while staring her way.

“Oh, but I do. My *nonna* used to say that we should always show our gratitude when someone does something nice for us, either with words or with food, and since sometimes, I’m not very good with words, so I chose food. Eat.”

Well, when she puts it like that.

I do as she says.

I eat.

I ate every waffle on my plate and then asked for seconds, and even when I was full and I knew I couldn't take another one, I asked for more anyway because that smile on her face now? A smile that lights up her entire goddamn face? That's the reason why I'm doing all of this.

The lying.

The secrets.

All of it.

Because there's always an endgame, and mine was always her.

Not the three families of Detroit, no.

Not their business.

Her.

Always her.

Then a sick satisfying feeling courses through my veins, knowing that she didn't smile at Kelly as she did me.

Baby steps.

"Mila?" Setting the plate aside, I speak up while she munches on a waffle. I try my best to divert the dirty thoughts that flash through my brain as I watch her lick the whipped cream off the corner of her pink lips.

She has no idea. No idea at all how fucking irresistible she is. My little forbidden fruit.

Her eyes fall on my face for a rare second, and that's all it takes for my heart to beat faster. How does she do that shit? I don't know. "Yes?"

"I need your help again." Lies. Little white lies.

"My help?" She narrows her eyes, making her look adorable as fuck. "With that?"

"My father has a bucket list that he's not able to complete right now. I offered to do it for him, and I need help crossing things off it."

"A bucket list." She gapes excitedly. "I love bucket lists. I have one, too." She ducks her head shily, as if she's embarrassed to share that with me.

There's no need to be embarrassed. Not with me. Bucket lists are to Mila what cage fighting is for me.

"I was thinking we could help each other then."

"How?" She lifts her head, and her excited gaze meets mine.

"You help me cross my father's wishes off his list, and I'll help you with yours. How does that sound?"



She doesn't answer for almost a minute. I already imagine the wheels on her head spinning, trying to figure all of this out. After what feels like an eternity, she offers me a small smile.

"I would love to help you with your father's bucket list, Riagan."

Little does my butterfly know that every single wish on that list is for her.

Wishes I know will make her heart happy.

In turn, it'll get me closer to said heart.

No one said I had to play fair.

Playing dirty for a man like me has always and will always be the only way.



*Mila*

PARADISE, plants, books, and bucket lists.

I'm starting to think the man walking next to me is a mind reader or a mythical creature. Because how else would a rational person explain this situation? There is no logic. No reason. It all went out the window when I not only fled the country with this beautiful stranger but also accepted his fake marriage proposal. I've been in a haze since yesterday. Marriage. A fake marriage. To an older man I barely know. I've seen movies about this—fake marriages of convenience. On-paper-only marriages. In books, it turns out romantic, with the main characters falling in love and living happily ever after.

But that's not a possibility for us.

How would that even work?

He can't stand my sisters, and they're the most important people in my life. He also is a crime lord who needs a fearless queen to stand by his side, and sadly that's just not me. I'll be more of a burden. He might not see it now, but he eventually will. But I'm still in awe of this man and how he has managed to leave me speechless more than once with his kind words and his suspicious knowledge of the things that make me smile. There is no explaining how someone I met only once before knows so much about me. You know that sweet blissful feeling you get when you're doing something

you love?

For me, it's when I re-read a comfort book or when I am surrounded by my plants.

Peace.

I feel that here.

Here with him, walking down a colorful street while eating a refreshing treat made of shaped ice and fruit syrup. It's so good. I was curious about the delicious treat like I am about most things I've never tried before, so I asked the man who was selling them out of his bright, colorful pushcart how he made them. The man was kind enough to show me his process, and Riagan stood by and watched with me, and not once did he look annoyed or exasperated.

When I looked up, I found him looking down at me with a soft smile. The same smile that makes my stomach feel funny.

He does that to me a lot.

All my life, I programmed myself to blend in with my surroundings, to not attract attention, and keep myself out of people's way, yet here, with Riagan, I can't help but ask questions and speak my mind. Riagan seems intent on pushing me into the spotlight, which is also new to me. New, and at times, scary.

Now, as we walk through a small street where there are various local vendors that not only sell treats but handmade tropical clothing and pretty jewelry made of seashells and colorful rocks, I keep stealing glances at his face that looks contempt.

I can't also stop looking his way because he's never looked more wild than he does today. He is wearing black swim trunks and his white tank, which he discarded and is now thrown over his shoulder. He also wears a black baseball hat backward. He looks like most heroes do in romance novels these days.

I also notice how he never looks the part of the rich and ruthless gangster dressed to the nines in expensive suits like most men that work for my sister do. Perhaps, it's only an Italian mafioso custom? I do not know.

He looks carefree, and like he's actually enjoying this adventure.

I keep stealing glances, watching him eat his ice cone while walking side by side.

I chose the coconut one, while Riagan chose the guava flavor. He even got his guard, who's been standing back watching his surroundings like a

hawk– one.

I noticed the two men really enjoy treats.

Which is interesting since he doesn't look like a man who likes to eat the way I saw him this morning. The look on his face while he took the first bite of my waffles will remain in my memory long after this arrangement is over. Gus and Carlotta are the only people who are always willing to try anything I bake. Kadra doesn't eat sugar, so it was just us, and although I know my friends enjoy what I make them, no one has ever requested to eat as many waffles as Riagan did.

Which delighted me.

"Mila." Riagan's voice breaks through the confusing thoughts. I've been so deep in my head that I didn't realize he stopped next to a kiosk where a lady in colorful clothing and a crazy hairstyle is selling hats. Noticing Riagan has extended an arm my way, I see he is holding a pretty aqua-colored hat with a baby turtle on it.

"Another hat?" I blurt out and instantly cringe. Do I sound ungrateful? I didn't mean to. "I– I, it's just that you don't need to get me anything." I look away, feeling embarrassed that my mouth got in the way of what I really wanted to say.

"You like hats."

"I do." He gently places the hat on my head. That's when I realized that I left without my comfort cap, and not once have I felt the compulsion to reach for it.

"I like your smile when I give you shit." He shrugs.

"You like my smile?"

"I do."

"I like your smile, too." I whisper, playing with the texture of the turtle logo on the hat.

Riagan laughs. A laugh that touches me the same way the sea breeze does my face.

It's soothing. "Well... look at that. My future wife likes my smile. Shit." His smile grows wider. So big that all his teeth are visible.

*Future wife.*

The prospect of being his wife shouldn't cause my heartbeat to raise or my skin to feel hot, but it does.

I don't know how to respond. I'm at a loss for words, so instead of opening my mouth and saying something that might make him lose that

smile, I just smile right back and do my best to look him in the eyes, and when I do, something happens. Something that's never happened before.

I get this strange sense that this man in front of me with the soulful eyes and melodic laugh is someone that I was destined to find.

Out of the blue, a girl in a baby pink bicycle races by, stealing my attention. The joyful and jovial look on the girl's face as she rides her bike makes me smile wider than I was before.

She looks so happy and free.

How can such a simple activity like moving pedals and steering a wheel make someone look that happy?

"Do you want one?"

Riagan's says from behind me, and without looking away from the girl who is now riding her bike faster while the wind blows her copper hair in all directions, I say. "I don't know how." I confess, still looking at the jovial girl. Then I wonder if he'll mock me for it, but he doesn't. Instead, he nods and jogs to the other side of the street, where there is a bicycle stand with a few of them. I frown when I see him talking to a man and hands him a wad of cash before grabbing one of the bikes and returning to where I am standing. The biggest smile spreads on my face. "You got a bike!"

"No, butterfly. You do."

Shaking my head, I look down at the bicycle nervously. "I don't know how. I—"

"I'll teach you." Then he offers me his hand, the one that's not holding onto the bike.

"I don't know..." I look up at his face, concentrating on his bearded cheek. "What if I fall?" I whisper vulnerably. The civilians will witness me making a fool of myself if I crash and fall.

And as if Riagan read my mind, he leans closer and takes my hand in his, causing those tingles to spread all over my skin again. Electricity. That's how it feels when he touches me. It doesn't feel like bugs crawling up my body like it usually does. "I won't let you fall, sweetheart, and no one will laugh. I promise you, and if they do, they'll lose their lives, so it wouldn't matter if they laugh because they'll be dead." He says nonchalantly.

It takes me a second to understand what he is saying.

He is not joking.

There was not a smile on his face, so he didn't make a joke.

He is being serious.

“You can’t kill someone for laughing.” I point out.

“I sure as fuck can kill someone that is being unkind to you.”

His words hit me like a rush of wind.

“You’re not like everyone else.” I point out, noticing he still hasn’t let go of my hand, and why don’t I want him to?

That’s the question, and right now, I don’t have an answer, at least not one that I’m willing to admit right now.

“Likewise, sweetheart. I have never met someone quite like you.”

“I’m just me. There’s nothing special about me. The only unique trait I have is my—” He interrupts me when I proceed to remind him of what makes me think differently and sometimes not be like others.

“Nah, it has nothing to do with that.” He pulls me gently until I’m straddling the bike. I hold my breath as he stands behind me with both tattooed arms around me. Then he places my hands on top of the handlebars. “You shine, Mila. So. Fucking. Bright.” he whispers, and I can feel the little hairs on the back of my neck rise.

*So do you, Riagan.*

*Like all the stars in the sky at once.*

I think to myself.

And there he goes again, stealing my breath and making my head spin with a multitude of questions. I move my head toward him and the words get stuck in my throat when I realize how close we are. Our lips are a breath away from each other. My eyes clash with his, and I smile. I smile with not only my mouth but with my eyes to let him know without words how grateful I am that he looks at me that way. That he doesn’t see a disability or quirky behavior when he looks at me like most people tend to do. He sees me for... me.

“Now, with your feet, move the pedals. I won’t let go.” He promises. “Remember to use the breaks to halt the bike.”

Nodding once, I turn away from him and look down at the pedals and do as he says and then we’re moving, and he doesn’t let go of me.

Not once.

Not even when I successfully get the hang off it.

It’s not that complicated.

You just need to find a balance while moving the pedals and try your best not to crash. That would be very, very bad.

I rode with Riagan holding onto the seat four more times until I got the

confidence to ride without him. Then I ride with the wind in my hair and Riagan watching from the sidelines with a smile on his face. Where did you come from? Where were you all this time? I wonder as I keep riding while still stealing glances at him.

“I did it.” I sing-song happily a few minutes later as I bring the bicycle to a halt right in front of Riagan.

Looking at his chest, I smile. “I learned how to ride a bicycle.” I say in awe, thinking that maybe this might seem insignificant to other people my age, but to me, it means everything and I have him to thank. He then helps me off the bicycle, and I’m standing in front of him, still holding onto the handles. “You did, sweetheart.” He winks at me, and my heart does a strange, baby-goatish gallop. Just looking at him makes my heart pound and my stomach flutter.

“I like you, Riagan. I know it is very premature of me to say this without us really knowing each other, but I have this gut feeling that tells me you’re one of the good ones. You’re a good friend, and my *nonna* used to say I should always trust my gut feeling. I am trusting my instinct. Please don’t prove me wrong.” I blurt vulnerability.

“I won’t, baby.”

*Baby...*

A moment of silence passes between us as the breeze picks up, and I think I somehow said something that he did not like. Why did he suddenly go quiet? Looking up at his face, I find him staring down at me with a look that I can’t comprehend. He doesn’t look happy, nor does he look sad.

It only lasted a second because, before I knew it, his face turned soft like before. “How about we ride your new bike back home.” He taps my hat once, and my heart beats faster at the same time as my grin takes over my entire face. I think I’ve never, in my nineteen years on this earth, smiled as big as I do here.

“What about the car?”

“Kelly will handle it.” He shrugs like he could care less about his very expensive and very over-the-top sports car.

And that’s how I end up sitting on the handlebars while Riagan rides us all the way home.

I laugh out loud and smile through the entire bicycle ride, and I wonder if it would be too much for me to ask that this moment last for a long time.

This moment.

This feeling.  
This...man.

*Riagan*

Friend.  
That fucking word.  
If only she knew that calling me friend felt like she was shoving a knife in  
my chest.

# MILA'S BUCKET LIST



1. Help a stranger find happiness.
2. Get a meaningful tattoo.
3. Open a bakery.
4. Create a masterpiece.
5. Learn how to ride a bicycle.
6. Visit a magical place.
7. Make a difference in someone's life.
8. Help my sisters find their way back to each other.
9. Kiss under a willow tree.
10. Find my voice in this loud world.
11. Fall in love.



# YACHT & LAUGHS

## MILA



*"Would you love me even when I show you all of me?" - M*

I don't remember much about the first five years of my life. Some memories are a blur when I try to recollect them. I once read an article that explains how one tends to block out the memories that cause you the most pain and trauma yet the memory of the night someone almost drowned me is still fresh in my brain.

I still don't know who it was. Maybe it was my father. Or maybe it was my mother on one of her 'off days', which meant she was drunk out of her mind. Perhaps, it was one of the maids or one of the men who worked for my father who tried to get rid of me following orders. I still don't know. All I do know is that one second, I'm quietly playing with the bubbles in the bath water, and the next thing I know my head's underwater as I struggle to breathe.

One.

Two.

Three.

I counted in my head while I was being pushed down, and yet the air wouldn't reach my lungs.

Only water did.

I can still feel the burning sensation in my lungs because of all the water I swallowed. Right before I fell unconscious, my sister Arianna pulled me out. The strong arms that were holding me down were no longer there but my

sister's.

That's all I remember about that night.

That and her eyes.

My older sister was an expert at concealing her pain, but in that moment, she let the tears fall.

She cried for me. I think I never saw her cry before or after. Just that time, and it will stick with me for the rest of my life.

A sudden squealing sound brings me back from the present and away from thoughts that hurt me. This morning, Riagan woke me up early because he wanted to show me something. He didn't tell me what. He only asked me to wear a bathing suit and put lots of sunscreen on.

Now, we're here.

In his stunning 35' yacht, not far from the shore, just enough that the water is deep.

The sun is blazing today, and the water looks so blue it has me beaming with eagerness to jump in it. My past trauma with the water didn't get the best of me. My sister, Kadra, made sure to teach me how to swim and what to do if I ever found myself in a situation where I could drown.

I'm no longer afraid of the water.

Especially not here in these magical, enchanting-looking waters of the Caribbean, where loud squealing is coming from sea creatures. Looking at the sweet dolphins now, I can't help but smile from ear to ear. My favorite animal. "Riagan..." I gasp at the same time as I look over my shoulder where I'm standing on the deck, holding onto the lifeline and watching as he walks my way after making sure the yacht stays in place.

I don't know much about boats, but I make a mental note to ask him all he knows about them later. Riagan is, once again, shirtless, with his impressive muscles and tattoos on full display. I notice that his skin has a golden hue now, and his hair looks like caramel in the sunlight. He takes the last step towards me, and I have to crane my neck to look at his face. Our height difference is ridiculous, but I don't mind it one bit. In fact, I like it more than I should, but Riagan is my friend now. Friends like things about each other, right?

*Keep telling yourself that...*

Hush... I kindly reprimand the sometimes-sassy voice in my head.

"Do you like it?"

*Do I like it?*

“This looks just like the movies!” I jump excitedly, making him chuckle softly. I think of every wildlife that lives under this water. A world of its own. Every type of sea life and the ones that haven’t been discovered yet. The sea is infinite, and I truly believe there is more to it than we have been taught.

“Tell me one of your fun facts, Mila.” His gentle voice gets me out of my head, and all my attention is now on him. *Tell me a fun fact...* I always offer them, but no one truly asks for them.

Until him.

I blurt out the most recent one I learned. “Did you know that bottlenose dolphins swallow fish heads first so the fish’s spines don’t catch in their throat?”

“Clever little fuckers.”

I smile at that. “They are so smart and very chatty!”

“How so?”

“They have some of the most elaborate acoustic abilities in the animal kingdom.” I explain while looking at his face. I try not to get distracted by that face. It’s been happening a lot. When I look at him, I lose focus and control of my thoughts. My new friend is dangerous, and it has nothing to do with how skilled he is with his gun. It has everything to do with his beauty and his...heart. Call me naive. Call me young. But life has taught me to see the good in everyone, even when it’s really, really hard. Riagan has a lot of goodness in him. I see it in the instances when I find myself lost in his gaze. Yesterday, he said that I shine, but I don’t see myself that way. He does. He shines and he doesn’t even realize it. Maybe it’s only with me? And that thought makes my heart beat faster. It shouldn’t but it does. A shake of the boat reminds me that I got lost in my head again and lost my train of thought because of Riagan. Clearing my throat, I smile sheepishly. “As I was saying... dolphins make a variety of sounds including whistles, clicks, squawks, moans, barks, groans, and yelps.”

“That I did not know.” I watch as Riagan looks away from me and toward the two dolphins swimming happily at sea.

“Now you do!”

“Now I do, baby.” He steps closer. So close that I can almost feel the heat radiating off of him. I notice he has an issue with not understanding personal space. Does he realize how close he is? Is he that close on purpose? Does it mean something? Part of me wants to believe it means he likes me, but I

immediately throw that notion out the window. It was ridiculous. He was an older man. A god made of flesh, and I was...well, young, quirky, and well, I'm sure I'm not his type at all. He seems like a man who enjoys a confident woman. A woman just like him. Strong, independent, and well, closer to his age. But what do I know?

I wanted him to like me. I want him to smile at me like he is now. I want things I don't quite comprehend, yet I just know it feels right.

He feels right.

In such a short amount of time, he has touched me in ways his hands haven't.

Most of my life, I felt out of my element in certain situations, mostly when I am around other people, given the fact that the only time I am ever truly comfortable is when my nose is stuck in a book, and my hands are busy either tending to my plants, baking or painting. The rest of the time, I'm uncomfortable being around people, especially people I have never met. Being around people makes my skin feel too tight, makes my head feel too full of thoughts and sensory stimulation. When there's a lot of chaos in my surroundings, my thoughts tend to run even faster, which makes me feel anxious, and I tend to shut down completely and distance myself from a person or situation. Men, especially, confuse or overwhelm me, but he does neither.

I also don't know how to relate to others or get them to engage with me. I read on the internet that jokes help in the process of making friends. I don't know how to crack a well-timed joke. Or make some pithy commentary. That is why I offer fun facts. It's the only way I know how to engage with others without making them uncomfortable with my silence.

I'm an introvert.

But Riagan? He clearly isn't.

Extroverted people make me edgy, and this man in particular, has got the fire hose in my brain turned on full blast. He's so tall and handsome it makes me question my own eyes, my sanity, and my existence. Men like him don't end up with girls like me. Not in real life anyway. Yet he's here with me. At times, I find myself spacing out, thinking to myself that he can't be real. Can a man this sweet truly exist? Yet here he is, in defiance of all logic. Standing so close to me. The top of my head comes to his chest. I am so close that I can even count the freckles on his skin where there isn't any ink. Right on top of his heart.

Then I remember he called me... baby for the second time.

Baby?

I am not an infant child, so there is no logic for him to call me that.

Men in books call their lovers baby, but there's also no logical explanation to him calling me that.

We are not in a romantic relationship, nor does he love me. That begs the question, why is he calling me baby?

Sweetheart, I understand.

People tend to use the terms of endearment a lot.

Butterfly, I also understand because of the circumstance of our first encounter.

But the word baby? I do not.

"Mila." Riagan speaks, getting me out of my head...again.

All too often, I find out that I have missed a social cue, overlooked a hint, or missed a subtlety in a situation. This is, in many ways, a defining characteristic of mine. Sometimes when others are talking, I have to remind myself to tune in. To pay attention.

Like right now.

I curse myself mentally, realizing I'd spaced out—or what others termed spacing out, but which was really just my mind spiraling off into a maze of interconnected thoughts.

"Can I touch them?" I blurt out, trying to distract him from my embarrassment. I look away from Riagan and point at the sweet dolphins, but then a long moment passes where Riagan doesn't say anything,

Nothing.

At all.

The only sound is that of the sea and its sweet creatures swimming joyfully around the boat.

Anxiety creeps in for a second, but then it quickly disappears as if I never felt it when I feel his gentle touch on my chin.

"You don't ever have to ask. You want to do something? You do it. You want something? Take it."

"I don't think that's how life works for most people." I frown, trying to understand the meaning behind his words, but I am not so sure I truly understand. Riagan is like a box of surprises. Like a puzzle, I can't wait to finish to be able to understand what the picture is.

He taps my nose sweetly. "You're not most people. You're mine." My

breath hitches, and he notices quickly adding. “You’re mine to protect from now on. You’re my...” He clears his throat and his face changes. I notice he grinds his teeth like people do when they don’t want to say what will come out of their mouth next. “Friend. You’re my friend.”

Friends... right.

All too sudden, he steps back and hunches over. “Get on my back.”

Frowning, I ask. “What for?”

“We’re getting in the water.” He says, as a matter of fact.

“But why do I need to get on your back? I know how to swim.”

Still hunching over, he taps his back, arguing with me to do as he says. “Yeah, but I don’t trust those little fuckers. Did you know a dolphin tried to rape a woman once? Horny little shits.”

My jaw falls, too stunned with his words. I look at the innocent-looking creatures, and suddenly I am not that excited to get in the water. “You are telling me that my favorite animals are the sea’s sex freaks?” I blurt out. I should really research more about this piece of information he just provided.

Then the best thing I ever witnessed happens.

Riagan throws his head back and laughs.

He laughs with his entire chest, and I stand there in awe.

I thought that this island was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen and will likely ever see.

Until now.

Until the sight of Riagan O’Sullivan laughing out loud out of pure joy.

Once again, his laughter is one of happiness and not cruelty.

Without thinking more about it, I step forward and hold on to Riagan’s neck as he quickly maneuvers me on his back. “Hold on tight.” He looks over his shoulder at me, and I have to concentrate really hard on his words and not on the thoughts that keep popping in my head. Thoughts about how his skin feels against mine. How not one single thing bothers me about this moment.

I don’t think about germs.

Not about the problems waiting away from this island.

Nothing.

I hold tighter, enjoying the feel of him, and he smiles.

Big.

He smiles, and the sun suddenly seems to shine brighter.

A second later, we’re going overboard and jumping into the water, going under.

And I have one thought, and one thought only.

I wish these moments could last a lifetime.

Every fear.

Every heartache.

Every bad thing that's ever happened to me seems to have washed away once we reach the surface.

I let go of Riagan's neck, and swim on my own. It's freeing. So that's what I do for at least twenty minutes.

I go under and swim like I would when I was a little girl with my sisters, pretending we were mermaids. All the while, Riagan seems contempt just watching me.

He even held me close while one of the dolphins gave me a kiss. Imagine that. My first kiss and it was a dolphin who gave it to me. The same dolphins Riagan accused of sexual predators. Just the thought of it all has me laughing by myself.

Throwing my head back, I stretch my arms out and float with my eyes closed, hyper aware that Riagan is not far away. Even with my eyes closed, and with my head in the clouds, I still feel him near me.

My head was buzzing with thoughts, wishes, desires, fears, doubts—a swirling maelstrom of them.

It's still surreal to me that this is my reality.

How does one go from a lonely castle to this wonderful adventure in a matter of days?

"Butterfly..." I was jolted back to awareness.

No longer floating but swimming in place, I look at Riagan. I really look at him at this moment with his hair wet and pushed back away from his handsome face. His lips seem redder than pink today, and his skin is glistening.

Perfect.

The total opposite of me.

"This is the best day ever, Riagan, like it was yesterday and the day before. All my best days seem to be with you. I want more days like this one."

He smiles gently. "I do, too."

"You do?" My heart starts to pound fast, so I tap my chest repeatedly, trying to calm myself.

He nods and then sticks his hand out from the water toward me. "Here."



There's a clam in his hand.

When did he find this?

Where did he get it from?

"You found a seashell?" I frown, looking at it, confused as to what is so special about the clam. A clam is not a treasure. At least, I think it is not.

Wait.

Taking the seashell from him, I squeal in delight. "You found a pearl!" I gently pry the thing open. "That is so—" The rest of my sentence gets stuck in my throat when I see what the clam holds inside. Shocked and barely able to find my next breath, I stare into Riagan's eyes which are as blue as the sky today. "What is this, Riagan? I do not understand. How is it possible that you found this in a clam?" I mumble, alternating between looking at his face and the beautiful ring inside the seashell.

A small ring with a traditional diamond and a pearl next to it. The jewels are perfectly placed in the form of a heart.

His gaze burns hotter than the sun on my skin when he takes the ring, then my hand and gently places it on my ring finger.

"It seems we both found a treasure, butterfly. Cross it off your list."

I swallow hard. "I'm sorry. I do not understand what this means." I don't.

The ring feels heavy on my ring finger, and I can't help but bring it up to my face to look at it. It's so pretty. A treasure, indeed.

"My future wife needs a ring, no?"

I nod, dumbfounded. "Yes, but you shouldn't have gone to the trouble or spent your money."

"Money is no issue, Mila, and you need a ring. Everyone needs to see my ring on your finger for it to look real."

"Oh." My heart was crashing, skipping beats, staccato and arrhythmic.

His thumb strokes my bottom lip, and it parts just like that. My heart hammers, and I think maybe I'm dreaming or something. He was a mystery. Fascinating, compelling.

"Riagan," I mutter, his name falling from my lips. What did I want to say? I had no idea. This strange feeling in my chest is overwhelming.

I am no idiot.

I might not have the most experience in this subject, but I do read a lot, and these feelings I only experience around him seem to feel a lot like...

but it can't be. Can it?

It's too soon.

This is real life and not a romance book.

"Mila." He breathes.

The water current seems to push us together. We're chest to chest. I stared at his face. I try my darndest to maintain eye contact, but after a few seconds, my eyes fall down to his lips. I can hear his breathing change.

With him, I never feel the pressure to fill the silence. Our conversations don't feel forced.

It flows naturally, as if words aren't needed.

After a few minutes, Riagan's hand tangles with mine. My heart slams in my chest hard enough, I worry I am at risk of a heart attack despite my youth and fitness, but I don't let go. I hold on to his hand as he holds onto mine.

Here, in the middle of the sea, with his arms around me and his fake engagement ring on my finger... I've never felt more at home.

Home.

Without saying a word, I lean forward, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead. I keep my lips there. "I think... I think you might become one of my favorite people, Riagan."

"Good." He pulls me closer to his chest. So close that I can feel his heartbeat. "Because you're already my favorite one."

Closing my eyes, I breathe in his scent mixed with the sea with a smile on my face.

I'm screwed.

Because there is no doubt that I've become obsessed with this overwhelming and joyous feeling in my chest whenever he is near.

I am irrevocably obsessed with this man.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*She makes me want to be better.  
Never wanted to before her.*

# PRIVATE BEACH

MILA



*"She's the miracle of life. My life." - R*

**A**nother day, another adventure.  
Another bucket list dream crossed.  
An engagement ring.

Unreal.

Once I woke up, I went downstairs and had breakfast with Riagan. He asked for waffles again, and ate all of his and two of mine. I didn't mind sharing food with him. I like that he enjoys my baking.

It brings me joy to see his face as he eats what I made him.

I don't fully understand why it brings me this much joy compared to others eating my food but it does.

After we finished breakfast, he asked me to join him on another adventure, and I, of course, couldn't deny him. Not an adventure. Never.

He then told me to wear another bathing suit and to rub more sunscreen on my skin.

Once I did all that, he brought me here.

To a private and empty beach where the sand is white and very clean.

Colorful seashells are everywhere to be found. Riagan even found me one so big I could hear the sound of the sea. I thought that was only a myth, but Riagan proved me wrong.

Looking all around me, from the crystal-clear water and the white sand to the little seashells buried in the sand, I find myself stuck in a dream. I'm awestruck and not just by this magical place, but by him too. "It's hard to

believe that one person owns all of this.” I breathe out, admiring our view. The sun is shining so bright that the turquoise water looks almost as if it has diamonds. “You’re so lucky, Riagan.”

“How so?” He asks in a husky tone, and I turn his way. God, sometimes staring at him is like looking directly at the sun. That’s why I look away. Sometimes his beauty overwhelms me.

“You have a piece of heaven here. You can easily escape the hectic chaos of everyday life in the city. You can hide from the world when it gets scary or too loud.” I whisper, trying to hold his gaze for as long as I’m able. Every time I last longer than the last, I find myself hoping I don’t ever have to look away. Hoping I could stare into those blue eyes of his that give me butterflies.

“I don’t wish to hide from the world, Mila.” He says roughly. I do. I want to tell him. I think I was meant to live in a place like this. Serene. Magical. Where everything seems so easy and so peaceful. “I’m not afraid of the world.”

That makes me look his way.

Of course, he’s not afraid of the world.

He makes everyone else seem like mere mortals in his presence. As if he could crush them just by snapping his fingers. He’s not only physically strong, but he has an aura around him. One that clearly says fuck with me, I’ll bury you. So easy. So simple.

But not for me.

I was built differently.

I made my peace with it.

That is why I find this man so fascinating.

Why I haven’t stopped seeing him in my dreams since arriving at the islands.

Before I space out and let my thoughts run wild, I look away and stare down at the stunning ring that now adorns my finger.

Riagan makes me feel like I’m strong too.

Like the world can’t touch me. Not if he’s near.

And that frightens me because he won’t be here forever. I’ll get attached to him, and what happens when this all ends?

I am back at square one.

Lonely.

Back in the shadows when I’m most comfortable.

“Mila.” I hadn’t notice I had been hiding my face with my wet curls until he lifted my chin between his fingers, lifting my face. I try my hardest to look into his eyes until I can’t hold his gaze any longer. I focus on his smile instead. Then his lips start moving. “You don’t have to fear the world, butterfly. One thing I learned is that you should make the world fear you. Our world, at least.”

I laugh, but there’s no humor. I know that he notices it. “Look at me, Riagan. What is there to fear?” It’s true.

“You have me. I got you. They should fear what I’m willing to do for you.” He says in a freighting tone. So quiet. So powerful.

Smiling softly, I blurt out. “You’re like my favorite cookie, Riagan. Hard on the outside, soft, and sweet on the inside.” I beam.

Riagan shakes his head and pokes my nose gently, causing my heart to skip a beat. And I wonder if friends look at each other the way he looks at me.

The way I think about him?

“Only to you, butterfly. Only you.”

At times like this one, I wish I were like my sisters. I wish I didn’t have to overthink every little thing. I wish facial expressions were easier to read and that feelings weren’t so hard to decipher.

Only to you, butterfly.

Only to you.

Does he mean that—

“Well, look at that...” My thoughts are interrupted by Riagan pointing at a spot in the sand a few feet away from where we’re sitting.

*No way...*

“Wow...” I whisper in awe, watching a dozen turtle eggs hatching at once a few feet away from us. So many baby turtles are making their way into the world, and Riagan and I are witnessing it.

It’s miraculous.

Reading about it will never be like experiencing the moment.

I am so happy I am here. So grateful.

Really, movies don’t do it justice. The beauty was almost overwhelming, making something in my chest expand and throb. The sheer, unadulterated, majestic beauty fills some primal void inside me. The natural beauty just... resonated. “It’s really, really amazing here, Riagan,” I say, after a while. He nods. “The view never gets old.”

We're sitting in the sand, enjoying the view while Kelly, Riagan's man, is sun-tanning on the yacht's deck. I hear Riagan tell him to stay back before we swam here and got to the shore. It's been just us since.

I spend the next few moments openly examining Riagan's features, the sharp lines of his jaw, the column of his neck, his thick eyelashes. His messy, thick brown hair. He really is incredibly beautiful. Hot wasn't a good enough word. Not to properly encompass what he truly looks like. Hot guys were a dime a dozen. Truly beautiful men? Not so much. He was masculine, utterly so—in his posture, in the way he carried himself, in his stride.

What does he see when he looks at me? I wonder. Curiosity gets the best of me. As always. "Riagan."

"Yes, butterfly?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Do you like my appearance?"

"I do." My breath hitches. I was expecting laughter, not this response. "I like it a fuck of a lot."

"Oh." My eyes widen. "I'm not as beautiful as my sisters. My father—"

"Your sisters don't hold a candle to you, sweetheart, and your father is a piece of shit." He's mad. That much I can tell by the change in his tone. Is he mad at me or on my behalf? I think the latter.

"It's just that sometimes I catch you looking at me in a way no one does. It's unsettling because I can't read your expression. I wish I could read your thoughts."

"If you want to know what I'm thinking, ask me, and I'll tell you." he shrugs.

"It's that simple?" I whisper while my heartbeat races in anticipation of his response.

Then he says the one thing I wasn't expecting. "With us, it is."

*With us, it is.*

Oh, my.

"You want to know what I'm thinking now?" He places his large hand next to mine on the sand, and his pinky finger plays with the pearl on the engagement ring.

I look down at our barely touching hands, and I nod because I'm unable to find my next breath.

"I'm thinking that you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, but



that's not all. Want to know what else?" He doesn't wait for my answer. "Your heart is so good, so fucking good, that I have trouble believing you're real. I swear to fucking God, when I look at you here by my side, it feels as if one of heaven's angels has gone missing and has fallen into my grasp. How does someone like you exist? Someone so good in this fucked up world. There's no logic in having someone as perfect as you exist."

"I'm not perfect. I'm far from it." I feel heat creep on my cheeks when I take in his words. His sweet words.

"You are to me." He says with finality, leaving no room for me to argue.

And for the first time in a long time, I don't doubt how someone else sees me.

I don't fight or question it.

I just feel the moment.

I feel him.



*Riagan*

THERE ARE things in life that I took for granted. The little things. Things I don't get to experience because of the life I lead.

The little butterfly gives me that.

The little things.

The joyful moments.

The peace.

I haven't had a day of peace since I was a young lad.

Since my mother's departure from my life.

Slumped back in the sand, I watch Mila build sandcastles with the most beautiful smile on her face and happy eyes. She's doing one hell of a job building them for a first timer.

She looks like a little kid experiencing her first day at the beach. Her soft skin has turned golden because of the sun with tiny little freckles.

Her blond curls look wilder now because of the sea salt and the sand.

She looks like a mermaid.

Wild. Happy. Free.

Fuck, and that bathing suit highlights her curves beautifully. Mila Areya

is short, coming up to my chest. While standing, I can see the top of her head.

I don't think she realizes how beautiful she is. There's no trace of the little girl I first met long ago. She's all curves and sweet sex appeal, without even realizing just how sexy and enticing she is to me. I've always been an ass man. I'm not picky when it comes to tits. But Mila's body was made for sin. Her breasts look like a handful too.

Perfect.

I know if I had them in my hands, they would spill.

The white bikini she has on accentuates her curves and has me daydreaming of what she looks like without it. Heavenly.

There's no doubt.

I told her the truth when I said she was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She is.

Everything about her enchants me.

Her voice.

Her smile.

Her sweet eyes.

Her pink lips.

Those fucking curls I wish I had wrapped around my fist as I pound into her like an animal staking his claim.

Perfection.

But then I look farther down to her thighs, and I see red. The marks.

Cut marks.

The need to reach forward and trace every single scar with my tongue, hoping to wipe away the ugly memories of them, is there.

It makes me want to kill them all.

Everyone who failed her inside that fucking soulless home.

Even animals treat their offspring better than Mila's parents did her.

I get wrapped up in my head, thinking of all the ways I could track down Gabriele Parisi and torment him the way he so clearly tormented his child. I know the fucker is not dead.

I know how women like Kadra think.

Death is not a punishment in our world.

No.

Death is mercy, and Gabriele Parisi doesn't deserve it.

I highly doubt his daughter granted him mercy.

“This is nice.” Mila’s soft-spoken words bring me back from my thoughts and to the now. When I look her way, my jaw almost hits the fucking sand. *What the fuck?*

“What are you doing?” I hiss, quickly sprinting into action, placing my black tank on her chest covering her. I put the thoughts of her ample, round tits and pretty pink nipples in the back of my mind for now. I’ll revisit that later.

Turning away from a confused Mila, I look toward Kelly, who is standing on deck, wiggling his eyebrows like a soon-to-be dead pervert, letting me know he saw her naked chest.

He saw her perfect tits.

Motherfucker.

“What’s wrong?” Mila says worriedly.

Trying to contain my anger and jealousy, I sigh and give her my attention. “You can’t do that, sweetheart.”

Her brows pull low. “I thought this was how people tan.” She whispers softly.

It is.

I should tell her some people choose to tan naked so they don’t get tan lines, but I don’t. I don’t say that shit because, fuck me, I don’t want her getting naked for anyone but me.

“Mila, if you don’t want to see my men, fuck that, any men or woman dead... don’t let them see you this way.”

She holds my shirt closer to her chest. “My mistake. I was pretty sure that is how people tan while on the beach. I’ve seen movies, and I read some scenes in books.”

Fucking movies.

Fuck the books, too.

I’ll deal with this shit later, but first...

Rising from the sand, I move towards the water. “I’ll explain later, butterfly. I’ll be right back...”

Fuck.

Kelly keeps grinning until a full-blown smile breaks on his face as I dive into the water, heading his way. The fucker is taunting me because he saw what belongs to me.

Now, I have no choice but to kill my best soldier.

# MESSAGE FROM M



C,

I wish I could meet you in person.  
I wish I wasn't bound to this house. I wish  
I could go out and experience like most teenagers  
my age do. But most of all, I wish I was  
brave enough to say this out loud.  
I'm not. - M

# A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE

## RIAGAN



*“Don’t ever question my love. When in doubt, just look at my scars.” - N*

*“You’re so pretty, Mum,” Riagan lies in bed ready for sleep, when he lovingly touches my cheeks, noticing that a tear has slipped from my eyes. “Don’t cry...” My boy whispers with a frown on his cherubic face. “I don’t like it when you cry.”*

*I smile through my tears, trying to reassure my son that all is well. But all is not well. It hasn’t been for a while now. Despite that, nothing will make me stop smiling through my pain. Nothing. I would do absolutely anything for my son. Even withstand a pain so great it’s tearing me apart.*

*Because my little boy is the greatest gift Natalia has ever received.*

*Her Riagan.*

*Her little king.*

*“I need you to know something, my little love.” I lean over in his tiny bed and brush his light brown hair back gently, revealing blue eyes that look identical to mine.*

*I put my big girl pants on and offer my child what I never had.*

*A mother’s loving and gentle touch.*

*My boy will need it now more than ever.*

*Riagan is young.*

*Only five years old, and although he is quite young, he is very perceptive for a child of that age.*

*He is clever.*

*An extrovert.*

*He knows what he wants and goes after it.*

*He was born to lead, that I believe with my whole heart.*

*After a long interval of silence, my boy speaks up. "I don't like your tears, Mum."*

*"I am crying happy tears." I quickly reply with a little white lie. I know the truth. The ugly truth.*

*My heart is breaking in two. The fairytale life I had hoped to live is falling apart all around me in heartbreaking pieces, and I can do nothing but stand back and watch helplessly as it all becomes ash.*

*How can they win when the biggest threat to her child and lover's life is a man as powerful as Tommaso Volpe?*

*An obsessive man.*

*A cruel one without a heart.*

*"I love you, Riagan. No matter what happens, remember that Mum chose you even when it doesn't feel like it. Even when pain and heartbreak fools you into thinking otherwise. Be sure that I would go to hell and back as many times as needed to keep you and your father from harm." I whisper ferociously, hoping the boy understands.*

*"You're leaving again." Riagan holds my hand tightly, willing me to stay.*

*I look at my son, trying to hold back the agonizing pain taking over my entire being. Trying to conceal the look of pure devastation on my face.*

*Because I know in my heart that I won't be able to escape Tommaso Volpe's claws.*

*Not with my life, at least.*

*I know that there is no choice, no other option, but to give my life and body to the soulless man. But my heart, love, and soul? That all belongs to the little boy, currently looking at me as if I am his whole world, and his father.*

*Until my last breath.*

*"Even when I'm not physically here, Riagan. I'll be here." I tap my son's chest three times. "As long as you carry me here, you will never be alone." I whisper. Riagan places his tiny hand on top of my shaky one, trying to comfort me.*

*"Okay..." My little king says in a small voice.*

*"Okay." I smile as more tears fall from my eyes.*

*One simple word but it wouldn't be so simple.*

*Not for them.*

*Months later, life took an unexpected turn and nothing was ever the same.*

*Because my heart did break with each passing moment I was away from my precious family.*

*It broke in two.*

*Half of my heart stayed in Philadelphia with my little family, and the other half was stuck in Detroit.*

*When three more children were born.*

*Two of my blood and one my bruised and broken soul chose.*

*Even Tommaso's cruelty and my hatred for my life could not stop me from loving all my children.*

*All four of them.*

*Only one thing ever could.*

*Death.*

*And it did.*



# MESSAGE FROM C



M,  
If you could have the perfect day. What would  
it look like to you? - C

# **BLUE BUTTERFLY**

## RIAGAN



*"His laugh is my favorite melody." - M*

I don't remember the precise moment my obsession with butterflies started. All I really remember is my mother always wearing a butterfly brooch on special occasions. A gift from her mother. I found out later from my father.

I guess my young mind held onto that one little detail of my mother in a desperate attempt not to forget her. Not that I ever could.

She's everywhere.

In the stars, in the wind. Hell, in every beat of my heart.

As I grew older, I began to see those damn butterflies everywhere. The pretty blue ones would appear whenever I was having a shitty day all through the most recent one. On the day Da revealed his battle with a disease that is threatening to take him from me, a butterfly appeared out of fucking nowhere.

Fuck.

I can't lose him too.

Funny how I haven't thought about the shit that awaits me back in Philly once since arriving here with the girl currently looking like a mythical creature in her long white summer dress that's almost see-through and her wild curls falling around her face, free of any make-up.

Tonight, she looks like an angel.

My angel, to be precise.

Here in my space, surrounded by exotic flowers and wild butterflies.

“You know... I am starting to believe this is all a figment of my imagination. I think all those romance books I’ve read have made me lose touch with reality.” Mila laughs softly. Her laugh is sweet and melodic. I noticed her cheeks have turned rosy. I find it endearing.

She also needs to understand that nothing about us is a dream. Nothing. She’s done dreaming.

Done experiencing life through her sister’s eyes.

From now on, there’s no need for her to just dream.

All her wishes, goals, and aspirations will become a reality.

Stepping closer to where she’s standing, frozen at the threshold of this small glass house in the back of the main mansion. “It’s real, sweetheart.” *As real as you and me.*

The sound of my voice seems to have startled her, making me think she spaced out and forgot I was here with her. I’ve noticed she does that a lot. When she finds something fascinating or when she gets bored and uninterested in the subject at hand, she loses herself somewhere inside her head.

I find that I don’t mind it. Not one bit.

“Sometimes it’s difficult for me to discern reality since I’ve been hoping and dreaming for so long.” Mila moves around, touching everything in her path as if she’s making sure she’s here and it’s not a dream.

Her words hit me like an arrow straight to the heart. Not an arrow, no. Something more painful, like a fucking ax.

“You’re here.” I clear my throat once before speaking again. “You’re here with me.” I don’t take my eyes off her and wait for her reaction. A small smile. That’s all she gives me.

And that’s all I really need.

While I was having the beach mansion remodeled, I made sure to have a butterfly conservatory added next to the garden. It’s more like a glass house. One that cost me a pretty penny.

I used to mock some of my men for acting pussy-whipped over women, but I gave a whole other meaning to the word. I’ve been slowly changing my entire goddamn life for her.

I’ve never really been a holy man, not really.

But I started believing in a bigger presence. A being of light and all that is good because how the fuck could I not? When someone like Mila exists in this world. Someone so pure and so good to her core.

Not tainted by the harsh cruelty of the world.

Someone who smiles despite the many challenges she faces every day, not only because of her disability but also the life she was born into. One of chaos and carnage for the sake of power and money.

“You like butterflies, too?” she says, smiling at a butterfly that landed on her shoulder.

Another butterfly nears her and lands on top of her head, making Mila laugh, which, in turn, makes me smile. “I do.”

Do I like butterflies? Not particularly. I don’t hate them, but they’re just bugs to me. Bugs both my mother and her enjoy watching and learning about, so I became interested in finding out all there was about them because she likes them. A lot.

I also enjoy the look on her face every time she finds out we share something in common.

So yes, if I must learn every fucking name of every butterfly in existence just to watch her smile. I will.

Hell, I did.

Mila remains quiet for a moment, then she slowly turns her head my way and offers me a soft smile over her shoulder before going back to looking around. I watch quietly as she does, contemptuous to just stand back and watch the world through her eyes.

Because that’s what I’ve been doing lately.

Watching the world through Mila Parisi’s eyes, and let me tell you, it’s a fucking beautiful world.

How she sees it.

Before, I only saw ugly, but now? Because of her? I got glimpses of what I was missing before she came along.

Magic. Fucking magic.

And that’s the main reason why I took it upon myself to insert myself in her life however I could.

Bain.

Carlotta, her very kind caretaker, and very much like Bain, my employee.

And the emails.

It wasn’t enough that I had a man and Carlotta with her, but I went ahead and wrote her letters under the guise of fucking pen pals. I needed to know more about her. I wanted to learn for myself the things she didn’t share with

anyone else.

It all started so innocently and easily, until it wasn't.

Until she went from a curious young girl who reminded me of my mother. A girl I only wished to keep safe and for her to not feel so fucking lonely in that house of horror, and then she grew up and the lines started blurring.

That's when the letters stopped.

I backed away, and it only served to fuck with my head more.

Because I found myself missing her.

Her stories.

Her words.

Just her.

Her essence.

And now she is here.

Right before me. I sometimes doubt this is real, and I'm terrified I'll wake up to a world she's not part of.

"So, you like butterflies..." Mila interrupts my thoughts as she comes closer. I didn't notice her turn around completely, so she is now facing me. At the same time, the butterfly on her shoulder flies away, and the one that was on her head lands on the tip of her nose. I watch with a smile on my face as Mila tries her best to remain stoic, trying not to spook the butterfly, but after a few seconds, the bug takes flight. I chuckle softly when Mila waves at the butterfly and then playfully narrows her eyes at me, making me grin. *And here you thought you had no sense of humor, sweetheart. You're the funniest person I know.* That's saying a lot since I find most people tedious and corny. "Okay, then. Tell me something about them."

My grin widens when I realize she's being playful and trying to figure out if she believes me. Good.

As much as I enjoy her shy and sweet side, I am starting to become addicted to the way she is slowly coming out of her shell and getting comfortable with me enough to call me out on my bullshit if need be.

Mila's eyes skitter to my eyes, then immediately look down to my neck, where I have a few butterflies inked.

"Did you know butterflies can see colors that we cannot?" I step closer to her until I'm able to smell her sweet and intoxicating vanilla scent. That close. Dangerously close. She doesn't step away or give me any indication that she feels uncomfortable. Still, I try not to crowd her.

She nods, still staring at my neck. “I do, yet that is a common fact. What is this one called?” She points towards a butterfly with bright orange wings.

“Gulf fritillary.” I answer while staring at the medium-sized, bright orange with brown insect speckled with silvery white dots. “Also known as Passion Butterfly.”

From the corner of my eye, I watch her top lip twitch. “And that one?” I follow her pointed finger to where another butterfly is resting on top of a yellow flower.

“The Pierid.” I don’t hesitate.

“I must admit I don’t have much knowledge about that one.” She looks up at me expectantly. “What else do you know about it?” Her curiosity and thirst for knowledge are adorable-as-fuck.

If she wants to know more about the insect, I’ll oblige. “Do you see how she’s resting with her wings open?”

“Yes...” Mila leans closer to me, and I take the opportunity to reach forward and play with a strand of her hair. I find comfort in playing with her silky curls.

Twirling the curl around my index finger, I speak again. “The shutting of wings offers protection from predators as its appearance resembles that of a leaf.”

“That’s very clever.” The look in her eyes is of pride. This girl is proud of a damn insect.

Smiling down at her, I grunt in response.

“Riagan...”

“Yes, butterfly?”

A grin forms on my face when I notice her sharp intake of breath.

“I quickly become obsessed with things. It’s part of my condition.” She turns her face to the right and looks up at me. “I hope my asking questions doesn’t bother you. I tend to soak up all the knowledge I can when something really interests me. It’s something I’ve done since I was a child. Please tell me when you’ve had enough of my inquisitiveness.”

The way she says it feels as if, somehow, she’s apologizing for being herself, and it only pisses me off because I know her need to apologize comes from a place of fear of being judged.

Taking a deep breath, I try not to sound as angry as I feel right now. “Nothing you do bothers me, sweetheart. Let’s start there. So, you go ahead and ask all the questions you want. I like listening to your voice.” I tell her

bluntly. I tend to speak freely, and I never play games. I say things how I see them. And when I want something I go for it. Whatever it takes, and what I want is the tiny fairy girl looking up at me with a soft look on her pretty face.

“You do?” she asks, genuinely curious and completely oblivious to the hold she has on me already, without even a single kiss. That’s how dangerous Mila Parisi is to my sanity.

“Yeah, sweetheart, I do.”

Then she blushes.

Her soft cheeks turn a light pink color hypnotizing me more than I already am. “Will you tell me more? About butterflies, I mean.” Her gentle eyes meet mine for only a second, before they fall to my lips. With the way she looks at me. So trusting and sweet. She could ask for my balls on a silver platter, and I would give them to her.

But for now, I will do as she asked.

I spend twenty or so minutes sharing all the shit I researched about butterflies, and she stands quietly beside me, listening with a tender smile on her face. That smile. The smile that turns my world on its axis.

“Mila.”

“Yes, Riagan?”

Riagan.

The way she says my name.

So proper and so sensual at the same time. She has no fucking clue, and that makes her even more enticing to me.

“How do you know so much about butterflies?” I ask while we move toward the butterfly bushes, which are located next to a small waterfall fountain I had installed last year. It was the last touch the glass-house-slash-butterfly-conservatory needed to be perfect. Perfect for her.

Once there, she takes me by surprise when she absently reaches out and touches my wrist. Once. Twice. Three times.

I watch her in fascination as she does it, and on the third, she pulls away, and actually looks like she was relieved to have done it.

Mila is a creature of habit, balance, and structure. She has things she does that might seem odd to most people, but to her, it offers some sort of comfort. It grounds her.

“I like butterflies,” she admits. “I like watching them fly around the garden back home.”

I grin. “All right then, tell me why you like them so much.”



And so, she does. She talks about it for a good, long ten minutes before she frowns and stops in the middle of a sentence.

“Butterflies have the ability to tell time and track...what?” I push.

She frowns. “I didn’t mean to go on and on about it.”

Poking her nose, I tell her. “Mila, if I had a problem with what we were talking about, I would’ve said something.” Even if I did have a problem, I would rather shoot myself in the face with my gun than to hurt her feelings.

She seems to think about that for a long moment, and then nods once.

“I’m going to culinary school,” she randomly says.

I blink. Of course, she will. “Hell yeah, you are.”

She looks up at me and she beams.

Beams so bright.

And I realize I’d give anything to see that look on her face.

Anything.

Stepping closer until our lips are inches apart, I look down at her as she looks up at me with that smile on her face that drives me wild. My chest, all of a sudden, feels too tight.

Without thinking twice, I grab her by her small waist and gently pull her to my chest, watching her eyes grow big, and her hands come up to my chest, tapping it repeatedly.

And it takes me back to the time my mother used to touch my chest gently, so I could feel her love, asking me to keep her there.

And right then, while surrounded by butterflies and holding the sweet and addicting girl in my arms, I wonder if the fucking stars aligned the day we crossed paths or if my mother sent her to me when I became cold and started drifting from her life.

Staring at her face, I focus on her lips and make a choice.

One that will change everything.

I will push her to see what’s right in front of her.

“Butterfly, I have a problem.” I caress her cheek gently, thrilled with the way she shivers at my touch.

“W-what?” She breathes out, concerned.

“I can’t be your friend.” Her pretty blue eyes meet mine for a second and instantly turn sad, shooting daggers through my heart. *Say it. Do it.* “I can’t be your fucking friend because friends Mila... they don’t dream, day and night, about doing what I’m going to do to you next.”

“Wha—” she’s not able to finish her sentence because the next thing I

know, I'm dropping my head and taking her lips in mine.

I kiss the fuck out of her. I kiss her so hard. I hope that, with this kiss, she realizes that I can't just be her friend.

Because I want more.

I want to be the sole reason she breathes.

Her reason to wake up in the morning and smile.

Because fucking psychotic and stalkerish behavior or not... she's that to me and so much more.

# MESSAGE FROM M



C,

I've dreamed about my perfect day many times.

It's what kept me from losing hope.

If you asked me this a year ago, I would've told you that my perfect day is sitting in a tiny cafe with both of my sisters drinking tea and eating lots of sweets.

But my perfect day looks different now.

Now when I think of my perfect day I think of you. - M

**ALWAYS HERE**

## MILA



*"I found home in his arms. I found love." -  
M*

**I**n a cold hallway of the Parisi mansion, a seven-year-old Mila hummed her favorite song as she colored the boring and plain white wall with her coloring markers, buzzing with excitement at the idea of giving the walls of their home color to not have it look so cold and empty all the time.

*The little girl chose to paint a tiny mural as a gift to her family.*

*Pretty pictures made her heart happy, so she thought it would have the same effect on them as well.*

*On the walls, she drew every member of her family. Her parents, her sisters, her grandmother, and even some of the maids.*

*The little girl was good for her age. Incredibly talented and imaginative, which made a good combination for a tiny artist like herself.*

*She first drew her eldest sister, Arianna, holding her sister's hands, looking strong and authoritative with a smirk on her beautiful face, and then she drew her middle sister, Kadra, wearing black clothes with a small smile on her face.*

*Mila spends most of her time when she's not reading or painting, studying her sister's expressions and actions in hopes of better understanding them. After a while, she caught on to the fact that her sisters only smiled for her. Not for their parents or for the other people who lived in their house.*

*Just her.*

*That is why whenever she draws her two sisters, she gives them smiles.*

*Not full-blown smiles but subtle ones.*

*The ones who show Mila how hard they try for her.*

*Real smiles.*

*Then she drew her parents.*

*She did not give them lots of color like she did her sisters because even at such a young age the little girl understands the truth of her parents.*

*They're colorless.*

*Sad.*

*Angry.*

*Mean.*

*Absent.*

*She drew them regardless.*

*Wanting to include them in her drawing, even if they did not care one bit for her.*

*"Mila..." Someone breathes out.*

*"What have you done, stelina?" Another voice rings in the silence.*

*The little girl, startled and confused by her sisters' tone of voice, drops her markers, making a mess on the floor.*

*She might not understand most emotions or situations, but she knows that tone all too well.*

*Shock.*

*Sadness.*

*Terror.*

*Mila, confused by their reaction, frowns, not understanding why they sound so sad. "I drew us! Look." Mila smiles and points to the wall while both her sisters stand rooted in the same spot, frozen and afraid.*

*A moment of silence that makes the small girl anxious passes between them.*

*Mila wonders what she did wrong but is unable to come up with an answer.*

*Her brain starts working hard, searching for a reason as to why her sisters look as if they saw a ghost, but she comes up empty.*

*And then she understands. It all sinks in. Why did her sisters react in that manner instead of being happy or pleased with her drawing?*

*One moment, she's staring at her sisters, wondering what is going on, and the next her father, Gabriele, appears behind them with an ugly and mean look on his face, the same look the evil villain in her favorite stories*

*has before they do something terrible.*

*The same look her father has when he says ugly things and hits her. When he hits her sisters.*

*At that moment, she understands that not all people appreciate the small things in life.*

*Some people don't have goodness or love in their hearts.*

*It all happens so fast that the little girl is barely able to register it all because, when things get loud and chaotic, she hides inside her safe haven.*

*Her mind.*

*Glass explodes all over when her father throws his drink on the floor beside her.*

*The noise of breaking glass hurts her ears more than the pieces of sharp glass hurt her skin.*

*Loud voices sound all around her.*

*Her father's angry shouts and slurred words.*

*Her sister's frightening screams as they both near the little girl, shielding her from their father's wrath.*

*But not once does the little girl scream in pain, no.*

*Instead, she curls into her body like a tiny ball, rocking herself in tune with her favorite song.*

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star, How I wonder what you are! Up above the world so high, Like a diamond in the sky. Twinkle, twinkle, little star, How I wonder what you are!*

*Even though her arms and thighs were bleeding with pieces of glass deep in her skin, the little girl never stopped singing.*

*Not once did she shed a tear, not until she realized her grave mistake.*

*Her sisters once again put themselves in the middle, trying to lessen her pain.*

*She was to blame is all she could think about at that moment.*

*The tears fell rapidly when she saw a struggling Arianna fighting her father's arms as he took her away, kicking and screaming, and her sister Kadra not far behind, pleading for their father to punish her instead.*

*Mila wonders how could a pretty picture garner so much hatred?*

*Why does her existence make their father so angry?*

*Everything the youngest Parisi princess does makes him want to hurt her or her sisters.*

*After that horrible instance, Mila understood what she needed to do to*

*keep her sisters safe.*

*She needed to disappear.*

*She needed to live as if she were invisible.*

*As if she were never born.*

*And so, she did.*



*Riagan*

LEANING BACK in the patio's lounge chair, I look up at the sky, taking a long drag of my cig. I've been trying to cut back on smoking since arriving on the islands.

I now only do it outside, and when I know Mila is nowhere nearby.

I'm not addicted, but I especially needed one tonight after that fucking kiss.

Her taste still lingers in my mouth. Not even the taste of nicotine could rid me of it.

The moment my lips touched hers, I felt the ground move from under me, and I started craving things I knew I was not ready for. The thoughts of all the filthy things I want to do to her beautiful body are keeping me up now, hence why I'm outside, in the middle of the night, smoking in the dark.

Thud.

A noise, as if something fell hard on the ground, sounds from upstairs. My mind instantly goes to the worst-case scenario.

Fuck.

Mila.

Throwing the cig to the ground, I stomp on it, putting it out before hurrying inside the house, taking the stairs two at a time on my way to her room.

Heart beating fast, I think of all the scenarios waiting for me once I open her door.

It's just the two of us here with Kelly out back.

I've been standing guard all fucking night, like I do every night since we came here.

The entire state has the best security system money can buy, plus Kelly



and I are armed and ready to eliminate any threat to her safety. I highly doubt someone was able to trespass, but you can never be too sure.

Not when the woman who's taken hold of my every thought had a million-dollar hit on her head.

*She could have fallen and hurt herself.*

Opening her door, the first thing I notice is the light on. Of course, I know she sleeps with her night light. That's not unusual. What has my heart beating a mile a minute is that her bed is neatly made, the sheets without a crease on them.

Also, the bed is fucking empty.

Stepping farther inside the room, my eyes move everywhere in search of her. Nothing. Fuck.

Having decided, I search the whole damn house for her, I turn toward her door and notice the walk-in closet's door slightly open.

And I almost don't hear it. The sound is so low I almost miss it. A whimper. As if a defenseless animal was in pain and frightened. That is how it sounded.

The feeling in my chest, the ache, only intensifies when I move towards the closet. I open the door wider and there she is.

Mila is lying on the carpeted floor with only a thin blanket covering her body. She cries in her sleep, and her body twitches as if it hurts.

I've seen a lot of tragic shit in my thirty-one years of life, and it almost never moves me, but this sight right here does.

It tears my heart in two.

There's a frown on her face that makes it look like she's in pain while stuck in a dream state.

She's having a nightmare.

I notice how she's touching the barely visible scars on her hands while she cries out for someone to not hurt them. Them? Frowning, I wonder if she means her sisters? Who else could've been?

Fuck that family.

Fuck anyone who failed to keep her safe.

Someone will answer for this. For her pain.

I won't fucking sleep right again until I give back every single scar she has on her skin and the ones you can't see because she hides them with her sweet smiles.

Having had enough of watching her suffer in her dream, I gently pick her

up from the floor and bring her closer to my chest. Holding her securely in my arms, I leave the closet, move toward her bed and lie on it with a still-in-distress Mila in my arms.

I've never been a man who feels comfortable touching or consoling others. It isn't in my nature, or so I thought, because with her, it comes easy.

Naturally.

"Shhhh." I whisper while pushing her soft curls away from her face. She's cold. Dammit.

I hug her closer and drape the covers over both of us.

I watch her, wondering what nightmare is haunting her mind—what she's seeing and feeling. I worry about what demons could be brainwashing her. I watch her sleep, taking in every delicate detail of her face, the length of her eyelashes, how they rest on her cheeks like little feathers, and the way her lips part as she breathes. I want her in my bed like this every day, with the sun shining down on her golden curls like a halo. "I'm here, butterfly. I've always been here and always will be." I rock her gently wishing I could wipe away all the shit that she's seen. All the pain in her heart and all the memories are currently haunting her.

Women as pure and good as this one should only have beautiful dreams. Sweet memories.

Not nightmares.

Definitely not scars.

Hatred runs thick in my veins at this moment while I'm holding my girl, and I make another silent vow to find Gabriele Parisi, wherever the fuck he's hiding at, and slash his skins, returning every fucking scar he gave to his youngest child.

And I'll take down anyone who gets in my way.

The current Parisi boss included.

# MESSAGE FROM M



Dear, C  
Did I say something wrong?  
I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I  
miss your messages.  
I hope you're okay. - M

# DANCING IN THE RAIN

## MILA



*"Kill them with kindness, she said. Nah, how about with a bullet?" - R*

The next evening, I find myself laid back on the bean bag next to the mini bookshelf, reading the book I was halfway through before I left Detroit and got caught up in Riagan O'Sullivan's world. The book is an enemies-to-lovers, age-gap romance with praise kink. I know, I know. I don't seem like the type of bookworm who would enjoy the darker themes in books, but I do. In fact, I much rather read a taboo romance than your typical vanilla read. It's not that I don't enjoy sweet romance because I do very much, but there's something about the anti-hero falling for his woman with all those emotional moments that I enjoy.

I am clueless when it comes to men and how their mind works, aside from what I read on the internet. I probably shouldn't use fictional books written by women to try and understand the male brain when it comes to love and romance, but it's a good source of distraction, and I am not ashamed of it. My books gave me unique and exciting worlds to escape to when my own was dark and scary. I got lost in the words the authors wrote for hours on end, and for the amount of time it took me to read the stories, I felt happy and safe.

But now, I am here in a world that is not my own and feels much like the ones of my books.

But it's not fictional at all.

It's real.

Riagan's world.

He's a man with his own demons that I do know. I see the same darkness in his eyes that I did in my sister's. Both of them. I can recognize it anywhere. It should scare me, but it doesn't. It somehow beckons me forward until all I want is to peel each and every one of his layers and find out all that he is. And then there was that kiss.

I've read a thousand first kiss scenes, but nothing could've prepared me for the moment my lips touched his. There was a current of electricity that struck me and traveled through my body, covering me in heat.

His heat.

Even now, thinking about it makes me feel warm all over. Another new reaction that only he provoked in me.

His lips were soft.

Softer than I initially thought by the looks of them. His kiss was gentle at first until I responded. That's when he touched my neck, pulled me closer, and stole the air right out of my lungs.

It was earth-shattering.

Kissing him felt just like freedom tasted. Like basking in the sun when you've been cold for so long. It felt like nothing I've ever felt before and thought it would.

Now, my mind is in shambles.

He doesn't want to be friends. That much I know. Do I dare hope that he wants more?

Friends don't kiss each other like we did, do they? No, I don't think so. The lines are blurring, and my mind is becoming a mess when it comes to him.

I hate messes, but I've come to crave his sweet chaos.

When I'm right in the middle of a scene where the hero is giving the heroine cunnilingus in his office desk while holding her down and calling her his good girl, there's a knock on the door.

Heat creeps up my neck to my cheeks.

It always does when I get to the intimate parts of a story.

Putting the book down, I pat both my cheeks lightly, trying to make the pink shade that's most likely there disappear before I speak up. "C-come in." I cringe when my tone comes off high-pitched. Very suspicious.

*Think of something else, Mila...*

My brain instantly replays my very first kiss, making me feel even more

embarrassed and hot all over.

Nope, nope.

I think of things that make me gag instead.

Like, watermelons.

That does the trick.

A moment later, the person at the other side of the door is revealed. Riagan's friend and guard is wearing low-rise jean shorts and a tropical pattern green shirt.

I've been so focused on his boss that I haven't had the chance to fully get my reading on Kelly. Whose first name I learned is Cianne.

Interesting name for an interesting-looking man.

A strong Irish name like Riagan.

Like his boss, he has just as many tattoos. The only difference is where Riagan's face is free of ink, Cianne Kelly has a few small tattoos. At first glance, he looks like any book villain with tattoos does. The kind of man I've read somewhere that mothers warn their daughters about.

Scary.

But that's when he tricks you.

He is a trickster.

He has a charming personality and lots of jokes I don't get, but I still try my best to understand and laugh at times to not come off as rude. I don't know how much Riagan has told him about me or how I'm wired. All I do know is that he treats me no differently, and he talks to me as if he would anyone.

No pity.

He even looks me in the eye, even if it does fluster me a bit.

I am grateful he treats me as a human being and not a wall like most people did before. I still wear my hat when I am around him and most likely always will. I don't like how my eyes can't stay still, and I would rather not make others uncomfortable.

The only person I feel confident enough not to hide from is Riagan.

"The boss wants you to join him for dinner, *milseán*," Cianne says with a small smile. His smile is nice. He has a smile that brightens up his entire face. It seems genuine.

Rising quickly from the bean bag, excited to see Riagan. I haven't seen him since last night.

Since he kissed me.

When I woke up this morning and went downstairs for breakfast, I noticed he wasn't anywhere to be found. Cianne informed me that he was handling business. I didn't ask. I know what business for men like him means.

I chose to spend the morning studying the butterflies instead, still fascinated with them. He has a butterfly cage. A conservatory, to be precise.

He's turning out to be more of a dream man than I originally thought.

The things he does and says, I've only read in romance books.

It feels too good to be true.

Things like this don't happen to girls as sheltered and inexperienced as me. Do they?

A clearing of a throat reminds me that I spaced out. A bit embarrassed, I look Cianne in the eyes for a brief moment before looking down at his stubbled cheek. "Should I meet him now?" I ask.

"How about you change first, love?" Frowning, I look down at what I'm wearing. An oversized Guns and Roses shirt with mid-thigh socks and slippers. "You look adorable, but how about we don't provoke the big man? I'm already hanging on by a thin line."

"Provoke?" I am dumbfounded, not understanding what he means by provoking Riagan.

"The psycho will have my balls if he finds out I've now seen you without a top and pants. You did see his reaction back at the beach, right? The motherfucker almost drowned me at sea." He laughs as if he enjoyed being almost drowned by Riagan.

Looking down at what I'm wearing, my brows pull low.

"Is it not proper attire?" I ask him, feeling confused. "I've seen girls wearing this type of shirt without pants on social media and it seems to be a thing."

Cianne laughs, but it's not a cruel laugh. He's not mocking me. "I guess they do, but the boss is—"

"What?"

"Territorial as fuck. I wouldn't be surprised if he peed on you next." He laughs.

Scrunching up my nose. "I would rather not. Do you know how many bacteria live in urine?"

Cianne raises his hand, stopping me from continuing. "Ah, no offense, but I don't care to share facts about body fluids." He deadpans. "It's gross,



sweetness.”

*I won't be surprised if he pees on you next.*

Shivers run through my spine just thinking about it. “Do you really think Riagan will pee on me?” Is that something men do? Is it part of their organization? I need to research this once I have access to the web.

“Mila...” I spaced out again. “I was joking.” Cianne clarifies.

Oh... I guess that makes sense.

“I’m sorry. I do not understand most jokes or sarcasm at all.” I explain.

“No worries.” His smile is mischievous. “Stick with me, kid, and we’ll remedy that real fucking quick.”

I don’t really think so.

I’ve tried for years but failed to understand humor like most people do. Humor, specifically jokes, involves cognitive capacities that are often challenging for me.

“Cianne.” I look up at his face and find him already looking at me.

“Yes, *misleam*?” he replies.

I play with the brim of my hat while asking. “What would be the proper attire?” It’s barely a whisper.

Making eye contact for a slight second, I notice his eyes turn soft, just like Riagan’s do at times.

“Now that I can help you with.” He claps his big hands and moves toward the walk-in closet, stepping inside. I stand there, and watch him take clothes out of the racks and throw them on the bed.

“You’re making a mess.” I blurt out, trying not to sound rude. He doesn’t seem to hear me and keeps throwing more clothes on the bed. There’s a big pile. A big messy one.

So as the muscle-tattooed criminal roams through my closet, trying to find me something to wear, I focus on fixing the mess. By arranging the clothes, he chose neat piles organized by color and fabric. All the while, I can’t ignore the feeling in my chest that’s making my heart race faster at just the thought of spending more time with Riagan.

I’m already in big trouble.

A huge one.

One that won’t be so easy to get out of.

I don’t even know if I want to.



SWEET WAS NOT an adjective I would have thought to describe men who look like the grim reaper if he were part of this century with tattoos and silver chains around his neck, but that's the first word that comes to mind when I think of not only Riagan but now Cianne, too.

"For a man with an odd sense of fashion and a love for animal print, he managed to find something more my style instead of his," I whisper to no one as I shut the backdoor softly behind me, stepping into the warm night.

*He's waiting for you...* Cianne said.

Looking down at what I'm wearing, I feel happiness. Cianne picked a bright blue ditsy floral print cami-dress that ties at the front. He even picked the matching blue sandals I paired the dress with.

If it wasn't obvious before, it is now. I love blue. I'm always wearing something blue, and both men have noticed. Bad men who wish to cause me harm wouldn't take notice of the little things, would they?

I don't think so, but I'm not an expert on men. At this rate, though, I will be once my time with them is over. I try not to think about what waits for me after this dream ends and hold on to the present. I grew up wishing the days away, and what a twist this is. I find myself trying to freeze time.

Freeze this moment.

Walking down the stone path, suddenly, I become nervous about what awaits me once I reach Riagan. Cianne said he would meet me between the garden and the glass house where the butterflies are. Gazing up at the sky, I take notice of the sun turning a dark shade of orange. It will be nighttime soon. I take in my surroundings as soon as I enter the garden. It looks extra magical today with the blinking white lights adorning the bushes and the tall palm trees. The garden looked stunning before, but nothing like it does today.

*Was this what he was doing all day?*

*Was this the business Cianne was referring to?*

I keep looking left and right with a big goofy smile on my face while my heart beats faster.

I remember watching a princess movie with Gus two years ago, where there was a fairy forest with all kinds of beautiful plants and cute little mythical creatures.

This place looks and feels just like a movie.

Magical.

Private.

Almost as if I were in a bubble.

My smile widens when I spot the small gnome wearing a cute purple hat standing next to the water fountain. Even the garden has fairy lights. “Wow...” I breathe out, taking it all in.

“There’s never been a more beautiful sight.” A voice whispers in awe, making my heart beat faster than it was moments before. Turning to where the sound came from, I spot Riagan standing tall and looking almost regal in a wild way under the lit gazebo. The pressure in my chest intensifies as I look his way. I’ve always thought of Riagan as handsome, but at this moment, while he stands in a white dress shirt with the two top buttons undone showing his neck and chest tattoos and wearing dark jeans, I can’t help but think that men like him should be illegal. He is not good for my health.

Every time I look at him my heart races abnormally, and that can’t be good.

“The setting you chose is magnificent, yes,” I say matter of fact. I swallow hard as he keeps staring at me, making heat spread to my body, starting on my cheeks.

“I was talking about you, sweetheart,” he says with a smirk.

I blush.

Of course, I do when he says things that make my stomach flip. “Cianne helped me pick this outfit,” I murmur while playing with the hem of the dress absently. I do that when I’m nervous, and at this moment, I am very nervous.

“Remind me to thank him later.” Riagan’s top lip curls in a smile.

“Why?” I ask curiously, while walking up the gazebos’ steps.

“Because you look beautiful in that dress.” He says while offering me his hand. The moment my skin makes contact with his, I feel a thousand bugs in my belly. Again.

“Oh...” *Oh? Is that all you’re going to say? Think Mila. Think of a more appropriate response to his compliment on your appearance.* “Thank you,” I whisper, and then quickly add. “You look beautiful too.”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever called me beautiful before.” He laughs, and I frown, wondering how it is possible that no one has ever called him beautiful before. “I’m glad you think I’m beautiful, butterfly.”

Butterfly.

Ironic that he chose that term of endearment for me. Is he aware of the thousand butterflies currently flapping their wings inside my stomach?

“Why?” Looking up at his jawline, I ask. I wonder how soft his beard

feels.

“Why what, sweetheart?”

“Why are you glad that I think you’re beautiful?” Please spell it out for me. It’s hard reading him most of the time.

“I want you to like me.” I notice his expression doesn’t change. Looking down at his bearded cheek, I reply. “I already like you.”

“I want you to desire me as a man, not a friend, Mila.” His voice catches me off guard. He sounds different than before. Almost mad?

No, not mad.

Passionate.

He doesn’t look joyful, but he doesn’t look angry either.

The thing I appreciate most about Riagan is his willingness to explain his emotions and his thoughts to me when I’m unable to read him. When it’s difficult for me to do so.

Like right now and many countless times before.

I force myself to stare into his eyes, and then I realize that is a mistake because the words get stuck in my throat. All I want to say is that I can’t. I’m unable to find logic or speak the words of my heart when he looks at me like he is looking at me now. I might have very little or zero knowledge about men, but I do see the same expression on Riagan’s face in every romantic movie ever made.

Then, I think back to all the little and big things he’s done for me. The lengths he’s gone to not only put a smile on my face but to keep me safe as well, and the weird feeling in my stomach grows stronger, spreading through my body like wildfire.

I already like you more than I should. I want to say, but the words scramble in my brain like they do every time I feel anxious or out of my element, and although I seem to feel more comfortable with Riagan than most people, he still makes me feel a multitude of emotions I can’t seem to understand even if I want to.

It’s freighting.

A moment of silence passes between us, and I wonder if I made this awkward when I didn’t mean to. Did I ruin the moment? Did my silence to his confession make him think of me any differently than he did before?

I become worried and anxious.

But, like always, Riagan swoops in and breaks through my thoughts, killing any anxiety that tries to take over my mind and body when he asks.

His voice, as rough as it is, is both serene and melodic.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, grabbing a loose curl and rubbing the strand between his thumb and index finger.

That’s when I noticed all he did.

The gazebo, much like the plants surrounding it, have fairy lights all around it with a picnic set up. A very soft-looking maroon blanket is placed on the floor with exactly seven pillows.

A picnic under the stars surrounded by one of my favorite things in the whole world.

Plants.

Riagan gently helps me down on the blanket and then joins me. He looks comical, sitting down next to me, being gigantic as he is. Even while sitting, he still towers over me. Our size difference won’t ever cease to amaze me.

He then starts to open containers of food, and my mouth starts to water when the delicious smells hit my nose. Which is surprising, to say the least because I’m very picky about food. I learned at a young age that I hated most smells, colors, tastes, and textures. It brought me a lot of discomfort because no one besides my sisters took me seriously when I refused to eat certain things, and, as the years passed, to save myself and my sisters from punishment, I started to eat everything that was given to me, even when it psychically made me ill. I don’t want to ruin the meal he worked so hard for. At moments like this, I wish I was less like me and more like Riagan. Carefree. Normal. Just so I didn’t have to constantly worry about what I say or don’t say, nor what I do or don’t do.

“Hope you like it.” Looking at him, I notice he almost seems nervous. Looking away from the food, I focus on him instead when a thought pops up. “Did you make all of this?” I whisper, without realizing I’m smiling wide until he reaches forward and bumps my nose with his index finger, and the smile spreads wider on my face.

Nodding, he replies. “Yeah...” He is acting weird. Does he feel shy? I recognize shyness. I’m used to that, but it can’t be. Not him. I believe he is the most confident man I know.

It’s endearing.

“You cooked for me?” I ask him in awe.

Grunting, he replies. “I did. Although, it’s nothing special.”

“If you made it. It’s special.” I look up, catching his gaze for a short second before looking down at the picnic set-up. Clearing my throat, feeling

embarrassed by the silence that followed, I focus on the food instead. “Sushi?” I ask happily, when I see one of my favorite foods ever. Most people hate sushi rolls, if not for the taste than the texture. I had an issue with it at first until I tasted the delicious Japanese delicacy. I notice he placed the soy sauce next to the daikon radish.

My mouth waters when Riagan starts to open the containers, revealing more sushi rolls.

Avocado, cream cheese, and cucumber roll.

California roll.

And the one that has me itching to get a taste, so I do. Reaching forward, I grab a barbecue beef roll and pop it in my mouth.

Once the delicious taste hits my tastebuds, I can’t help but moan aloud.

I’m surprised he didn’t go the traditional route and choose the Americanized one.

Not that I am complaining.

I dislike fish.

The taste and the texture.

Does he know? Did I tell him that small fact? No, I don’t think so.

“I take it you enjoy it?” Riagan’s humorous tone snaps me out of my head. Heat creeps in when I realize I just stuck my hand and helped myself to the food without waiting for him to join me. Quirks and all, I do have manners. It’s just that sometimes my excitement takes over, and I act impulsively.

The roll smelled and looked delicious. I wanted it, so I went for it.

“Sowwy.” I say between bites, cringing when I realize I spoke with my mouth full. I keep making a fool of myself.

“Stop saying you’re sorry, sweetheart, and go ahead. Eat all you want. I like watching you eat.”

“You do?” I pick up another sushi roll. This time a California roll after finishing the other. Frowning, I shove the full roll into my mouth and frown at a smiling Riagan. “Do you have an eating fetish?” I say out of nowhere while still munching on the roll.

“Eating fetish?”

Nodding I explain. “Yes! It’s when people find pleasure in watching others stuff their faces with food. I don’t particularly enjoy watching people stuff their faces, but I don’t mind it if you do. Do not feel embarrassed.”

He laughs out loud, and I instantly feel pressure in my chest. Music to my

ears. That's what his laugh is to me. You see... Riagan is everything I am not. He is strong, loud, and brave, and oftentimes, I find him a bit petty, and I am the opposite.

"I don't have an eating fetish, sweetheart. I like watching you enjoy something I make. That is all."

"Me too." I take another bite of the roll. "I liked how your face lit up when you ate my waffles. I will make you more just so I can watch you smile like that again" Swallowing my last bite, I notice he is not eating. Just watching me. Something I learned the past few days is that I like his eyes on me as much as I liked his lips on mine.

How strange yet wonderful the realization is.

"Likewise, Mila." He grins before popping two rolls in his mouth at the same time. Riagan is huge compared to most men. It's fitting that he eats like crazy too.

We both sit in comfortable silence as we eat, one that I have only ever experienced with him. I find myself staring at him while he looks out the gazebo toward the beach. I do that a lot lately.

I watch him while he focuses on something else.

Unashamedly, I stare at his profile. I found that Riagan doesn't have a bad side like most people claim they do. Every side of him is raw beauty. Masculinity. Confidence.

And as much as I like his appearance, what I love most is his ability to make me feel at peace.

Riagan is serenity even in all his beautiful chaos.

I feel a feather-light touch on my hand, letting me know that I zoned out while I watched him enjoy his food. Looking down, I notice my hand is now clasped in his much larger one as he plays with my ring. The beautiful ring that symbolizes our fake engagement.

"Want to trade secrets?" Riagan says, breaking the silence first.

*He wants to trade secrets?*

*Never let others know your secrets, stelina. They'll use them against you as a weakness.* My sister's, Kadra, voice plays in my mind as a warning.

Riagan's not like that.

I don't see the darkness that surrounds most cruel men in him.

Not when it comes to me, at least.

Ignoring all logic... again. I give in.

"I'm not that interesting." I whisper honestly. I'm really not. All the

secrets I keep close to my heart tend to make people look at me as if I'm a charity case.

"I beg to differ." I become enthralled by the way his gentle touch on my skin makes me feel a million and one things at a time. Nervous. Thrilled. Happy. Emotions I've yet to understand I am sure I am feeling them somehow.

That is the Riagan effect.

I also think about how he knows me better than I think I know myself, and how illogical is that? How can someone who I've just met know so much about me? My sister Kadra told me once that fairytales aren't real. Romance novels are just stories.

What if she was wrong?

What if fairytales do exist? What if I am living my own?

"Friends do that?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"Fiancés do."

*Fiancé.*

Thud.

Thud.

My heart.

There's that feeling again whenever he mentions our new status. We effortlessly graduated from complete strangers to strangers with a common mission to fiancées-slash-friends.

"I wouldn't know where to start." I tell him truthfully, looking down at our joint hands, too nervous to look at his face.

Sharing secrets is like opening a book and letting someone else read it. It makes me feel vulnerable. And in the world I grew up in, vulnerability equates to weakness.

"Tell me something that makes you smile that no one else knows?" Riagan whispers, still holding onto my hand.

"Adding color to all that is colorless." He says nothing, and I take it as he wants me to explain. It makes sense to me, but perhaps it won't make sense to everyone else. "Every room in my house growing up was plain white. There was nothing in my room that had color or brought warmth to it. It felt lifeless. Empty. When I added a pop of color, it suddenly didn't feel sad or empty. It made me smile. I paint everything I can. Colors are proven to uplift human's emotions."

"What else?"



I think about it for a second before replying. "I like vintage things."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know." I say softly. "I guess I've just always been drawn to old things. Usually, old things are forgotten and tossed aside when they're no longer useful." I take a deep breath before continuing. "It doesn't make sense, I am aware, but I like the feeling I get when I fix them and bring them back to life by caring for them. Loving them. Same as my plants. Caring for them makes me smile." I look up, and my eyes clash with his for a brief second then I redirect my gaze and stare at his chest instead. I wait in silence, hoping he understands and doesn't laugh. In my head, it makes perfect sense but others might not see it the way I do.

"It makes perfect sense, butterfly." He then rubs my hand with his thumb tenderly. I find comfort in his touch. That's it. That's all it takes. He never mocks or judges me. He just...lets me be me.

"Your turn." I smile shyly at him. I want to listen to him talk. I prefer to listen to him. "Tell me a secret."

"I don't like people. I find most humans to be a nuisance and a waste of air."

A waste of air? I smile wider, enjoying his honesty. That is one of the many things I've come to appreciate about Riagan. He genuinely doesn't care if he sounds rude or mean when he is unapologetically himself.

"But you like Cianne." I think back to all their moments together. All I've witnessed, and yes, it does seem like they're always at each other's throats.

"I tolerate him. There's a different, sweetheart." He chuckles when I frown.

"Your father? You most love him to go out of your way to complete his bucket list. That's a sweet gesture you only do for people you care about."

There's a moment of silence, and I wonder if I said something out of line, but then he speaks. "I love my father. I am capable of love. I just don't enjoy being around other people unless it is necessary." Well, I get that. My sisters are the same. Is it fate? That I found a man who thinks and, at times acts, just like my sisters. But with me, they change. They're not cold or uncaring. Perhaps, cold people need people like me to keep them warm. I can do that for them. As long as I'm able to, I will be there when they find themselves in the dark. "What I'm getting at is that I've never been a huge fan of the human population. It's exhausting having to follow their rules and social norms. It takes a toll on me to have to pretend to be someone I'm not because they're

afraid of a little dark. I guess I never quite felt like myself around others until you.”

Until me.

“I’m not afraid of the dark.” I say truthfully. Most people are terrified of what lurks in the dark, but I am not one of them. Evil has no preference. Evil hides in daylight as well.

He nods once, still holding onto my hand. “You shouldn’t fear anything ever again.” I wish it were that simple, but we’re all afraid of something. I don’t tell him that, no. Instead, I run the pad of my index finger over his four-leaf clover tattoo on his knuckle. I like that Riagan is a walking, talking coloring book with how many tattoos he has inked on his skin.

He is... unique.

“Can I ask why you sleep in the closet?”

“I do?” I frown, not really knowing what he means.

“Last night I heard whimpering coming from your room, and I found you in a fetal position sleeping on the closet’s floor.”

I do not remember that. I do have nightmares of bad memories of the past, but I don’t recall ever waking up inside a closet. Thinking about it, I hid in my childhood closet when I was a child. I spent more time there than I did anywhere else in that mansion. So, I tell him that. “My father liked to terrorize us, and I used to hide inside the closet so he wouldn’t get to me. If I wasn’t in his way. If I was invisible, he would let me be.”

“And the scars?” He asks bluntly, while I feel his fingers caressing one of the scars on my left arm. The scars are barely visible, but the skin is marred. I can feel the puckered skin, and so can he.

I take a second to think about what I’m going to say next.

I don’t want his pity, but that’s the thing about Riagan...he never treats me as if I’m made of glass. He doesn’t look at me as if I’m some broken little thing that can’t protect herself. Perhaps, he thinks so, but he never shows it.

“I told you I love adding color to colorless items. I used to do it a lot when I was younger. I found comfort in the little things, like drawing pretty pictures for my family, and I thought it was harmless. My father found me one day coloring the white walls in front of my room and lost it. He threw a glass at the floor next to me, and when it exploded, the sharp glass cut me.” I whisper and wait for his reaction. When his hand that’s holding mine tightens, I get the sense that he’s angry on my behalf. Livid, actually. My neck and cheeks are flush red. I feel embarrassed, and I’m unable to hold his

gaze. He wanted my secrets now he has them. Surprisingly, I feel lighter now that he knows. He should know all of me if he plans to bring me into his world. I am not perfect, and I never claimed to be. I am most likely someone he's not used to. My past is not pretty, and I am not the easiest person to understand. Yet, here he is, trying.

"Would it scare you if I told you that I daydream of slitting his neck and watching the blood pour out as he slowly dies a painful death?"

A sane person would.

Apparently, a sane person I am not.

"N-no." I mumble. Then to ease his anger, I tell him. "Do not feel sad for me, Riagan. My sisters had it worse."

"Don't minimize your pain, your trauma, Mila. You were a child. One who did nothing wrong to deserve the twisted shit that motherfucker subjected you to. None of you did, but their pain does not diminish yours." My heartbeat slows and all I can think of at this moment is how handsome he looks, looking down at me with angry eyes. The anger is directed at my father. Then his words touch a part of me that's been hurting for a long time. The part where guilt resides permanently in me. "I'm sorry you had a shitty life, Mila." I force myself to look into his blue eyes and my breath hitches when I see how intensely he is looking at me. There's no pity or anger. There is just...longing? Is that it?

"Thank you, Riagan." I breathe out.

"For?"

"Being you." My eyes fall on his smile, and I watch in delight as it grows wider. I like it when he smiles. His smiles make me happy. Maybe one day I'll find the nerve to tell him, but until then, I'll just love them in silence.

"Only for you, butterfly. Only for you." And that makes my heart beat abnormally fast, so much so that if I didn't believe in science like I do, I would think my heart is trying to free itself from its confines in my chest and fall into Riagan's hands.

The feelings this man stirs inside me never cease to surprise me. Every day with him feels like an adventure. Even the most ordinary of days with Riagan feel extraordinary.

Then, it all happens so fast, my head starts to spin.

Lost in my head, busy trying to make sense of a basic human reaction I've yet to fully comprehend, I notice Riagan is no longer holding my hand or sitting next to me.

No, he's a few feet away, outside the gazebo, with his arm stretched out towards me as rain falls rapidly down on him.

How deep inside my head was I thinking of him that I missed the moment his hand let go of mine and he left my side?

"Mila." He shouts gently over the loud noise of the waves and the rain. He's getting all wet, and his beautiful light brown hair looks darker.

A lot of things have left me speechless or have taken my breath away throughout my life, but nothing quite compares to the sight of him at this moment in time.

"Yes, Riagan?" Standing up, I move closer to him. I focus on his face and watch in fascination as a blinding smile appears, revealing perfect white teeth. Thud. Thud. Thud. I gently tap my chest three times, trying to calm my rising heart.

"Dance with me."

My eyes widen at his odd request. Dance with him? In the rain with no music on?

I've never danced with anyone. Not even my sisters.

It was not something we did.

I've imagined countless instances where I would be in the arms of a dashing prince as he spun me in circles, dancing the night away, but it was just all in my head. There was never a dashing prince.

My chin trembles, and so does my voice. "You want to dance in the rain? With me?"

"I do, with you."

"But there is no music." I point out the obvious to him, and he only laughs.

"We don't need music." This time when he offers me his extended hand again, I take it.

The tattooed giant tugs me gently until we're standing chest to chest with my palms on his shoulders. I'm left breathless once again when his rough hands grab onto my waist, and he slowly starts to sway to the sound of the rain. My heart is beating so loud, I wouldn't be surprised if he's able to hear it. Rain, wild waves, and all.

It's been established that I don't know much about love or feelings between two people. What I do know is that, in this moment, while dancing in the rain with Riagan's hands on my body, I feel as if the parts of me that I believed were buried long ago are throbbing with life.

Parts I didn't even think he could touch, he has.

There's no dyeing it any longer. This man who looks like the devil has made a place for himself in my heart, and every day that I spend with him I feel myself losing myself in all that he is.

*Does he feel the same?* I wonder.

*Of course, he does. Just look at the man. Really look at him.* The small voice inside my head insists.

I do.

We're pressed against one another, so closely that I can feel his hot breath on my face, warming me from the rain. I can smell the hypnotizing scent of his cologne. His scent evokes a combination of raw masculine power and fresh and playful sweetness.

I find myself wishing I had the power to stop time right at this moment. Every moment with him. The first few times we've been this close, I tried to protect my heart from the inevitable by telling myself that it is just in my head. That this feeling that takes over me every time he's near is one-sided.

But it isn't, is it?

"I've never danced with anyone before." I blurt out.

"Me neither." He pulls me closer, making my breath hitch. "I guess we're each other's firsts."

And why does the thought of being the only woman he's ever danced with fill my heart with joy and something else? Something possessive.

"I like that." I whisper as he sways me from side to side. "Being your first dance. Your first something." I steal a glance up at him and find him already looking at me, but his smile is gone. Flustered, I look back down at his chest. Sometimes I feel brave, and other times, the intensity with which he looks at me makes it too much. I have to look away. We continue swaying slowly and gently, and I feel his gaze on me.

"Was I your first kiss, Mila?" he asks, startling me. His voice is smooth and easy, and I imagine it as a soft rippling wave of sound. Comforting. Lovely with its bass tones. I can't get enough of this man's voice.

Lifting my head, his gaze meets mine. I break contact and let my eyes focus elsewhere. "Yes." I whisper, a bit embarrassed. What must he think? What girl my age has her first kiss at twenty years old?

"Fuck, baby." A growl escapes him, startling me.

My gaze shoots up, and I look up at him with fresh eyes.

His gaze shoots down to mine, then pins me for one long moment. And I

swear I feel stripped down like he could see under my clothes. Like he could see even beneath that. To my heart. My soul.

Then his finger was tracing my lower lip, then slipping to my chin and angling it up.

The next thing I knew, his lips were on mine.

Soft and coaxing at first. Then getting firmer and more demanding as I felt myself sway into him and sighing against his lips.

Feeling the sudden urge to have more of him. To feel him closer. More than we already are. My hands rise, sliding up his chest. Feeling the hard ridges of his muscles beneath his shirt.

His mouth was warm, and his lips were damp, pliable, and firm. His lips softened as our mouths met, and his hand clutched my jaw, fingers on my cheek, thumb on my chin, and brushing across my cheekbone with soul-shaking intimacy. I feel his tongue dance across my upper lip. We were kissing. Riagan was kissing me—I was kissing him. My heart stopped entirely for an agonizing moment and then pounded to life, crashing madly. It felt as if he belonged to me in some way.

He pulls back, suddenly breaking the kiss.

I don't know what comes over me, but when I open my eyes, they clash with his heated ones, and I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "Riagan, do you know the most beautiful places on earth?" His hold on me doesn't loosen, and the rain keeps falling around us like a gentle caress. "Ha Long Bay, the colosseum, the Amazon rain—" I don't get to finish sharing all the places because he stops me,

"Nah, baby. You are." He whispers close to my lips. "The most beautiful place is right here with you."

I don't know if it's the effect of his kiss or his words. All I know is that one moment I am looking at him while my heart beats wildly inside my chest, and the next, I am pulling him down by his neck. Our lips meet once more, and a crazy tingle races down my spine and explodes in my stomach like little fireflies. I become mesmerized by his kiss, which makes me way weaker in the knees than I want to admit.

Various things bring me joy.

Memories of my sisters, my plants, baking, and the color blue. All those things were my safe place when everything felt ugly and dark.

But then I met this man and added him to that list.

His voice, and now?

The feel of his hands on my skin and the taste of his lips.

Suddenly, Riagan breaks the kiss again, but his face lingers closer to mine.

“Fuck,” he murmurs against my lips. “One taste will never be enough, butterfly.”

Then his teeth are nipping my lower lip, and all other thoughts fly out of my head.

My hands slid upward, resting on his shoulders, and I kissed him back with everything in me.

A soft, mewling sound escapes me as his tongue teases the seam of my lips, then slides inside to toy with mine. And while he kisses me senselessly I think of how this man has the power to ruin me for everyone else.

I also think that it feels almost impossible to stop this feeling. It’s maddening. Overwhelming.

Beautiful.

It’s Riagan.

# UNSENT MESSAGE FROM C



Butterfly,  
You have turned into a lovely girl.  
You are witty, smart, kind and too good for this  
world.

Too good for the likes of me.  
I want you to always remember that.  
I wanted to be the one you confide in when you  
had no one.

But now that you're not a kid, this friendship  
we've formed doesn't feel appropriate.

Your 'one day' will come.  
I promise you.  
But for now I have to go. - C



# HER VILLAIN

## RIAGAN



*“She is my only virtue.” – R*

*“What is it about that girl that has you losing your fucking mind?” The other bane of my existence, Kelly, asks while cleaning his gun for the third fucking time this night. We’re at Mayhem or more like the abandoned basement below. It just got done sending one more useless cunt to meet the Reaper but not before having a little bit of fun with him first.*

*A loud, incoherent mumble sounds from my right. Turning away and ignoring Kelly, I walk towards the man currently hanging from the ceiling by a hook on his shoulder with blood staining his cream-colored shirt. Men like this fuck don’t deserve to breathe. Their kind is filthy, and as such, they should be treated like it. Hence why he ended up in my hands. The Russians wanted him, but I got to him first. How does the saying go? The early thug gets the pedo? No, I don’t think that’s right. Although, my version sounds much better.*

*Looking at Elijah Walter, I think back to the shit my men and I walked into a month ago. I’ve seen sick shit, shit that would turn the stomach of any man, but the things this motherfucker has done would even make the devil cry, and it did.*

*The Solonik brothers were the ones who were impacted more, and that is the only reason why I am not killing this bitch now. Let the Russians have the honor, but until it’s delivery time, I’ll enjoy each and every second we have*

*left together in my playground.*

*We cut and burned his body until the fucker passed out, and once he gained consciousness, Kelly fucked him in the ass with his favorite rifle. One with a magazine grip designed to quietly kill wounded animals. This fuck is no wounded animal, and he was shown no mercy.*

*There is no mercy for the ones who hurt the innocent, and this sick son of a bitch snuffed out the light and the purity of children and women as a sport.*

*I am not a good man, but even I have limits that Elijah crossed.*

*Now, he's here.*

*"Having fun yet, Elijah?" I smile when the asshole shakes his head and mumbles, clearly in pain and seeking mercy. "No? I'm wounded." Touching my heart, I feign disappointment. "And here I thought we were having a blast. I guess we should continue then. See if anything changes for you." I slap him as if we're the best of friends. I'm having a blast.*

*Taking a cig out, I place it between my lips and then pull out my zippo, lighting it up. I take a deep and long puff before expelling the smoke his way. My grin widens when his eyes widen, and he starts to fight against his restraints, but the loveliest thing is that when he fights against his restraints, the ropes burn his already-burnt skin, and the hook goes deeper, making him scream. It's painful, I imagine.*

*Still, it is not enough.*

*It will never be enough compared to what he subjected those children and young women to.*

*I deal in the gun and drug trade but never flesh trade.*

*Only the sick fuckers of this world have the heart and the stomach to do that shit.*

*The second I walked inside the wagons with my men, where the kids were being stored in until they were transferred to be auctioned as if their lives were not their own, I knew I would never be the same man I was before I walked into that hell.*

*I also vowed for as long as I have breath in my lungs and blood in my body, I would not rest until I rid this fucking world of scums like this one, but for that I needed a little help, and that is how New York and Chicago come into the equation.*

*I don't care about wars. Wars are for stupid and weak men.*

*The real winner is the one who knows he does more with allies than enemies.*

*And although I may have my differences with not only the Soloniks, Sandoval and even the fucking president of the United States, I know they stand for the same shit I do.*

*The wicked are fair game to us.*

*Getting out of my head, I step closer to Elijah, removing the cloth from his mouth. I want his screams. I get off on their screams. Their shouts of agony feed the sadistic animal in me. It always has, and this time is no different.*

*Once the gag is removed from his mouth, the fucker starts to plead. Ignoring him, I take another long drag of my cig while holding onto his face tightly so he doesn't move. He's helpless against the brutality he's about to suffer. Good. Let him feel what they all felt. What I felt when I saw the kids, covered in bruises and naked, knowing I couldn't save them from the horrors this man and his colleagues put them through.*

*"Kelly."*

*"Cap."*

*"Take a picture of us." I turn my face and smile from ear to ear. All the while, Elijah screams obscenities. Oh no, he's showing his colors. Now he knows mercy won't come. Pain, and ultimately, death, will.*

*"This is glorious, Cap. Say cheese." Kelly points his phone toward us, looking giddy as he always does when he gets to let his psychotic tendencies loose.*

*"You're sick. Fuck. Stop, you piece of shit." Elijah shouts over the pain when I put pressure on his jaw and break it. There. He'll be quiet now.*

*"Hurry the fuck up." I finish crushing Elijah's jaw in my hands, enjoying the satisfying snap.*

*Then I take my cig out of my mouth and shove it in his eye.*

*Once I'm done with him, he'll be wishing for a quick death.*

*Stepping back from Elijah, I walk toward the sink near the door to clean his filthy blood off my hands. Feeling Kelly join my side, I look over from the corner of my eye as he scrolls through his photo gallery.*

*"You never answered me, Cap." Kelly speaks once I shut off the sink.*

*Wiping my hands with a rag, I turn his way, ignoring our prey's whimpers of pain. "Why do you care?"*

*Kelly leans against the sink with his arms crossed. "Just want to know what I'm fighting for."*

*"You fight for me and this family, Kelly."*

*“For the girl, too?”  
Turning my face, I stare him dead in the eye. “She’s mine.”  
There’s nothing else to be said.  
The O’Sullivan gang values family over all else.  
That’s what differentiates us from the Italians.  
They feed their people to the vultures.  
We die protecting ours.  
And after I am done, there will be no doubt that the blonde angel with a  
smile that brought my heart back to life... is mine.  
Maybe that’s why I feel the compulsion to rid this world of all this ugly.  
It should be a fucking crime to have someone as good as her be touched  
by all these filths.  
Yeah, that’s why I do it.  
And I’ll keep doing it until the day I die.  
I’m too far gone.  
I don’t tell him, though. That since meeting the girl, my life doesn’t seem  
so fucking bland.  
There’s color.  
Everywhere.  
Just by thinking about her.  
She did that with just one soft-spoken word and a sweet smile.  
And every second she was far away from me... it felt like an eternity.  
An agonizing one.*



“IT FEELS as if I waited a thousand fucking years for you...” I whisper, watching the rise and fall of her chest while she sleeps. The second her head landed on the pillow after we got done dancing in the rain and sought shelter in the gazebo, she went under. I notice she falls asleep everywhere. It doesn’t matter if she’s uncomfortable.

That was proven when I found her huddling in a corner of a dark closet. I don’t let the anger that threatens take over me. I don’t allow the dark thoughts to get at me at this moment in time. Not while she’s sleeping soundly, with a small smile on her face.

She suffered from night terrors, but they’ve gradually disappeared since

she's been here, except for one. Carlotta and Bain, the man I had on her when I couldn't be there, the one she knows as Augustus gave me daily updates on her, and one of them was the fact that she would wake up in the middle of the night screaming from nightmares that haunted her. It feels fucking good to know that, since she's been here with me, the nightmares are slowly fading away. A creature as good and pure as her shouldn't be touched by darkness and the ugliness of this world.

I shove down the anger I feel every time I think about the shit she's gone through and focus on her instead.

On her beauty and the fullness of my chest whenever I see her. Fuck. I'm so obsessed with this girl, it's not even funny. So much so that, after I know for certain she's fallen asleep, I sneak into her room to watch her sleep as if I had the power to keep the nightmares away. Sometimes I just sit there watching her sleep, just to make sure she's real and that this is not a dream. That she is alive and well with me.

Like I am doing now.

After the rain settled, we went inside the mansion, and I walked her to her room. I didn't push her for more, even though just a kiss will never be enough. I can't push her because, if I do, she might retreat into herself, and I will lose everything I've accomplished this past week.

I walked her to her room and kissed her goodnight.

Then, I snuck in like I do every night.

I sit in the huge bean bag chair next to her bookshelf with one of her books in hand. Yeah, I sometimes pick up one of her books with the naked assholes on it and read them. I was surprised to find out that my sweet butterfly likes her filthy stories. The shit I've read in some of these books almost made me fucking blush. Almost.

There are a thousand and one things I love about Mila. One is her ability to be unapologetically herself, even when she sometimes feels self-conscious and afraid to show the real her. She managed to surprise the fuck out of me the first time I ever laid eyes on her, when she looked like a breakable little doll, but then opened her mouth to tell me off. A man a decade older than her with more kills than tattoos on his body. She is soft and kind, yet she is strong and curious at the same time.

She loves fucking baking, plants and fairytales, yet she also reads about a CEO fucking his much younger intern on his desk while pinning her down and calling her his little slut. It turns me the fuck on. I am not ashamed to

admit it.

And I can't wait for the moment she lets me do to her what the men she reads about do to their women. The things I would show her. The things I would do to her body would make her blush more than her little books do.

I smile when I notice she added a blue sticky tab to a page where the characters are having sex while one of them is in a zoom meeting. That's what I call multitasking.

Dirty, dirty, beautiful girl.

Closing the book, I place it back on the shelf where I took it from and lean back, getting comfortable just watching her. Her wild curls are splayed all over her pillow and one is stuck to her mouth as she softly snores. She even manages to look adorable with her mouth open while she sleeps. I long for the day I can lie down in the same bed and hold her while she sleeps.

Soon.

There's a buzzing in my pocket. Reaching inside my jeans, I pull out my phone and see a notification.

**Maeve:** Location has been compromised. They're coming for her. You have to move. Now.

Fuck.

I quickly get up, rush to the bed, and gently pick Mila up in my arms.

"Riagan?" She slowly opens her eyes and looks at me for a second before her eyes look around her. "What is going on?"

Tucking her closer to my chest, I hurry out of her room and into the hallway, making my way toward the stairs when I get an eerie feeling. I put Mila down on the floor and grab her shoulder, gently forcing her to look my way. "I need you to trust me, butterfly. Will you do that?"

Without question, she nods her head yes. Fuck, so sweet. "Yes."

"Cover your ears and stay behind me, and whatever you do... don't move. Be my shadow, yeah?"

Again, she nods and does as I say without question, but I see it. The fear in her eyes. I don't have time to feel guilty or think about all the ways this could go wrong. Of all the ways I fucked up. Nobody knows of this place. It's a safe house, so that means someone betrayed me. But who? With no time to dwell on it, I focus on getting out of this situation alive and with my girl intact.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, I say. "Nothing will happen to you."

"And you?" The question is barely a whisper.

My eyes soften, and so does my tone when I watch her gently touch my beard. “I’ll be alright as long as you stay behind me, okay?”

Her eyes come up to meet mine for a second before they look back down. “Okay.”

With that, I position her hands on her ears and move her behind me, leading the way and using my body as a shield. I need to get my gun. Shit.

Bang.

Bang.

Gunshots ring through the air not far from where we were. I die a little when I feel Mila trembling behind me. Loud noises affect her so much that she retreats into her head as a safety mechanism. I could have left her hidden in her room, but what guarantee did I have that she wouldn’t be found? The only safe place for her is behind me. With me, because I would sooner take a dozen bullets to the chest than allow anything to happen to her.

“Cap!” Kelly comes running up the stairs, covered in blood with two guns strapped to his naked chest, a bloody knife on one hand and a semi-automatic in the other. I let out a sigh of relief when I see that he is alive.

“How many?” I ask and take the semi-automatic from him.

“Counted ten and took out five of those bitches.” The son of a bitch smiles wide with blood-stained teeth.

Looking at my man, I hold the gun tighter in my grip ready to tear the world down, if need be, to get her out of this island with her life. “Don’t kill them all. We need to find out how the fuck our location was compromised.”

Kelly nods once, then gives me his back, where a tattoo of the grim reaper towering over the dead corpse of a woman is on full display.

It all happens quickly.

The intruders came here with one purpose and one purpose only. To take us out.

When the first motherfucker appears before me with his gun raised and pointing my way, I shoot him straight in the head before he gets the chance to pull the trigger. Then, two more come in, running, but Kelly gets to them first by slashing the first man’s throat and blowing the second’s brain out and covering not only himself in blood but the white walls too.

I shut my emotions off so I don’t let them cloud my judgment and make me lose focus. Two more mercenaries are left.

When I see one dressed from head to toe in black with a black ski mask covering his face coming up behind Kelly with his gun raised to the back of



my clan chief's head. I yell. "Kelly, duck." When he does, I shoot at the fucker. The bullet pierces his neck, and he drops.

"Ahhh." I whip my head when I hear Mila scream in pain. Rage consumes me until all I see is red. Red over the motherfucker who grabbed my girl by the neck and put that terrified look on her pretty face. Tears fall down her rosy cheeks, sealing the fate of the motherfucker that's hurting her.

"Drop the fucking gun, or I'll slice her fucking neck." The fucker screams, scaring her further. I watch as her eyes can't seem to focus on just one thing, and her lips move as if she's singing a song under her breath. "You, too." He says to Kelly.

Putting the gun down slowly, I raise my hands. "We both know you won't do that. You need her alive to claim the money." I grin like a fucking lunatic, eager to tear him limb from limb. "If you let her go, I'll triple the offer."

Dogs like this one always want more. They're never satisfied, and that will always be their downfall. Greed. When the mercenary takes a second to think about the offer, that's when we attack. In tune with each other, Kelly throws his blade at the asshole, hitting him on the shoulder, and at the same time, in one swift movement, I take Mila from him and give her to Kelly before going back to the son of a bitch.

Tackling the fucker to the ground, I rip the mask off and pummel his face until he's no longer recognizable, and then I continue some more until he's on the verge of death.

The cunt put his hands on her. Made her fear for her life.

I lose all control and only stop when I feel Kelly's hands pushing me back from the almost-dead man on the floor. Spitting on the fucker, I get off the floor and turn. "Grab him." I order Kelly without looking away from Mila. She has her arms crossed as if she's covering herself from any threat that might come her way, and she's looking down at the bloody mess on the floor, then her eyes move to me.

I stand there, with my future a few feet away, looking at me like I didn't just kill and beat a man to a bloody pulp. Like I am not covered in blood from head to toe. I let her see. I let her see all of me.

Because yes, I might be the prince in her story, but I am also the villain. The nightmare who won't hesitate to annihilate anyone that dares take her from me or hurt her in any fucking way.

"I told you we would be okay, sweetheart."

“Riagan...” Her sweet mouth forms an 'O' shape, but her eyes? Those gorgeous expressive blues? They hold no anger, no fear. Nothing like moments before.

All I see is curiosity and a whole lot of sparks.

And that's how our time in paradise ends.

With blood in my hands and rage in my heart.

The dream is over.

It's time to go home.

To my playground.

# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*Something about him makes me feel alive and not  
lost.*

*It's wonderful. Very scary, yes but oh so  
wonderful.*

# PART 11

# THE QUEEN OF PHILLY



*"I fell in love with a dream.  
That sweet dream is now my reality.  
My forever." - R*

**MAEVE & BRUNO**

MILA



*"All I see is him. He's all I ever want to see." - M*

I should be used to how life changes in the blink of an eye by now. One moment, I was on a magical island, experiencing life like I've never done before, and the next... well... I ended up here.

In his world.

No longer blissful paradise.

The reality of my situation sank in the second I watched several bullets fly, hitting flesh and taking lives. All while I stood behind Riagan, covering my ears but not my eyes. I witnessed everything, not feeling pity or even a slight feeling of guilt, as he took the lives of those who intended to hurt us with Cianne's help.

Logic tells me I should feel terrified of what I saw, but I am not.

To be fair, in the moment, I did feel scared, but not of Riagan. No. Never him.

I was terrified of losing him when I had just found him.

So, yes, life changes in an instant.

We're no longer dancing in the rain in a faraway paradise but in Philadelphia.

Riagan's city.

After the long flight and car drive, we finally arrived at a mansion just as grand as the one he has in the islands, but this one fits more his style. The large medieval architecture and modern building stands out among the tall

trees that surround it. This place is so big. He doesn't even have neighbors, just a whole bunch of acres. It's stunning, in a different way than the beach mansion was, but beautiful just the same.

The car stops as Cianne pulls in front of a gate. He has to step out, not just to enter a passcode into the security box, but to also press his palm against the green screen before the gate makes an audible groan as it rolls open. Then, he drives down a path and around to the back of the large mansion, the gate slowly closing behind us. The first thing I notice is that there's an army of men dressed in black guarding every inch and corner of this place from the outside and the inside. None of them wear suits like most guards do back home but jeans and t-shirts. Much like their boss does.

I can't help but press my nose to the car window and watch the tall trees as we pass them. It wasn't until we reached the fountain—a black fountain—that one word slipped out.

“Wow.” Thick patches of grass bisected tiles of concrete. The landscaping was just as beautiful as the house itself.

But that didn't sound quite accurate.

Despite its proximity to the city, the place was a mansion with so many windows that I wondered how the view would look when winter came.

“Is this yours?” I ask, unable to help my awe as I look around at the garden and the towering willow tree in the very center of it.

“As of a week ago, it is.” He quickly answers.

Wait a second.

*A week ago?*

I turn quickly, trying to read his expression. “You purchased this castle a week ago? Just like that?”

“It's not quite a castle, baby, but yes.” His smile was a touch clever. “Are you impressed?”

I nod. “Very much so.” I answer truthfully.

Riagan's laughter echoes as a man with a gun strapped to his chest and wearing an earpiece opens a large, ornate door for us. I watch as Riagan steps to the side to allow me in first. I do.

I thought I was prepared for the opulence when I stepped inside—something that reminded me of a museum more than anything else—but instead, I got the complete opposite.

Art hung along all the walls, colorful sculptures tucked in corners, and the sofas that I could see weren't made from leather or some other impossible



fabric that meant it could get damaged very easily. The living room itself looked open and inviting, as if it were well-lived in rather than just a room meant for show. I could feel his energy surrounding me.

Paintings hung on the walls, some abstract—made of harsh brush strokes in bright, vivid colors—while others were more classical, beautiful, and incredibly old.

With Riagan still distracted for the time being, I wandered on my own to check out the rest of the place.

As far as I could tell, there were three bedrooms on this floor alone and just as many bathrooms. As I swept through the back hallway, I found another spiraling staircase that led down instead of up, and the closer I came to stand by it, the better I could smell and even hear the water below.

There was a pool down there. Somewhere I would definitely need to explore while I was here, but that would come later.

“Welcome home, butterfly.” Riagan whispers from his spot behind me. Turning, I look up at him for a moment before going back to inspect this place. *Welcome home.*

I never had a home. Not really.

Love made a home.

Love and care.

My sisters were my home.

Now, there’s Riagan.

How strange that it really feels like that.

Like a home.

“You have white walls here too.” It’s the first thing that comes out of my mouth. I chuckle awkwardly, trying to not sound so brash.

“Think of them as a canvas.”

I whirl around so fast I’m sure I pull a muscle on my neck. “What?” I look up at him once again, but this time I force my eyes to remain trained on him. Blue. So pretty. And not at all angry like before when he took the lives of those strange men.

I stare at him as he reaches over and plays with one of my curls. He does that a lot, I’ve noticed. It makes my heart flutter every time he does. “Do whatever you want with the walls. Paint them. Redecorate them. Make this place your own. It’s been sad for far too long.” He whispers, and I detect a bit of sadness in his tone. Reaching up, I tap his chest three times I stop, and then do it again. His heart is hurting. I don’t like it when he is hurt. I can’t stand it

when he doesn't smile. It feels as if my day turns dark.

"Bruno! Heel! No! Bad doggy!" I am startled by a loud feminine voice and a tiny bark. "Oh, Riagan, you're back!"

Giving Riagan my back, I turn just in time to watch as a small golden retriever comes running my way with his tongue out. A short, curvy girl that looks to be around my age with a boisterous laugh, wild, red-colored locks and big brown eyes runs after the puppy.

I instantly become on high alert, knowing I don't do well with new people. It took me at least a day or two to get used to Cianne's presence before I was able to not feel anxious around all the time.

But the girl with the loud laugh doesn't seem to take me by surprise when she sidesteps Riagan and greets me with an air hug, which catches me by surprise because who does that? Most people would pull me in for a hug or offer me their hands when first meeting, not caring about personal space at all. Not this girl with the pretty hair, smile and laugh.

"What are you doing?" I look at her hair first, wondering if it's as soft as it looks. Then, I notice the freckles on her tiny button nose, her big plump lips and weird shade of green eyes. I wonder who she is. She's not dressed like the other women who I assume work for him with an established uniform. This person is wearing baggy jeans and an oversized white graphic shirt. Her hair falls over her chest and she even has bangs.

She is very beautiful in a way that's effortless.

"Giving you a big bear hug without touching you."

Did Riagan tell her about my discomfort when meeting new people?

When I say nothing, she pulls back and says in a serious tone. "Okay, you got me. I hate germs, and I don't like people touching me, especially people I don't know."

Huh.

Germs.

She hates germs.

"Mila, this is Maeve, my--"

"His best employee and longtime bestie." The girl says while side eyeing Riagan.

He rolls his eyes, but there's a small grin on his face while Maeve flips him off before turning back to me with a smile.

I can't help but frown when I think of how close they might be that she feels comfortable joking around with him. I also refuse to admit how

territorial I felt when he smiled at her. I am not a jealous person. That is not who I am.

“Anyway... it’s nice to finally meet the woman behind this,” she points at Riagan. “brute’s obsession.”

“Maeve, do you want this to be your last day on earth?”

“As if you had the guts to kill your third favorite person in the world?” Maeve shrugs.

Third? Is she talking about his father? Who is the second, then?

I take a mental note to ask him later.

“What kind of work do you do for Riagan?” I ask, interrupting their banter.

Maeve smiles proudly. “I hack a lot of shit, and most of the time, steal money for him.”

Riagan hisses before pulling her behind him with an annoyed look.

“That is...” I think of the right word.

“Illegal? Immoral?” Maeve jumps behind Riagan, so she can see me better.

Looking at both of them, the tall man with tattoos on full display and the tiny ball of spitfire jumping behind him and saying. “Badass.”

“Badass.” Maeve stops jumping while Riagan looks proud? Yes, proud. “I think you and I are going to be the best of friends, Mila.”

Smiling shily, I just nod. Making friends has always been difficult for me and not something I really sought to do much, but this is different.

These are Riagan’s people.

They obviously mean something to him.

I have to try hard to fit in his world to not cause trouble.

I wouldn’t want that.

Not for me or him.

An older-looking lady with a weird vibe and a scowl on her face approaches us, interrupting my silent staring. “Everything is ready for the wedding, sir.”

Wedding?

“Who is getting married?” I ask Riagan curiously.

He dismisses the grumpy lady and turns to me. “We are.”

“We?” I frown, looking at his chest now. “N-now?” I cringe when I stutter in front of them.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t tell her...” Maeve pushes him aside, looking

wide eyed. “Cap... that is so unromantic.”

*Tell me what?*

After a second, it dawns on me.

I stare at Riagan, looking for answers. “Are we...?”

I watch his every move with my heart in my throat as he moves Maeve aside and steps forward, getting closer to me. As close as he possibly can to me. Chest to chest. I feel my heartbeat race. He stands tall, towering over me, looking so handsome and fierce. “Do you trust me, Mila? Do you trust that I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe?” He gives me his hand, and I look down at it. Trust?

I do.

There is no doubt in my mind, after all we’ve been through in such a short amount of time, that I trust Riagan O’Sullivan with not just my life but my heart.

Placing my hand in his, I give him my answer without speaking.

There’s no going back now.

Not that I would want to.

*Woof!* The small dog reminds us he’s here when he barks at my feet. I smile wide when Maeve picks him up and makes him wave at me. I feel a wave of warmth rush through me.

I love dogs.

Always wanted one, but I was never allowed to have one.

Nothing that would bring me joy was allowed.

Maeve drops Bruno in my arms before clapping once. “Mila, meet Bruno. Our honorary little shit-head. He loves chasing Cianne around the mansion, and belly rubs.”

*Woof.*

Bruno barks as if he understands just what Maeve is saying, and I laugh when he squirms in my arms, trying to get to my face. Lifting him up, I hold him close to my face, and he takes the opportunity to lick my nose.

“He likes you.” Riagan speaks.

Hugging Bruno close, I look at Riagan and beam.

Nerves about the events of the night are completely forgotten, I smile wide like I’ve never smiled before in this moment with Bruno in my arms and Riagan smiling softly down at me with a light in his eyes I only witness when he looks at me.

A light that shines from within.

I didn't know it then, but I was already falling hard.

So hard that it both excited and terrified me.

“Let's get you married, cap!” Maeve's excited voice breaks through my thoughts, reminding me of my current situation.

Yet I feel zero nerves.

It feels... right.

# UNSENT MESSAGE FROM M



C,  
I hope you're okay wherever you are.  
I hope... I hope you're happy. -M

**JUST IN CASE**

MILA



*"She's my masterpiece." - R*

I've been seeing the same person every day for as long as I've been alive, reflected back at me while looking in the mirror. Just an ordinary girl with ordinary looks. Boring. Safe. Just me.

Nothing to get excited about.

Not today.

Today, the person looking back at me in the mirror feels like a stranger and a friend at the same time. I can't put into words or explain this feeling more eloquently.

It's like it's me, but not really.

I'm wearing a mid-length, blue-green satin, backless dress that is neither casual nor too elegant. It's very pretty and matches perfectly with the clear strap heels and the tiara on top of my head.

Yes, a tiara.

One with small butterflies made of diamonds.

It's safe to say that I don't look like I typically do. I ditched the mom jeans, sneakers, and oversized shirts, which are my go-to attire. Oh, and my cap.

I don't have it with me.

"You look so beautiful..." A chirpy voice startles me, and I turn away from the mirror to find Maeve standing at the doorway of the room she brought me into after we left Riagan in the living room area. She changed her clothes and is now wearing a dress similar to mine but in a different color.



Black. Her pink hair is pulled up in a high ponytail with her bangs perfectly divided in the middle. She looks stunning and kind of like an anime character.

“Thank you.” I offer her a small smile, feeling a bit anxious about being alone with her. Not because there’s something wrong with her but because it’s just a habit of mine. She’s been nothing but kind, but you never know. “You look very pretty.” I mumble, focusing on her pink strands.

“He picked it, you know?” She steps into the room and comes to stand next to me near the mirror.

Frowning, I ask. “Who picked what?”

“Your dress and the hairpiece. The boss, Riagan, picked all of it.” She laughs softly. “He sent me to pick them up last week, and I thought he finally lost it. All those hits to the head must’ve done a whole lot of damage because why would he purchase a wedding dress when we’ve never even seen him with a woman. Not one that was serious, anyway.”

The thought of Riagan hurting makes me nervous.

But the thought of him with another woman, serious or not, makes me angry and sad.

More sad than angry, actually.

“He didn’t know about me a week ago.” I whisper while I play with the ring on my finger. His ring.

“Oh, he knew about you, sweet Mila.” My eyes meet hers for a moment, and they seem happy. “You’re everything he was missing and more.”

I find myself at a loss for words.

What should I say? What’s the appropriate response here?

“He is very kind.” I tell her and I mean it. Riagan has treated me with kindness and respect, and for that he will always have a special place in my heart, regardless of what the future holds for us.

“To you and the people he cares about, yes. Others?” I stare at her face for longer than I’m comfortable with. “Not so much.” She stops talking for a second and then continues. “You needn’t worry. He really is a good guy to the people he loves.”

Love.

My eyes grow big, and my blood pressure spikes the moment the word slips from her mouth.

“He doesn’t love me.”

Maeve lifts a white bag and hands it to me. “I beg to differ.”

“What is this?”

“Open it and find out.”

I do.

Opening the white bag, I pull out a cap. A plain white one. Huh. Searching the bag for more, I find a small sticky note with writing on it. Turning it, it reads:

*Just in case. - R*

Just in case things become too much today and the world starts to cave in. He gave me a cap so I can feel less anxious.

These are the little things that make me fight off any doubt I might have. Riagan is not a saint. He has done and seen things that would give me nightmares, yet I’ve never felt unsafe with him. He has never made me feel like I shouldn’t trust him. Not once in all the moments we’ve shared.

He might look like the villain in a fairytale, but his heart? There’s nothing cruel or evil about it.

It’s beautiful, just like he is.

Click.

The flash of a camera makes me look up to find Maeve smiling widely with her phone in her hands after taking a photo of me.

“Why did you do that?” I ask curiously. Here I thought I was an odd duck. I think maybe this girl is even odder.

Maeve puts the phone down. “I bet once the boss annihilates the threat to your life, your sisters would love to see how beautiful you looked on your wedding day.” That is... sweet. Very sweet of her, actually.

“Do you know my sisters too?” I step forward, looking at her eyes for a few seconds, then at the five diamond earrings in various sizes on her ears.

“Know them? No. But I do know of them.” She explains.

“How?”

“Well, one of your sisters is banging the most powerful man in the country while the other is making waves as the first female boss in Detroit history. They’re pretty rad.”

Smiling, I say. “They are. They’ve always been pretty amazing. Even before the president and the title of boss.”

“You’re amazing, too.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks, and I look away from her and down at the baseball cap in my hands. “You don’t know me.” I blurt out truthfully.

“What the boss has told me about you and what I’ve discovered online is pretty amazing.”

“Discover? What do you mean?”

“I’m one of this country’s best hackers, babe. I can find anything about anyone.” She steps back with a grin on her face. “You should share it with him, you know. The things you do are incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it.” I think I detect a hint of awe in her voice.

I wonder why she hasn’t shared what she found about me with her boss? If she’s been looking up things on the internet, it’s safe to assume that it was by his command, then why didn’t she tell him?

In truth, I’m not hiding anything. I just figured there’s nothing special about it. To me, it’s just a hobby. Something that I did to pass the time while I was trying to be invisible. The internet helps with that. I could upload my projects, and no one had to know the person behind the screen. Their identity.

I guess someone did find out.

Maeve.

“I won’t tell him, so get rid of that frown, will you?” Her voice is gentle, and so is her smile. “Now, come on. He’s waiting for you. Has been for a really long time.”

My mind instantly goes somewhere else.

To the days prior, where I created so many beautiful memories with a man that some call the Godfather of this city.

The one I will call my husband from today onward.

I think of him, his smile and all the overwhelming feelings he stirs in me with just a gentle touch and kind word.

The way his lips feel.

I think of all that he is and a smile takes over my face.

I don’t think there will ever come a day where I’ll regret this arrangement.

I’ll regret him.

Maeve’s words come back to me, and for the longest time, those words are all I can focus on.

*He’s waiting for you. Has been for a really long time.*

Holding the baseball cap to my chest, I tap it three times in awe of how

fast my heart is beating just from the thought of him.

Thoughts of becoming his wife.

For real.

No arrangements.

No expiration date.

Forever.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*All of a sudden all of my thoughts were about  
you.*

# BEST MEN & VOWS

## RIAGAN



*"You're in my veins." - M*

If someone would have told me years ago that I would be marrying a girl much younger than me. The same girl I came across as a strike of luck years ago. A girl whose family is one of the three who had a hand in my mother's demise. I would've laughed my fucking ass off because no way would I have believed that shit. Marriage, love, and babies were not in the cards for a man like me.

I never once saw myself settling down with just one woman, let alone putting my ring on her finger.

But here I am, standing in my backyard garden with my father and Kelly, waiting not so patiently for my bride to appear before me, so I can make it official. I can finally make her mine in the name of God and my law.

My clan's law.

She'll not only be mine in the sense of the word but by law.

With my name and my ring, she'll not only be protected by my city but respected by my men and my enemies as well.

That, I'll make sure.

Looking at my watch, I count the minutes she's been away from me. Seventy minutes, to be exact.

I entrusted Maeve with helping Mila get ready for this moment, but now that the minutes keep ticking by I wonder if I shouldn't have left her alone. Perhaps she got nervous? Or anxious? Shit she doesn't know Maeve.

What if she—

“I’m proud of you, *a sheòid*” I feel my father’s still strong hand clasp my shoulder. Turning my face away from the double doors, where my bride should be walking through any second now, I look at my father.

He stands in the center dressed as usual. A long black sleeve button down with two buttons undone, revealing butterfly tattoos almost identical to mine. His are black ink butterflies, while mine were filled in with blue ink.

I’m glad to see him looking better than he did a week ago, but still he lost some weight. His doctors told him the chemotherapy would be hell on him. For the most part, he’s been good at hiding how rough it has been on him, but he can’t hide the changes to his appearance. He had to shave his hair, and the dark circles under his eyes are a clear sign that he’s not been getting enough sleep.

Still, he’s a fighter.

He doesn’t complain and wakes up every morning, ready to fight that fucker cancer with all he has.

Cancer was a word that was never part of my vocabulary. Yes, I know it happens to many people, but it never crossed my mind that it would hit so close to home.

Touching my father’s hand, I give him a reassuring squeeze. He needs me to be okay, just as much as I need him to be here with me for as long as life allows him to. “I’m proud of you, too, Da.”

“I hear she’s a beauty.” Da murmurs, looking ahead, then back at me.

*Fucking Kelly.*

“Kelly has a big mouth.” I mumble while the image of his beady little eyes staring at Mila’s naked chest still burns in my memory.

“And a great appreciation for a woman’s beauty.” Da laughs, and it’s like music to my ears. Although, it seems like things are finally falling into place now that Mila is where she should’ve been all along. Another part feels as if it’ll all crumble at my feet if my father is taken from me. “He’s a good man and an even better soldier. He’s loyal as fuck, too, boy.”

I know.

I wouldn’t have chosen him as my right hand if I didn’t trust him.

I trust him with my goddamn heart. I proved that in Turks and Caicos.

He still has a penchant for pissing me the fuck off and testing my patience.

But it seems like all my men do.

“That’s the only reason he’s still breathing.” I joke with my father while



we wait for her. My father will serve as the officiant and both Maeve and Kelly will be witnesses.

“I don’t know for how long this will la—” I don’t let him finish his thought before I answer.

“Till my last breath.”

My father’s face turns soft. “Does she feel the same?”

I think back to how her pretty face lights up every time I came near her, even when she didn’t really know me. When she was afraid and anxious. When she was just a girl alone in the dark on that Halloween night. Her eyes lit up the damn night like, to this day, she lights up my entire fucking world. Her beautiful smiling face flashes through my mind, and so does every memory of her I have engraved in my brain, and I have my answer. My girl was kept from the world for so long, she grew up a bit naive and sheltered, yet she is so brave and kind. Nothing has hardened that sweet heart of hers, and I know, without a doubt, that nothing ever will.

She’s that good.

That fucking magical.

“She does.” And she does. I see it in her eyes. In the way she looks at me when she doesn’t think I’m looking. In the way she feels safe enough with me to not hide under her baseball cap. Safe enough to share her wishes and fun facts about the things she’s passionate about.

Perhaps, she doesn’t feel it as deeply as I do, but I know I’m in there.

In her heart, and I don’t plan on ever leaving.

Because she’s not only inked in my skin, but she’s my entire heart.

My weakness.

My strength.

My Mila.

The double doors that connect the mansion to the garden open, and Maeve strides in dressed in all black with her pink hair, a total contrast to the pale tone of her skin. She walks towards where both Da and I are, standing under the gazebo with a grin on her face.

Maeve might be my golden little genius, but to two other men she’s their ruin and salvation.

Feeling my father grip my chin tenderly, like he used to when I was a young lad, I look into his eyes, identical to mine. I’m not only blood of his blood.

But my father believes I was made in his image.

I believe so too.

I see traces of my mum, but it's mostly him.

"And why her?" Da asks.

I smile at that.

"Because there's never been and there'll never be anyone else for me." I confess proudly as I wait for her. Kelly stands to my right, and across from him now stands Maeve, who looks nervous as if she were the bride.

And like a magic trick or a fucking miracle, the double doors to the garden open once again, and Mila enters by herself. Fuck, she deserves better. She deserves someone to walk her down the aisle to me. A wedding that would be the envy of every woman in this city. She deserves so much more than this. Still, I don't regret every decision I've made since retrieving her from Detroit.

Because that road led me here. To this moment in time where she is seconds away from becoming legally mine. She is wearing the dress I picked for her. An elegant yet casual, long satin dress. Her wild curls fall down her back held back, by a tiara that matches both her dress and her eyes perfectly. I can't seem to look away. I don't want to look away.

Fuck.

The tiara has tiny butterflies on it, reminding me of the very first time I laid eyes on her. When she was dressed as a butterfly. A blue butterfly.

But this time is different. She's a young woman, and she's never looked more like mine.

Mila smiles slightly as she walks toward me, but her nerves aren't hard to miss. When she arrives in front of me, I notice she's carrying a bridal bouquet with my favorite flower. My mother's favorite. Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I catch the hint of desire and happiness, both surprising and grounding me.

I take her much-smaller hand in mine and smile, reassuring her while Da begins the short ceremony. As he goes over the usual ceremony script, I tune everything out and focus solely on her.

"Hi," I whisper, getting her attention away from my Da and to me. It's obvious she's nervous. Nervous and out of her element. Still, she smiles at me while her hand trembles in mine. Holding it firmly, I smile back, offering her comfort. Telling her with my smile that all is fine and that, from now on it will always be. I'll always make sure she's good.

That she'll never go without.

“Hi,” she whispers back.

“Everything will be alright.” I assure her, still staring at her eyes while her gaze falls to my lips. “You’ll always be safe with me. Always.”

Her gaze lifts to mine once again.

“Always? That’s a long time. That’s for—”

“It’s not long enough, butterfly. No amount of time with you will ever be enough.” I cut her off, smiling wide when her nostrils flare and she licks her lips.

The heart in my chest seems to slow down, just like the world around us, as I wait for her to speak again and tell me what’s in her head.

And when she does, I know.

I know she’s here with me.

On the same page of our book.

Our story.

“Okay...” she breathes out and squeezes my hand three times.

Three times like her favorite number.

Like the number of days, it took me to realize that Mila Areya Parisi was more than just a girl I met one autumn night.

She’s everything.

Everything and more.

“Do you Riagan, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife. To have and to hold. In sickness and in health, as long as you’ll both be alive?”

“I do.” There’s no hesitation on my part.

My father repeats the question this time to Mila.

I hold my breath, waiting for her to answer. I don’t have to wait long because her “I do” comes soon after.

While we exchange the rings, Mila keeps throwing shy glances up at me. “I got you, Mila. Always. No matter what.” I slip the silver band onto her small finger, and watch as it connects to her engagement ring.

“You may kiss your bride, *a sheòid*,” my father said. Mila’s eyes widen a fraction, as if that part of the ceremony comes as a surprise. I wait for her. I want her to give me whatever she’s comfortable with, even if it means she shakes my fucking hand instead of sealing our union with a kiss. But then, as always she manages to surprise me when she goes up on her tippy toes, grabs the back of my head, urging me to bend low, and when I do, she firmly presses her mouth against mine.

Now, as her soft lips touch mine and her sweet scent hits me, a deeply

buried desire kindles inside me. I pull back, causing Mila to open her eyes. She holds my gaze, a blush creeping up her cheeks. Then she gives me a small, shy smile. So goddamn innocent.

Kelly, of course, is the first to congratulate me. He claps my shoulder with a teasing smile. “And how was the first taste of your young wife?” he asks in a low voice.

Without looking away from Mila, I speak. “Kelly.”

Kelly claps my shoulder more forcefully this time. “Yes, darling?”

“Fuck off.” My eyes linger on hers for a few seconds longer than the last time she held my face and smiled. She’s trying. She, like me, can’t help not wanting to look at anyone or anywhere else. “You’re mine now, sweet Mila.” I touch my forehead with hers. “Mrs. O’Sullivan.” I whisper proudly against her lips before claiming them once again. This time I don’t kiss her sweet or gentle, no.

I kiss her like a man who’s been starving for years.

Starving for a taste of heaven.

A taste of her.

My wife.



*Mila*

WE SAID I DO, and then I was pulling him in for a kiss while his people clapped.

Short and simple, but somehow it felt like everything.

Effortless and natural.

Just like us.

I never thought this day would come. Simply because I didn’t believe a man such as Riagan existed, and although our situation started out as a mutually beneficial arrangement, it doesn’t feel like that anymore. To me it feels real.

Feels like forever.

His words play through my mind while I stand by his side and witness his employees—no, they’re clearly more than that. His family circle around us, congratulating both of us.

*You're mine now, sweet Mila.*

Those are not the words of a man who thinks about this marriage as a momentary thing.

No.

Those are the words of a man who wishes to keep me forever.

I want that too.

There's no denying it any longer.

I fell fast and hard.

For a man who isn't the one I dreamed about for countless days and nights.

My mystery man who would bear his soul to me through letters.

He was a ghost.

And Riagan?

Riagan is real.

Real and true.

And now?

Mine.

I watch him talk among his people, thinking he was the breath of fresh air I didn't know I was missing until it was there, winding its way through my oxygen-starved lungs.

The dream that always seemed impossible.

I did say once I had obsessions.

Healthy ones, but I still become obsessed easily, and I have.

I am tiredly obsessed with the man who makes my chest ache in a good way. The best way. The man who has given me everything in a matter of days.

My best days.

My husband.

# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*I once thought happily ever after only happened  
in romance books.*

*Now, I know that happily ever after does  
happen.*

*Rarely, but they do.*

*My happily ever after is... you.*

# **FAMILY DINNER & DEADLY THREATS**

## RIAGAN



*“The shit I do for her.” - R*

*“Here he is,” The lady, Lany, I think that’s what she said her name was, announces happily as she enters the room with a small Golden Retriever on the end of a green leash. The small dog approaches me cautiously when I kneel in front of him. Wide brown eyes, tail down, and a bit guarded, yet he lets me pet his small head.*

*He’s shy.*

*I can tell by how he looks up at me cautiously, not barking up a storm like the other dogs did to grab my attention.*

*Every reservation I had before entering the pet store disappears when I touch his soft fur. “You’re a handsome little fuck.”*

*A giggle makes me look up at the lady and find her smiling down at us.*

*“His name is Bruno.” Lany says.*

*Bruno.*

*Don’t think there’s a Bruno in the clan. “Bruno.” The small dog licks my hand playfully. “Oh, you’re a clever one, huh?”*

*“He’s a super nice boy. A little shy at first, but he’s not used to his surroundings. It’s hard for older dogs to adjust to such an upheaval. As much as we try to make them happy and comfy here, it’s still so scary for them.” I detect a bit of sadness in her tone. I bet.*

*While I was researching the perfect dog, or perfect fit for me, at least, I came across a bit of information and statistics on how many dogs are*



*abandoned daily in the United States and how a lot of those dogs who end up being put up for adoption take a little time to get comfortable.*

*I chose this particular store because they not only find homes for pure breeds but for stray dogs as well.*

*The dog, Bruno, relaxes as I pet him, easing himself into a sitting position and offering me his paw to shake. Laughing, I take his furry paw in my hand and bob it up and down. He wags his tail and offers me his other paw.*

*“You want to come home with me?” I ask the dog, gently rubbing his head. “Get spoiled? Run free?” He licks my hand, as if he’s telling me ‘yes’, then he puts his leg over his eyes, almost as if he’s shy.*

*And it reminds me of her.*

*I came here for her, and now I’m leaving as the owner of a dog.*

*One whose fur is the same shade as the hair I constantly dream about at night.*

*Woof.*

*The tiny pup removes his leg from his eyes, sticks his tongue out and falls back on the floor.*

*Sweet and dramatic.*

*I’m sold.*

*Thirty minutes later, I’m speeding home with an overly excited pup scratching his balls inside my Porsche.*

*\*\*\**

The memory of when I first met Bruno comes to mind as I watch a nervous Mila focus all her attention on Bruno, who is lazily napping on her lap. I got the damn dog a couple of months ago, and originally, I was aiming for a guard dog, but then I saw Bruno lying on the mat, away from the rest of the dogs, and it tugged at my heart. The little happy fucker reminding me so much of her. I was sold the moment he put his tiny paw in my hand. So sweet. So smart. Fuck, I was gone for him too. Now seeing the two of them together and witnessing Mila’s joy, I don’t regret leaving that shelter with the little guy.

All he needed was a home and a little bit of love.

Tenderness.

Just like my wife.

Wife.

Mine.

Half an hour later, it still feels like I am dreaming, and this is all a figment

of my fucked-up imagination. How else would I explain someone as good as her saying yes to a man like me? To this life I lead.

But here she is, next to me, trying her best to fit in with my men and my family. I am not oblivious to her anxiety. She has tapped the silverware repeatedly since we sat down at the table, yet she hasn't cowered or ran away when the attention is directed at her.

Not my girl.

Maeve has directed the conversation toward her a couple of times to make her feel included and has made sure to not overwhelm her either. I appreciate that.

I appreciate all of them making an effort for me.

For her.

Every single member of the clan is loud and outgoing, none of them shy. There's no room for that here, but for her, we make an exception because that is, who she is and that is exactly who they'll respect.

She's perfect just the way she is, and I can tell by the gentle look in the eyes of not just Maeve and Kelly but Da too.

After we said I do, we moved toward the dining room, where Da had a dinner set up to celebrate the occasion.

When there's something to celebrate in our family, we do it with drinks and food.

Irish alcohol, to be exact.

Looking at my beautiful wife, I smile when I notice that, even though she's busy playing with the dog, she's also paying attention to the conversation. She's trying. Fuck me, so sweet.

Reaching under the table, I grab her hand and squeeze it, and once she looks away from the dog and at me, I wink at her, loving the way pink colors her cheeks. With my hand still holding on to hers, I rise from my seat and pick up my whiskey with my free hand. "Thank you." I look at my father, then at Maeve, and lastly, Kelly. "Thank you for being here for us." Clearing my throat, I then direct my words toward my wife. Looking down at her, my heart starts to beat fast when she grabs my hand tightly as if she needs me for comfort too. "This woman here." My woman. "This is my wife, and you will protect her with your life. Treat her as an extension of me. I trust that you will not only make her feel safe in your presence but include her in your conversations. You will treat her with the respect she deserves as not just a human but as my wife. The wife of your captain." Mila's eyes widen at the

same time as her thumb traces the ink on my hand. “You make sure everyone inside and outside these walls does as well. No one hurts her. No one makes her feel less than perfect.” My eyes leave Mila and move toward Kelly and Maeve, who quietly sit, listening. “And if you do, I’ll treat it as treason to your captain. To this family.” I threaten. Looking at my father next, I make sure he knows that not even blood is safe.

No one.

We’re not in paradise anymore, away from the world where I can keep her fully to myself.

We’re in my world now.

Where her life is in danger every hour of the day, but she has me.

She has this city behind her.

She’s no longer the forgotten princess.

No.

She’s now the heart of this O’Sullivan clan.

The queen of not only my fucked-up heart but this city.

My Philly.



*Mila*

I’VE BEEN by myself for so long that I’ve never gotten used to being around people for long periods of time. I’ve enjoyed the quiet so much that, at times, the presence of other people gives me anxiety or makes me feel out of place. I’m constantly trying to keep up with their social cues, and I try really hard to understand their jokes and think twice about what I’m going to say not to offend them in any way.

It’s exhausting. It really is, but not with Riagan and not with his people, apparently.

They’re... loud. Very loud, and they all have big personalities.

They fit so well with each other, and all through dinner, it hasn’t escaped me how they’ve tried to include me in their conversations.

Not once have I felt left out or uncomfortable.

Then, Riagan stood up and said all those things.

Those words that made my stomach do a flip and my heart skip many,

many beats.

*“This woman here. This is my wife, and you will protect her with your life. Treat her as an extension of me. I trust that you will not only make her feel safe in your presence but include her in your conversations. You will treat her with the respect she deserves as not just a human but as my wife. The wife of your captain. You make sure everyone inside and outside these walls does as well. No one hurts her. No one makes her feel less than perfect. And if you do, I’ll treat it as treason to your captain. To this family.”*

He said all that to his friends and his father.

People he has known longer than he has me, yet he threatened them for... me.

I feel eyes on me, and when I look away from Riagan and to my left, I find Riagan’s father staring at me. Usually, when someone stares at me for too long, I feel not only uncomfortable but this sinking feeling in my chest. The same feeling makes me want to hide but I don’t feel that now. Haven’t felt it for a while. Since Detroit, actually.

Trying to hold the man’s stare for as long as I’m physically able to, I offer him a smile. I might have trouble expressing my emotions and following social cues most times, but I did master ‘normal’ social manners.

Mr. O’Sullivan holds out his hand with a smile of his own. I notice how alike father and son are, even if the older man does look a bit sick. Both men are tall, with light brown hair and sky-blue eyes. Both handsome, confident, and by the looks of it, a charming personality.

Staring at Riagan’s father is like looking at an older version of my husband.

My husband.

I still haven’t wrapped my head around it.

I’m married.

Legally bound to a man I didn’t know until a week ago.

“Mr. O Sullivan,” I say in a small voice, still processing all that has happened in the last couple of hours and all that Riagan said just moments before.

“Cathan, please. We’re family now.”

Cathan’s eyes were kind, but like his son, his demeanor was chilling. He has an air that screams he’s done and seen things that would give me nightmares. I still remember the things some of the men that worked for my father and now for my sister whispered about the boss of Philadelphia. The

one before Riagan.

As if Cathan could read my mind, his smile widens a bit, but the look in his eyes remains the same. Gentle. “My son is not only my heart, but he is also my greatest accomplishment. My joy.” I wasn’t sure what to say, so I remained quiet and let him get what he clearly wanted to say off his chest. “The way he smiled today, I haven’t seen him smile that way since he was a young boy, and you gave him that, darling. You gave me that.” Cathan makes a move as if he wants to touch my hand but stops himself before he does. I wonder why? “I don’t know how much he has told you about me or my current situation...”

“You’re sick.” I whisper, ignoring the chatter around us and focusing only on Riagan’s father.

“I am.”

“I am sorry.”

His eyes look sad, but his smile remains. How odd. He is clearly in pain. Both physically and emotionally. How can he smile as if he’s okay? I guess most people do just that. Smile to hide their pain. That, I can understand well. “Nothing to be sorry about, darling. I’ve had a good run.”

“He loves you.” I blurt out. “Riagan loves you very much. He’s even completing your wish list.”

Cathan clears his throat and looks at me as if he knows something I do not. “He loves you too.”

“I don’t know ab—” I mumble a denial, but he interrupts me.

“He does. I see the way he looks at you. How his entire face lights up when he sees you smile. Never has he smiled as big as he did today. That I’m sure you noticed during your time with my son.”

“How does he look at me?”

“Like I used to look at his mother.” He replies instantly, and I sense no anger or sadness in his tone. Nothing. “He looks at you, Mila, like a man who is willing to take on the world for his woman. For you.”

The heart inside my chest somehow manages to slow down, and all I can hear is Cathan’s words, and all I can feel is the rapid beat of my heart, plus a thousand butterflies causing a storm in my stomach. “Welcome to the family, sweetheart. About damn time.” Cathan raises his glass of water and grins before taking a sip.

Bruno licks my palm, trying to catch my attention. Looking down at the sweet boy, I run my fingers through his soft fur and smile softly at him. I

used to prefer the company of animals and my plants over people. But then Riagan entered my life and turned my world upside down in the most beautiful and special way. Raising my head when Kelly laughs out loud at something Cathan says, and Maeve joins them, I can't help but look at Riagan, and I'm not surprised to find him already staring at me.

Even when we're surrounded by other people, he's always looking at me. It both excites and scares me, all in a good way.

The best way.

Just with one look, he makes the world stop when it gets too loud.

He makes the chaos in my head bearable when it gets to be too much.

*He loves you too. Riagan's father's words replay in my mind while I hold his son's stare.* I study the softness in his face that I've only ever seen when it came to me. Even when he was staring at his father or Maeve, he always stares with a look that you couldn't quite tell if he liked you or not. In my case, I knew that he liked me. At least, now that I knew how to read him really well, I did.

A warm feeling, one I only get when he looks at me, spreads in my chest. These newfound feelings frightened me. Frightened me so much that I found myself constantly overthinking every little thing he did and said because nothing could ever hurt more than having my heart broken by him. Yet, I push my fears away because, as much as my feelings for my husband scare me, one thing is for sure...

Nothing frightens me more than not having him at all.

More than losing him because I'm scared to give myself to someone else.

To give my heart away.

But it's not really my heart anymore, is it?

It's his.

That warm fuzzy feeling in my chest expands, and I smile. Smile because I'm genuinely happy. At this moment, with the people who care most about him, I'm overjoyed. "Riagan." I lean forward so he can hear me over the noise around us.

"Yes, wife?" His smile widens, and my heart skips a beat. In the past week, I've seen some of the most beautiful sights of nature. Yet, nothing compares to his smile. Nothing.

Wife.

His wife.

That's who I am now.

Reaching under the table, I grab his hand and look into his eyes. I make myself hold his stare for as long as I can, then I give him another truth. You make me happy when happiness has always been fleeting to me. You make me smile just by being by my side. You make my heart do weird things I'm still not sure I quite understand. You've become my favorite part of the day.

I think all of this, yet I'm too scared to admit it aloud. Instead, I tell him. "I'm lucky to have met you." Too embarrassed to hold his gaze any longer, my eyes fall to his lips as I try to slow down the beating of my heart. It feels as if it wants out of my body to get to him. To his owner.

"I'm the lucky one, butterfly." Then, he does something I've only seen in movies and read in books.

He lifts our joint hands and brings them to his mouth, kissing my hand gently.

My breath hitches, and my heart loses control.

I'm the lucky one.

No.

He doesn't see it, but I do.

I'm the one lucky to have met this man, who every day turns out to be so much more than his ink, name, and the blood he has spilled.

So much more, and now he's mine.

At least for as long as it lasts.

I think of forever.

I wish... I wish I could keep him forever.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*I find myself wishing I could stop time  
whenever I'm with you.*



# FIRST TIME NERVES

MILA



*"I didn't believe in magic until I stared into her eyes." - R*

I'm not completely out of touch with interactions between a man and a woman.

I read about it too.

The wedding night.

Some are sweet, some are downright dirty, while some are awkward.

This could go either way, but I'm leaning toward awkward.

That's why as soon as we entered the large suite with a huge bed in the middle of it, my nerves got the best of me, and I blurted out a fact. One that has my face turning red and wanting to hide under the covers in embarrassment. "Newlyweds are expected to consummate their marriage on a white cloth, as eager family members wait close by. Did you know that?" And because I just can't control my mouth, I make it worse. "As soon as the deed is done, the sheets are handed over for inspection. If suitably blood-stained, ecstatic family members will take it on a tour to display it to other family members."

My embarrassment intensifies when a moment of silence – a long one passes between us.

Turning away from Riagan, I look everywhere in search of an exit, but there's none besides the main door which Riagan is blocking.

Ah, darn it.

This is why some people think of me as weird.

Not my new husband, though.

He proves it in the next instant. “Virginity testing occurs in many cultures, yes. It’s a common tradition. Archaic but common.” I feel my soul return to my body when he finally speaks up. Still, I don’t turn, too embarrassed of what he must be thinking right now. “Mila, please look at me.”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. This is Riagan. He hasn’t forced me to do anything I don’t want. Not once.

But do I want to? That is the question.

I’ve never felt sexual attraction before. At one point, I thought I might be asexual since I did find men attractive before, but not enough to fantasize about them or wish to be bedded by them.

Until him.

I guess it was not a me problem, but a Riagan missing from my life problem.

Turning, I come face to face with his hard chest. He looked so handsome as he waited for me in the gazebo, wearing black dress pants and a matching button-down silk shirt with his sleeves rolled up, revealing all those intricate tattoos.

But what made him look even more handsome was the subtle smile that hadn’t left his face all day.

Feeling his gentle fingers on my chin, Riagan tilts my face up to look at him. I find those big blue eyes looking down at me with the same gentleness as every time before. Always gentle, never harsh, but too intense. “There’s no need to be nervous. Us?” He motions between us. “We are not conventional, would you agree? I won’t do anything that you don’t want. Ever.” He promises. “You know this, right?”

Smiling, I answer him. “I know.”

And I do.

I love facts.

I also enjoy collecting data.

And so far, he has given me zero reasons to doubt him.

“Besides, that shit doesn’t fly with this family.” He mumbles, and I find myself looking at his stubbled cheek, no longer embarrassed. He does that to me.

I can be myself around him and not worry so much about being perfect or society’s definition of it. Yes, I get nervous, but not because I’m afraid of

him judging me, but because I want him to like me.

He never judges and never makes me feel inadequate. He is unlike anyone else.

Almost too good to be true.

“Tell me something else?” He asked quietly. His voice was warm, smooth, soft, like an enveloping hug that could wash all your worries away.

“Like what?” I breathe out.

“Another fact.” He traces the bridge of my nose with his tattooed finger, then moves it down to my top lip.

His soft touch causes heat to crawl up from my neck to my cheeks.

“Did you know that Stockholm Syndrome got its name from a bank robbery in Norrmalmstorg in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973?” I speak, then my fun little fact is followed by silence... again.

And then he does it.

My favorite thing in the world right now.

He laughs.

“Are you trying to tell me something, sweetheart?”

I nod and lift my hand to his chest and do my best to hold his stare. “Yes.”

“Tell me then.”

“I am not suffering from Stockholm Syndrome.” I feel his chest expand and his heart beat more strongly than it was before. Smiling softly at that, I continue. “What I am trying to say is that I choose you, Riagan. I chose you back in that alley, and I chose to be here with you today.”

Then, I notice his eyes flash with something I’ve come to learn while being with him is desire. Yes, desire. That’s exactly it.

His heart races, and his nostrils flare.

Some indicators that prove my theory.

I love how little butterflies come to life in my stomach every time our eyes meet.

“Let’s get you out of this dress so you can rest. It’s been an eventful day.” He whispers as he moves closer. His cologne wafts into my nose. I love the way he smells. Manly. Clean. Fresh.

“So, no sex?” I blurt out.

“Do you want to have sex?” His voice does things to me. Things I’ve never felt before him.

I think about his question.

Do I want to? That's the million-dollar question. I take too long to answer, so I'm busy stuck in my head trying to come up with the best answer when he interrupts me. "Turn around."

Lost for words, I do as he says because it gives me a distraction. I don't get to tell him all I'm feeling. How I find myself craving his touch, but I'm afraid. I'm afraid he will be disappointed at my lack of sexual experience.

Yes, he is kind to me, but he is still a man.

An older man who surely knows exactly what he wants in bed while I know nothing.

Will I be able to please him?

Nerves get the best of me, so I try to push them down and focus on him instead.

Feeling his hot breath at the back of my neck, I find it difficult to find my next breath.

There's a long pause where I swear I can hear both of our hearts beating loudly. Impossible, I know. Not logical at all.

Not being able to stand how quiet he is, I shift my face and peer up at him. I'm sure the nerves are evident in my eyes. "Is there something wrong?" I ask quietly.

"You take my breath away." He breathes out. His voice is husky and sensual.

Dark and tempting.

Just like him.

Then, without notice he pulls my dress down slowly. With my back to him, I am topless and only wearing very skimpy white lace underwear.

I'm almost fully naked in front of him, and not for the first time.

My heart is racing now, and my breath quickens.

I feel the urge to tap my chest, but I fight it when I feel his heat at my back and his eyes on me.

"I'm going to touch you." He reaches up and cups my head. I hold my breath. How sweet and how rare that he remembers how I freak out when someone touches my head.

That's the kind of thing he does that makes my stomach flip and my chest feel full.

The little things.

Turning, with my breasts on display, I regard his handsome face for a moment too long. Intimate. Vulnerable. Yet I don't cower, nor do I feel the

need to hide like before.

Then, he leans down and presses a simple kiss to my mouth. I stay still. He runs his thumb over my cheekbone and then repeated the motion. I soften against him.

Then, his body heat disappears, and I watch him turn and walk toward the drawer. He opens it and grabs a pair of sweatpants and a white shirt.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the bathroom door. “Get cleaned up before bed, yes. Wash away the germs of the day.”

“I don’t mind your germs.” I blurt out.

“That’s good to know, sweetheart.”

“I do need to wash before I get into bed.” I alternate between looking at him and at the bathroom door.

Riagan laughs. “Go ahead. I’ll be here when you get out.”

Good.

I worried he would leave.

I don’t want him to.

“Okay.” I whisper and turn the knob, opening the bathroom door.

“Okay.”

Then, I spend exactly fifteen minutes scrubbing my body more than once, washing away all the dirt and grime I might’ve accumulated during the day. You never know what type of bacteria clings to you without you realizing it.

Germs are sneaky little jerks. Once I’m done, I grab the towel that’s hanging on the wall. It’s white, clean, and warm.

I hum contempt when I wrap it around my body.

Exiting the bathroom, I’m surprised to find Riagan sitting quietly at the end of the bed.

He waited.

He didn’t leave.

I round the bed and walk towards him. He then quietly takes my hands in his, and we both watch as the towel falls to my feet.

Holding my breath, I’m proud that I don’t look away or hide my face when I find myself standing naked before him.

Does he like what he sees?

He does.

He told me so back at the beach when I exposed my chest to him.

I watch him quietly as he grabs a white shirt and helps me into it. It’s funny how even sitting down, he’s taller than me.

Once I'm dressed in his shirt, he stands to his full height, towering over me. He presses a kiss to my forehead and lingers there for a moment. "Goodnight, butterfly." His lips leave my forehead, and he steps back, ready to leave the room.

Like a quick reflex, I grab his hand, stopping him from leaving. Focusing on his wedding ring, I ask "Will you stay with me?"

He's quiet for a second before he squeezes my hand. "If that's what you want."

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

He chuckles as the butterflies in my stomach start to dance to the sound of his voice.

"Let me shower, and I'll meet you in bed."

Letting out a relieved sigh, I nod and watch as he moves towards the bathroom with his sweatpants in hand.

Ten minutes.

He takes ten minutes to shower.

I counted them, yes.

Then he exits the bathroom, wearing only his black sweatpants. His ink is on full display, and his wet hair is brushed back.

He takes my breath away too. I think to myself as he moves toward his night chest, takes off his jewelry and turns my way.

I count every step he takes until he gets near the bed.

"You smell nice." I whisper while I nervously play with one of my curls.

Riagan smiles before replying. "Thank you, sweetheart." Then he quickly climbs under the covers and reaches for me. Letting myself be pulled toward his body, I lay my head on his chest, exactly where he wants me. Right where I want to be.

It feels natural.

As if we've done this a million times before.

There's that feeling of déjà vu again.

"Riagan..." I whisper, feeling his warmth on my cheek.

"Hum?"

"I'm really happy."

There's a long pause, one that makes me question if I said something wrong, but then my nerves ease when he speaks.

"Good. That's all I'll ever want." Thud. Thud. Thud. My heart. "Sweet dreams, wife." Riagan whispers into my hair as he kisses my head.

Swoon.

With my ear to his chest, I fall asleep to the beat of his heart, and not one single nightmare haunts me while in his arms.

Not one.



# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*You're now my favorite plot twist.  
My favorite chapter.  
My favorite story.  
Just... my favorite everything.*

# MRS. O'SULLIVAN

MILA



*“Save all your dances for me.” – R*

When I was ten, I went for months without talking to anyone who weren't my sisters. Everyone in my household ignored me. That was per my father. *“If she won't speak, don't speak to her,”* he'd said. What no one understood was that I kept to myself and made myself invisible so my sisters wouldn't get hurt. It's not that I didn't want to talk. It's just that I just couldn't bring myself to do it, too afraid of what the consequences would be.

Father was the one who instilled fear in me by not only using his fists but also humiliating me by pointing out my flaws to anyone who was willing to listen. So, I spent every waking moment hiding inside four walls since what waited for me outside the walls of my room was just too frightening and painful. For both me and my sisters.

I only got to wander outside the confines of my room when my parents were away, and even then, his guards were everywhere, and they were just as scary as him.

It's not like I missed a lot. I really didn't.

The Parisi mansion never felt like a home to me or my sisters. It felt more like a cage, one meant to not only keep us in but to degrade us. Make us feel less of a human and more like possessions.

It never felt like this.

Like Riagan's home.

Warm, cozy, and I sure can feel the love and respect I have for him.  
That is also new to me.

My father's men followed him out of only fear, but I already can tell that Riagan's men followed him out of loyalty.

The distant sound of Bruno's barking steals my attention as I make my way down the stairs. After falling asleep in his arm last night while listening to the strong beat of his heart, I woke up alone this morning. Except for a flower—Riagan's favorite—and a lone, yellow sticky note on his side of the bed. I couldn't help but smile when I noticed he wrote down a fun fact about shrimps and where their heart is located. A fact I already knew, but I appreciate his effort. It made my heart happy to know that he tries to not only understand me but to enjoy the same things I do, even if we're both so different from each other.

He also wrote that he was going to be out half of the day on business but that he would see me later today. I don't know which business he was referring to. The killing bad guys business or his other business ventures. The legal ones.

I didn't give that too much thought and decided to take his note and place it inside a music box that sat in the room's vanity.

Something about his note felt familiar, but I couldn't quite put a finger on it. Normally, not knowing something would bother me until I had the answer but not today.

Today, I smile more than I have in a long time and focus on the joyful feeling in my chest, wanting to savor it and not let go of it.

Back home, I always tried to look at the bright side of things when waking up in the morning. I had my sisters, I was healthy, so what if my happiness was fleeting, never lasting for long? Other people had real problems, right? Sickness and poverty.

Some are homeless, and I had a roof over my head, so I should be grateful, right?

I reminded myself of all the things I did have, and then I would smile.

I would smile even when it felt forced.

Even when smiling hurts.

Not today, no.

Today, I woke up in bed alone, and I still smiled from ear to ear and not once did it hurt. My smile wasn't forced. It was a genuine one, like all my smiles since he came along.

To say that I was living in a fairy tale would've been too tame of a word.  
I felt warm and protected, and, for the first time in an eon, happy. Well  
and truly, completely, and wholly happy.

It was an odd feeling.

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. For something to go wrong.

Except, it hadn't.

I was happy.

It was like being in a different universe.

After waking up, I took a shower and went in search of some clothes. I  
was going to put on one of the sundresses Riagan packed for me from the  
beach house, but then I stepped into the walk-in closet and was struck by  
what was inside it.

One side was all his.

His clothes and shoes.

Then, there was the other side— one I assume was mine.

There were countless rows of shoes, from high heels to sneakers. Most of  
them were white without designs.

I smiled at that.

He remembers I enjoy painting them.

There was a section with baseball caps in every color.

No one has ever done something like this for me except for my sister,  
Kadra, but apart from her, no one has ever paid attention to my preferences  
and quirks.

He does, and he spoils me.

I was pleasantly surprised when I noticed all kinds of dresses, from  
elegant to boho styles.

All beautifully unique.

What made my heart skip a beat was how neat the closet was. No dirt and  
no mess.

And every single item in there was color coordinated.

I was once mocked for my aversion to germs and my OCD. Ridiculed.

Not here. Not with him.

So, after getting dressed in a simple floral pink puff sleeve dress, I headed  
downstairs in search of a familiar face.

Yesterday, I didn't get to explore the rest of Riagan's home, but I did  
notice it was massive.

My first impression of his place had been awe.

His place is not only massive but very beautiful, aside from those darn white walls.

I headed towards the kitchen. Giddy excitement had thrummed to life inside of me.

The kitchen is my favorite part of the house. It always has been. I am not disappointed when I find a kitchen much like the ones I saw on the cooking channel with all those cooking gadgets.

“He did say I would find you here first thing in the morning.” A too chirpy voice sounds from my right at the same time as two ladies—members of the staff — scurry out of the room after saying a quick hello. Maeve is seated at the counter with a laptop in front of her and a bowl of cereal.

“Hullo.” I wave my hand awkwardly while I move further inside the kitchen.

“Hi.” She smiles. “Are you hungry? The chef prepared you a plate. Let me reheat it for you. Take a seat.”

“I can do it.”

“I know you can.” Maeve says while nodding.

When I realize she’s not going to let me serve myself, I take a seat next to her chair and watch as she heats up the plate and then places it in front of me. It smells mouthwatering.

Sausage and cheese breakfast egg muffins.

Yum.

One of my top three breakfast dishes.

“Thank you, Maeve.” I whisper to her.

“You’re welcome, Mila.” she says sweetly, taking her seat.

I find myself feeling grateful that she goes back to whatever she was doing on her computer before I walked in. Finding common ground with strangers is a challenge that has proven to be not only difficult but, at times, stressful. Somehow, with this girl, it doesn’t feel that way.

She’s comfortable in silence, just like me.

After I’m done eating, I get up from my seat and take my plate to the sink. When I open the faucet, Maeve speaks. “There’s people for that, love.”

“I know.” I clean my plate anyway. “But I have two hands, and they work perfectly fine.” After the words slip out of my mind, I realize that my bluntness may come off as rude.

Maeve laughs. “I can see why he can’t get enough of you.”

She means Riagan.

My cheeks reddened, and those excited flutters at just the mention of his name were still going crazy in my belly.

“Have you known him for long?” I ask while grabbing a napkin to dry my hands and walking towards the counter.

“Ten years.” Maeve says with a shrug.

That’s a long time.

Enough time to form lifetime bonds.

“Did you guys —” I don’t get to finish my sentence because she interrupts me.

“What? Date? Fuck? God, no. No offense, but the boss is not my type at all.”

I asked what’s been on my mind since meeting her, and now I feel silly. Does she think of me as a jealous fool? Looking away from her, I speak again. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s a valid question.” She pauses. “His father, Cathan. He... he saved u —”

“Sunshine.” The booming voice of an intruder startles us both, and interrupts what she was going to say to me next.

A familiar voice. Gus.

Gus with a slight accent.

An Irish one.

He was good at hiding it all these years. The sneak.

Turning away from Maeve, I stare at Gus or Bain, as that’s his legal name not the fake one he went by for years while he was undercover working on behalf of Riagan. “Sunshine...” he says softer now while his eyes look remorseful.

“Ah, I’ll give you both some privacy.” Maeve looks between us, noticing the change in the room and decides to leave. “Be nice, ass-face.” Maeve says over her shoulder at my friend as she exits the kitchen.

“I’m always fucking nice to my favorite girl.” Bain says cheekily.

Once Maeve is out of the kitchen, I focus my gaze on my friend, who is standing a few short feet from me, looking strong and healthy and a whole lot worried.

I could give him a hard time, but I chose not to.

Life is too short to hold grudges, that I learned.

Moving towards him, I hug him. I squeeze him tight, then I lean back and punch his arm, but it does absolutely nothing. He doesn’t even flinch. “I

deserve that.”

“You do.” I snap. “You lied and friends don’t lie to each other.”

He grimaces. “Had no choice, princess. You were and still are my duty.”

I understand duty.

I also understand he couldn’t tell me who he was and what he was doing all those years by my side. He’s loyal to his boss, and that is commendable.

Hugging him once again, I whisper. “I’m glad you’re safe, Bain.” I call him by his name. I kind of prefer it to Augustus. He never looked like an Augustus to me, anyway.

“It’s so fucking good to see you, kid. So fucking good.” He breathes out.

I feel the same.

I knew he was safe. Riagan said he was, but a part of me still felt guilty that he was in danger because of me. That he could’ve been seriously hurt, or even worse, killed because he was with me that day. A tear slips while he holds me close.

“Hey, no crying. You know how crying women make me fucking nervous.” He shudders, making me laugh.

Looking up at him, I smile through my blurry eyes. He’s safe, and even though he lied, he is still my friend.

“I want to know everything.” I narrow my eyes on him under the rim of my cap. “And leave nothing out.” I want to know how he came to work for my father and how he managed to fool my sister. More than that... I want to know why Riagan planted one of his loyal men in my family. “Friends don’t have secrets, remember?”

If he had any intention of keeping the details to himself, that ends the moment his eyes soften. I’ve witnessed the things he could do with his bare hands, yet he has never, not once, made me fear for my life or made me feel threatened.

He never crossed boundaries and always made sure I was okay, even when I was still living in the hell of my family’s making.

Nodding, Bain gives me his pinky finger, something we do because he knows my aversion to unwanted touch. Gripping his thick finger, I let him stir me away from the kitchen and into the back area of the mansion.

I hesitantly wave to the first guard I see. It’s a habit of mine. I used to do it a lot when I was younger on the rare occasions I could leave my room. The only difference is that where none of the men who worked for my father acknowledged my existence, the tall and muscular man standing guard at the



back door that leads to the outside area gives me a subtle nod with a small smile on his face.

Wow.

These people are not like any of the criminals I've met before.

These polite criminals.

Who would've thought it?

"Mrs. Sullivan."

"Oh," My cheeks redden. "That's not necessarily. Mila is fine."

"If I want to live long enough to see my grand babies, I better not, ma'am."

*Okay...*

"Smart thinking, Pauly." Bain says to the man before sliding the glass door that leads to the patio open and stepping aside so I can go first.

"I do not understand. Why won't he call me by my name, and why is he worried he won't live long enough to see his grandchildren?" I frown. It makes no sense to me.

"The boss is a psycho."

"That is not nice, Bain." I whip around, glaring at him. "Especially when he is not here to defend himself." I say, as a matter of fact.

Calling people names behind their backs is rude and... unkind.

I look up at Bain and find him smiling. "I call him that out of love, sunshine, just like he calls me cunt face. Motherfucker. A pain in the ass and a waste of—" Holding my hand up, I stop him.

"I get it now. You're all insane."

Bain chuckles. "Well, look at that... you made a joke." I did? I wasn't trying to be funny. I just said the first thing that came to mind after he went on a long rant of obscenities. "The men won't address you by anything other than Mrs. O'Sullivan because that's who you are to them now. This city's godfather's wife." Bain says as he closes the sliding door behind him. "Also, the boss ordered them to treat you with respect or he'll drown them in the back pool." He adds.

"Oh..." I murmur softly.

"You'll get used to our brand of crazy, but know this, sunshine." He steps forward, looking down at me. "There's nowhere safer than here with us. Me? Those men guarding every corner of this place? The boss? We would all put our lives in the line of fire for you."

"Why?" I ask in awe of such devotion. I knew Bain would always be

there for me. He proved it time and time again in the past, back in Detroit, but there's something about him here that feels more intense. Perhaps, it's because, here, he can be himself. He's in his territory with his people.

Bain gently turns me around, away from him, until I'm looking forward. His touch doesn't bring me discomfort. "Because you're his heart." When I'm fully turned, I come face to face with a view that robs me of air. I've witnessed a Caribbean sunset, the birth of a dozen baby turtles, dolphins dancing in the sea, and so much more, yet this one right here makes my heart stop with its sheer beauty.

A few feet away from us—ten feet, at most—a huge willow tree stands in the middle of the garden with a swing on it. Fairy lights adorn the leaves and the rope on the swing, and I wonder how it would look at night. All lit up, bringing the tree to life.

Beaming, I clap my hands under my chin, almost jumping in place eager, to see it up close.

Willow trees and magical gardens.

"How does he do it every time?" I slowly make my way towards the tree with Bain following behind.

"Do what?"

"Surprise me." I reach the swing and quickly take a seat.

The air feels warm, and the sun is shining bright.

The perfect weather.

The perfect morning.

The perfect view.

That's one word I've not tossed around lightly and look at me now. Lately, everything seems perfect to me.

"A man in love does that, or that's what I've been told."

Looking over my shoulder at my friend, I ask. "Do you think he loves me?"

"I don't think so..." My heart stops, and not in a good way. But in a way that feels painful, but then Bain speaks again. "I know so."

"How?" I whisper, feeling vulnerable. "How do you know?"

"Cause that motherfucker has been a moody and heartless son of a bitch for as long as I've known him, and then one night, he approached me, and he didn't seem as cold or as detached from life. I thought he was having a midlife crisis or some shit until he gave me an assignment." I listen carefully. "He asked me to not only take care of a girl that was part of a family he

despised, but to make her laugh and to always be kind. He asked me that shit, can you believe that? I sure as fuck didn't. Not from the man that would take his gun out if you as much as looked at him wrong." Bain takes a long pause, then adds. "He always wanted what was best for you and sunshine, even I know that's love."

I take a second to process his words and let them sink into my heart.

Love.

What an odd and beautiful feeling.

I was just a girl when I first met him, and he was a man. One that was hard to forget. Apparently, he felt the same way because with just one meeting, he felt the need to protect me the only way he could.

I think about love and how it's obvious to spot the little things the other person does.

I noticed he hasn't touched one single cigarette since the islands.

He did that for... me?

"Bain."

"Yes, sunshine?"

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"For protecting me all these years and for being my friend."

"You don't ever have to thank me, kid." He stands behind me and pushes the swing slowly. "It has always and will always be my fucking pleasure."

I smile at that while holding tightly to the ropes.

There's a ping sound behind me.

His phone.

"Go take a shower and get all dolled up, sunshine?" He says, halting the swing.

Planting my feet on the grass, I turn to face Bain. "Why?" I ask.

A grin takes over his face before he says. "The boss has a surprise for you."

A surprise?

My body buzzes with excitement.

Surprises didn't mean much to me before, but now it's all different.

He is different.

Before heading back to the mansion, I look back at the enormous tree and wonder how. How did he know? I dreamt of a place like this one for myself. A place where I could escape to when the world got too loud.

The tree.

The swing.

All of it.

Not one person knew.

Not even my sisters.

All my heart's wishes were written on letters.

Letters I sent to one person and one person only.

But it couldn't be, could it?

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*I dreamt of her even when I didn't know she  
existed.*

*She was always there.*

*Like the sun.*

*Like the moon.*

*Like all the stars in the night.*

# DATE NIGHT

MILA



*“I know you feel the same.” – R*

“How about this one?” I turn away from the fantasy selection to find Riagan standing with a smirk on his face while holding up a book with a half-naked blue alien on it with tentacles for feet.

Uh-oh.

He found the spicy section.

My cheeks reddened when I noticed a small crowd of women not far from us, giggling while ogling the giant tattooed man in the tiny bookstore. From the moment we entered the tiny, cozy bookstore, all eyes were on us, well, him. Not only because Riagan is as big as the bookshelves but also because he looks just like every model on most romance book covers on display here.

Earlier, when Bain notified me that Riagan had a surprise for me, I did not expect he would bring me to this sweet and warm bookstore.

I was genuinely surprised and incredibly excited, not only because this place feels like home to me already but because I’d never been inside a bookstore before. Most of my books are downloaded through my reading device, and some I order online and have shipped to me.

I’ve never stepped inside a bookstore and browsed for hours like most people do.

“For the third time, Riagan.” I take a deep breath, trying to hold the smile that wants to break free and, holding the five books I chose closer to my chest. “I’m not into alien romance,” I emphasize.

No, there's nothing wrong with those types of romance. I tried reading one once, but I couldn't get into it. I pride myself in being a logical person, and the thought of a blue creature-man with tentacles for feet that comes to earth to steal his heroine was too outrageous, but hey, I thought that falling for a mafioso was not something that happened in real life, and yet here we are.

"The lady at the front desk said that paranormal—especially alien romance, is really in right now." Then, he starts reading out loud. "Rogue Barbarians by Mary Pines. The king of planet Rogue arrives at earth looking for a human bride to procreate with." He purses his lips adorably while holding the book my way. "The ugly fucker abducts the human and shows her a good time out of space. Kinky." Riagan wiggles his brows, making me laugh at how absurd this conversation might seem to outsiders.

"You're crazy." I smile with my entire face while holding tightly onto the books I chose.

His blue eyes fall on mine. Soft and gentle. Penetrating my soul. "Crazy for you."

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

My chest feels tight, and it's difficult to find my next breath when he says things and looks at me like that.

He makes a thousand butterflies take my stomach hostage.

It's fascinating just as much as it is frightening at times.

Because I lose my train of thought and my ability to form a simple sentence, and it's frustrating. I wish I could tell him a thousand things, but I'm too afraid. Even though he's never been cruel to me, sometimes I wonder if I say something that he doesn't like, he will lash out at me like others have in the past.

I don't want to embarrass him. Nor do I ever want to offend him, so I constantly rethink my words in my head before I let the words slip out my mouth.

Instead of saying what I really want to do, I choose the safe route. The polite route. "Thank you for this day and for my books." I blurt out, holding onto my new books tighter while trying to hide just how much he affects me.

Tell him how you feel... the little voice inside of me whispers.

But when I look around the bookstore and notice we're not alone, and



some women are standing way too close to us, I chicken out.

“Are you happy, Mila?” Riagan’s soft-spoken words steal my attention away from the nosy women, and I look up at him.

God, will I ever stop being blindsided by his beauty? I know men aren’t typically described as beautiful, more like handsome and sensual, but Riagan is all the above to me. I think I’ll never get tired of admiring him.

Thinking about his question, I look away from him and around the store.

My heart buzzes with happiness, yes.

Taking in the tiny bookstore, I realize that this is not a place where you just go in to pick up one book. It is a place where I want to stay for hours. The walls are not white, so that’s nice. They’re covered by soothing colors that are relaxing. There are nice carpets and comfortable fluffy chairs.

And even though I don’t enjoy the taste of coffee, the smell of it brewing is great. I even enjoy the noise. It’s delightful. Classical music plays in the background, giving customers a pleasant experience while browsing for their next read. It’s not overbearing, of course.

Even the small amount of dust I noticed on the display tables as soon as I entered the store is not entirely unwelcome, and that’s coming from someone who can’t stand the sight of it.

That’s how happy I feel today.

How happy I feel every day that I’m with him.

That I’m with... my husband.

Realizing that I spaced out, I smile sheepishly, feeling a bit embarrassed. “I’m very happy.”

His smile is tender as he leans forward, taking a curl and twirling in his index finger. “Good, baby. Now pick out some more to take home.”

More books?

My eyes widen before I tell him. “Oh, these are more than enough.”

There’s a gazillion books waiting to be read at home already. I can’t take more.

“Nah, not nearly enough.” He lets go of my curls, takes the books from me, and strides over to the front desk of the bookstore where the owner, her name is Hailey, is ringing in a customer’s order. I stand back and watch him lean over the counter and whisper something to the owner, and her eyes grow big then fall on me.

Feeling on the spot, I avert my eyes and focus on the tattoos on the back of Riagan’s head.

Ten minutes later, Hailey and two other girls approach us with five bags, filled with books. Riagan takes four of the bags and the last one is given to me by the bookstore owner. "You're one lucky girl," she says kindly.

Thanking her, I take the bag and ask her. "May I ask what he asked for?"

I look over her shoulder to find Riagan not far from us standing in the fantasy romance selection. "He asked us to get him every romance book that's popular right now and some of our own personal favorites. I hope you enjoy them, honey." My eyes leave Riagan and fall on Hailey as she adds. "He is indeed crazy for you." She winks before leaving my side and going back to her spot behind the counter.

Holding my brand-new books as if they are my babies, I look at him. I look at my husband as he walks to my side. "What's wrong?" he grunts. I watch as his eyes turn darker with worry.

He thinks Hailey said something to hurt my feelings by my quick change in mood.

That's something that I shouldn't enjoy so much, but I do.

His willingness to cause hurt to anyone he thinks poses a threat to me.

Before he goes off and does something crazy like threaten the nice older woman, I speak.

"Nothing. It's just that..." I adjust my hat, one that he gave me, and stare at him looking so scary and at the same time so handsome in that rugged way, while inside a bookstore holding four pink bags filled with books and thinking to myself that the lady was right. I am lucky. So lucky to have crossed paths with someone as extraordinary as him. Because that's the truth, isn't it? My life was ordinary until him. "This is the best day ever," I exclaim excitedly, and my heart warms at his attempt to bond with me over something I love. I need to remind myself to find something he enjoys so we can do it together.

He comes closer, leaving little to no room between us, and kisses the top of my head.

I love how he lingers there for a long moment. It makes the organ in my chest skip many beats.

He then steps back and smiles one of those smiles that makes time stand still before he says. "It's not over yet." He grabs my hand for everyone there to see as he guides me out of the store. I wonder how something as trivial as holding hands can feel so monumental. In this instant, it feels as if I'm not only his but we're each others, and he has no trouble showing it to the world.

“We have one more stop.”



THIS IS NOT HAPPENING.

Not in a public space.

I should've known Riagan is not a man who gets embarrassed by anything, especially dirty books. “Oh, no!” I cry out, laughing as I did. God could the man make me smile. “You can't read that in here!”

We're at a Japanese restaurant.

After we left the bookstore, he took me thrift shopping, which I didn't realize could be so much fun. I found a lot of vintage items and even some crystals to add to my collection. I even got some for my sisters to give to them once I see them again.

It warms my heart that Riagan finds small ways to connect with me and that he remembers my love for old and used things. It's clear that he put a lot of thought into this date night. From the bookstore to the thrift store to now.

He brought me to a Japanese restaurant called Hana Sushi Bar, where the atmosphere feels calm and relaxing.

It has comfortable tatami mats and soft lighting.

The concept of the restaurant could be categorized as minimalist, which provides an intimate experience.

“Why not?” he asked seriously. “This shit looks interesting. I've been thinking of expanding my knowledge on the woman's mind.” He leans back in the booth opposite me. When the waiter came to take our order Riagan asked for whiskey and I asked for a fruity drink with no alcohol.

Now we're sitting, waiting for our food to arrive.

At times, I'm a creature of habit. I've noticed my husband has no routine. He is the type of man that goes with the flow and where the current takes him.

So tonight, I have decided to act a little bit more like him and get out of my comfort zone.

I ordered Onigiri— commonly known in Western culture as rice balls, instead of my usual California rolls. I asked for the teriyaki chicken filling, not sure about the taste of seasoned seaweed.

While Riagan ordered Tonkatsu, which is pork cutlets served drizzled in

fruit-and-vegetable-based tonkatsu sauce with shredded cabbage and other crisp salad greens on the side.

Noticing I zoned out, while Riagan was speaking, I focus on him while he holds one of the books he got for me, knowing some people in here might be offended by the salacious image the author chose for the cover because he chose the most naughty-looking one. The front image is of a half-naked man wearing black frame glasses while a young girl in a revealing schoolgirl outfit is holding onto his pants as if she's begging him for something.

You can imagine what.

Looking behind me, I notice a family with two small children looking at us as if we've offended them. Giving them my back, I turn to Riagan. "You're crazy!" I hiss, but there is still a smile on my face. "That- that's." I pause, then continue. "People will think you're reading porn."

He turns the book over in his hand, then hefts it once. "You're admitting you read porn." he says, raising his eyebrows at me with mirth filling his eyes.

I had to pause at that one.

Heat creeps up my spine. "Ah..." I avert my eyes, staring at the romantic comedy section of the bookstore. "Spicy romance, yes. But that one you're holding, it's just weird." I laugh when he wiggles his eyebrows. "Why did you buy it?"

"The premise was very..." he pauses, taking a sip of his drink. "Captivating."

*Captivating?*

Reaching forward, I snatch the book from his hand. Turning it over, I quietly read the synopsis.

"The Bloodsucker's Baby." I look up at him. "A story about a thousand-year-old vampire and his mortal baby's mother is captivating?" I ask, stifling a laugh. I hand him back the book.

He smiles and is about to say something when his eyes flicker to something over my shoulder, and I see his eyes narrow.

What?" I ask, looking behind me. I move so fast that I bump my thigh against the table, causing his drink to spill.

"Sorry," I quickly spring into action and pat the table with a napkin.

He glances at me, takes the napkin from me, and then winks.

"What did you see?" I ask as I once again look behind me.

Thought I saw someone staring at you. But when I glanced to get a better

look, they were gone.” He shrugs, still looking alert. “You were laughing. They were probably caught in the beauty of your smile.” He takes a sip of his drink while leaning back on the booth.

I look down at my drink, playing with the straw while trying hard not to blush but failing.

This man and his compliments. I’m sure could make a grumpy man blush.

It’s come to a point where I can feel the compliments in my soul.

“That’s sweet,” I whisper. “But I think that you’re blind or something. My smile is nothing special. It’s like everyone else’s.” It is.

I’ve seen myself smile. It’s nothing special. It’s just a smile but then I think of how his smiles light up a room and give me butterflies.

Is it the same for him?

“Butterfly, don’t hide your eyes from me.” Riagan reaches forward, grabs my chin, and lifts my face to see me better. “It’s special alright. Your smile always has the power to stop me in my tracks, and your laugh?” He shakes his head with a soft look on his face. “That fucking laugh of yours, I feel down to my bones. It’s my favorite sound, sweetheart, so yeah it’s fucking special.”

The things he says, the way he says them, and the way he looks at me make me feel like I matter.

“But you’re you... you like me, so you have to feel that way.” I scrunch up my nose. “But I’m sure that normal people don’t feel that way. When I was little, my father got mad when I laughed.”

His eyes turn dark, and there’s a grim line on his face. “Fuck them and fuck your bitch of a father.” He rasps while I notice him holding onto his drink so hard that I believe he will break it any minute now. “You should see yourself the way I do. The way every man in my clan does,” he points out. “It’s not just your pretty smile and sweet laugh. It’s every fucking thing. You have all that golden curly hair and that ass. All those fucking curves that drive me insane with the need to trace every dip and turn of your body.” I can’t seem to look away from him as he leans closer, as if he’s whispering a secret. Maybe he is. Maybe he is finally telling me the things he thinks I’m too innocent and afraid to hear. “You’re beautiful, and fuck me, you’re a dream. Every single part of you makes me feel like an addict craving his next fix, from your sweet heart to those plump pink lips.” He gestures with his finger to my mouth. My breath hitches when I feel his touch on my lips, and I

feel a burning sensation between my legs. A sensation I only fear when I'm this close to him.

Arousal.

I know that much.

I become aroused when he touches me.

Hell, even when he looks at me the way he is now, I feel my skin become hot and tingly.

His eyes heat more, and he taps my nose before saying, "Don't do that shit with me, yeah? Don't talk about yourself as if you're anything less than perfect. I won't have it." His eyes trained on me, the blue seeming a little more intense than they were before.

"You make me feel that way." I nervously tap the table three times, in sync with the beat of my heart. It's not going fast but it's not slow, either. It's strong and steady. "Feel perfect, I mean." I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn't and just stares at me, I blabber away. "I've never been the ideal daughter, let alone the perfect girl. I made my leave with being plain and ordinary Mila, but then you showed up and made me believe I am more than just my disability or my quirks. That I'm more than just Kadra and Arianna's weakness. I'm not my father's greatest failure." I keep my eyes locked in his for a long moment, proud that every day I'm able to meet his stare for far longer than the times before. His eyes tonight seem bluer than when the lights hit them, and I realize that his shade of blue is my favorite one.

Riagan's sky blue is now my favorite color.

The color that makes my heart sing.

"You, Mila Areya Parisi, are not their weakness and their failures." My heart slows when he leans closer, so close that I can feel his hot breath on my face. "But you're certainly my biggest blessing. The one I never saw coming, but I'm sure-as-fuck beyond grateful."

Thud.

Thud.

My chest feels like it's about to explode right here and now because of his declaration. Never did I dare dream this would be my life, and never did I think a man like him could be in the cards for me. Yet, here he is. Stealing the breath out of my lungs and making my heart a slave for him.

Reading someone's expression has always been a bit of a challenge for me, but not totally impossible. It takes me longer than most people but

eventually, I get there. Right now, when he's not speaking, I try to read his expression, not wanting to misinterpret anything, but then I notice the look on his face, so intense, fearful, and so much like the one he had back at the beach when I exposed myself to him.

Need.

That's it.

But it's confusing since he looks like he wants me, but he doesn't push for anything more than a kiss. Does he want me? I believe he does, but why would he hold himself back?

When I think he is going to kiss me, our moment is interrupted by our waiter, who arrives at our table with our food.

The need to taste his lips once again takes a back seat when my stomach grumbles the second my plate is placed in front of me. The delicious smell is enticing.

Riagan's plate looks delicious too.

Before she leaves, the waitress places a bowl of fortune cookies in front of us.

"Is this a first for you, butterfly?" He asks.

"I've researched most of the world's cuisine, but I haven't tried them all. I'm a person that yes, has limitations of what they can eat, but somehow, I'm also a foodie. I'm excited to try this. I've never had this plate before, not even the lucky cookies." I beam at the plate between us.

"Take one then." He picks up the bowl and urges me to grab a cookie.

I do.

"We will need to break it to see the surprise inside," I say as a matter of fact.

"Yeah, baby."

Raising my gaze, I find him staring at me, and find myself wishing I had my pairing equipment here so I could capture him this way forever.

So happy.

Riagan smiles, then breaks his cookie, and so do I.

There's a tiny piece of paper inside.

*The love of your life is right before your eyes.*

Holding the paper up, I look at him and share a secret smile.

Divine timing.

Luck.

Whichever is it.

I wasn't a big believer in them. I thought that we all make our own luck in life, but perhaps sometimes there's a little help from the universe.

Because here he is, and now I'm the lucky one because I have him.

As a friend and as an ally, but most importantly, as my person.

My favorite person.

I didn't see him coming.

He is and will always be my favorite surprise.

"Are you happy, Riagan?" I ask while discreetly tucking the little paper from the fortune cookie inside the pocket of my dress.

"Never been happier, butterfly." He kisses me this time.

Softly.

Gentle.

Ground shaking.

And just like that, I come to terms with a new reality.

The reality is that I'm deeply and madly in love with my husband. I knew that what I felt for him was something more. More than gratitude.

More than friendship.

I honestly believed it was a mixture of gratitude and obsession, but no. It's so much more.

It's love.

The kind that you feel down to your bones. The one that's in your blood.



# UNSENT MESSAGE FROM C



M  
I'm still here.  
Our day is almost here.  
- Yours, C

# HER EVERYTHING

## MILA



*"I want the world for you. The whole-fucking-world." - R*

Later that night, as I lay in bed with a sleeping giant behind me, holding me close with my head safely tucked in his neck, I feel a calmness I've never felt, not even inside my head. My safe place. Not even when I lose myself in the hobbies I love.

But here with him, feeling his strong arms covering me in his warmth, I feel like there's nowhere else for me but here with him. Nowhere I'd rather be.

Sleeping with Riagan... was different. Riagan was warm and cuddly and hard and hot, and I kept wanting to kiss him in his sleep. I woke up one time in the middle of the night to find his hand under my shirt, cupping my naked breast. I was startled and a bit embarrassed at first, but then I realized he was completely asleep. It was sweet that he reached out and held me even when he wasn't awake. I didn't wake him, no. I left his hand there. It felt nice and comfortable.

I didn't even think about germs, not with him, and that's never happened with anyone else.

Not when he's holding me close to his naked chest. His hard, naked chest lately has awakened a side of me I never knew. The side that aches to be kissed and touched by him.

Everything about Riagan is out of this world sexy. His tattooed muscled chest and back and his thick neck.

His plump and pink lips.

His hands.

God, his hands are strong and harsh, yet they feel like heaven on my skin. The feeling of them now so close to my stomach is driving me insane.

His hand under the covers moves closer to my pelvic area while he sleeps.

My heart starts to race, and heat shoots straight to the center of me. I press my legs together to ease some of the ache that has suddenly pressed hard against my clit. It's thumping like mad, and my nipples are aching pinpoints against my nightshirt. I shuffle my legs, trying to ease the ache, which caused his soft snoring to stop momentarily before picking back up again just as softly.

I've come to love hearing him snore and feeling his heat on my back.

The comfort of knowing he was there, even to protect me in my sleep? That meant the entire world to me.

And he didn't even know that just by being around, he was slaying all the many demons that my father instilled in me and keeping all the nightmares away.

He's my dream catcher.

I lie there, focused on steering my thoughts away from how his hand on my pelvis is making me feel all hot and bothered when he speaks, startling me. "Your breathing changed."

Busted.

"W-what?" I stutter, feeling caught. I thought he was asleep.

"Your breath has quickened, and your chest is rising and falling at a rapid pace, sweetheart." He takes a pause, and I swear I can hear the beat of my heart and feel my ears burning. "You're turned on, aren't you?" He maneuvers me, so I can face him. When I'm fully turned in his arms, I find him with his head on his balanced palm and an intense look on his face. His free hand, the one that moments ago was dangerously close to my core, draws a circle on my upper thigh. Then, I realize that this position has my wide thighs spread even wider.

"I don't understand what you're talking about." I try to deflect, feeling my cheeks redden.

"Oh, I think you do." he grins. His fingers slide between my thighs, and with a gentle press of his palm, he spreads my thighs. I close my hand over his when his knuckle grazes my panties. And I am one hundred percent sure

they're wet and that he noticed. "Does your little pussy ache, Mila?" He noticed.

My breath hitches, and my mind goes blank the second the dirty word falls from his mouth. I'm surprised not because of the way he's speaking to me but because I don't mind it at all.

In fact, his dirty mouth excites me just as much as his touch on my thigh does.

Everything he does makes me feel things I'm not used to but am slowly becoming addicted to.

Knowing there's no going back, not that I want to, I think about my options here.

I could shy away from this moment, or I can give in to my wants and needs.

And I do want him very much.

"You're so adorable when you look like that." He kneads the skin on my thigh, and I can barely think about anything else except how good it feels and how better it would feel if he moved his hand lower.

"Like what?" I whisper, trying to ease my breathing but failing miserably.

I feel goosebumps when Riagan trails kisses up my neck and then bites my earlobe. Oh, wow. I've read plenty of spicy scenes, and I am not completely oblivious to what happens between two people who desire each other. The way Riagan is touching and kissing me makes me feel like I'm more than wanted. It makes me feel as if this man is dying to get more of me. "Like you know exactly what you want, but you're too shy to voice it." He raises his head and looks me in the eyes before he kisses my nose quickly and then moves down my body, keeping my gaze hostage.

"Riagan, did you know that fellatio was considered a felony in almost every state in 1950?" I blurt out nervously and cringe when I realize what I just said. This is definitely a mood killer, right? No man wants to talk during sexual relations or hear weird facts. But then, as always, he reminds me that he's unlike anyone else. My husband, the one currently looking up at me with a wide smile on his face, speaks up. "Didn't know that baby, but that's fucked up."

I nod in agreement. "Not so long ago, as of 2014, twelve states—Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah— still had anti-fellatio laws on the books." I watch every movement, not wanting to miss a thing. I

try to focus solely on him and what he is doing instead of giving power to the anxiety that is creeping in, and it's getting in the way of me expressing what I feel in this moment with him between my legs so close to a part of me no man has been this close to. A part that is burning and aching for his touch.

He presses his lips against the sheet on my thigh, and I can feel the heat of his breath when he says, "You're so fucking pretty, butterfly. I would gladly serve a life sentence for sticking my tongue inside your little cunt." I jump. "Y-you would?"

"Fuck yes." He breathes out before tossing the covers aside. Then, he expertly adjusts my body until one of my legs is over his shoulder. "Did you know I'm dying to taste your pussy, Mila? I keep wondering if it'll taste as fucking sweet as your lips?" He bends his neck and nips me through my panties.

"Riagan," I protested. My body buckles, and he places one of his thick arms over my belly, keeping me in place.

"Shhh," he whispers, but I can hear him chuckling. "Did you like that baby? Do you like me biting your tiny cunt? I do." He does it again, but this time he flattens his tongue and licks me over my panties. It's an intimate and odd sensation.

"I do." I say truthfully. I more than like it. I want him to do it again, so I tell him exactly that.

"Good." he grins wickedly at me, and my heart skips a beat. "Can I eat it, baby?"

"Eat wha- Oh... you mean my vagina?"

His grin spreads to a full-blown smile now. "Pussy. Say pussy."

Embarrassment takes over, and I swallow hard. "You want to eat my pussy?"

"Good girl." His palms press my thighs wide apart, then a questing finger edges under the side of my panties. "And yes, I really fucking want to," he whispers. I feel him slide my panties to the side, exposing me. "Damn, that's pretty," he says.

Then his mouth touches me, and I swear I see stars. I totally lose any reservations I had about him doing this. Not that I had many, but still. I don't think about my fears, lack of experience, or my aversion to germs.

My mind goes blank, and I just let myself feel this.

Feel his tongue doing dirty things to me.

His tongue is wicked and marvelous and absolutely skilled. He licks

across my center and sucks my clit between his lips, where his teeth, tongue, and lips do crazy things I never dreamed were possible.

When the sensation becomes too much, I hold onto his forearms at the same time as he sticks finger inside me.

I read somewhere that some women feel discomfort when a digit is inserted, and yes, it feels weird, but it doesn't hurt. "Fuck, this pretty pussy is tight." He mumbles between licks. His fingers are doing crazy things to my vagina as his lips do wonderfully wicked things to my clit, and I feel the intense need from before but stronger. Then his blue eyes meet mine.

I don't know if it's his mouth on me, his fingers inside of me, or the look he is giving me that makes me go over the edge.

I come apart, breaking as I thread my fingers into his hair and hold him close to me, riding this wave of ecstasy that I've never felt before. He doesn't let up as my wits shatter, but his licks, tugs, and pulls grow softer as my orgasm eases. I shiver and quake as he brings me back down. I lie back and close my eyes.

I can't believe I just let him do that. And now I'm embarrassed.

Riagan eases the edge of my panties, covering me up softly and tenderly, and then he presses a kiss against the fabric. The heat of his breath sets off an aftershock, and my body rocks one last time. God.

Riagan crawls up my body, careful not to squish me, until he's up by my mouth. "That was the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen." My face fills with heat.

He leans back and kisses me. It's long and hard, and I can taste myself on his tongue. "Thank you," he says.

I should be thanking him if I could get my tongue to work. "For what?"

"For trusting me. For giving yourself to me and for letting me taste that pretty pussy." He takes my lips in his tenderly before pulling back and grinning. "And you taste the same, baby. Sweet, like cherries."

My cheeks redden when I realize what he means, but then my embarrassment slips away fast when he releases me with the intention of sleeping next to me. Just sleeping. No sex.

I don't know what happens and what comes over me, but I don't overthink and take charge by grabbing his neck and pulling him closer until our lips touch.

I realized that I was going to have to make the first move.

He was slowly killing me inside.

Then, a thought creeps in. An unwanted thought, but one that's been bugging and slowly making me doubt myself. He's all man and much older. Of course, he is used to doing more than just a few kisses and going to bed with an erection. I am not that naive. I noticed his reaction to giving me oral sex. It turned him on, but he chose not to take it further.

I turn my head, feeling my heart start to hammer. "Riagan, are you sure that I'm what you want? I'm not like other women. I have no expe—" I stop right there, not wanting to bring his past and other women between us. His past has no room here.

He growls and pulls my earlobe into his mouth to bite it gently.

My hand moves up his chest and I press it against his heart. It was hammering. "I'm sorry if it seems like I'm insecure. I am not. It's just that, at times, it's hard to believe that you—" he cuts me off by grabbing the back of my neck in his grim grip. Not gentle but not painful either. Just... right.

"I don't want anyone else. You're it for me." Then he slowly brings my face to his and licks my lips. Yeah, that's right. "The fact that I'm the first man and the last one that'll get to be inside your pretty virgin pussy has me rock-fucking-hard baby." He licks my lips before pressing his tongue inside of my mouth.

Opening my mouth for him, I press farther into his body, feeling his steel hard erection. He wants me.

This man really wants me, and it's obvious with his erection pinned between us. I did that to him.

Me.

Ordinary Mila.

I sit up, feeling my shirt fall back into place.

My nipples pebbled, and though I knew he couldn't see them, I smiled anyway, remembering the expression on his face the day he saw my naked chest. The same one he is wearing now.

I'm getting good at recognizing his emotions and all his expressions.

It's easy with him.

Desire.

Joy.

Pride.

Love.

I've come to recognize them all, and every time they're directed at me.

With my heart on my sleeve, I look into his eyes for a couple of seconds.



More than I'm used to.

His blue eyes appear lighter, almost the same shade as mine.

We both stare into each other's eyes without saying anything, but at the same time, feeling a lot.

His hand goes to my hip, but he still doesn't say a word.

Again, him giving me the reins.

He is giving me a choice.

I could stop this now or give myself fully to him.

"Riagan?" I whisper quietly, unable to disguise my nerves. As brave as I feel right now and as comfortable as I feel in his arms, there's always going to be shyness and nerves. It's who I am. I am okay with it.

He's shown me that he is, too, so there's no need to hide who I am. Not with him.

"Yes?" His voice is husky and full of desire, and God does it do things to my body.

Hell, to my heart as well.

It drives me crazy.

He drives me crazy.

"Fuck me," I blur out.

Then, I feel my face heat.

Because, oh God, did I just say that out loud? Did I just curse?

His hands convulsed on my hips, and then we were moving.

He moved quickly, ripping my shirt off faster than I could draw a startled breath.

Then, he took my panties off next, and then he was settling between my thighs.

I was so wet that he didn't need to do any preparation—I'd been thinking about this very thing half the night.

Yet, his fingers, still gentle as hell every time he touched me, came to my pussy and swirled.

"Wet," he growled. "So fuckin' wet."

"You do that to me," I breathe out. "Your voice. Your kisses and the thing from before."

"My tongue on your delicious cunt, you mean?" he teased.

"Ahhh...yes, that."

Then he was bringing one breast up to his mouth and suckling lightly. "So sweet, my baby."

My back bowed off the bed.

“Eeep!” I cried out. “That feels weird!”

He chuckles. “Sensitive?”

“So sensitive,” I whisper. “I like what you do to me. Keep doing it.”

“Oh, I plan to,” he promise as he licks my nipple. “You drive me wild, butterfly. I can’t get enough of you. Now that I have had a taste... I’ve become addicted. I want more.” He gently bites on one nipple, and sucks on them both until I am a panting, delirious mess.

“Riagan,” I hiss. “It hurts down there. I- I need.”

“Does your pussy need my cock, baby? Is that it? That’s why it hurts, isn’t it?” Settling between my thighs, he starts to rub his cock up and down the length of my pussy, coating himself in my wetness before notching himself at my entrance. “So hot, baby. That’s it. Yeah, this pretty cunt needs me to fill it. To tear through that virgin wall and fill it with my cum.”

“Yes,” I breathe out. “That. Exactly that.”

He sinks into the hilt, not stopping until he is fully sheathed inside of me. I feel so full, too.

There was a slight pain, but nothing I couldn’t handle. The erotic sensation of having him fill me was much more intense than the discomfort of him sliding inside of me for the first time.

After the pain comes pleasure.

Pleasure I never thought possible.

Never thought I would enjoy sex because of all the exchange of germs and all the fluids, but it’s the last thing on my mind. All I can focus on is how good he feels inside of me and how his touch and kisses have set my body on fire.

Every part of me was aflame, including my heart.

That’s what he does to me.

“Fuck, I knew you would be tight,” he growls. “But goddamn, you fit me perfectly. You were made for my cock, butterfly.”

“I never thought it could feel like this...” I shiver in delight when he shimmy his hips, grinding inside of me. “It’s like being in another galaxy. Just you and me.”

“Keep talking, baby,” he said. “Shit, I’m not going to last. You were made for me. Your body was made for me. Ah, fuck yes.”

I hold onto him tighter. “Faster, please. Move.”

So, he does.

He moves faster and hits a spot deep inside me that has me rolling my eyes to the back of my head. My breathing becomes erratic, and my heart goes crazy as well.

And then something beautiful happens.

As I ride the wave of ecstasy, I feel my belly tighten, and it's like I'm flying.

It only took one and a half strokes, and something beautiful happened. Just like when he had his mouth on me before, my belly tightens, and my breathing stops.

I closed my eyes, and stars burst behind my eyelids as I came undone for him.

Hard.

Harder than before.

More intense, too.

The squeak that leaves me is nothing short of embarrassing.

"Shit." He grounds out before he throws his head back and growls like a wild animal. I can't seem to look away from him as he comes along with me.

When our bodies settle, and he all but falls to the side so as not to crush me, I can help but laugh.

"That was fun," I smile wider. "Let's do it again."

"I think you broke my dick, butterfly," he admits, sounding chagrined. "You had me busting my load like a prepubescent lad." He laughs. "It's been a while."

"A while?" I turn in his arm. "I don't understand."

I blush when he places his hands between my legs and runs a thick finger between my labia. I moan, loving the feel of it. Then, to my utter surprise and embarrassment, his fingers leave me, and he puts them in his mouth, licking my wetness from each digit. "It's simple, baby. My dick had an owner, so it's been a while." he winks while he pops another finger into his mouth. "Next time, I want to come inside you. Fill you up with my cum."

Okay, that's... I don't even know how else to describe it other than insanely hot and a bit troublesome.

"I am not on birth control. I could fall pregnant." I look up at him, worried.

"I see nothing wrong with that."

"Do you want kids?" I hold my breath. The thought of having kids never crossed my mind. I didn't want them to face the same difficulties I did, but

then I thought about a mini Riagan, and my heart could combust in my chest.

A little brown-haired boy with blue eyes and the sweetest smile.

The thought doesn't scare me. Not as much as it did before.

What is happening to me?

Love... the little voice in my head whispers. That's what love does to you.

"I do."

Thud.

Thud.

"How many?" I ask while holding my breath.

He curls me into him as he says, "As many as you give me, butterfly."

"What if I say five kids?"

He chuckles, and I smile like I do when I hear his laugh. "You want five kids, baby? I'll give you as many as you want."

How does he always know what to say? It's like he knows me better than I know myself, and it's scary because he has slowly become not only my favorite human and my treasured obsession, but my heart as well.

"Riagan."

"Yes, butterfly?" His arms tighten around me.

"Children are forever. They bind us for life."

Then, with more seriousness than I'd been expecting for a conversation I'd just been teasing him about, he says, "I thought you would have realized by now, Mila. You gave yourself to me, and I don't plan on ever letting you go. Children or not. This is it, baby. Till death do us part, and even then, I'll follow you there, too."

*Till death do us part, and even then, I'll follow you there too.*

I felt that in my soul.

His heartfelt words, and the way he was so serious, made me realize that he meant every single word.

I love him.

So much.

I fell in love with the man who proposed a fake marriage for my safety.

The man who treated me with gentleness and kindness from the first moment we met.

The one who has me dreaming while awake and making each and every single one a reality.

It was the quiet type of love.

I couldn't tell you when exactly, I'd fallen for him. Maybe it was when he'd killed a man for me and, the next instant, lifted me into his arms and taken me to safety. Or possibly when he looked at me as if I was just like him and not like I was lacking in any way. When he took me to his private paradise, that had so much meaning to him and his family. Or maybe, it could have been when he introduced me to the people he cares about and told them, in other words, that I was the single most important person to him.

Whenever it was, I know now that I am head over heels for him.

And I needed to do a better job of showing it.

Which made my stomach and heart do weird things.

Lifting my head, I press a soft kiss to his mouth. Then I pull back to look into his eyes. They're so blue and so happy.

"What was that for?"

"I-I just wanted to kiss you." I touch his bearded cheek, loving the feel of it.

Riagan lifts his hand. "I'm going to touch your neck."

There's that too.

He remembers how my neck and my head are triggers, and he always tells me before touching me.

Then he grabs my neck gently and brings my mouth down to his. We're so close that the tip of our noses are touching. "You can kiss me anytime you want to, sweetheart." Then he takes my lips in his. He might've well taken my breath too.

"Want a fact?" He says while playing with one of my curls.

Touching his chest where his heart is, I tap it gently three times, then stop. I do it repeatedly in sync with his heartbeat.

I love the reminder that he's here and he's alive.

"Tell me, Riagan." I whisper with a small smile on my face.

"You're the best sex I've ever had." he mumbles, still playing with my hair.

I pause at that, and look at him, trying to see if he's joking.

But he's not laughing. He is serious.

I smile big at that because a part of me feels jealousy of every other woman that had him before me.

But now I know.

I'm the one he desires.

The one who wears his ring and has his name.

The one who gets his sweet and gentle side.

Me.

Not them.

“Can I share a fact of my own?” I press my ear to his chest, getting comfortable. This is my favorite place to sleep in. His arms with his heartbeat as my own personal lullaby.

He hugs me closer. “Always.”

“You’re the best sex I’ve ever had too.” I say matter of fact.

“Sweetheart, I’m the only sex you’d had and will ever have.” He growls playfully, making me laugh.

I like it when he is jealous.

How do I know he’s feeling jealous?

Well, Riagan has many tells.

First, he gets angry, then possessive, and lastly, very dramatic.

Dramatic, as in threatening his lifelong friends with murder.

And I wouldn’t have him any other way.



*Riagan*

I WASN’T KIDDING when I said she’s the best sex I’ve had.

The faces of wonder she made and her sweet moans were just as hot as the act itself. There’s something about her innocence that drives me wild.

I had to control the burning need that crept in while I was inside of her. The need to take her like an animal and claim her as mine.

And I did claim her.

Butterfly is now mine in every sense of the word.

Fuck, I can still taste her on my lips, all sweet and tangy.

Watching her come was unlike anything I’ve ever seen. She’s so guarded, and I understand why. She can’t undo years of thinking she wasn’t enough in a few weeks, but slowly she has come out of her shell around me, and it’s a beautiful sight.

Just like the caterpillar who turns into a butterfly.

Holding her tightly, I look at her cuddled next to me with her cheek pressed to my chest and her pretty pink mouth slightly opened as she snores.

She's so fucking beautiful.

I love every side of her.

I've seen her with a little bit of makeup, and I've seen her with no makeup and no artifice, and I like all the different sides of her. She's learning to let her guard down with me and with my family. Hell, even my men.

She's shown me parts of her that no one else has seen.

Her past.

Her fears.

Her insecurities.

So sweet.

So open.

So trusting.

My girl.

And even though it was evident in her gaze how nervous she was, she still gave me her body. She didn't shy away, nor did she hide. She was perfect.

Fuck, she even asked me to fuck her. My girl doesn't swear, yet she did, and it was the hottest thing I've ever experienced.

And I'm no virgin, but with her, it felt like the very first time. I can't even remember anyone who came before her. Their all blurred faces.

The past.

And Mila is my present and my future.

My forever.

Now, there isn't a doubt in her mind.

I wasn't bullshitting her or talking out of my ass in the aftermath of the most intense orgasm I've ever had. I meant every word.

We're forever.

I'm not letting her go, and I'm not sure I could. Not even if she asked me to.

The kids, too.

I never gave children a thought.

I was conscious that the life I led had no room for brats. I didn't want to subject them to a life where daddy wouldn't come home or to a home where there was no love. Because that's the truth. Before Mila I didn't think I was capable of love. Hell, I'm sure I didn't know the meaning of it until she came along.

But now I do.

Fuck, I love her so goddamn much, and I'm not even sure she knows it.

In time, I hope she comes to terms with it because before her, when I thought about the future, I saw myself living a short life. I wasn't afraid to die, but now I am. Now whenever I think about the future, all I see is her. I see her. I see love. I see a life that is no longer black and white.

A life filled with color and magic.

With love, adventures, and laughter.

And if I'm lucky, a tiny mini version of her.

A little girl who looks and acts just like my butterfly.

Blonde curls and big bug eyes that could wrap me around her little fingers, just like my wife.

Rosy cheeks and those adorable dimples.

With the same giggle that makes my heart pound hard.

God, her laugh.

Her smile.

Her everything.

Looking down at my wife sleeping peacefully in her sleep, I smile, knowing in my goddamn soul that I won the prize.

My endgame.

Her.

My queen.

Shit, I'm obsessed.



# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*When our lips touch, I can taste forever.*

# BLOOD AND MAYHEM

## MILA



*“If you look at her the wrong way, I will hit you so hard, you will puke out your balls.” - R*

“Are you sure this is safe?” I look at the big men stepping out of a fighting cage with blood-covered hands and lots of visible bruises. Some have blood running down their noses, and one big burly man is being held by two men and that looks even worse. He has bandages on his head, and I’m pretty sure he has a concussion. My head starts to spin with the possibility of Riagan getting hurt, and it makes me feel anxious. So much so that I make up scenarios in my head in all the ways it can all go wrong. “Did you know that the probability of you dying while in a fighting cage is 73.6 percent? Did you know that?” I blurt out.

Okay, I might be stretching the truth a little.

The overall injury prevalence for combat sports like this one is reported to be 73.6 percent, so I stretched the truth a lot, but I have good reason for deceiving him. I’m... afraid.

Feeling guilty about lying, I whisper while holding onto his hand, feeling his band-aid fingers. “What I just told you was not accurate. I apologize.” I tell him truthfully while looking down at our joined hands.

I hold my breath and wait for his response.

Is he mad? Disappointed?

He chuckles softly. “You don’t need to worry, baby.” He tips my chin up, making me look at him. “I won’t lie to you or insult your intelligence by telling you that cage fighting is not dangerous because it is.” I frown at his

callous way of saying it. How does he expect me not to worry? I don't want him to get hurt. Ever. But I also know who he is and what he does, so the probability of him getting hurt, is high. "The only one who needs to worry is my opponent," he says calmly. Too calm, I think.

"Be careful still," I grumble, worried and he hasn't started fighting yet.

Looking around the establishment, I notice how crowded it is. Mayhem. I think it's what Riagan called this place, which looks like an abandoned hospital on the outside, but it fools you. There's nothing old or abandoned about this place. It looks exactly like how a professional Mixed Martial Arts ring would. On our way here, he clued me in about the place and how it came to be. Riagan's family, like my own, have built empires out of their legal business, which in this case would be the O'Sullivan brand of alcohol their grandfather founded and the casinos all over the city both Cathan and my husband own. Then there are the underground businesses. The gun trade, the illegal casinos hiding in plain sight in hotels, and the business that is solely Riagan's.

The illegal fighting matches.

Cage fighting to be precise.

A normal woman would frown when finding out all this but not me. I grew up aware of the illegal activities my father did for Detroit. I might not have been treated like a mafia princess like the other girls in the families were, but I did hear the whispers and saw with my own eyes the same brutality that's going to occur here tonight.

I just wish it didn't involve Riagan.

But I trust him.

I've seen firsthand what he does to someone he deems as a threat, and he is right. The one who should be worried about permanent brain damage should be the man who decided to get inside a cage with my husband.

"Hey, lost you there. Come back to me, butterfly." Riagan's voice snaps me out of my head. I zoned out. Looking up at him and then at his cheek, I smile, not wanting him to think I'm afraid of his life. At one point, I was, and to an extent, I am afraid of losing him, but I don't want him to think he made a mistake and realize he should have married someone who isn't afraid of the things he loves.

Why did he have to enjoy fighting? Out of all the dangerous sports, he chose the most dangerous one. Not dwelling on it too much, I shake off the nerves that start to rise and touch his cheek. I touch him to remind myself that

he's here with me and he is real. "Good luck, and fight smart, okay?"

"Okay, butterfly." He pulls me closer, and the noise around us fades away. It always happens when he touches or kisses me. It's like he has the power to slow down the world and stop time. It's almost magical but everything about him is. As silly as it might sound. To me, Riagan O'Sullivan is what dreams are made of, at least for me. I also can see how he could be other people's nightmare.

Not to me, though. Perhaps, I am biased.

Oh, well.

Then he pulls back and fishes something out of his shorts' pocket. "Got you these. Use them when the crowd gets too loud." Looking down at his extended hand, I see pink earplugs in his palm, and just like that, I feel myself melting at the sweet gesture. He never forgets, and he always puts me first. Pulling my curls aside, I shiver when I feel his touch on my neck before he puts the noise-canceling plugs in both ears. Wow.

The noise of the crowd is not that loud with these on. It doesn't completely drown it out, but it doesn't hurt my ears. I'm still able to hear, just not as intensely as before. "Thank you." I breathe out, beaming at him.

He then kisses my forehead and lingers there for a long moment before he says. "Stick close to Kelly. He'll protect you while I'm inside the cage."

I nod, a little bit less anxious than I was before. "Riagan."

"Yes, baby?"

"I—" Looking at his chest, I can't seem to finish my sentence. The words get stuck in my throat.

"I know, baby. I know." He grins as if he just won the lottery. Does he know? Does he really? I didn't even know, and I'm still not fully sure I understand this feeling that takes over my chest when he is near. "You just made me the luckiest fucking bastard twice. First, when you agree to marry me and now." Before I can reply, he leans down and kisses me.

Not gentle but hard.

It's a brutal kiss.

Claiming me.

I feel it down in my soul.

Too quickly, it ends, and he is pulling back and moving away from me. "See you in a bit, baby. This shit won't take long." He says cockily as he retreats into the crowd, not once averting his gaze from mine. With my heart in my throat, I smile at how genuinely happy he looks.

This smile seems different.

So, as he walks away from me, I save how he looks in my memory, not wanting to ever forget it.

*I know, baby. I know.*

His words play through my mind, making my heart beat faster.

He knows I love him, and that has to be what he meant because that is what I wanted to say.

I was about to blurt it out, but something didn't let me. Perhaps nerves or fear, whichever it was, got in the way.

“This is him, little one.” A rough voice says from in front of me. Too busy staring at Riagan, I didn't realize his men had made a barricade around me. Bain is standing to my left, while Cianne is to my right. Looking over my shoulder, I spot men I've seen guarding the mansion, and the one who spoke is guarding my front. Byrne. Riagan calls him Byrne, but Maeve told me his name is not actually Byrne but Callam. “This is the boss. This city's Godfather.” He says without a smile on his face. Nothing. His expression is unreadable and difficult for me to understand. Out of all Riagan's men, he is the one I have the least contact with. He makes me nervous, I must admit. He's never been rude to me or unkind, but the times we've crossed paths at the house, he just nods as he passes by without saying anything.

He gives some serious grim reaper vibes.

Still, he is one of Riagan's closest friends, even if my husband would rather die than admit that is what these four men are. Kelly, Bain, Callam, and even Conor, Maeve's twin brother, who is sitting not so far from us, typing like a crazy person on his laptop.

If I thought Riagan looked scary at times, this one is much more scary-looking in an attractive way. Yes, I've noticed most of the men who work for Riagan are good-looking in a savage way. Not clean-cut like you would expect most mafiosos. Byrne looks as big as a tank, which is good since he serves as the muscle. His hair is blond, just like mine, and he has it shaved at the sides with a bun at the top. He looks like one of those Vikings warriors in the movies Carlotta loves so much. There's also something tragic about him, but I can't quite put my finger on it. It's in his eyes.

I'm no expert in understanding human emotions, but I know what sadness looks like, even when you're smiling or making jokes. Even when you have no expression on your face, like the man in front of me.

But before I can give Callam much thought, the distant noise of a bell

going off sounds in the distance, followed by a slightly accented Irish tone greeting the crowd.

It's starting.

The nerves are not completely gone. They're there but under the surface, bubbling and wanting to take over me, but I don't allow it. Instead, I take a deep breath and count to three.

He got this.

They don't fear this man for nothing.

I've seen him fight.

He fights like he hates the world.

Angry. Pissed.

Ready to tear the world apart.

Focusing on the ring, I watch closely as the match between my husband and a man who looks as scary as Riagan is about to start.

Oh, God.

Okay, don't panic.

Looks can be deceiving.

Take your new husband as an example.

He looks like he could snap my neck with a twist of his fingers, yet he has never laid his hands on me in a cruel way.

His opponent looks like a death machine, but Riagan looks different right then, too. Shed of his usual neat dress shirts - another of his shields, I was convinced - dressed only in a tee that he strips off when he gets to the center of the room and a pair of bottoms just like his opponent, he seems almost like another man entirely. It was in the fierce set of his jaw, in the stubbornly raised chin, in the tension that seemed to be overtaking every inch of his body, culminating in tightly curled fists down at his sides. His body, too, was intimidating. It even glistened under the light of the cage, making him look like a warrior ready to tear his opponent limb from limb.

Looking at him now, standing there as a fighter in black basketball shorts, I can't fathom the idea of someone betting against him and putting their money on his opponent. To begin with, Riagan is taller and wider. Even his hands look stronger than the other man's hands. He looks brutal and violent.

Let's not forget extremely confident, as if he already knows he has this in the bag.

For a man who's been fighting since before he learned to ride a bike, I think he does really have this in the bag.

Putting all my faith in him, I watch the scene before me unfold.

Both men stand in the middle of the cage, sizing each other up as the crowd watches intently with giddy smiles on their faces, and another voice rises from the crowd, loud, like an announcer.

I don't recognize him - tall, mostly gray-haired, dressed in a suit much like what expensive criminals always wore, looking way too snazzy for an underground cage fight. "Ladies and gentlemen, bets are now suspended," he calls out.

"How do these matches work?" I ask no one specific while my eyes are glued to where Riagan is standing, cracking his knuckles.

"It's pretty simple, really," Callam answers, surprising me once again. He's feeling chatty today, or perhaps I misjudged him? I feel his eyes on me when he speaks. "Here are the rules. There are no rules. No shots are off-limits. There are no breaks or rounds. Tap-out or knockout is the only end to a fight. There's no leaving that cage without spilling a lot of blood," he says, and both Riagan and his opponent move forward, closer to each other on the uneven ground. "Fuck him up, Joke!" He demands.

I watch as Riagan's opponent cocks back, swoops low, and slams a fist into Riagan's side, making him hiss and fall back a step, his ankle scraping against the jagged, uneven floor. I watch as blood starts trickling down, seemingly unnoticed by Riagan. I hadn't been aware of it, but I must have gasp, because then Bain is turning to look my way. "Sunshine, we can go if this is too much."

"Say the word, and I'll take you out of here," Cianne tells me while all their eyes are on me now.

"She's fine," Callam snorts without humor. "This is her world now, after all."

I feel someone touch my hand lightly. "Ignore him." Another says. "I can take you back home if you don't want to be here, Mila." My head is shaking even as I see Riagan take another hit before charging forward at the man.

"No. This is part of him," I say, like it explains everything.

Then I watch him in his element, still worried for his safety but confident in his ability to, as Callam put it so eloquently, 'fuck his opponent up.'

Riagan lands a fist that sends the man literally spinning, but the force makes Riagan stagger back, his foot falling off the end of a particularly low break in the rocks, making him slam down on one knee just as his opponent gets his bearings, and comes charging forward. "You can breathe, *milseán*,"



Cianne informs me, voice calm as could be. "I've seen him in hundreds of fights, and this one, he is not planning on losing. The captain just likes to play with his meat before he ends them." Cianne laughs as if this entire thing is funny to him. I guess to him it would be since I've noticed the handsome and funny man loves chaos.

"What is so important about this fight?"

"You."

"Me?" I momentarily meet his eyes, turning away from the fight.

"Does the piece of shit look familiar to you?"

Confused, I follow his gaze back to the cage, where Riagan is currently gripping the man's hair and punching his face repeatedly as blood pours in all directions. The scene is gruesome and quite frankly disgusting. Focusing on the man that is not my husband, it takes me a moment to connect the dots. How I didn't see it before, I don't know.

Locke.

One of my father's men is Riagan's opponent.

A man who enjoyed watching me squirm and made me feel uncomfortable with his sleazy looks and hurtful insults.

*She's fucking defective. Look at her. She can't even speak.*

*You're lucky you're pretty, princess. It makes up for your lack of brains.*

*The girl has the personality of a rock. Fucking idiot.*

It all comes back to me like a flood of ugly memories that I had, suppressed as I look at the man who alongside many others, made my life very difficult.

I never told my sisters. I knew if I had, they wouldn't even be breathing the same air as me, but I kept quiet and kept my head down, not wanting to add to my sisters' misery. They both have their own demons to deal with. I just learned to ignore mine until now.

Because what goes around comes around, and this moment is proof of it.

"W-what is g-going o-on?" I stumble through my words.

"He's making an example of that cunt, and while he's at it, cap is showing not just you but everyone around you what happens when you fuck with the Godfather's heart."

"He asks for names, and I give them to him." Bain chimes in with an evil smile on his face. "You should've seen the fucker's face when Cap told him who you were."

I'm almost afraid to ask. "Who am I besides Riagan's wife?"

“You’re this city— his city’s queen.” This comes from Callam. “Now, they’ll know what will happen to anyone who has ever hurt you or tries to. The captain won’t have mercy, and neither will we.”

Without really knowing what to say to that, I look at all the men surrounding me, protecting me from harm. They’re all so different. From the color of their hair and eyes, the way they speak, to their personalities. From broody to reckless, yet they all have one thing in common.

They are loyal to a fault to their boss and, by association now, me.

“Holy fuck!” Someone not far from us shouts. “This is it. Here we go.”

The oddly-sweet moment is interrupted by the crowd going insane, jumping in their spots as Riagan stumbles back from a punch, almost falling to the ground. He gets up. Doing so with a giddy smile on his handsome and bloody face, like a child at a candy store, while swinging and landing an uppercut that has blood spurting out of Lock’s mouth. Truthfully, a part of me didn’t want to watch because I didn’t want to see Riagan getting hurt. It pains me to even think about it. But it was proving impossible to look away. I was seeing a different side of him right then, a rougher side, a side he only showed the people that troubled him or hurt me. A clear part of him. His movements were methodical, practiced and controlled, while Lock got more and more sporadic, clumsy, and frantic.

I watched with a pit in my stomach as Riagan took several shots, making his lip break open, his head snap hard to one side, hard enough that it reminded me of the memories when my brain slammed against my skull, making me pass out when I was younger all those times my father pushed or threw me against a wall. I worry, for a second, that might be his fate as well. But he comes back harder, stronger, taking Lock’s ground from underneath him, then pounding into his face and midsection. My heart was slamming so hard that it was somehow nauseating, making my skin feel clammy and goosebumpy. Something about how vicious this was getting is causing me to genuinely wonder if I might get sick. There was just so much blood. Lock’s sure, but Riagans’ as well. How much longer could this go on? How many fists could your body endure before it started to give up on you? I didn’t want to find out the answer to that last question.

As the fighting got worse, the noise of the crowd got louder and louder, clearly enjoying the bloodshed while it made me completely lightheaded. Then, there was a slam that had my stomach jumping up into my throat before my eyes adjusted enough to see Locke’s body sprawled on the ground,

his breathing uneven. Not Riagan. That was really all I could focus on. But then there was Riagan again as well, dropping down over Locke and continuing to beat the shit out of him. Blood splattered out onto Riagan's skin, mingling with his own blood and sweat. I saw it then. Locke's hand slamming into the ground. Tapping out. But Riagan didn't stop.

No.

He only stopped when he claimed a life.

The life of a man who was unkind to me when I was only a child. An innocent one who had no fault and didn't deserve all the cruelty that was thrown her way.

Tonight, Riagan showed me, once again, a part of himself that should scare and worry me.

His dark side.

The reason why he was baptized as the godfather of Philadelphia.

The two sides of the card. The joker.

And I have a choice.

I could either run away scared, or I can hug the demons of the man I love.

Yes, love.

So very much.

I choose what I've always done.

I choose love over hate.

I choose happiness over sadness.

Now, I'm choosing Riagan over my fears and my reservations.

I'm choosing life.

"That's how it's done, Cap." Cianne's loud voice snaps me out of it, and I follow his gaze to the cage where Riagan is now standing over Locke's body, staring at me with a look I've seen on his face many times before. The pressure in my chest increases, and I feel my heart start to beat a mile a minute as I look at him and just him. He looks like an evil villain in every old-school classic horror movie, and yet he takes my breath away. Oh, what a pair we are.

Lifting my hand to my chest, I tap it three times, and so does he.

Somehow, the gesture stopped being one of comfort but a way for me to communicate with him. To let him know how he makes my heart race and stop at times. How I'm barely able to breathe when he looks at me the way he is doing now.

As if I'm the only person he sees in this room.

Like I'm the only person who matters.

That's how I see it.

In a sea of people laughing and cheering him on, there is only us.

I stand frozen in place, watching as he throws the cage's metal door open, climbs down, and moves in my direction. Every step he takes my way is in sync with my heart.

Then, one second, my feet are firmly planted on the ground, and the next, I'm being lifted into his strong arms. My safe place. He hugs me tightly to him, and oddly, I don't dwell on the fact that he has someone else's blood on him and now on me. No. I just feel the moment. A beautiful and pure moment.

After a few seconds of holding me up in the air, he put me down, his arms going around me, and his lips press into the top of my hair. I hug him close, feeling my heart full of joy. Leaning back, I look up at him to find him smiling despite the blood in his teeth and the bruises already forming on his skin. "Told you, *a chusle*." He breathes out.

Beaming, I stand on my tippy toes and press a soft kiss on his bearded chin. "You were..."

"Scary?"

I frown at that. "No." I shake my head, and then smile up at him. "Very impressive."

He laughs, then removes his arms from around me, and I already feel the loss of him. But then he takes out the earplugs from my ears. "I'm glad you're here."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Good."

Focusing on the gash on his left cheek, I ask. "Riagan, will you teach me how to fight?"

"There's no need for you to fight, butterfly. You don't ever have to fear for your life. That's why I am here." He says roughly, while twirling a curl on his finger. Lifting my gaze from his bloody cheek, I try to hold his gaze for as long as possible before I can't any longer. "But if you want to learn how to fight, I'll teach you." How sweet it feels to have someone who never belittles your capacity to learn new things or your intelligence. Someone who believes in you and wants to protect you without clipping your wings. How sweet it is to be cared for by this man. This man covered in blood after taking a life.

“How did you know about him?” I turn to look at the cage where Locke’s body is being lifted off the ground. Riagan grabs my chin and turns my face his way.

“Bain and Carlotta.”

“Do you know all of th—”

“I do.” His voice is rough, and his eyes turn darker.

“But why?” Deep down, I know why, but I need to hear it from him. I need to know for sure.

And what he says takes my breath away and lifts my feet off the ground, and I find myself never wanting to come back down from the high that is Riagan.

“Because there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, butterfly. If I have to fight the world for you, I will, and that bitch, Locke, was just the start. I’m not done, and I won’t be done until every person who made you cry meets the same fate as him. You have my word on that.” And with that, he takes me in his arms once again and kisses me fiercely.

And with his kiss, he makes a thousand promises.

Promises I know, down to my bone, he will always keep.

Of that, I have no doubt.

# MESSAGE FROM M



C,  
Take me with you.  
Somewhere.  
Anywhere. - M

# EXTRAORDINARY YOU

## MILA



*"I'll go wherever you go." - M*

**Y**ou're all bloody." I point out the obvious.

"Killing a man in cold blood will do that to you." He laughs.

"It's not just his blood." I frown. There's so much blood on him. His and Lock's.

Riagan leans back on his office's leather chair here at Mayhem, positioning me between his parted thighs.

"Are you alright?" I ask, watching as he winces while he shifts in his seat, trying to find a comfortable position. "And don't sugarcoat it or make jokes, please." I demand, giving him a firm look that he must find endearing because he smiles. "I'd say two bruised ribs and a split lip is the worst of it."

"Nu-uh." I poke his eyebrow gently, and he does his best to suppress a groan which makes me smile. "This doesn't look good." I reach for the first-aid kit he had lying around his office and open it. After we left the fight he took me to his office, and I couldn't help myself. I couldn't bear looking at him this way. He was hurting, yet he shook it off as if it was nothing, and I guess for a man like him, it is nothing. Still as soon as he unlocked the door to his office and let us both inside, I rushed into the bathroom and frantically dug through his cabinets for first aid supplies. I came out of the bathroom with a plastic container full of gauze, butterfly bandages, elastic bandages, salves, splints, braces, glue, and even a sewing set for stitches. I was pretty sure I would be having a mild heart attack if he didn't have all the things I needed to patch him up. Grabbing the bottle of alcohol and a cotton ball, I



start to work on cleaning his wounds. All the while, he remains quiet, just holding onto my waist.

I'll never get tired of this exhilarating feeling I get when he looks at me with longing and more. A strange warmth spreads across my chest. After I'm done cleaning his wounds, I add the butterfly stitches. The part I hate. Something Riagan notices because he speaks next, breaking the silence. "Baby, did you know that I haven't had a single bad day since you came into my life?" he whispers as if he's sharing a secret, making me smile.

I think about that for a second, stopping what I was doing.

Bad days.

I used to have a lot of those, even when I had my sisters. Even when I tried to pretend all was okay. It wasn't.

Our life wasn't normal, and our days weren't all happy.

But since I've crossed paths with Riagan, I hadn't had a single bad day, and even if I did have a bad moment, he would make it better just by being him.

By protecting and caring for me even when I didn't know that was what he was doing then.

He made sure I was taken care of and surrounded by people who were kind. He made my life better and happier.

I was trapped in a city that held a lot of bad memories, but at least I had good people to make good memories with. He gave me that. My sisters did, too.

"When I think of my good days, the best days now, all I see is your face." I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "You changed me, Riagan. Fully and wholeheartedly." I confess.

"Ditto, butterfly." He breathes while touching the exposed skin on my belly, making my heart race and my breath hitch. A moment of silence passes between us, and I can't help but notice how the air around us feels sweet.

So sweet.

Raising my head, I stare directly at him for a long moment. "And did you know that I have discovered new things about myself since you barged into my world? Things I didn't know were possible?"

"Like what?" I feel his hands tighten on my waist and his minty breath close to my face.

Clearing my throat, I say. "Before you, I knew joy but not in the capacity that I do know. It was fleeting but not anymore." I open my heart to him at

this moment, and I don't feel scared. I feel safe. "I feel so much joy when I hear your laugh or witness your smile. Before you, it made me happy to see other people smile, yes but now I look forward to your smiles. When you don't smile I worry that you're having a bad day. It makes me sad. The thought of you hurting in some way lingers in my mind the whole day, and my heart won't settle until I know for sure that you're okay. Until you smile." I whisper, now looking away from him, a bit embarrassed but not enough to shut my mouth. I focus on cleaning his bloody knuckles and carry on. "I also feel free to express my thoughts, and I no longer second guess every single thing in my head before I say it. Not with you. Even with my sisters, I was always cautious of the things I said, not wanting to trouble them in any way, but with you, it's different. Everything is different. The good kind. Change always scared me, and surprises made me anxious because they were almost never good. Until you." I take a deep breath, but don't give him time to answer before I'm rambling again. "I don't like when you're away, and when you're near, I feel peace. I never had that before. Not entirely. I was happy at times, yes, but it never lasted long. The dread of what comes next in a home like I had never allowed me to. Here, in your world, I feel peace. Here with you, I feel strong and vulnerable. Brave and afraid. I feel so many things all at once. It's a whole new world to me, and I wouldn't change it for a thing. You gave me all of that. You, Riagan."

There, I said it.

There's no taking it back.

When the silence that follows becomes too much, I start to feel a bit anxious until he raises his hands to my cheeks and brings my mouth slowly to his. The kiss is slow but intense. When he pulls back, ending the kiss, he whispers close to my mouth. "Thank you."

Licking my lips, I taste him. Mint. Just mint because he no longer smokes. I know it's bad for him and the people around him, but I kind of miss the taste of tobacco when he kissed me. "Thank you for what?" I don't look away from his lips. I watch them pull up in a smile.

"For making me smile. For shining your light all over my dark." He says, rendering me speechless. "Because, baby, you're the only one that can."

The only one.

Me.

I do that to him.

"Good." I smile at him, which makes him laugh before he kisses my

forehead tenderly.

“Yeah, butterfly. Good.”

After that, we both remain silent. I pick up the needle and start stitching him up, and not once does he complain. He just stares at me while I work on his wound.

When I’m done fixing up his split eyebrow, he speaks up. “How you know how to do this?”

For a second, I consider not telling him. It’s not pretty, and I don’t want to ruin the moment with sad memories, but I want complete transparency with him. Always.

I quickly clean up the mess I made on his desk and stash all the supplies inside the emergency kit. “I had to do it a lot when I was younger. Cleaning wounds and stitching them, I mean. Sometimes on my sisters and others on myself.” I shrug. “After so many times, I guess I got really good at it.”

He growls.

He honest-to-God growls, sounding like a feral animal.

Angry.

He’s angry on my behalf.

“It was a long time ago.” I try to appease him. “It doesn’t hurt me anymore. Not like it used to anyway.” I smiled at him.

“I’m in awe of you.” He touches my cheek gently with his bandaged knuckles. Warmth spreads through me at his touch.

“How so?”

“There’s not a moment when you don’t smile and make others smile.” He says roughly. “And fuck me, but you’re brilliant. You’re the smartest person I know, and I know two geniuses. So clever even when you didn’t have the same opportunities as your sisters. Fuck, you know more than people I know have spent years pursuing an education. You’re so talented and so kind. I’m still having trouble believing you’re real. I think I’ll never truly believe it. But most importantly, that piece of shit sperm donor of yours and all his puppets didn’t break you. He didn’t succeed.”

His words pierce my heart.

He didn’t succeed.

I guess he didn’t because I’m here.

I’m breathing and living, and most importantly, I’m free from him and his cruelty.

And so are my sisters.

He didn't win.

Pride and joy takes over me as Riagan's words replay in my head like my favorite song on a loop.

I don't realize I've spaced out until I feel Riagan's hand on my hair, playing with a curl.

"I'm going to take a quick shower, okay? Then we can head home." He drops a quick kiss on my temple before rising from his chair.

"Ah... you're hurt. Are you sure you can stand up on your own, Riagan? You could fall in the shower." I question, watching him cringe when he stands to his full height.

"Then I guess you are going to have to come in with me, aren't you?" he asks cockily, a little devilish smile taking over his bruised face.

"You want me to take a shower with you?"

"I do," he says and I watch him kick off his sneakers and reach down to push his shorts off his hips. "I'm hurt, baby." He pouts, and it takes a lot for me to not laugh. Oh, he's clever. A vixen, too.

"You are hurt." My lips curve in a smile at his playful teasing.

He then proceeds to take off my shirt, dropping it to the floor before he moves to take off my jeans. "You said it. I can barely stand. I could fall in the shower. You wouldn't want that, would you, butterfly? Besides, I need help reaching the cuts on my back." He says while turning slightly to show me his banged-up back, where he has scratches from slamming back against the jagged floor during the fight.

I have to admit that as soon as he turned, my eyes traveled down to his naked ass, not the bruises on his back.

"O-oh okay then," I give in and drag my eyes back up. "But make it quick. Gym showers give me the creeps." The things I'm willing to do for this man surprise me every day.

Gym germs. Yuck.

"The last thing you will be thinking about are germs, baby. Trust that." Then he grabs my hand and leads me to the bathroom. We're both naked as the day we were born as we move toward the shower. Riagan releases my hand to reach in to turn on the water. I don't miss how he's hard as a rock already. It feels good, really good knowing I have the power to do that to his body. He wants me just as I want him, and it's evident when his penis twitches just by me looking at it.

I smile at that.

He growls. “Fuck, baby, come on,” he says, moving inside, watching as I moved across the floor, naked, and completely devoid of any self-consciousness. Once inside the shower, he closes the sliding door and traps us inside. As soon as the warm water hits my back, I feel goosebumps spread over my skin.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. All wet and all mine.” He whispers in my ear before nipping it. His front to my back while his cock presses into my backside. “I like your skin on mine,” I whisper honestly as he washes my ass globes with soap. “I enjoy the feeling of the hard ridges of your body against me.”

“And I love being inside of you. It’s my favorite place to be, baby.” He whispers while washing me. “I swear to fuck all I do lately is think about all the filthy things I want to do to this hot little body. You make me hard, Mila just by fucking breathing. It’s fucked up.”

“W-what do you want to do to my body?” I ask breathlessly.

My head falls back against his shoulder as he reaches between my legs. I gasp. My eyes closing at the pleasure of being touched there.

“I want to fuck all your holes and fill them up with my cum.”

My breath hitches, and my breasts become tight while I feel the space between my legs getting wetter as he plays with my clitoris. “What e-else?”

“I want to bend you over the kitchen counter and fuck you so hard that my men will be able to hear it. They’ll be able to hear the loud cries of my woman—the most beautiful woman taking every inch of my cock. They’ll wish they were me, but no one gets to have this cunt, right baby?”

“This tight, hot and pretty little cunt is mine?”

“Yes.” I breathe out, out of my mind with pleasure. The filthy things he’s saying... the dirty things he’s doing to my body. It feels...right.

“Good girl. That’s my good girl.” Warmth takes over me at his praise. I never would’ve imagined that I would participate in the kind of activities I read in my books, but here we are, and I certainly never imagined that I would love to be called a good girl by a man fingering me like Riagan is doing now. Like he owns that part. Every part of me. Which he does and he knows it.

“Ahhh.” His teeth come in, sinking into my neck. I cry out, unable to control the roll of my hips because I need him inside me. My legs nearly give out under me. The heat of his mouth pours over my skin like hot syrup, and the pain is just enough to bring every other inch of my skin to full awareness.

Everywhere he touches is sensitive, feeling like a flaming torch over my body. I couldn't think. I didn't want anything else. I reach back, touching his face. "More."

"Fuck, yes, baby." His breath almost sounded like a growl. He knocks my knees wider, grips my hips, and yanks me back to him, the hard flesh of his cock pressing into me. A moan escapes me, and I could already feel how wet I was.

He takes hold of himself, crowns me, and before I can say anything, he slides inside me, burying himself deep and filling me so good my knees quake. "Ah," I whimper, going rigid for a moment to adjust. The spot he hits deep inside me sends a wave of pleasure to the rest of my body, everything tingling and buzzing, and I hear his labored breaths behind me as he gives into it, too. He doesn't wait long, though. Squeezing my hips where they meet my thighs, he starts pumping hard and fast, and I fumble my hands on the shower wall to keep my knees from giving out. All I could do was try not to fall as he thrusts into me in short, quick attacks, filling me up with his size and warmth and then pulling back out to do it again. God, he felt so good. My body jerks, and he pants and grunts as he fucks me harder and harder. The deeper he hits, the stronger my orgasm builds, and after less than a minute, my stomach starts to shake, fireworks started to spark deep inside me, and I hold my breath, letting the orgasm explode all over my body. I feel the skin of my nipples tighten and harden, and I cry out, "Riagan."

"I'm going to touch your head, baby." Lost in a daze, I barely process his words as I feel him grip my hair gently and pull my head back up, forcing my back to arch more and my ass to stick out farther for him. He drives in violently, pumping me hard and fast until he, too, starts to grunt, growing more strained as he begins to come. He jerks into me several more times and then gives one final thrust, and I feel him pull out of my body. I feel him spill all over my backside, breathing loud and so spent I was sure he might fall on me. But he doesn't. He stays there, buried inside me for another minute. "I want that." I blurt out. 'All of it.'

"What do you want, baby?" He is out of breath, and for a second, I worry what we just did was too much on him. He is hurt, after all.

"When you recover, I want you to do everything you've fantasized about." I turn around and find him looking down at me with a smirk on his face as water cascades between us. He doesn't say anything, just stares at me while picking up the soap and cleaning my back, where he ejaculated.

So filthy...

I like it.

Everything he does, I enjoy and want more of.

“Did I say something wrong?” I ask when he puts the soap down and reaches behind me to shut off the water.

“Next time, baby. I’ll show you all the shit I dream of doing to you,” he promises, going out to grab us towels. “Right now, I really want to get us both home and into bed. As much as I love fucking you, butterfly. I can’t get enough of you sleeping on my chest.” With that, he disappears into the other room, and comes back wearing gray sweatpants and with one of his shirts in hand. He quickly helps me put it on.

“I like you in my clothes. From now on, wear only that.”

“I can’t wear men’s clothes.” Well, I can. There’s nothing wrong with that, but I like my clothes. The dresses, mostly. I also like how I look in his shirts, how they swallow me up and make me feel as if he were hugging me. His smell and the feel of fabric. “Maybe to sleep.”

“Deal.” He helps dry off my hair and then I check to make sure we didn’t mess up his butterfly stitches when we were in the shower. Once we’re both dressed and dry. I hug him tightly. “Thank you.”

I feel his strong arms wrap around me. “Not that I don’t fucking love your hugs, butterfly, but what’s this for?”

Still holding onto him, I look up and focus on his lips. I love his lips, and the things he can do with them. “For what you did in that cage.” I take a deep breath before continuing. “I blocked out most of the memories that caused me pain when I was younger, not wanting all that ugly to bleed into my present and future, but I didn’t realize how demons never really leave you alone unless you get rid of them, and you did that for me, Riagan.”

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Mila.” He pulls me closer to his body. “Nothing. I can’t breathe right knowing every piece of shit who ever said an unkind word or hurt you in any way is still breathing in your world. I can’t. I’m not done, and I will be doing it again and again until there’s no trace of all the ugly you had to witness, baby. Nothing.”

“I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I am so grateful for you.” I admit, feeling shy suddenly.

“Nah.” He drops a kiss on top of my head and holds me there. “I’m the lucky one. How I got someone as pure and as extraordinary as you, baby, I don’t know, but I’m not questioning it. I’m one lucky bastard.”

I'm the lucky one, but I don't say it. He wouldn't accept it anyway.

The only extraordinary human is him, and it hurts me sometimes that he doesn't see himself the way I do.

My hero.

My beautiful villain with the heart of a hero.

My perfect husband.

"Let's go home." He says, pulling back from me.

Home.

I find myself grinning like a damn idiot. "Home. I like that." I admit.

"Me too, baby. Me too." I smiled at that as Riagan walked us out of his office, heading for the building's exit. He quickly gets us in his car and drives us home. And when we get there, I find myself lying in his arms, listening to the beat of his heart. My favorite sound, along with his laugh. Tonight, I came to terms with the truth that there was no one else but him. Even as I cuddled beside me, careful not to touch anywhere that might hurt, which meant my hand was barely resting on his shoulder, I realized that was what he did for me. He muted the world. He muted the bad memories. When he was around, that was all there was. Everything else was quiet.

It was the most peace and freedom I had ever known in my entire life. He gave that to me.

As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered what I did to deserve someone like him. A criminal, yes, but with a heart of gold.

My heart.



# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*I love her exactly for who she is.*

# RIAGAN'S GIRL

## RIAGAN



*“Loving you comes so easily.” – M*

“Are we there yet?” Mila beams excitedly as I lead her while blindfolded.

“A few more steps, baby.” Her childlike excitement warms my heart and has me planning my next surprise already. If surprises make her this damn happy, I’ll plan one each day for the rest of our lives.

She deserves that and more.

Today, she’s crossing off another dream on her bucket list, and fuck if it didn’t make me feel proud as fuck.

She passed her driver’s license today with flying colors. Not that I didn’t think she would. Mila’s brilliant, and she does exceptionally well with everything she sets her mind to.

Most girls her age have outrageous bucket lists or shallow goals like becoming famous or some shit like that, but not my girl, no. She’s all about the little things. The ‘normal’ things us humans take for granted and see as insignificant.

Like changing someone’s life or learning to drive.

That’s how sweet and kind she is.

“I’m excited, Riagan. Did you know that good surprises trigger the release of dopamine - the brain’s feel-good neurotransmitter.”

“That’s our happy chemical, yes?” I ask while reaching our destination.

“Correct!” She gives me a thumbs up.

Fuck, my wife’s cute.

When we are close to the garage, I stop. “We’re here.”

“Finally.” She claps excitedly, and the gesture shoots daggers through my heart.

So sweet. Fuck, her sweetness is addictive.

“Are you ready, baby?” I ask, releasing her hand and reaching for the bandana that’s covering her eyes.

“Yes!” She jumps in place.

“Here we go.” I remove the bandana from her face and let it fall to the ground next to her feet. “Congratulations, butterfly.”

A shocked gasp escapes her when she stares at the 2023 white Mercedes GLC and the light blue Model X SUV. I remember a conversation she had with Maeve a few days ago, where Mila mentioned she couldn’t wait to own her car.

Now she has two.

I would’ve gotten her one or two more, but I know that’s not who she is. She would’ve been just as grateful if I gifted her a beat-up bicycle.

I watch as she freezes for a moment too long before she turns to me and asks. “Are those cars for me?” Her voice shakes, breaking my heart a little. Shit, a lot. Every time I do something nice for her or give her nice things, she over thinks it, or it’s hard for her to believe it’s all real. A sign that she still carries trauma from her life back in Detroit. She’s slowly healing those traumas, yet some will take a little more time. But I have all the time in the world.

Reaching forward, I caress her cheek, smiling reassuringly at her. “They’re for you, baby. Think of them as an early birthday present, yeah.”

“But two cars? One is too much, but two? I-I can’t—”

“No buts.” I poke her nose playfully. “You said that you love seeing me smile, correct?”

She narrows her eyes adorably. “Yes. Where are you going with this?” she asks suspiciously.

Smart girl.

I contain the laughter that’s bubbling inside me at how cute she looks right now.

“Well, teaching you new things and giving you gifts makes me happy, which in turn makes me smile.”

“Oh, that’s not fair!” she argues.

“Nonsense. It’s a fair transaction.” It is. Money and cars mean shit to me.

But the happiness she brings me? That means everything. Every-single-funking-thing.

“It’s not. I don’t have the money. I can’t give you the same things. I—” she drops her head, making all those unruly curls fall around her face.

Shit.

Reaching under her chin, I make her look at me. Those big blue eyes hit me. They move rapidly, trying to focus on just one thing. So pretty. She takes my breath away.

“You give me so much more. Something no amount of money can buy.” I bend low so we’re face to face. Kissing her lips softly, I groan at her sweet taste. Mine. The wild animal in me hisses. Mine. Only ever mine.

She pulls away and touches my cheek. “I want to be able to buy you things, too. Things that make you smile.” She whispers. Her intoxicating breath hitting my face.

Stealing another quick kiss, I smile down at her, wanting her to know that I mean every word that comes out of my mouth. “I don’t need anything but you, butterfly. Your happiness is all I want.” I tell her. Because her love? Yeah. I have it, even if she hasn’t said the words.

I have her heart, and that’s the only thing I treasure in this life besides my father.

Mila smiles at me brightly.

God, she’s pretty on a normal day. But when she smiles, she could knock me to my knees.

“You always say the sweetest things, Riagan.” she breathes out.

“What can I say, baby. You bring out the good in me.” I wink at her, and her smile widens.

“Every part of you is good.” She says shyly.

“Nah, baby. I know that’s not true.” I breathe out, loving the way she’s looking at my lips now. “The only good part of me is you.” Her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink.

Beautiful.

“Oh, you’re wearing them!” she completely forgets our conversation when she looks down at the ground, pointing at my feet.

“Of course, I am.” I lift the end of my jeans, so she can see the white sneakers she costume made for me better. “You’re incredibly talented.”

“Thank you.” She smiles. “I’m glad you like them.”

“I love them.” I love you is on the tip of my tongue.

“They look good on you.”

“They do. Would it be too much to ask you to paint all my shit? Go crazy, baby. Paint my world.”

“You’re crazy.” She laughs, hugging me.

“Crazy for you,” I tell her truthfully. I am completely mad for this girl. She’s all I think about. All I see when I open my eyes in the morning and when I close them at night. She’s everything, she’s everywhere, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

My perfect girl.

My dream come true.

“I feel the same way, Riagan.” She mumbles on my chest. Smirking, I pull her back so she can look at me. I save the look on her face in my memory. The look of pure happiness. I’m addicted to her smiles. I want all of them.

“I know.”

“You’re so cocky.” She hits my chest playfully.

“Oh, you would know.”

She gasps. “Oh, I got that one! An innuendo. Clever.”

I bark out a laugh while her neck turns the same shade of pink as her cheeks.

Fuck, does she paint my world.

Colorful and full of magic.

Grabbing her hand, I walk her towards her brand-new cars. “Come on, pick one, and let’s go for a drive.”

“Really?” She smiles, and I can’t help but smile with her. Her smile is as beautiful as it is infectious.

“Really, baby. Pick.”

“I love them both!” she says while giving it some thought. After a few seconds, she makes her decision. “That one.” She points to her blue Model X.

And that’s how we spend the rest of our day. Talking, laughing, and sharing fun facts while my sweet queen drives us all over my city.

It can’t get better than this.

But it did.

So much fucking better.

# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*He stole my heart and kept it to himself.*

**BECAUSE YOU'RE YOU**



## MILA



*“You are all of my best days.” – R*

**A**t times, when I’m deep in my thoughts, I tend to tune out the world. I don’t notice when I’m being called by my name. That’s what happened next.

*Too busy reading my favorite book, I didn’t notice my father standing behind me, calling my name. Not until it was too late.*

*“Mila.” A dark voice barks from behind me. I startle and drop my glass of milk on the floor. A feeling of dread takes over me when I realize what I just did. What father hates more than being ignored is messes, and I just made one on his squeaky-clean floors.*

*Before I have any chance to defend myself, I feel hands slam into my chest, and I fly back, the wind knocked out of me as I land on my behind.*

*Pain shoots through my tailbone, and I suck in a breath, déjà vu washing over me.*

*“What have I told you about ignoring me?” My father barks, making me jump. I don’t like people who yell. They’re mean and have nothing nice to say in my experience. “Fuck, look at you. Even dogs respond to their name.” He says in disgust, followed by a mean laugh.*

*It sounded cruel. The dark sound burrowing through my stomach like a screw.*

*I push to my feet, feeling embarrassed and sad. How can a father take so much pleasure in hurting and terrorizing their child?*

*I’m not perfect. I know that, but it hurts. I feel. I’m human, even if he tries*

not to see me that way. The worst part is that he never comes to my room. There's nothing here for him. The only reason he's here is because he's in the mood to remind me of my place in his life.

He loves to humiliate me. It makes him feel better to blame his failures on me and my sisters.

"I did not mean to space—" he slaps his hand across my face. A whimper escapes me, my cheek bursting into flames. He's always yelled ugly names, smacked me around, but he has never slapped my face until now.

"Don't talk back." He gets in my face. His eyes are harsh, and his mouth twists in a cruel smile. My father is a handsome man. He reminds me of my older sister Arianna, but where Arianna has a kind heart even as cold as it is, my father's heart is black.

Tears of embarrassment gather in my eyes, and I try my best to hold them back. I drop my head, knowing that nothing I say will ever appease him or make him look at me as his daughter instead of a nuisance.

"What do you say, child?" Child. Never Mila. Another attempt to dehumanize me.

Knowing by heart what will follow if I don't give him what he wants, I answer. "I'm sorry, father," I whisper with my head down. He hates my eyes. He hates looking at me, but especially my eyes. I can't seem to maintain eye contact for long, and that makes him angry. He says it makes me weak and it makes people uncomfortable, so I learned to hide my flaws, but sometimes I slip up. Like today.

"Clean this mess up." He kicks the glass on the floor, making more of a mess before he leaves the room.

I wait for the door to click shut behind him, and only then do I dare let the tears fall.

Going into the bathroom, I grab a towel to clean the puddle of milk on the floor. I'm not risking going downstairs to look for a mop and running into him again. This will have to do.

Dropping to my knees, I wipe the floor until there's no stain on it. Once I'm sure it's clean, I rise and make my way to the window with the dirty towel in hand.

Lifting my hand to my chest, I tap it three times, stop, and do it again, trying to ease the pain there. God does it hurt.

"Why?" I whisper to the dark, looking out my window. The sky is dark, but the stars are shining so brightly. "Why was I born this way?" I cry out,

*trying to hold in the sob, not wanting anyone to hear. Not wanting to cause another mess.*

*Wiping my tears, I don't look away from the window and start to imagine all the things I would do if I ever got out of this house. I hold onto those dreams and focus on only that until my chest doesn't ache.*

*Until the tears dry.*

*But deep down, I know there's no leaving this house of horrors.*

*This is not a fairytale.*

*No one will save us.*

*No one.*



WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I took up drawing and painting as a hobby because it offered me an escape. It also helped me understand human emotions better by observing their behaviors and later translating them into art. It was just something I did to keep myself from constantly thinking of our living situation inside the Parisi home. Later, I realized how much I truly loved drawing and painting. It has become so much more than what it originally was. Now, drawing and painting help me communicate with people better. Plus, it increases my emotional intelligence. Which is always good.

Humming my current favorite country song, I pick up the brown acrylic paint and empty what's left of it onto the clean palette.

I smile because I finally found the perfect shade. An exact match for what I want.

Mixing the brown paint with a small amount of yellow, I look up at the wall that used to be plain white a few days ago and now is filled with color and love.

For him.

Yesterday, I heard Cianne mention that Riagan's birthday is coming up and a thought popped up. One that had me giddy and nervous at the same time.

It is the perfect time to give him something.

Something from the heart.

I asked Cianne to help me with the surprise and asked if he could get me the supplies I needed for the project I am planning but he just smiled at me

and said to follow him. I did and when he took me to the left wing of the mansion he showed me the studio Riagan added just for me.

At first, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It looked just like one of those professional studios I see popping up on social media, but the difference is that mine has a homier vibe with bright colors and funky furniture.

I almost fainted in excitement.

My heart almost burst when I saw everything he had gotten for me.

All the materials and equipment he purchased. It's more than I will ever need. And the beautiful room is decorated with colors I love.

It made me so happy.

Not the material things, but that he thought of me.

He remembers my likes and dislikes. He always does.

I showed him that night just how grateful I was for his kindness and thoughtfulness.

I showed him in many ways.

Heat reaches my cheeks when I think back to the things he did to me.

The things I did to him.

I never would've thought, not even in my wildest dreams, that I would feel so comfortable being naked and sharing germs with someone else, but I am, and I like it. I like it a lot.

Picking up the small brush, I continue painting the wall where I left it yesterday. It's coming along beautifully, and I am very excited to see what he thinks of it when he sees it. He has given me so much, and I know this is not a lot, but it's a gift from my heart.

And thanks to Cianne, I've managed to keep Riagan away from this part of the mansion. Every morning when Riagan leaves to deal with his men or his other businesses, Cianne helps me uncover the wall, and in the evening, he also helps me cover it so no one will spoil the surprise. No one knows, not even his house staff.

Cianne has made sure of that, which I'm grateful for. Just as I'm grateful for his company. He's in charge of looking out for me while Riagan is away and he treats me like a person and not a job. We talk, well he does most of the talking, but I listen to him and enjoy his tales and funny remarks, even when I don't understand half the jokes he tells me, but that doesn't bother him. When I don't give him the reaction he wants, he explains.

We've been laughing all afternoon as he shares tales of his time working

as Riagan's clan chief, but he stepped out for a second to take Bruno to the patio to do his business. He should be back any minute now. Cianne won't admit it, but he's enamored with the tiny pup. He's always complaining about Bruno chewing on his stuff but he will be the first one to come home with a brand-new chew toy or a treat for the puppy. He doesn't fool me. I've also caught him scratching the dog when he thinks no one is looking.

I'm so deep in my head that I don't realize until it's too late that someone called my name. My mind is barely able to process what happens next, even though I've been through it many times in the past.

I zoned out, and someone got angry.

"Mrs. O' Sullivan." Someone snaps at me, then throws a tray of food next to the floor, startling me and snapping me out of my own little bubble. I also don't miss how he called me retarded under his breath.

I hurriedly pick up my cap and put it on my head, trying to hide from the scrutinizing gaze of the man towering above me. The brim of the hat hides my eyes, which I prefer. I've been told my gaze is weird because I don't like to look people in the eye when I talk. Some people get freaked out. It has happened before.

At this moment, I wish the ground would open up and swallow me. It'd be better than facing this situation.

I hate confrontations. I don't react well to them.

I tend to freeze, which only makes them angrier.

"The fuck is going on here, Mitch?" A growl comes from somewhere near, but I pay no mind to the voices. Instead, I focus on the paint I dropped on the clean floor. Oh, no. I made a huge mess. It takes me back to when I was younger, and my father would yell and punish me for making messes with my crayons or liquid paint. "Get the fuck out of here. He'll deal with you later."

"Sir, I—" The man, who threw the tray of food and called me a name I rather not repeat, tries to argue, but he gets cut off by the newcomer. "Save it. Get the fuck out before I deal with you myself. Trust me, you don't want that, boy."

*Twinkle, Twinkle, little star...*

I sing, trying to drown out the loud shouts. Riagan is not here. He can't save me.

Snap out of it, Mila. The little voice in my head orders, but I can't make myself move. I'm frozen.

“I’m touching you, darling girl.” The familiar voice says before the cap is taken off my head. I instantly shrink into myself and whimper. “It’s okay. It’s just me. I won’t hurt you.”

It takes me a few minutes to calm my breath and find the courage to look up at the person kneeling next to me. A person with hollowed eyes and sunken cheeks.

Kind eyes that look identical to the ones I love so much.

Cathan.

Riagan’s father.

Hurt spirals through me. I’ve been called names hundreds of times before, but this one hurt more than normal. Riagan’s employee called me that, and if he thinks I’m retarded, maybe deep down, Riagan thinks that as well?

Does Cathan?

I can’t help but feel ashamed.

Ashamed and embarrassed that he witnessed someone calling me such an ugly word.

Ashamed that he saw me just lie down and take it.

Does he think I am weak?

Does he think I am not the right choice for his son?

Feeling rough hands on my face, Cathan takes my chin and forces me to look at him. I try to look away, but he doesn’t allow me to. He reaches forward and wipes away a tear I didn’t know had fallen. I try focusing on the sparkly diamond earring on his left earlobe, too ashamed to force myself to stare into his eyes.

“You’re okay, and that won’t be happening again. You have my world, sweet girl.” He whispers, trying to comfort me, and I allow him. I feel myself inching closer to him, not minding his closeness at all. There’s something about Riagan’s father that, even though he looks scary, he also transmits warmth and serenity.

Just like his son.

I think about his promise, but I don’t have the courage to say ask how he can be sure it won’t happen again. People will always look at me and think of me differently just because I don’t act like they expect me to or think the way they do. “Please don’t tell him…” I hiccup, almost begging his father.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that, honey.”

I don’t need to raise my head to know it is indeed too late.



## Riagan

LOOKING at the photo Kelly sent me of Mila sitting on the floor with paint in her curls and face makes me smile. Fucking gorgeous, even covered in all that shit.

I'm saving the photo as my screensaver when a new text message pops up.

**Conor:** Got a lead on the mercenary who accepted your wife's contract. Call me.

I read Conor's message, then get ready to call him back when I hear the distant sound of my father comforting a weeping Mila.

My heart sinks, and I start to move in the direction their voices are coming from. When I reach them, I notice my father on his knees, hugging Mila close to him. On a normal day, the sight of them together would soften me, but not when she has tears in her eyes and food on the floor and all over her. The look of anger on my old man's face tells me shit went down while I wasn't here to protect her. Shit that I won't like, I'm sure.

I'm too fucking pissed and worried to notice the surprise on the wall she's been hiding for a week now. All I can focus on are those tears in her eyes.

Someone will die for that.

I should have known something was wrong when I didn't find her next to the main entrance, waiting for me like she does every day to greet me as soon as I come home.

"What's wrong?" I bark, directing it at my father. When he says nothing and just hugs her trembling figure closer, I try to cool the raging anger bubbling inside of me that promises bad things to whoever hurt my woman in my home. In her space. Fuck. To my girl, I say. "Who?"

"It-it's not" Her stuttering only pisses me off more. She only stutters when she's afraid. Afraid or hurt. Then she does something that hurts me just as much as her tears do.

She bows her head as if she's ashamed.

Bullshit.

The one who needs to be ashamed is the motherfucker who thought to hurt her in my home, thinking I wouldn't find out. A bold move, and a stupid

one, too.

I force myself to stay rooted in place, not wanting the ugly I'm about to unleash on whoever was behind this to touch her. Looking at my father, who looks both tired and angry, I ask. "Who?"

"Mitch."

That's all I need.

As hard as it is, I turn and leave my girl clinging to my father with tears still in her eyes and calling out my name, confused and worried, while I go in search of Scotty Flynn's youngest son.

I should've taken out that entire fucking family long ago, but out of respect for the clan and their years of loyalty, I let them carry on even when I took out his father for being an insolent shady cunt but not anymore.

Now, I have the perfect excuse to end them.

What does it matter if they're loyal when they don't respect me? If they don't know their place?

This was the last straw.

I don't take kindly to betrayal, and it's obvious now that there's a traitor in my clan and in this home.

It's time to flush him or her out.



# MESSAGE FROM C



*M,  
There has never been anyone else.  
Always you. - C*

MY WIFE

## RIAGAN



*“You fucked with the wrong one.” – R*

I gotta respect the fucker. I really do.

Even with chains around his neck holding him up and knowing the outcome, he doesn't scream or beg.

He makes excuses, though.

I hate those just as much as the begging.

It's useless.

The fact that he thought I wouldn't have the mansion wired in places not even my most loyal men know is beyond me. I trust my men to an extent—Kelly, Byrne, Bain, and the genius twins, but I know it takes very little to turn a loyal man into a traitorous dog. That's what happened to Mitch Flynn.

The dumb fuck thought he could hurt Mila, and I wouldn't find out. What he was thinking, I do not know, but that's why we're here.

To find out.

I killed his father for not only questioning my leadership and commitment to the clan but also for speaking ill of my Mum.

Now his son has hurt my girl.

There's no going back from that.

But there has to be more. There has to be a motive other than just to fuck with her.

He can't be that fucking dumb to retaliate his father's murder by hurting my girl in my damn house. He had to know I would find out, and nothing that he said or did could save him. So why?

Stopping in front of Mitch, I remove my knife from my back pocket and flip it open. Grabbing his wrist, I slam his hand down on a table and stab the knife through it, pinning it down. The same hand he used to point at her while he called her ugly names.

Retard.

That's what he said.

I watched the surveillance video from the moment Kelly stepped out with the dong for a moment, leaving her alone —thinking she was safe in her own home— to that fucker Mitch throwing the tray of food next to her, while she was quietly painting. I replay the moment she jumped when the food was spilled next to her and I witnessed her eyes start to water before she hung her head.

He not only scared and intimidated her, but he also had the balls to throw shit at her while calling her names.

Death is a merciful penance. A route I won't take.

I shove the knife deeper into his hand, smiling as he screams, trying to jerk it away, but the knife is in the wood. The fucker is only making the pain worse. "I won't ask why, because I don't really care." I grab the fucker's face forcing him to look me in the eye. "Apologize," Releasing his face, I then order while pointing at Kelly, who stands behind me, holding his phone as he records the scene.

"Wh-hat?" Mitch's shrill voice shakes.

I smile enjoying the way the cunt looks terrified, no longer looking as tough as he did when he messed with Mila. That's the thing about bullies. They tend to prey on people they believe are weak to make themselves feel better about their useless existence, but Mila is not weak, nor is she alone. Not anymore. She has me.

I grip his hair, yanking his head back. "Apologize to my wife. Now." I once again point at Kelly, who now has a cheerful look on his face but his eyes tell a different story. He is just as pissed as I am and feels a little bit guilty, too. He thinks it's his fault because he stepped away for a minute, but it's my fault for thinking she was safe in my own fucking home.

"I'm ... I'm sorry," he growls through gritted teeth. "I didn't know she was different." He snarls. Bullshit.

When I remain quiet, just staring at him, not believing a word he says, that's when he gets angry and shows his true colors.

The same as his bitch of a father.

“My father was right.” He growls while his eyes turn darker. Crazy. “You’re weak, and they all know it.” He looks toward my men, who are standing back, watching the scene quietly. “They’re coming for you, and you have no idea how close they are.” He laughs as blood pours from his mouth to his chin and chest. “No idea you have a Judas amongst you.”

Oh, I know there’s a traitor in the clan, but I don’t know exactly who it is. I won’t let the cunt know that, though.

And I won’t ask who it is because Mitch won’t say shit. I know snakes like him.

I remove the knife from his hand. He drops to his knees, the chains holding his upper half up. He holds his hand to his chest as it bleeds everywhere. Running the blade across my thigh, I close the knife and slip it back into my pocket. “Mitch?”

“Yeah?” He lifts his head to meet my glare. I remove my gun from the back of my slacks and shoot him right between the eyes.

There’s no sound in the room.

My men stand back, looking at the now-dead body of Mitch with zero emotion.

Turning to them, I point my gun at Mitch’s body on the floor and stare at each and every single one of my men. “This will be your only warning. Don’t put your hands on my wife. Ever.” My voice rings loud and clear. Reaching out, I grab the phone from Kelly. “Clean this shit up,” I order, and everyone scrambles, getting back to work.

That’s one less rat.

Now, onto the next.

Because there’s no doubt in my mind that Mitch wasn’t the only one.

The fucker was not that clever.

Nah.

One thing is clear. The contract for Mila’s head has nothing to do with my men, she was caught in that situation long before I made her mine.

Shit. Something tells me I’m running out of time.

Danger is closer than I thought.

Here.

In my fucking city.

# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*Love hit me quietly.  
Taking me by surprise and turning my world on  
its axis.*

# DIRTY GIRL

MILA



*“You taste like heaven.” – R*

“**T**his shit is kind of soothing.” I smile, watching Riagan’s large, tattooed hands kneading the dough. He woke up cheerful today and told me he was spending the whole day with me. He said it would just be us and that we could do whatever I wanted. I wonder if he feels bad about what happened yesterday. He shouldn’t, and I told him that, yet I can’t help but notice how there’s no one in the mansion with us today except for his father and his most trusted men.

No one else.

Not even the rude man who threw a tray at me while I was quietly painting on my own or his house staff.

I wonder what happened to the man— Mitch. I’d never spoken a word to him before yesterday, but I also remember not being rude to him. I try my best to smile at everyone and to always be kind.

I kept thinking about his reaction to my spacing out and how it might’ve looked as if I was ignoring him, but that doesn’t warrant what he did. I remember the look on his face, and it was as if he enjoyed frightening me. It reminded me so much of all the times back home when my father and his men would yell or make fun of me because I didn’t answer fast enough.

Yesterday started as a great day, but then it turned ugly until Riagan came home.

The feeling of shame disappeared as soon as he took me away and held me until I fell asleep. Nothing hurts when he holds me. He makes everything



better, and that makes me love him more because I know that, with him, I can be myself—the good and the bad— and he still has my back. He proves it every chance he gets.

That is why I chose to stay home today.

I wanted to spend it with my favorite person.

Although, I wonder, if the activity I chose was a big mistake.

A shirtless Riagan with messy hair, mixing and kneading bread, has my heart rate spiking.

Weird.

My breasts feel tight, and my breath hitches every time he rolls the dough through his fingers like an expert. It makes me think of all the dirty things he has done to me with those fingers.

“Share a fun fact with me, butterfly.” He suddenly says, stopping me from fantasizing about his skilled fingers.

*Share a fact with me, butterfly.*

Beaming, I think about it for a second, looking at the pile of warm bread we baked thus far.

“Riagan, do you know how old the oldest bread is?” I ask while adding more flour to the mix. We have more than enough, but I thought it would be nice to give some to his men-slash-friends.

“How old?”

I sprinkle a pinch of salt on his mixture because, somehow, he keeps forgetting the steps I taught him to bake bread. I don’t mind helping him. It warms my heart that he’s here with me instead of running his city and his many businesses. “Archaeologists found the scraps of what is believed to be flatbread around a fireplace at a Natufian hunter-gatherer site called *Shubayqa*, located in northeastern Jordan. It’s believed to be around 14,400 years old.”

“That’s old as fuck.” He seems surprised.

“It is.” I smile up at him, finding him adorable with flour on his face.

“Can I ask why you love bread so much?”

“You can ask, yes.” He laughs, and my smile widens. “And I like it, but I’m not crazy about it.”

“Then why did you want to bake bread today?”

“It reminds me of my sister.” I shrug. “She loves bread. All kinds of bread.” I take a bite of the warm goodness and moan out loud. We baked this. I feel proud.

“Arianna?” He makes a face as he can’t see my big sister being a fan of bread.

“No, not Arianna.” I move toward the oven and check on the cupcakes we threw in there before starting the bread. Cupcakes, I love. Cupcakes, I go crazy for. “Kadra.”

“Ah.” He breathes out while working on the mixture.

A moment of silence passes before he asks me. “You miss your sisters a lot, huh?”

My chest feels tight when I think of them. When I miss them, but I know we’ll meet again soon when we’re all in a better place. Our one-day basking in the sun together will come. I know it. “Very much.”

“You’ll see them again. I promise you that.” I didn’t realize I had spaced out.

“I know.” I craned my neck all the way back so I could look at his face. God, he is so tall.

“You have that much faith in me?” He gives me a crooked smile.

“I have all my faith in you.” I blurt out. He grows silent, and I wonder if I said something that made him uncomfortable, but then he growls, and the sound causes my whole body to vibrate and come alive before he leans down and kisses my mouth.

After a long while, he pulls back and releases my lips. Instantly, I miss his warm mouth. “Mila.”

“Yes, Riagan?” I breathe, looking into his eyes before I look at his mouth.

“I’m hungry.”

“Oh,” I wasn’t expecting that. Pointing at the mess of baked goodies on the kitchen counter, I reply. “Then eat. It’s all done except for the—” Before I can finish my sentence, he grabs my butt, lifts me, and drops me on the marble counter.

“Oh, I’m eating alright.” Confused, I look at his mischievous grin and sparkling blue eyes, and it dawns on me.

The other kind of hungry.

“Oh...”

I was definitely not expecting that.



## Riagan

“No,” I said. “Let me look at you.”

She squirmed underneath my penetrating gaze.

“When you look at me like that, I feel vulnerable,” She admits, her lips pursing as she looks away.

I catch her chin with my free hand and direct her to look at my face again.

When she looks up, the vulnerability in her eyes makes my heart jolt.

“I want to do nothing more than to make you smile. Give you everything you could ever want. And make you happy all at the same time,” I tell her. “When you look away from me, I feel like I’m doing something you don’t want me to do,” I tell her.

She licks her lips, then reaches for me, her hands going to either side of my head as she pulls me closer.

When my mouth is only inches from hers, she says, “I like everything you do to me. Everything.” I guide her legs around my waist. When I have her where I want her, I reach for her hands that are still on either side of my face, using only my body to hold her in place.

“If at any time you feel that we should stop, for any reason at all, even if you’re uncomfortable that I’m looking at you too intensely, I want you to say something. I’ll stop.”

She groans and leans forward so that her forehead is resting against mine. “I don’t know what I ever did to deserve you, Riagan O’Sullivan.”

I grin and press forward, allowing my hard cock to dig into one of my happy places. Her sweet pussy.

“I love the way you look at me. Even when, at times, it feels like it’s too much. I don’t want you to look away. Just keep looking at me.” She tells me honestly.

That’s all I need from her. All I need is to start taking off my clothes right here, in the middle of my kitchen. When I am naked in front of her, the look on her face would’ve been enough to make me hard had I not been in a constant state of arousal whenever she was around. Hell, whenever she breathed near me.

“You’re looking at me like you’re about to devour me,” she whispers shyly.

My hard cock is nestled between her folds, and my upper body is pressed

against hers.

Looking at her, completely at my mercy, drives me insane with need.

Then, I kiss her.

Long. Deep. Wet.

When her tongue tangles with mine as she slowly starts to heat up beneath me, I start to rock my hips back and forth. She's wet.

Really wet.

So wet, in fact, that, with each rock of my hips, she covers my cock with more and more of her juices until I know that if I angle my hips just right and adjust my angle, my dick will slide right inside her with little resistance.

My wife must've had the same thought right around the same time, too, because between one thrust and the next, I went from outside of her hot pussy to inside.

She gasps, her mouth pressing against my throat. "Oh, wow."

I pull out slightly, smiling, and sink back inside, just a little deeper this time than before.

"Fun fact about penises," she murmurs. "Did you know that there is a thing such as a death erection?"

Without much thought, I pull out and then slam back in, taking every available inch of space inside of her and more. "There is?"

"Oh, wow!" she squeaked as she dug those nails in deeper. "Yes! It is also called angel lust or terminal erection. It happens moments after death."

I did not know that.

I bend down and bite her shoulder, then pull back to lick the skin. "What made you look up fun facts about cocks, butterfly?" I ask while looking at her clit. Her pussy. How great she looks stretched around me.

She groans and lifts her feet to dig into my thighs. "I was just curious."

I can't think straight or focus on her facts now.

Her pussy is rippling around me, and her nipples are pebbled into hard little peaks that just beg for my attention. But I don't move or change my angle because before the thought could even enter my mind to grab those perky nipples, her body starts to convulse around me.

My balls draw up at that thought, and before I can think better of it, I am coming.

It was perfection every time.

"You make me feel like a fucking king," I whisper while biting her ear gently. I triumphantly smile when I feel her shiver in my arms. "Like I'm on

top of the world.”

After we were both spent, we lie on top of the counter, covered in bread mix and flour, panting, and trying to catch our breaths.

“Do you think anyone heard us?” She whispers so softly I almost miss it.

I hope they did.

It might make me seem like a sick fuck, but I would love it if my men heard the sounds of pleasure coming from my wife. Heard all the dirty shit I did to her.

“Riagan?” she slaps her hand on my chest, catching my attention.

“Probably, baby. You were pretty fucking loud.” And hot. So fucking hot. I don’t tell her that.

Then my wife hides her face in my neck and groans with embarrassment, but not me.

I just laugh, hug her closer, and think to myself: how the fuck did I get so lucky?

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*Why you?  
Because you're my one.  
Your name is inked in my heart.*

# WAFFLE CAKE & WILLOW TREES

## RIAGAN



*“Nothing you do will ever be wrong.” – R*

*“M*ake a wish, a sheòid,” Da says while he smiles at me proudly alongside all his men. Every year he throws me a big Irish-themed party with all the O’Sullivan members and their kids in attendance.

*Today, I turned ten years old and just like all my birthdays before, he asked me to make a wish. I do as he says, not wanting to make him feel bad. Because I will if I show him how I truly feel inside. I’m all he has aside from his men and this city. I’m all that matters to him. My happiness is his priority. I know this too.*

*That is why I act like nothing hurts and that all is well because I know he needs me to be okay, but I don’t tell him I don’t have dreams or believe in wishing for shit.*

*I’m not a kid who believes in magic and unicorns like most children my age. I used to once, although I don’t remember much about those days.*

*All I do remember is that all my dreams and wishes faded to black when she left. My home was no longer full of light and laughter but sadness and fury.*

*My old man is not the same, not even when he pretends.*

*But I do pretend for him because he’s the most important person in my life.*

*That is the only reason why I close my eyes and blow out the ten candles as everyone cheers and whistles loudly around me.*



*Irish people know how to throw a party, and every year, my father goes above and beyond.*

*Expensive decorations and cool as fuck gifts.*

*Today, whereas a normal kid my age would get a video game or some shit like that for their tenth birthday, I got my first gun. I don't mind it one bit.*

*All I ever wanted was to grow up and be like my grandfather and father.*

*Live the life they do.*

*Fast cars.*

*Fights.*

*Power.*

*It all calls out to me more than anything else.*

*But I also know that not even that can fill the hole that's been slowly growing in my chest.*

*The void I feel.*

*Instead of communicating all this with my old man, I chose the easy route.*

*I smile wide for him.*

*For him and his men, even when it hurts.*

*Smiling hurts when you fake it.*

*I've been faking it for as long as I can remember.*

*"Atta, little man." Da bends down and kisses my forehead, then ruffles my hair affectionately, and I wonder if it hurts him, too?*

*If he fakes all his smiles for me like I do?*

*"Make a wish, Riagan!" The sweet and exciting sound of my wife's voice pierces my soul and brings me back to the present and away from the past. "And smile wide!" she beams happily.*

*Shit, I do.*

*I smile with my whole face because for the first time in a long fucking while, I am truly happy. I don't smile because I was granted another year on this earth, especially with the life I lead, but because I have her. I have someone who makes me believe in magic and happily ever after. Someone who has trouble expressing her feelings, so instead, she shows me with her actions. Someone who had tears in her eyes yesterday but woke up with the most blinding smile on her face today. She spent all morning and afternoon decorating and baking with men twice her weight, and who look like serial killers, even when gets shy and sometimes has trouble relating to them. Yet she tries.*

For me.

I also smile wide when I see her holding a waffle cake with green frosting — my favorite that she baked with the help of two of my men, who now seem to like her more than they like me, and I have zero issues with that unless they step out of line, which they won't because they value their lives.

My girl is wearing ripped jeans that show a bit of creamy skin and an oversized mint shirt that reads 'Ask Daddy.' I don't think she realizes the sexual meaning behind the message, but I'll gladly show her tonight.

What makes me laugh is the crooked birthday hat she has on— the same one she put on the dog. That's another one who quickly attached himself to her.

Good because he was always meant for her.

All I've built for the past couple of years, I did it with her in mind. With the hope that one day, maybe she would be here in my world.

And here she is.

Celebrating me when, before her, everyone knew how little I cared about birthdays, but if celebrating me makes her smile like she's doing now, I'll deal.

Tuning out the rest of the men gathered around, I lean over the Irish-themed waffle cake she's holding and blow out the candles without looking away from those blue eyes that have the power to stop the heart in my chest. Once every single candle is out, I whisper for her and only her. "I got all I want right here, butterfly. Don't need anything else." As soon as the words leave my mouth, her eyes grow softer, and that perfect smile of hers widens, robbing me of air.

That's it, baby.

That's all I need.

"Dig in, motherfuckers. This shit looks good." Byrne roughly says. I'm about to call the fucker out for his lack of manners when he playfully touches Mila's head.

*Fuck.*

Before I have time to react and break his hand for touching her without her consent, she freezes.

Swear to fucking God, she freezes in place as if she's trapped inside her head.

Nothing like the time when that filthy cunt that was after her in the alley pulled her hair. This time I watch as she completely goes into her head. Her

eyes are no longer focused, and I'm not sure she's breathing with how still she is.

A long moment of silence falls, and then the cake falls to the floor, crumbling at both of our feet.

Fuck.

That's when she snaps out of it.

I see the look of sadness that falls over her face when she realizes she dropped the cake.

"It's okay, baby." I grab her shoulders and make her look at me when she tries to look around the room, embarrassed. "You're fine. It's nothing." I hug her closer, kissing the top of her head as I do. "Hey, look at me." I step back and try to get her to look at me, but she won't.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, dropping her head.

My chest feels tight.

I drop another kiss on her head, comforting her. "Nothing to be sorry about. It's not your fault."

But she doesn't believe me I know.

I witness how quickly she puts on a wobbly smile and acts like all is fine. She learned to adapt to bad or awkward situations when she was a child. She goes to her head for protection, and when she snaps out of the daze and comes back, she pretends, and that just breaks my fucking heart.

"Baby—" Then Maeve steps forward and steals her from me. I don't fucking like it, but I understand. She's trying to ease Mila's discomfort and distract her.

At least, I'm thankful for that.

I watch as Maeve pulls her with her to the other side of the room, where a table is set with all the food, and ask her how she managed to pull all this off in a day, which successfully makes Mila get out of her head and explain logically all she did to pull an Irish themed party with no professional help.

"Fuck, man." Byrne steps forward, staring me in the eyes with a look of remorse in it. That's a first. The fucker is a skilled and trained assassin. A killing machine. But I see my woman got to him too. "I didn't think."

Raising my hand, I tell him. "Don't let it happen again."

He nods, then turns to leave toward the others who had the good sense to carry on as if nothing happened.

Walking to the bar, where my father is sitting, nursing a glass of water, I serve myself a glass too. Not wanting to drink tonight for some reason. "That

girl is gold, son. I'm glad you have her." The raw pain in his voice makes me turn to look at him. He looks better than he did months ago, but he's still clearly sick. Fuck.

"I'm glad I have you both. That's all I need." I clasp his shoulder gently, not wanting to think about the possibility of him leaving me just yet. Not at all.

"Yeah, boy. You have us." he breathes out, then takes a cigar from his jacket's pocket and puts it in his mouth, but he doesn't light it. "I heard about a wish list or some shit like that you're completing for me." he raises an eyebrow at me, all sadness gone from his eyes. There's only mirth there. "I didn't teach you to lie, *a sheòid*."

"Only to fight and kill, right?"

"Damn straight."

The heaviness in my heart eases as we both laugh.

Then, I turn and search for my girl but don't see her where she last was with Maeve and the dog.

Shit.



THE SUN IS ALREADY SETTING, and the sky has a beautiful pink hue. Mila loves the sunset. That's why it doesn't surprise me to find her outside, sitting peacefully on the swing I set up under the big-ass Willow in the center of the garden.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," I whisper as I get closer. Mila's back tenses, and she stops pushing herself on the swing. I love how her feet don't reach the ground. "I don't like it when you're away from me Mila." I position myself behind her, and grab the ropes to help her, and gently start pushing her.

"I ruined your cake and your party with my issues." She mumbles, sounding sad.

"Bullshit. You did no such thing." I try to keep my voice soft, but when she apologizes for being herself, it pisses me off. She never has to apologize for her past or her beautiful and endearing quirks. "Byrne's sorry."

Her head whips around as she looks at me over her shoulder. Well, with our height difference, when she's sitting, she comes face to face with my

chest. “He doesn’t have to apologize. It was—”

“He does have to apologize, and he did. People shouldn’t touch others without their consent. You never know what could trigger them.” I didn’t think that way before. I honestly believed this world was too damn sensitive, but after she came along, I started looking at it in a different light. A beautiful one. It sometimes scares the fuck out of me because I’ve witnessed just how ugly this world truly is. Hell, I contribute to that ugliness. “He’ll do better from now. That I promise you. They all will.” It’s a process, but at least my men are mindful of her. They don’t have a choice. I’ll kill any of them in a heartbeat if they make her cry. If they step out of line like that dumb-fuck — Mitch.

“They’ll look at me differently now.” She whispers, hurt, while I push her gently. The wind is blowing her curls, and she’s never looked more unreal than right here to me.

“You are different,” I tell her, feeling her back grow rigid. But before she goes and starts thinking things that aren’t true, I speak again and explain myself. “You’re not one of them. You’re my wife, and as such, they need to treat you, but you also carry a soft heart, butterfly. Men like me aren’t good enough for it, but we try. We try like fuck to deserve it. My men aren’t used to exceptional humans like you, but they care for you.” I won’t mention her disability. Her disability is not her, and my men know this. All they see is this sweet creature that scares them. I know it. Because she sure as fucked scared the hell out of me when I met her, and she still does. Maeve was right, and we all know it. Soft hearts are a challenge but worth it. I also didn’t lie when I told her my men care for her because they do. Bain got attached to her in all those years of keeping her safe. Too fucking close, if you asked me.

Kelly’s eyes grow soft every time he finds a sticky note with a positive message on his car door or stuck in the fridge where she leaves them, knowing he’ll find them. She doesn’t know it, and he doesn’t know I know, but it makes his day.

Then, there’s Maeve, who’s never been happier now that there’s someone else who listens to all that genius shit she likes to go on about for hours with her twin. Now, they have added Mila to the nerd club.

Maeve’s words. Not mine.

Fuck, even Byrne.

My warlord is emotionless. In all these years, I’ve never witnessed him look remorseful, but he did today.

They all care in their own way, and I'm fucking glad about that.

If the time comes to lay their lives down for her I know they will just as they would for me.

I also know where she's coming from. A man attacked her in a place where she was supposed to be safe from the cruelty of the world. And today, she was triggered, even if it was unintentional.

"I'm sorry there's so much ugly in the world, butterfly."

"Well... we can only appreciate the light because of the dark." When I think she doesn't hear me, she does.

"I don't want to leave." She blurts out.

Frowning, I stop pushing the swing. "Leave?" The thought of that happening cuts deep.

"I don't want to ever leave this place," she whispers, and she looks away from me. With my heart thrumming in my rib cage, I move until I'm standing in front of her. "I don't want to ever leave you."

Thud.

Thud.

Fucking thud.

Gently, I lift her off the swing and into my arms. Once her eyes are on me, I say. "You're not going anywhere, Mila. You are mine, and I am yours."

"I love you," she says quietly, then hesitates before she speaks again. "Since the first letter."

I'm taken aback but not at all surprised that she figured it out. I'm surprised it took her this long.

"How'd you figure it out?"

"It took me a while to connect the dots and you, with him— the one from the emails—but then, with every little and big gesture, I started to wonder how you could know things not even my sisters knew. Only one person knew my heart's wishes, and then I felt with you what I felt when I opened every message. I no longer felt alone. I was excited and couldn't wait to find out what was written inside. I've felt the same here." she touches her chest. "That's how I knew."

"Baby—" I exhale, lost for words.

"Plus, Maeve let it slip." she laughs, and the sound goes straight to my heart. "She said, and I quote: "Don't let the tattoos and the kills fool you. Bossman is a big romantic teddy bear. He even writes love letters."

Maeve and her big mouth.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asks, frowning now.

“I wanted you to fall for who I am. Not just the man from the letters. All of me.” I say truthfully.

And she had.

Because I’d shown her my black soul, and she chose me anyway.

“Oh, that makes sense.” I watch her cheeks turn pink, and her eyes fall to my mouth. “You didn’t say it back,” she says.

Smiling like a fool, I kiss her forehead and whisper back. “I love you more.”

“I don’t think that’s possible, Riagan.” Fuck, so sweet.

“It is. Trust me.” I hold her tightly in my arms while her arms hold onto my neck. Her eyes no longer look sad but full of love and happiness. They’re shining. “I think I loved you long before I met you. Long before the letters.”

“Perhaps, we’ve met in another life.” She frowns, and I can tell she’s trying to find the logic in my statement. “That does explain all the deja vu feelings I’ve been experiencing since our very first encounter.”

I was not one to believe in past lives and all that shit that most people believe in when they fall in love, but she makes me believe in it. In soulmates and love after death. Multiple lives and finding your soul mate in each and every single one of them.

It started with a lonely girl who stirred the protective instinct in me.

Then, life threw me the biggest plot twist.

The sweet girl who tugged at my rusty heartstrings grew up and became my wife.

My heart.

My thoughts are interrupted when she squeezes my neck tightly and breathes out. “Thank you for loving me, Riagan. For who I am.” There’s a vulnerability in her words that makes my chest ache. One day, I’ll get her to see just how extraordinary she really is. One day, she won’t doubt it.

“You’re perfect,” I answer seriously. “You make the world pretty, butterfly.”

Her blue eyes turn soft. There’s tenderness in them. “Ria—”

My mouth cuts her off as it crashes down on hers.

Her taste made an addict out of me.

One taste has me weak in the knees.

Weak for her.

My sweet vixen.

Pulling back, I release her lips and watch her pretty face as she scowls adorably. “More.”

Laughing, I reach inside my jeans pocket and pull out the crumbled piece of paper I’ve been carrying with me for weeks and place it between us. She untangles one arm from my neck and grabs the paper.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

“This is my bucket list.”

“Wish number nine made. You can cross it out, baby. And while you’re at it, cross off numbers one and seven.”

“But I can’t. I haven’t changed someone’s life.”

“You have. You changed mine, butterfly.”

She stays quiet for a moment too long, and I wonder if I pushed too hard, but then she grabs my face and whispers close to my lips. Her sweet scent was all over me. “Forever, Riagan?”

“Forever, butterfly.”

And then she surprises me by kissing me as if she needs me to breathe.

I do.

I need her to breathe.

I’m utterly obsessed with the tiny magical girl who appeared out of nowhere and made her home in my once-black and hollowed heart.

My Mila.



# UNSENT MESSAGE FROM M



*Dear, C,  
Found you. - M*

# TOUCH HIS HEART

MILA



*"Thank you for being my person." – M*

The second I unveiled the present I got Riagan for his birthday, nerves started to sink in. "If you don't like it, that's okay! You don't have to. I just wanted to give you something to smile at whenever you pass this hall. I—" When he says nothing, I grow nervous. I hold my breath and watch as he steps closer to the mural and touches his mother's face. I try to capture all the little details of the old photo. Not only her beauty and essence but the pretty butterfly hairpiece she has in the photo and the young Riagan, who is touching her cheek with his small fingers. They're both smiling wide while staring into each other's eyes. I didn't get to have that kind of love. A love so fierce and true between a mother and her child, but I'm glad he had it. I guess that's what captured my attention the moment I saw the photo. The tender expression on her face while she looked at her son. I can tell from the photos of them together that his mother, Natalia, was the heart of their little family. The softness to Cathan's harshness.

She was very beautiful and clearly a huge part of Riagan's heart. That's why I chose to paint her in this cold and empty hall. But maybe I overstepped?

"Riagan, are you okay?" He's not saying anything, and I'm having trouble deciphering what he's feeling at the moment. I don't like it when he's quiet. I don't like it at all. Stepping forward, I touch his back, and that's when I see it.

The big, brave, and strong man I love so much has tears in his eyes, and

for a moment, I panic, thinking that perhaps I did something wrong. Maybe the mural is a bad reminder. I should've thought about this better. Since Riagan has given me more than I could dream of, I just wanted to give him and his father something to be reminded of the woman they both clearly still love so much.

Before I get the chance to open my mouth and apologize for making him sad, he turns, and even though he has unshed tears in his eyes, there's a beautiful smile on his handsome face.

The same smile that makes my heart race.

"I love you so fucking much, butterfly." His strong arms wrap around me, pulling me closer. "This... this is breathtaking. I don't even know how to put into words just how perfect it is. You're so fucking talented, baby." He breathes closer to my face. I watch his blue eyes shine, and I no longer feel nervous. I feel... loved. Cherished and appreciated. I don't feel useless. Not anymore.

"I'm glad you like it."

"I love it." He squeezes me, making me laugh. "You're incredible."

"Good."

He drops a kiss on my nose and then asks. "What made you draw this?"

"I was curious and wanted to know more about your childhood. When I saw this photo of you and your mom, it made me smile. It made me so happy to see you so happy. And I wanted to paint something that would make you smile every time you saw it." I touch his cheek, trying to hold his gaze for as long as I can. "I think the love and bond you had with your mom should be on display, Riagan. Now, she'll be not only in your heart but in this home as well."

He stares at me without saying a word, with an intense look on his face. I love the way he looks at me as if he's not sure if I'm real or not. No one ever looks at me like he does. I don't want them to. Just him. Always my Riagan.

"She sent you to me through the butterflies. I know it now. I feel it." He breathes, pulling me closer, and all I can do is try to calm my racing heart that's trying to escape my chest and fall at his feet. "I was cold, and then I saw you, and suddenly, the world didn't seem so dark and empty."

The butterflies?

Then, I think about it, and it all hits me in full force.

The butterfly that repeatedly hit my bedroom window, trying to come inside on the morning I met Riagan.

The butterfly costume.

His mother's love for butterflies.

Huh.

"She loved you very much." I touch his cheek, and he kisses my open palm. "You just have to look at her eyes, and you'll see it. I believe love as pure as that doesn't die, even if the body does. I think your mom found a way to love you even when she was away from you." I choose to believe in love. Love never dies, not even if his mother did.

He grunts but says nothing. He just hugs me close while we both stare at the mural. My heart is buzzing with happiness and love. He loved the gift.

My art.

"I'm glad you found me, butterfly."

Hugging his side, I smile big.

When I stumbled upon him all those years ago, I wasn't looking for him. I went out looking for something. I didn't know back then what it was, but I do now.

I was looking for freedom.

For peace.

For love.

Him.

"I'm thankful to my lucky stars, Riagan. They led the path to you." I whisper.

He smiles at me, then turns me in his arms until we're chest to chest again. Staring at his lips—those luscious lips of his, all I want to do is kiss them. Kiss him to show him just how much he's wanted. Just how much I love him.

And I do.

I kiss him like he means the world to me.

Like he's all I see and feel.

Because he is, and I do.

He is everything.

# MESSAGE FROM M



M,  
You own every piece of me.  
The good and the ugly. - Riagan Cage O'Sullivan

**OKAY? OKAY.**

## RIAGAN



*"I'll always be here. Always." - R*

After I turned the tables on the contract for Mila's head no more targets have popped up, but I'm not taking any chances. After both Maeve and Conor relentlessly did their hacker shit, they found one more mercenary that took the initial contract, which is less than the sum I offered. Shit. This means that the price for her head has increased. "Conor, raise the offer. I don't care how much it costs. Find me that fucker. We're running out of time." I bark orders at him while he sits at the far end of the home office. Just as I say it, Kelly enters my office, followed by Bain after spending all day handling business at Mayhem while I've been here with Mila. After everything that's gone down lately, I've decided to not leave her alone, especially with this unease I feel. "Anything?"

"Word on the street is that she went rogue." Bain answers as he steps farther inside the room, taking a seat opposite Conor. Kelly stands leaning against the door.

"Bullshit. She's too smart for that. She's coming for her." I take a cig from behind my ear and place it on my lips. Fuck, in times like this, I do miss the rush of nicotine. "How about the fuckers?"

Kelly takes out a piece of paper and a pen from the inside of his hoodie. "Five down." I watch as he crosses names off the list. A list Bain gave him with all the men who were in any form disrespectful or abusive towards my wife. I couldn't keep her safe when she was a young girl, but she won't spend a single day on this earth breathing the same fucking air as anyone who ever



hurt her. I promised to take care of them, and that's what we're doing.

"Ya know, most of the men here are no longer breathing, right? The majority of them were sent swimming in the Detroit River by Kadra Parisi and never came back. The ones she didn't bury alive, of course." Bain says from his seat. "I'm guessing for those fucks to have lived this long is because she didn't know about them."

Perhaps.

"Found you," Conor crows, standing up and fist-pumping the empty air of my office.

After three days of intense leg work, we'd found the man that's taken the hit to take out Mila. I picked up my phone and called Byrne, who would do whatever he needed to do on his end next. "Taylor Dean, thirty-six, retired Army sniper. Lives in Colorado Springs, has six kids, and a very, very nice house for someone that works as a public-school janitor," I said the moment he answered.

"Got it, man," Byrne said before I hung up.

"How do we pin this on the fucker?" I ask my men, finally feeling like we're one step closer to ending this shit. I've never felt more useless. I've always been able to neutralize threats, and in part, I have, but this won't end until the initial contractor is taken out. I have offered a large amount of money and yet the fucker won't back down. He or she is very fucking rich, that's a no-brainer, but they're also very focused on Mila. No one knew about her up until two weeks ago, and suddenly, they're gunning for her head. Makes no sense. Months before, they were attacking the future first lady of this country, Mila's sister, Arianna.

This is about the Parisi family.

One of them pissed off very rich and important people, and they're now gunning for all of them.

My bet is Kadra Parisi.

"With the information you've sent me, and the information I've been able to dig up on my own, I'll call a buddy in the FBI and pull a favor. Without exposing your woman's name to the world and announcing her location, he's going to have to find a way to do this with the last hit he took," he explained. "But with the information Maeve was able to gather off the dark web, we at least have a starting point to stop him."

"Do that." We all watch as he stands with his laptop safely tucked under his arm and heads toward the door. "Thanks, kid. Good work." I don't say it

often, but I lucked out with my team. Every single one of them has proven to be loyal and competent in every way. They all have irritating as fuck traits, but they are also pretty good at what they do. That's all I ask for, and it's the reason why I tolerate half of them. Kelly, mostly.

Conor nods once before exiting the room quietly.

"That kid's brain scares the shit out of me," Kelly mumbles as soon as the door clicks shut behind Conor. "Did you know the little fucker spent all morning yesterday cyber fucking some of his old bullies? Let the bitch dry after stealing all his money and pinning an unsolved murder on the man."

"If I were you, I would cool it with the virgin nerd jokes. I wouldn't mess with him or Maeve, for that matter. They're petty." Bain whispers as if they could hear him.

Idiots.

Before I can tell them both to shut the fuck up, a loud alarm blares, and I watch, with dread sinking in my gut, how the monitors with the security camera footage turns completely dark on the far right.

Fuck.

No.

The security system is down, and the mansion has been breached.

"How the fuck does this happen?" Bain rises from the sofa and turns around before meeting Kelly at the door.

There's a long pause before Kelly speaks. "This shouldn't have happened. The only people who have access to the security codes and could turn off the cameras are you and—"

"The twins." Bain finishes for him. Both my men look as if they already buried a friend.

Because that's exactly what will happen.

I was so busy worrying about the hit on her head that I hadn't focused on the fact that maybe this was all connected. A mole.

The twins.

Standing up, I grab my gun from my desk, strap it to my chest and grab a knife. "Mila. Your priority is Mila." They both nod.

That's the only thing I say before I exit the office.

Mila.

This all ends tonight.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I run towards her. The world can go to hell for all I care but never her. No one can hurt her.

# MILA'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*Lately, all I want to do is lie on his chest and  
listen to his heart beating.*

# KNIFE TO MY BACK

MILA



*"Say you won't let go." - M*

“How didn’t I know this!” Maeve gasps as she types enthusiastically on her tablet.

“Why would you? I never told you.” I say it as a matter of fact.

She stops typing and looks at me sheepishly. It takes me a second to figure out why she looks guilty. “Riagan made you spy on me?”

“Spy? I don’t like that word. Think of it as me being your cyber guardian angel.” She winks and continues working on her tablet.

She’s weird.

The nice kind of weird.

She doesn’t make me nervous. Nor do I feel myself constantly trying to find things to say to her. She likes the quiet like I do, and when she does speak, she always has something interesting to say.

“When did you start doing this, and how did you do it? I hope you don’t mind me asking. It’s just that this is so much money.” She looks at me expectantly.

I like painting old things to make them pretty again, and Carlotta suggested I start posting anonymously on social media. She helped me with everything. She’s so smart and has a knack for marketing. Carlotta is the reason why my hobby is now a successful business.”

“What did you do with all that money? You haven’t spent a single dime.” She smiles. “Yes, I tapped inside your bank account.”

“I wanted to give it to Carlotta, but she refused, and so did my sister Kadra, so I left it there.”

“Do you want to do something with it?” she asks.

I think about it for a second. “I think I’d like to give some to charity,” I told her. The rest I can use to purchase gifts for Riagan that will make him smile. Just like he does for me.

“We could do that. If you want to, yes.” She leans back on the sofa, and I see her expression change. “I can also help you grow your business. It’s all about social media these days and finding sponsors. Your designs are fun and young. People eat that up.”

I listen to what she’s suggesting, but I’m not really into the business side of things. I just like painting and fixing old and broken things. The only reason I decided to post on social media was because it gave me a sense of freedom. It allowed me to do something for myself instead of depending on my sisters or my family’s name.

“It’s just for fun.” I blurt out. “I mean, it’s just something I do for fun. I don’t really care about the money.”

“Well, if you ever decide to make something more out of it. I—” She’s interrupted by the loud sound of an alarm blaring.

Men’s shouts are heard in the distance.

Maeve abruptly stands, and I see it on her face.

She’s not afraid, but there’s worry written all over her expression.

And I know.

I know there’s something terribly wrong.

I don’t have to guess because when I rise from the sofa, the door to the theater room opens at the same moment, and in walks Riagan’s father.

My heart stops, and so does my breathing when I see him covered in blood.

From the look on his face, I can tell that he’s angry. Furious.

“Maeve. Take Mila to the panic room, and don’t leave until I come to get you myself. Don’t open for anyone else.” He barks, startling me. Cathan has never raised his voice around me. Not even once.

“What’s going on?” I inch closer to him, worried about what all this can do to his health. Is the blood his? I don’t understand what’s going on.

His blue eyes, the same as Riagan’s, soften when they glance at me. “The security alarm has been disarmed from the inside, and we’ve been breached. You aren’t safe.”

Bad guys. Bad guys are coming.

“You need to go.” He gently urges me toward the door.

“I don’t want to leave you here on your own.” Where’s Riagan? My heart starts to beat erratically and not in a good way. My head spins with all kinds of bad thoughts. Is he hurt?

“We need you safe, honey. He needs you to be okay. He can’t get us out of this alive if he’s worried about you.” I know he doesn’t mean harm with his words, but they strike me.

“I’ll protect her with my life,” Maeve says while moving closer to the door. She has a look on her face that I can’t quite decipher.

“No. Wait” I cry out, scared for them. For my husband. “Riagan...”

“He’ll be okay. My boy won’t let anyone hurt you. We won’t let anyone hurt you. Any of you.” He nods at Maeve, and I watch a silent agreement pass between them.

“Watch your back and your brother’s back.” Cathan turns away from us and faces the armed men who appear at the door of the theater, his family, who were all looking at him. “Just like we do to all our enemies. We go after them and show no fucking mercy.” I watched as each of them nodded their heads, gripped their guns, and flicked their knives.

None of them looked scared.

Not even Maeve.

They’re used to times like this.

Some might even crave this kind of chaos.

My husband is one of them.

As kind and loving as he is to me I am not blind to his darker side.

He enjoys the thrill the chase gives him.

The same could be said of my father-in-law.

It’s evident in the way Cathan grips his gun with a determined look on his face. He almost looks giddy.

He throws a cig into his mouth, balancing it between his lips before winking at me and pushing both Maeve and me out the door toward safety. And all I can do is hope that he survives this. That we all do, and that Riagan comes back for me. “Hide, and whatever you do, don’t come out of that room until he comes to get you himself.”

“O-okay.” I tell him, not feeling good about this at all. I don’t want to leave him, but I also don’t want to be in their way.

“We’ll be fine. He’ll be fine. Come on.” Maeve gently leads me down the

flights of stairs that lead towards the downstairs area of the mansion.

As soon as we're safe inside a room I've never seen before, Maeve touches a keypad and locks us in.

"No one can come in here. It's a panic room. We're safe."

"And him? Is he safe?" I lean my head back against the metal door. My heart is racing, and my mind is a mess.

"Of course, he is." she scoffs arrogantly. "He's the captain. The Godfather. He always comes out on the other side. Always."

I know.

Deep down, I know that he'll come out of this just like he has done countless times before, but something about this attack seems different. Seems final.

How did they breach the mansion when he had guards in every corner, and how come the system was hacked? That had to be an inside job, no? Someone on the inside, someone smart. Something that only a hacker could do. The moment the thought crosses my mind, the panic room's system shuts down completely. Then, my eyes fall to Maeve, who is sitting at a desk no longer typing on her computer but looking at something or someone behind me. "No." her grief is evident in her tone and in the lone tear that falls from her eyes. Turning, I look at the person who no doubt caused all this. Someone with a mind to match her own. "Con... why?"

Her twin brother.

What is going on?

I watch as Conor, one of Riagan's men that I know very little of besides that he is a genius hacker and Maeve's twin, steps inside the panic room while more men stand behind him, waiting with guns strapped to their chests.

Men I don't recognize.

"I had no choice, Mae." He walks closer to his sister and lowers his gun. "I made a mistake, and I was in deep." I detect guilt. Yes, guilt in his tone. At least, there's that. I alternate between keeping my eyes trained on him and his men. This was an ambush.

Does Riagan know?

Where is he?

Someone he trusted betrayed him. Someone who was close all this time.

Then, I started to wonder if he was behind the vendetta against my family and the contract for my and Arianna's heads. But I've never met this man in my life. What grudge could he hold against my family? This makes no sense.



“Was it money? Maeve cries as she slaps him. The pain in her voice is so raw I feel it in my soul. “Wasn’t all we had enough? Or was it power that you sought? Is that it? What was it? Answer me, dammit!”

“I wanted to see how far I could take it. It was just a game at first. The feeling was addictive. I, the little guy, got to stick it to the big man. I took from them, and they didn’t even fucking notice, and it worked, Mae! I fucking did it until I took it too far.” His eyes go crazy, then he points my way. “If we hand her over then it’ll all be forgiven. No one has to know. We let them take her, and we can walk away with more money than we could ever dream of. More money that we could ever make working for Cap.”

“And what, Con? And fucking what? We pretend you didn’t fucking betray the hand that fed us. The man and son who took us when nobody fucking wanted us. We walk toward the sunset with our pockets full of dirty money that comes from hurting an innocent girl. Who are you? How fucking could you!” She cries harder, and my heart breaks for her. “We had nothing! No one! Cathan gave us everything! The clan saved our lives. How could you?”

A moment of silence passes, her brother is clearly lost for words.

He not only betrayed Riagan but his sister.

His only family.

“I–I” Conor stumbles to get his next words out, and while he does, I take the opportunity to look at my surroundings to see if I can find something to use as a weapon. I might not be brave and a fighter like my sisters, but I won’t allow anyone to hurt Maeve or me.

But one not-too-subtle move gives me away, and then I have a gun pointing my way. Conor’s.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if you don’t cooperate.” He whispers harshly. Still, I don’t see evil in him, just greed and plain stupidity. That’s saying something since he’s a genius.

But tonight, he made a dumb decision.

One that will cost him his family and, if Riagan gets to him, his life.

When I think Maeve will think things through and choose her brother, she takes us both by surprise when she speaks. “Go, Con, before he finds out what you did.”

“You would turn on me?” Conor whispers incredulously.

I watch as Maeve stands up and moves at a slow pace without taking her eyes off her brother. “You betrayed me the moment you chose greed over me.

Over the clan.”

“But we’re one.” He argues.

“I thought we were.” Her voice breaks, and she turns her back to him. She’s already grieving him. “You either go, or you fucking kill me, Con, but I won’t let you hurt her.”

“Mae.” Conor looks as heartbroken as his sister, but then an ugly look crosses his face. “You’re just like her. Choosing everyone else over me.” He shouts the last part. Hitting his chest with the hand that’s holding the gun. I’ve never noticed the anger that lives inside of him. But in truth, I never gave him much thought, thinking of him as just a quiet genius who was in no way a threat, but how wrong I was. And who is the ‘her’ he is referring to?

“I’m saving your life, Conor. Even when your selfishness just put mine at risk.” She snaps, looking angry. Angry and broken. “Get out, Conor, before he finds you, and I have to bury another brother because of your selfish decisions,” she says brokenly. Then, to drive the nail deeper, she hisses. “And what would she think of you now if she saw what you became?”

The look of anger fades, and one of heartbreak takes over.

Her words about a dead brother and a mystery woman made him look at his twin sister as if she just shoved a knife in his chest. While I’m stuck watching the frightening and heartbreaking scene in front of me unfold, I almost miss the loud and angry shouts coming from upstairs toward us.

In my gut, I know it’s him.

It’s Riagan and the other men who in a short amount of time, become my family.

They’re coming fast, and the men that are closing in on us notice, too, turning to face their threat.

A threat I know all too well.

He came for me, and maybe these men weren’t anticipating Riagan getting out of this alive in time to get to me, but he did.

One by one, Conor’s allies fall to the ground either by gunshots to their heads or knives shoved into their eye sockets or neck.

Just one man does all of that.

Mine.

I no longer worry about what can happen to me, Maeve, or even my husband because he’s here. He’s here, covered in blood, and from what I can see, unharmed.

I let out a sigh of relief as my heart settles down, but it doesn’t last long

because the room's atmosphere changes as soon as Riagan's eyes fall on me. It went from heartbreaking to chaotic.

Cianne, Byrne, Bain, and even Riagan's father stand behind my husband, covered in blood with murderous looks. I've never seen the look like this, but I know this is who they all are deep down.

Savages.

Men who do what needs to be done to remain on top of the ranks.

I know this, and yet I do not care because I've seen other parts of them, too.

Their human side, even Byrne's.

Right now, even though their eyes are angry and there's darkness behind them, I also see the pain from when they walked in and saw Conor— someone they thought was a brother and a friend— betraying not only their leader but them as well.

It happened so fast that my head started to spin, but I tried to tune out the loud noise and focus on him.

*You can do this, Mila.*

*Be strong.*

The voice in my head that used to be my own changes into his. All I hear is Riagan telling me to be brave, and that's what I do. Instead of falling to the ground in a fetal position like I would have done before, I stand strong and put all my faith in him.

It only takes a second for all hell to break loose.

When it does, shots are fired.

Fists are thrown, hearts keep breaking, and then I'm being pushed. "Maeve, no!" Someone yells, and I think it is Cathan, but I'm not really sure. It's all a mess. I can't see anything because my head starts to spin.

Then, I fall to the floor with another person's weight on top of me. All I can see is pink hair.

Maeve.

But then I hear machine guns go off.

Loud, so loud, and grunts of pain.

Then there's a scream.

Loud.

Desperate.

Heartbreaking.

A person is down on the floor crying and screaming until their throats

hurt.

I didn't realize the person screaming and crying was me until the world turned dark, and I could no longer feel anything.

My last thought is him.

His eyes.

His smile.

Just him.

# RIAGAN'S SECRET THOUGHTS



*I love you.  
I've never loved anything or anyone more than I  
love you.*

# LETTING GO

## RIAGAN



*"She painted my world. It is no longer black."  
- R*

When I was a young lad, my grandfather would always remind me that with leadership comes great responsibility and that, to remain on top, you had to have the respect of your followers more than their fear. A man who fears their leader might grow to resent them and will most likely turn rat out of bitterness and desperation. While a man who respects their leader and trusts him will not falter. They won't bite the hand that feeds them.

I tried to maintain a balance when keeping my men in line by treating them like my brothers, between gaining their respect and trust and putting the fear of what would happen to them if they crossed me. I always made an example out of the rats, but I guess I was too soft on the twins.

They had a shitty start in life, but whereas Maeve didn't let her past keep her down, Conor allowed it to cloud his judgment and feed his need for more.

Both twins have abnormally high IQs, but Conor's was something more. He always kept to himself and did what he was told without complaining. Just kept his head down. I didn't notice he was straying until it was too late.

I had no choice.

He was—

"Riagan..." The voice of an angel whispers soothingly, pulling me out of the shadows. It's dark here. Cold, too. "Riagan, please open your eyes." The

angel with the sweet voice pleads.

Mila.

My butterfly.

Slowly coming to consciousness, I open my eyes to find the eyes of the woman I love so fucking much filled with tears and anguish. Mila hovers over me while I'm lying on the couch, and before she has a chance to say anything, I quickly rise to my full height, not caring that it fucking hurts everywhere when I move.

"Are you hurt?" I hold her slightly away from me and inspect her quickly. She does not appear to be harmed besides her red eyes. She's been crying. Fuck. This shouldn't have happened. Not to her and not in a place where she should always feel safe.

"No. Maeve protected me until you came for me." She raises her hand, places it on my chest, and taps it repeatedly. She's trying to comfort me.

You came for me. I hear nothing else. I press a kiss on the crown of her head. Then, her forehead, and because I cannot stand one more minute without reassuring myself she is alive and well, I capture her mouth and sweep my tongue inside. She responds instantly, molding her body to mine, and kisses me back. We break away, panting from the intense kiss.

"I will always come for you, butterfly. There's nothing I wouldn't do, and there's not a single man I wouldn't destroy if they stood in the way of me getting to you. Never doubt that." My busted-up fingers brush over her tear-wet skin. "And your weeping destroys me," he says in a soft voice and kisses my cheeks. "No more crying. You're safe. I'm here now."

She smiles weakly at me, and then her eyes leave me and focus on something or someone behind me. "Riagan there's something you need to know." My wife whispers.

Turning to look at my surroundings, I find some of my men looking grief-stricken and others angry. That's when all that occurred in the past hour flashed through my mind. The ambush.

The mercenary who, in the end, turned out to be one of my men who betrayed me, Conor.

Then the look of fear on Mila's face when a gun went off.

The pain in my chest from a bullet grazing my skin.

Whoever shot me didn't intend to kill me.

A shot from that close should've killed me, but it didn't.

"Where's Da?" I search around the room with my goddamn heart in my



throat. No one speaks up, angering me further. “Where the fuck is my—”

“I’m right here, *a sheòid*.”

I won’t ever admit, but at this moment, I could fall to my fucking knees and weep with gratitude that no one got to him. That my wife is safe and here with me. My men – all of them risked their lives for me. For my wife and my father. “Who then?” I ask, turning to look at which of my men is missing, and that’s when I don’t see Maeve. The twins?

The sound of a throat clearing pulls us apart. Turning with Mila in my arms, I watch as Kadra Parisi strides inside the living room area that looks like a battle zone with just one of her soldiers in tow. Her right-hand man. Crow.

The Parisi boss is dressed to the nines in a heavy leather coat and nine-inch red heels. I don’t miss the look of disapproval she gives me before her eyes turn to my wife. Her youngest sister.

“How did you find out I had her?” I hold tightly to Mila’s hand, now facing her sister. If she’s here to take her from me, she’ll have to do so over my dead body. The fact that she came with just one of her soldiers makes me think she’s not looking for a war.

“I’m ashamed to admit it took me this long.” She then throws something at my feet. A Joker’s card. “This was sent to one of my hotels.”

“If you came to take her from me, it won’t be so easy,” I warn.

Kadra arrogantly raises a gloved hand and turns to look at her sister, dismissing me.

That woman leaves a bad taste in my mouth. She’s cold and calculating. There’s just something off about her. There’s no light in her eyes. They’re empty. Never have I met anyone who gave me the chills whenever they entered a room, but when this woman enters a room, the atmosphere changes. It suddenly becomes darker and cold. I wonder, at times, just how much evil she has seen. How much more than her sisters she had to endure to end up like this.

“Sirius.” My wife gently squeezes my hand before releasing it and walking towards her sister. We all watch as Mila throws herself at Kadra, crying silently. This was not how I wanted her to see her sister again. It takes a moment, but Kadra wraps her arms around her little sister, hugging her close.

She gives nothing away, though. Not a smile, not a tear. Nothing.

Both sisters break apart, looking at each other. “You’re here. I missed

you.” My sweet wife whispers to her sister.

“Are you hurt? Did this animal hurt you in any way?” Kadra asks my wife in a monotone voice, but there’s a tenderness in her eyes that wasn’t there before. I guess not even the cold woman is immune to Mila’s sweetness.

“Never. Riagan would never hurt me.” My wife whispers, looking back at me. I wink at her, and then she turns to her sister. “H-he’s my one day, Sirius. I-I know this all might seem crazy, but I feel free when I’m with him. I feel like I don’t have to hide, and I can be me.”

Thud fucking thud.

Her words make my heartbeat race.

I look at her while she stands tall, facing her big sister, who looks like Satan’s bride against my fairy-like wife.

“I must confess I came here with every intention of taking you home with me and gutting him with my favorite knife.” Kadra’s bottomless eyes meet mine for a second before she dismisses me again and goes back to staring at Mila. “Until I walked in and realized I had already lost you.”

“You could never lose me, Kadra. Never.” Mila grabs her sister’s gloved hand.

“But I did lose you long before he got to you. Didn’t I?” Kadra raises her other hand and pushes Mila’s curls back. “I never thought I would have to let you go, *stelina*.” The Parisi boss looks at her little sister as if she’s seeing her as a woman for the first time instead of her defenseless baby sister. “I guess I held on so tightly, trying to keep you from the horrors I—” Kadra stopped herself from saying whatever the hell she was about to say and cleared her throat. “I tried to keep you safe and, in a bubble, thinking it was best for you that I didn’t realize how badly I was hurting you.”

I watch as Mila shakes her head vehemently. “No! You never—”

The Parisi boss does something, something I never thought I would witness. She shows her human side. The side that loves her little sister. She leans forward and kisses Mila’s head before pulling away. “You’ll always have me, Mila. I’m never too far away.”

For the first time, I think I see the Parisi boss’s human side. The sister who went through hell more times than a child should ever go through just to keep the flames from touching the people she holds dear to her heart or whatever she has inside her chest. Once, I would have thought she had a rock for a damn heart but I see it now. The pain behind all that darkness. I only

ever saw that look once, and that's on a man most people call the unfeeling. "If this man is what you want, then I won't get in your way. Just know that if he ever hurts you." The Parisi boss looks my way now and then looks every man in the room in the eye. "If you ever hurt my sister, not even your city could keep me from coming after you."

"Noted," I say through gritted teeth.

"Crow." She motions her soldier forward and extends her gloved hand his way. We all watch as the man hands her a small plant. A cactus.

That must be the famous —

"Mr. Prickles." My wife gasps, finishing my thought.

"Now you have so much more to care for than a plant." The older sister says, reminding me that at one-point, Mila didn't have what she has now. Friends who understood her. A family who would go to war for her.

A man who would go against God and Satan for her if need be.

She had her sisters, yes, but no one she could protect and care for like she did her plants.

"You and Arianna were enough for me." The pain in my butterfly's voice cuts me deep, hurting me more than my fresh wounds.

"But we both know you deserve more."

She sure as fuck does.

She knows it.

We all know it.

My wife is too damn nice to say it, but deep down, she knows it too. Her sisters will always have a place of their own in her heart, but now she has more people in her corner. More people who care for her and love her.

She has me.

My chest tightens when I see Mila hug her sister as if she's afraid to let go because, deep down, she knows the moment she does let go, things won't ever be as they once were, back when she only had Kadra and Arianna. When they were all each other had.

She hugs Kadra tightly, and I have to look away when her body starts to shake while she cries silently.

Those damn tears of hers are like daggers to my heart.

"I love you, Sirius." Mila snuffles, crying a bit louder now.

It takes her a moment, but Kadra says it back. "I love you, my little star."

That just makes my wife cry harder.

"Is it over?" Mila pulls back and looks at her sister. "Did you deal with

the bad men who wish to hurt you? Hurt us?”

“It’s not over, but it will be,” Kadra whispers to her sister. I see something my wife most likely doesn’t. A dark look crosses Kadra’s eyes. A look that promises pain to her enemies. “Until then, I’ll have to stay away.”

Mila starts to protest, but her sister cuts her off. “You and Arianna had a different vision for your ‘one day’ than I did. My ‘one day’ doesn’t have a happy ending.”

Both sisters hug one more time before Kadra Parisi turns to me. “A word.”

Shit.

Here I thought this would be easy.

I should’ve known nothing with this woman could ever be easy.



“I SHOULD KILL you for what you did,” Kadra mutters as we both watch her right-hand man get on his bike and leave with only a nod of his head to his boss.

“You should, but you won’t.” I say in a bored tone.

“You’re so sure?” I feel her icy stare on me now. Turning my head away from the entrance of the mansion, I look down at her. Unlike my wife, Kadra is tall. Much taller than both Arianna and Mila. “You revealed your cards there. There’s no chance you will ever hurt your sister’s heart, and like it or not, I’m in her heart. Hurting me will be hurting your sister.”

“Pretty cowardly of you to hide behind my sister,” she says darkly with an eyebrow raised.

“Not hiding. Just stating a fact. She’s mine, and she’s not going anywhere. You threatening me, is just unnecessary bullshit. Now go on. What do you want?” I want to get to my wife and reassure her that, from now, on it’ll all be fine. There’s still a lot of shit I need to deal with and come to terms with, but for now, all that matters is that she’s alive. We’re all alive.

“Cocky asshole.” I watch as she strides toward her parked glossy black Ducati and straddles it. “I opened the gates of hell. Now, I need you to keep her away from the flames and from Detroit. It’s going to get ugly from here on out, and as much as I hoped she would end up with someone so much better... I know she’ll be safe with you. They’re both safe now. It’s time.”

“Time for what?”

She puts her helmet on, still looking at me. “Time for all of them to pay. It won’t be pretty.” She smiles as if she’s looking forward to the chaos she just released in her city. “And O’Sullivan.”

Crossing my arms, I shout over the noise of her bike. “What?”

“Thank you.”

The fuck?

“For what?”

“You know, both of my sisters had a dream of one day finding happily ever after.” She actually smiles before a dark look takes over. “My definition of one day is very different from theirs.”

“How so?” I ask, a sinking feeling in my gut.

“My story doesn’t end on a happy note, and I made my peace with it.”

What the fuck do I say to that?

The three sisters went through hell, but something tells me Kadra’s hell was much worse.

You just have to look at her empty and, at times, soulless eyes to know the light was snuffed out of her.

“Kadra.”

She arches a thin brow. “Yes?”

Come out of this war that you started alive. For my wife’s sake. I want to say, but I don’t. Instead, I tell her, “Be careful.”

But she says nothing. I don’t even think what I heard was right. Kadra lowers the visor, kicks the bike stand, and speeds out of the mansion, only leaving smoke behind.

# MESSAGE FROM RIAGAN



*Dear wife,  
You are all of my good days.  
Yours always, - Riagan*

# EPILOGUE 1

MILA



*"He's my lover and my best friend. How lucky am I?"*

**“W**hat is it?” I asked Riagan for the fifth time since we left home. “A few more steps, and you’ll find out.” He laughs as he guides me with both of his rough hands covering my eyes. At one point, I dreaded surprises, never knowing if they were going to be good or just painful lessons, but now, living with Riagan, every day is a big surprise.

“Can you give me a hint?” I try to get him to tell me, but he won’t budge, just like everyone back at the mansion. Not even Cathan – yes, Cathan, who the doctors didn’t think would survive the sickness, but he did, like me and his son believed he would. Now, he’s back to himself, still recuperating but strong and healthy, and the dark cloud that was looming over both Cathan and Riagan’s heads is no longer there. We’re all so lucky. So blessed.

“Nope.” My husband laughs.

Okay, I was expecting that after he denied my every attempt before.

He really knows how to keep a secret.

I let him guide me a few more steps, and while at it, I tried to think of what the surprise could be.

We’re not home because we got in his car and drove for at least twenty minutes, and once we got out of the car about three or four minutes ago, I noticed we’re in a public space. Although I can’t see anything, I can hear the



sound of pedestrians walking nearby and traffic. We're close to a busy street.

Where is he taking me?

Suddenly, he takes his hands away from my face, and I'm able to see what's in front of me when a sudden rush of happiness mixed with a bit of confusion hits me. What?

"Happy anniversary, butterfly."

Looking at the magical-looking building in front of me, I can't help but gasp as I take it all in.

A bakery.

A small bakery with mint-green tones, glass doors, and an empty sign in the middle. It doesn't have a name.

"Is this—"

"It's yours." My husband turns me around, taking my cheeks in his big hands, and makes me look up at him. "I was thinking you could paint a mural for it to go with the aesthetic and theme you want, baby. Something that's all you."

"I don't know what to say..." I honestly don't. How does he always manage to leave me speechless? I can't find the right words to express just how I feel. I feel so much now that I can't concentrate on just one emotion.

"How about you tell me what you're going to name your bakery slash bookstore?"

Bookstore?

Then, I look at the blue-green building and notice the large bookshelves visible from out here.

Yup, I can't find the words, but one thing does come to mind.

"Lucky Willow." I blurt out.

And he smiles. "I like that."

I do, too. Maybe for different reasons than he does.

Lucky because of him. My lucky clover.

Willow not just for our many kisses under the tree but because he's also my Willow Tree. Strong, resilient and beautiful.

"I love you..." I hug him closer to me. I hug him so tight that my cheeks are pressed to his hard chest. I can feel his cold chain on my skin. His heart is beating strongly and steadily.

Stepping back, I rise to my tippy toes and kiss his bearded cheek because that's as far as I can reach.

"I love you more, butterfly." he grins, causing my heart to beat faster.

“And one last gift.” He hands me a book. A book with a cute illustration of a short blonde-haired girl with curls and a giant tattooed man standing next to her. A golden retriever and a whole bunch of butterflies surround them.

“How did you do this?”

“Two very talented twin criminals owe me a few favors.”

“Lorenzo and Valentino Nicolasi?”

He nods. “My brother got them to write and draw the illustrations. They didn’t do it for me, though. They did it for you.”

“For me?” Tears fall down my cheeks as I hold the fairy-tale book he made of us. My heart hurts as I turn over to the last page and find a handwritten note:

Mila, I’m not the noble prince you dreamt about your whole life. I don’t have a white horse or a flashy carriage. But I have a heart that beats only for you. An army of men who would lay down their lives for you. A family who loves, embraces and celebrates you. I promise to always love you on your good days, but especially on your bad ones. I promise to fill your life with magic and wonder until my last breath. We have a weird family and a lazy dog. But it’s the good kind of weird. It’s us. I have all the love in the world for you. From this moment on, I promise darkness won’t touch you. Bad men won’t get a hold of you. I’ll keep you safe for the rest of our days together. This book. This story. It’s us now, but maybe as the years pass, if you want to, we can add more love and more laughter in the form of tiny people, and fuck, if you want more animals, we can get some too. All I ask of you is to always believe in me and never let go of my hand, and I promise I’ll give you the happily ever after you longed so much for.”

I can’t move. I can’t gather my thoughts as my mind works on processing every beautiful word that just came out of his mouth. I have to force myself to breathe. Is this real? Is he real? I blink several times, but the book is still in my hands and Riagan is still hovering over me. I close my eyes and count to three, tap my chest with the book three more times, then open them. He’s still here. Holding the book against my chest, I watch him smile a real smile, the one I live to see every day. My heart gallops in my chest as I hold his stare for a few seconds before my eyes fall to his lips. My sweet giant. My best friend. My person. My hero with some villain in him. My dream man. “Riagan, I—” He grabs my face and kisses me, long and slow, dizzying me. Making me forget my own name and everything I wanted to say. I wrap my free arm around his neck and hold onto him tight while the book gets

squished between our bodies. When he pulls away, he says, “You are very loved, butterfly. Even when you don’t notice it. Even when you were surrounded by darkness, there was still so much love there.”

I think about what he just said, and my heart feels as if it’s going to combust with love at any given second. I spent so much time with my nose in a book and my head in the clouds running away from everything that hurt and could potentially hurt me that I missed a lot. I won’t be doing that anymore. I love my fairytales and romance stories, but they no longer serve as an escape or a safe place.

My safe place is him.

The tears I’ve been trying to hold back start to fall when I think of how lucky I am to get to live this life after thinking for so long that forever and happiness weren’t in the cards for me.

“Are those sad tears or happy tears, baby?” He whispers while holding me close.

I nod while trying not to snuffle but fail. “I’m just so—” My whisper comes out raspy.

“Butterfly, your tears strangle my heart.” He gently pushed my hair from my face. “Fuck. Don’t cry. What’s wrong? I thought this would make you happy.” I brush my face with my fingertips and smile weakly. “It has. So much. I’m...overwhelmed.” I look up at him and find his big blue eyes idling on mine. “No one’s ever done anything so nice for me. Not ever. Everything you’ve done for me. Every word you’ve said. I think I’ll never get used to it.” Before he can say a word, I throw my arms around his broad shoulders and press my damp cheek into his neck. “Thank you,” I said softly. “You’re amazing.”

“I’m not amazing, butterfly. I’m just trying to be the man you deserve.” I hug him tighter. “You are. You’re the best ever.” I wasn’t expecting tears and hugs.

“Really. You make me smile every day. Even when you’re not there.” I smile with tears in my eyes when I witness how big his own smile is. It takes over his entire face. I will never get tired of seeing that smile. It’s more beautiful than the sunset. The most breathtaking sight.

Riagan brushes my thumb across my damp and warm cheek to wipe my tears away before he leans down and covers his lips with mine. His large hand moves to cradle the back of my neck, his fingers sliding through my curls as he has a thousand times. I moan in pleasure when his tongue sweeps

over my lips before I open them, and he slides inside. One thing I never told him is how addicting his taste is. It always leaves me wanting more of him. My hand tightens on his shoulder, my nails digging slightly into his inked flesh. Taking that as a sign of passion, he rolls his body closer to mine, half covering me, and grips the back of my neck, kissing me deeper.

“Let’s go inside, baby.” Riagan pulls back and whispers breathlessly close to my lips.

Delirious with pleasure, I ask. “O-okay. Will you show me the inside of the bakery?”

“Yes, after.”

“After what?”

“After I fuck you like I don’t love you.” He then throws me over his shoulder, making me screech in surprise. “Forgive me, baby.”

And I laugh all the way inside the bakery of my dreams in the arms of my dream man.

One more wish and dream crossed on my bucket list because of my sweet, sweet gangster.

My life changed before I even had him in my life, and I didn’t even know it. He was there protecting me and being my hero when I was clueless about it.

I don’t fear the future anymore or the changes that might come my way because I have him in my corner. And I know I can always be myself with Riagan, and he’ll always love me for it.

I’m not lost anymore. I’m finally home, where I’ll be safe, warm, and loved by this beautiful man fate handed me...and I’m going to make him smile every day for the rest of our lives.

Fairytales do come true.

You just have to believe it.

I did.

I dreamed and hoped for a better day.

For one day.

My ‘one day’ in the sun had a name.

Riagan.

# EPILOGUE 11

## RIAGAN



*"I walked through fire so you could both have your one day." - K*

**“W**hy are you nervous, *mo chuisle*?” I hold tightly onto Mila’s hand while we walk toward a small cafe with a European theme that looks like a place that should be in France, not on a crowded street in Washington.

It only took a call to arrange this meet-up.

It did take me a while to make sure everyone involved was safe while meeting somewhere so public, but I knew it was something that needed to happen.

Both Mila and I have been through some shit.

From betrayals I never expected and a threat that still looms in every corner of my city.

Conor was both the betrayer and the threat.

I let him leave the mansion that night with his life only because he put himself in between the bullet that could have taken my wife from me, and for that reason only. Not even my gratitude for his twin sister could’ve saved him. I did offer him mercy, but on the condition that he stay gone and out of sight.

I don’t want him in my city. I don’t trust him to be near us.

If he knows what’s good for him, he better stay far away because I won’t offer him mercy a second time.

He was going to hand over my wife for his selfish greed.  
For money.

The two-faced asshole had more than what he could've imagined with me, and yet it wasn't enough for him. Not only did he lose my trust and respect but he lost his brothers in arms and broke his twin sister's heart.

A twin sister who's not the same person she used to be because of him.

Then, there was Kadra, who appeared out of nowhere and didn't fight to take her sister back like I was anticipating.

She chose to set Mila free, and I'm grateful I didn't have to take out my wife's dear sister. If it had come down to it, I would have.

I would annihilate anything and anyone who came between us and tried to take her away from me.

Now, the time for my butterfly to see her sister again is here, away from everything that haunted them both.

The only piece missing is her middle sister, Kadra, but that's a long and fucked-up story for another day.

"Do you think she hates me?" I whip my head so fast, flabbergasted by her absurd question. How could she think her own sister would hate her? "She doesn't hate you. I don't think someone that hates another person would look at you the way she's doing now." Leaning forward, I give her a peck on the top of her head, push her forward, and watch as Mila slowly turns and looks at her older sister, who stands holding her husband's hand with her other one guiding a little girl, who looks like a replica of the president, pushing a stroller with a chubby baby in it, while their security makes a barricade around them as they slowly make their way toward us.

Who would've guessed that a once-cold mafia princess who had a great talent for pissing people off with her nonchalant attitude and her vicious mouth is not only the beloved first lady of the United States of America and a CEO, but a mother of two kids? How the man above allowed two cold and cocky assholes like those two to procreate is a mystery to me.

Yet here they are, with their two cute-as-fuck pawns.

"Arianna..." The way my wife whispers her sister's name, both in elation and pain, makes my heart constrict inside my chest. Then there's the look of pure adoration on Arianna Parisi's face and a couple of tears, too, as she watches her little sister.

"Mommy, is this fairy Mila?" The tiny girl with wild curls, the same as my wife's, asks with a pretty smile on her face.

“Ellaiza, Royal, and Sebastian...” Arianna speaks up, sounding both strong and vulnerable at the same time. “Meet my stelina.”

Shit.

When she says it, I turn to look at my butterfly worried that it’s all too much for her and that the attention may make her anxious, but then she takes a step forward, and I know she’s going to be just fine. Because she’s no longer that scared girl who, in my eyes, was the bravest person I’d ever met, but she didn’t see it that way. A girl who overthought everything, too afraid of other people’s reactions.

Now, she’s a woman who, although shy and at times reserved, goes after what she wants.

I stand back and let her enjoy her moment, the one she always dreamed of with her sister. Her one day where they no longer hurt.

A day where they cry from happiness instead of heartaches and abuse.

Fuck, look at her.

She’s glowing.

Then, I feel something warm and sweet start fluttering through my chest when she stops halfway to her sister and her family and looks back at me, extending her hand for me to take. I do. I take her hand in mine and move toward the family she longed for so much. Towards one of her sisters. “Arianna, I want you to meet my favorite person.” Mila’s voice, although soft and shy, comes out strong and proud, too. “My husband.” The moment she says that the Parisi spawn narrows her eyes at me just like she did many years ago when I first met her little sister. She tells me many things with her icy green eyes, most of them not fucking good, but just like last time, I could care less what she thought of me. Her little sister is stuck with me. I ain’t going anywhere. She’ll have to deal.

Because Mila is not only my pulse, my world, and my love.

She’s everything. My past. My present. My future. My soulmate—the one who shares the path of my soul.

Feeling eyes on the back of my head, I turn away from the heartwarming scene of two sisters finding their way back to each other and looking over my shoulder. Frowning, I notice a black figure straddling a bike, but from all the way here, it’s too hard to tell if it’s a man or a woman. I quickly reach for my gun and move toward my woman, ready to eliminate anyone who is a threat to her.

What I didn’t know, at the time, was that the silhouette watching from



afar was not a threat at all, but the other half of these sisters' hearts.

“Riagan, come meet Sebastian Kenton!” My wife speaks up, catching my attention. When I turn back, the silhouette is gone, making me think perhaps I imagined it. “Did you know that he’s considered the hottest president of all time?” I never thought a day would come when I wouldn’t care for one of the fun facts my beautiful wife likes to share. Ignoring the president’s cocky smirk, I walk over to my wife and take her into my arms.

Fuck the hot president.

Fuck any man who isn’t me.

Because I’m it for her, just like she’s it for me.

# EPILOGUE III

RIAGAN - 7 YEARS LATER



*"I'll love you till my heart stops beating.  
Okay!" - R*

**“W**hy are you nervous, *mo chuisle?*” I hold my six-year-old daughter’s hand tight as we walk down the beach in search of her mother.

After years of countless attempts to get pregnant, luck was finally on our side and blessed us with our little piece of heaven.

Willow Emersyn.

A tiny girl who came to give us more love, magic, and laughter.

Looking down at my sweet girl, I give her all my attention as she moves her hands, explaining to me how she feels. We communicate through sign language whenever she doesn’t feel like using her voice.

Both Mila and I and everyone who’s part of Willow’s life have learned sign language. Not only do we love her, but we also want her to feel just how important she is. We would do anything to make life simpler for her.

I would move land, sea, and sky just to make the world better for her.

Make life less ugly.

Willow, alongside her mother, is my heartbeat.

My reasons for breathing.

My light in the dark.

*Do you think that he or she will like me?* She signs, and my heart instantly melts. That’s my kind-hearted little girl. She didn’t get anything

from me. That sweetness is all her mother.

“Of course, they will, and if they don’t, I’ll drown them here in the ocean. Won’t that be fun?” I point toward the ocean, making her smile at me. Just like her mother in every fucking way, and I couldn’t be more proud or thankful. Willow looks like a replica of her mother except for the color of her hair, which instead of being a medium shade of blonde, is light brown like mine.

She has the same unruly curls just as her mother, framing her cherubic face and the same pouty lips.

Blue eyes that can light up my darkest days.

Just like her Mum.

*That’s not nice, Daddy.*

“I’m not nice, and no one hurts my girl.” I squeeze her tiny hand and watch, in amazement, as she taps her chest three times just like her mother, but out of nervousness and not out of fear like my wife did when I first met her.

Willow reminds me so much of both my wife and my Mum when she does it. Sometimes, I feel like my Mum is there in every little sweet thing Willow does for me. I choose to believe that.

A gentle squeeze of my hand interrupts my thoughts. Dropping to my knees and grabbing my daughter’s shoulders, I make her look at me. Unlike her mother, Willow can read people’s expressions with ease. She has a disability of her own, but it’s not the same as Mila. But they’re both perfect in every way. “There’s nothing to worry about, *mo chuisle*. Just be yourself, and you’ll have them eating out of the palm of your hand.” I poke her nose, trying to get her to smile at me the way I love— with her whole heart.

“I love you, Daddy.” My baby girl says in a cute voice, just slightly off-key. Willow has no hearing in her left ear, but luckily, she has some hearing in her right, almost one hundred percent. It made me adore her more, if possible.

“I love you, my pulse.” I sign the words at the same time I say them. She can speak, but she chooses who to share her voice with. As of now, she only speaks to her mother and me. But unlike her mum, she would never grow up thinking she should be ashamed of her disability or had to hide it. Mila was teaching her to be proud of exactly who she is. She’s ensuring that our baby girl never feels ashamed to be exactly who she is—without apology. Willow was shy and reserved like Mila, unlike her cousins, who were as loud as they

came. Now, she has to adjust to another person who will be part of our home for a little while. After the doctors advised us that getting pregnant a second time could cause serious problems for Mila's health and the baby's, we chose the adoption route.

A journey I never thought about, just like, at one point, I thought having kids was not for me. Now, I would do absolutely anything to keep the smile on my butterfly's face, and if a house full of kids is what she wants, then I'm all for it.

"Where's mommy?" Willow whispers. "I'm here, angel girl," Mila called as she appeared a few feet away us. I smiled at my wife as I watched her walk down the beach toward us. The wind blew those gorgeous curls in all directions. She looked beautiful as always, dressed in a floral blue dress. After I break away from the spell of her beauty, I notice her holding a little hand.

A smaller hand that belongs to a young boy with pale skin, dark as-night hair, and guarded green eyes.

Out of reflex, I hold my baby tighter now that I realize that it's a boy and not a girl like I initially thought. My clever, sneaky wife forgot to mention that tiny detail.

Willow pulls on my pant leg, making me look down at her and away from my wife and the kid. He looks angry. My daughter sighs instead of speaking like she does when it's just us.

"He's just... shy, baby." For the kid's sake, I hope that's all it is. Willow doesn't look so sure. Same, angel girl.

When both kids remain quiet, Mila tries again.

"Willow girl, meet Madden." My wife bends down, still clutching the boy's hands. The kid is older than I thought. Tall and lanky. He must be around nine or ten years old.

"Madden, this is our daughter Willow." Mila smiles warmly at this Madden kid. I notice he hasn't let go of her hand.

I watch as the kid slowly turns his head away from the sea and looks at my girls. His eyes are empty, or so I think because I see something there.

Something I saw every day looking back at me in the mirror.

Tenderness.

Shit.

Then, my sweet girl steps forward and points her chubby finger at the boy's shirt that's a dark shade of green and signs.

I watch as my wife's smile widens and her eyes soften while the kid looks down at her with an expression of boredom.

"She's telling you that green is her favorite color." My wife explains to the kid.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Fucking nothing, boy." I bark, ready to tear the little asshole apart if he says something to hurt my daughter's heart.

"Willa communicates through sign language. Nothing's wrong with her." Mila tells him with the patience of a saint. Even though Willow and I have a special bond, I know Mila and our daughter have a special one, too. My wife is not one to fight or hurt anyone's feelings, but for our child, she's willing to go to war with anyone who tries to hurt Willow.

"Will you teach me?" The young boy whispers this time at Mila instead of Willow.

"Teach you...?"

"To talk to her. Her language."

That makes both my girls smile brightly.

I don't trust this kid, not because he's part of the foster system but because he is a boy.

One that is not blood-related to us and that has put those little stars in my baby's eyes.

Shit.

As if on cue, with my sudden change in mood, thunder sounds, and the sky darkens.

It's about to rain.

"Let's head home." I move to pick Willow up, but she shakes her wild curls at me and latches onto Madden instead.

It's starting.

Fuck, it's happening.

Boys.

"It's good for her. It's good for both of them." My wife grabs my arm and hugs my side.

My gaze moves between my wife and the kids. "I don't think this is a good idea, butterfly. I'm mad. You never said it was a boy."

"You would have said no."

I wouldn't have said no. I could never say no to them.

"He's one of them."

“On of what?” She frowns and takes a second to realize what I mean. She laughs. “A boy, you mean?”

“It’s not funny.”

Suddenly, I feel my daughter put her hand on mine. *Ready?*

*And just like that, my mood brightens.*

As we walked toward the beach house, I held my girls tighter and started thinking of ways to make this work with the kid. He has no one. From what Mila told me about the kid, he comes from a dark background and has been in the system from the time he was three years old until now.

That makes me ease up on the kid for now.

Every child deserves a chance at a happy life. It all starts with a happy home, and there’s no happier place than with my girls.

Our life.

Our home.

My baby girl pokes my leg, catching my attention, and then she signs with a soft smile.

I laugh and shake my head. “How did Daddy meet Mommy? You wanna hear that story again?” Mila asks Willow, and our daughter nods her head.

Squeezing Mila’s hand, I say, “When I met Mommy the second time, she was running from a bad guy who ended up at the end of my gun’s barrel.”

“Riagan!” Mila laughs happily.

“You killed the bad man?” This comes from Madden. Mila and Willow nodded their heads. I never hid who I was, and I never will. My girls know there is nothing I wouldn’t do to keep them safe and with me. Nothing. Murder included.

*Tell us all of it.* Willow signs.

And I do exactly that all the way to the gates of our home.

I enter the digits on the gate’s keypad and wait for it to buzz open, and when it does, I usher my family inside. The kid, Madden, looks up at our beach home unimpressed before he says, “I don’t believe in fairytales or love.” He says in a dry tone.

I stare at him, trying to figure him out.

One second, he’s hardened and cold, and the next, I get a glimpse of the young boy inside.

“Oh, it’s funny that you think you have a choice, boy,” I tell him as he finally steps foot inside the gate with his eyes trained on the back of my daughter’s head.

Yeah, I don't like this shit one bit.

Perhaps this wasn't one of Mila's best ideas.

But then my girls turn around while holding each other's hands, looking at me with those beautiful faces of pure happiness that make my heart stop inside my chest and then come back to life, one heartbeat at a time, filling me with a new purpose every time.

And right now, the kid standing stoically next to me has a part in that happiness, so I suck it up and hope for the fucking best because bad idea or not...only time will tell.

Willow runs back to Madden and grabs his hand, pointing toward the back area of the house. The kid looks back at us and raises an eyebrow. He's a little asshole, I see. "She's asking if you would like to see the butterflies." Mila translates for our daughter, sounding way too damn happy about that.

Madden looks down at my girl and shrugs, and she takes it as a yes.

We stand back watching them walk toward the garden where my old man is sitting on the gazebo, next to the woman who brought him back to life—looking as healthy as ever after battling stage four lung cancer and coming out victorious. All I can do is hope that this decision doesn't come back to bite me in the ass. Because I really don't want to add to my long list of crimes.

"Oh, look at how cute they look, Riagan!" Mila beams next to me. She just sees two kids with the potential of becoming great friends or forming a familial bond but I know better.

It's troublesome.

"Yeah, real cute," I mumble, trying to sound as positive as she does but failing. I've done a lot of hard shit in my life, but becoming a father has been the hardest job. The most rewarding, yes, but hard all the same. Because right now, I get to watch half of my heart walk hand in hand with a kid with a chip on his shoulder who looks like something out of a Tim Burton movie. No father wants to deal with boys and heartbreaks. Especially when their daughters are this young. Shit.

"It's all going to be okay, my gentle giant." I laugh at her cute attempt at giving me a nickname.

"Keep working on it, baby." Gentle giant, my ass.

Mila's hand presses on my back, and I catch her cue to lean down and press a kiss on her lips. When I pulled away, it was to see her breathless, looking at me with that look that disarms me. I love the way she can't help



but stare at my lips. I love her eyes on me, but even all these years she still has trouble maintaining eye contact, and I don't mind it one bit.

I love how she looks at every part of me and how it feels like she's penetrating my soul with just one look. "You were and still are my best idea, Riagan O'Sullivan," Mila whispers close to my mouth, breathing life into me, just like every time we're this close.

Grabbing her face, I pull her closer until our foreheads touch.

"And you, Mrs. Sullivan, have given me the best days and a great fucking life."

She laughs, and I close my eyes and let the sweet sound wash over me.

"Tell me a fun fact, Riagan?" She whispers with a smile on her face.

I don't think twice before saying: "I fucking love you."

And that's a fact I'll keep reminding her of every day of our lives until my heart stops beating, and even then, I'll find a way to remind her because deep down in my soul, I know that the love I feel for this woman transcends time and space. It's infinite. Never dying.

Rubbing my thumb over the clover tattoo on the inside of her wrist that matches mine, I smile because she's alive and mine. Meeting those blue eyes that melt me every time they meet mine even for only a second, I say, "Okay, butterfly?"

She rises on her tippy toes, and I meet her halfway until our lips are mere inches away. "More than okay, Riagan."

And that's that.

Luck was on my side, and as long as I have her, there won't ever be a single bad day.

Just the best days with my best girl.

My only.

My wife.

**THE END**

FOR MILA & RIAGAN



*And the forgotten princess lived happily ever  
after with her not so villain...*

# COMING NEXT

## KADRA “THE UNFEELING”



**L**ove fucks you up and bleeds you dry.  
I knew better than anyone how love hurt those stupid enough to let it consume them.

I was once that naive and reckless with my heart. Until I learned a harsh lesson and buried what was left of it so no one could ever get a hold of it. Pieces of it, broken pieces I left in Washington and Philadelphia.

Safe and away from the chaos I created.

I once used to dream like my sisters did. I'd dreamed of traveling to the beach— of running into the ocean until it submerged me. Until the sea washed away the scars on my skin. The ones in my heart. It was only wishful thinking of a lonely kid.

After years spent in hell where I wished for death daily, that dream had died a slow painful death.

But my sisters still had hope in their hearts, even Arianna. I was already tainted, a mess of broken dreams but they still held on to the idea of better days so I did what I had to do to get them there.

Even if it meant losing them.

Arianna believes I betrayed her and I did. I make no excuses for it and I don't regret it either.

If it would've been up to her, she would have never left Detroit willingly.

She would have never left us and in turn she would have never gotten the dream life she has now.

Those two kids and the very powerful man who stands beside her treating her as her equal.

And then there is Mila.

My sweet baby sister finally did something for herself.  
She allowed herself to be selfish and got her one day.

I spent my entire life keeping her safe, and trying to spare her from the shit I went through, that I didn't realize I was hurting her just the same.

I did come to Philadelphia to take my sister back with me to Detroit but I had another reason.

Multiple reasons, actually.

One of them is now huddled on the cold and filthy ground of a back alley, seeking shelter from the rain inside a card box. Looking down at the small figure, I harden my heart because if I plan to win this war that fucker started years ago, I'll need to be just as ruthless and evil as them.

Kicking the carton box with my boot, I watch as it falls to the ground, exposing the kid.

Time seems to stop when I look at the lanky boy who looks like he fought death and barely survived. Tilting my head, I look at him waiting for him to give me something, anything, but he just keeps his head down while the rain pours over him.

Hard and cold.

There's a pang in my chest.

No.

Stepping closer to the boy, I cover him from the rain with my umbrella. "Give me your eyes." I order the boy gently. I am not a complete monster, at least I could never be one to him.

Never him.

It takes him a minute to lift his head and when he does I feel something.

Something I shouldn't.

A crack in my heart.

One that doesn't hurt.

Not at all.

Those eyes.

Those eyes that remind me so much of a boy I used to know.

"What is your name?" I whisper-shout over the loud noise of the rain.

He stares at me as if he's not sure whether I'm an ally or a threat.

I am both.

"I don't have one." After a long silence he answers.

Taking in his white as snow skin, gray bottomless eyes and inky black hair, I ask. "If you could pick a name, any name. What would you choose?"

The young boy thinks about it for a minute too long then those gray eyes meet mine and for a second, I allow myself to feel things I shouldn't.

Things I know will never end well.

Not for me and definitely not for the boy.

“Azariel.” This time his voice is more than just a weak whisper. It's strong and proud.

I smile at him then.

I haven't done that in a while.

Smile.

But I do because of him.

*Azariel.*

A strong name for a strong boy.

The perfect name for an heir.

“Very well, Azariel. Hop on,” I offer him my gloved hand and when he narrows his eyes at it, I smile wider. Smart boy. “I know you're angry and you want to make them pay for what they did. If you help me, I promise, you'll see each and every single one of them bleed.” I vow.

Oh, they all will bleed.

“Who are you?” Azariel asks looking at my gloved-hand.

I grin still looking into his eyes.

*Who am I?*

I am a lot of things, none I will explain to him right now.

All he needs to know is that I want the same thing as him.

So, I tell him the answer he needs to hear. “I am the only chance you have at survival, kid. Take it.”

When his much smaller hand touches my gloved one, a feeling of awareness courses through me.

*As if I've met this kid before.*

I ignore it, though, just like I ignore every attempt of humanity trying to sweep its way to my soul.

“I don't trust you.” The boy, Azariel, shouts over the sound of the rain.

“You'll learn to. Now, let's go.” Once we reach my bike, I help him on and climb behind him, making sure he is secure between my front and the bike. “Hold on tight, Azariel.” This is going to be one hell of a bumpy ride.

When I am sure he won't fall off, I rev the engine and take off. I'm a long way from home.

Five minutes into the drive, I catch a dark figure on the side mirror. I

watch another bike speed up behind me, trying to catch up. Fuck.

They know.

They're too late, though.

I have him now.

Slowing down the bike, I watch for them to catch up. "Keep your head down." I told the boy. When I think he is going to defy me, he doesn't.

With one hand steering the bike, I reach behind me, pull my gun out and shoot. I miss the first three shots but not the fourth.

The bullet hits the rider then I witness as they fall off their bike seconds before it crashes.

Stopping my bike, I look over my shoulder just in time to see the person – a man – remove his helmet.

"Stay here." I murmur to the kid but he remains silent. Good boy.

Climbing off the bike, I move towards the man on the ground and what I see doesn't surprise me. Not even a little. I was beginning to wonder what was taking him so long.

My clever, clever Russian.

You're a long way from New York.



# AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

Thank you so very much for all the support you've shown this story since you heard about it. It filled me with great joy to write about someone as precious as Mila. My intention from the beginning with this story was to give a voice to a beautiful character who might not fit into society's box of 'normal' yet she is perfect just the way she is.

Thank you for giving this story a chance. I hope you had a blast while reading it!

PS: It's going to get real dark from now on! Because the last book in this series is coming and it's crazy.

Love always,

Adri.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my amazing readers,

Thank you. This book was possible because of your love and support. Thank you for sticking by me and rooting for these characters. I could not do this without you.

Elsa,

This time around I was all over the place yet you helped me till the end. I also cannot do this without you. The book wouldn't be what it is without your help.

Bloggers,

You guys are the MVPs of these community. THANK YOU! You have know idea how awesome you guys are for what you do.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adriana Brinne is a new author who fell in love with reading from a very young age but never felt brave enough to share her words with the world. She was born and raised in a tropical island surrounded by only beauty and water called Puerto Rico. She is a full-time IT tech, and, in her downtime, you can find her reading new adult stories by her favorites, and watching The Big Bang Theory. She has a love for all things dark in romance and almost every trope created except cheating and death trope. I hate them and you won't catch me writing or reading about it. The Holy Trinity characters are screaming to have their stories told and I plan to do so. You can expect from me all the feels, strong girls, and asshole heroes that worship them.

You can connect with her on:



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# TRIGGERS

*Triggers include:*  
*Graphic murder & torture*  
*Child abuse*  
*Foul language*  
*Emotional abuse*  
*Sexual explicit scenes*