



poisoned
Dawn



IMOGEN WELLS

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CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

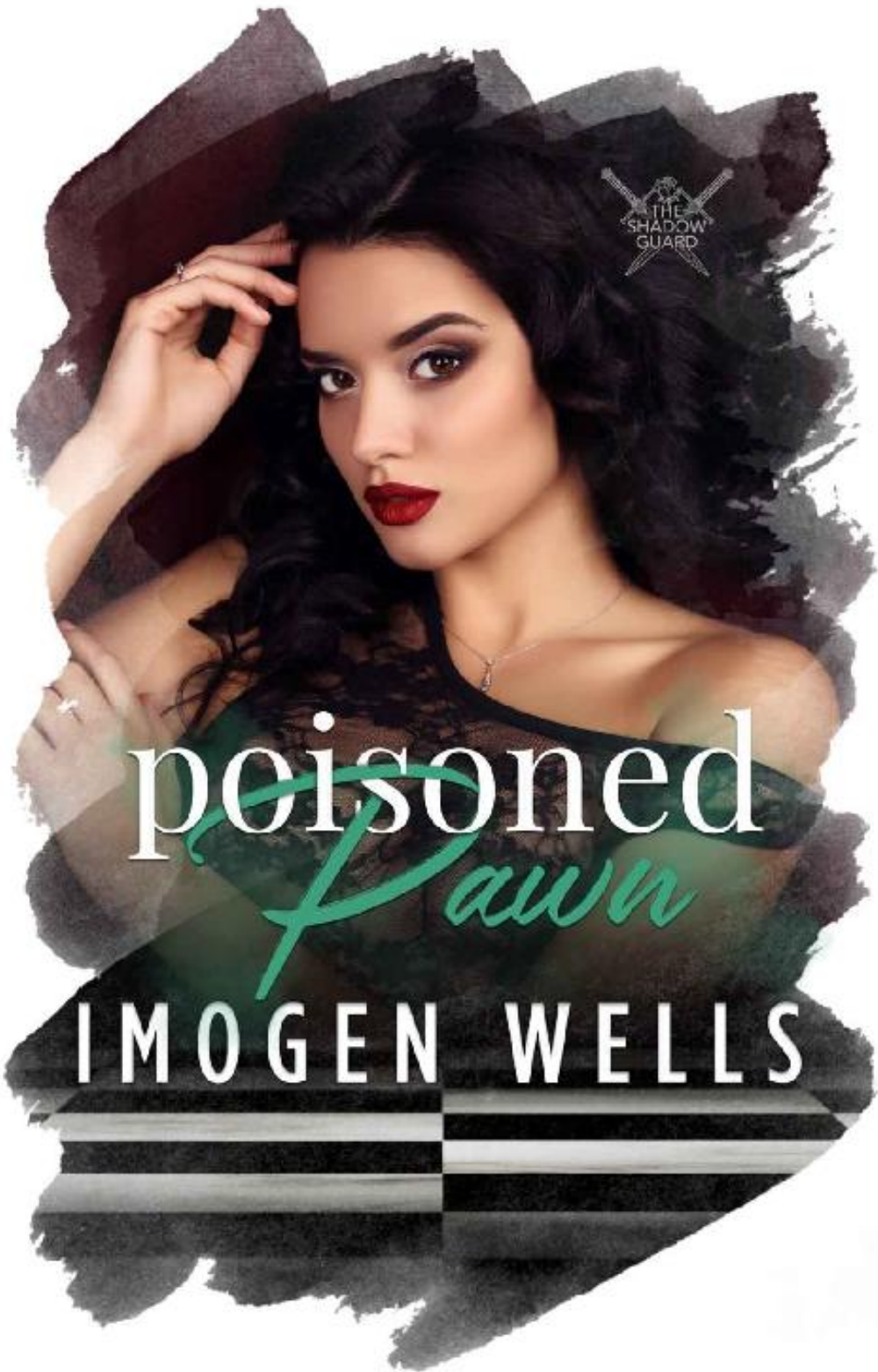
[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Imogen Wells](#)



THE
SHADOW
GUARD

poisoned
Dawn

IMOGEN WELLS

FOREWORD

This book contains scenes and themes that some readers may find upsetting and/or offensive. Scenes of explicit sex, violence and profanity can be found in the pages that follow.

The author is British, and British English spellings and phrases are used throughout. If there are any words or phrases that you are unsure of, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Imogenwells.author@gmail.com

CHAPTER ONE

STAR



“Oh for fuck’s sake!” I grumble as the coat hanger hooked over my pinkie slips free, and the clothing bag holding my boss’ dry cleaning hits the floor with a clatter as the metal scraps against the front step. I shove the key in the lock and push the door open before bending to pick it up, then make my way inside. With my hands full, I march straight to the kitchen and dump my handbag and shopping on the counter before hanging Mr Graham’s suit over the door to the lounge on my way back to close the front door and collect my keys.

Every Friday since I started as Mr Graham’s PA, I take his dry cleaning to the same shop on my way home then collect it Monday morning before going to the office. When I arrived tonight the place was surrounded by police, and with no other dry cleaners close by, I drove straight home. I sent a message to Mr Graham explaining the situation but haven’t heard back from him. He’s very particular about where he gets his suits dry cleaned. God knows why because a dry cleaner is a dry cleaner.

I pull the keys from the door and am just pushing it shut when a silver car across the street catches my eye. As soon as they see me, they pull away and drive off down the street.

My phone rings in the kitchen drawing my attention, so I close the door and hurry to answer it before it rings off.

“Hello,” I say as I begin to unpack the shopping.

“Hey, girl. You ready for tonight?” Toni asks excitedly.

“Am I. This week has been shit.” I cradle the phone in the crook of my neck as I grab Mr Graham’s suit and climb the stairs. “Are you coming here first, or shall I meet you there?”

“Well, that depends on whether you plan on going home alone later,” she says with a smile in her tone, and I picture her with her tongue in her cheek.

“No dick for me tonight,” I tell her, shaking my head.

“You still thinking about that last guy?”

“No, absolutely not.” It’s a lie. She knows it and I know it.

I hooked up with a guy two weeks ago and still have his fingerprint marks etched onto my arse cheeks.

Toni laughs down the line. “Okay, tell yourself whatever makes you happy. I bet you’ve got him on speed dial.”

“See you in a couple of hours. Bye, Toni,” I say, ending the call to a cackle of laughter.

I toss my phone on the bed, still unmade from this morning, and hang the suit over my wardrobe door as I open it to look for something to wear.

After thirty minutes of rummaging and flicking through everything in my wardrobe, I settle on a new khaki green two piece with wide leg trousers and a cropped cami top. I lay it on the bed before going for a quick shower.

I ignore the tingling between my thighs at Toni’s mention of the guy from the other week and the thought of his hand as it pinked my arse.

I don’t like that he’s on my mind.

I don’t do relationships.

Correction, I don’t do intimate relationships.

Nothing past sex—rough and hard.

I shake the thoughts away, not wanting my mind to slip into a place I’ve worked hard at getting out of over the last five years.

I'm just doing up my trousers when the doorbell rings out. I jog down to let Toni in.

"Damn, girl!" she says as she steps inside. "You sure you're not planning to ride the pony tonight?"

"The pony?" I hang my head at her cheesy reference to Ginuwine's song. Looking back up at her, I say, "Not even if Channing Tatum offered it to me on a plate."

"I'm seriously beginning to question our friendship," she jests, handing me one of the four bottles of beer she's carrying then heads to the kitchen.

I trail after her, reaching her as she pops the top on her beer before handing the bottle opener to me. I do the same and take a deep swig.

Dropping the bottle opener to the counter, I say, "Come on. I need to finish getting ready."

She snatches up the discarded bottle opener and the other two beers before following me upstairs. "So, what's dick face *Mr Graham* done this week?"

"Grumpy fucker has been riding my arse all week. If anyone needs to ride the pony, it's that tosspot."

"He's gay?"

"Is he fuck. But a dick up his arse would be preferable to the stick he's currently hugging like a cock in a virgin pussy."

I sense her stop behind me, and I look over my shoulder at her.

She laughs. "Diiiiirty," she drawls and raises her bottle to me.

"What? Don't act like you ain't heard it before. The man just..." I visibly shudder. "He makes my skin crawl."

She nods her agreement. Having met him, she knows exactly what a sleaze he is.

We polish off the beers and talk crap while I finish getting ready. Toni and I met when I took a part time job at a local

restaurant. She'd been waitressing there for a little under a year and draw the short straw on showing me the ropes.

I was lucky not to lose the job two hours after starting when I poured a glass of red wine over a customer after he propositioned me.

Toni took the fall for me, even stood there and apologised to the asshole. He knew it wasn't her, but he got a kick out of her standing there in the middle of the restaurant and kissing his arse while wearing a smug smile.

We've been close since. Of course, she had to endure an interrogation from Aidan who miraculously felt then was a good time for a visit. I brushed it off to Toni as an extremely overprotective brother, but when she heard his Irish accent, she wasn't buying it.

Toni didn't question me on it, but slowly over the last few years, I've opened up a little more. She knows Aidan isn't really my brother but that I have a sister, who she's also met. Toni almost keeled over when I introduced her to Roxy and her two guys, Maddox and Zak. She peppered me with a dozen questions about that.

About two weeks later, she was hammering my door down at the crack of dawn. When I finally crawled from my warm bed and let her in, she talked non-stop like she'd dropped a wrap of speed about how she'd just had her first threesome.

I let her talk, nodding at all the appropriate points like I had any clue what she was talking about. The truth is at that point I'd only been with one guy, and it wasn't anything to rave about.

“Earth to Star.”

“Huh! Sorry, I zoned out,” I say, looking at her beside me in the back of the taxi.

“We're here. Come on. Let's party.” She tugs on the sleeve of my jacket as she opens the car door and climbs out.

I shake off all thoughts of sex and men and climb from the car, speed walking to catch Toni up just as the bouncer eyes her up and down, then he promptly unclips the rope permitting

her access to the club with a wink. I slip past the bouncer a second before he closes the rope across, his fingertips brushing across the back of my legs as I do. I look over my shoulder pinning him with a glare, but he just chuckles before turning away.

Toni links arms with me as we enter through the double doors and are hit with the sounds of heavy base and the overriding smell of sweat, alcohol and pheromones.

Neon Flux is one of the most popular clubs in Manchester. With it's strictly over 25s door policy it's perfect for avoiding horny teens looking for a good time. Doesn't mean you can't pull if that's what you're looking for, but it does mean you can mostly avoid having some overzealous and drunken eighteen-year-old pawing at you like you're back in high school getting fingered behind the bike sheds. Not that I'd know anything about that. My school years weren't exactly normal.

Toni releases my arm and takes my hand instead as she squeezes her way to the bar, receiving several dirty looks. She catches the eye of one of the bar staff, giving him one of her best sultry smiles that has him making a beeline to her as soon as he's finished with his current customer.

"Hey, beautiful, what can I get ya?" he asks, leaning over the bar and offering her his ear.

I just make out her asking for two cosmos over the music and chatter around me. A couple of minutes later, a cosmo and a shot of tequila is shoved into my hands, and we weave a path out of the throng of people crowded round the bar area.

We find a small space beside a tall table that has just been cleared, and I place my drinks down.

"No, no, missy. Get that down you," Toni says, waving a hand at my shot glass.

I roll my eyes and pick up the glass as she counts down from three to one then downs it. I do the same, shaking my head and grimacing as the sour taste hits my tongue.

That sets the pace for the night. Shots and cocktails in between dancing and flirting. Toni has a line of men making

fuck-me eyes at her and some buoyed by alcohol even risk getting up close and personal. She shuts them down quick enough if they aren't her type.

I'm just on my way back from the toilet, edging my way between sweaty bodies, when I'm slammed into from the side. The blonde who crashed into me stumbles on her skyscraper heels and pins with a glare.

"Watch it, bitch!" she slurs, giving me another shove and almost falling over as her intoxicated brain struggles to control her arms.

I look her up and down with a small smile playing on my lips then step forward to move past her. Only she's not done and snatches hold of my elbow as I try to pass.

"I said, watch it, bitch."

I open my mouth to respond but am stopped as a large guy, at least six foot even with his head bowed, wearing the hood of his jumper over his head, barrels into her.

She screeches, spinning around and slapping at him as he mumbles a slurred apology.

Her cursing and yelling draws the attention of several others around us, including a guy a little deeper in the crowd, who shouts out and quickly pushes his way toward us.

The guy who knocked into her is standing between us with his back to me, but he tilts his head and says, "Get the fuck outta here!"

His voice sounds familiar, like the way he holds himself, but it's the gruff command that really catches my attention. Arousal flutters ready to fly, but its wings are clipped before it can take flight when the new guy breaks into the circle now formed around us and pulls the girl who crashed into me away.

Facing off with the guy in front of me, who now stands a little taller, he says, "You fuckin' touch my girl?"

My saviour's head turns slightly, showing me his shadowed profile, but I still can't make out his features.

“Go,” he says again, and while the command is the same, the words sound forced like he’s gritting his teeth. A hand on my arm startles me, and I turn to see Toni.

“Hey, what the fuck happened?”

“Er... Let’s go. I don’t want to stick around and find out.” My eyes go back to the two men, who have both stepped forward and closed the gap between them.

I pull on Toni’s arm, turning around just as the sound of flesh hitting flesh greets my ears and shouts and hollers drown out any further sounds. We disappear into the crowd, most of which are oblivious to what’s going on behind us.

I catch a glimpse of one of the security guys holding a hand to his earpiece before hurrying off into the melee.

Toni and I fall out the front doors holding onto one another and laughing as I finish explaining what happened. I ignore the tiny voice telling me something was off with the guy who stepped in and is now fighting the girl’s dickhead boyfriend.

“*Watch it, bitch,*” I say mimicking the girl as the front doors open and a large group of girls and guys exit. Toni tugs on my arm, pulling me from their path as the group head this way. I smile and mutter a sorry as I step out of the way of a small brunette girl sporting a white bodycon dress. She smiles back before continuing her conversation with her friend and leaving me to wonder if she’s wearing any underwear with a dress that white.

“Do you—” My words are cut short as a whoosh of air whizzes past my head and a scream rents the air.

I know that sound.

There’s only one thing that flies so fast and creates that whooshing sound.

I’ve felt it before.

A bullet.

My head spins round, my eyes looking to where the brunette girl was just standing. Only she’s no longer standing, and her friend is cupping her mouth and screaming at the top

of her lungs as she looks down at her friend and the small hole in the centre of her forehead, a trickle of blood oozing from it and trailing down her cheek.

“Holy fucking shit!” Toni exclaims beside me, but her words are like a shot of adrenaline to the heart. Before she can say or do anything else, I’ve grabbed her and shoved her to the ground.

“Get down. Everyone get down,” I shout and watch as everyone around us either runs or drops to the ground.

I cover Toni’s body with my own while looking around. Something flashes in the light across the street, but it’s gone before I can make it out.

There’s a wail of a siren in the distance but the screaming continues. I raise my head enough to see the dead girl and beside her on her knees is her friend. She’s screaming the girl’s name and stroking her face.

“Help me. Somebody help me. Hannah...oh my god... Hannah, wake up. Please wake up. Help is coming.”

I look away unable to watch anymore knowing her friend is beyond any help. I check Toni is okay and then dig around for my phone as the sirens grow closer.

Scrolling my recent calls list, I hit call on a number I know will answer and be here in a second.

CHAPTER TWO

CARTER



I tuck the lock pick back into my pocket and slip inside the door through the small gap. The house is bathed in darkness and perfect for me to do what I came for.

There is only one person home, and he is exactly who I came here for.

Right now, he should be sleeping like a fucking baby, and in about ten minutes his little nighttime excursion with the sandman is about to evolve into a trip to the fields of Tartarus.

I creep up the stairs on silent feet, although I'm not all that bothered about waking him. As long as I get the job done, my client isn't bothered about the how.

Halfway up, I become aware of a noise that isn't the snoring I was expecting to hear. Groans and panting breaths echo down the dark hall, joined by the steady thump of a headboard against the wall.

The feminine moaning grows louder as I approach the slightly open door of my marks room. This is a fucking complication I could do without. I look through the gap, which is open wide enough to see the bed fully, and there is some bird with the biggest fake tits riding cock like it's an Olympic sport. Bouncing up and down and tugging at her nipples while the wet fish beneath her just lies there with his hands behind his head.

I'm mulling over the idea of taking them both out when she starts yelling.

“Yeah, Daddy, make me fucking come. Yes, yes, yes, Daddy.” She shakes her head from side to side as she speeds up. “Oh...fuck! Da...ddy,” she stutters out as her body convulses, and his hands grasp her hips, holding her down on his cock and turning her flesh white from the firm grip.

She bucks back and forth, riding out her orgasm. He lets out a roar with his own release. I step back from the door as he tosses her off him and adjust my dick. Calling him daddy doesn't do anything for me, especially when he's old enough to be her fucking dad, but watching the bitch get fucked certainly does.

An image of the chick I fucked a couple of weeks ago pops into my mind, but I shove it away. I don't have time right now. After this job is done, I intend to find myself a wet pussy to fuck till the sun comes up.

Soft footfalls padding across the plush carpet break through my thoughts, and I listen as a light is switched on and a door closes. Peeking back into the room, my mark is lying in bed, stark bollock naked with his hands back behind his head and eyes closed. Guess that means she took a trip to the bathroom. Now is the perfect opportunity.

Stepping forward, I scan the rest of the room and see the closed door on the other side. Slipping inside, I pull the blade from the sheath strapped to my belt and creep closer to the bed. I take a second to admire the sated smile on his face, then with the stealth of a B2 bomber, my wrist flicks out, slicing across his neck.

His eyes pop open in surprise, but it only lasts a fraction of a second as his surprise gives way to pain. His hands drop to his neck, gripping it as he attempts to talk, but all he can manage is a strangled gurgle as his mouth fills with blood. The cream sheet beneath him turns a bright shade of red, saturated within seconds.

The toilet flushes, and I know that's my cue to leave. Leaning forward, I deliver my message.

“Lev sends his regards.”

Stepping back, I watch as he reaches out an arm, as if I might help him, then I turn and slip away. I step outside as the first scream rents the air.

By the time I've gone home, showered and changed, Neon Flux is heaving. I scan the room as I take deep mouthfuls of my beer. The little show my mark and his fuck buddy put on earlier has made me desperate to fuck. I could have gone to Illicit for a guaranteed fuck, but tonight's hit has me wanting to prowl.

Sometimes the chase is the best part.

Like the brunette the other week.

I knock back another mouthful of beer as a girl who has been eye fucking me for the last ten minutes makes a beeline straight for me. I casually twirl the near empty bottle on the tabletop as I wait. The moment she steps into my space, something to the left catches my eye, instantly drawing my attention away.

“Hey, gorgeous,” she purrs, reaching out a hand and running a finger down my t-shirt that's just poking out the top of the hoodie I'm wearing.

My eyes track the brunette as she walks past, and when she turns to look this way, I dip my head so she doesn't see me.

The chick currently unzipping my hoodie with one hand while the other strokes my cock through my jeans takes that as her green light. Abandoning the zip, her hand joins the other one and attempts to open my flies.

She lets out a gasp, of shock or arousal, either way I'm not interested, as I snatch a hold of her wrist, stilling her movement.

“Go back to your little entourage and find another dick to choke on tonight,” I tell her, pushing up to stand and forcing her backward.

“But—”

“But I’m not interested. Now run along.” I pin her with an icy glare that warns her not to argue. She turns to walk away but can’t help tossing an insult my way first.

“You don’t know what you’re missing, cunt.”

I laugh at her, but my attention is soon snared by a commotion in the direction the brunette went. Pushing my way through the dense crowd, I spot the brunette—the same one that’s been on my mind more than I’d like today—in a heated exchange with a blonde who looks like with just one breath she’d topple over in those heels, not to mention there isn’t an ounce of meat on her bones. As skinny as a fucking rake.

I watch as the blonde grabs hold of her elbow, and something deep inside me snaps. Throwing my hood up over my head, I push through into the circle, stumbling as though drunk and crash into the blonde.

I mutter an apology, but it’s lost to the high-pitched yelling and cursing of the blonde as she rounds on me and begins slapping at me. I hold her off, then push her away as a deep voice calls out.

I see the ogre as he barges his way toward us. Keeping an eye on the blonde in front of me, I turn my head a fraction, and say, “Get the fuck outta here!”

The guy snatches a hold of his girl, demanding to know if I’ve touched her. Sensing the brunette still behind me, I tell her to go again before moving closer to the guy in front of me. He’s mad as fuck.

Guess I’m fighting not fucking tonight.

He takes a swing at me, but it’s sluggish, easy enough for me to dodge. He on the other hand isn’t so lucky when I throw a fist back at him and catch him square on the chin. The hit stops him in his tracks. He freezes, then sways from side to side before he hits the deck.

The blonde girl looks to her boyfriend out cold on the floor then to me before she lets fly with an ear-piercing screech that would shatter the ear drums of a deaf person.

That screech is joined a moment later by a dozen others coming from outside.

Slowly, as I begin to move through the even thicker throng of people, whispers of a shooting reach me. Not wanting to get caught up in it, for obvious reasons, I head for the fire exit. Once I make it outside, I slip down the alley, coming out a few doors down from Neon Flux. Sure enough, the outside of the club is awash with old bill and an ambulance. And there right in the centre of it all is the brunette.

A flutter of relief goes through me, which I choose not to acknowledge, and then I hightail it out of there.

I'm just rounding the corner to my street when my phone buzzes in my pocket. Pulling it free, I see it's Lev.

"Where are you?" he demands as soon as I answer.

"At home," I bite back.

"Getting your cock sucked by some whore."

"Not tonight. Your sister was busy washing her hair."

"Fuck you, Carter. I need you to do another job for me."

"No fucking way. I told you one job and that's it. If I start taking out everyone you have a beef with, people are going to ask questions. I don't work for you. I don't work for anyone but me. End of fucking story."

"Hmmm, I understand. Let me put it this way, if you don't do this for me, then I can pull the plug. On everything," he says keeping his tone light but weighing his words with the full force of his threat.

I've known Lev for several years, watched him rise through the ranks of the Bratva under his father the pakhan. I'm no fool. We aren't friends. And his threat proves that.

Sensing I need a little more of a push to agree, he adds, "You owe me, Carter."

Clenching my jaw, I breath deep through my nose. Once I'm sure I can say what I need without letting him see how

pissed I am, I say, “I don’t owe you anything. I paid my fucking dues, Lev. Tonight was it.”

He sighs, and I sense there is more than he’s saying to this favour. For him to attempt to blackmail me, it must be big.

“What’s going on?” I ask, reaching my front door and letting myself in while I wait for him to answer.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

Before I can ask anything else, he ends the call. He knows I’d never back down. I have nothing to lose by saying no. Sure, he could have me taken out, or his father could, but there is nothing holding me here. Nothing worth breathing for except my sister, and I’ve made damn sure she’d be well looked after if I should disappear. There was a time when that threat would have worked, but not anymore.

I’ve been owned before and fought fucking hard to pay for my freedom. I refuse to do it again.

I toss my keys down on the counter as I enter the kitchen and head straight for the fridge to grab a beer. My evening turned to shit. I didn’t get my dick wet, so now I’m stuck with blue balls and wondering what the fuck has Lev so rattled he’d threaten me with something he and I both know is next to useless.

There is also the matter of the unnamed brunette who took my cock like a fucking champ. Our hook up a couple of weeks ago was by pure chance and no names were exchanged. Just the way I fucking like it. But she isn’t as unfamiliar to me as I am to her. I feel like I know who she is, but I can’t put my finger on it.

And I have no intention of finding out. My dick, however, disagrees and instantly hardens at the thought of her.

Needing to focus on something else, I finish my beer, dumping the empty bottle in the bin, and grab another before heading off to my office to try and find out what’s going on with Lev.

Pressing my thumb to the biometric door lock, it flashes green, then the door slides open permitting me entry. Once

inside, I drop down into the desk chair, flicking the mouse to wake up the computer.

It's a small room, built and equipped like a safe room. CCTV camera screens monitor every inch of the property, and a state-of-the-art alarm system is in place to keep it secure. A locked metal cabinet houses my weapons, mostly knives—my favoured weapon—but there are also several different kinds of guns, including a sniper rifle, and a mixture of ligature wires and tools good for torture. I try to mix things up a little. Too much of the same thing gives you away. I know a few men like me who always leave a calling card. To me that's a one-way ticket to a concrete room and being somebody's bitch.

Ain't no man sticking his dick anywhere near my arse unless I'm dead.

I like a lot of extracurricular activities but cock ain't one.

Logging into Tor, I navigate to the news site. There are several, but this one is specific to my business. It was set up by a friend; one of only a few I have. People like me don't have friends.

The first thing I see when the screen loads is the outside of Neon Flux and confirms that the shooting tonight wasn't random but a paid hit.

I click on the forum where jobs are listed. It's a hitman's notice board where you can pick up a random job, or if you're like me, you can add encrypted contact details allowing clients to hire you directly. Most of my hits are done this way. When I first started out, I used to take jobs from the board, but I gained a reputation that now affords me the luxury of picking and choosing which jobs I take on.

I see that I have a new request and click to open the message. Like always, names are disguised, and I'm careful not to do too many jobs for the same people.

This is a new user, and I click to open the attachment.

Details about the mark light up the screen, name, address, age, and just below that is a small image icon. This mark is a woman, not unusual, but more often than not it's some

husband wanting to off his wife for cheating, or he wants rid so he can take her fortune and marry his little twenty years younger side piece with her over inflated lips and silicone filled tits and who sucks cock like a pro.

I scan over the minimal details. Reading it twice more to make sure I read them correctly.

Is this guy fucking mental?

Ordering a hit on anyone is risky business, but ordering a hit of a Kavanagh is suicide. This one in particular. But it wouldn't be the first time I've knocked off someone big in my world. So, I click the image and wait for the picture of my mark to appear on the screen.

And when it does, there is only one thing to say.

“Fuck!”

CHAPTER THREE

STAR



Like I knew he would, Rick is here in a matter of minutes. I hear him before I see him as Toni and I sit at the back of an ambulance getting checked over.

“Star,” he calls, frantically searching the crowd before he spots me. A cop attempts to stop him passing the crime scene tape that has haphazardly been erected, but with no more than a couple of words and a look, he is permitted, ducking under the tape and making a beeline straight for me.

Rick Sullivan owns Triple R Security along with his two best friends, Ryder ‘Blue’ Hawkins and Seb Roberts. My sister Roxy’s best friend Jess is married to Rick, who has a son Max from his first marriage. I’m almost certain that’s the only reason her and Aidan—my brother for all intents and purposes—so readily agreed my move to Manchester. I didn’t know it then, but having made the move, reluctantly agreeing to the security detail Roxy and Aidan insisted on, Rick’s presence in my life became a constant. And even now when I no longer need a security detail, despite Aidan and Roxy’s protests, he is the first person I call when I’m in trouble.

“What the fuck happened?” His eyes scan me, checking I’m unhurt, then briefly look to Toni before coming back to me.

Rick’s question has me instantly looking to where a white sheet covers the body of Hannah, the girl who was shot, now lies.

“I don’t know,” I say quietly. “One minute we’re standing there laughing and the next...” My words trail off. I don’t voice the thought that has been probing the back of mind since it happened; the one that says that bullet was meant for someone else.

He rubs a hand over the scruff on his face as he continues to look at me. I’d be forgiven for thinking he’s thinking the exact same thing that I refuse to acknowledge.

“Have you called—”

“No, and I don’t plan to.” My tone conveys that he’s not to either.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Star. They need to know.”

The paramedic tells me I’m good to go, and I jump down from my perch on the tail gate of the ambulance.

“It was nothing. There is no need to worry them unnecessarily. I’m fine. Toni is fine. End of. I just want to go home and sleep.”

There is a tense stare off and a moment’s hesitation before he finally nods.

“Fine. But they will find out, and then we’ll both be in fucking trouble.”

“I won’t mention you. They’ll never have to know you were here.” Toni steps up beside me having also been given the all clear.

Rick sends me an incredulous look. “You and I both know that’s bullshit. Or have you forgotten who you are?”

“As if I possibly could.” I shake my head. But he’s right. Aidan, at the very least, will find out, and then I’ll be back to being watched like a fucking hawk.

And that ain’t happening.

Rick’s attention is snagged by a police officer coming this way before we have a chance to leave.

“Evening. Ladies, I’m going to need you both to give me a statement before you leave.”

“I’m not sure how much we can help,” I tell him, then add, “But go ahead and ask your questions.”

He does, and after each of us giving a brief statement, which match and don’t amount to much, he lets us go, reminding us that he may need us to answer further questions.

Rick gives me his keys, pointing over to where his car is parked, and tells us to wait in the car while he stays to chat to the copper.

By the time he climbs into the car, Toni is barely awake, and I’m more than ready to fall into my bed and sleep. Although sleep will evade me once I’m in bed I’m sure.

“He tell you anything?” I ask as Rick starts the engine before pulling away.

“Not really. At this early stage they don’t know much. We dropping Toni off home?”

“No, just take us to mine. She can sleep in the spare room. How’s Jess and Max?”

He changes gear as we hit the dual carriage way off the slip road and slants a look my way. “They are good.” His words are cautious, and it makes me suspicious.

“Okay, out with it,” I say, twisting in my seat to face him.

He looks over at me again then changes lane before finally answering me. “It’s still early days, so—”

“Oh my freaking god! Jess is pregnant, isn’t she? Tell me she is,” I squeal, startling awake Toni in the back.

“Yes—”

I squeal again, a little quieter this time and cut off anything else he was going to say.

“Yes, but”—His voice rises to be heard over my obvious excitement—“we aren’t telling people yet. You need to keep it to yourself.” Rick’s tone changes, and I get the seriousness of his words.

“Not even Roxy?” I ask.

“No. Not even Roxy. Jess doesn’t want to have to look at the broken expressions on peoples’ faces if...” He doesn’t finish his sentence, and I watch as he shifts in his seat.

“That’s understandable. I know how hard it was for you two last time.” Silence ensues for a moment. “How far along is she?”

“Twelve weeks. We’ve already had two scans to check everything is okay. Just a few more weeks and then we can tell everyone.”

The strain and worry are evident on his face, but beneath it his happiness is practically glowing.

After that I change the subject. I was here when Jess had her miscarriage, and it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to witness. Roxy stayed with Jess and Rick for several weeks, and I saw the emotional destruction losing a baby wreaked on all of them.

I know that Roxy and Maddox and Zak want to start a family, but seeing what happened to Jess has made them cautious, especially the guys.

Toni interrupts our chit chat about my job when she groans loudly and calls out a guy’s name. Thankfully, Rick ignores her and simply continues like she’s not having a sex dream in the back of his car.

When we arrive at my place, Rick helps me get Toni inside and up the stairs into the bed in the spare room.

“Jesus, she’s heavier than she looks,” I exclaim as we reach the bottom of the stairs.

“I heard that,” Toni’s sleepy words carry down the stairs, and we both laugh.

At the front door, Rick stops before stepping out. “Are you going to be okay? Do you want me to send one of the guys over?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m fine. Honestly. Wrong place, wrong time, that’s all. I feel awful for Hannah’s family though. And her friend.” That damn niggle is back, whispering words

of caution in my ear. Shoving it down, I let Rick out, thanking him and wishing him a goodnight.

“Call me if you need anything. And don’t say I didn’t warn you when Aidan hears what happened.” He points a finger at me with a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, yeah. Go, get home to Jess. Give her and Max a hug from me, and I promise to come and see you all soon.” He nods then turns and walks off down the path to his car. “Thanks again,” I call as he climbs in his car and drives away.

I lock up and grab two bottles of water from the fridge before heading upstairs. I put one on the bedside table for Toni then head to my own room.

I toss my outfit on the floor and throw on an old t-shirt, then jump into bed, plumping up the pillow as I turn on to my side. I lay staring at the clock on my bedside table, watching as the digits flick over and the minutes count down to 2 a.m., 3 a.m., until my eyes finally drift shut around 3.30 a.m.

I’m making my second cup of tea as the TV plays in the background. There’s still no movement from Toni, but it is early. The events of last night have made sure my sleep was little to none.

Carrying my cup into the lounge, I’m just lowering myself on the sofa when the newsreader’s words catch my attention, and I look up to see a picture of Hannah Swift, the girl who was shot last night, splashed across the screen.

I listen as the male newsreader explains how the young girl was enjoying a night out with friends when her life was cut short as she was leaving Neon Flux. He goes on with the usual spiel that police are looking for any witnesses who might have any information to help their investigation.

I switch the TV off just as another news story comes on, not interested in hearing more depressing shit. I drink my tea and play some mundane game on my phone to distract my

mind. Having used all my energy for now, I switch out of the game as my phone chimes with a message from Rick checking everything is okay. Sending him a quick reply, I carry my cup to the kitchen then head for a shower.

By the time I come back downstairs, Toni is sat on the sofa cradling a cup of her favourite coffee.

“Hey, you okay,” I ask dropping down beside her with my legs tucked underneath me and facing her.

“Yeah. A little freaked out still.” She lifts the cup to her mouth, then stops and adds, “You could have died—we could have died, Star.”

“I know, but we didn’t.”

“No, but that poor girl did.” Her eyes drop to her cup for a moment. When she raises them back up to look at me, her eyes are heavy with tears. “Do you know how relieved I was when I realised it wasn’t you? How awful is that?”

“It’s not awful. It’s a natural reaction. I felt the same when I knew you were okay.” She doesn’t need to know it’s not the first time I’ve been so close to getting shot.

“Maybe, but it doesn’t make the guilt taste any better.”

“No, it doesn’t. Come on let’s head into town and shop. I have a date tonight.”

Her head snaps up, wide eyes pinned on me. “What the fuck! And you didn’t think to mention this, huh?”

I laugh. “I didn’t mention it because you know how disastrous my dates are. I’ve no doubt this will be another wasted evening. But look on the bright side, I’ll have another hilarious and enthralling episode of ‘what not to do on a date’ for you tomorrow.”

“They are disastrous because you are so damn picky. Just close your eyes, open your legs and get off. If he talks too much, then stick a tit in his mouth. Every man loves to suck boob.”

“Oh my god,” I say through my laughter. When I’ve got myself back under control, I say, “And I’m not picky, just

particular.” If only she knew exactly how particular I am.

Even after years and hours of talking with my therapist, my sex life isn't close to being conventional. And while I'm okay with it to a degree., I don't share my preferences with people—not even my closest friend.

It's not that I don't trust Toni, or even think she won't understand. It's more about me, about still not being able to fully reconcile what happened to me and what turns me on. Not forgetting she's bound to ask questions. And I'm certainly not prepared to delve into my sordid past. And I don't want Toni giving me the look—the one that shows sympathy, yet they have no idea what to say or how to deal with you telling them you were kidnapped and sold to a paedophile sex ring when you were barely eight years old.

Yeah, I'm that girl.

The tainted, damaged girl who gets turned on by rough sex and being praised as they make me...

My thoughts part like a cloud of smoke as Toni waves a hand in front of my face and calls my name.

“Yo, Earth to Star. Where'd you go?”

“Huh, er...sorry.” I laugh it off. “I was just thinking about something I forgot to do at work that's all. Let's go shop.”

I can tell by her lingering look that she's not convinced, yet she lets me lead her up the stairs to dress.

Within thirty minutes we are shopping in town, but it takes a good couple of hours before I find something I'm happy to purchase. Toni claims I'm the worst shopper in history. I just know what I like. Unfortunately for me, the designers don't.

After a quick lunch, we say goodbye with me promising to message her after my date later.

I'm staring at my date across the table as he regales me with another example of his mathematic skills. He's an accountant.

A tiny detail he forgot to mention on his dating profile. One that would have had me instantly swiping left.

His short dark hair is styled in a neat side parting. When I say styled, what I actually mean is it's perfect. Not a damn hair out of place. And as he talks, I can picture him in front of his mirror this evening with a fine-tooth comb going over every inch of his head and making sure every hair lies exact to the minutest degree.

"Excuse me. I need to use the toilet," I say interrupting him as I get to my feet.

"Of course." He gives me a puzzled look, creating a V between his brows that is slightly off centre. My mind immediately wonders how much that irritates him that it's not perfect. This man adjusted the cutlery when we were seated because the knife wasn't parallel to the fork.

I pick up the small clutch from the table and head for the stairs that lead to the toilets. I look back to our table as I reach them. Seeing that he's not looking this way, I quickly duck out of sight behind a large pillar and open my clutch to find my phone and call Toni so she can rescue me.

"Planning your escape," a female voice says, startling me.

I look up to find our waitress with a knowing smile on her face. "That obvious, huh?"

"No, not as obvious as some of his dates. And you've lasted longer than most too." At my blatant surprise, she laughs and then adds, "He brings every date here. And there have been many."

"Wow, that's kind of tragic."

"Yeah, it is. He's a nice enough guy, but he's so—"

"Boring." We both laugh, then I ask, "Please tell me there's a back way out of here?"

She keeps me waiting for several seconds before finally her serious expression gives way to a beaming smile.

"There is. Come on, I'll show you."

The sigh of relief is hard to hide as I follow her toward the kitchen. Pushing through the double doors, we are greeted with a symphony of sounds. The one sound above all others is the gruff voice belonging to a tall lean man who is waving his arms around and shouting eloquently in Italian interspersed with heavily accented, yet still clearly understandable, English swear words.

I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my amusement. As funny as it is, I do not want to draw the attention of this man. He makes Gordon Ramsey look like a pussy cat.

Fortune is not on my side though.

“Ah, another of Isaac’s dates, si?” he says with an exaggerated bow, spreading his arm wide as we pass. “Much prettier than the last.”

“Oh my fucking god,” I whisper utterly mortified.

“Bravo, Carlo,” the waitress replies with a laugh. “This way,” she says holding open a door.

I step through into a short corridor with a closed door on the left and at the end is a fire exit. I practically run to it, desperate to get out of here and never return.

Of all my dating disasters this is top of the fucking pile.

I push the metal bar down, the door popping open with a clunk, as the waitress reaches me.

“Thank you...”

“It’s Becca. And no need to thank me.”

I step outside, ready to get out of here when Becca stops me.

“Can I offer you some advice?”

Turning to face her, I give a nod. “Sure.”

“I may be way out of line here, but I don’t think you want a nice guy.”

I try not to let her words offend me, even though they do. She doesn’t know me. Attempting to keep the bite out of my

words I ask, “And what do I need then?”

“Sometimes we need the opposite of what we think we need. Forget the suits and go get yourself a man with a little bit more...danger about him. Someone that will take care of you in a way you never knew you wanted.”

“Okay, thanks for that, Becca. Goodnight.” I walk away, quickly disappearing round the corner. “A man with a little more danger, huh? I don’t fucking think so,” I mumble as I find my way back to the main street.

My whole life has been spent around dangerous men. Why would I risk my heart to a man whose sole purpose in life is death?

Because he’s the type of man that feeds your fantasies.

The words rattle around my brain, joining with those of Becca and giving credibility to my therapist’s idea that the reason my dates are always such a failure is because I’m dating the wrong men.

Trisha has been telling me for the last three years that I pick safe men. She believes my taste in men is linked to my sexual preferences and is my way of suppressing them, to make me more normal—my skewed version anyway.

I’d like to call bullshit on that, but based on my dating history—always with men who think a riding crop is only for a horse, wear suits and work a safe 9-5 job—and my recent visit to a particular club where I met a man who not only knew what he was doing expertly but also didn’t leave me feeling like a dirty little whore, I’d have to give some credence to her theory.

Reaching my car, I get in, slamming the door shut and attempting to ignore the very real thrumming between my legs at the memory. I start the engine, rubbing my hands down the front of my thighs, but all it does is remind me of his hands.

I shove the car into gear and pull away, almost colliding with a car coming in the other direction. The drive home is one involving numerous beeping horns and a fair few middle

fingers—from both parties but the majority of the up yours lie with me.

Once home, I head straight for bed, ignoring the ringing of my phone as I switch it to silent and place it on the bedside table. It's Toni. But I'm too frustrated with myself to talk to her right now.

Sleep finds me and offers nothing but a circus of light and dark, pleasure and pain, dreams and nightmares.

CHAPTER FOUR

STAR



After waking late, I make coffee, put washing on and shower before calling Toni.

“Star Kavanagh, you and I are going to have a serious conversation about best friend etiquette,” she barks down the phone before I can even say hello.

“I know.”

“You know. That’s all you have to say?” My silence is my answer, and she takes it as such. With a sigh she says, “How bad was it?”

“So fucking bad. He’s an accountant.”

She gasps. “Nooooo! Call the fucking cops,” she says, her words full of sarcasm. “If that’s his worst crime then I think your safe.”

“Very funny. And no that wasn’t his worst crime. Not even close.” I tell her about bailing on him and that all the staff know who he is, even the damn chef. She can barely talk she’s laughing so hard.

“Okay, well... Moving on, do you want to know how my Saturday night went?”

I roll my eyes. “Do I? Because if you’re about to tell me in the most detailed way that you got railed by some guy, then no.”

“You’re such a spoil sport,” she grumbles. “Anyway, I need to get going. I have to go to my dad’s in an hour. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.”

Toni’s mum and dad separated a little over a year ago, and she’s struggled to come to terms with it. It doesn’t help that he’s moved his new girlfriend in already. According to Toni, Lillian is the daughter of some famous magnate in America and has a son a little older than she is, but she hasn’t met him yet as he’s still living in the states. Today’s dinner will be her first official meeting with Lillian, and I know she’s not been looking forward to it.

I toss my phone down and take my cup to the kitchen to get a refill before making a start on the housework.

It’s lunch time when I finish, so I grab a sandwich and a cold drink then plonk myself down on the sofa in front of the TV. This is where I plan to stay for the rest of the day. I should really go food shopping, but I can’t be bothered and decide to get a takeaway tonight. I’ll do a shop after work tomorrow.

I take a bite of my sandwich as I scroll through the channels looking for something to watch when my phone pings with a message.

It’s Rick checking up on me. I send a quick reply letting him know that I’m fine. His response is quick and to the point.

I’m glad to hear it. And a heads up, Aidan knows.

“Shit!” Another message comes through before I can respond.

Call him, Star.

I can’t even pretend I’m surprised Aidan knows about the shooting. And while I appreciate Rick’s heads up and advice to call Aidan, it won’t matter. Aidan hasn’t called me and neither has Roxy which means only one thing, one or both of them are going to be banging my door down anytime. It’s inevitable.

Knowing that calling them won’t stop them from coming, I get comfy on the sofa and watch the TV. At some point I must have fallen asleep and wake with a start.

The sun has set casting the room in darkness but for the intermittent light pouring from the telly. I push myself into a sitting position and find the remote. Muting the sound, I listen for whatever woke me, but the house is silent.

I drop the remote on the coffee table as I get to my feet and slowly make my way to the kitchen. As I near the doorway, a shiver runs down my back, and I stop. I take a step forward, keeping close to the wall and take in the far end of the room. With no light in here at all, it takes me a moment to see there is nothing out of place. Twisting to see the opposite end, where the back door leads to the garden, I breathe a sigh and roll my eyes when I see everything looks as it should.

Stepping further into the room, I'm berating myself for being ridiculous when a flash of movement catches my eye at the window. I pulled the blinds in here earlier due to the sun making it more like a sauna, but I'm in no doubt about the shadowy figure who is now stalking past my window toward the back door.

I pat the back pocket of my jeans for my phone, checking the other when I find it empty. Then I remember it's on the sofa.

Fuck!

Without a second thought, I dash for the stairs as they are closer than the lounge. I race up the stairs on my tiptoes. Each step is a thud like my heart inside my chest.

I stumble on the top step as my phone beeps loudly from the lounge telling me they are inside the house, but it cuts off as quick as it started. Fear slithers like a serpent inside me as it becomes clear they know my alarm code. I dare to look back to the bottom of the stairs as I round the knoll post and see their shadow as they enter the hall.

Knowing my room will be the obvious choice, I quickly close the door then drop back and slip inside the guest room, leaving that door slightly open.

I snatch up the landline phone and am greeted by silence as I put it to my ear.

“Son of a bitch!” I whisper.

Replacing the phone, I reach under the bedside table, stretching and slapping my hand around blindly as I search for the knife I taped there. Relief washes through me as I finally make contact with the handle and yank it free violently.

I grip the handle, knuckles turning white, as I step behind the door and hold my breath, praying that they go straight for my room. I know staying in this room is suicide and I’ll have to move at some point, but it’s my only choice right now.

I can’t hear a thing. Whoever this is, they’re like a fucking ghost. I press my back to the wall, wishing I could become one with it, blend in like a damn chameleon. Every second that passes feels like a million. I start to think that maybe I’m dreaming, but then I hear it. The faintest sound of movement in my room; the sliding of the wardrobe doors and rattle of coat hangers. Knowing there aren’t many other places I could hide in my bedroom and assuming they haven’t already checked the en suite, I know this is my only window of opportunity to get downstairs and out the house.

Cautiously stepping away from the wall, I sidestep to the open crack. With the hand holding the knife raised in front of me ready to strike, I use the other hand to slowly open the door a fraction, pausing to listen before slipping out enough to look down the hall. My bedroom door is half open, but there’s no sign of whoever is in there.

My breath heaves in and out of me, my heart thumping loudly, as I fully step out of the room, keeping my eyes on the bedroom. With a quick glance over my shoulder to the stairs then back to the room, I run.

I know the instant they hear me. I know the second they fire their weapon despite not hearing a sound.

Plaster rains down on me as the bullet hits the wall just as I take the first stair. I practically jump down the rest, almost becoming a mangled heap as my ankle twists and buckles. Rational thought falls to the wayside as I reach the bottom, and my plan to go out the front door is forgotten as I hear footsteps thumping above.

I round the bottom knoll post as the hall mirror shatters, and I spin around, jogging backwards, to see shards of glass skittering across the hard wood floor.

My back hits something hard, and I realise it's the kitchen door frame. Sidestepping, I keep moving backward into the kitchen, knowing the back door is just a few feet away, which I know is open as a cold draught blows over the back of my neck.

I step back behind the corner as an eerie silence descends over the house. Trailing my free hand over the wall as I keep walking backward, feeling every bump and blemish in the old plaster. Goosebumps prickle over my skin as the hair on the back of my neck rises. My breath catches in my throat and...

I know I'm not alone.

A hand latches onto my wrist as a second slides over my mouth, cutting off the imminent scream bubbling up from deep inside. Thick fingers on a calloused hand fit tightly, perfectly over the lower part of my face, gripping tight and pulling me back into a hard body.

"Shhhh," he growls against my ear.

I begin to fight his hold on me, but his fierce grip on my wrist tightens painfully, causing a muffled whimper to stick in my throat.

"I applaud your fight and my dick thanks you for the welcome but stay fucking still." The hoarse timbre of his voice stills me as delicious memories from two weeks ago flash through my mind. But that's not possible. We didn't exchange details not even our names. What the fuck is he doing here and how? My thoughts are cut off as he speaks again.

"Give me the knife," he whispers.

His hand holding my wrist glides along my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps, before covering my fingers wrapped tightly around the handle of the knife. I don't let go. I squeeze tighter, refusing to give it up.

A low, dark unhinged laugh rumbles over the shell of my ear. "You're in no position to disobey me. In less than two

minutes he's going to be right fucking here and he won't pause. So give me the fucking knife."

A second of thought before sense and survival instinct take over. My fingers loosen on the knife barely a fraction, but he doesn't miss it and has it ripped from my hand in the blink of an eye.

"Good fucking girl," he purrs, but before his words permeate my brain fully and allow me to think about the delicious throb between my thighs, he spins me around behind him, turning sideways and pinning me to the wall with one hand wrapped around my neck.

My chest rises with every panted breath as I meet his eyes. Vivid blue orbs that reach into my soul and tear at the fear running through my entire body.

"Shhh," he whispers, raising the hand holding the knife and placing a finger to his lips. His eyes rake over my body, drinking me in for a moment before he turns away, knife poised and ready to strike.

My fight or flight response is going mental right now as I watch him listening intently for any sign of the guy who is trying to kill me, his fingers flexing around my neck.

My mind is screaming at me to break free and run for my life while the rest of my body is ready to drop to my knees and worship at this man's alter.

I know exactly what he's capable of in the bedroom.

And he knows just how to get me off with nothing more than a flick of his fingers and a few perfectly said words.

But this fear and lust crashing together like Titans has me in a spin. A spiral so warped and twisted I can't do anything but hold on and hope to still be breathing when it's all over.

The faintest sound has my thoughts fracturing and him pressing his back against the wall, his rough fingers tighten around my neck, cutting off my breath.

My eyes widen as the barrel of a gun appears around the wall. I think he's going to strike, but he waits...one...two...

three seconds as the guy takes another step, revealing the hand holding the gun.

A flash of silver catches my eye as he slices through the man's wrist causing a river of red and a guttural cry of pain. A clatter of metal hitting wood, then I'm yanked away from the wall by the tight hold on my neck as the squelching sound of a knife piercing through flesh silences my attacker.

Choking and spluttering follows as the fingers around my throat fall away and I suck in a deep lungful of air.

Oxygen permeates my starved brain, and I can finally begin to process what I'm seeing.

My attacker is on his knees with his hands at his throat as he tries desperately to stem the blood spilling from his neck. But it's too much.

He's not looking at me, but at the guy who just stabbed him, slicing his jugular like it was air. As his eyes dull, my blue-eyed saviour picks up the gun, checking the clip and safety before shoving it into the back of his jeans.

I hadn't realised I was moving, slowly stepping backward away from them both, but my foot catches on the base of the back door as he turns his attention to me.

He sees my intention and stops me short with his next words.

"You run, I'll catch you. I catch you, I fuck you." Those icy blue eyes, alight with promise, home in on me, prickling over my skin as he looks on.

"You wouldn't—"

"Try me...Star."

My name on his lips has me spinning around and racing off down the garden. Utterly ridiculous because it's a dead end. There is nowhere for me to go. But I knew that when I ran.

Heavy footfalls thud on the dry ground as he chases after me. I'm not even halfway across the garden before he's slamming into me. We hit the ground hard.

His whole body covers mine, muscular and heavy as he uses his weight to keep me beneath him.

“Get off me! I’ll fucking scream,” I tell him, wriggling under him to try and get free. He wrestles with my flaying arms as I try to find some purchase. Finally grasping both wrists, one in each hand, he pins them to the ground.

“Do it. I love it when you scream.”

I close my eyes at his words, shutting out the image of me screaming as he fucked me from behind, a hand wrapped in my hair while he whispered what a good fucking girl I am and how he loves to hear me scream.

Desire, hot and rampant, fires through my blood.

“Be a good girl and scream for me, Star.” His lips ghost over my ear, then he trails his nose down my neck, smelling my skin and no doubt my arousal as it pools inside my knickers.

Loud voices suddenly ring out inside the house. He raises his head, tensing for a second before leaning back in.

“I’ll see you soon.” His hot tongue licks up the side of my face, then he whispers, “Till then, be a good girl.”

No sooner have the words left his lips and he’s gone. Coldness replaces the warmth of his body over me, and I feel...empty.

“Star! Star!” Roxy’s panicked yells carry from the house, and I slowly turn over, scanning the garden for any sign of him. But he’s gone.

“I’m out here,” I call out hoarsely, the effort has my hand rubbing at my throat where *his* hands were. I know without looking that he left a mark.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Roxy exclaims as she runs toward me, Maddox and Zak behind her, splitting up to search the garden.

I get to my feet only to have them almost taken out from under me a second later when Roxy crashes into me. She

squeezes me tight then runs her hands over my body checking for injuries.

“I’m fine, Roxy,” I tell her, pushing her hands off me and stepping back.

“You did not just use the fine word with me. The dead guy in your kitchen tells me you’re anything but fucking fine.”

“Because I am fine. I’m standing here breathing and talking and not bleeding out on the floor, so that means I’m fine.” I march toward the house certain that I may escape Roxy temporarily, but where one is the other won’t be far behind.

And as if on cue...

“Get me a fucking clean-up crew here now, then get me a fucking name ‘cause there’s going to be some serious fucking pain for the stupid cunt that sent a hitman after Star,” Aidan barks into his phone as I step through the back door.

CHAPTER FIVE

CARTER



After receiving the request to take out Star Kavanagh the other night, I did some digging. But I may as well have been trying to shovel shit with a bent spoon. Nobody was talking.

And so I found myself outside her fucking house like the creepy fucking stalker my reputation says I am.

And just like I feared, a second attempt on her life is about to go down. That I understand, but what I don't fucking understand is why someone would hire two people to do the same job.

Unless there are two different people out for her blood.

Given who she is, it's plausible to think more than one person would be looking to hit Kavanagh or the Lawlers where it hurts.

Nobody is more vulnerable than when they've lost something precious to them.

I watch as he accesses the back gate with ease, telling me he either knows the code or is using a scrambler and code breaker.

As soon as he disappears from sight, I move. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I sign into the security app and wait for the moment he triggers the alarm. I watch her on the screen as she realises he's there and runs for the stairs. Her fleeing triggers my hunter instinct, an intense desire to chase her. But I shove it down. Now is not the time for my dick to be in charge.

My phone vibrates in my hand as she reaches the top of the stairs letting me know he's inside. Then once he's upstairs, I use the lock pick and slip inside.

Things go at warp fucking speed as soon as I step foot inside and are how I find myself in my current predicament; one hand holding a knife and the other wrapped around her delicate and fragile neck just crying out for me to snap it—or bite it, either way it's a win for me.

I don't do either.

I do however make a mess of the fucker who has been hired to kill Star.

Something you were hired to do too.

I ignore the irritating and unwelcome reminder, and instead turn around as Star readies to make a run for it.

Bad fucking idea.

“You run, I'll catch you. I catch you, I fuck you.” Star's momentary surprise gives way to fear when I cut off her daring protest with one of my own. “Try me...Star.”

And off she runs like a good girl.

That earlier hunter instinct I suppressed returns full force and carries me out the door after her.

My body thrums with excitement as I barely break a sweat. Taking her to the ground, I envelope her body as she thrashes and attempts to get away. But that's not happening.

Pinning her hands to the ground, she threatens to scream. Like that will stop me. Screaming is my kind of poison, it's my heroin, my addiction.

“Do it. I love it when you scream.” I know without a shadow of doubt she's picturing our night together. Her body softens only a fraction, but it's enough to tell me I'm right. “Be a good girl and scream for me, Star.” I inhale her scent, a delicious and heady combination of possibilities with a hint of cinnamon, something unique I've never smelt before.

I hear them when she does, calling out her name and desperately searching for her. Time for me to leave. I can't afford for them to see me. But I make sure Star will be thinking of me long after I've gone. And I can't resist a taste, swiping my tongue up the side of her face. It's not the taste my dick had in mind, but it will have to do for now.

Then I'm gone.

When I make it back to my car, I pull out my phone and watch through the security app I used earlier as Aidan Kavanagh orchestrates a clean-up. Although there is no sound, his fury is clear. It doesn't take long for the feed to be cut off. A move that pleases me and means Aidan is leaving nothing to chance, but along with that comes the risk of him seeing me.

That's a problem for another day.

Monday means it's time to be a normal member of society and go to work, the kind that doesn't involve killing people.

The garage is open when I arrive, and I find Kai with his head under the bonnet of a 1983 silver capri. He looks up as I enter.

"Hey, boss. Good weekend?"

"A quiet one this week," I tell him as I move toward the office.

"Sure," he mocks knowing my weekends are never quiet. He thinks they are filled with parties and women. He doesn't have a clue that when I'm not here, I'm murdering people and getting paid for it.

I bought the garage about eight years ago needing a cover for my real job, and it's a great way to launder my less legitimate earnings. When you have medical bills to pay, a legit business is the best way to avoid too many questions from the authorities.

Becoming a mechanic was much easier than my path into the life of killer. It's not a role you imagine when you're a teenager, but it is the unfortunate position I found myself in thanks to the piece of shit my mum was dating when I was sixteen.

That piece of shit was also my first kill after he beat my mum and raped my sister then set fire to our house. What I didn't fucking know when I sliced that fucker up was that the men he was working for would want payment for the loss of their man.

The mark they branded me with burns at the memory. I might not be owned by them anymore, but the memory and who I became are a living legacy.

My phone pings, and I pull it free from my pocket to see another message from the client who hired me to kill Star. Only he doesn't seem pleased that she isn't dead.

Last night when I returned home, I returned the down payment he sent after I initially agreed to the job. To say that pissed him off would be an understatement. One I give absolutely no fucks about.

What I do give a fuck about is that I can't stop him from hiring someone else to do the job, and I still have no fucking clue about who the other guy hoping to put Star in an early grave is.

My little intervention last night is not going to stop them, but it will delay the inevitable.

There are two kinds of job in my world, and one of them involves a man or woman who is paid to keep going till the job is done. Think *The Bodyguard*. This person is a ghost, a loner, with no connections to anyone or anything. They live off the grid, and the only way you can contact them is via a number, a number that is disconnected the second your money is paid. There is no changing your mind, there is no chance of a refund, and they never say no. You could ask them to take out the fucking Queen, and if they think they can and you're offering them enough money, they will.

Changing my mind about taking out Star isn't good for my reputation, but it's well known enough to survive one little mar on it.

I don't bother responding. Instead, I bury my head in paperwork for the next couple of hours. Kai leaves at five after I tell him I'll lock up tonight. Around thirty minutes later, I hear a car pull up outside.

It's a black escalade, and there is only one man that owns not just one but a fleet of them in Manchester.

Pavel Orlov, the head of the Orlov bratva and Lev's father.

But it's not him who steps out when the back door opens. I get up from my chair, taking a second gun from the locked drawer of my desk, and walk out to greet him, if you can call it a greeting.

"Akim, I wasn't expecting you," I say pointedly making it clear that his arrival is not only unexpected but also unwelcome.

"As it was intended," he replies, stepping forward, flanked by two other men who step from the car.

Not a friendly kind of visit then.

He continues, "Pavel wanted me to deliver a message. He requests your presence this evening. He has a...special job for you." He tilts his head, mouth down turned in the equivalent of a shoulder shrug.

"And that's fucking grand, but I'm busy tonight."

He doesn't seem surprised by my refusal. Pavel must have warned him that I wouldn't be accepting.

"I'm afraid it was not an invitation you can refuse."

I take a step forward. "And you can remind Pavel, kindly of course, that I don't take orders from him." My money is on whatever shit Lev called me about the other night. Or at the very least the mark I took down. Hell, they are probably connected. I see the slight movement from the guy on the left and know what comes next. It's always better to be on the offensive.

I have both guns out and pointing at Akim's men before they can even move.

"I don't think you want to do that, fellas. Now get the fuck off my property and tell Pavel that whatever it is he wants with me, I'm not for hire."

Akim stands with his hands in his pockets looking mildly amused, but the small tick in his jaw tells me he's not happy.

"Pavel will not be happy, Carter."

I let out a laugh. "Not my fucking problem. The three of you turning up at my work and making idle threats is, however, a big fucking problem. And one I don't care for."

"I will give him your message."

"Yeah, you fucking do that."

Akim retreats with his men, and I wait until they are out of sight before heading back inside. Phone in hand, I call Lev. It rings off. Before trying again, I pack up, taking the cash from the safe and any important documents. Then I send a message to Kai to tell him I need to go away for a few days and to take some paid leave.

When I try Lev for the second time, he answers after the fifth ring.

"I can't talk right now."

"Don't you dare fucking hang up on me, Lev. I don't give a fuck what you think is so important because nothing is more important than why your father sent Akim here ordering my presence this evening."

"Did you agree?"

"No. I didn't fucking agree. What the hell is going on?" He curses down the line. "Lev?"

"I'll call you back."

"Lev, don't you—" The line goes dead. "Fucking asshole!"

I close up and get the fuck out of here before Pavel sends a fucking army for me. Back at my house, I head straight for my office, depositing the money and documents into my safe here. A nuclear fucking bomb would be hard pushed to crack it.

I shower, I eat and I scour the dark web for any information about Star and Lev. I make a call to my friend Koda, the same one who set up the news site I use for my jobs, asking him to work his magic and see what he can find, then I catch the last part of the news reporting the death of Mr Perry Graham. The newsreader is outside his office as she explains how Mr Graham was murdered in his home Saturday night, but I lose interest in her report the second a brunette appears on the screen behind her.

“Well fuck me!”

Star stands with a suit bag slung over her arm as she talks to an officer at the entrance of the building. She isn't alone, which I'm only half pleased about, as a guy in a sharp suit stands just behind her.

I quickly pull up the info from the client last night, and there in black and fucking white, had I been paying attention, is the name of her workplace.

Star is Perry Graham's PA, or she was until I slit his throat.

CHAPTER SIX

STAR



Aidan spins round as I enter the kitchen, and I don't think I've ever seen such a wild look on his face.

“What the fuck happened?”

“A guy broke into my house and tried to kill me. I think that about sums it up,” I snark, stepping over the dead body and trying to avoid the river of blood soaking into the wood floor.

He rolls his eyes. “Someone's been spending too much time with Parker,” he snaps. “You do this?” he asks pointing to the bloody mess on the floor.

I hesitate a moment, taking in the scene. Roxy and the guys step in, and before I can answer, Zak says, “If you did that, a round of fucking applause, Star.” His words sound like a compliment, but they are far from it.

While I'm not as soft as I look and have had some training in self-defence with all the men standing in this room, and even Roxy, we all know I didn't do that.

“I don't see anyone else here, do you?” I say waving an arm around to demonstrate my point. “Now if you don't mind, I'd like to go shower. The whole Carrie look really isn't for me.” I stride from the room before any of them can say another word.

I stop at the bottom of the stairs as Roxy speaks.

“You think she did this?”

“No. But not because she’s not capable. Whoever did this is left-handed, and unless I’m mistaken, Star is right-handed,” Zak says.

I don’t know why I even bothered to lie. Even without Zak’s call, they only have to check the CCTV footage to see it wasn’t me.

I have no idea what I’m supposed to tell them when they find out. It’s not like I know anything about the guy except that he’s savage, his dick is pierced and he fucks like a wild dog.

And he calls you good girl.

I shake of the thought and strip down, leaving my bloodied clothes in a heap on the floor in my en suite. They’ll need burning.

Stepping in, I turn the shower on hot needing to burn away the feel of the guy’s blood on my skin. Unfortunately, it doesn’t erase the images in my mind or the feel of *his* hands on my body or the smell of *him*, a faint coppery scent, which has nothing to do with the blood all over me, laced with something altogether too alluring that seems to have become permanently etched into my skin and nose.

When I step out of the en suite, Roxy is waiting for me.

“Better?” She gets to her feet, a clear bin bag clutched in her hands.

“Yes.” I watch as she loads my blood-soaked clothes into the bag and knots the end. “I know you have questions, but—”

“Oh I have plenty of questions. Let’s start with something simple.” She walks to the bedroom door and hands the bag to Maddox, who I hadn’t noticed till now. He gives me a nod before striding off down the corridor as Roxy closes the door.

I slip on some pjs then find my hairbrush and begin running it through my wet hair.

“Who is he?” Roxy asks taking a seat back on my bed and crossing her feet at the ankles.

“The dead guy? Haven’t the foggiest clue. Never seen him before.”

“That is not who I meant,” she says tilting her head. “Star, a guy tried to kill you.” Her tone gentles a little, and I stop brushing and look at her.

“I’m aware, Roxy. I was literally bathed in his blood.” The words come out with a little more sarcastic bite than I had intended. “I know you want answers, but I don’t have any. I’ve been home all day, fell asleep on the sofa and when I woke up, he was breaking into my house,” I tell her, my tone softer, which isn’t hard considering how exhausted I am.

“Okay, if that’s the story you’re sticking with,” she says knowing she isn’t going to get anymore from me tonight. Getting to her feet, she walks forward and stops in front of me. “Me and the guys will crash here tonight. And because I know you and that you’ll insist on going to work tomorrow, I’ll arrange a security detail”—I roll my eyes and sigh, but she continues before I can protest—“You don’t want to talk, fine. But this is not up for negotiation, Star.”

I don’t take her veiled jab at my unwillingness to talk to her to heart. Just like she shouldn’t take it personally that I refuse to open up to her. I’m like it with everyone. Except Parker, Aidan’s fiancée, something that Roxy isn’t fully aware of because I know how much it would hurt her.

She pulls me into a hug, and I hug her back, holding on tightly to soften the blow of not giving her what she so desperately wants.

“I love you, Star. And nothing will ever change that.” She drops a kiss to my cheek before pulling back. “Get some sleep. We’ll be right next door.”

“I love you too.” The words stick in my throat. Not because I don’t mean them, far from it. But because I do and with every bit of me.

I manage to hold back the tears until she’s closed the door, then I drop to the floor and let them fall. They flow like a river down my face as pain rips through me. It’s a pain I’m well

acquainted with; one that has been with me since the day I witnessed the carnage of my mother's death and then was snatched from my home and sister.

I've mastered the art of compartmentalisation and most days the darkness that surrounds those memories and that period of my life is there in the back of my mind but that's where it stays. But some days, like today, something will trigger a memory, or I'll be reminded of the pain my disappearance caused Roxy. Today it's my inability to share my most inner thoughts and feelings with the one person who loves me unconditionally like a mother would.

The man who rescued me tonight, the same one who managed to give me the most intense sexual experience of my life so far and without eliciting the usual feelings of disgust at myself afterward, has now also managed to compound my inability to talk to Roxy and in turn lie to her and Aidan.

A lie that I know will be discovered, yet it didn't stop me from telling it.

For that, and that alone, I'm livid with him.

It's not like I haven't told a lie before because I've told plenty. More a case of why and because of who.

I'm not even going to think about how he made me feel tonight when he was holding me, growling filthy words and threats of fucking me in my ear.

What kind of sick person gets off on being chased like prey? What kind of person enjoys pain and rough sex while being told what a good girl they are?

Me. I'm that person.

My sobs increase, and as I try to contain the sound, not wanting anyone to hear me, my head throbs with the pressure. I curl into a ball on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. Basically, I'm holding myself together physically and emotionally, although I'm failing at that last part right now.

I'm not sure how long I lie there, but as my sobs subside, goosebumps break out across my skin. I swipe at my face with

my hands, brushing away the last of my tears and then drag myself off the floor.

I climb under the covers, tugging the duvet up to my ears as cold and exhaustion take over my emotionally wrought mind and body.

The following morning, although shattered and emotionally wrung out, I wash and dress for work as usual. I refuse to allow events in my personal life to crossover into my work.

Roxy doesn't try to talk to me again about last night, which sets my mind spinning as I wonder why. What she doesn't fail to do is make it clear that Zak is coming to work with me. I don't waste my energy arguing with her. There's no sign of Aidan, which is another red flag and fits perfectly with her lack of quizzing this morning.

There's also no sign of the dead guy in my kitchen or that he was even here. The only sign that anything happened last night is the bullet hole in the wall as I descend the stairs and my missing mirror from the hall.

I don't eat despite Roxy's persistent nagging. I do manage to drink a cup of coffee before we head out.

Zak parks down the road and follows a few paces behind me all the way to my office. Only as we get closer it becomes clear that something is very wrong and a sense of *deja vu* comes over me.

Police stand outside the entrance to the building and across the road are several reporters. Approaching the officer closest to me, I explain that I work here, but his response isn't what I expected at all.

"What do you mean Mr Graham is dead?" I ask, shifting Mr Graham's dry cleaning from one arm to the other.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you anything more than that at this time. We have a list of employees, and an officer will be in touch with you in due course."

I sense Zak behind me, and the officer's gaze shifts to him. He doesn't say anything to Zak, merely scans his eyes over his nice suit contrasted with the tattoos peeking out of the sleeves of his jacket and neck of his shirt. It's clear from the look on the officer's face what he thinks of Zak.

"Let's go," Zak says, taking hold of my elbow and steering me away, giving the cop a lingering look over his shoulder.

It's not till we are in the car and heading back to the house that I realise I'm still clutching Mr Graham's dry cleaning.

"Shit. I should have given this to the cops."

Zak glances over at the suit bag resting in my lap. "How come you have it?"

"I take it to the dry cleaners on my way home every Friday, but this week the place was shut. Cops all over it. Do you think..."

"I think we need to get home and have a look at exactly what's in the bag."

Back at the house, Zak and I quickly get the bag laid out on the table and unzip it. At first, it just looks like a simple suit, but I am surprised there is only one inside given the weight of the bag. I'd always assumed there were several. The answer becomes clear as I unbutton the jacket, revealing the neatly folded trousers beneath and something neither of us were expecting.

The inside of the jacket is lined with small flat pouches, a couple of centimetres thick, of cash; twenties to be exact. And when we check the trousers, they're the same. There must be almost fifty thousand pounds hidden inside this suit.

"Jesus Christ."

"Guess that explains why your boss ended up dead."

"And why the dry cleaners was raided." Zak nods, pulling out his phone and typing on it for a moment before turning it toward me.

It's a news report about Mr Graham's death stating that he was murdered in his home on Saturday night. I am

immediately reminded of the shooting at Neon Flux, but I don't get a chance to voice my thoughts as Zak beats me to it.

"I doubt the shooting at the club was a coincidence, Star. And I'd bet my life you were the target."

"Yeah, thanks for that cheery deduction, Sherlock." He gives me a shrug. "It's not like the thought hadn't already crossed my mind. Let's be honest, I'm the most obvious target." I hand him his phone back and pull out a chair, dropping down into it with a heavy sigh. I point to the suit and all the cash. "You think this is the reason why?"

"I'd say yes..."

"But?" I ask as he pauses.

"But it's flimsy. Presumptuous at the least to assume you're involved based solely on you being the one who delivers to the dry cleaners. Anything happened recently, you seen or heard anything that someone might think means you're more involved?"

I'm shaking my head before he's finished asking the question. "No, nothing." As I say the words, a thought pops into my head about the club I met *him* at. Is it suspicious that for the last five years there's never been a threat and then I visit a club and hook up with a guy, who is clearly not just your average bloke on the street, and now two weeks later there's not one but two attempts on my life in the space of twenty-four hours? When you factor in that it was also him who saved me, it's not hard to see there might be a link between the two.

Zak watches me for a moment, and I'm sure he doesn't believe me. "Get this packed back inside. I need to make a call," he says, putting his phone to his ear as he leaves the room.

I do what he asked, then make a strong cup of coffee. I can hear Zak's muffled voice as I sit with my hands wrapped around the cup and think about last night. I think about *him* and how the fuck he found me. Did he know me when we hooked up? Was that the plan all along?

My phone rings making me jump. I've barely got it to my ear before Toni's panicked voice hollers down the line.

"Oh my fucking god have you seen the news?"

"Jesus, Toni, I quite like the ability to hear. And to answer your question, yes, I've seen the news."

"Are you okay? Do you know what happened? Do you think it was a jilted mistress? He's married, right?"

I have to hold back a laugh at her rapid-fire questions. She's such a gossip whore. I don't think I want to imagine what she would say if she knew what went down here last night.

"Yes. No. No idea. Yes. I think that covers all your questions," I say with a small smile playing on my lips because I know it will confuse her.

"Wait, what? One question at a time, Star."

"You should take your own advice."

This time she gives me an exaggerated laugh. "Hilarious. Now, start again from the top and tell me everything you know."

"I don't know anything. I didn't even know he was dead until I turned up at work this morning and was greeted by cops and reporters. Why aren't you at work?" I ask trying to steer the conversation away from all the crazy, none of which she needs to know about.

"Pulled a sickie." She huffs down the phone, and I sense something is bothering her, but she doesn't elaborate or give me the chance to ask. "Besides, I've been getting my Bridgerton fix. Queen Charlotte just released, and it is top notch. Heartbreaking but in the best possible way." She suddenly bursts out laughing. "Dicked in the nob," she blurts.

"What the fuck is that?"

"It's Georgian slang. Dicked in the nob means silly, crazy. I mean crazy is a good description of your life right now." She giggles again. "Did you know there's a whole dictionary for it. *The Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* by Francis

Grose and written in 1788. Can you imagine the ladies of the ton using sugar stick, or whipt syllabub.”

“I’m not sure I even want to know the meaning of those words.”

“Well, sugar—”

“Nope,” I cut her off, shaking my head with a laugh, but I’m grateful for the light relief from other things on my mind. “How did your dinner go with your dad?”

“Urgh, do not fucking ask. The guy is wanker!”

“Who, your dad?”

“No, he’s just an idiot sucked in by Lillian’s hot body and money. I’m talking about Lillian’s son.”

“I thought he was still in the states?”

“Apparently not. He’s decided to hop across the pond and live here for the rest of the year. Shame his plane didn’t drop out of the sky.”

“Oh dear, that bad, huh?” I ask with a deep chuckle.

“Worse. Knight Kingsman—who the fuck even calls their kid *Knight*—is a spoilt rich boy who needs to remove the silver fucking spoon from his mouth before I choke him with it.”

Movement at the doorway catches my eye, and I look up to see Zak there. His arms are folded across his chest and he’s wearing a look that says I’m about to be given the third degree. I don’t have to think too heavily to come up with an idea of what it’s about.

“Er, Toni, I need to go. There’s something I need to do. I’ll call you later,” I say interrupting her mid rant. I end the call before she can say anymore and place the phone down on the table. “Everything okay?” I ask Zak.

“That depends,” he wagers.

“On?” I press, my feet shuffling nervously under the table.

“On whether you can explain to me who the second guy is.” Zak drops his arms to his sides and steps into the room, pulling out the chair one down from me and sits.

My hand finds my phone and I slowly trace my finger over the screen, smearing it and attempting to give my brain time to come up with something that won't sound like another lie.

As I look up at him, meeting his eyes, I say, “Would you believe me if I told you I don't know?”

He immediately shakes his head. “Not even if you were the best liar in the world.

I frown, convinced there is more to his words. “I'm not lying. I don't know his name.”

“But you do *know* him?”

This time it's easy to translate the meaning of the inflection in Zak's words. I hold his gaze for a moment, then I nod.

“I know him.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

CARTER



Less than twenty-four hours and I'm back where I was before and stationed outside Star's house. Only this time I don't have the luxury of being able to watch what's happening inside, though I don't need the security feed to know she has a house full.

From the outside the house looks like all the others down this street, but they don't see what I see. The guy in the house next door watching between the slates of the pulled blind, then there's the guy in the van parked across from the house no doubt monitoring the phones and CCTV. But all of that isn't what stops me from entering the house. No, it's the people inside who are my biggest threat.

The hours pass slowly, and nobody comes or goes from the property except the takeaway delivery guy. I try Lev again but he's ignoring my calls, and they just go straight to voice mail.

I catch a small glimpse of Star as she pulls the blinds in her bedroom, and I think she's spotted me when she looks right where I'm hiding for a moment before she tugs on the cord and the blind falls shut.

The next time I see any movement inside the house is the following morning when the suited guy who was with Star yesterday steps out, jumps into his car and drives off before returning twenty minutes later with a bag full of shopping.

I take him in as he exits the car, clocking the knife I know he has sheathed under his jacket and eyeing the tattoos peeking out from his open shirt, just like the cop did yesterday.

One thing I have over the cop is that I know exactly who I'm looking at.

Zak Lawler, one half of the notorious Lawler brothers and one third of Star's sister Roxy's little menage. He heads back inside as my phone vibrates in my pocket. This better fucking be Lev. It's not.

"Koda, what you got for me?"

"A fucking hornet's nest, man."

"Talk," I tell him, keeping my voice low and shifting further back in my hiding spot as a couple pass by. I extend one leg, giving it a stretch before doing the same with the other, not that I can feel much as both went numb some time ago.

"I don't even know where to start. The long and the short of it is that Perry Graham was involved in a deal with Lev, don't ask me what 'cause that I haven't been able to figure out yet. But Perry got a little too greedy and wasn't happy with his cut."

"So he was skimming off the top?"

"Basically, yeah. But it's not that simple, man. There is something fishy about the whole thing. I can't find anything about the third party involved and it looks like Pavel has been kept in the dark. Or he isn't aware that shit went sideways."

That at least explains Akim's little visit and why Lev was freaking the fuck out when I told him I refused his father's offer to attend the house. Lev gave me the impression the order for Perry's hit came from above, but I don't think that's the case now.

"What else you got?" I ask hoping there's more because this info is lacking in meat.

"Nothing, man. Lev is cleaning up. Whatever he's been doing, he's now locking that shit down."

"What about the girl?"

Silence.

Never a good sign.

“Koda, what about Star?”

A muffled groan travels down the line as though he’s scrubbing a hand across his face. “I heard that someone took out a Shadow last night and they are pissed, man. I don’t know what went down, but if you had anything to do with it, then you need to watch your back. As for Star, she’s still on the hit list. Whoever wants her dead ain’t giving up.”

“Thanks, Koda. I’ll be in touch.” He says bye, and I end the call. Koda has just confirmed something I was afraid of. It seems that my hiatus from the Shadow Guard is about to end.

If I was smart, I’d reach out to Lennox first, but there’s no way in hell I can do that right now. Guess I’ll wait for the bastard to come to me. He’ll find me just like he did when I was sixteen. Only difference is that I don’t owe him anything this time.

Another couple of hours pass before there is any other movement inside the house. And thank fuck because I’ve been sat here so long I’m about to become a fucking garden gnome.

Zak and Maddox exit first, followed closely by Star and then Roxanne. Zak, Maddox and Roxanne all scan the area like a damn hawk, so I keep my head down until they get in the car Zak used earlier this morning.

Knowing the guy in the house next door can’t see me until I exit the path of the garden I’ve been hiding in, I wait for the car to reach the end of the road before getting to my feet. I stroll down the path not worried about the van man because he’s not in the front which means he can’t see me from the back as there are no windows.

I’m wearing a cap and keep my head low as I pass the house next door, turning away to look over my shoulder just to be certain he doesn’t see my face. The car turns right at the end of the road, and once I’m in mine, I pull away casually, reaching the end of the road just as I see their car disappear towards town.

I follow at a safe distance, then drop back as they pull up outside a restaurant, watching them enter before driving a little further up the street and parking.

I check my rear-view mirror while I figure out what my plan is. There's been no sign of Aidan Kavanagh since last night or anyone following them, but none of that settles the uneasy feeling in my gut.

There's no doubt that they know Star wasn't alone last night and it's just a matter of time before they know who I am. What there is a doubt about is why the fuck I'm wasting my time with this. Star isn't anyone of importance to me. I don't care if someone is crazy enough to take out the Kavanaghs or the Lawlers. It's none of my business. So why the fuck am I here? Why the fuck do I find myself entering the back entrance of the restaurant ten minutes later and watching them like some jealous boyfriend who thinks his woman is cheating? Because something keeps pushing me toward her, something is telling me I need to be involved in whatever this is.

It ain't because I need to get involved with the fucking Shadow Guard again. But the fact they are involved is definitely intriguing. Regardless, my actions last night have put me back on their radar.

It's lunch time, and the restaurant is relatively busy and means I can get lost among the diners. I find my way to a small table for two tucked away in the corner. From here, I can see them all, including Kavanagh, who has joined them in the time it took for me to get inside. He isn't alone either. Beside him sits a woman. I don't recognise her, but Kavanagh's body language and possessive hand on her thigh beneath the table make it easy to guess. She's Parker Bryant, Kavanagh's fiancée. On her other side sits Star and the two of them are chatting away. Star is wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and a cream polo neck jumper, which is no doubt hiding the faint marks from my hand last night, with her dark hair hanging over her shoulders, framing her neck and face.

While enjoying the conversation, Star looks distracted and somewhat uncomfortable. If I'm honest, she looks like she's

about to bolt.

Now wouldn't that make things interesting.

I look away, shifting in my seat as the memory of chasing her last night dances in my mind. When I look over next, a waitress is taking their order. As the waitress leaves them, Star gets up and begins walking this way. I track her, watching every footstep, the way her chest rises with each breath and the way her hands tighten into fists as she disappears into the hall leading to the toilets.

I slip away unseen.

A ghost. A shadow.

The ladies' toilet is empty except the last cubicle where I can hear clothes ruffling before the whoosh of water as she flushes the loo.

As the snick of the lock opening echoes in the room, I step back into the cubicle beside hers and watch as she steps out, tugging at her jumper. She walks to the bank of sinks and switches the tap on, wetting her hands before squirting some soap into her them. She begins washing and slowly raises her head to look in the mirror. Her eyes land on me, leaning casually against the side of the cubicle, and widen. Her moment of surprise is just that, a moment, then she continues to wash her hands like I'm not here.

I smile at her attempt to cover her fear, but the way her body has tensed, locked up, is a dead giveaway. Her eyes watch me in the mirror as she rinses the soap off her hands. She turns the tap off and flicks her hands to remove any excess water, then with intent she spins around to face me.

“What do you want?” she asks, her words strong as she breaks my stare and reaches for a hand towel.

“Of all the questions you could ask you want to know what I want,” I say, pushing off the side of the cubicle and taking a step toward her. I tilt my head, watching her as she crumples up the damp tissue, balling it tightly in her hand. “You seem... agitated.” Another step forward. “A little afraid.” And another. “And I'd say a whole lot excited.”

“And I’d say you’re brave and stupid coming in here like this.” She raises her chin, but her leg twitches giving away her body’s reaction of wanting to run or step back.

“Why aren’t you running, Star?” I take another measured step toward her, and her breath hitches as I breach her safe space.

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” Her voice waivers slightly, deepening in tone.

“You bet I fucking would,” I snap, darting forward so our faces are barely an inch apart. “And so would you.” She jumps, falling back against the sink, but regains her composure almost instantly. “Is your heart racing thinking about it?” My eyes drop to the pulse thrumming in her neck, bringing a satisfied smile to my lips. “I know it is, Star. Just like I know how much you enjoyed my cock. Taking it all like a good fucking girl.”

Her eyes drop to half closed and her tongue darts out, wetting her bottom lip, at my words. My dick hardens, straining against my jeans for another dip in her exquisite pussy, another taste of her fear as I fuck her.

“Hmmm, how easily I could slip inside you right now. And you’d let me because good girls love to be fucked,” I whisper, grazing my cheek against hers and inhaling her unique scent, one laced with intoxicating fear and arousal. I close my eyes and push my deviant thoughts away. This is not what I came here for, although I’m enjoying toying with her. “You need to leave,” I tell her firmly.

“Get out of my way, and I’ll gladly leave.” The words are breathy, almost a whisper. I love the effect I’m having on her, but I focus back on my reason for being here and it certainly wasn’t to fuck her, which is the winning need right now.

“No, Star. You need to leave town. Lay low.”

Her head snaps back in surprise and confusion. “And why the fuck would I do that?”

“Because someone wants you dead.”

“You mean you?” she laughs. “Then what are you waiting for?” she says daringly, pushing her face closer to mine.

“Oh Star, Star, Star. I don’t want you dead.” My arm snaps out, wrapping around her waist and pulling her to me. “You’d already be dead if that were true. No, I want you very much a-fucking-live so—” Voices in the hall stop me, and we both turn to look at the door. There is nowhere for me to hide or run to in here, but I have something they don’t.

With my arm locked tightly around her waist, I drag her back toward the cubicle she used, slamming the door closed and locking it as she begins to protest.

I pin her to the wall and slap a hand over her mouth, pushing my body closer to hers. “Shhh. You’re going to do exactly what I tell you.”

I can feel her fast, panting breaths coming from her nostrils against the side of my hand as they flare with a mixture of exertion and the rush I know she’s getting from me having her pinned this way. I saw it last night, and I see it now. Star Kavanagh likes the fear I invoke in her, she enjoys the adrenaline pumping through her veins from the uncertainty of what I might do, but more than any of that, she enjoys it when I praise her.

“I know you’ll do it because you’re so good at doing as I tell you.” She begins to shake her head. I lean forward and whisper my next words in her ear. “As a reward, I’ll give you what you need.” She shakes her head more firmly, trying to release her mouth from under my hand, and I let her. Our eyes lock on each other—mine telling her to be quiet.

“I need you to leave me alone,” she grits out between clenched teeth and keeping her voice low.

Before I can respond, the main toilet door swings open allowing the excited chatter of feminine voices to flow inside.

I pull her away from the wall and keeping a hold of her, I close the toilet lid before stepping up onto it and positioning Star in front of me. I take her chin in my hand, and her hands fly up to grab hold of my forearm as I tip her head back so I

can see her as the two women that entered lock the door on their cubicles while continuing to chat back and forth. I release my hold on her middle and gently tug at the hem of her jumper. As my fingers brush her bare flesh, her eyes widen and she goes to speak, but my hand beneath her chin holds fast preventing her.

My fingers tiptoe up her smooth stomach, her muscles flinching with each touch. I keep going, up past her tits to the dip at her neck, and my hold on her tightens as I picture us like this a couple of weeks ago. It's an image that has lived rent free in my mind since that night, and I don't like it.

I don't understand it.

I don't come back for seconds because that complicates things, and my life is complicated enough. There is no room for women just pussy. I take what I need and leave. Being a hired killer means no attachments, no leverage, no family. It's solitary. And that is how it needs to stay.

I'll give myself this tonight, then I'll fucking vanish. I'll leave town for a few days. Let the dust settle.

The words go through my mind, but I know they're bullshit.

I'm on too many people's radars after last night, and whatever Lev has dragged me into means no chance of disappearing.

My finger strokes along her collar bone, tracing the hard edges up to her shoulder and then back down again before dropping to the cup of her bra. I slip a finger beneath the edge, and all the while I watch her.

Her pupils are blown with arousal as they lock onto my lips, fingernails digging into the flesh of my forearm as her own hold on me tightens, but she doesn't move to stop me. And that is all the invitation I need. Brushing a finger over her nipple causes a fractured moan to rumble up her throat, vibrating under my hand at her chin, and I can barely contain my own growl of approval at the sound. I roll her nipple

between my thumb and forefinger, pinching and tugging on it as she arches her back.

“I bet you wish it was my teeth biting this hard as fuck nip,” I growl into her ear as the two women exit their cubicles and begin washing their hands. “Or maybe you need my teeth somewhere else?” I lean down over the top of her, bringing my lips to hers, then I run my tongue across her lower lip before nipping at it. “I remember the sweet taste of your pretty little cunt as I licked you clean after I made you scream while you came all over my fingers. And you did it so fucking well. Hmmmm, maybe I’ll do it again. Maybe I’ll leave my teeth marks all over you so any man that sees them knows you were mine first.”

“Oh...god,” she stutters out, and I release her chin, her hand falling away, as I quickly bring that hand up and mirror my actions on her other nipple.

“Not fucking god but close enough,” I growl and I’m just about to take this to the next level when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I ignore it, moving one hand to the button of Star’s jeans when it vibrates again at the same time as the main door is opened and shouting bursts in through the open door.

I yank my phone from my pocket and check what the fuck the emergency is.

If you’re at Gambino’s, then get the fuck out of there!

Now!

“Sorry, sweetheart, but we are going to have to do this another time.” I jump down from the loo, manoeuvring Star to the far wall by a small window. I tuck my phone back in my pocket and unlock the door, opening it just enough to see out.

“What’s going on?” Star asks, shoving my hand that’s holding her away and trying to get past me. “Let me out. My family is out there.”

I see the two women that were in here just outside the door, one is holding it open. A blood-curdling scream rents the air as one of the women jolts then hits the floor.

Star starts pulling at my jacket and yelling at me to move and let her out. I close the door quietly, clicking the lock back in place and look at the window. It's small, and I ain't ever fitting through that, but Star will.

Grabbing her wrists in one hand, I pin her to the wall. "Shut up. If you want to get out of here alive, then you need to be quiet and do as I say."

"But—"

"No fucking buts, Star. They can take care of themselves. You're going out that window, then you're going to fucking run. You hear me. You fucking run." Her lust filled gaze from moments ago has given away to real fear, but I don't have time to comfort her or try to reassure her. She nods and I let her go, reaching behind her to open the little window. It springs open, and I push it as wide as it will go.

I grab my car keys from my jacket pocket and snatch a hold of her hand, slapping them into her open palm.

"These are my car keys. It's a little beat-up old dark blue Fiesta parked just down the road. You get in and you drive. You find somewhere out of the way and wait for me there."

"This is crazy. Do you know who my family is?"

"Of course I fucking do. Now go."

She holds my stare for a moment, a frown creasing up her brow, then she closes her fist around the keys, shoves them into her back pocket and turns to the window.

I give her lift up, and she pulls herself the rest of the way. I watch as her feet disappear out the window followed by a thud as she hits the ground the other side.

"Go!" I whisper-yell, pulling the window shut as a loud bang echoes around the bathroom

CHAPTER EIGHT

STAR



I collapse in a crumpled heap on the ground, dirt and grit digging into my palms as they break my fall. Thankfully the drop outside is lower than I thought, and I didn't fall more than a few feet. I push up from the ground and get to my feet as I hear a barked out "Go!" then the window close shut.

My eyes quickly scan the area, and I realise I'm at the back of the restaurant. I can even see the back entrance. I could sneak back inside and find Roxy and Aidan, but even as the thought forms in my mind, I know it would be a mistake. Instead, I take one last look behind me at the closed window before bolting to the left and looking for a way to get back to the main road.

After I pass two other buildings, I finally see an alley leading to the main road up ahead and slow to a jog as I reach the entrance. Keeping close to the wall, I peer into the alley, but I can't see a damn thing. It's pitch black and the only lighting is at the far end from a lamp post along the main road that only manages to reach about a foot in.

I hesitate, looking back to where I ran from. I can't make out anyone and wonder whether it was all a misunderstanding. What if he's trying to trick me, to get me on my own? But I dismiss the idea. What's happened to Roxy and Aidan and everyone else? What if they are hurt? What if they are... I shake the thought off and look back to the alley, taunting me.

The sound of gunfire behind me makes up my mind for me. I rush into the darkness and run. I fly out the other end and dive to the right with my back pressed to the wall as I scan the

street searching for an old Fiesta or any sign of Roxy or the others.

My mind is frantic, my head swinging from left to right up and down the street, but I don't see it. Cars whizz past mixing with the sounds of gunfire and shouting coming from further up the road, and I'm just about to give up and peg it when my eyes land on a dark blue Fiesta parked directly opposite me.

"You have to be kidding me." I pull the keys free from my back pocket and jog across the road between the line of cars that has started to form. I click the fob and breathe a sigh of relief when the door unlocks. Jumping in, I start the engine and am just pulling away when a guy bursts from the alley way. I put my foot down and thank god there's no traffic this side of the road. I look in the rear-view mirror and see him watching me as I speed off. He's talking on the phone, and I know he's seen me.

"Fuck!" I turn off and head out of town with no idea where the fuck I'm supposed to go and with no phone but knowing I need to ditch the car as soon as possible.

I drive for twenty minutes before pulling over outside a small car sales place that you'd only ever buy from if you wanted something guaranteed to break down or was used in a robbery.

I cut the engine and drop my head to the steering wheel. Five fucking years I've lived in Manchester and never had more than a drunken college guy try to feel me up at a party.

Now I've got a guy I met at a sex club stalking me, a dead boss and someone that wants me dead. And wants me dead bad enough to shoot up a whole restaurant full of innocent people.

And that little trio of bad shit doesn't even cover the fact *he*, whoever *he* is, once again had me like putty in his hands. I do not have time right now to unpick what the hell that's all about.

I look around the car, but there isn't even an empty wrapper or receipt. For such an old car it's surprisingly clean

and well maintained on the inside. Next, I try the glove box. It drops open with a click revealing nothing but an empty black hole. There is no logbook, no map, no fucking anything.

“Who has a car with nothing in it?” I grumble, slamming the glove box closed and dropping back into the seat with my head tipped up toward the ceiling. I close my eyes trying to get my brain to think.

My eyes open as something *he* said pops into my mind. I get out and open the boot. It looks like a normal boot, empty except for the spare, a jack and a wrench. I run my hands over the inside but find nothing. I even try to lift out the tyre, but it won't budge. It's like it's locked in.

I take the wrench, jamming it into the back pocket of my jeans then close the lid. He told me he'd find me which means there must be a tracker on this car. Not sure why anyone would want to track this old thing. It's not like there's anything important in here...unless.

I open the boot again, and this time I take my time. Starting at the left side, I run my hand over every square inch of the boot and am about to give up when my fingers brush over a small button tucked in the front right corner. Something inside the boot clicks, but I don't see anything open or move. I shove at the damn stupid spare tyre in frustration only this time there's a whoosh as it begins to lift, tilting back to reveal a hidden compartment underneath. There's a decent sized black rucksack inside that I pull out then check the rest of the space before closing the tire back into place and tossing the wrench back in and shut the boot.

I jump back inside the car and rest the bag on my lap. The ripping sound of the zipper being peeled open is loud in the heavy silence of the car and apprehension at what I might find inside thrums through me.

I pull the bag open and peer inside. Sitting on top of some folded clothes is a gun, a Glock by the looks of it. I pick it up and carefully place it on the seat next to me. Next, I remove the clothes, placing them beside the Glock as a scent I'm starting to recognise as *his* fills the space. I find a mobile,

probably a burner, a knife in a leather sheath and a small metal box. Putting everything else aside, I take the box and turn it over, inspecting it. Around the size of a mobile phone in length, I flick the catch and open it.

Bingo!

It's a GPS tracker, and I'd bet he can track it from anywhere via an app on his phone. I push one of the buttons on the front and the screen lights up. A map loads showing my current location as a white flashing dot, but it's the small navigation symbol in the top left that catches my eye. I fiddle around trying to click on it until eventually a new screen loads. This one shows a list of recent locations, and I scroll through looking for anything familiar. The first address on the list is mine and again a little further down, not a surprise, but it's the address in between that I decide on. There doesn't seem much point in going home; it's not safe, and I don't want to put the others in more danger, which seems to be following me like a bad smell.

I check the burner but it's dead, so I recheck the bag and come up empty. Cursing to myself, I quickly repack the bag, leaving out the little metal box and the gun, then drop it into the footwell of the passenger side for later. With no other option, short of stealing a car, which I wouldn't even know how to do, yet I can shoot a gun, I head back toward the city using the map to guide me.

When I'm a couple of miles away from the address, I stop in a supermarket car park, parking in the furthest corner from the late afternoon shoppers.

Grabbing the bag, I take out the thick hoodie and pull it on over my head, ignoring the flash of goosebumps that pop up over my body as I become encased in *his* smell. It's baggy as hell but comfy and black so less likely to draw attention to me. I put the gun in the large front pocket along with the GPS tracker, then climb from the car and throw the rucksack over my shoulder.

My skin prickles with unease as I lock the car and begin walking toward a small path carved from many feet through

the low hedge at the edge of the car park. I feel eyes on me even when there's no one around. It's unsettling. But it does make me extra aware of my surroundings.

I walk quickly and calmly and periodically check the map. Thank god I wore my flat boots. I reach an estate and think that this must be it, but according to the map the address is just beyond here. Yet when I pass by, there's nothing but a small industrial estate.

Most of the businesses are closed as the late afternoon gives way to early evening. Rounding the next corner, I stop short. A row of garages greets me. Several of them have the overhead doors twisted and broken, and I can almost feel their laughing and taunting stares as I pass.

"Prick!" I curse as I reach the end of the row. "A dead fucking end. Just wonderful." I spin on my heels ready to track back and play roulette with the GPS tracker for another address when I hear the purr of a car engine approaching.

I duck under the partially open garage door next to me and almost crash into a stack of boxes. My eyes adjust to the hazy dust-filled light as breaks squeak outside and a door opens and closes. I sidestep a beam of light coming in through the buckled door to avoid casting a shadow and press my back up against the wall between two stacks of boxes.

Feet scrap on the concrete as whoever is out there paces back and forth in front of the garage.

"Where the fuck are you? I'm here and you're not," an angry voice barks, and I assume he's on the phone.

There's a loud clang as something hits the garage door making me jump. I hold my breath hoping he didn't hear me as he begins speaking again.

"I don't have time to wait around for you to fuck some cunt. You told me an hour. Time is up. Get here now or the deal is off!"

It's silent for a moment and I wonder if he's got back in the car, but then I didn't hear the car door closing. The shuffling feet are back, and I can picture him biting a thumb nail as he

paces back and forth. I settle in for a long wait. It's only been a couple of minutes before his phone rings, and he answers with a gruff tone, and I listen as he talks quietly, keeping his voice low despite the fact there isn't anyone else around, that he knows of anyway.

"How was I meant to...at the club...he told me the guy is the best there is...of course I know how serious this is...well maybe if your guy...killed...we wouldn't be...mess." I catch snippets of his conversation as he moves about making it harder for me to hear him. "What the hell—" The rest of his words cut off sharply and are replaced with a grunt followed by a loud exhalation of breath before a dull thud carries to me.

Footsteps and the sound of something being dragged across the ground filter in under the door. It stops and there's the audible click of the boot being opened and groaning and rustling of clothes before the resounding clunk as the boot is slammed shut.

I wait with bated breath yet desperate to look and see what is going on. I slowly slide down the wall into a crouching position then lean forward to peek around the boxes and under the door.

From this angle and with the door bent as it is, I can only see the bottom half of the car wheels. Then a pair of trainers come into view, white Nikes with a black tick. There's nothing special about them and given the number of people who wear them, they don't help me at all. That is until he turns showing me the right trainer, and I notice that half the black tick is missing, leaving behind a jagged line. He walks round the front of the car and gets in, then reverses back down the road out of sight.

I drop to the floor as the sound of the engine fades, bringing my knees up and resting my elbows on them. I've had enough of this day. I've had enough of this week to be honest.

Here I am sitting in a dirty old garage surrounded by boxes of god knows what and looking for a man whose identity I still don't know while running from my family, who I pray to

fucking god aren't dead, instead of to them while someone hunts me. Someone who doesn't care who they hurt in the process.

I take a couple of minutes and let everything wash over me, then I suck in a deep breath, letting it out slowly and expelling all my negative thoughts and emotions. I have a lot to unpick later but now I need to get the hell out of here and somewhere safe.

I lean forward onto my hands and knees and look under the door, letting my eyes scan as far as they can. Seeing nothing, I push up to a crouching position and creep forward. I do one last scan of the area before edging out.

The sun has begun to set casting an amber glow over the area, which is empty again. I keep close to the garages as I slowly walk back the way I entered.

When I reach the industrial estate, I stop and pull out the GPS tracker to search for another address, one close by because something tells me my mystery man lives close by. Although it is strange that the garage address is the one that shows up the most yet there is nothing there.

Maybe I should just find somewhere quiet and wait for him to find me, which is invariably what will happen. He told me so.

And as if I conjured the arsehole myself just by thinking of him, he's here.

Behind me.

I feel him.

"Clever girl." His words roll over the shell of my ear, sending a shiver over my body and pooling low in my belly.

I spin around, raising a fist ready to smack the fucker, but he's too fast. My back slams against the side of the building as he wraps his thick fingers around my wrist, locking it above my head, and pinning me with his body. My mind instantly fills with a memory of him over the top of me like this as he slid his cock inside me.

“Are you remembering me stretching your tight little pussy as I filled you with my cock?”

“You wish. It wasn’t worth locking in my memory vault. I scrubbed that from my brain the same way I washed you from every inch of my body that night.” I spit the words at him like I mean them. He doesn’t need to know that scrubbing my skin would have done nothing to rid me of the night we shared. Scrubbing my skin after sex is par for the course, but not with *him*.

“Says the girl wearing my hoodie like a second fucking skin.” He chuckles darkly. “Besides, I can smell your sweet cunt from here. It’s remembering exactly how much it liked my cock.” His eyes drop to my lips, and I know what he’s going to do. And I can do nothing to stop it.

He leans in, lips grazing mine for a second, and I can taste him, taste his anticipation, his want. It is mirrored by my own. Yet it seems his restraint is greater because I’m the one who closes the gap. I’m the one who takes his lips. I’m the one who slips my tongue inside the hot heat of his mouth, meeting his tongue in a battle with only one winner.

And it ain’t me.

He stops the kiss and grasps my chin. “How sweet you taste. Fear and desire are thee fucking best combination. But we don’t have time for you to run right now my scared little bunny. We need to get the fuck out of sight for a while. Come on.” He releases my chin but maintains his hold on my wrist, towing me along behind him as he sets off at a quick pace toward the housing estate I passed earlier.

“Hey, let me go. You don’t need to drag me down the street.” I tug at his hold, digging my heels into the ground to no avail.

“I’m afraid I really do. Right now, your body is ready to flee. And while I’d love to hunt you myself, we have a much bigger fucking wolf looking for us both.”

“What do you mean? You know who’s after me?”

“No. If I knew that, they’d be dead and you’d be living your best fucking life far away from me,” he says as we reach a car, this one at least made in the same decade I was born.

The car beeps as he unlocks it, releasing me at the passenger door and walking round to the driver’s side.

“Get in,” he tells me, opening his own door and climbing in.

I do and slam the door shut with a loud thud causing him to look my way with a scowl of displeasure. Good. His words a moment ago have pissed me off more than I’d like to admit, so slamming the door is the safer alternative to pulling the gun from the pocket of the hoodie—his hoodie and his gun—and shooting him.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he spins the car around and heads off down the road in the opposite direction to the garages. He doesn’t answer. His focus is entirely on the road and the rearview mirror. I look behind us as he’s clearly worried someone could be following us, but I don’t see anyone. “Is everyone at the restaurant okay? My sister and A—my brother”

“You mean Aidan Kavanagh?”

“Yes, my brother—”

“And I’m the fucking Little Mermaid. But to answer your question, they’re fine.”

I let out a sigh of relief, but I know they’ll be going crazy. I imagine Aidan has people out looking for me right now, tearing the city apart.

“Well, you, *Ariel*, are out of your depth,” I snark back at him.

He takes a sharp right turn and I almost end up in his lap.

“What’s the matter? The Lawler-Kavanagh princess sounds pissed off.”

“Fuck you! I ain’t no princess.”

He slams on the breaks, and the car skids to a halt. “No? Then how about you climb down from that ivory tower of yours and understand that the people trying to kill you don’t give a flying fuck about your sister or your *brother*”—He emphasises the word brother and makes it sound like a slur —“outside of getting whatever the fuck it is they want. And right now, that means you dead.”

He pulls the keys from the ignition and gets out. He leans down to look at me still inside the car. “Time to get out, *princess*.” He slams the door shut and walks away.

CHAPTER NINE

CARTER



“Time to get out, *princess*.” I slam the car door closed and head for the house. “Fucking brother, like that shit is going to save her arse,” I mumble, opening the front door and turning off the alarm system as I enter. I look back over my shoulder and see she’s finally out of the car but not moving with any urgency, which pisses me off even more. Spinning on my heel, I march back outside straight to her as she rounds the front of the car. Her mouth opens but before she can say a word, I have her tossed over my shoulder and the only thing that comes out is a high-pitched squeak.

Back inside the house, I dump her arse on the sofa then back track to close the front door and reactivate the security system. The verbal assault I was expecting doesn’t come.

I stop in front of her and hold my hand out. “Bag,” I demand.

She tilts her head to look up at me, and although she might not be verbalising her displeasure, it is more than clear on her face. She shrugs the rucksack off her back and practically throws it into my hand.

“Nothing to say, princess?” Her lips remain tightly closed as she relaxes back on the sofa and crosses her arms. “Have it your way. You’ll talk soon enough.” I stride away, checking the bag as I go. It seems the little princess is packing. Most probably stashed it in my hoodie. That begs the question of why she didn’t use it when I snuck up on her. In my bedroom, I quickly switch out the rucksack for a bigger bag and pack

some extra things. Something tells me that I'm going to need it. We won't be safe here for nearly as long as I'd have liked.

Back at the restaurant, I know that Roxy spotted me going out the back door after I took out the guy outside the toilets. And, if they haven't already, once they see the security footage from Star's house, it won't take them long to identify me.

I send a message to Koda telling him I'll be going off grid for a while but will be in touch when I can. I don't tell him where because that would be a rookie mistake no matter how much I think he's trustworthy.

I try Lev again too, but he's still not answering. I need to go to my office, but it'll have to wait. I carry the bag out and drop it near the cupboard in the hall before going back to the lounge. Star is still sitting where I left her, and I watch her for a couple of minutes. She's got her head down and is picking at something on my hoodie. I don't like the feeling seeing her in my clothes does to me. I don't like any of the feelings this girl seems to induce in me.

Feelings are something that I left behind in a bloodbath sixteen years ago.

Instead of heading to the lounge, I go to the kitchen and grab a couple of bottles of water from the fridge first. I hold one out to her as I pass. She startles, only a fraction, but I see it.

"Thank you," she says unscrewing the cap and gulping down half of it.

"She speaks," I mutter as I take a seat in the chair opposite her. She rolls her eyes and plants the bottle between her legs. "Tell me something—"

"I'm not telling you anything until you tell me who you are?"

"Someone you don't want to know."

"A little late for that, wouldn't you say." She raises a brow as she slowly traces a finger around the top of the bottle.

“Screwing in a sex club doesn’t mean we know each other.” She looks away, swallowing uneasily, and a blush colours her cheeks. From her reaction, I can tell sex makes her uncomfortable, at least talking about it. Now that’s a surprise.

“But you know me. My name and where I live, but I don’t know yours. How?”

I push down the urge to get up, to crowd her and push her boundaries and make her squirm.

“My name is Carter. The rest isn’t important.”

“What the fuck do you mean the rest isn’t important?” She sits forward, gripping her bottle of water, the plastic crinkling under her firm hold. “You broke into my house and killed a man. Then you turn up at the same restaurant as me and my family and corner me in the toilets. And then, can you guess what comes next? Yeah, that’s right, we get attacked again. I’d say it’s very important because you seem to be the common element in all of this.”

“And how the fuck do you explain the shooting at Neon Flux and your boss getting offed, huh?” Her eyes widen with shock. She doesn’t need to know that I was at Neon Flux that night or that it was me who killed her boss. But I do need her to start talking. I also don’t dismiss the very slim chance there is an element of truth to her words.

“Neither of those things had anything to do with me.” She says the words, but she doesn’t believe them. And neither do I.

“So, they are just a coincidence then?” She has no answer. And I can see the guilt she feels in her eyes. “Look, someone wants you dead, princess—”

“Stop fucking calling me that.”

I’m up out of my seat and in her face in a second, forcing her back into the sofa as I lean over her. “Stop fucking acting like one then. A little gratitude wouldn’t go amiss. And don’t feel any guilt over that boss of yours. He’s not so squeaky fucking clean.” Her jaw clenches and nostrils flare. She knows more than she’s saying. “Something you want to tell me?”

“Yeah, get the hell out of my face.”

“I like your fire, but you don’t want to mess with me. You don’t know me remember.”

I know you. I remember every dip and curve of your body.

I’ve never been more grateful to hear my phone ringing as I am right now. This girl is doing things to me a man like me has no business entertaining. I push up and step back as I check who’s calling.

“Take the second room on the left and go get some sleep,” I tell her, pointing to the furthest corridor as I take the other, which leads to my office, and answer the phone.

“Evening, Carter.”

“Lennox, to what do I owe the pleasure,” I say casually as I enter my office. I check the bank of screens showing the security cameras and see that Star has disappeared. I find her in the bedroom I told her to use, and she’s currently checking every drawer and cupboard in there. She won’t find anything. I imagine she was hoping for a phone to call her sister or Aidan, but she’ll be shit out of luck.

“Oh, you know just the little matter of a pawn taken without fair game.”

“It’s been a while, but as I understand it any pawn is fair game if they are blocking my path to the queen.”

I bring my computer to life as I continue to watch Star, only now having given up the hope of finding anything of use in the room, she’s removed *my* gun and GPS tracker, which I’d forgotten she had, from *my* hoodie and is now removing the hoodie. Lennox’s question forces me to look away just as Star flashes her bare stomach.

“Are you saying the game is double pawned?”

“Are you saying you didn’t fucking know? The board is littered with illegal pawns.” I wonder if he knows that Kavanagh is in town. “Please tell me you know who the queen is?”

“What kind of fucking fool do you take me for, Carter? Why is that a problem?”

Something in his voice has me treading carefully. I'd bet money on him knowing that Star and I hooked up. It's probably why he thought I intervened.

He's a little right.

"And why would you think that?" I ask, injecting a little venom to my tone.

"I don't. I was simply making sure you remember the rules that's all."

"You mean rules that don't apply to me anymore? I don't work for the Shadow Guard, Lennox, or did you need the reminder?" I glance at the camera for Star's room. But it's empty. I quickly begin a scan of the rest of the camera's, but Lennox's threat halts my search.

"Hmmm, it seems you do need a little reminder about the conditions of your release."

"The fuck I do. I haven't broken our agreement. If I had, we wouldn't be having this fucking conversation." Because he'd be dead. But I don't say it. We both know it's true. Lennox may have trained me, but sometimes the student overtakes the teacher. And this is one of those times. I bet he's kicking himself for training me too fucking well. Making me one of the most sort after commodities in our business.

I scan the rest of the cameras and still don't see her. There are only two places in this house that don't have any cameras: the bathrooms and this room. I know she hasn't left because the alarm would have alerted me.

"I have to go," I tell Lennox. "Call me when you have something worth my time."

I'm just about to go back over the last couple of minutes footage when Star steps out of the bathroom opposite her room. Happy that she hasn't tried to leave or go rooting around anywhere else in the house, I log into Tor and wait for the screen to load.

The news site is littered with reports about the shooting at Gambino's earlier and speculation about a turf war. I scroll

through the comments and pictures but most of it is nonsense. Then one user's comment catches my eye.

User arkham666 has posted a picture from inside the restaurant as Star leaves the table. The angle shows her face as clear as day and can only have been taken from behind me. The caption reads,

Most Wanted - 1M bounty dead or alive.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” I open a private message to Koda and copy the link to the comment and send to him.

Eliminator69 Since when has this been a thing?
You need to remove it. Every fucker in the city
and beyond is going to be looking for her.

I impatiently tap my fingers on the desk as I wait for Koda to reply. Anxiety kicks up a notch when the little dots show he's typing. When they stop and no message appears, I slam my fist down on the desk.

I type out another message and go to hit send as my phone rings.

“What the fuck, man?”

“I know, but there's jack shit I can do about it.”

“What do you mean you can't do anything about it? It's your site,” I ask slowly, my tone fearful.

Koda's heavy sigh heightens the dread in my gut. “Someone hacked my server. They have complete control over it all. I've spent the last two hours trying to get back in and find out how they got in in the first place. Trust me, man, I'm just as pissed as you.”

“No, Koda, I don't think you are.” I scrub a hand across my face when something else occurs to me. “Can they access personal details?” My question is met with silence. “Koda, can they access personal details,” I enunciate each word making sure he understands the seriousness of my question.

“Yes,” he says.

That one word is said with such disappointment and apology, yet it does nothing to relieve the absolute rage his simple yes has induced.

“The folder is encrypted, Carter. It will take some time to gain access.”

“But they will get in, right?”

“Yes. Someone this smart will definitely get in.”

“How long?”

“I...I do—”

“How fucking long, Koda?” I yell, my patience unravelling.

“A couple of hours. Twenty-four at the most. I’m sorry,” he quickly rushes out.

I take a deep breath. “It’s not your fault. I need you to look after—”

“It’s already done, Carter. Everything you need is at the storage facility.”

I’m nodding and planning in my head. After I left the Shadow Guard, I no longer had their protection or resources and needed a plan in case I ever had to disappear. Koda helped me, although he doesn’t know where I’ll go. That little gem of info is something I’ve not shared with anyone. No point in going off grid if people know where you could be hiding.

“Thanks. I’ll check in when I can. Be safe.”

I pull open the drawer in my desk and take out the small tablet I keep in there along with a charger and a remote. Then I log out of Tor and activate the remote self-destruct feature. Koda set up my computer with a high-end security system like his own that uses two-factor authentication. The fact that I won’t be using my computer means if I get an alert then someone else is trying to access it. This particular system has a self-destruct chip than can be activated remotely. Koda’s server has been hacked which means destroying his own system won’t do anything to prevent them from still having access.

I take what I need and exit the office. I grab the bag I left in the corridor earlier and pack the tablet and charger in it and pocket the remote. From the cupboard I take a small cool bag and pack up some water and food. I don't want to stop unless I absolutely have to. Getting from here to the storage facility is going to be hard enough. And stopping means more chance of being spotted.

"Let's go, princess," I say as I barrel into the bedroom without so much as a knock. If I was expecting to startle her, I'm shit out of luck because she's sitting on the bed with her knees up, forearms resting on them, and leaning against the headboard.

She doesn't respond or make any move to follow my order. "Get up. We need to leave." I walk to the side of the bed and reach out to grab hold of her arm, but she pulls away.

"No."

"No?" I question.

"Yeah, no. No, I'm not getting up. No, I'm not leaving or going anywhere with you. No."

"Please tell me you aren't that fucking petulant? 'Cause I gotta say, you do not want to be giving me this shit right now," I growl and make another grab for her, but she evades me again. Do I understand her reluctance? Hell yeah, but do I give a fuck? Absolutely not.

"I'm not being petulant. I'm being cautious. I don't know you, and yet you just expect me to follow you blindly. Screw that." She points a finger at me. "I need to call my sister."

"Not happening. Now get up and let's go," I tell her, folding my arms and staring her down, daring her to defy me. I see the defiance. It's radiating off her like a fucking laser beam. She won't win, and she knows it too. But she will thank me when she's still breathing tomorrow. Knowing she isn't going to come willingly, I give it to her straight. "At the risk of sounding like a fucking sheriff in a western, you've got a million-pound bounty on your head dead or alive, so you can stay here if you like while the whole of fucking Manchester

hunts you like a rabid wolf, or you can get your arse up and put a little trust in me and get the fuck out of here. What's it going to be, princess?"

She raises her chin and gets to her knees, even like this she only reaches my chest, but I respect the show she's putting on even if it is bullshit. Her pulse is beating wildly in her neck and her eyes are tight as she holds my stare. Warm satisfaction tracks through me as I wait for her to come at me.

"They know I wasn't alone that night. Do you honestly think they aren't tearing this city apart looking for me? If there's a bounty on my head, there will be one on yours too," she says with a smug smile. It falls as quickly as it came when I fling out a hand and snatch hold of her throat.

"Oh, princess, I'm counting on it because someone needs to save you from yourself. You have no fucking idea whose bed you slid into that night at Illicit. A tempting little princess like you is no match for me. I can see straight fucking through you and your false bravado. The facade that you have even one inkling what you're doing is as transparent as glass, and when I shatter it completely, I'm going to swallow you whole." My fingers flex around her neck for a second before I release her.

She drops to rest her arse on her heels and rubs at her neck. "You don't know anything about me," she snaps, but it's weak.

She spins around, giving me her back as she shuffles off the bed on the opposite side to me. It's good to keep her distance from me. She aggravates me, makes me feel...out of sorts. God knows how I'm going to get through an almost five-hour drive with her. I've murdered people within five minutes of meeting them so five hours is going to test my fucking patience. Although I've never wanted to fuck any of those people.

"Where are we even going?" she asks standing and facing me.

"You'll see when we get there. You've got five minutes," I tell her then leave before she can ask any more questions.

CHAPTER TEN

STAR



As Carter disappears from the room, I reach out my hands and imitate throttling him as my face scrunches up in frustration. I add a foot stomp and a growl for good measure. He makes me feel more vulnerable than I've ever felt before, and I don't know how to deal with that. I was already struggling with my feelings after our hook up, and now I'm stuck with him. He terrifies me yet makes me feel alive. I'm not even sure if it's him that terrifies me, although I know he could kill me any time and I wouldn't see it coming, or if it's how he makes me feel that terrifies me. It would be nice to say I've never been so conflicted but that would be a lie. My whole life since the moment I was kidnapped as a child has been conflicted. I'd also like for my life and everything that happens in it to not come down to that one moment of time. But it's shaped me and not necessarily in the best way.

I look around the room for anything I need to take, but it's not my room and I have nothing but the clothes I'm wearing. I spot Carter's hoodie and snatch it up, quickly throwing it back over my head. It's then I realise that the gun and GPS tracker are gone. Nothing like being completely reliant on a stranger with no weapon and no way to contact anyone.

The thought settles in my mind for a moment, and I have to choke back a tear at feeling so alone.

Knowing my five minutes must be almost up, I head to the bathroom. When I get to the front door, Carter is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and a bag at his feet waiting.

He casts his eyes over me, clocking his hoodie and raising a brow, then picks up the bag and opens the door. Forget being a gentleman and letting me go first. No, he marches right out the door.

“Shut the door behind you,” he calls over his shoulder as he opens the boot of his car and tosses the bag inside.

I consider slamming it shut or even leaving it open just because, but I’m above that kind of pettiness. Besides, it’s not going to help our situation.

I climb into the car as Carter starts the engine and all that vulnerability and tension he elicits bleeds out, filling the space like a noxious gas. If he feels it, he doesn’t show it. And I wonder if a man like Carter actually feels anything.

I watch his hand on the gear stick as he changes into sixth once we reach the dual carriageway, captivated by the prominent veins and corded forearm as it flexes beneath his tattoos. His knuckles are rough and littered with scars and his fingernails, although clean, are ingrained with what looks like grease. I think back to the night we met and vaguely remember him mentioning something about working as a mechanic, and while that explains the slightly greasy undertone I can smell on his hoodie and him and his rough manly hands, it’s clear to me that a mechanic isn’t his only job.

No, Carter is much more than your average mechanic. And our worlds are more alike than I thought. I try to track where we are going as he pulls off the dual carriageway after about ten minutes, but I’m not familiar with this area. Five minutes later and we are pulling into a storage facility. It’s late so the only people here are a security guard and one other car parked a few spaces down. I go to open the car door when his hand on my arm stops me.

“Wait here,” he tells me as I look down at his hand gripping my arm.

“Er, fuck no,” I blurt out. “You are not leaving me out here.” I realise how stupid it sounds after I was just giving him shit for not letting me call Roxy and expecting me to go with him wherever, but I’m aware that if what he said back at the

house is true, then I can't do this alone. The idea that I have to rely on others pisses me off almost as much as Carter does. Being watched over like a fragile child has been my life, and in the last five years I had just started to relish living my life how I want to. Guess that's fucked now.

"This is not up for discussion," he says biting each word out like it physically pains him, only it's me it pains as his grip on my arm strengthens. "Stay here, lock the doors and if something happens you drive the fuck away." He releases me with a little shove making my arm fly across my body while he slips out the car.

"Jerk!" I mutter as he begins to jog toward the entrance of the storage facility. But I lock the doors like he suggested then I see him talking to the security guard for a couple of minutes before he disappears down a corridor.

I look around the car park suddenly feeling like the unlucky goat left out for the T-Rex in *Jurassic Park*. And when I look back to the security guard, he's watching me as he talks on the phone.

"Fuck! I don't like that," I whisper to myself. "Come on, Carter. Come on," I chant, my leg bouncing with nervous energy. "Come on, god dammit!" Lights blast through the side window as another car pulls into the car park, completely blinding me for a moment. As the car turns and my vision becomes clear, I see they have parked just ahead of us and to the left. From this angle I can see there are two people inside, but I can't see their faces. I look back inside to the security guard and see he's now off the phone and looking down the corridor that Carter went down.

Movement in the corner of my eye draws my attention to the other car that parked up, and I see the two occupants getting out. The two men seem to climb from the car in sync and close their doors. Both in dark jeans and jackets and their backs to me, they move toward the building. As they reach the path outside the entrance, the driver turns and looks over his shoulder back to the car, then his gaze skims over Carter's car. I'm not sure how much he can see inside the car, but as his mouth moves obviously calling out to his friend, I know he's

spotted me. His friend walks back toward him and they chat for a second or two before the driver points in my direction. The other guy pats his mate's chest, and they exchange some bro fist bump shit with enormous grins on their faces as white teeth gleam in the faint light coming from inside the entrance. My pulse jumps rhythmically inside my neck, thumping against my clammy skin and my heart races alongside it. As the driver takes a step forward, he pauses, then they both turn to look behind them. Following their gaze, I see Carter has now joined the guard at the small desk carrying a large bag over one shoulder while he holds a gun in the other hand that is firmly pointed at the guard.

“Oh shit!” I mutter and reach for the door handle, slamming against it when it doesn't open. It's enough to bring me to my senses, and instead I climb over into the driver's seat. The rumble of the engine starting has the two guys looking back over at me as I put it in drive and fly forward. I head straight for them, and they split apart, then run for their car as I come to a grinding halt right outside the entrance. I slam my hand down on the horn and see Carter walking backwards toward the door as he continues to point the gun at the guard who is holding both hands in the air and looking terrified.

I open the window as the automatic doors open and yell, “Get in the fucking car!”

As soon as Carter is clear of the doors and they whoosh closed, the guard moves to the desk. I flick the door lock as Carter reaches the driver's side back door and opens it, tossing the large bag inside. He runs round to the front passenger side and climbs in. As his arse hits the seat, I hit the accelerator and head for the exit.

“Turn right,” he barks at me as he clicks his seat belt on.

I do as he says, but inside I'm steaming mad.

“Take the exit for the M56 at the next roundabout.”

“What the hell was that?” I ask flicking on the indicator to turn left onto the slip road. The motorway is quiet at this time of night, and I sail into the middle lane.

When he doesn't answer, I glance over at him and find him fiddling with a small black box with a microphone attached to it.

"What's that?" I ask, not at all confident I'll get an answer to this question either. I don't. He simply unclips his seat belt and leans between the two seats into the back. Closing the distance between us and a car up ahead, I slip into the outside lane and overtake. The movement jostles Carter causing him to knock into my shoulder, and I immediately become aware of how close my elbow is to his junk. I contemplate ramming my elbow straight into his crown fucking jewels.

"Don't even think about it, princess," he says dropping back into his seat. "And I ain't going to quit calling you that, so don't even say it."

He opens the glove box, dipping his hand inside for a moment before coming back to grab a lead from his lap and then plugging it in inside the glove box. He plugs the other end into the device I asked him about and switches it on. Static crackles through the car for a moment before faint voices can be heard as he turns a dial on the side. He listens intently to each voice before switching to another channel on what I guess is some sort of CB radio or scanner.

The next voice I hear is a police handle and it becomes clear he's listening in to the old bill. I focus on driving for now and let him listen. After an hour, he switches to another channel, and I pick up the use of some type of slang that doesn't mean much to me.

I spot a sign for services and move into the slow lane ready to come off at the next exit.

"What are you doing?"

"Stopping at the services. We aren't all emotionally stunted or robots. Some of us have needs, and right now, I have a need to pee."

He lets out a heavy sigh, and I catch the last part of an eye roll that morphs into a deep frown.

“Problem?” I ask already knowing he absolutely has a problem.

“Yes, she goes by the name of Star, but I prefer princess because I like how much it fucks her off. You need to learn some restraint.”

I drive up the slip road and take the first exit at the roundabout to the services.

“I have plenty of restraint. If I didn’t, I would have left you back there instead of subjecting myself to the torture of being stuck in this car with you heading who knows where.” I look over at him with a hyperbolic smirk. I pull into the car park, and despite the hour, it’s quite busy.

“And just how far do you think you would have made it without me, huh?”

His lack of faith in me stings more than a little. Swinging the car into the nearest space, I slam the brake on causing Carter to lurch forward and almost get up close and personal with the dash. That’s what you get for not wearing a seatbelt.

“Restraint has nothing to do with bodily functions. Condescending, egoistical psycho,” I snap as I switch the engine off and turn to face him. “You need to learn not to underestimate people based on their outer appearance or what you think you know.” I throw the keys into his lap and climb from the car before he can respond.

Inside, there are only a handful of people grabbing drinks and snacks for whatever journey they are venturing on at this late hour. I spot the sign for the toilet and briskly walk that way. The bank of cubicles is mostly empty and after checking for one that doesn’t have a mountain of toilet paper stuffed down it, no paper at all or unidentifiable but easier enough to guess stains smeared inside the bowl or up the wall, I settle on one and do my business.

Back out in the main area, which has now emptied somewhat, I walk slower and think about what the hell I’m doing. As I pass a public telephone, I almost stop knowing that if I leave now, I’ll have lost perhaps my only chance at

contacting Roxy. I double back and pick up the handset, scanning the area before dialling 100 for the operator. I give her Roxy's number and wait nervously for her to pick up.

My breath catches in my throat as I hear her voice.

“Star?”

“It's me,” I say over the top of the operator as she asks if Roxy will accept the collect call. Relief and anxiety roll into one as I hear the click of the operator dropping her end of the call. “Rox—”

“Star, are you okay? Where are you?”

“I'm okay. I'm at—” The line cuts off as a hand appears over my shoulder and heat hits my back.

“Bad fucking move, princess.” Carter takes the handset from my hand, dropping it back into the cradle, while he wraps an arm around my waist. The rough bristles from his scruff covered face scrape against my cheek as he whispers, “Move and don't try anything.”

I take a couple of steps, my blood boiling at having been caught. More at the fact he refuses to let me speak to Roxy at all, even just to let her know I'm okay. We are almost to the main doors when a phone rings somewhere behind us. I know it's her calling back and hoping that I'll be there to answer. My heart fractures a little at the pain this will be causing Roxy.

“You better sleep with one eye open,” I warn as we push through the main doors and make our way back to the car.

My threat doesn't even warrant a disbelieving chuckle. He guides me round to the passenger side, spinning me to face him.

“What makes you think I'll be doing any sleeping?” He raises a brow, letting his words sit there for a moment before adding, “Get in.” He pulls me aside enough to open the door and pushes me forward, standing by and watching as I climb in while throwing piercing glares over my shoulder at him. Each time, I'm met with a troubled frown.

“This how it’s going to be?” I ask having remained silent for the last thirty minutes. A task that got harder every second.

“And how is that exactly?”

“This constant back and forth of growly asshole to cold shoulder. She’s my sister.”

“I’m not here to make small talk, Star.”

“No, then what the hell are you here for other than to irritate me and keep me from the people I love. Sounds a lot like abduction.” I don’t add that I’ve already done this twice before. Admittedly, this time is a little different. I’m not being molested, and he doesn’t seem to want me dead, although that could be a ruse to get me to lower my guard.

You’d fuck him though!

I mentally tell my straight-talking conscience to shut up and turn my attention back to Carter.

He shrugs. “Abduction, kidnapping, whatever the fuck you want to call it. If you’re still alive at the end of this, then that’s a win. As for your sister, all you’re doing is endangering her and making it easy for cunts to find us.”

“Bullshit!” I snap, but deep down I know there’s some truth to his words.

“Not bullshit, Star. Did it ever occur to you that this isn’t to do with you? That you’re nothing more than a pawn in a much bigger game? *Princess.*”

My reaction to him calling me princess again is instant.

My hands fly at him, slapping wildly as he attempts to shield his face with his arm while trying not to crash the fucking car. He suddenly swerves to the left across both lanes before skidding to a halt. Without any thought, I’m out the car and running.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CARTER



I slam my hands down on the steering wheel, fury and fire lick a path through my body as she jumps the barrier into the woodland beyond. I see the top of her head as she darts between trees, and lust and desire join the party. Reaching into the back seat and the go bag from the storage unit I root around for a couple of minutes until I find exactly what I'm looking for.

If the princess wants to play, then we fucking play.

I hop over the barrier taking my time. There is no rush. Nowhere she can run to out here. Besides, running with a dick as hard as fucking stone is a pain I don't enjoy but can endure if needed.

My hunter senses kick in as soon as my feet break the first twig beneath them. The crack of it is like the starter gun of a race, only this isn't a race. It's a fucking hunt.

Using the cover of the thick tree trunks, I stalk toward where I last saw her, twirling the coil of rope I took from my bag, feeling the rough bound threads as they glide through my fingers.

I let out a low whistle between my teeth that cuts off as a flash of black moves in the corner of my eye.

“Do you remember what happens when you run, Star?” I call out, moving closer to where she is. “HMMMM, I can fucking smell you. Almost taste that sweet nectar dripping between your thighs.”

Snap!

My eyes dart to the sound, catching a glimpse of her as she runs from behind one tree to another. The moon is full tonight and high in the sky casting shadows through the treetops, but the ethereal glow will come in handy once I catch her.

I creep a little closer—so close I can practically hear her panted breaths, and it sends a tremor of excitement down my spine and a dark and desperate need to the tip of my cock. It pulses, leaking pre-cum, and I have to adjust myself. Anticipation is high as I wait for her to move again.

1...2...3...

And like clockwork, she bolts.

Laughter rumbles up my chest and bursts free, echoing off the trees. Star's head whips round as she startles at the sound and how close it is.

I don't waste a second. I chase after her, and my cock strains, almost screams at me, to be set free. To find her wet cunt and bury itself inside. The pain is sublimely beautiful.

Closing the distance between us, I can taste her fear, taste her arousal.

“Are you ready for what comes next, Star?” I ask just as I wrap an arm around her and take her to the ground. She cries out as we hit, and I roll her to the side, snatching her arm and bringing it up behind her back.

“Get the fuck off me! What are you doing?” she yells, but she doesn't struggle.

“I'm doing what I promised you I'd do. What you've been silently begging for since that first night at your house.” She scoffs, and I add, “Or maybe you've been wanting my cock again since the first night I fucked you, huh?”

“Once was enough, thanks,” she says flippantly.

“I guess we're about to find out.” I pull her up with me as I get to my feet, pushing her back until she hits the large oak behind her.

Her eyes are on mine, wild and full of fury, and when she sees the rope in my hand, they widen, pupils dilating with lust.

“Put your hands out,” I tell her, holding my left hand out, palm up waiting.

“Fuck. You,” she spits out at me.

“Oh no, princess, that is what I’m about to do to you.” I take her hands, quickly wrapping one end of the rope round them several times like a coil, then needing to distract her, I slam my lips down on hers. Biting, sucking and fucking her mouth in an imitation of what I’ll be doing to her soon enough. Dropping her bound hands, I grab hold of her face, fusing her to me. As she melts against me, I slide a hand down her body and pop open the button of her jeans. I swallow her moan as it slips free when I reach inside and run a finger between her pussy lips. Fuck! I damn near come at how wet she is.

“Oh, Star, so fucking wet for me,” I growl against her lips. Kissing her again, I take hold of the rope and toss the loose end over the branch above us. She breaks the kiss as I catch it, but it’s too fucking late now. I have her right where I fucking want her.

Her mouth opens to protest, but nothing comes out as I rub my finger over her clit several times silencing her. I keep going, working her over until she’s bucking her hips, moaning and writhing and desperate for release. When she’s teetering on the edge, I pull my hand away and let out a laugh as she screams in frustration.

“Noooo! Fucking finish me off,” she demands, attempting to lower her hands and do it herself when she realises I’m not going to. Her lack of inhibition turns me on even more, and I remember how much she begged me to fuck her the night we met.

A quick tug on the rope binding her hands reminds her who is in charge.

“Tut, tut. Restraint remember.” I can make out her flushed cheeks as she tips her head back toward the sky, confirming her arousal, but the furious fire burning behind her eyes speaks volumes about how pissed she is to be left hanging. Literally.

With that thought in mind, I loop the loose end between her hands and over the binding coil then tug until her arms begin to stretch over her head. I keep pulling until only her tiptoes are touching the ground.

“Carter...”

“Shh, good girl,” I whisper as I tie the rope off. Then I step back and admire my work. I grab my dick through my jeans, giving it a squeeze as I look at her hanging there vulnerable and free for me to take what I want.

Star’s eyes track my every movement as I bend down and pull a knife free from my boot. She licks her lips as her thighs tense when I take a step toward her.

“Carter, what...” My name on her lips is cautious but intrigued too, and to reassure her I move in close and suck her bottom lip into my mouth while I let my fingers seek out her wet cunt again. I skip over her clit in favour of plunging my middle finger inside her. “I’ve got you. Good girl.”

“Ahhh, fuck!” she groans as I pump in and out of her.

Withdrawing my finger and eliciting another frustrated groan from her, I raise my hand and make sure she’s watching, eyelids heavy with arousal as I suck it into my mouth, licking it clean.

I swap the finger in my mouth for the handle of my blade so I can tug down her jeans and discard her shoes, leaving her lower half in nothing but her thong. Rising back up, I hold out the hem of my hoodie, levelling her with a questioning look, then I raise it up over her head and leave it resting behind her neck. Then I take the knife from my lips and trail it up her body, resting the tip in the dip of her neck.

Her gasp only heightens my need for this woman. I don’t think she has any idea of the power she holds right now, or just how much she speaks to my soul. I don’t let that thought manifest too much, and instead I cut open her polo neck, making quick work of it with my blade. By the time I’m finished, her polo neck is nothing more than ribbons. With every swipe of my blade, Star’s pants and gasps and whimpers

urged me on, feeding my deep desire to ravish her. To feel her pussy wrapped around my cock as I fuck her.

Something primal, carnal, comes over me as I look at her, clothes in tatters, breasts heaving and full and begging for attention. Who am I to deny them. Or myself.

“Sweet, sweet, Star,” I drawl, twirling my blade between my fingers. I move in, flicking the button of my own jeans open, then I duck down and tuck my knife away. I can’t resist the lure of her pussy as I rise and find myself burying my head between her thighs and inhaling the heavenly scent of her arousal through her thin underwear. Her thighs part in invitation, and I take full advantage, licking a hot path with my tongue up her thinly covered slit.

“Ahhh, fuck!” she groans, her voice low and hoarse.

I keep going, licking up the full length of her body, both hands gripping her hips. When I reach her mouth, I whisper, “I’m going to eat your pussy, then when I’m drunk on your juices, I’m going to fucking wreck it with my cock, Star.” I dip my head, nipping at her bottom lip, then move lower and shove her bra up over her tits to take her nipple into my mouth. I suck hard, rolling it round my tongue as I slip two fingers back inside her. I fuck her with my fingers, biting down on her nipple and grazing my teeth around the hard peak.

“Holy...fucki—”

Her cry cuts off as I drop to my knees, tug her thong to the side and draw her clit into my mouth as I continue my assault with my fingers—pumping in and out over and over. My mouth floods with saliva in anticipation of her impending orgasm, and the walls of her pussy convulse as she comes apart on my tongue and fingers.

I lick her clean as she comes down from her release, then rise to my feet and free my cock, wrapping my cream coated fingers around it. Her hooded eyes find mine as I stroke my hand up and down my shaft, sliding easily over my Jacob’s ladder.

Her tongue swipes out, wetting her lips, and her hips buck involuntarily as I lick the palm of my other hand then wrap it round my dick. I hold out the two fingers that were deep inside her not two minutes ago, and say, “Open.”

Her mouth opens before I’ve even finished asking, and I shove them inside, all the way to the back of her throat and causing her to gag. My dick jumps in my hand, and I pump it a little faster.

“You’re going to be choking on my fucking cock like that soon.”

She pulls back, releasing my fingers with a pop.

“Do you remember what it feels like to have me inside you, filling you up?”

“I remember every fucking second,” she says firmly, then adds, “Haven’t been able to get it out of my head.” This time her words are quieter like she’s embarrassed to admit it. And while I’m not embarrassed, I am hesitant to admit exactly how much thoughts of her have consumed me since that night two weeks ago. I sense her reasons are far different than mine, and I intend to find out but later. First, I’m going to get my second taste of this beautiful and complex woman.

“Are you ready,” I ask, stepping closer and brushing the head of my cock along her slit. Gripping her thighs, I lift her, and she wraps her legs around my waist. The rope around her wrists takes some of the weight allowing me to tease her a little more.

“Fuck me, Carter,” she purrs, her head dropping back in pleasure as I let my cock slip forward so she can feel each barbell pierced through the underside of my dick. “Oh god!” she pants.

“There is no God who could do what I’m about to do to you,” I growl, my swollen head resting at the entrance to her pussy. “Get ready to scream for me, baby,” I say and slowly lower her down my shaft, stretching her wide, until I’m fully seated inside her. “Good girls always scream when bad men do dirty things to them.”

Then I fuck her.

I fuck her so hard that she's hoarse from screaming my name.

I fuck her through two orgasms before I find my own release, and even then, I'm reluctant to stop.

Despite the cool night air, sweat drips down my face and covers our bodies making us a hot and sticky mess. Lifting her off me, my arms shaking with exertion, I lower her legs back until the tip of her toes touch the ground.

"Star?" I question, and she raises her head from its resting position on my shoulder.

"Carter," she replies, her voice a husky, honeyed timbre that goes straight to my dick. Her head wobbles like she can barely hold it up. Pride at wrecking her so beautifully rips through me. I loosen the rope, wrapping an arm round her and taking some of her weight, then lean her against the tree on unsteady legs as I finish untying her.

Once the rope is removed from her hands, I lift the hoodie back over her head, unable to resist sucking her nipple into my mouth.

"Fuck, no more," she groans even as she arches her back, her body defying her mind.

"Not tonight. I like you fractured but not broken, Star," I tell her as I finish covering her up and tuck my semi back in my jeans. After helping her put her jeans and shoes back on, I grab the rope then lift Star into my arms and carry her back to the car. She's almost comatose by the time I reach it. With no room on the back seat, I put her in the passenger seat, clip her seatbelt on and recline the chair enough she won't end up with a crook neck when she wakes.

Star sleeps for the rest of the journey while I struggle to focus on the road as my thoughts turn to what it is about her that has the ability to switch my humanity button. Something I've not touched base with in years.

Whimpers snap me from my thoughts, and I glance across at her as she shifts, a frown creases her brow and her head

whips side to side. I reach out a hand and gently brush her cheek. I had hoped it would soothe her, but her gut-wrenching cry quickly shits on that theory.

Star Kavanagh might be a name I know, but the woman behind the name is a mystery to me. A mystery that has hooked me, pulled me in, and I intend to uncover every dark and dirty secret she's hiding.

Somebody hurt this woman.

That somebody, whoever the fuck they are, is going to pay me in blood.

CHAPTER TWELVE

STAR



“You like that don’t you, sweet little girl?” His fingers run a circle over my bare chest, and it’s soft and tickles a little. But something tells me that what he’s doing isn’t sweet at all. Not in a way an adult should with me. I remember seeing a man do this to my mum once, and then he did something do her that made her scream. They were both naked. It scared me. But I couldn’t look away. Roxy found me spying through Mum’s door and pulled me away. When I asked her what that man was doing to Mum, she just said when I was older I’d understand. He moves his hand down further toward an area that Roxy told me is private and I should never let a man touch me there.

He has a strange, dreamy look on his face as he tugs at the thin, worn knickers I’m wearing. They took all my other clothes when I arrived here. I still don’t know where here is. I don’t know anyone. I really hope Roxy finds me soon.

He tries to pull them down, but I pull away.

“No. You mustn’t do that,” I tell him, wrapping my arms over my body.

That strange look he had has changed now. He looks mad, all red like his face might explode.

“I’ll do whatever the fuck I want,” he spits out, then there’s a sharp sting on my cheek as he slaps me.

I bring my hand up and hold my burning face. A silent tear rolls down my cheek. I want to run, but I don’t know where I

am. There is nowhere other than this small room with a tattered camping bed and a holey blanket.

He sighs as he watches me. When he speaks next, his words are softer, but I don't trust them.

"I'll make you feel nice. You're special, Anastasia. Let me show you," he says, taking hold of my wrist and pulling my hand away from my face.

I shake my head no, but he just grips me tighter and tugs me closer to him. When his face is so close I can smell his breath, he grips my other hand and lowers it. I don't understand what he's doing until my fingers brush against something soft but hard too. It's warm and a little wet. I look down and gasp as I realise it's his willy. I yank my hand back, but he growls and pulls harder, squeezing my wrist. I cry out.

Something touches my face, and I whip my head side to side, trying to get away. I can't make out if the touch was in my dream or not, but as I settle back into a lighter sleep, my thoughts and dreams turn to a man who is rattling the cage of my demons. Demons that have been haunting me since I was eight years old.

Consciousness slips through me, and I stretch out my body. Soft cotton brushes against my skin, and for a moment I don't understand where I am. But the stretch highlights several aches over my body, my shoulders, my legs and between my thighs. Each one a reminder of what Carter did to me last night. Each one a reminder of how fucked up I am to let a guy hang me from a tree and fuck me like some worthless whore.

Because that's what you are. A good little whore.

I mentally slap the voice away, flipping over onto my back to stare up at a vaulted beamed ceiling. I take a few breaths, my arms flopping down to my sides as I close my eyes. Years of therapy and reassurance that I'm not some sexual deviant have been blown apart by one man.

Carter is stirring a plethora of unwanted and unexplainable feelings in me. He's single handedly tearing through everything my therapist tried to convince me of. That my desire, my fantasies and pleasure at being praised during sex aren't unnatural. That being told I'm a good girl and handled roughly during sex doesn't make me sick or perverted. While what happened to me as a child has left a mark, opened a door to something a little atypical, there is no reason to think I wouldn't have reached this same point had my childhood trauma not occurred.

Part of me understands that and can even accept it, but what I can't get past is why. Why do I get off on it? Why does something that was so traumatic turn me on? Some part of me just can't get past the thought that I'm damaged, defunct.

What's worse is that I actively sought out a place offering all those things. I went to Illicit looking for someone who would be willing to tell me what a good girl I am while he fucked me hard, to leave bruises on my skin. To leave me feeling worthless yet satisfied and like I'd pleased them.

And look at where I am now; with a bounty on my head, on the run and endangering everyone I love.

If that's not karma for my screwed up sexual desires, then I don't know what the fuck is.

I push up into a sitting position and scan the room I'm in. It's bland and basic, but the comfy bed makes up for lack of any character.

I'm reluctant to get up and leave the room as it means facing Carter. I'm not sure I'm ready for that, at least not while I'm awake given that he must have carried me in here at some point. The thought reminds me of my dream. Already his presence in my life is bringing my nightmares back. After I was rescued, my nightmares were at their most prevalent but only for a short time. Then as a teen with raging hormones and a sex drive, experimenting bought them back full force. The first guy that ever tried to touch me ended up with a black eye. And that was just from me. When Aidan found out, a black eye was the least of his worries. The next few years were a

battle between wanting but denying myself any sexual pleasure except by my own hand and struggling to understand my sexual desires.

I watched the usual porn like any other teen, but I found myself searching for something more. It wasn't hard to find what I was looking for with the internet a hot bed of every fantasy and sexual proclivity you can possibly imagine.

Then came the self-loathing and shame of being turned on by something outside the norm. My first time having sex was a disastrous disappointment. Between the pain and the constant war going on inside me to beat the guy grunting above me, I didn't enjoy a single second of it. The only thing I was grateful for was that I no longer had the desire to do it again anytime soon.

Unfortunately, that didn't last long. Going to university opened the doors to more than enough opportunity to experiment. Once I started to see the therapist Parker found for me, I began dipping my toes again.

And now I'm stuck god knows where with the only man to ever make me feel normal. To ever fuck me in a way that satisfies my darkest desires and doesn't leave me disgusted but leaves me wanting more.

I throw the covers back and climb from the bed, my muscles give a little protest, a delicious reminder of last night that I try to toss aside. I succeed but only in allowing anger at Carter to fill their space.

Anger I can use.

Especially when I look down and see that I'm still wearing Carter's hoodie and my underwear, but it's the littering of bruises on my thighs that really set my mood.

I find a pile of clothes on a small chair sat in the corner of the room next to a door that leads to an en suite shower room.

A quick shower cools some of my ire, but when I get out and stand in front of the bathroom mirror, the small bite marks on my breasts set it to a steady boil.

I dress in the plain white t-shirt and too big black joggers, which I have to roll up at the top. Bare foot and sans underwear, I exit the room.

The hallway isn't really a hall at all but more a balcony, mezzanine floor. To the right of me is another door and on the left is a wooden staircase leading down to a light, airy open plan ground floor. Scanning the area, I spot Carter in the kitchen making tea, and the mouthwatering aroma of bacon cooking reminds my stomach that I haven't eaten.

Despite being angry at him and wanting to smack the shit out of him, I can't deny how fucking hot he looks wearing nothing but a pair of grey joggers hung low on his hips and no top, displaying his ripped abs as he turns the bacon in the pan. One arm is completely covered in tattoos that carry over his shoulder as he turns his back to me. Foolishly, I think he isn't aware of me as I stand and watch the muscles in his back flexing with each movement as he lifts the kettle and fills two cups with hot water.

"Getting a good look, princess?" he says before spinning around and raising his eyes to meet mine.

"Don't flatter yourself," I snap back, completely disregarding him calling me princess and walk to the stairs, stomping down them. I'm surprised by the warmth as I step onto the flagstone floor and make my way towards him.

"So, it's the bacon that has you drooling like a starved dog then?" He places a cup in front of me as I take a seat at the breakfast bar then turns back to the hob to finish the bacon.

"You should work on those similes. Comparing a woman to a starved dog isn't exactly complimentary."

He laughs, turning round and carrying over two plates of sandwiches. "Compliments aren't really my thing. I'm more of an action man."

"Really? Then how's this for action," I say and hold up my middle finger.

He puts up two fingers, forefinger and middle finger. "Nice, but I prefer these two after you've come all over them."

He then proceeds to run his tongue up them both before sucking them into his mouth. “I can still taste you on them, and it made my wank this morning in the shower even fucking sweeter.” He picks up his sandwich and takes a large bite.

“You’re disgusting!” I say picking up my own sandwich, yet suddenly my appetite has taken a nosedive. I thank god he can’t see me squeezing my thighs together under the worktop. If I were wearing any knickers, they’d be soaked through.

I bring my sandwich to mouth and hope that once my tongue gets a taste my stomach will wake back up. But just as I’m about to take a bite, Carter moves to beside me.

“I’m not disgusting, princess. I’m a red-blooded male that likes to get his dick wet. And you sweet, Star, are prime pussy.”

Oh my fucking god!

Half of me wants to ram that fucking sandwich down his throat and the other half wants him to show me just how disgusting he can be.

But you already know what he can do to you.

I shut off the voice in my head and bite the sandwich, chewing for what feels like forever, as Carter takes the seat beside me.

“Swallow, Star. I know you like to swallow.” His words trip off his tongue so casually like he isn’t alluding to the blow job I gave him the night we met while I choke on his words, or more precisely the mouthful of sandwich.

I manage to swallow my mouthful and then turn a murderous glare on him as he sits there with a raised brow and a smirk on his lips.

“What’s the plan here, Carter? ‘Cause if it’s for me to be stuck here with you while you continually remind me of one monumental mistake and throw innuendos at me, then I think I’ll head back to Manchester and take my chances.”

He rises from his seat, and towers over me, the cocky smirk he was wearing slips away and is replaced by a look that

could cut off oxygen and stop hearts. Reaching out a hand, he tucks my hair behind my ear, then trails his finger down my neck, ghosting over the pulse point there, and I feel it as my heart skips a beat at his touch.

“It’s two, and I’m nowhere near done with you yet. Neither of those times were a monumental mistake. But you thinking you can walk away is. You’re mine until I decide otherwise,” he growls, and his tone has taken on a deadly timbre that matches the look on his face.

“Well, that doesn’t work for me. I’m not your fucking plaything. Go back to Illicit and find yourself another fuck-toy because I’m not it.”

His fingers wrap around my neck, and I can’t help the sharp inhale of breath as he tightens them.

“I don’t want a fuck-toy. I want a good girl who knows how to fuck me. One who can suck my cock like it’s an Olympic sport and swallow everything I have to give her.” His lips brush mine, and my eyes fall closed.

“You can’t fix me, Carter. I’m irreparably damaged.” The words come out a strangled whisper thanks to his grip on my throat and the tsunami of emotion his words have induced. My still closed eyes hold on tightly to the tears I refuse to let fall.

“I ain’t into fixing you. I want a woman who is broken to everyone else but whose fractured pieces match my own.”

As his mouth closes over mine, a lone tear falls down my cheek, and I give myself over to the pleasure this man—and only this man—can give me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CARTER



God fucking help me for the words that just left my mouth. For wanting this woman when I know it's a path to fucking misery.

My dick throbs painful as she swipes her tongue inside my mouth, and my hand tightens around her throat. Star Kavanagh is a succubus, but I'm not sleeping. I'm wide a-fucking-wake.

I suck on her tongue, releasing her throat and grip the bottom of her t-shirt, then slip my hands inside, trailing light fingers up the side of her body. She groans into my mouth as I take her tits in my hands, cupping them as I graze my thumb over her hardened nipples through the thin lace of her bra.

Fuck! I want to do unimaginable things to this woman. I want to hurt her and soothe her. I want to ravish her and worship her. I want to fuck her until we are both spent.

But I can't do any of that right now because we need to have a conversation.

As though she can sense I'm about to put a stop to this, her hands grip my hips and tug me forward between her legs before breaking the kiss.

"My safe word is illicit like the club we met in. I don't know my hard limits yet, but I'm willing to bet you can find one," she whispers against my lips.

Her words are like a match to a flame, and white-hot rage sparks inside me at the idea of another man touching her. I growl low in my throat as I grind my hips against her core.

Then I lift her from the stool, spinning around to pin her against the wall.

“Who? Who the fuck touched *my* good girl?” Every word is laced with threat and a savage possessiveness cloaks me like a shroud of darkness.

“Half a dozen nameless faces,” she says, then she grips my face, but before she can say another word, the burner phone I set up last night rings in my pocket.

Reluctantly, I gently lower her back to the floor, then take hold of her face. “Nameless or not, I’ll fucking find them.” I kiss her, pulling back quickly then turn as I pull the phone from my pocket, noting the withheld number, and answer it. Bringing it my ear, I say nothing and just wait.

“You’re on borrowed fucking time, Carter Beckett! Put my sister on this phone right now or your little friend Koda here is going to be next to useless without any fingers.”

Star’s head snaps up as soon as she hears Roxanne’s voice, and she moves closer to me. Roxanne Lawler’s threat isn’t empty, but I know she won’t kill her only chance of finding us.

“I wondered how long it would take you to find me. But you’re not quite there yet. And I wouldn’t waste your time trying to torture my location out of him because he doesn’t know jack fucking shit.”

“Guess we’ll find out when Zak starts removing his magic tech fingers one by one.”

“Roxy, I’m okay,” Star calls out, but I slap my free hand over her mouth before she can say anything else. She scowls at me and tries to shove my hand away.

“Star. Star,” Roxanne calls down the line. “You’re a fucking dead man, Carter.”

“Now, now, Roxanne. Not the best idea to threaten the man currently keeping your sister safe. Maybe you should put your energy into finding the man who put a bounty on her head.” I hear someone whispering in the background followed by a growl of frustration.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” comes a male voice this time, and the lack of Irish accent tells me it’s either Maddox or Zak Lawler. I’d bet money that if Kavanagh was there, he’d have found a way to kill me down the phone.

“Is Koda there? Can he hear me?”

“Yeah, he’s fucking here, and he can hear you, for now.” The threat added to remind me my friend’s life is at stake, but we all know I hold the bigger card.

“Koda, any luck with reclaiming your server back?”

“Nah, man. Whoever they are, they fucking locked me out tight.”

“Fuck!” I release my hand from Star’s mouth and run it through my hair as I pace. “Show them.”

Rustling and then the tapping of fingers on keys echoes down the line as Koda brings up the thread and the bounty put out on Star.

“Is this for fucking real?” another guy asks.

“It’s for fucking real,” I tell them. I consider whether to fill them in with what else I know, but I’m not ready to share every fucking secret with these three. Something doesn’t add up, and until I know it has nothing to do with the Lawlers or Kavanagh then I ain’t sharing shit, least of all my location.

“Who is it?”

“You think he’d still be breathing if I knew that? But Koda is your best chance of finding out.”

“He ain’t doing a good job so far.”

“Maybe if he didn’t have you three arseholes breathing down his neck, he’d do a lot better,” I snap back.

“Enough. This isn’t helping anyone. Carter, let me talk to my sister. Please.” Her please is tacked on begrudgingly.

Star is right behind me, as I knew she would be, and she pleads with her eyes. Pulling the phone from my ear and placing a hand over the mouthpiece, I say, “Watch what you say. No clues on where we are. Keep it basic.”

“I don’t even know where we are,” she snarks and holds out a hand for the phone.

“That’s because I fucked you into oblivion,” I say, leaning in close and keeping my voice low, but my hand may have slipped from the mouthpiece a little. Her cheeks pink and her breath hitches as she snatches the phone and turns her back to me.

I can hear Roxanne calling Star’s name, and I get immense satisfaction at knowing she heard me.

“Rox...”

“Has he hurt you? Did he...?” Roxanne’s half question raises my brows, and I sense there is a story there.

She hesitates, and I step up behind her, brushing her back with my front, and whisper in her ear, “Did I hurt you, princess?” I feel a tremble run through her body before she gets her emotions under control.

“No, he didn’t hurt me.” Her words are firm, certain, but tainted with the smallest lie. Because I hurt her. And she enjoyed every fucking second of it.

She goes to take a step forward, but my hands on her hips stop her. “Uh-uh, stay right fucking there.”

I hear Roxanne asking where we are, but Star deflects and tells her that we are safe before asking if they are all okay. Roxanne tells her they are all fine and no one was hurt. I check my watch. This call has lasted longer than it should have. I take the phone from Star’s hand.

“Okay, time’s up. Koda, find him,” I say then end the call and pocket the phone.

“What the fuck, Carter? It’s a burner, right? So they can’t trace it. Why are you being so secretive?”

“I’m not in the business of sharing. Information comes at a cost, a fucking valuable one. Giving it to the wrong people gets you killed, or are you skipping over the part where you’ve been shot at and attacked in your own home?”

“As if I need a fucking reminder. How else did I end up here.” Her eyes scan the room, looking out the windows to the view beyond.

It’s a beautiful view. Headland for miles and not another soul to be found. The nearest village is over a thirty-minute drive away.

“Don’t get any ideas. There is nothing and no one for miles.”

“Of course there isn’t. So, what’s the plan, huh? Are we just supposed to hide out here forever?” she asks, waving her hand around the room.

“What’s the matter, princess, I thought you’d be used to being locked away?”

I know I’m goading her, but I need to get her riled up enough to let something slip because I know she’s keeping shit from me. After the request for her hit came through, I did something I don’t usually do and ran a search on her. There are limited records of her under the name Anastasia up till the time her and Roxanne’s mum was murdered, and Roxanne entered the foster care system. But there is nothing on Anastasia from then up until five years ago when she miraculously reappeared using the name Star Kavanagh.

“Oh, I see what you’re doing, and it won’t work. You think I’m naive, that I’ve been protected and hidden away like some princess, but you’re wrong,” she says, pointing a finger at me.

I take a step toward her. “Is that so. Then tell me why you no longer use the name Anastasia?”

As soon as the name leaves my mouth, her whole demeanour changes. The shutters come down, her eyes widen and her face pales.

“Don’t say that fucking name. That is not my name,” she says, her words are low but said with such force. She backs away as I move closer, her shoulders tight, and she raises a shaky hand to stop me from coming any closer. “That girl... she doesn’t exist.” She shakes her head as if to expel the very thought of Anastasia from her mind.

Screw this. I march forward, invading her space and shoving her hand aside as it lands on my chest and grip her face. She flinches at my touch, and it's like someone hit me with 2000 volts of pure fucking rage.

“Who the fuck hurt you?” My voice is strained, and the words come out as a gruff demand. Her wide eyes are pinned to mine as I hold her face, pleading with me to leave it alone. But I can't. For some inexplicable reason the thought of someone hurting her, touching her, has filled me with so much hate, so much anger, that I can't see past my need to make them pay.

I feel her as she tries to shake her head, to lie to me.

“Was it Kavanagh? ‘Cause I'll fucking destr—”

“No,” she barks out quickly, cutting me off. The idea obviously unimaginable to her.

“You will tell me. And when you do, I'll tear them apart. Do you hear me, Star?”

“Okay,” she says in a small voice that holds no emotion but is clearly another lie. She takes hold of my wrists and pulls my hands away from her face. “Where's the bathroom?”

Despite wanting to force her to tell me everything, I let her go knowing that it won't do me any good because I have a feeling that Star is a locked vault and won't give me anything she doesn't want to no matter how much I try to force the issue. But she's underestimating me if she thinks I won't get answers.

“Down the hall, first door on your left is a small bathroom,” I tell her with a nod of my head in that direction.

I watch as she hurries off in the direction I told her. As soon as she's gone from sight, I jog upstairs to my room and open the iPad I bought with me. I'm nowhere near as good as Koda but I've learnt a few tricks over the years, especially how to hack sealed records, although it takes a while my way. Once I've set the system up and am running the program, I head back downstairs.

I find Star in the kitchen clearing up our breakfast things, which went half eaten. She looks at me over her shoulder, mask firmly back in place, as I take a seat at the breakfast bar and watch her. She's methodical and thorough, and I imagine her work ethic is the same. Which brings me nicely to the question of how she ended up working for a cunt like Perry Graham.

"How long have you worked for Perry Graham?" I ask as she wipes down the hob. There's a fraction of a second's pause before she continues.

"A little over a year. Why are you so interested? You obviously know him because you told me he wasn't a nice guy."

"He wasn't."

She finishes wiping the hob and the rest of the tops, then tosses the cloth onto the draining board and turns to face me, leaning her arse on the counter, arms folded.

"I never told you I worked for Mr Graham, just like I never told you my name, so how the hell do you know that? And don't give me the whole bullshit spiel about not sharing info 'cause it's valuable." The pitch of her voice changes to a sarcastic whine with that last part. "How did you find me, Carter?"

"The how isn't important. It's the why that matters." Why the fuck am I holding back telling her what I do? It's not like it would shock her to know I kill people for a living given who her family is. But something keeps me from revealing it.

"That's not an answer," she says with a roll of her eyes.

"Well, it's all you're going to fucking get. What do you know about Perry's business or his associates?"

She pushes away from the top and walks to the breakfast bar then leans forward with her forearms resting on the counter in front of me.

"What I know is that you're expecting me to tell you what I know while you give me fuck all." She looks at me expectantly, tilting her head, but I hold my gaze and my

tongue. “Stubborn asshole. I used to deliver Perry’s dry cleaning every Friday and collect it on Monday, but when I arrived to drop it off on Friday the place was cordoned off and surrounded by old bill. I took it home with me, and let’s just say it’s not just the clothes that are getting laundered.”

Well that explains a lot.

“Where is the cash now?” I ask, my mind running through possibilities as to what the fuck Perry and Lev were up to and still no fucking clue as to how much Pavel knows about it.

“Still at my house as far as I know. After we...er I—”

I cut her off as she tries to back track on revealing someone else knows about the money. “We? Who else knows?”

“Who do you think, Carter. There isn’t much that goes on in the underworld my family doesn’t know about.”

“Fucking failed on this giant fuck up.”

“Whatever,” she mutters as I pull the burner from my pocket, tapping it on the counter as I consider how smart it would be to try Lev again.

With the Lawlers hovering over Koda, I don’t have a lot of other options. The only other is Lennox and I’m not ready to bring him on this yet. I don’t want that fucker knowing anything about my business till I’m royally screwed and out of options completely. He already knows more than I’d like.

I tap the phone on the counter one last time before getting up.

“Where are you going?” Star asks, rising to her full height.

“To make a call.” I feel her eyes follow me as I climb the stairs and disappear back to my room. I check the program I set up to hack her sealed records, but I don’t think they are going to give me what I’m looking for. Whatever Star’s hiding isn’t going to be here. I need to get it from the horses fucking mouth.

My gut tells me I won’t like it when I do.

Leaving the program to run in the background, I type in Lev's number and hit call.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring. Ring—

“Who is th—”

“What the fuck have you got me mixed up in, Lev?” I demand.

“Carter...er...now's not a good time.” His whispered words and stammered response tell me he's on edge. Faint voices in the background mean he isn't alone either.

“Now is the perfect fucking time. Tell me what I want to know or maybe I'll call Pavel.”

“Are you fucking threatening me? 'Cause that wouldn't be a good move, Carter.” I hear him moving around and a door closing.

“Damn fucking right I'm threatening you. I've got some serious heat on my arse, and you're the reason.” I watch as the program I've been running on Star finishes and the screen loads with a little yellow file. I turn away needing to focus on this asshole first.

“Perhaps it is the company you keep that is the problem.”

I know he's talking about Star, but I throw it back at him anyway. “Like I fucking said, you're my problem. Whatever fucked up deal you and Perry had going is blowing up in your face, hence you wanting him dead. So, what was it, Lev, huh? Drugs? Skin? Who'd you and Perry piss off?” As I ask the question, a thought occurs to me, but I keep it to myself for now.

“Just give the girl up, Carter, and this will all go away.” The line goes dead. My fist meets the wall, and the phone almost makes its maiden flight across the room.

“Son of a fucking bitch!” I growl out, stomping back to the small desk where the iPad sits with that file glaring at me. Just begging to be opened.

I'm not sure how good of an idea that is right now, but when have I ever given a flying fuck before. I pull out the

chair and sit my arse down ready for anything.

Only I wasn't ready for what I find.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

STAR



I watch as he walks away and consider following him to listen in on whoever he's calling, but I decide I need some space from him. My little escape to the bathroom earlier when things got heavy between us wasn't nearly enough.

Some of the tension I've been feeling since my failed attempt to speak to Roxy at the services last night has faded. Talking to her just now, even if it was short, at least means she knows I'm okay and vice versa.

When Zak asked me who the other person was at mine that night, I knew it wouldn't take long for them to discover who he was. A thread of worry winds its way into my mind as I think about them finding out how we met, but I'll have to worry about that later.

I'm still clueless as to how he found me. I check out the rest of the downstairs while I try to figure it out. Other than the small bathroom I used earlier and a utility room with a back door leading to the garden, the rest is open plan. Deciding to have a look around outside, I step out the front door. The sun is warm on my face and the air fresh as I wander down the dirt path that opens into a large gravel driveway. Beyond that is nothing but wide-open country. Dips in the rolling landscape are filled with shade while the peaks are cast in a warm glow and dotted with trees. I don't know where we are, but it's beautiful. Carter was right about there being nothing for miles.

As I round the side of the house, a large barn comes into view. The front is pitched above large double doors with grey paint peeling in places. I carry on past as the sound of running

water reaches me and find a worn path leading beneath a canopy of trees.

I consider going to take a look, but the wind has picked up and there's a chill in the air that wasn't here when I first came out. I look up to the sky and see one half is now taken up by dark rolling clouds. Turning back the way I came, the first spots of rain begin to fall. By the time I reach the barn, the heavens have opened, and my thin clothes are soaked through, so I slip inside the barn, shoving the door closed against the strong wind.

The earthy sweet smell of hay surrounds me as I take in the huge space before me. Dust motes float in the air as I step forward, craning my neck as I look up. There is a second floor accessed by a ladder to the left, but from this angle I can't make out what is up there. Ahead of me, there are several bales of hay, which appear to be relatively fresh, hence the nostalgic summery notes in the air. It reminds me of my childhood in Ireland with Niamh and Darragh. Sadness fills me as I think about the man who took me in and raised me as his own. Risking his own family's safety for me. Most of Anastasia Parks' childhood was nothing short of tragic. Just thinking the name turns my stomach and brings me out in a cold sweat. I shake the feeling away and fill it with memories of sunny days spent chasing after Aidan and his brothers.

Carter's mention of her means nothing good and has me wondering more so than ever about exactly what he knows about me.

And if he thinks I'm going to sit him down sometime and open the vault on my past, he can think again. There is only one person who knows the story of what happened to me at the hands of Don Rogers, and even then, it is heavily censored. Nobody needs to know the sick and sordid details.

I wish I didn't.

I wish I could forget.

It's a little hard to forget something that my body deems necessary to enjoy sex even though my mind revolts. When Aidan's fiancée Parker suggested that I explore what I enjoy,

I'm certain she didn't intend for me to find a sex club and pick up random men who enjoy calling me a good girl while they fuck me. And I never imagined that I'd enjoy being chased and pinned down, but the rush when Carter captured me in my garden that night and what he did to me last night have opened a whole new kink.

Just the thought has me squeezing my thighs together despite feeling a little tender this morning.

I give my head a shake and focus on the barn. Slowly walking round, I find several large wooden trunks and walk to the closest one. Flicking the catch open, I lift the lid just as a creak comes from behind me.

“Quite the curious little kitten, aren't we?”

I turn to face him, barely having glanced inside the trunk.

Good god!

I'm almost certain my mouth is hanging open as I take him in. He's still wearing the joggers from earlier but is now sporting a white t-shirt that is soaked through from the rain and stuck to every hard plane of his toned body. The dark ink covering his arm and that continues over his shoulder and down the top half of his torso is also visible. Dragging my eyes from his body, our eyes meet. His words might have been light, but the hard gleam in his eyes tells a different story.

“Somebody's wet,” I say mockingly. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know what's coming.

His lip curls up at the side as he strides toward me. “Oh, princess, that's my line.” His eyes never leave mine, and when he's standing right in front of me, I see confusion swirling in them.

“Well, I'm not even slightly wet,” I say, but it's a god damn lie, and he knows it. I'm expecting some cocky comeback, but instead he turns away, sidestepping me to close the lid of the trunk.

My hand shoots out, stopping it from dropping closed, and I take a look at what it is he doesn't want me to see.

The trunk is full of weapons, guns and knives, but there are also hand grenades along with several other items I don't recognise.

The lid slams shut with a bang making me jump.

“What the hell are you doing with a trunk full of weapons? And grenades too,” I ask, but Carter moves in front of the trunk, blocking my view and access. This only strengthens my suspicions about who Carter is. He sure as hell ain't no everyday mechanic. There are at least five trunks that I can see.

“Not for you to worry about, princess.”

There he goes again with the princess bullshit. Part of me wants to call him out on it given what happened the last time I did. But I ignore my body's immediate response to the idea of his hands on me.

“Who the fuck are you, Carter? And don't give me some shit about being a mechanic because I'd have to be the stupidest bitch on the planet to believe that.”

I think over all our conversations, wracking my brains to find something to explain who he is and why he was at my house that night. And then it hits me.

Hits me like a ten-ton truck.

I take a step back. Then another. I see it in his eyes. The moment he realises I've worked it out. He knows I'm going to run, and I know he's going to chase me. And catch me.

It doesn't stop me as I spin and bolt for the barn doors, bursting out into the pouring rain. I immediately head for the little dirt path I discovered earlier as I hear Carter yelling for me to stop.

“For fuck's sake!” he curses as I hit the path and fly down it knowing he's behind me.

Adrenalin pumps through my veins closely followed by arousal, and I curse my stupid body. I focus all my attention on pumping my legs as fast as I can, ignoring the branches slapping me in the face as I rush through the trees. My feet

begin to slip as the trees overhead thin out and the ground beneath my feet turns muddy. The sound of rushing water I heard earlier becomes louder as the path up ahead widens and I spot a waterfall.

“Star, this is not a fucking game. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

If I wasn’t running, I’d scoff at the irony of that comment. My gut warns me to slow down, but screw that. I keep going, bursting into the clearing and coming to a grinding halt as the ground falls away in front of me. I teeter on the edge, earth and stones crumbling down the side as I look down into a deep pool of water below.

“F-f-fuck!” I gasp out, stumbling backward. Rustling behind me snaps me back into focus. The path leads left down a crude set of steps worn into the ground, and I turn that way. Just as my feet hit the final step, I feel Carter right behind me and push myself forward out of his reach. I don’t think about how utterly ridiculous it is to be running from him. If I’m right, which I’m a hundred percent sure I am, then I’m running from a man who hunts people and kills them for a living.

Damn! Why is the thought of that so fucking hot!

Never mind the fact there is nowhere for me to run to. And the very strong possibility he was hired to kill me. That thought alone is enough to dampen my desires.

My heart pumps inside my chest as rain pummels me from above, making it difficult to see ahead of me, and the whoosh of the waterfall fills my ears. I can just make out another small path leading into denser woodland, and I almost make it.

“Jesus fucking Christ, just stop!” Carter hollers in my ear as he crashes into me, lifting me off my feet and turning us so we fall into the long, wet grass to the side of the path.

I begin to struggle, fighting his hold, arms and legs flying in every direction as panic grips me.

“Let me go! Let me fucking go!” I slam my elbow backward, hitting him in the stomach. The hit is met with nothing more than a small oomph of expelled breath. “I know

who you are. I know why you were at my house that night. Now let me fucking go.”

I don't know how, but in the blink of an eye, Carter has me pinned beneath him, both my arms spread wide and an ironclad grip on each wrist as he straddles me.

I manage to knee him in the back before he hooks his feet over the tops of my legs, locking them in place. I raise my head from the ground and let out a piercing scream that echoes through the trees.

“Let me go or fucking kill me like you were hired to!” I growl, dropping my head back to the ground and turning away from him. Emotion raw and powerful claws its way up my throat, and I fight back the tears that come with it. I don't want him to see my pain. I don't want him to know my fears.

I don't fear death. I only fear the pain my death will bring to others.

I've seen death before. Looked into his eyes the night my mum was murdered. Walked alongside him the night my innocence was stolen from me and I was branded. Felt him breathing down my neck the night Don Rogers held a gun to my sister's head.

“Look at me, Star,” he demands. “Look. At. Me.” Comes again when I don't comply, each word a punctuated growl. He daren't release one of my hands to force me to look at him because he knows that free hand is going to smack him right in the face. He can feel it.

Finally turning my head to stare up at him, I say, “Why aren't I dead, Carter? Are you too pussy to kill the Lawler-Kavanagh princess you've deemed me as? Or maybe you found yourself a target with a much higher price than me.” My words are the catalyst that burns through the last of his restraint, and the reason I find myself with his hand wrapped around my throat.

He squeezes, cutting off my air supply, his jaw ticking as he grinds his teeth, and I welcome it.

“Do...it,” I manage to say in a stuttered whisper.

His eyes narrow as he scans my face, fingers tightening just a little bit more. I can see the pulse in his neck thrumming away with anticipation and excitement, the thrill of a kill, just like that night at my house when he killed another hired to take me out.

“I should fucking kill you,” he grinds out, face twisted with rage. Then he’s up and on his feet as quick as he had me under him, cursing and running his hand over his shorn hair.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

I lay there for a moment, filling my lungs. Rain continues to fall, plunking off the trees above. With my breathing evened out, I roll to the left, preparing to climb to my feet. My eyes catch on something across the path as I move, and at first I’m not sure I saw it at all. But when I drop back down a little and tilt my head, it comes back into view. A wire that runs from one side of the path to the other. It’s so close to the ground that you’d never see if you were walking by. Certain that it’s a trip wire of some sort, I climb to my feet and turn around. I expected to see Carter still pacing, so I’m surprised when I find him sitting on a large rock at the side of the pool of water.

“Did you know there’s a—”

“A trip wire? Yeah, because I set it,” he says, cutting me off.

He remains facing away from me, and I hesitantly step forward, fully aware there could be more.

“Don’t worry there aren’t any inside here, only on the paths leading in. And to answer your next question, exploding bodies are hell to clear up.”

“Oh I feel so much better knowing that. Thanks,” I say, sarcasm lacing my tone. I rub at my neck and know Carter has left his mark there. It sends butterflies fluttering low in my belly. “Carter—”

“I was hired to kill you. And I knew who you were when I came to your house that night,” he states, cutting me off again.

“Did you know who I was the night we met at Illicit too?” I ask, coming to a stop in front of him and wrapping my arms

around myself. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, but my wet clothes have me chilled to the bone.

He shakes his head. “Nah, and it wouldn’t have fucking stopped me if I had.”

I sense he’s uncomfortable with being so vulnerable. I don’t blame him. I’m uncomfortable enough with where I know this conversation is going to lead. I wonder whether he’d have been so keen if he knew everything about me. And as I’m finding with him, he reads my question again.

Looking up at me, he says, “I know, Star, and it won’t stop me wanting you. Won’t fucking stop me from sinking my dick into you every chance I get, or making you scream so loud as you come all over my fingers, my cock and in my mouth that you’ll be hoarse. I’ll hunt you, hurt you, fuck you, and you’ll take it all like the good fucking girl you are.” The words roll off his tongue and are a threateningly salacious promise.

I can’t stop the tears this time, and I can’t separate the crazy, contradictory emotions exploding inside me. It’s a full-scale war between shame and arousal.

He knows.

I want to be sick. I want to turn and run from the reality that this man knows a part of my past I wish had died along with my half-brother Don Rogers; the man responsible for everything bad that has ever happened to me.

I didn’t want him to see my pain, my fear, how weak I am, but I can’t hold myself up any longer. I drop to my knees and bury my head in my hands.

This is me.

Unveiled and naked.

Worshiping at the altar of the man who strips me bare and makes me feel less like a freak.

Hands grip my wrists, pulling my hands from my face, then with a finger beneath my chin, he forces my head up.

“Tell me what you need, Star,” he asks, leaning down and licking a path up one side of my face, swallowing my tears.

“Tell me and it’s yours.” He does the same on the other side then grips my chin, forcing me to look at only him.

I swallow thickly and lick my lips as Carter tracks the movement. “I...I need...” I try to shake my head, to avert my eyes from his intense stare.

“No,” he states, shaking my chin in his hand until I raise my eyes again.

“I need...to...forget. I need you to make...me forget. Please,” I beg between shaky breaths and watch as his eyes spark to life with fire.

Eyes that banish my fears while his touch burns away my shame.

“I’ll make you forget everything. Even your own fucking name,” he says, gripping the front of my t-shirt and pulling me to my feet.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STAR



He kisses me, one hand still gripping my t-shirt while the other winds into my hair, and with just a kiss, every nerve ending in my body comes to life. It's not just a *kiss* though. It is a claiming, full of ferocious want. It speaks of a twisted and possessive desire to own me. And I should run from it. Instead, I fall headfirst into it, allowing him to possess me. My body is happy to give up complete control, and I can't do a damn thing about it.

I barely notice as the hand wound in my hair loosens because I'm too focused on how his tongue dances with mine, but I sure as hell notice as he rips open my t-shirt. Cold air licks at my skin like tiny pin pricks. My head drops back, breaking the kiss, and I look up at the sky swollen with unshed rain.

"This body...fuck! It's divine. Perfectly made for me." He cups my breasts, pushing them together as he flicks his thumbs over my hard nipples. "I'm going to fuck these tits. I'm going to fuck your cunt. Your arse. Your mouth. I'm going to erase the memory of every man that ever fucking touched you. I'll own every god damn fucking inch of your skin. My touch will be your brand, Star."

I can't speak, can't make a sound as his words tattoo my soul.

The sharp sting of teeth on my nipple is like a bolt of lightning and has my eyes snapping open. Clouds swirl in the sky mirroring Carter's tongue and making my head swim. My hands reach out for purpose, finding his shoulders and balling

his t-shirt up in my hands as he sucks my nipple into his mouth, switching between each one. I let out a low keened of pleasure, my back arching, desperate and begging for more.

I want everything he promised.

I want it all and more.

He releases my nipple with a pop and runs his tongue up my neck, nipping at my chin before trailing kisses along my jaw. His lips scorch my skin, branding me. But it's deeper than that. Each touch is a score on the very bones of me.

He knows.

He knows what they did to me. What they made me into. And yet, here he is setting fire to everything before him.

Everything stops as he strips off from the waist down, giving a quick tug of his cock, then he drops to his knees at my feet. Like he's worshipping me. My eyes meet his as he yanks at the joggers I'm wearing, and he lets out a growl when he sees me naked beneath them. Slipping off my shoes and trousers, he grips the back of my thighs and tugs me forward, then he sits back on his haunches.

Raising one leg, he places my knee on his shoulder, baring me to him. "You're going to ride my face and show me how good you come as I fuck your pussy with my tongue." A wicked smile flashes across his face as he places both my hands on his head then with one hand on my arse, he raises my other leg, again placing my knee on his shoulder. The precarious position sends a thrill through me as he adjusts his hold slightly before hauling me forward and burying his face in my pussy.

"Holy...fuck!" I stutter as he sucks my clit into his mouth, flicking the tip of his tongue over and over again. My hips rock back and forth, chasing my release as rain starts to fall again. Tossing my head back, raindrops cascade down my face. It feels like we're moving, but I'm too lost to the euphoria this man is building in me to care. I'm lifted high as Carter drives his tongue inside me, the bridge of his nose rubbing against my swollen clit.

The rushing of the waterfall grows louder like a staccato rhythm in time with each flick of his tongue, and my thighs tense, squeezing against the sides of his head. My hands lock around his neck, fingers interlacing as I ride his face. Skin tingling and heart beating, my breaths shorten, coming out in hitched pants.

“Ahh, ahh, fuck...oh fuck, Carter! Fuck!” My rocking slows, and I grind my pussy against his face as my orgasm rips through me like a wild storm.

Carter hums his approval, and the vibration is nearly too much for my oversensitive clit. As he lowers me enough to look up at me, his face slick with my cum, I become aware of water lapping at my toes and see we are now in the middle of the pool of water. It's not very deep, resting just above his waist.

“What the...” My words trail off as he lowers me, and I wrap my legs around his waist. He strides forward toward the waterfall, and I tense in his arms as we near it.

“I've got you,” he says, voice a husky growl and laced with humour. He sidesteps the main flow, choosing the right side where the water flows down the rocky face more steadily.

Cold water sprays off the surface of the pool as the waterfall hits sending goosebumps up my arms.

“Shit that's cold,” I exclaim.

“It is,” Carter says, stepping up and stopping at the edge of the thundering fall. “Do you trust me?”

I think about his question as I search his eyes. Then decision made, I nod. “With my body yes.”

“For now, that will do. I'll earn the fucking rest. Lean back.”

My eyes widen and my hands, still locked behind his neck, tighten. He loosens his hold and I slip down his body a little until I feel the head of his cock just resting against my pussy. It's enough to get me relaxing and slowly leaning back. Carter keeps one hand under my arse while the other rests in the small of my back, guiding me. I close my eyes and hold my

breath as I pass under the waterfall. Cold barbs of water hit my breasts and stomach, and while it's a shock initially, it settles and becomes so much more.

"Oh god," I moan as my back touches smooth rock and cold droplets rain down on me, hitting my nipples with an icy sting before morphing into pleasure that hits my core, warming me from the inside out.

My legs relax, and Carter trails a hand up my torso, splitting the spray, then he flicks my nipple while he uses his other hand to glide his cock up and down my slit. I feel each barbel of his Jacob's ladder as he slides against my clit, and I want to scream at him to fuck me. Instead, I bring one hand up, squeezing my breast and rolling my nipple between my finger and thumb. The combination is heady, creating a desperation so intense, so deep, that it takes everything not to use my feet and thrust him forward until he's buried to the hilt inside me.

"Someone is impatient," he teases, but he's clearly feeling the same as a second later he's pushing inside me, stretching me wide. Each ridge, each pulse, I can feel it all.

I want it all.

"Look at you taking all of my cock. Look how fucking well you take me, Star," Carter says, his voice echoing off the rock face as he begins pumping his hips.

He thrusts hard and deep, rolling his hips with each one and hitting that sweet spot inside. His pace intensifies and he pulls my legs from around him, pushing them up and back, forcing him deeper. With one hand still on my breast, squeezing and tugging the nipple with a bite of pain, I reach out the other, finding his taut stomach, abs rippling with every movement. My fingernails claw at his flesh as my stomach tightens with the first signs of my impending orgasm. Arms break through the waterfall, and hands grasp hold of me under my arms and lift me clean off the smooth rock. A gush of water falls over my face as my legs wrap around him, and I'm carried clear of the spray. Gripping his shoulders, he moves his

hands under my backside, holding my weight as he continues to fuck me.

Our eyes lock onto one another as he roars, “Come for me my good girl. Let me hear you scream.”

Those magic words throw me headfirst over the edge into nirvana as the walls of my pussy clamp down on him, convulsing around him and pushing him to his own release.

“Ahhhh...fuck, Carter!” My cry reverberates off the rocks and trees before being swallowed by a crack of thunder overhead.

I lower my head, gripping his face and kissing him as he continues to pulse inside me. Another crack of thunder rolls overhead, and he breaks the kiss.

“We need to go before that storm hits. And you need a hot bath.”

I wiggle my hips a little invitingly.

“Nope, the bath is for you.”

I screw up my nose at being shot down, but my body takes this moment to remind me of the last twenty-four hours, and a wave of tiredness washes over me. Carter carries me from the water then puts me down as we collect up our belongings. The sky lights with a streak of lightning followed seconds later by more thunder. Not bothering to put anything but shoes back on, we climb the steps to the top and hurry down the dirt path to the house. I can't imagine how silly we look running through the trees half naked.

Inside the house, Carter takes all my wet clothes, carefully lifting the ripped wet t-shirt from my body too, which he tosses in the bin, and chucks them into the washing machine alongside his own.

At the top of the stairs, I head for the room I slept in last night, but he steers me to his room, swatting me on the arse when I don't move quick enough. I eye him over my shoulder as pleasure zips through me.

“No spanking tonight, princess.”

I spin around to face him, walking backwards into his room. “But you’re not ruling it out, right?” My forthright question surprises me and him from the look on his face. I’ve never found it easy to ask for what I want when it comes to sex. But the first night we spent together was the exception, albeit a little reserved.

His brow cocks as he studies my face looking for any indication that I might be bluffing.

“You been spanked before?” I pick up a slight growl somewhere in his question. But I’m too focused on a memory his question brings.

My vision blurs and I squeeze my eyes closed against the assault on my mind. My chest tightens as I gasp, trying to control my breathing, and I suddenly feel hot. Nausea swims in my stomach then crawls up my throat as the image of a young girl bent over a table, each of her hands tied to metal hoops holding her in place, and her ankles tied to the legs fills my mind.

She’s naked, her small body littered with bruises. Her face is turned to the side, squashed against the surface, and looking right at me. Her eyes are glassy with tears, and her body flinches as the man standing over her brings his hand down on her bum. The crack of his palm on her skin makes me jump. As a fat tear falls from her eye, I look away to the man standing over her, inflicting pain on her. But it’s not paining him. No, he’s enjoying it. He has his trousers undone, his willy out and is stroking his hand up and down it. He lands another slap to her, causing her to whimper, and I watch as his eyes roll back in pleasure at the sound...

The memory swirls as hands grip me, and I try to fight them off. But then I hear him.

“I’ve got you. It’s me, Star. Carter.”

I’ve never heard his voice so gentle. He wraps his arms around me, holding me tight, enveloping me in warmth. His scent fills my nostrils mixed with the smell of rainwater, and I feel my heart slow.

“Shhh, you’re safe. I’ve got you,” he whispers, and the dam on my emotions breaks as a clap of thunder rolls through the sky above us.

Wracking sobs shudder through me as tears fall from my eyes freely. And all the while he holds me, soothing me, calming me and making me feel safe.

I don’t know how much time passes, but I slowly become aware of us moving as my body exhausts itself. I hear the faint sound of running water as I’m placed down. Carter’s hands move over my body gently, and everywhere his hands touch brings my body to life. Banishing the dark memories and filling them with light.

I sense him as he moves away a little, and my hand wants to reach out and stop him, to keep him close, but I don’t. The water stops running, then he’s there again. He goes to lift me, but I stop him.

“I can walk,” I tell him, pushing his hands away from me. My neediness has twisted my emotions into irritation. Irritation that he’s seeing me at my worst. Irritation that after such raw and intense sex—fantastic fucking sex—I’m a sobbing wreck of a woman. Vulnerable. He makes me vulnerable, and it irks me.

He holds his hands up and steps back, allowing me to stand on my own. On shaky legs, I force myself to my full height and lift my chin as I raise my head, looking him in the eye.

His eyes hold mine in a stare off, and I feel as they burrow beneath my skin, scanning the very depths of my soul. Other than a scowl, his face shows no emotion at all.

I step toward the bath. My legs wobble, but I make damn sure they hold me up. Reaching it, I grip the edge and let out a quiet breath, blowing it through my pursed lips slow and measured. I can feel him hovering behind me, waiting for the moment when I fall. But I won’t. Not again.

Slowly throwing a leg over the side, I climb in. The warm water prickles against my chilled skin, thawing me out from

my toes to the top of my head as I lower myself.

Once settled, I lay back, closing my eyes and slip deeper beneath the water until it reaches my chin, leaving only my head exposed.

How easy it would be to slide beneath the water and let it steal my last breath. It's a thought I've had before, but I'd never go through with it. That would mean Don won. He stole a lot from me, my mum, my sister and my innocence. There is no way I'd give that bastard the satisfaction of stealing my life too.

A shadow falls across my closed eyelids, and I know if I open them he will be leaning over the bath staring down at me. I can practically feel his eyes as they travel the length of my body.

“Open your eyes, princess.”

I roll my eyes behind my lids at him calling me princess, then I slowly open them. And as I thought, he is leaning over the bath, one hand on either side, looking down at me.

“That thought you were thinking, forget it. I'm going to get you some clothes, and when I come back you better still be fucking breathing. 'Cause if you're not, I'll travel to Hell and fight the devil for you.” He continues to look at me for a moment longer, then happy he's made his point, he pushes away from the bath and disappears out the door, leaving it open.

I struggle with the idea that he can read me so easily, but more than that, his last comment stabs at the demons that plague me. They settle back into the dark crevices of my mind.

I let my eyes trail over my body, taking in all the places Carter has left his mark. My fingers brush over the inside of my thighs and the red rash from his beard as I rode his face.

“Hmmm, Michelin star cuisine right fucking there,” comes a deep rumble from behind me.

I'm exhausted, emotionally wrung out, but that doesn't stop the deep stirring of desire at his words.

“Sit up,” he demands as he appears in my line of sight beside me. I notice that he’s changed into another pair of joggers but is shirtless.

I ease myself into a sitting position as Carter grabs a bottle of shampoo from the side and kneels. Water cascades over my head and down my back several times, then his hands are in my hair, massaging my scalp as the scent of tea tree and lavender permeates the air.

It feels amazing, and I close my eyes with a groan.

“I’m not a fucking saint, Star.”

A smile slips across my face. “I’m sorry but it feels so good.”

“Lots of things feel good. None of which are on the table right now.” His tone implies a high level of restraint, and I’m thankful for it.

While I don’t think I could deny him, it wouldn’t be a good idea given where my mind went earlier. I’ve never experienced a sub drop before. And while the term generally refers to submissives, it can happen to anyone after an intense scene or sexual experience. For me, it’s just another layer of my complicated sex life.

The fact that he’s aware and is focused on caring for me only confirms my feelings about this man.

I don’t entirely understand them, but I do know Carter is the cure to my afflictions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CARTER

One question and the euphoria I was riding pops like a fucking balloon. Her face pales, her eyes become like black holes and her breathing erratic.

As soon as I touch her, she snaps out of it, turning on me, trying to get away.

“I’ve got you. It’s me, Star. Carter,” I say, wrapping my arms around her. “Shhh, you’re safe. I’ve got you.” Thunder rattles the sky above as she breaks apart in my arms. When she’s finally spent, I lift her and carry her through to my bathroom. Setting the bath to run, I slowly take in her body, and I can’t ignore the deep satisfaction I get from seeing my marks on her. But it pales in comparison to the utter devastation being wrought through my bloodstream as I think about what set her off. I know it’s not just a sub drop. My question triggered a memory for her. And I want to delve into her mind and tear it from her subconscious. I want to obliterate the memory. Them. What I want to do to those men would make Jack the Ripper look like child’s play.

And I fucking will.

Every last one of them.

I’ve only ever felt rage like this one other time in my life. The night that changed my life. Changed me.

I go to lift her, but she stops me, pushing my hands away. I’ve no fucking idea how I hold it together enough to step back and let her get to her feet on her own.

I fight against myself as I watch her wobble her way to the bath edge and climb in. Darkness slivers beneath my veins, and I thank fuck she has her eyes closed. As she sinks into the water to her chin, I sink into the mind of the killer inside. But something about the look on her face pulls me back and I school my features as I lean over her.

“Open your eyes, princess.” The slightest movement beneath her lids gives away her eye roll. Using princess had the desired effect, and she opens her eyes, a small spark of light back in them. “That thought you were thinking? Forget it. I’m going to get you some clothes, and when I come back you better still be fucking breathing. ‘Cause if you’re not, I’ll travel to Hell and fight the devil for you.”

Exiting the bathroom, I calmly make my way downstairs and out the front door, pulling it to behind me. I wait. I wait for the next roll of thunder, and as it cracks through the sky, I let out a roar. Every pent-up emotion, every ounce of rage, pours from me in a wordless promise to a God I don’t believe in and a threat to the Devil.

It’s a vow to sell the last of my soul in exchange for the lives of the men that hurt Star.

Back inside the house, I quickly shower, throwing on a pair of joggers, before grabbing some clean clothes for Star. I stop at the doorway to the bathroom and watch her fingers as they trace the inside of her thigh.

My cock hardens at the sight and the memory of her riding my face.

“Hmmm, Michelin star cuisine right fucking there,” I hum as I walk into the room, demanding she sit up and snatching the bottle of shampoo and dropping to my knees before she can see how turned on I am.

I wash her hair, struggling to not climb in there with her and fuck her again when she groans. An image of her with her legs hanging over the sides of the bath and me beneath her ploughing into her plays like a fucking movie reel as I rinse the shampoo from her hair. A better man might vow never to touch her again. But that ain’t me.

I hold the towel out in front of me, still hiding my painfully hard cock, and she climbs out, turning around so I can wrap it round her.

I grab another to dry off her hair, then she lets me steer her into the bedroom and sit her on the edge of the bed.

I walk to the bedside table and grab the small tub of cream there. She watches me, and when I stop in front of her, she looks up at me expectantly. Of what I'm not sure.

Placing the tub on the bed, I take hold of the top of the towel and peel it open. She makes no move to stop me even though she doesn't know what it is I plan to do.

So many fucking things.

Sitting naked in front of me and nothing to hide my reaction to her, her eyes drop to my dick. It stands proud as fucking punch under my joggers.

"Ain't fucking happening, Star." I crouch, dropping my hands to the top of her thighs and gently open her legs. I reach over for the tub, but she beats me to it, handing it to me.

"Your mouth says one thing, but your body says the opposite," she whispers as I pop the top off the tub and dip my fingers inside, scooping a little blob onto two fingers.

I place the tub back on the bed and place half onto the same two fingers of my other hand.

"My body doesn't rule my head." I massage the cream into the rash from my scruff. And while my words were true, I can't help how my fingers tighten on the soft skin of her inner thighs, picturing my cock... I go to pull my hands away before I can't stop myself. A liar I fucking am not.

She grasps my wrists halting me, and I raise my eyes, keeping my head low.

"Thank you."

"For what?" I ask even though I can take a damn good guess.

She tilts her head and looks at me as if to say ‘how dense are you?’.

“What are you thanking me for, princess, huh? The thorough fucking? ‘Cause that weren’t no hardship, and I have every fucking intention of doing it again.”

“That is not what I meant and you fucking know it,” she says, her tone erring on the edge of pissed off.

I rise, forcing her back and caging her in. “Oh, I know. But you don’t need to thank me for taking care of you. Now, get some sleep,” I tell her, needing to leave before I undo everything she’s just thanked me for. She is testing the limits of my restraint.

I walk away, closing the door behind me. I’ve experimented with the whole dom/sub thing before, but it ain’t for me. I’ve never cared much about what comes after we’ve fucked. Never gave a shit about them past making sure they come a couple of times before I did. But Star is the exception to that rule.

The only fucking exception.

That is one hell of a fucking sobering thought.

Of all the women I’ve screwed, I pick the one requiring me to give a fuck the most afterward. And the kicker about that? I want to.

I pick up the iPad I removed from my room earlier and take a seat in the lounge. I stare at it for the longest time. I don’t need to look to remember what that file said, it’s etched into my mind.

I remember the shit that went down with Don Rogers and the Lawlers. What I didn’t fucking know was how Star was involved. But I guess that was intentional on Kavanagh and Roxanne’s part. And it explains her dislike of the name Anastasia.

There is nothing specific to Star in the file just details about other girls who were held there. But I don’t need words on a piece of fucking paper to tell me the story of what happened to her. My stomach turns over at the thought.

You're a special kind of mentally deranged fuck-up to do that shit. My iPad chimes with a message. Opening it, the encrypted message portal pops up on the screen. Before I left home, where I left my phone, I enabled an app that Koda created that allows messages and calls sent to the phone to be secretly forwarded to another device, even an untraceable one.

Where the fuck are you? The board is over run, and they are moving in, Carter. Even Orlov is on the hunt. Call me. We need to fucking talk.

"No, we fucking don't," I mutter, opening a box to reply to Lennox.

Then you better start talking about who the fuck hired the Shadows.

I hit send, dropping my head back against the chair with a sigh. I've got nothing. Nothing that makes any fucking sense anyway. And I figure I've got forty-eight hours max before the Lawlers find us.

No one knows about this place and my name isn't attached to it in anyway; at least not this name. And the other is dead as far as the world is concerned. But Aidan Kavanagh and the Lawlers will dig deep to find the person who kidnapped one of their own.

While I wait for Lennox to reply, I risk a scan of the web for anything linking Star to Lev or Perry apart from the obvious job connection.

I come up empty again.

"Fuck!" I curse, slamming my hand down on the chair with a thud.

Then I search for the dry cleaners. I don't know the name, but the search alone brings up a news report. It has to be the one Star delivers Perry's suits and money to. Scrolling the article, I look for anything out of the ordinary. I almost miss the picture because I'm so focused on the words.

It's a photo taken on the day the police raided it and in the background is a face I recognise.

“Who is that?” comes Star’s voice behind me as I zoom in.

I turn to see her as she walks around the chair and sits on the arm. She’s only wearing the t-shirt I gave her, which rides up her thighs as she sits. The thought of her naked underneath is a distraction I don’t need right now. Another time and I’d fuck her all over this house.

“That’s the dry cleaners Perry used,” she says, snapping me out of my dirty thoughts. “But who is the guy?”

“Do you know who Pavel—”

“Orlov. I know who he is. Head of the Manchester Bratva.”

“Well, that’s one of his soldiers. And not just any soldier. Kir Gusev, brother to Akim Gusev’s, who is Pavel’s right-hand man.”

I stare at Kir for a moment lost in thought. I’m beginning to think that disappearing wasn’t such a good idea. I can’t do shit from all the way out here. If it was just me, I’d have laid low while I hunted the fucker responsible. But that is not a fucking option with Star involved. From the moment I turned down the hit on her and killed one of the Shadows, I made it clear what side I was on. Didn’t know I was stepping into a fucking war then though.

“You think he’s connected to Perry’s death?” she asks.

“Maybe,” I say carefully. “How did you get the job with Perry anyway?” My question is a good diversion from the fact it was me that killed her boss, but it’s also something I’ve been thinking about.

“Oh, err...I’d signed up to several job sites and agencies toward the end of uni and got a call about a temp position there. It was only supposed to be for a week, but the lady who I was covering for never came back. Perry offered me the job.”

“Tell me what you know about Perry’s business dealings. Anyone new he started doing business with recently?”

I watch her as she thinks about my question. “Erm...the only person I can think of is Mark Swanson. About a month

after I started there. I remember the guy because he was a sleazy prick and tried to hit on me every time he came to the office. He owns a company called Medi Labs, and from what I saw, he and Perry became partners.”

“Medi Labs the 3D printing company?” I ask, the idea setting off a spark of suspicion.

“Yeah, that’s the one. They’ve been pretty tight up until a few weeks ago. Mark came storming into the office and marched straight into Perry’s office.”

“Do you know what it was about?” My suspicion growing even more.

“No idea. Perry’s office is soundproofed. But I saw the two of them through the window shouting at each other. It was heated whatever it was about.”

I search up Mark’s company aware that the longer I stay online the higher the risk even with a VPN. All it would take is for someone to be monitoring me when there is a break in the VPN connection.

“What are you thinking, Carter?”

The page loads, and I click the link for Mark’s company website. “I’m thinking that Perry and Mark were making something other than...” I pause as the page loads with a picture of medical equipment. “Something less legit.”

“Like what though?” Star muses beside me. “Unless he’s making organs to sell on the black market, I’m not sure what else there is.”

“I wouldn’t rule out the idea of that becoming a possibility in the near future, but I doubt Perry was smart enough.”

There’s only one thing other than drugs and skin that makes criminals rich, and that’s guns. Star shivers and gets up.

“That’s a frightening thought,” she says as she walks to the fridge and opens it, looking inside.

“It’ll happen,” I mutter, but I’m too busy focusing on the very strong fucking chance that Perry and Lev were making

ghost guns. But who the fuck were they supplying, and how much, if anything, does Pavel know about it?

Star comes back over carrying a can of Coke from the supplies I picked up on the way here. Instead of sitting back next to me, she drops down onto the sofa opposite me, tucking her legs under her. After taking a mouthful, she glances at me before looking down at the can nestled in her hands.

I watch as she trails a finger up the can, colliding with a bead of condensation rolling down the side. My gut tells me this conversation is about to take a direction that's going to create waves.

“Just ask the damn question, Star.”

Her eyes lift to mine. “Okay,” she says, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “How did you get your job? I mean, hired killer isn't exactly high on the help wanted pages.” Sarcasm hangs heavily in her question, and the hypocrisy irritates me.

“Neither does mob boss, but I guess the rules are different for Aidan and Roxanne, huh?” I bite back with a questioning raise of my brows. There's an element of avoidance in my answer because I don't want to explain how I became a killer.

“Not the same thing. Aidan was born into the life, and Rox...” she trails off as she realises just how ridiculous her question is.

“What? The good apple turned bad?” I reply flippantly.

“Hey, I fucking resent that,” she snaps, sitting up a little more. A fire lit beneath her arse at me criticising her family. It's a fair fucking point given that Roxanne used to be a cop and now runs half of London with the Lawler brothers.

“Yeah, and I resent you judging me when you know nothing about me.”

She scoffs back a laugh. “Seriously? That's your defence?”

I place the iPad on the table in front of me and lean forward. “Not my fucking defence because I don't need to defend my life or my actions to anyone. Why don't you ask

what's really on your mind? Ask me again why you're not dead. Ask me why I didn't take the money and slit your throat, Star. Fucking ask me I dare you."

Her silence speaks so loud it's almost deafening.

"Wanna know what I think? I think you're scared. Scared to admit that I turn you the fuck on. Scared to admit that what I do doesn't scare you at all but makes your blood heat and your pussy wet. You're scared of the truth. And the fucking truth is that I didn't kill you because you make my dick hard and my dead heart beat again. You make my black soul scarred by death just that little bit fucking lighter. That's the fucking truth."

Star's jaw clenches at my words, her fingers tightening around the can in her hand as her thighs tense, rubbing against one another.

"Wanna know what else I think?" I ask, relaxing back in the chair, revealing the hard outline of my cock through my joggers.

"No, I think you've said enough," she says, but her breathless words say otherwise.

I hook my thumbs under the waistband of my joggers and drag them down. My cock springs free, twitching against my stomach and leaving a bead of precum glistening against my skin. She can't help a quick look.

"Princess, I haven't said nearly enough." I wrap my fingers around my dick, sliding my hand up and down the shaft as she desperately tries not to look again. "I think you wanna taste me. You wanna feel my cock hitting the back of your throat, choking you. Then you wanna slide your pussy down on my cock and ride me until my cum coats the inside walls of that tight as fuck cunt that I now own. How's that sound, princess?" I ask, giving my dick a hard tug as I watch Star bite her bottom lip, her legs unravelling from under her and giving me a perfect view of her bare pussy, soaked with arousal, as she puts her can of drink on the table.

She's still pissed, but her need is shoving her anger aside like a piece of trash and trampling all over it. It's the driving force behind her getting up from the sofa and sauntering over to me, nipples hard beneath her t-shirt. When she reaches me, she bends over, resting her hands on my knees, and brings her mouth to within a fraction of an inch of mine.

"Would a princess take your cock like this," she whispers, then drops to her knees in front of me. Taking my cock in her hand, she watches me with hooded eyes as she dips her head lower, then runs her tongue up the underside of my dick. Her tongue glides over each barbell, vibrating all the way through me, and I let out a deep groan as she reaches the crown. My deep groan morphs into a gasped breath as she crests the head and pierces my slit with the tip of her tongue before she closes her mouth over me fully and takes me right down to the hilt. My hips buck, and I feel her throat contract as she gags.

"Fuck! There's my girl." My hands came down on her head, holding her there as she chokes on my dick. My fingers tangle in her hair, and I drag her head up slowly, savouring the feel of her lips as they skim over my Jacob's ladder.

Her eyes meet mine as she swirls her tongue over my crown, panting for breath and saliva dripping from the corners of her mouth.

I'm in fucking heaven.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

STAR



Carter's hand pushes on my head, and I willingly swallow down his cock again, chocking on it as I drown in the gaze of his bright blue eyes. His lips part, and he lets out a deep guttural groan as I gag, and liquid heat pools between my legs, then runs down the inside of my thighs.

I'm doing this to this man.

My tongue, my mouth is literally bringing him to his knees. It is the greatest pleasure I've ever felt.

I grip the top of his thighs, squeezing and digging my nails into his flesh as I open my throat to take him once more.

He hisses in pleasure or pain, doesn't matter which just as long as it's me that caused it.

He pulls on my hair, and this time, I bare my teeth a little as he drags me up the length of him. At the top, I push against the hand in my hair until he releases me, and I let his dick pop free from my mouth. I push myself up from the floor, my hands skimming up his heated chest. I straddle him, knees either side and hands on his shoulders as his own hands skim up my thighs, stopping at my hips.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asks gruffly, but with a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Well, your so-called princess is about to give you the ride of your fucking life," I say, rubbing my nose on his and letting our lips brush as I breath him in. I tilt my head, teasing him with my mouth again as I lower my hips until I can feel him, hot and throbbing beneath me.

I roll my hips, sliding my wet pussy up and down his cock, each rung of his Jacob's ladder increasing the friction against my clit.

"Oh...god," I whisper, increasing the pace of each hip roll, bringing me to the edge.

Carter nips at my chin, then balls his hands into fists and bunches up my t-shirt with a rumbling growl when I stop. But any words he was going to say die on his lips as I reach back, raising my hips and cocking his head against my entrance.

"Show me what you've got, princess," he says, thrusting his hips up as I slam down on him.

"Arrrgh...fuck!" I cry, my breath stolen from my lungs like this man as stolen me. I rise up and slam back down on him again and again until my thighs burn and my pussy begs for release.

His hand twists in my hair at the back of my neck, forcing me to arch my back and push my chest forward. I can feel Carter's hot breath on my nipple, then a shot of pain like a bolt of lightning straight to my clit as he bites down on it through my t-shirt. He sucks it into his mouth, laving at it with his tongue, and the combination of his wet mouth and the cotton t-shirt is fucking exquisite. He switches to the other nipple just as I feel a tug low in my belly.

"Don't you dare fucking come yet, Star. You look too damn good riding my cock." He releases my hair, and grips my hips, slowing my movements to a soft roll.

"Not helping, Carter," I grind out between panted breaths, my clit rubbing against his pubic bone. "Ah... I need to come...please," I beg, desperately pushing against his hold on my hips for more.

"Look how good you beg. And how well you take my cock." His words are strained, and I feel as he swells inside me, telling me he's close. His hands land on my arse with a slap, and he squeezes, kneading the cheeks and letting me move again.

It takes me seconds to reach the peak of my orgasm again, and with his hands assisting each rise and fall, I crash over the precipice, surrendering to my body.

“Yes, yes, yes! Fuck...yes!” I slump forward, breathing heavily against Carter’s sweat slicked neck.

“Fuck, Star!” he pants out, gripping my face with both hands and lifting my head up. “You’re fucking beautiful,” he says, pressing his lips to mine.

I kiss him back and swallow down my emotions.

“Too fucking good for a man like me,” he says honestly when he breaks the kiss.

I shake my head to disagree. “No, Carter—” He cuts me off with a thumb to my lips.

“I’m not a good man, Star. I was sent to kill you, and if you’d been anyone else, I’d have done it.”

“Because of my name, right? Because of Aidan and my sister,” I say bitterly and attempt to climb off him, away from the real truth. He didn’t kill me because of who my family is. Nothing more and nothing less.

“Hey, that’s not true. Didn’t you hear what I fucking said earlier,” he snaps, keeping me in place and forcing me to look at him.

“I heard you. Heard you saying the right words so you could fuck me again. Men will say anything if there’s a chance of a fuck!”

“Bullshit! I don’t need fancy words or to sweet talk a woman into my bed. And I sure as hell don’t need them with you.” He pauses, and it only takes me a moment to understand why.

He’s hard again. And when he thrusts his hips up, I can’t help the small moan that leaves my mouth along with most of my unnecessary anger. I’m angry at me more than anything. Angry at not being able to accept his words for what they are. For not allowing myself to believe that he could want me in the first place but even more so now that he knows what

happened to me. And there's a little bit of shame too. It's the first time I've felt it with him, and it scares me.

"Your name isn't why I didn't kill you, or even because my dick gets hard just fucking looking at you. I'm not that simple. It's so much more fucking complicated than that, Star."

"Explain," I ask.

"I don't fucking know how. I don't do emotions and fluffy shit. I'm fucking dead inside. But you? You make me wild, feral, possessive. Protective. It's been a long time since I've felt that way about anyone."

"Who was she?" I ask, and as soon as the words leave my mouth, I know I've screwed up. His hands leave my face, and he lifts me from his lap, placing me beside him, then he gets up, pulling his joggers up as he goes.

"We are not doing this now." There's a ping from the iPad on the table and he picks it up then turns to me. "It's not what you fucking think either."

He climbs the stairs and slams the bedroom door shut.

"Not what I fucking think. What else am I meant to think?" I mutter, getting to my feet. Wetness between my thighs reminds me I need to clean up, and I head to the small downstairs bathroom with a trail of cum running down my leg. It's also a glaring reminder of the fact that not once has the subject of contraception come up. I must be losing my mind. He's making me lose my fucking mind.

Thankfully, I'm covered having just recently had a new shot. When we had sex at Illicit, he used a condom, so at least I can hope he's clean. But it shows how much he affects me. How lost in the moment, how utterly and irrevocably consumed I am by him.

God, I wish Parker was here, or I could at least speak to her. Death and murder are part of my life because of my family, and Carter was right that what he does doesn't scare me. And he was even a little right about it turning me on. Not the killing but who he is, his strength, his conviction, that alpha male protectiveness. It exudes from him, seeps from his

pores. Darwin's Theory of Evolution dictates that for evolution of any species, the strongest male and female couple and procreate to form a stronger next generation. Females seek out the strongest male.

Carter's words about being protective hit that mark. Who he is and what he does make him a perfect—slightly morally grey—choice. But me? I'm scared of my own body.

What happened just now was the first time I've ever felt so empowered. He made me feel strong, like what my body was feeling was okay, natural.

I'm not sure I have enough space in my head to deal with everything that's going on right now. We are being hunted, not only by people prepared to darken their soul for money, but also by my family, who will also want Carter's blood. A man that sparks a fire in the deepest parts of me.

I finish up in the bathroom, my stomach growling as I walk back to the kitchen. The rain has let up, but the dark, stormy clouds remain.

I find some pasta and cream cheese and set to work making a simple carbonara. By the time I'm done, Carter still hasn't come back down, and I'm in no mood or hurry to see him again. I'm more confused than ever about the two of us—if there even is an us. Maybe we are just two people who like to fuck.

It's more than that.

Ignoring the voice in my head because it clearly doesn't know what it's talking about, I dish myself up a bowl and go and sit in the lounge. I switch the TV on, but I'm not really paying any attention as I fork mouthfuls of pasta into my mouth while staring out the window.

I watch as the sun sets from my position sprawled out on the sofa, the sky darkening till it's pitch black. There aren't any stars visible tonight thanks to the clouds, the moon peeking through intermittently.

Something new starts playing on the TV, but I don't pay it any mind until a voice I recognise speaks. I let out an ironic

laugh as John Wick fills up his car at the petrol station. It's a mean a car, but would I steal from John Wick? Not if my life depended on it.

Another question pops into my mind; would I jump into bed with him? Hell fucking yeah.

I give another little laugh as I realise that's exactly what I did. I'm sleeping with a hitman. I think I might even be falling for the hitman.

I watch for a little while until my eyelids grow heavy, and I eventually fall asleep.

My dreams are swathed in darkness. Flashes of men's faces, twisted by their own sick desires, girls whose screams fill the air, every room, every corner of the building. Screams that morph into sobs, broken, a childhood ripped apart at the seams. Nightmares can't compete with their new reality. A reality that will scar their souls, fester in their minds, eating away at every good thought and future dream, for the rest of their lives.

Blood splattered across my face as I'm carried away, dirty blood infected with an illness there is no cure for. Even in death they continue to infect everyone they have touched. Whispering in their mind, tainting every touch of men who only wish to love them. Warping their sexual desires and filling them with shame.

Until that one man who can fight their demons, scorch the memory and burn the evil touch of these men away...

I startle awake, bolting up from the sofa, my breaths seesawing in and out. My wide eyes dart around the dark room, seeking out...a shadow moves in front of me.

"Jesus Christ, Carter," I curse, swiping a hand down my face and feeling the wetness there.

"Come on," he says, holding out a hand to me.

I place my hand in his, and the warmth of his touch spreads through my body like a drug. One I'm becoming ever more addicted to. He pulls me to my feet, barely an inch of space between us, and I crane my neck to look at him.

He's frowning, his head held high and face expressionless as he looks everywhere but me. I want to say something, but I don't know what, and my mouth feels like glue, the words getting stuck.

With my hand still in his, he leads me upstairs. My heart stutters as we near the room that is mine, and I'm unsure whether I want him to leave me there or take me to his.

He strides straight past, towing me behind him. His bedroom door is open, and as we slip inside, I'm suddenly nervous.

"We're just going to sleep, Star," he states, reading my mind again, something he is, surprisingly, very adept at. He takes me to the opposite side, where the sheets are barely touched, and lifts them.

I climb in, conscious as he does the same on the other side. I lay on my back and stare up at the ceiling. My mind is making far too much noise right now for me to fall back to sleep.

"Whatever it is you're thinking about so fucking hard over there, stop it," he grunts, tucking an arm behind his head.

I turn my head and see him side-eyeing me. I want to ask him about earlier, so many things. But I can't. Instead, I tell him something I'm sure he already knows.

"Roxy is going to find us. You know that right?"

He sighs. "Yeah, I fucking know that. And I also know she's going to want to put a bullet in my head. But she won't."

"Cocky much. What makes you so sure?" I ask, rolling to my side so I can watch him. It doesn't seem so dark in here, and my eyes rove over his body, watching as his chest rises and falls. I can also make out several scars that I hadn't noticed before.

I don't have any scars from my past except one. As far as I know, Carter hasn't discovered the small branding at the top of my left buttock. It helps that I had it tattooed over with the Celtic Tree of Life after Dara's death.

He rolls to face me, resting on his arm and propping his head up with his hand. “Because you won’t let her.”

I let out a small laugh at that. “Okay. Still not sure why you think that will help you.”

He leans forward and down, his face close to mine. “Because no matter what she thinks of me, she won’t do anything that hurts you. And you can fight it, deny it, as much as you want, but you’re mine, Star. All of you. Everything that’s touched you, all your pain, I fucking own it. I’m going to wipe it from this earth just like I will anyone that dares to touch you again.” His words are a deadly promise that send a shiver of fear and lust down my spine. And I believe every single one.

I can’t hold his gaze and lower my head. But a finger beneath my chin lifts it back up. I speak before he can.

“Some pain, some scars, can never be erased, Carter, no matter how much you will it.” I reach out and trail a finger over another scar that runs down his rib cage. It’s about three inches in length and deep, the skin jagged and raised.

His breath hitches at my touch, and the hand beneath my chin disappears, slipping under the covers to my hip. He pushes the t-shirt out of the way and runs his hand over my hip, and I know before he even reaches it where he’s going.

I hold my breath and close my eyes. The first touch of his fingers on my own physical scar is like a jolt of electricity. Shocking me and sending a wave of pin pricks from my head to my toes. My heart sinks at the thought he knows what it is, that it’s even there. But I can’t ignore how his touch somehow erases the sharp sting of pain and smell of burning flesh that scar holds.

“And some just need a reminder of who owns them, Star. *You* own them. They serve as a reminder to you that you’re a survivor and a warning to others that you won’t be beat.”

“Yeah, and is that what you think of your own scars, Carter?” I ask softly, continuing my journey across the many scars that litter his body.

“No, Star. Mine are just a reminder of the choices I made. They don’t mean shit.” He pulls his hand away and gently pushes me until I roll to my other side, facing away from him. “Time to sleep,” he states, cutting off any chance of further conversation. He wraps his arm around my waist, dragging me back into his body.

“I call bullshit,” I mutter grumpily. I don’t understand how he thinks my scars are more important than his, or how they don’t represent the same for him.

He’s right of course. My scars don’t own me, at least not the physical ones anyway. But the emotional ones are still haunting me, still impacting my life in ways I just don’t know how to deal with. Carter is making me face them head on, but some part of me resents him for it.

Resents that he’s reaffirming my body’s reaction to certain situations. It doesn’t matter that my therapist told me, on more than one occasion, that my sexual desires are not abnormal. There are many women, and men, some who have suffered the same trauma as me and others that haven’t, that enjoy the same kinks I do.

It annoys me even more that I sought out someone just like Carter when I decided to visit Illicit and now can’t deal with the consequences. What the fuck did I think would happen going to a sex club and looking for a man that would indulge my fantasies? Honestly? I think I was hoping to discover that nobody enjoys what I do and that I’m a freak born of childhood trauma. That my therapist was full of shit and my shame was justified.

Instead, what I discovered was a club full of people just like me. People who walk the line of normal and taboo, that like pain, that like to be dominated, tied up, whipped, so many things and all consensual and completely normal for them.

I discovered a world in which I fitted perfectly.

I just never imagined I’d find a man that fitted me so perfectly too.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ROXY



“Rox...”

Relief at hearing her voice floods me. “Has he hurt you? Did he...? The words stick in my throat as I think about what that bastard has done to her.

“*Did I hurt you, princess?*” he whispers, but it’s loud enough or he’s close enough to her for me to hear. The fucker meant for me to hear. Just like when he said he fucked her into oblivion. My eyes meet Maddox’s, and the fury in his eyes matches my own. He heard it too. I feel Zak behind me just as Star answers.

“No, he didn’t hurt me.” Her words sound sure, and I struggle to decipher a lie if there is one.

“*Uh-uh, stay right fucking there.*”

Zak places his hand on my hip at the perfect time because I’m about to lose my fucking shit. His touch calms me enough to focus, and I ask her where she is. Star deflects and I knew it was a long shot. He’s listening and watching her every move. I reassure her we are all fine and am just promising her we will find her when his voice comes down the line again.

“Okay, time’s up. Koda, find him,” he says, then the line goes dead.

I almost throw the phone, but Zak’s hand on mine stops me.

“Not a good idea, Rox,” he says, taking it from me.

“Here’s an idea,” I snap, grasping hold of Koda’s hair and yanking his head back. “Where the fuck is he?”

“I don’t fucking know. He already told you that,” he grits out between clenched teeth as my hold on his hair tightens.

“And I’m supposed to just believe you?”

“It’s the truth. Carter—”

“That’s not his real name though, is it? Who is he? Who is the real Carter Beckett? And don’t fuckin’ lie to me.”

“How the fuck should I know! I work on the dark web. Do you honestly think my real name is Koda? Give me a fucking break.”

I push his head forward as I release his hair, and he almost face plants the desk. Al-fucking-most! I turn away from him, sucking in a breath that does nothing to calm me.

Maddox moves into the space I vacate. “Can you find out?”

I don’t hear a response, and when I turn around, Koda is staring Mad out. The guy has balls I’ll give him that.

“I don’t like to ask twice, and I certainly won’t ask again. Can you find out?”

“I… Come on, man, he’s my friend. He’ll fucking kill me.”

“And you think I won’t?” Maddox asks, raising a brow.

“Don’t worry about him coming after you, Koda, because when I get my fucking hands on him—”

“I’ve got him,” Zak says, cutting me off and snaring our attention and giving Koda a small reprieve. “And I have an idea where they are.”

Koda’s shoulders relax now he thinks he’s been let off the hook.

I stride back to the desk, both hands slamming down on it as I lean down level with his eyes. “You are not off the hook, not by a long fucking shot. Find me a name for whoever

posted that bounty.” I move to turn away, then pause and look back at him. Maddox slaps a hand on his shoulder at the same time.

“Oh, and, Koda, you’ve got twenty-four hours to deliver, or I’ll be hitting control, alt, delete on your life.” Footsteps on the stairs draw my attention, and I look up to see a familiar face—two familiar faces. “And because I’m not a complete bitch, this here is Jay, and he’s going to give you helping hand while babysitting you.”

Rick and the guys share a greeting nod as I walk toward him and Jay. I give Rick a hug.

“Thank you,” I say, feeling bad for getting him involved given everything he has going on at the moment.

“Don’t need any thanks, Roxanne. Just need to find Star and bring her home safe.” I give him a nod as I move to Jay.

“Good to see you, Jay.” I give Jay a hug, then whisper, “Don’t let this fucker out of your sight.”

“I’ve got this,” he tells me, walking to the other seat behind Koda’s desk and making himself at home.

I head upstairs with Rick, Zak and Maddox following behind. Once we are out of earshot, I turn to Zak.

“What you got?”

“Okay, so his real name is Jack Carter, died aged sixteen in a house fire along with his mother and sister.”

“Only he’s not dead, so that makes him a ghost? Ex-military?” I ask.

Zak looks at me then between Rick and Maddox. “Not exactly.”

“What does ‘not exactly’ mean, Zak?” Maddox asks.

Zak turns his attention to Rick. “You ever heard of the Shadow Guard?”

“Fuck!” Rick says, scrubbing a hand over his face. “You’re sure?” he asks, and I don’t like the edge to his voice.

“Someone want to explain,” I demand, agitation flaring up inside me. “Rick? Zak? Someone fucking talk to me?”

“The Shadow Guard are the UK’s largest secret society of assassins run by a man named Lennox Fortune.” Rick’s face tells me everything I need to know, and that my concerns about the man who has my sister are valid and then some.

Aidan is going to go ape shit.

“And Carter is one of them?” Zak nods. “Do you know where to find this guy Lennox?” I ask, even though I’m still reeling from the fact there is a secret society of assassins. Not really sure why I’m so surprised after everything I’ve seen as a cop and having spent the last five years running the streets of London with Maddox and Zak.

Both Zak and Rick shake their head.

“I bet the techy shithead downstairs knows though!” Maddox says, directing a thumb over his shoulder to the basement we just came from.

“Good call. You said you know where they might be?” I ask Zak.

“Jack’s mum had a brother who owned a farm in the Brecon Beacons. About five hours from here and in the middle of fucking nowhere. If I was looking to stay off grid, that’s where I’d be.”

I turn to Rick, but he beats me to it.

“I’ll get on it and see if I can dig up some blueprints for the place.” I nod, and he walks off, pulling his phone free from his pocket.

“I need to call Aidan. You two should go and find out what Koda knows about Lennox and where we can find him. If I go back down there, I might end up murdering the fucker.”

Rick is on his phone in the small living room as I pass on my way to the front door. Once outside, I call Aidan.

“Anything?” he snaps when he answers on the second ring.

“Maybe. What do you know about the Shadow Guard?”

“Nothing fucking good. Why’d you ask?”

I’m quiet for a moment thinking that calling him might not have been such a good idea and that maybe I should have called Mickey first.

“Roxanne,” Aidan presses.

“Just tell me what you know about them.”

“Da used them a couple of times when they got some heat from the Mancinis years ago. All I needed to know is that you pay them, and they make sure whoever you want dead is dead. If a Shadow Guard was hired to kill Star, then we have a huge fucking problem, Roxanne.”

“When don’t we have a fucking problem,” I grumble.

I give him just enough to keep him calm, and I sure as hell don’t mention that we have a possible location. Firstly, because I need him here working the Bratva angle and not halfway across the country. And secondly, I have a strong suspicion that there is something more to this Carter or Jack guy than we know about. And I hate to admit it, but I think he’s going to be more valuable to us alive than dead. Aidan will shoot him on sight, not to say that I won’t be tempted, but I can at least shoot him without killing him.

“You managed to dig up anything useful on this Orlov guy?” I ask, pacing the path outside.

“He’s not fucking Laskin. And that makes him a pain in my fucking arse.” He sighs, and I picture him running a hand over the scruff on his face. “He’s in deep with racketeering and got himself a nice little patch of Manchester. Only someone has started taking out his businesses.”

“A rival?”

“Seems that way. One possibility is the 51 Squad. They own the adjacent patch to Orlov’s and rumour has that Orlov took a big chunk of their patch recently. 51 Squad aren’t big, and even less since Orlov took out a large number of their members during the takeover.”

“Begs the question of who’s backing them, huh?”

“Aye, it fucking does. Call me when you have more,” he says, then ends the call.

I’m still pacing when Zak comes out five minutes later.

“Hey, you good?” he asks, stepping up to me and halting my pacing.

“Yeah, just thinking.”

He grips my chin, raising my head. “She’ll be okay, Rox.”

“I know.” He leans down and kisses me, and for a moment, I allow myself to get lost in it. Then I break the kiss, pulling back to look at him. “What are you not telling me, Zak?” He holds my stare, and I watch closely for any reaction, anything to give him away.

He drops another kiss to my lips. “When I watched the playback of the security feed from the break in at Star’s, I saw something between her and this Carter guy. A familiarity.”

“Are you saying she knows him?”

He nods. “But I could be wrong, and I don’t know how well they know each other.”

“You ask her about him?”

“Yeah, but she was evasive.”

His face is blank, no expression, no twitch to say he’s lying, but I know Zak. I know he knows more or has an idea about Star and Carter. Before I get the chance to press him, Maddox comes out.

“No joy. Koda claims the only people that can get in touch with Lennox Fortune are his Shadows. And the only way you can get a meet with him is if he wants to talk to you.”

“Fuck!”

“But”—Maddox waves a piece of paper around—“I do have an address for a club he frequents.”

“Let’s fucking get going then. We aren’t going to get anymore from Koda, and Jay will call when they have a name.”

Maddox and I begin walking down the path toward our car, but Zak hangs back.

“You coming?” I ask, walking a couple of steps back to him.

“We sure this is the best move?” I tilt my head at him, not quite sure I’m hearing him right. “I get you want to go after Lennox, but I think we should find Star first. You go to Lennox now and you’ll tip him off we are on to him. I think we should wait until we know for certain the Shadows are involved.”

“You said he’s one of them, so of course they’re fucking involved.”

“Yeah, but think about it, Rox. He hasn’t killed her.” He raises his brows. “We need to know why. If we go after Lennox before we know the full story, we could be walking into a trap.”

“Or put Star in more danger,” I concede, knowing he’s right. Placing my hands on my hips, I look to Zak, then Maddox. “Okay, let’s find Star first. I’ll let Rick know to send the blueprints to me while we’re on route.” I head back inside and catch Rick as he’s finishing up a call.

“We’re heading out but send us any info when you get it.”

“Will do.” I turn away, but Rick stops me. “Rox— ”

“Yeah, be careful. I’m always careful,” I say with a smile, then I leave.

I’m ready to go get my sister back.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CARTER



I can feel her thoughts and the words she's choosing not to voice out loud thrumming through her. I know she doesn't understand how I view her scars any different from mine. But they are.

She didn't choose to be kidnapped and abused no more than my sister chose to be defiled and almost burnt to death. I chose to kill Craig. I didn't understand the consequences of my actions until after, but I still made the choice to accept Lennox's offer of life. Not for me because I knew once I accepted his offer my life would be over. But for Erica, it meant living. Sometimes I wonder if it was the best decision though.

A life spent trapped in a body disfigured by flames and a mind ravaged by her memories.

Star relaxes beside me, and I know she's asleep, but I remain with my arm wrapped around her for a little while longer, happy to draw some comfort away from my dark thoughts.

Only I can't stop thinking about the brand on her skin, so similar to the one I wear. It's a reminder that we were both once owned. She covered hers with a tattoo, but I still wear mine. The Shadow Guard insignia. I might be out but I'll never be completely free from their grasp. Death is the only way that ever happens.

I noticed hers the first night we were together, but I didn't give a shit beyond fucking her then. Now though? We are far

beyond just fucking.

I lower my lips to her perfectly tanned skin, kissing along her shoulder and breathing in her scent. She pushes her arse into my crotch, and my dick, already at half mast, comes fully to life. I can't ignore the need to grind against her, or how much I'd love to sink my dick back inside her. But after a couple more rolls of my hips, I reluctantly pull back and force myself from the bed, adjusting my dick as I go.

I grab the iPad from the bedside table and take a seat in the tub chair in the corner of the room. The screen lights up displaying the last message from Lennox.

You want answers, meet me.

"The fuck I will," I mutter, swiping the message away and opening the browser. I hesitate for just a second, knowing that doing what I'm about to do is an even bigger risk than scanning the web earlier.

The login flashes at me on the screen, just begging for me to enter my details. I slowly type them in, then look over to Star as she rolls to her back in my bed, stretching out like a damn starfish.

"Fuck!" I mumble beneath my breath, rubbing a hand over my scruff covered chin. I hit the sign in button, confident that we'll have at least five hours before anyone can get here.

I don't waste time and head straight to the news site. The less time I spend on here the fucking better. Koda being compromised means this site isn't safe, but I need information. Information I can't get anywhere else. Not from here anyway. If I was still in Manchester and half the city weren't looking for me, I have a number of contacts I could hit up. The thought just confirms that I need to go back to Manchester.

I open the weapons forum and quickly scroll through the latest thread. Most are just requests for single use guns, nothing to indicate a deal on a supply of guns.

I switch back to the main screen, tapping my fingers on my knee as I think. I mindlessly scroll through a couple of other

forums and the news forum, which is full of shit about sightings of Star. There is no mention of me, which is strange. Admittedly all the guys that came after her at Gambino's are now in the ground, courtesy of me or the Lawlers and Kavanagh, so no one to report back that I was involved.

I don't like it. Not one fucking bit.

There are a few possible sightings of her mentioned around the area she lived, but of course they're bullshit. And nothing new in the last twenty-four hours. This is no off the cuff hit. It's orchestrated, planned, but I still don't think this is one person. The person who tried to hire me to take Star out isn't the same person who sent the other Shadow after her, and they certainly weren't the ones who set up the bounty and hacked into Koda's server. I exit Koda's server, and trawl through half a dozen other sites for just a fucking nibble of something tasty.

There's chatter about shootings and stabbings between the smaller fractions, and several about attacks on properties inside Orlov's territory, which the underground rumour mill is citing as the work of the 51 Squad. The 51 Squad haven't claimed responsibility for the attacks, but it's not a stretch to think it was them. They are Orlov's biggest threat right now.

I've done a few jobs for the leader Fraser Mack, but the guy is a viciously ruthless narcissist whose people are completely disposable to him.

He and Pavel Orlov aren't so different, but at least Orlov has a code of honour. Fraser's seems to be if they don't like it, kill the fuckers. If unaliving them is the only way to get it, do it.

Orlov runs a small gun supply, but his main focus is drugs and racketeering. Whereas Nick wants his fingers in all the pies, wants in on anything that will make him some fast cash, including a couple of whore houses that are run by Priscilla Queens. I've had the misfortune of meeting her once, and I couldn't wait to get the fuck home and wash the stench of her off me after only being in the same room as her for less than thirty minutes. The way she eye-fucked me said she didn't feel

the same, but I'm not, nor ever will be, desperate enough to tap that.

There is nothing here that's going to help me figure this shit out. The dark web is good, but it doesn't beat street chatter or a nice face to face with whomever holds the info you need.

I log out and think about climbing back into bed with Star, but I'm not interested in sleep and don't want to disturb her. She looks so peaceful. I take the iPad and myself downstairs to make coffee.

Feeling restless and wanting to be prepared, I head out to the barn. I sort through the trunk of weapons Star came across the other day, taking out a nice AVM sniper rifle and a box of cartridges, and I also set aside a couple of smaller knives, including a favourite of mine the KA-Bar D2, which is perfect for close combat, some hand grenades and smoke bombs.

I load them into a duffel bag ready to take back to the house, but first I need to expel some of this frustration at not being able to figure out this crap.

Shoving a few scattered boxes aside, I move to the punch bag I hung a few years ago and dig out a pair of gloves from one of the cubbyholes on the shelving unit at the back. I smack them together, creating a plume of dust motes that float through the air, catching in the first rays of sun peeking through the window upstairs. I see the red sky and heed it's warning.

I pound the shit out the bag, a combination of punches and kicks, till sweat drips from me and every breath is a heaving inhale. I hold onto the punch bag, resting my forehead on it as I try to catch my breath.

I sense her before I see her, twisting my head to the side as she finally steps into view. The sun blazes in through the open door, casting her in a soft golden halo.

She's fucking stunning.

What the hell is she doing with me?

Who the hell am I kidding with this *mine* bullshit?

“Did you win?” she asks, stepping further into the barn, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Course I fucking did. I always win,” I boast, tucking one gloved hand under my arm and pulling it off. I toss it over my shoulder, doing the same with other as I stalk toward her. I ignore the irritating fucking voice in my head that asks the question of whether that’s lie.

Her eyes flick over the duffel bag next to the trunk before coming back to me as I stop in front of her. Heat flashes in her eyes as she takes in my bare chest glistening with sweat.

“Keep looking at me like that, princess...” I let my words hang unspoken in the air as I reach out a hand and tug on several long strands of hair hanging over her shoulder. She steps back, something wicked glinting in her eyes.

“Yeah, promises, promises, Carter,” she cajoles, temping the hunter in me with another step.

She’s still only wearing my t-shirt, and I know for a damn fact she’s naked underneath. Her eyes track my hand as it drops away from her face, but only as far as my crotch. My cock is fucking steel inside my joggers, and I lay my hand over it, pressing against it and giving it a firm squeeze.

“It’s more than a fucking promise.” Her chest rises with a heavy exhale as she prepares to bolt. “You better run, princess,” I taunt, and the wicked little temptress hitches the hem of her t-shirt up her thighs, then she turns-tail out the door with a flash of her bare arse. I march after her, catching a glimpse of her as she rounds the back of the house. I pick up the pace, and I almost have her as she turns down the other side of the house, my fingertips brushing the back of her t-shirt.

“Oh, I’m going to make you pay for that, princess. I’m going to spank your arse and have you riding the edge all fucking night,” I call out and turn the corner, but something feels off, and I bolt after her as she disappears round the corner at the front of the house.

“Star,” I yell as I follow her and come to a grinding halt, almost ploughing into the back of her.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her back behind me, and cutting off this cunt’s clear shot.

“Get the fuck off my property!” I snarl at him.

“I don’t think I will. I reckon I can get another mill added to the bounty. A two for the price of one.” He smiles, showing a set of gappy, crooked teeth, clearly thinking he’s hit the jackpot.

“Car—” Her hold on my hips tightens as I cut her off.

“Shh.” I angle the left side of my body toward Star slightly, keeping my left arm behind me. “Put your hand inside my pocket,” I whisper to her through the side of my mouth.

She hesitates. “Are you fucking serious?” she snaps, and I know what she’s thinking.

“Just fucking do it,” I tell her quietly. “Slowly,” I remind her as her hand leaves my hip, and I keep the idiot in front of us focused on me. “What the fuck you waiting for, dipshit?” I feel Star’s hand as she carefully slips it into the left front pocket of my joggers. I feel the exact moment she realises what’s there. “You’re not going to shoot me. Because if you miss...” I leave the rest unsaid, letting him wonder about what will happen if he misses as I feel Star slide out the small military pocketknife I have there and pass it to me. It’s not much, but I’ll make it fucking work. As soon as it’s in my hand, I push her back behind me fully as I straighten my body to face him and flick the blade open, keeping it concealed.

“I ain’t gonna miss. Gonna put a bullet in both your skulls then claim my money,” he hisses shakily.

His actions defy his words, and the tremble in his hand and his voice as he points the gun at me assures me that my words have unsettled him.

I take a step forward and thank fuck Star is smart enough to match it.

“Stay back, man,” he growls, his anxiety rising.

I take another step.

“Stay the fuck back. I’ll shoot!”

And another. He’s visibly shaking now.

“Yeah, I don’t fucking think so,” I say, bringing my right hand up in an arc and knocking his hand holding the gun to the side, leaving his front perfectly open for me. The strike is fast, and he doesn’t see it coming. The gun falls from his hand as his eyes widen, both hands coming up to clutch at his neck. I feel Star as she moves from behind me, bending to collect the gun from the ground.

The dickhead drops to his knees, blood spilling between his fingers and staining his white t-shirt crimson. I lean down, his eyes barely focusing on me.

“Should have fucking shot me first time, motherfucker.” I raise my leg and plant my foot in the centre of his chest, giving him a shove. He falls to the ground, his legs bent up beneath him.

“Jesus Christ,” she mutters beside me.

I crouch, wiping my blade on his t-shirt, then close it and tuck it back in my pocket before searching him. I take his wallet and phone and find a set of keys too, which means he has a car somewhere close by. I use his finger to open his phone, adjusting the settings so I can continue to have access after I’ve disposed of his body. Then I pocket them and stand, turning to Star.

She’s standing there, gun hanging from one hand and eyes on the guy whose throat I just cut open. Not the first time she’s seen me do this, and I doubt it will be the fucking last.

I step in front of her blocking her view and raise a hand to her face.

“Hey, you okay?” She startles at my voice and touch, and when her eyes finally find mine, her pupils are blown and heavy with tears. I take the gun from her and tuck it into the back of my joggers. “Hey,” I say again only to be cut off as she clasps my face and kisses me.

I let her have what she needs, banding my arms around her and squeezing her to my chest. I guess I needed it too. I loosen my hold and roam my hands over her body, checking she's not injured before coming back to rest on her hips.

Breaking the kiss, she shoves at me, breaking my hold on her and slapping her hand down on my chest.

"You could have fucking died! He could have shot you! You could have died!" Her voice rises with each statement, and her eyes fill with fire.

I snatch her wrists as she continues to rain blows down on my chest.

"Hey, stop. Stop! I didn't fucking die. *You* didn't fucking die. Never fucking happening, Star," I tell her, pulling her to me and trapping her hands between us. Her chest heaves with emotion against my own.

"You can't say that. You could have *died!*" she implores, anger rising in her words.

"I don't give a fuck about me, Star!" I snap back, my own anger coming out that she's more concerned about me than herself.

"I fucking do, Carter!" she yells, her face twisting with fury. "I—" She snaps her mouth shut.

"You what?" I ask, sliding a hand up her back, twisting it into her hair and forcing her head back, displaying her neck to me. "You what, Star?" I ask again, then lower my head, trailing kisses up the slender column of her neck.

"I'm...I...oh god." Her words trail off turning into a breathy moan. "I can't think with your mouth on me," she pants out as my other hand leaves her hip, cupping her tit and tweaking and tugging the nipple into a hard, tight bud, begging to be sucked and bitten.

I really want to hear what she was going to say, but I want to fuck her more. I want to— A snap comes from behind me a second before the muzzle of a gun meets the back of my head.

“Get your fucking hands off her before I blow your fucking brains out!”

Star gasps, tensing in my arms as someone removes the gun from the back of my trousers, and I release the hold on Star’s hair, her head snapping up and eyes locking on the person holding a gun to my head.

“Rox... Oh fuck!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

STAR



“Rox... Oh fuck!” Carter still has his head slightly bowed from kissing my neck, but he at least has dropped his hand from my breast. “Put the gun down, Rox,” I tell her as I take in Maddox and Zak either side of her both wearing deep frowns and their own weapons out.

“Not a goddamn fucking chance. Let her go and step the fuck away.”

I feel Carter’s arms begin to loosen, and a little bit of panic sets in that as soon as he moves away from me, Rox will shoot him.

“No!” I state firmly, able to lower my hands from between our bodies now and snatch hold of his wrists, stopping him from letting me go completely.

“What are doing, princess?” he whispers, looking up at me with a warning in his tone.

“Saving your arse.” Meeting Roxy’s eyes over Carter’s shoulder, I say, “He’s not a threat, and I need you to not fucking shoot him. Do you hear me, Roxy?”

Roxy’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t lower her weapon. “Star, I don’t think you understand who he is,” she says carefully, and I can tell she isn’t sure how to handle this situation.

“I know exactly who he is and what he does. And I understand what it must look like, but you’re wrong.”

“Not sure I’d agree with that assessment, Star. He had his fucking hands on you,” Maddox growls, but I ignore him and move my attention to Zak, staring at him and imploring him with my eyes. He knows, or at least suspects, there’s more going on here between Carter and me.

“The only fucking hands that will ever touch her again!” Carter snarls at Maddox, his body trembling with tension.

Carter’s head is pushed forward as Roxy shoves the gun harder into the back of his skull “I’ll cut your fucking hands off!”

I open my mouth to deny her promise, because it is a promise, but Zak’s voice cuts across all of us.

“That’s enough. Rox lower your gun. I think it would be best if we didn’t stand around out here much longer.”

Roxy tosses a look of sheer fury over her shoulder at Zak, then she slowly lowers her weapon, but she doesn’t put it away, neither do the guys. As soon as her gun is away from Carter, he spins around shielding me just as he did moments ago.

Roxy steps forward and punches Carter in the face, and I let out a gasp. He doesn’t even attempt to block her or hit back.

“You’re lucky it wasn’t Aidan, or he’d have shot you the moment he laid eyes on you,” Roxy says as Carter swipes a hand beneath his nose.

“And I would never have forgiven him for it or you,” I tell her, stepping round Carter, much to his displeasure. The words sting my heart and burn my throat, but I mean them even though I can see how much they hurt Roxy too.

Roxy narrows her eyes at me as Carter wraps a protective arm around my waist. It’s a bold move and one that has Maddox and Roxy both raising their guns again.

But not Zak, and I give him a nod of thanks.

I ignore them and twist in Carter’s arms, getting my first glimpse of his face. His own blood is smeared along his cheek

and under his nose from where Roxy punched him and joins the spray that already dotted his face and chest from the arsehole on the floor. I lay a hand on his cheek, tracing the deep lines that surround his beautiful mouth when he smiles. A smile that has vanished and is replaced with an equally deep frown.

“I’m sorry,” I say, then gently touch my lips to his. If I thought having an audience would make him less intense and more reserved, I was wrong. He steals my breath as he takes my mouth in a savage kiss, ignoring the growls that come from beside us.

“Now you’re just asking to have a bullet put in your skull,” Zak cautions as I sense Roxy moving closer.

I break the kiss a moment later, breathless and more than a little conflicted.

“Don’t need apologies, princess, just you breathing,” Carter says, finally letting his arms fall away as Roxy practically steps between us, giving her back to Carter.

“You and me, inside now,” she demands, storming toward the front door.

My eyes flick back and forth between the three men, three very pissed off men. But three important men to me.

I make eye contact with each of them, Maddox first, his growly countenance glaringly obvious. Zak next, who I’m less concerned about, and finally Carter. His arms are folded, where I now notice the blood splatter is smeared across his skin, some in the shape of handprints, and is wearing a satisfied smirk.

He jerks his head in the direction Roxy went. “Go. I need to get rid of this tosser.”

I slowly turn and begin walking back to the house, but I can’t help glancing over my shoulder when I reach the front door. The three of them are still standing exactly where I left them, glaring at one another. It’s like a trifecta of testosterone.

The front door is open, and I see Roxy wandering around, making judgments about the man outside. It doesn’t matter

what she sees inside this house, in her eyes Carter isn't good enough for me.

With one last look at the three men, I take a deep breath and go inside, leaving the door open.

She spins around having heard me enter, and immediately strides right to me, wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug. I hug her back, but while I'm happy she's okay, I know what's coming. This is a conversation that has been coming for years. I've thought about this day a lot.

"Roxy..." She releases me, stepping back and examining my face, scanning my body for any sign of injury. She begins pacing again, even chewing on her thumb nail, something I haven't seen her do in years. "Roxy—"

"No. I've been going out of my damn mind, Star. Aidan is walking on a knife's edge to destruction right now, and I wasn't lying when I said he would have shot Carter without a second's thought."

"And I meant it when I said I wouldn't ever forgive him or you." She glares at me, my words cutting just as deep the second time. I release a heavy sigh. "Look, I get why you're angry, but it's...complicated."

She huffs. "It's not complicated. Carter Beckett is not who you think he is."

"He's exactly who I think he is."

She narrows her eyes at me. "And you just jump into bed with the man who abducted you?" she snaps, pointing outside to where Carter is.

"Screw you, Roxy. This is not fucking Stockholm Syndrome. He didn't abduct me, not the way you think. And you don't get to judge me, not for what I do or who I choose to fuck!" The words burst from me in a rush of anger, and even though my heart jolts at the thought I've hurt Roxy, I don't regret it.

I can't.

“I know who Carter is and I know what he does. I’m not asking you to like it, but I am asking you to respect my choices. *My* choices, Roxy,” I say, then I jog up the stairs before she can stop me and shut myself in Carter’s room.

Leaning against the door, I tip my head back and close my eyes. I have never spoken to Roxy like that. But her accusations riled me up something rotten. She doesn’t understand me, and that’s partly on me because I shut her out. That’s not an excuse though. Baggage aside, me getting with a guy was always going to be contentious.

Voices drift up from downstairs, slowly getting louder and louder. As soon as I open the door, I hear him.

“Where is she?” Carter demands.

I step out onto the landing and watch as Carter steps toward Roxy.

“Where the fuck is she?” he demands again.

“Back the fuck off, man,” Zak growls, stepping in between them, and pushing against Carter’s chest.

Carter throws Zak’s hand off with a growl. “Fuck you!”

“As appealing as that might sound to some, I’ll pass. Now step the fuck back.” Zak lifts his gaze to mine, and Carter’s follows. “You wanna protect her and that’s fucking admirable, but this is their fight.”

Carter’s intense gaze burns into mine. I can’t look away. He’s furious. I can feel it as if it were my own. He breaks the connection and storms from the house, slamming the front door. Zak steps into Roxy, cupping her face and whispering something to her as I descend the stairs. I stand at the bottom, giving them their moment, and after dropping a kiss to her lips, Zak walks this way.

“Thank—”

“Don’t thank me, Star. I’d like to put him in the ground. But I get it. If you want Rox to understand, then you need to talk to her. Don’t shut her out anymore.”

“Okay,” I say, knowing he’s right. He drops a kiss to the top of my head, then disappears outside.

Where the fuck do I even start with explaining any of this to Roxy? I look down at myself wearing Carter’s blood-covered t-shirt. I try to put myself in Roxy’s shoes; thinking I’d been taken again after three attempts on my life, to then find me standing next to a dead body wearing a bloody t-shirt belonging to a man hired to kill me. Let’s not forget the fact I was just about to let him fuck right there and then.

“Star—” Roxy starts but I stop her.

“Please don’t. Just let me...” I suck in a deep breath, then blow it out slowly, words tripping off my tongue in a rush. “I met Carter at...a club. We didn’t exchange names, and I had no idea who he was. He was in my house that night, saved my life. Then again at Gambino’s. He gave me his car keys so I could get away. And when he found me later that night, he took me back to his. He told me there was a bounty on my head and that we had to leave. And then we ended up here.” I may have missed out several bits of information, but that’s the gist of it. It’s an emotionless jumble of words that paints barely the outline of a full picture.

“Sounds romantic,” she mocks, raising a brow at me. “I know about Illicit, Star. And before you get pissed, I wasn’t keeping tabs. A friend saw you there.”

Heat creeps up my neck and shame knocks at my door again, and I look anywhere but at Roxy for fear I’ll see shame and disappointment in her eyes. But she’s not having that, and I should have known better. She steps in front of me, taking my hands in hers. “Hey, look at me.”

When I don’t immediately comply, she drops my hands and clasps my face instead, raising my head until I have no choice but look at her.

“It’s me, Star. You can tell me anything. Even the things you keep locked in the vault. I would never judge you.”

“But you are judging me, judging Carter.”

She blows out a breath through her nose, tilting her head. “Not judging. Testing him.” I frown. “You didn’t honestly expect to bring a man into this family and not have every member look at him like he’s the enemy, did you? No man is good enough for you.”

This time I roll my eyes, partly because I know her words are the truth and partly to prevent the tears that I can feel building from falling. I have no doubt that by the end of this I’ll be crying, but I’m going to hold out as long as possible.

“That’s so cliché, Roxy,” I say, lightening the moment a little.

“It is,” she says with a smile, releasing my face, but she retakes my hands, her face turning serious again. “He’s certainly not who I imagined you with.” And before I can call her out, she continues, “Not judging, surprised is all. What is going on between you?”

Her question causes a ripple of nerves to scatter up my spine. I’ve never shared any details of what happened to me as a child with Roxy. Even my therapist isn’t fully in the picture.

As if she knows her question has made me uncomfortable, she adds, “I might have been pissed when I arrived, but I’m not blind. Things looked intense between you out there, and the tension in here just now was...”

“Hot?” I finish for her, feeling a blush colour my cheeks.

“That’s one word for it,” she says with a smile. “I’m not looking for explicit details, Star. But I get the feeling you aren’t entirely comfortable about something.”

I instantly pull away from her, putting some distance between us and taking a seat at the breakfast bar. I risk a sideways glance at her, hurt and concern flashes across her face, but she quickly masks it as she joins me, sitting on the stool at the end having clearly read and respecting my need for space.

“Has he—”

“No!” I snap harshly, the accusation lighting a spark of anger. “Nothing I didn’t want,” I say barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know how to explain any of this to you. Not when I don’t really get it myself.”

“Is this about what happened to you when...” She trails off, unable to say the words.

I can feel her eyes on me, feel her pain. I’ve always known she blamed herself for what happened to me, but I’ve never felt that way. I’ve told her so too. This is different. I don’t want to put images to all the thoughts and possible scenarios she’s imagined about what happened to me.

“I... Sex is...different for me because of what happened, and I like things that aren’t normal,” I stutter then blurt the rest of the words out. I keep my head down, fiddling with the hem of the bloody t-shirt I’m still wearing.

“Okay,” she says carefully. “And this is why you went to Illicit?” I nod. “Star...”

She’s waiting for me to look at her, so she knows I’ve heard whatever it is she’s about to say. My stomach churns and my heart thumps inside my chest, but I finally look at her.

“Sex is personal. If what you do isn’t hurting you or anyone else, then normal doesn’t come into it.” She clears her throat, shifting a little on the stool. “Some think that my relationship with Maddox and Zak isn’t normal, doesn’t make them right. Our sex life isn’t conventional either, and I...we... enjoy things that wouldn’t be considered vanilla.”

As I’m watching her, I realise that the discomfort she’s trying so hard to hide isn’t because she’s ashamed. It’s because this isn’t the usual conversation you have with your sister, or any family member for that matter. If I was anyone else questioning the way she lives or what she enjoys when it comes to sex, she’d probably put them on their back.

“But it’s different for you,” I say, finding a little confidence to voice what’s really holding me back. “What happened to me made me feel like it was my fault. I did something to make them do those things. I felt so much shame.” My hands fist, screwing up the bottom of my t-shirt. “I know it wasn’t my fault now, but I did for a long time. The

first time...”— she nods, letting me know I don’t need to say it—“I felt numb. Then after, I just felt sick. *Dirty*.” My faces scrunches at the memory. “But the real shame, the real disgust”—I let out a little laugh—“that came after I discovered what makes me feel, what turns me on.”

Roxy rises from her seat, but I hold my hand up.

“Please, don’t. I can’t say this otherwise.” She sits back down, and I take a breath before continuing. “That first night with Carter was the first and only time I’ve never felt shame or disgust or dirty afterwards. But the things we did...”

This time when she gets up to come to me, I couldn’t stop her even if I wanted to. She crashes into me, almost knocking me off the stool, and the flood gates open, tears pouring down my face in torrents.

She holds me while I cry into her shoulder, letting out all the feelings I’ve kept locked up for so long.

“It...feels...so...wrong,” I stutter out between sobs. “But I... I can’t stop. I can’t...stay away from him.”

As my sobs lessen and my emotions slowly calm, Roxy leans back, clamping my face between her hands like she did earlier.

“Listen to me, Star. There is nothing wrong or dirty or shameful about anything that you did. Lots of people enjoy rough sex, role play, bondage, the list is endless. And there is nothing wrong with any of those things between two consenting adults.”

“You sound like my therapist,” I say with a wan smile, feeling lighter than I have in ages.

“Then you should listen to her.”

We both laugh at that, then Roxy turns serious again, lowering her hands to my shoulders as I swipe at my wet face, dashing the tears away.

“Do I like Carter? Right now, the answer is no. Because I don’t know him. I don’t know his motivations or his involvement in all of this. My priority is you. Always you. As

is Aidan's. But I promise not to kill him without good reason. I can't speak for Mad and Zak, and definitely not Aidan."

I level my eyes on her. "Seriously! You're not funny. You know he's a hitman, right?"

"I know. And we need to talk about all that. You okay?" she asks just as the front door swings open revealing Maddox, Zak and Carter, whose grim expressions call a halt to any further discussion on it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CARTER



I storm from the house, slamming the door. The bang is the detonator to a cold fury I've been carefully keeping under control, but seeing Star's face just now is the spark that finally lights it up.

Rage crackles and fizzes down the lit fuse, pounding in my ears as I march back over to the dead body and Maddox Lawler, whose own anger is visible in the set of his jaw and flared nostrils.

I ignore him, bending down and picking up the dead guy's legs. "You gonna fucking help or what?" I snap, getting back to my full height with the dead guy's legs one in each hand. He just glares, making no move to help. Giving up, I walk backwards in an arc, a thick smear of red painting the grass, then pass by Maddox on my way down the small slope that runs parallel to the driveway. I stick to the grass as it will be easier to clean than the gravel driveway, but I'm pissed about the extra work thanks to the asshole refusing to help.

About halfway down, Zak joins me, and I pause allowing him to hook his hands under the arms of the dead guy. I adjust my hold now the weight has shifted, then set off again.

"What's the plan?" Zak asks after several minutes of silence.

"I found a set of car keys on him, so I'm guessing his car is parked down here somewhere."

"And then?"

“And then, we drive him to the Welsh equivalent of Yellowstone’s train station.” He laughs but doesn’t make any other comment.

When we reach the bottom, I steer us behind a hedge, then say, “We’ll drop him here and find his car.”

Stepping out onto the road, Zak points right and tells me they parked a little way down there and didn’t see any other cars, so we head left.

“So, is Koda still breathing or do I need to find a new tech guy?” I ask as we begin walking.

“He’s still alive. For now.”

“Right. You and Maddox draw straws for who plays good cop, or is bad cop his default setting?”

“Watch it, man. I might not be projecting my dislike of you or the fact I’d like to cut your balls off, but it’s there. Trust me.”

“Message received,” I say, pulling the set of keys belonging to the dead guy from my pocket. “But none of you have the balls to actually do it, so it’s kind of pointless posturing really,” I add as we round the bend.

Zak grabs my arm, pulling me to a stop. “And what the fuck makes you think that, huh?”

Snapping out of his grip, I step forward until we are toe to toe. Almost nose to nose given there is barely an inch in height difference between us.

“Star.” It’s one word, but it’s the most powerful one right now. His nostrils flare with suppressed anger because he knows I’m right.

He opens his mouth but is cut off by the sound of an engine revving, closely followed by the squealing of tyres as we look toward the noise and see a white transit van tearing down the road.

“Son of a fucking bitch!” I shout, punching air. I look down at the keys in my hand as Zak snaps a photo of the van before it vanishes round another bend up ahead. “We need to

fucking leave. Now before the asshole comes back.” I spin on my heels and march back up the road.

As we round the corner to the drive, we run into Maddox.

“What’s going on?” he asks as I continue straight past him.

“He wasn’t alone, and whoever was with him, just drove off,” Zak says as we head back to the house.

Shoving the front door open, I find Star and Roxanne sitting close at the breakfast bar and both look our way. Star’s eyes are red, her face blotchy and cheeks wet. My fists clench as her pain-filled eyes scour my body ensuring I’m unhurt.

I feel Maddox and Zak at my back as Roxanne and Star get to their feet.

“What’s going on?” Roxanne asks, looking between the three of us.

Not giving a fuck that her family is here, I stride straight to Star and take her face in my hands.

“You okay?” I ask, tipping her face up to mine and brushing my thumbs over her tear-stained cheeks.

“I’m fine. What’s going on?”

I kiss her, needing to taste her pain, to take it away. Her lips are soft and salty, telling me a thousand words in a single kiss. I ignore the whispered voices behind me, stealing a moment longer of the peace her lips on mine brings.

Finally breaking the kiss, I lean my forehead on hers. “We need to leave.”

She pulls back, looking into my eyes, trying to read what she missed that now means we have to leave so suddenly. I move away, digging in my pocket for the dead guy’s wallet and phone, I slam them down along with the car keys, which are obviously for a different car, on the counter.

“He wasn’t alone. They drove off before we could stop them,” I say, picking up his wallet and opening it. “His driving licence states he’s Vinnie Haskil aged 31 from Manchester.”

Other than that, there is little in the wallet; a couple of bank cards with the same name and about fifty quid in cash.

“You think they’ll come back,” Star asks.

“I’m not willing to take that chance,” I state.

“It’s just one guy though, right?” Star asks, looking around the room at each of us.

I understand her confusion, but before I can explain, Zak gets there first.

“If it’s just one guy, I doubt he’d be stupid enough to come back alone.”

“Exactly that,” I say, pointing at Zak. “My guess is the two of them scoped the place out and seeing only the two of us, thought it’d be easy pickings. Now though, I reckon he’d be prepared to split the million-pound bounty and bring a couple of friends back, especially as we killed his mate.”

“And just what is your plan here, Carter? Keep fucking running?” Maddox accuses with a sneer.

“No, arsehole. We’re going back to Manchester,” I snap, levelling him with a hard stare. Star tenses beside me, and I sense her apprehension.

“You think that’s a good idea,” Roxanne asks, sounding sceptical.

“You got a better fucking one? ‘Cause apparently, *running* ain’t it.” Maddox bristles at my emphasis on running, and I can’t help but smirk. “Look, getting out of Manchester was necessary at first. Half the fucking city was hunting Star”—I can’t help the growl that follows that statement—“It’s been a few days, and most are chancers looking to make quick cash and don’t have the time or brains to chase after the big fish when a smaller, easier one comes along. The rest will have figured she’s left or gone to ground.”

“That’s a big assumption,” Zak says, taking a seat on the arm of the sofa.

“Not really. It’s the way my world works. Kavanagh is in Manchester, right?”

My question about Aidan Kavanagh is met with suspicion and narrowed eyes that I can't help but laugh at.

“What a fucking joke. You think I'd go to all this trouble to lure Kavanagh to Manchester, to what, kill him? You'd be wrong. I wouldn't need to.”

“Arrogant bastard!” Maddox snaps, nostrils flaring and jaw ticking.

“It's not arrogance when you're good at what you do. And I'm the fucking best!”

Sensing that shit is going to go sideways any minute, Roxanne steps in front of me, stealing my focus and blocking Maddox from view.

“Watch it, Carter. You might still be breathing but that can change. What's the issue with Kavanagh?”

“If it's seen he's looking for Star too, it could give us some time to figure out who posted the bounty and get it shut down.”

“Or it could backfire and get us all killed. You might not have lured us all to fucking Manchester, but that doesn't mean someone else didn't,” Zak says.

“And I'm the arrogant one,” I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Let me put it plain and fucking simple. I get hired to kill people not play fucking cat and mouse games. They hire me, I kill the mark, I get paid. Just like that. Do I think there's more at play here than just trying to take out Star? Too fucking right I do. But I sure as shit don't have the time to stand here and argue about it right now. Vinnie is from Manchester and depending on where his mate is pulling extras in from means we have five hours tops before they come back. Even less if he's connected and finds some locals to pull in, so how about we save this conversation for another time.”

“And what's the fucking plan then, *Rambo*?” Maddox questions tauntingly.

And he's beginning to push my buttons. Which is why I find my feet moving forward involuntarily. My chest meets Roxanne's shoulder as Star grips my arm.

“Carter,” she warns, drawing my attention. “He’s just trying to get under your skin,” she adds, pulling me back.

“I’d say it’s working,” Zak says, tone hard but laced with humour at my expense.

“And I’d say this isn’t getting us anywhere,” Star snaps, scowling at him and Maddox. With a sigh, she asks, “If we go back to Manchester, where are we going to go?”

“I have somewhere,” I reply, keeping it vague. It’s not the best option, but it’s an option and the best I’ve got right now.

“What about Vinnie?” Zak asks as the tension eases.

“Nothing a barrel of acid won’t fix.”

“Could have done that in the first place,” Maddox states, eyes narrowing as he tries to figure out if I had another angle with my original plan.

“Driving him off a cliff makes it look like a tragic fucking accident. Little harder to claim dismemberment and falling into a barrel of acid as an accident, not to mention it’s fucking messy. You think your gut can handle it, Maddox?” I can’t help the dig. I know he used to be Theo Rogers’ personal assassin.

He sneers, but Roxanne cuts off whatever he was going to say. “Let’s get started then. We can work out the other details once we are on the road.”

Her words give the impression we are riding together but fuck that. We’ll end up at the bottom of a cliff if I have to endure being stuck in a car with them for five hours, but I keep my mouth shut for now.

Zak and I head to the barn while Maddox and Roxanne go and collect Vinnie, leaving Star in the house to pack up.

I see Zak eyeballing the trunk full of weapons as we enter. I leave him to have his fill while I fetch a sheet of tarpaulin.

“Should I start calling you John,” he asks behind me.

I smile as I turn around and see him holding one of several Microtech Ultratech knives. The exact blade John Wick uses.

“One of the best blades I own. They belonged to the guy who owned the house before me.” I watch as he handles it, caressing the handle like its precious. Only a man with an affinity for knives would wear a look like that on his face.

“Your uncle, right?” he asks casually as he swipes the blade through the air.

I’m not surprised he knows who owned the house. I knew they would dig deep to find Star. It also means they know my real name. I wonder how long it will be before that subject comes up.

“Yeah. Keep it,” I tell him, hauling the tarpaulin to the doors.

I step out just as Roxanne and Maddox arrive carrying Vinnie. Zak pockets the blade then joins us.

“Come on, there’s a small outhouse at the back of the house perfect for what we need.”

The concrete outhouse is musky and damp when I open the door, and several large spiders run for cover as we enter. Shelves cover the back wall, but are mostly bare, and there’s a large, lidded barrel in the corner.

I quickly spread the tarpaulin out, covering the ground and about three inches up the wall. I leave Roxanne and Maddox to dump the body while I go and fetch an axe and some overalls.

When I return, they’ve stripped Vinnie down to his boxers, his clothes piled in the corner. I’ll burn them later along with my own. I drop the axe next to Vinnie and begin pulling the plastic overalls up my legs.

“You done this before?” Maddox asks, assuming his usual stance of feet apart and arms folded as he scowls at me.

“A couple of times. Not my favourite thing in the world, but necessary at times like this.”

He simply nods. “Maybe I’ll stick around in case I ever need to do it,” he suggests, and I don’t doubt he’s referring to disposing of me.

“You’re welcome to. No better way to learn than from the best,” I tease knowing it will piss him off, which isn’t hard to do.

“Yeah, I don’t think so. Maddox and I will go clean up the blood. You got a hose?” Roxanne asks, pushing Maddox toward the house as he throws murderous glances at me over his shoulder.

“Yeah, round the side,” I call as they walk away. Zak stays, standing in the doorway as I finish putting the overalls on and pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

“You’re seriously pushing it with him, man. And it’s not cool.”

“And he’s not doing the fucking same?”

“He’s protecting his family.”

I raise my brows and step forward. “Tell me something, Zak. What would you do for Roxanne?”

He doesn’t even hesitate before answering. “Whatever it takes. Burn it to the fucking ground if I needed to.”

“And there you have your answer.” I spin around, going inside and closing the door behind me. I spend the next hour dismembering Vinnie and depositing the pieces of him into the barrel. By the time I’m done, all that’s left of him are his clothes and a pool of blood littered with pieces of broken bone and torn flesh.

I wrap up the tarpaulin and take it and his clothes plus my blood splattered overalls to a metal drum at the back of the outhouse and set fire to it. Acrid black smoke plumes up into the sky as I contemplate what I just did. I don’t hold an ounce of remorse or even a small level of disgust at the fact I just chopped a guy up. Some might consider that a sign that I’m a psychopath, but I consider it a sign of a man willing to do whatever it takes to protect the people he loves. If that makes me a psychopath, then I’ll claim that label and wear it like a fucking badge of honour.

Once the fire is burning fully, I head back to the house. I need to get cleaned up and burn my joggers and the t-shirt Star

was wearing. There's no sign of Roxanne and Maddox, and the trail of blood on the grass is gone.

Voices reach me from inside as I near the door, but I can't hear anything audible enough to make sense of what they're talking about. The second I open the door and step inside, their conversation ends, all eyes turning to me.

"Where's Star?" I ask.

"Taking a shower," Roxanne says with a nod upstairs.

I've barely put one foot on the stairs when Roxanne stops me.

"Carter, or should I call you Jack..." She leaves the words hanging knowing she'll get a reaction from me. But I'm not surprised. There's no way they could have found me unless they knew my real name.

I turn and face her, Maddox and Zak standing like sentinels behind her. "Jack is dead. Just like Star did with Anastasia, I buried that person a long time ago."

Her wide eyes and sharp intake of breath tell me I've shocked her.

"She told you?"

"Not exactly. Let's get this out the way now. Someone hired me to kill Star, that's why I was at the house the night she was attacked. And that means I knew who she was, knew her real name. It's not hard to find information on someone in my world—*our* world." She understands my words.

"Does she know?"

"What that I was hired to kill her, or that I know what happened to her? Either way the answer is the same. She fucking knows."

"But you knew each other before that night?"

"Yes, but I didn't know it was her until the hit came through."

I don't need to spell it out. Something shifts in her eyes as she understands that I never had any intention of killing Star.

Something I didn't know myself until I saw her again. Saw that she was in danger.

“Are we done with the inquisition? I have shit to do before we leave.”

“For now, but—”

“When we get back to Manchester, we'll talk,” I tell her, then I jog upstairs and straight to my room.

I hear a phone ring as I close the door behind me and Roxanne answering it, but all thoughts about who it is vanish the second my eyes land on Star. She's standing in the middle of my room, shock splayed across her face at my sudden entrance, in nothing but a towel.

Water glistens on her damp tanned skin, and my dick hardens instantly.

“You scared the shit out of me,” she says, relief washing through her. “I need something to wear,” she adds as I close the space between us.

“Nah, I think”—I hook a finger in the top of her towel, loosening it— “I much prefer you like this,” I finish, the towel falling open and pooling at her feet as it drops from her body.

I reach out and run a finger down her cheek, tracing the now invisible track of her tears from earlier. I don't stop when I reach her chin. Instead, I continue down her neck as I lean in and follow its path with a trail of kisses before wrapping my hand around her throat, tilting her head back.

“I don't think walking around naked is a good idea,” she whimpers as I tighten my hold on her neck and cup her breast with my other hand, lifting it to my mouth and swirling my tongue over her nipple.

“Sounds like a fan-fucking-tastic idea to me,” I growl before sucking on her nipple.

“Sounds...ahhhh...like the start of a massacre to me.” She grips the sides of my face and gently draws me away from her breast. “I wouldn't want anyone else's eyes on me.”

“Fuck no!” I growl. “This is mine. All fucking mine,” I tell her possessively.

A knock at the door stops this from escalating any further, and I curse the interruption.

“Star, Carter, we need to go,” comes Roxanne’s voice from the other side.

Star hurries to wrap the discarded towel around her before opening the door.

“What’s going on?” Star asks as she takes in her sister.

Roxanne’s eyes meet mine over Star’s shoulder before looking back to Star.

“We have a name for the guy who set the bounty.”

Her words don’t match her expression though, and I’m about to ask her when Star, obviously picking up the same feeling as me, beats me to it.

“And? What else, Roxy?”

“Someone tried to take out Aidan and Parker.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

STAR



Once Roxy assures me that Aidan and Parker are both fine, she leaves, and I get dressed while Carter showers.

When he exits the bathroom ten minutes later, a cloud of steam billowing from the room, I'm sitting on the bed looking at my feet.

"What you thinking about, princess?" he asks sauntering over to me in nothing but a pair of boxers.

I raise my head and meet his emerald-green eyes. "Nothing and everything."

It's not a lie. My mind is full of questions, concerns for my family and doubt. My doubts aren't whether I have feelings for Carter because I couldn't deny that even if I wanted to. I'm trapped in his snare, and not even the fact he just dismembered a body and dissolved it in a barrel of acid could break the tether he has on me.

My doubts are more along the lines of my own sanity. I've spent so long fighting my demons that I'm worried what will happen if I stop fighting and just let them have me.

I'm falling for—no, I've fallen for a man that gets paid to kill people. How is he any different to the man hired to kill me. Hell, he was one of them.

But he didn't.

The words whisper through my mind as clear as if someone had said them out loud, but it doesn't change the fact he came to my house to kill me that night.

And despite his words about me being beautiful and making his dick hard, I still don't understand his attraction to me. Why he didn't kill me.

“That everything and nothing you're thinking about better not include more damn questions about why I didn't kill you, Star.” His words are gruff, pissed off.

“How can they not?”

“Because I already told you why.” He turns away, grabbing clothes from his drawers.

“Telling me you want to fuck me isn't an answer,” I shout, rising to my feet. “Plenty of men have wanted to fuck me and some even ha—” My words are cut short when in less than a blink of an eye, Carter is in front of me, nose to nose with a hand wrapped around my throat, firm yet tentative.

“Those men had their fun, had you for one night, and they will pay the price for touching you in time. But I own you! Each breath, each beat of your heart and every inch of your skin has my name tattooed on it. Every time desire unfurls in your belly, it's me your body craves. Every time your clit throbs and your pussy begs to be filled, it's my cock it seeks. And every time you come it will be me that pushes you over the edge.”

I squeeze my thighs together as his words slither into my heart, under my skin, into my fucking blood, creating a flash of desire and ownership so powerful my knees almost buckle beneath me. His eyes never leave mine, but he knows just what his words have done to me.

“If you're looking for declarations of love and big romantic gestures to confirm what your body already knows, you're shit out of luck. But I promise you this, for as long as there is breath in my body and blood pumping my heart, no man or woman will ever lay another fucking hand on you in pleasure or pain.”

As if I need any further affirmation of his words, his lips meet mine, raw and demanding, savage and brutal, just like the

man who has slain me with his words, cut me open and taken up residence inside my soul.

“You’ve no fucking idea how much I want to fuck you right now.”

“But we need to go,” I say breathlessly as he unfurls his hand from my neck and steps back.

“We do. And I know you want to get back to check on Aidan and Parker.”

His words are a stark reminder of our current reality. One where both sides of me are about to meet head on in the most dangerous way.

Just like when I arrived, I have nothing to leave with. Even less if you consider that I’ve given myself over to Carter and unloaded some unnecessary baggage too.

Carter is more than a man.

He’s my salvation.

We’ve been driving for almost two hours after a heated argument between Roxy and Carter about whose car I was going in. I’ve never really been stuck in the middle when it comes to Roxy and someone else, not even her and Aidan. Those two have been unanimous when it comes to me. But my relationship with Carter has placed me firmly in the centre, piggy in the middle. And to a degree has even pitted Roxy, Maddox and Zak on different sides of the coin.

It’s an unsettling feeling and one I’m not used to but was prepared for. I don’t see it getting better any time soon either if something as small as a car journey has created this much drama.

Carter and Zak left a surprise for anyone that returns to his property in Wales. I’m a little concerned about what those two could cook up given more time together.

Roxy wasn't able to tell us anything other than a name for the man who apparently posted the bounty on the dark web. Koda has been tasked with finding out everything he can before we arrive back.

Some part of me feels a little relief that this might all be over soon, but a smaller, quieter, nagging part is reluctant to believe it could be that easy.

I fall asleep and am woken some time later to the sound of Carter's voice along with another man's. I keep my eyes closed while I listen to whoever he's talking to.

"That's bullshit and you know it," Carter snaps, his tone venomous even though his voice remains low.

"It's not bullshit. We don't concern ourselves with the politics of our world. It's not our job to keep the peace or even give a fuck about who's taking out who."

"No? Then maybe you should start. Especially when you are being used as another pawn in the game. If you can't give me a name, then I'll find them myself, and I won't give a fuck who I have to take out to do it. Including Shadows."

"Watch yourself, Carter. Are you really prepared to start a war with the Shadows over this?"

"No, the real question is are you prepared if I do?"

There's a moment of silence before Carter speaks again.

"In all the years I worked for you, there has never been a situation like this. A double pawn means you're in on it or you have a fucking rogue Shadow. Whichever it is, fix it before I do."

The car goes silent, which means their conversation is over. I intend to wait a couple more minutes before pretending to wake up.

"You can open your eyes now, princess," Carter drawls knowingly beside me.

I do as he says, turning in my seat to face him. "Who was that?"

He sighs, snorting his breath through his nose and making his nostrils flare. I sense that whatever Carter says next is going to be profound.

“My old boss,” he says.

“That doesn’t tell me anything, Carter.”

“It wasn’t meant to.”

“But I need you to. So, I’ll ask again. Who was that?”

“Fuck,” he mutters, hands squeezing the steering wheel like it’s someone’s throat. “Lennox Fortune. He is the owner of the Shadow Guard.”

“Okay. Quit stalling and just tell me. What the hell is the Shadow Guard?”

We pass a sign for Manchester as Carter takes the slip road, and I know we are almost home.

“A secret society of assassins.” He lets his words hang in the air for a moment, giving me time to soak up that little nugget of information. “Lennox is the guy that trained me.”

This is uncharted territory for me. With all my knowledge of the world Aidan and my sister, and even myself to a degree, live in, this is an area I know little about. I guess the fact it’s a secret society goes some way to explain why.

I take a moment to think over everything I heard. “Is that how you were hired to kill me?”

His eyes flick over to me. “No.” He raises a hand and rubs it down his face. “I haven’t worked for the Shadow Guard for several years. But the man I killed in your house was a Shadow, and I’m certain that the man who tried to shoot you outside Neon Flux was also a Shadow.”

I frown. “How do you know they were Shadows?”

“It’s not hard for one Shadow to recognise another Shadow. We are all trained the same way.”

“And the men at Gambino’s?”

“No, those were not Shadows. The bounty on you was posted while you were sitting at the table.”

Carter’s phone pings with a message, which flashes up on the screen.

KODA:

I have an address.

Carter reads the message as I do, then puts his foot down.

“He was in the restaurant?” I ask, keeping my eyes on Carter as he changes lanes. He nods.

My mind goes back to that day. It was busy in there. It could have been anyone. Gambino’s is run by Aldo Gambino, and anyone that is anyone knows Aldo is the cousin of Angelo Gambino, the head of the Gambino family. It’s why Aidan chose it. He’s been making connections with the Gambino family over the past year after they offered their support following the collapse of the Mancini and Ricci families. Of course, it’s a foot in the door on their way to the five families. But any connection is a good one when it comes to business.

Another message pops up on the screen from an unknown number.

UNKNOWN:

The church is all yours.

Whatever that message means, it pleases Carter, and instead of heading into the city, Carter skirts the outside before heading towards the north.

I check behind us to see that Roxy is still following just as Carter’s phone rings. He lets it ring off. And again when it rings a second time. On the third ring he finally answers.

“Where the fuck are you going, Carter?” comes Roxy’s irritated voice.

“Somewhere safe.” That’s all the answer he gives before ending the call, then taking the next left. After another five

minutes, Carter takes a small dirt track. At the other end, we are met by large metal gates. Looking around, I see a small cemetery sitting to the right of the gates, and beyond the gate is a church that looks like it hasn't seen a living person in years.

There is a keypad and Carter rolls down the window and punches in a code. A loud whirring noise starts up, then the gates creak open.

“What is this place,” I ask as he drives through the now open gates toward the church.

“It belongs to a friend. It's a safe house of sorts.”

“If you say so.” My scepticism couldn't be more obvious, and I guarantee it will be one shared by Roxy after her last visit to a church.

Carter follows the dirt track straight past the church to the back where I'm surprised to see the church looks well kept. There is a second building and an open-fronted garage, and Carter pulls in next to the black SUV already parked there.

Roxy and the guys park beside us as Carter and I climb from the car, rounding the back just as someone steps out from inside the church.

“Well, well, if it isn't Carter fucking Beckett,” the man drawls casually, his deep voice is husky and full of familiarity, but there's also a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

He steps out of the shadow of the church, and I get my first look at the man. He's as tall as Carter, but older, with short dark hair and tanned skin like he's been on a beach somewhere. Black jeans cover his legs and thick muscular arms covered in tattoos poke out from beneath his plain white t-shirt.

“It's been a long time, Frankie,” Carter says as they embrace, doing the half hug half back slap.

“And whose fucking fault is that?” Frankie says, stepping back and folding his arms. “Guess I'm only good when you're in the shit, huh?”

“Screw you. You’re the one who went on a jolly around the fucking world. Look at you.” Carter waves a hand at Frankie’s tanned arms.

“And what a fucking jolly it was.” Frankie’s eyes twinkle with glee at the memory before his face hardens as his eyes meet mine for the first time. He scans me from head to toe before taking in Roxy and the guys behind us. “It looks like you should have joined me.” And without another word, he turns and heads back inside.

Carter places a hand on the small of my back as we follow. I look back to see Roxy and the guys right behind us, all wearing uneasy expressions and scanning our surroundings.

There are several closed doors leading from the narrow corridor, but we keep walking to the very end where we step out into the central room. Aside from the ceiling height with its stunning architecture and the stained glass windows there is nothing in here that would identify this place as a church.

It’s a home. One side consists of a lounge while the other is a kitchen and in the centre is a large dining table big enough to seat ten. There is a spiral staircase leading to a mezzanine floor above in the back corner. The old front door isn’t visible having been blocked by a stud wall.

“Make yourself at home. Carter, a word,” Frankie says, tilting his head toward the corridor we just came through.

I wander around the space, brushing a hand over the soft leather of the sofa and arching my neck to take in the beautiful beams and watching as the light shines through the windows, casting a rainbow of colour into the room.

“Who is this fucking guy?” Maddox asks, picking up a picture from a side table.

“I don’t know. Carter said he’s a friend and that this is a safe house.”

“Can’t say I’m feeling very fucking safe right now,” he growls, putting the framed picture back.

And while I don’t say it, I’m inclined to agree. It’s not that I don’t trust Carter, but being back in Manchester and having

even one person knowing I'm here feels like a threat.

“Where have you all been staying?” I ask as I realise I have no clue about my house and the money that was stashed in Perry's suit.

“We've been at yours, but Aidan and Parker were staying somewhere else,” Roxy says, her words cautious, and I get the sense she doesn't want to say too much in case our conversation isn't exactly private.

Zak sidles up to me and shows me his phone.

Rick has moved them to one of his safe houses since they were attacked.

I take his phone and type another question.

What happened to the money we found in my boss' suit?

This time he doesn't use the phone but whispers in my ear, “It's safe.”

This feels ridiculous to be whispering and typing questions and answers on a phone, especially as I know Carter wouldn't bring us here if we weren't safe. How the hell are we supposed to figure shit out if we can't even talk freely.

I walk away from Zak and drop down onto the sofa. While we were in Wales, I felt safe, detached from everything that was going on here, and there didn't seem to be so much urgency. Now we are back here and have a name for the guy who posted the bounty on the dark web, urgency and the need for answers is knocking at the door again.

Another five minutes passes with no sign of Carter or Frankie, and we are still sat in silence.

“This is fucking stupid. Tell me what you know about the guy who posted the bounty? Who is he?”

Roxy shares a look with the guys before answering. “All we know at the moment is his name is Brian Lewis. Koda has been using the time to try and get his server back before we pay Brian a visit once we have an address.”

“It’s not clear yet how involved this Brian guy is. It could just be that he was paid to hack the server and post the bounty,” Zak adds.

“A dead end then,” I say.

“It’s likely,” Zak says even though I didn’t really ask, it was more of a statement. “The dark web is the Yellow Pages of the underworld. Services for hire is top of the list just like Carter.”

Zak’s words feel like a reminder of who Carter is, but I don’t need it. Carter hasn’t shared his conversation with Lennox with Roxy and the guys, but there isn’t room for secrets among us right now.

“Carter spoke with Lennox Fortune on the way here.” That grabs all their attention. “Something about a double pawn and having a rogue Shadow.”

I don’t mention Carter accusing Lennox of being involved. Lennox’s speech about not getting involved in the politics of their hits rings true with me. The Shadow Guard are a secret society, an organisation, and you can’t have one without a strict code of conduct and loyalty.

“Double pawn,” Maddox muses. “Carter thinks there were two Shadows hired to kill you?”

“The guy at my house was a Shadow, but he also thinks the shooting at Neon Flux was a Shadow too.”

“They could have been the same person. That would make Carter the second Shadow,” Zak accuses.

“And you’d be right, except I don’t work for the Shadow Guard anymore.”

We all turn at the sound of Carter’s voice near the hallway we entered by. He’s leaning against the door frame and pushes off, entering the room further as Frankie comes into view behind him.

“Your little background check wasn’t as thorough as you thought.” Carter stops at the dining table, leaning his backside against a chair and facing me, his arms folded. “The same

client can't hire two Shadows to do the same job. Lennox is very strict about that. If your first hire fails, then you can hire a second, but it's a new deal, which means paying again too."

"Hence why you think it's a rogue Shadow," Roxy says. "But that doesn't explain your part in this."

Carter's eyes find mine. "I was hired to kill Star and is why I was at her house the night the Shadow broke in." His eyes remain on mine the whole time. "I never had any intention of killing her."

"How very fucking noble of you," Maddox scoffs.

Carter ignores him and continues, "The person that hired me isn't the same person who hired the Shadow Guard, and I don't think they are connected to the bounty on Star either."

"Well, there's only one way to find out how true that is," Zak says, getting to his feet. "Time is up for your friend. He should have an address by now."

I wait for Carter to tell them that he has an address for the guy who posted the bounty, but he remains silent. I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes as he continues to watch me. His lips don't make any move to speak, and his face gives nothing away.

I see Frankie pull his phone from his pocket out of the corner of my eye. Carter finally breaks eye contact with me and shares a look with Frankie before stepping away from the table. He strides toward me and leans down, cupping my face with his hand.

"I need you to stay here with Frankie," he whispers in my ear.

The hand at my face tightens with his words because he knew the kind of reaction he would get, and this was his way of making sure I didn't alert the others.

I'm pissed at him. Turning my face into his a little more, I say, "What the fuck are you playing at?"

"Protecting what's fucking mine." And before I can say another word, his lips land on mine. His lips are like a drug, a

shot of smack that rushes through my veins and clouds my brain.

“There’s a bed upstairs for that.” I hear Frankie say as Carter pulls back.

I’m lucid enough to get a nip at his bottom lip before he can withdraw completely. I make sure it’s hard enough he knows how annoyed I am.

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Maddox snarls at Frankie as Carter steps back, and I hear Frankie laugh.

While I’m not happy to be left here with a man I don’t know, I’ll be glad for a break from the testosterone overload going on right now.

When Carter moves toward the hallway and I remain where I am, Roxy looks to me.

“Oh hell fucking no. She is not staying here with this fucking guy.”

“It’s not up for discussion. Let’s go,” Carter commands and continues his path down the hall without so much as a backward glance.

It should sting that he can just walk away from me so easily, but I find myself thinking about his words.

“Protecting what’s fucking mine.”

It’s all the incentive I need to keep my arse in the chair and stay out of the row that is coming as Roxy and the guys follow him out of the church.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CARTER



I've just reached my car and opened the boot when Roxanne calls out to me.

“What the hell are you doing, Carter? You can't leave Star here with someone none of us know or trust.”

“Wrong. I know him and I trust him. That's all you need to know. She'll be safe here,” I tell her, digging around in the bag of weapons I took from the barn.

“Like fuck she will. She'll be safer with us.”

I spin around to face her. “Did you forget there's a bounty still on her head? Or maybe you left yours in Wales. Because I sure as fucking hell ain't taking her straight to the guy who posted the bounty.”

“Watch it,” Maddox growls.

“No, you fucking watch it. This is my life, my woman and my rules. You don't like it then fuck off back to London. You might know how things work down there, but Manchester ain't fucking London and you three ain't the fucking authority up here.”

Maddox steps forward, eyes alive with fury and his fist raised, but Zak pushes in between us before he can throw his punch.

“Okay, okay. Let's just fucking chill.” He throws me a warning glare over his shoulder as he pushes his brother away. “Next time, I'll let him at you.” I scoff at Zak's words, but he

ignores me and keeps talking. “You already have an address, right?”

I don’t even need to answer.

“Jesus Christ!” Roxanne exclaims, spinning away with her hands on her hips. I’m guessing she’s considering punching me right about now too.

“And what was the plan, huh? Head off and deal with him on your own?”

“Got it in one! He’s mine.”

“That is not how we do things, Carter,” Roxanne says, pointing her finger at me.

“It’s how I do things. He set the whole of Manchester’s underworld after her,” I grit out between clenched teeth, every muscle in my body tightening at the thought.

I’m laying myself fucking bare here. Since I was sixteen, I’ve only ever had to look out for myself and Erica. As long as I did my job, she’s been safe. And like me, the world thinks Erica died in the house fire that night. But Star fucking Kavanagh, of all women, has shat all over that. Strutting into Illicit with an air of innocence begging to be corrupted and a body so fucking stunning that I practically tripped over myself to get her on her hands and knees.

Roxanne drops her finger and places her hands back on hips, tilting her head as she contemplates me. Then a small smile kicks up the corner of her mouth.

“Firstly, it’s not Brian but whoever he’s working for that set that bounty on Star. But I get why you want him, and I’m guessing you’re hoping he’ll give you answers as to who his boss is. Secondly, and don’t even waste your breath denying it, you’re in love with my sister. And after seeing how she reacted to me threatening you, it’s a pretty safe bet she feels the same. Now, here comes the important part, so fucking listen up. In this family we don’t go off half-cocked and alone. We’re a *family*. We work together, as one unit. I get that might be a strange concept for you, but you need to level up and fast.”

Her words are a direct hit. There is no denying I'm in love with Star, but I won't admit it to anyone else before her. And whilst I'm pissed she called me out, there's no denying I need to change my mindset. Sure as shit ain't admitting that out loud either.

What I can do is share a little more info with them.

“Brian is the only way Koda can get his server back, so I don't want him dead till it's done. Without the server, we can't call off the bounty. Plus, I have no way of finding out who hired me. And there is no guarantee that they didn't hire someone else to do the job after I refused.”

Roxanne laughs, clearly amused with my glossing over everything she said. But she's astute and knows I got the message loud and fucking clear.

“What else? 'Cause I know you're keeping shit back, Carter.”

I run a hand over my head and eye each of them in turn. “We deal with Brian and get the server back to Koda, then I'll share what else I know.”

“Fine. How do you want to play this?”

I accept her invitation of letting me decide how this goes. “You and Maddox head back to Koda's”—I look to Zak, who gives me a subtle nod— “while Zak and I deal with Brian.”

She agrees and her and Maddox head off toward their car, but I stop her as a thought comes to mind.

“Roxanne.” She turns around, walking backwards toward the car. “Ask Koda to check out the sale of ghost guns for me.”

“Okay,” she calls back, then spins around and jogs the last couple of steps to her car.

“You think it's connected?” Zak asks as I find what I was looking for in my bag. I pocket the little lock pick kit and leave the other kit on top of the bag ready to grab before we enter Brian's house.

“It's a possibility. But even if it's not, it's something that needs looking into. Come on.” I slam the boot shut, then hop

in the driver's seat as Zak jumps in the other side.

I wait a couple of minutes for Roxanne and Maddox to leave first. This place is well hidden, but I don't want to risk drawing too much attention.

It's a short drive to the address Koda gave me, but this area is primarily associated with the 51 Squad. Another mark on the board for some sort of connection to them being involved.

I park up the road just in view of the house, and we spend the next twenty minutes watching as we wait for the sun to set.

"We've waited long enough." I get out and grab the second kit I left in the boot earlier. Metal clunks together as I gather it up, and Zak's eyebrows rise knowingly.

Getting inside is easy, and we are greeted by the sound of a TV somewhere further in the house, which only helps to mask any noise we might inadvertently make.

There's a strong scent of skunk that increases as we near a room on the right. When we reach it, I peer round the frame and see a man slouched in the corner of a beige sofa, head back and eyes closed holding a spliff in his hand. Smoke swirls upward, dancing in the dim light coming from a wonky lamp nestled on a small table beside the sofa.

An episode of *Eastenders* plays on the TV across the room and a laptop sits open on the coffee table along with a bag of weed, Rizlas, the card torn off in places, and a lighter. The guy raises the hand holding the spliff and takes a long drag before blowing out a perfect chain of smoke rings.

I inch quietly inside the room, drawing the small blade I had stashed inside my pocket as I go. I place the tip of my blade under Brian's chin, and as soon as it touches his skin, his eyes spring open and he lurches forward almost impaling himself on it.

"Oooh, careful there, Brian. I'm not ready for you to die just yet," I tell him teasingly. It's a little mean of me to joke but I don't give a fuck. The shock and fear in his eyes on the other hand is nothing short of joyful. "Check the rest of the house," I tell Zak, leaning down to take the joint from Brian's

hand mindful that he could toss it at me or use it to set fire to the sofa. It would be stupid but then the guy is clearly a dumbass anyway. I stub out the joint in the overflowing ashtray beside the lamp, then snatch hold of Brian's left hand and pin it beneath my knee.

I keep Brian in place as I listen to Zak checking the rest of the house. When he comes back and gives me the all clear, I point to the laptop on the coffee table.

“Who the fuck are you, and what do you want?” Brian demands non too politely.

I tut at him and shake my head. “Not too smart are you, Brian.” I dig the tip of my blade into his chin a little harder, just enough to draw blood. He hisses at the sting. That's nothing compared to what he's got coming. Zak runs a finger over the mouse pad of the laptop, bringing the screen to life. “I think you have something that belongs to a friend of mine. And you're going to give it back. Along with some information.”

“I ain't got nothing of yours. Don't even know who the fuck you are. And I ain't telling you fuck all,” he spits out.

I'll give him points for bravery. I grip the shaggy mess of hair on top of his head, instantly wishing I hadn't at the feel of the greasy strands, and pin his head back against the sofa. With a quick flick of my wrist, I slash a line down his right cheek. The skin blanches white for the barest of seconds before a rich red seeps between the sliced skin. Pleasure blooms at the sight made even more enjoyable by his screech of pain.

“Let's try this again. You recently hacked into a server and posted a bounty for Star Kavanagh. Ringing any bells now?” I ask, this time the tip of my blade making itself felt between his legs. One little slip and Brian will become Brianne. His eyes almost pop out of his tiny little head as fear and recognition hit at the same time.

I see Zak tapping away at the laptop from the corner of my eye.

“Now you’re getting it. Who’s next on my visit list, Brian? What fuckwit paid you to post the bounty? And just remember where my knife is before you answer.” A little pressure in the right spot is the perfect reminder.

“I do—”

“I really hope your next words weren’t going to be ‘I don’t know’ ‘cause that’s a big fat fucking uh-uh in this game.”

“Fuck you, man. I don’t give a fuck about names just as long as I get paid. Whoever he is has a fat bank account and offered me enough to retire from this fucking shit.”

“Oh dear, Brian. You really are a fucking idiot. If you’d have been smarter, you would have taken your nice fat pay cheque and got out of the country. You could have been lying on a beach somewhere getting your dick sucked by an equally dumb bitch whose only interest was your wallet size.” As the words leave my mouth, a thought pops into my head and I laugh.

“This is fucking priceless. Tell me, was this a fifty percent now and the rest once the job is done kinda deal?” I don’t need him to answer. I look over to Zak, who’s wearing a smile much like mine.

Brian’s face pales as he finally catches on.

“That’s right, Brian. Set up as the patsy from the fucking get-go because Mr Moneybags never intended to pay you. I’ll bet he was banking on me finding you and doing his tidying up too.”

I laugh again. But Brian’s not laughing. Not even a little bit. My laughter cuts off sharply as I dig the blade a teeny bit deeper into his bollocks.

“I’d love to keep you on ice and pin your untimely and gruesome demise on Mr Moneybags himself, but alas, he won’t be around to fully enjoy it.” I frown, chewing over an idea, then look to Zak, who reads my next move and grabs one of Brian’s hands, pinning it to the sofa. “Maybe I’ll keep a memento. Something small...”

I release Brian's hair and slap my hand over his mouth just as I slash my blade across where his balls are. Excruciating pain silently screams through his wide eyes and screwed up face.

"Don't worry, Brian. The first cut is always the deepest. Kind of poetic, right? I'll make sure Mr Moneybags knows exactly how big your balls are. Now, this is your last chance. Tell me, Brian, who hired you?"

Tears collect along the edge of my hand covering his mouth, creating a little stream that rolls back and forth as he shakes his head, and my palm is hot and wet with saliva from his scream that never materialised into an audible sound.

I slowly remove my hand from his mouth hoping Brian's ready to give me a name. Something.

"Ahhh...fuck. Oh god..." he cries.

"Ain't no God in the history of civilisation that's going to help you."

"Please...oh fuck!"

I roll my eyes, then raise my blade so it's visible to him. The tip glistens with a rich, shiny red and the copper tang of Brian's blood taints the air.

"Please... I don't know his name"—I lower the blade again, and he follows the movement with his eyes— "no, no, wait. Please." He lets out a sob, and my patience is running low. "I only know him as the Rook."

The name hits, scattering over my skin like a thousand tiny blades that slash through my flesh. It takes everything in me to hold my position, to not give away my shock at hearing a name I've not heard in three years.

"How do you contact him?" I growl, my jaw clenched tight and my blade now hovering over Brian's jugular.

"It's all there...a secret folder—"

"Passwords. What are your fucking passwords, Brian?"

Brian reels off two different passwords, and I force my mind to pay attention.

“Again, Brian!” I shout, piercing the skin just to the right of his jugular. He winces, panic rising and making it hard for him to speak coherently.

He fumbles over the passwords a second time, stuttering out each letter and number.

“I’ve got them,” Zak says beside me, but I barely hear him. “Carter, I’ve got them,” Zak says a second time, louder and firmer. And this time his words make it to the conscious part of my brain.

Without pausing for breath or to acknowledge I’ve understood, my blade sinks deeper into Brian’s flesh then slowly glides along Brian’s neck. At the first nick of his jugular, blood spurts out, showering me in tiny droplets, then transforms into a river freely flowing down his front as the flesh parts.

By the time I step back, Brian’s body is drenched in blood. His head is tipped back, throat split open like a macabre second mouth, revealing muscle, fat and bone.

“Carter?”

I hear Zak, but right now I’m too lost in a memory. Rapidly going over that night and trying to see how what Brian is claiming can possibly be true.

It can’t.

He must be wrong.

He *has* to be wrong.

“Hey, Carter!”

A hand lands on my arm, and the touch finally snaps me from my thoughts. The bloodied knife still in my hand finds its way to Zak’s neck. His hands go wide, palms out, telling me he’s no threat.

“It’s just me, man.”

I lower my hand and step back from him.

“You okay?” Zak asks as I look around the rest of the living room. “Do you want me to call a clean-up crew?”

“Yeah. Yeah...a clean-up crew would be good. Too much evidence to come back and bite us on the arse otherwise,” I say finally getting my head in the game and out of the past. I don’t usually bother with a clean-up crew as I’m more prepared and careful. Not this time. My mind fights to focus on what I need to do while arguing against what Brian told me,

Zak pulls his phone from his pocket and makes the call while I look back to Brian. Turning away, I clean my knife on the bottom of my already ruined t-shirt, then collect up the laptop and Brian’s phone, which I saw earlier sitting beside the ashtray.

I swipe the screen and hold it in front of Brian’s face then switch off Face ID so I can get into it later. Zak comes back into the room a minute later.

“Clean-up are on the way. You wanna explain to me what the hell that was about?”

“That was about a ghost.”

“Someone you know?” Zak asks, watching me as I stare at Brian.

Pulling my gaze away from the bloody mess that is now Brian, I say, “No, Zak. Someone I *knew*. Rook is a guy I killed three years ago.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CARTER



Once the clean-up crew arrive and after a quick change of clothes, we set off to Koda's. My eyes are on the road, but I'm not really paying attention past knowing which direction I need to be heading in.

I realised that I killed Brian before securing Koda's server, but hopefully he'll be able to get control back using Brian's laptop, and if not, then he can just use the set-up Brian has until he can figure it out.

Should I be concerned about it?

Probably.

Should I be concerned that Zak managed to get a clean-up crew to the house fucking sharpish?

No, but I sure am aware of how far their reach goes.

The only thing I can think about right fucking now is, is Rook really alive or is whoever set Star's bounty just toying with me.

It's a bucket load of shit either way.

Zak hasn't quizzed me anymore since I told him Rook is a guy I killed three years ago. He can read a room, but the questions are going to be like bullets from a firing squad once we get back to Koda's.

When we pull up at Koda's, Roxanne is waiting for us outside. I grab the laptop and phone from the back seat. Zak instructed the clean-up crew to bag anything else they find that might be useful.

“Inside,” is all I say as I pass Roxanne to the front door.

Koda’s basement is almost bulging at the seams with people, several I don’t recognise, and from the look on his face when I finally make it through the throng, he’s pissed.

“This is not fucking cool, man,” he grits out as I pass him the laptop and phone.

“I know. Just work your magic for me.” I turn and face the room, eyeing the guy sitting in the seat next to Koda before taking in the tall dark-haired guy standing behind him. His wide set stance and folded arms scream ex-military. Passing over him, I see Zak talking quietly at the back with Roxanne and Maddox.

“Er...Carter, you might to take a look at this,” Koda says behind me.

I turn around and look at the screen. There’s a pop-up message.

Carter,

nice of you to take out the trash for me. Saved me some work and money. At this point, I'm guessing Brian gave you my name. You always were persuasive. I would love to have seen your face when you realised your biggest ghost had come knocking. But there's plenty of time for a face to face. For now though, I'll satisfy myself with the knowledge you know who I am and that you and your little slut are back in town. I must admit she was an unexpected but

*welcome pawn. Can't beat a good old
game of chess.*

Your move, Carter

I hold back the need to smash my fist into the screen as though it were Rook's face.

"Can you track it?" I growl, aware that all eyes are on me. There is no denying that Rook is alive now.

"Working on it. Who is this guy?"

I don't waste time answering him, instead I'm running up the stairs two at a time with my phone to my ear.

"Pick up!" I mutter as I burst out of the basement door into the kitchen. Frankie picks up as I grind to a halt.

"Carter?" Frankie questions down the line.

Ignoring the man before me, although maintaining eye contact and despite knowing exactly who it is, I say, "Just checking in. Everything good?" I'm aware of bodies behind me too. A quick glance over my shoulder confirms it.

"All good. Star is helping me cook dinner."

"Check the perimeter and pull the blinds. We'll be back soon." I end the call, pocketing my phone.

Aidan Kavanagh has a gun pointed at my head and his other hand casually in the pocket of his suit trousers.

"You might want to reschedule that dinner date," he drawls, his Irish accent upgrading the statement to an outright threat.

"I don't fucking think so," I say with an air of indifference.

I can almost hear the eye rolls from behind me. Kavanagh takes a step forward, the barrel of his gun meeting my forehead.

“Cocky little fucker, ain’t you.”

I don’t bother answering. It wasn’t a question.

“Let’s see how cocky you are with a bullet in your fucking skull.”

“It would certainly curb it for sure. But as I’ve just discovered, sometimes the dead just don’t fucking die. I’m happy to test the theory. My soul is already lost so I have no problem fighting the fucking devil to make sure Star is safe.”

“Well then, it seems you’re in luck ‘cause I am the fucking devil!”

“Shooting me would be a waste of a good bullet then,” I counter, maintaining my cocky front. Roxanne chooses this moment to step in.

She brushes past me, coming to stand between us, not in any protective measure towards me I note as Kavanagh still has his gun touching my forehead, and she makes no move to remove it or tell him to.

“Carter, who the fuck are we dealing with here? Zak said you know this guy. That he’s meant to be dead.”

“His name is Rook, an ex-Shadow.” I have no desire to continue this conversation with a gun in my face, so I push it aside, raising my brows at Kavanagh. He lowers the gun but only marginally. “Three years ago, I executed an order to terminate him.”

“I’d say you fucked up!” Maddox states, a clear dig at my expense.

“And I’d say it’s about time you gave it a fucking rest,” I bite back, exhausted with this bullshit.

“I see Maddox has been giving you hell in my place.” It’s clear from his wide grin this amuses Kavanagh, and even Roxanne cracks a smile.

“I didn’t fuck up. Put a bullet in his head as planned. Someone else fucked up when they declared him dead ‘cause that clearly wasn’t the fucking case.”

Footsteps on the stairs behind me draws Roxanne's attention.

"What is it, Rick?" she asks.

"Carter is wanted downstairs." He comes into view pointing at me before greeting Aidan. I turn and head back down to Koda. At the mention of Rick's name, it becomes clear who he is; Rick Sullivan, one third of Triple R Security.

"I'm still working to get the server back, but I've managed to terminate the bounty. As for tracking the message, that might take a little longer."

"VPN?"

"More than one and each bouncing off the other. Brian was just the decoy," Koda states, mirroring my words to Brian earlier.

This is the disadvantage of having an enemy who knows you, knows how you think. But it works both fucking ways. Rook was a good Shadow, someone I considered a friend, but he changed.

"Did you dig up anything on the ghost guns?"

"Ah, now that I did get a hit on." Koda, switches from Brian's laptop back to his screen, clicking back to a page he was using earlier. "I was trolling a couple of forums used for gun sales and came across this." He taps the screen, pointing to a comment.

"Mac51? He's got to be—"

"Fraser Mack, head of the 51 Squad," Rick cuts in, coming to stand beside me. He continues at my questioning look. "He's been on our radar for a while. The 51s and Orlov seem to be at constant loggerheads with each other over territory."

"Nothing new there. But who's this guy?" I ask pointing to the reply from someone known as Gambit. The chess reference can't be a coincidence.

"No idea, but whoever he is, him and Mac51 seem pretty friendly. And based on some of their other comments to each other, I'd say they have some kind of deal going on in the

background. I'll keep looking into it and see what else I can find out."

I nod to Koda before turning to leave only to be stopped by a firm grip on my wrist.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" Aidan demands, keeping me in place. "We aren't done here."

I look to his fingers wrapped around my wrist then slowly bring my eyes up to meet his.

"We're fucking done here. I'm going to check on my girl. You got a problem with that take it up with someone who gives a fuck!" I yank my hand free and continue on my way unhindered.

I'm just reaching my car when Zak catches up to me.

"Hey, heads up Aidan is heading back to the church with us," he says quietly before striding off to Roxanne's car as she, Maddox and Aidan arrive.

I had planned to shower, eat, then spend the rest of the night buried balls deep inside Star. While I might have the balls to front Aidan, I can't afford for him to actually shoot me. Fucking Star—or even implying it—in Aidan's vicinity would guarantee me a ticket to see the ferryman on my way to Hell.

Some well-placed PDAs aren't out of the question though, and something he's going to have to get used to because I have no intention of going anywhere anytime soon.

Getting in my car, I speed away, planning to get back to Star before Roxanne. I use the journey to think about Rook. I know my shot hit him that night. Fucking watched him hit the ground. If he survived, he had help. The first person is whoever Lennox sent in to check he was dead. After that, who the hell knows, but someone had to have been hiding him all this time.

I have my suspicions about who that might have been. Rook isn't the only person I made an enemy of at that time.

Fraser Mack.

I let my thoughts go as I pull into the drive at the church having cut my journey time in half with the speed I was going. Right now, my only thought is Star. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.

My mouth practically waters as I step inside the church. Frankie wasn't wrong when he said he was cooking dinner. The spicy aroma of Frankie's curry has my stomach growling, but the sight that greets me has my dick standing to attention too.

Star is beside Frankie, her hair piled on top of her head, several strands have fallen around her flour dotted face, as she kneads homemade naan bread. She's smiling at something Frankie said, cheeks full of colour and looking completely relaxed.

If Frankie was any other man, I'd have cut his tongue out for making her smile that way. Never in my life have I felt such an overwhelming sense of possessiveness, some might even say jealousy. Whatever it is, it can have me if it means I get to spend the rest of my life watching over this beautiful and strong woman.

Star really is heavenly. Way above me. But I'm selfish and there isn't one person who will hurt her ever again and live to remember it or speak about it.

Mine.

My feet are moving before I've even thought about it. In the next second, I have a shocked Star in my arms, her legs wrapped around my waist, and I'm carrying her up the spiral staircase. My lips are on hers, swallowing any protest and giving me a small taste of what I missed earlier but what I plan to take right the fuck now.

The bounty might have been lifted, but I know deep in my bones it's not over. Rook told me it's my move. And this is it; fucking the woman I love. I can admit it even if I can't say it yet. Cementing myself inside her so totally and utterly that not even death will break us. She'll own a piece of me no woman can claim to have ever been given. A jagged shard of what's

left of my heart, shaped and worn from years of delivering death.

I stumble at the top, turning to take the brunt of the wall as we crash into it, then spin to seek the door handle. I thank fuck Frankie put walls and a door up here, even if they are nothing but plasterboard and flimsy as hell.

My hand finds the handle as Star breaks the kiss.

“What are you doing, Carter? This is insane,” she pants.

I shove the door open, stepping inside and pushing it closed with my foot.

“Insane is right. I have the blood of a dead man on my skin and all I can think about is you. Being inside you. I need to feel you. To know you’re real.”

Mine.

The word floats through my mind again, fanning the flames of my desperate need to claim her. I drop to the bed, but before I can take her mouth again, her hands on my face stop me.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Her hands hold me in place as she searches my face for answers.

Such a simple question, yet the answer is so much more complex. My dick throbs painfully as I slam the breaks on my primal urge to shut her up with my cock in her mouth, to choke her with it, and attempt to put what I’m feeling into words.

“Show me, Carter. Make me feel it instead,” she whispers clearly having read my thoughts.

I don’t need asking twice. With each piece of clothing I remove, I let my hands linger, fingers trailing over her silky-smooth skin. A kiss here, a lick there, hitting every spot and teasing her until she is nothing but a writhing, burning body yearning for release.

Hooking an arm under each thigh, I lean down, pushing her legs back and taking in the sight of her glistening pussy. The scent of her arousal is like a fucking drug drawing me in.

She raises herself to her elbows, locking eyes with me as my head lowers. I lick my lips, ready for a taste of fucking heaven, then swipe my tongue up her slit. It's not heaven. It's something wholly otherworldly, and my eyes roll at the sweet oblivion.

Standing up, I shove my trousers and pants down and grip my cock with an iron fist, tugging at it viciously. A bead of precum wets the tip, building with each stroke of my hand, weeping to be inside her.

"Touch yourself. Show me how you fuck your pussy with your fingers," I hiss, slowing my hand on my cock as her fingers slide through her slit, parting her swollen lips, then slowly pushing inside herself.

She pumps in and out, her pace gradually building until her stomach muscles clench with the first sign of her orgasm.

"Fuck me!" I groan.

I rip her hand away before she can come, holding her wrist as I step forward and drive my cock inside her, forcing a cry from her lips. As I pull out and slam back in, I bring her fingers to my mouth. They are coated in her juices; her sweet, sweet fucking nectar. I wrap my lips around them, swirling my tongue and sucking them deep as I pound into her.

"Mine!" I bite out, letting her hand fall to the bed and watching her fingers curl into the duvet as I fuck her. Driving deeper with each thrust and hitting her cervix.

My hands grip behind her knees, pushing her legs back till her toes touch the bed behind her head. My balls smack against her arse with every thrust, and I can feel the tight walls of her cunt begin to squeeze my dick.

"Are you ready, Star?" I ask, her back arching and head tilting her chin upwards. I lean down and suck her nipple into my mouth, sucking on it like it's my life force, and laving my tongue across it. "You ready for me to fill your cunt with my cum? You ready to milk me fucking dry while I imprint my name on your insides?"

“Yes! Yes, fucking do it!” she pants, her chest heaving and eyes locked on mine.

My balls draw up tight as her walls clench around me, and she starts to moan, breath hitching.

“Oh... Oh... Fuck!” she cries out as she comes apart on my cock.

“That’s it. Take my dick like the good girl you are. You fucking love it. Crave it. Own it!” I can’t hold back any longer. “Good...fucking...girl!” I roar with each thrust, sinking myself to the very core of her and pumping my cum inside her.

My head drops to her chest, and I can hear her heart beating like a drum inside her.

“Shit. I think you broke me,” she puffs out on a chuckle.

Raising my head, I take in her flushed cheeks and beautiful smile.

“Nah, I think it’s you that broke me, princess,” I say, then kiss her. Showing her what I couldn’t say just like she asked me to.

Voices grow louder downstairs, and I know our time is up.

Aidan is here.

She breaks the kiss having heard it too. Her face scrunches in concentration for a second before she realises who it is.

“Oh fuck! Is that...” Her words trail off as I place a finger to her lips.

“Don’t say it,” I tell her, then slowly pull out of her as I stand. Holding out my hand to her, she takes it and sits up.

She frowns as worry replaces the smile from moments ago. She goes to step past me, but I stop her with an arm around her waist, pulling her back against me.

“Hey,” I whisper in her ear and running a hand down her bare stomach to her pussy dripping with my cum. “Stop worrying.” I swirl my finger through our juices, circling her clit. Her head falls back against my shoulder. “I told you. You are fucking mine! He’s not going to hurt me.”

The moment is broken as she spins in my arms. “You knew he was coming here?”

“Yes. He was at Koda’s house.”

She shoves me away. “So that’s what all that was about,” she says pointing to the bed. “Some sort of macho fucking bullshit.”

I step into her, snatching her chin. “Fuck no. It was me realising just who we are facing. Me realising that for only the second time in my life someone else’s life matters more than my own. Did I not make myself clear enough for you? ‘Cause if you need a fucking reminder, I’m ready. I’ll gladly fuck you till the message is branded on your fucking skin. My touch will be your brand. You remember me telling you that?”

“I remember,” she whispers, tears filling her eyes.

“I’ve never said those three words to anyone bar one. My sister Erica. They were easy because she’s my sister, Star. But with you... Damn. They stick in my throat and choke me every time I think about them because admitting them makes you vulnerable, a target. They mean my soul isn’t as damned as I thought. But it’s a soul that will turn black as coal and spark a fire that will burn for eternity if it loses what it lives for.” I cup her face as tears paint a path down her cheeks, brushing them aside with my thumbs.

“I don’t need you to say them, Carter. I hear them. Whispered to me every time you touch me, every time you’re inside me. From one lost and tortured soul to another.” She sucks in a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. “You want to brand me? Already done. You want to own me? I’m yours.”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” My words are punctuated with the tell-tale signs of my growing dick between us. Her words any other time would lead to me telling her to run before chasing her down and fucking her wherever I find her. But I push override and just in time as a knock comes at the door.

“Star, can I come in?” Roxanne asks.

“No!” we both shout at the same time, turning to see the handle being pressed down.

I hear Roxanne muttering a Jesus fucking Christ of her own.

“We’ll be down in a minute,” Star calls back.

“There’s a bag out here with some clothes for you.”

“Thanks,” Star shouts as Roxanne’s footsteps echo on the metal staircase.

I fetch the bag from just outside the door, then tell Star to go shower first. There’s no way I’d be able to keep my hands off her if I get in there too. Once she’s done, she heads downstairs to see Aidan while I shower.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

STAR



I'm not sure where to start with everything that happened in the last hour. I'm pretty sure that Carter just fucked me like he loves me. Scrap that. I know that's what he was doing.

But I can't believe he has a sister.

Where is she? Why has he never spoken about her before?

Questions I intend to get answers to because I have a feeling she is the reason he became a Shadow.

First though, I need to face Aidan. I know how to deal with him normally, but this feels different. I've pushed back plenty when it comes to Aidan and Roxy, but I've never truly gone against them. I've never needed to—until now.

I step out of the room to the sound of Aidan firing questions at Frankie. Not that I need to be worried. That man is more than capable of holding his own. He didn't give much away earlier when I did the same as Aidan is right now, but he gave me enough to glean that he and Carter have been friends for many years. As to who he really is? I'm still clueless. I guess that's how he wants it.

As soon as I begin my descent down the spiral staircase, the voices stop, and when I reach the bottom, every face is turned my way.

"Here she is," Frankie says. "Freshly showered and deflowered."

The second the words leave his mouth all eyes turn to him with death glares.

“No pun intended,” he adds with a laugh and offers me a wink as everyone turns back to me.

I greet Aidan, giving him a hug, then he steps back, holding onto my shoulders as he inspects me. I know there are still some faint marks on my body, my throat, from Carter, and Aidan’s eyes narrow as he spots them.

I cut him off as he goes to speak. “Don’t. It’s not what you think.”

“I’m sure it’s exactly what I fucking think,” he replies, then he shakes his head like he needs to clear it of an image he doesn’t want to see. “Where is he?”

“Taking a shower. He’ll be down in a minute.” Needing to steer the conversation away from Carter for a moment, I ask, “How’s Parker? Where is she?”

“She’s fine. I left her at the safe house with Seb and Ryder.” His eyes flick over to Frankie as though checking if he’s listening in on our conversation. It’s clear that Aidan doesn’t trust Frankie yet. But I’m not surprised. Aidan doesn’t trust many people. The fact he left Parker with Seb and Ryder, Rick’s partners at Triple R Security, speaks volumes.

“Food is ready. Let’s fill our bellies before the real talking begins,” Frankie says, ushering everyone over to the table in the centre of the room.

Of course, Aidan takes the seat at the head of the table. It’s a calculated move to piss off Frankie or Carter, or both.

Instead of taking a seat with everyone else though, I go and help Frankie in the kitchen.

“Thank you,” I say quietly as he places the sliced naan bread we made onto a plate.

“Don’t thank me just yet. I sense the best is yet to come.” He hands me the plate just as Carter comes down the stairs.

Carter’s eyes find mine instantly, and despite my whole family being here, my body tingles with desire. God, I hope he doesn’t touch me. I’m liable to go up in flames. How he looks

freshly showered and dressed in nothing but a simple white t-shirt and dark blues jeans should be illegal.

He meets me as I reach the table, placing his hand on the small of my back. And there it is. A single touch that is like a caress of my soul.

I place the plate on the table, then take a seat beside Aidan. Rox, Maddox and Zak are on the opposite side. Carter sits beside me, making me the only thing between him and Aidan.

Frankie carries over the large cast iron pot holding the curry before going back to fetch the rice, then he hands out drinks to everyone before taking the other end seat directly opposite Aidan.

“Dig in. Ain’t no grace spoken that can save any of our souls,” Frankie says leaning over to grab a piece of naan bread and dropping it onto his plate.

I stifle a grin behind my hand. In the few hours I spent attempting to get to know Frankie, the one thing I discovered is that he’s a straight shooter. Doesn’t matter if his words come with a bullet attached, he’ll say them anyway.

“How cheerily ironic,” Maddox says dishing up rice onto his plate and passing it along.

“On the contrary, John 1:9 ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins’. Confession is the path to forgiveness. Don’t you agree?”

Carter smiles beside me as Frankie maintains a blank expression that is difficult to ascertain his seriousness on the subject.

“I call bullshit on that. Some of the worst sins have been committed in the house of God,” Maddox rebukes.

“Amen to that,” Frankie says, and this time his words are followed by an amused smile.

“Arsehole!” Maddox mutters now realising Frankie was humouring him.

A tepid silence follows as we all eat, but the inevitable conversation that’s to come is a constant pool of heat and

warming rapidly as we finish eating.

“That was delicious, Frankie,” Roxy says, placing her fork down on her empty plate.

She’s not wrong. “I second that. It was lovely. Thank you, Frankie.” He gives me a wink as he gets up and begins clearing the plates.

“You think that’s good, wait till you try his risotto,” Carter adds passing our plates to Frankie.

Aidan is quiet, which is never a good sign. And as if he heard my thoughts, he looks at me for a second before passing his glare to Carter.

“The food was great, but I don’t want to be here all night. I have someone I need to check on,” Aidan says, and I sense there is a dig at Carter in his words. “Tell me about Rook?”

I manage not to show that I have no idea who the hell Aidan is talking about, but I assume this is who Carter was referencing earlier.

Frankie leaves a bottle of whiskey and several glasses on the table before taking the last of the dishes to the kitchen area.

Carter picks up the bottle and holds it in Aidan’s direction asking a silent question. Aidan gives a nod, so Carter pours and passes it down the table to him, then pours one for himself before giving the bottle to Zak across from him.

“What do you want to know?”

“I’d have thought that was fucking obvious, but if I need to spell it out, I want to know why the fuck he’s going after my family.”

Carter takes a slow mouthful of his whiskey. “I killed someone important to him and then I took him out, which we’ve already established wasn’t a fucking success. My guess is he knows Star is important to me and who she is, ergo leads to you. Top of the list for anyone wanting to make a name for himself.”

I don’t mention that we weren’t anything other than two people who spent a night together when the first attempt on

my life happened at Neon Flux, but I don't need to.

"If we're assuming the shooting at Neon Flux was aimed at Star, then that doesn't fit your theory," Roxy questions. "At that point you and Star had only met once at a club."

I say a silent prayer that she didn't mention which one in front of Aidan. It was mortifying enough explaining to Rox about my visits to Illicit let alone to Aidan.

Carter nods. "Agreed, but I don't think Rook was the only person who hired someone to take Star out." He raises his glass and takes another mouthful, then turns to face me. "I think that first shot at you at Neon Flux was more to do with what Perry was up to." At my frown, he continues, "That was the same night Perry was taken out."

It takes me a second to catch on to what he's saying. "You? You killed my boss." He nods. "Oh my fucking god."

I push to my feet, meaning to gain some distance, but Carter's hand on my wrist stops me. It's a mirror of his move in the bedroom earlier, but I shove the image away because this is nowhere close to that. The moment he lays a hand on me, Aidan shoots to his feet too and pulls his gun, pointing it at Carter.

I spin to face Aidan. "No. Put it down."

I might be mad at Carter but that's for me to deal with. If Aidan is shocked at my reaction, he doesn't show it. He also doesn't lower his gun, but I ignore him and turn back to Carter semi confident that he won't just shoot him now.

"Explain right fucking now, Carter," I demand while trying to ignore the movement of his fingers as they stroke the inside of my wrist.

"I was hired to take out Perry by Lev Orlov. I didn't know he was your boss until after that night at your house."

"Then why the fuck haven't you said anything until now?" I demand, sensing everyone watching us, judging Carter's every move and every word.

“Because until you told me about the money laundering, I didn’t think they were connected.”

“But you do now?” Zak asks.

“Not for certain, no,” Carter answers but keeps his eyes on me. They are always on me. He tugs on my wrist, forcing me to step forward. The move blocks Aidan’s aim. No doubt a calculated one on Carter’s part. “When I spoke to Lev last, he told me to ‘give up the girl’. If that doesn’t at least point suspicion his way, then I don’t know what does.”

“Aidan, has Pavel given you anything?” Roxy asks.

“Aside from a fucking headache, no. But this is a good opportunity to press the bastard.”

I’m half listening to the conversation going on around me, but most of my focus is on Carter. His hand is still tightly wrapped around my wrist, and he knows as well as I do without it keeping me here, I’d have run. And we both know where that leads.

“Sit. Now is not the time, princess,” he whispers, dragging my chair back with his foot.

“Fuck you!” I mouth back to him, but I sit. I feel a pair of eyes, other than Carter’s, burning into me and look to see Zak watching us. My cheeks heat at the thought he knows what that was about, and I quickly look away. But Carter isn’t done toying with me. He places my hand down on his thigh, resting his own over the top.

“I have a better idea. Let me talk to Lev first. Pavel won’t give you anything anyway,” Carter says.

“Maybe. But we’ll see. I want you to set up a meeting with Lennox Fortune,” Aidan says.

I feel Carter tense beneath me. “I’ll talk to Len—”

“No, Carter. I want to talk to him.”

“He’ll never agree.”

“Then I guess that means you better not tell him I’m coming.”

A moment of silent question passes between them, then Carter finally agrees. He squeezes my hand before lifting it and placing it back in my lap. Then he gets to his feet and mutters something about checking the perimeter and stalks off down the hall to the back door.

I think about going after him, but Aidan ensures that doesn't happen.

“His real name is Jack Carter. According to his records, he died when he was sixteen along with his mother and sister.”

“And?” I ask, turning to Aidan.

I know what he's doing. He thinks if he can tell me all of Carter's secrets or find something shocking enough, I'll walk away. But he's wrong.

“Star, this man—”

“Is dangerous, keeps secrets, kills people? No different to you then.” Just like with Roxy in Wales, my words sting—him and me.

His eyes narrow and his jaw ticks as he stares at me. His argument is dead in the water. There's a deep chuckle from the left, and I look over to see Frankie leaning against the kitchen island facing us all with his arms folded. His laughter might have indicated he finds something amusing but his piercing eyes and hard stare say otherwise.

“Oh, sorry. Don't mind me.” He pushes upright as though to walk away then changes his mind. “On second thoughts, while you sit there on your throne of sanctimony, why don't you have a little think about who's kept Star alive up until now. I never pegged you as shortsighted, Kavanagh.” Then he carries on his path down the hall. Aidan is still standing, pointing his gun after Frankie as he disappears inside the room he and Carter went into earlier.

“You going soft in your old age,” Zak teases Aidan as he shoves his gun back inside his suit jacket.

“Fuck you, Zak.”

Sniggers fill the room, all of them at Aidan's expense.

“You might not like it, but he’s right,” Maddox says surprising me.

From the moment he and Carter met, he’s made his dislike of him clear. I’m not fooled that this is the start of a bromance between them, but I’ll take his words for what they are; a realisation that Carter isn’t the enemy here.

Aidan throws a glare his way, but it’s half-hearted because he knows Maddox and Frankie, though he’ll never admit it, are right.

“What is the deal with your dead boss?” Aidan asks, refilling his glass with whiskey.

“You mean you didn’t do a thorough check on him when I started working there?” My question holds a little sarcasm because I know he bloody did. He simply tilts his head at me, so I continue, “Carter thinks that Perry and some guy called Mark Swanson, the owner of Medi Labs were making something other than medical equipment.”

“Ghost guns,” Maddox states. “That’s what all the shit back at the tech’s house was about.”

Well that makes sense, more so than my theory about human organs.

“Hmmm, let’s see what Carter can get from Lev. In the meantime, you see what you can find out about Mark Swanson. I have someone I can speak to about the guns.”

“Do you think pushing Carter for a meeting with Lennox is a good idea?” I ask. Carter wasn’t happy that Aidan wanted to meet with him. I get the feeling that tricking Lennox into a meeting with Aidan isn’t going to go well.

“What do you know?” Aidan asks cautiously.

My eyes scan everyone at the table before I turn back to Aidan. “The relationship between Carter and Lennox isn’t exactly friendly. Carter accused him of having a rogue Shadow. I might be wrong, but getting out of a secret society is usually only by one way, right?” My question is met with several nods. “Then don’t you think pitting Carter against

Lennox is only going to cause a bigger threat than we already have to deal with?"

"I'm listening, Star," Aidan says, downing his drink.

"Okay, then don't push Carter to betray someone he has an already precarious relationship with. You want to meet Lennox, and I agree you should, but not by putting Carter in the firing line against a whole fucking organisation of assassins. You need to trust him, Aidan. And if you can't do that, then you need to trust me."

"I don't fucking trust him or anyone else when it comes to my family, Star. If it wasn't him, it would be someone else. Whoever thinks they are fucking good enough to step inside this family." I go to interrupt him, but he holds his hand up. "This is his only chance to prove his fucking worth. And make no mistake, if he hurts you, I'll bury the fucker without a second thought."

I take his words as they are meant. Aidan will kill Carter no matter the cost or pain to me. If I never speak to him again, it won't matter because in Aidan's eyes death is justified when it comes to family. It's an ethos I respect, and one that kept me safe for ten years, but it's a little harder to swallow when he's threatening the man who has brought peace from my nightmares and salvation from my shame.

We chat back and forth for about fifteen minutes before Aidan announces that he needs to get back to Parker. I'm gutted she's not here. I would have liked to chat to her, but it would have been difficult given the tension and everyone being here.

Roxy walks him out, giving me the distinct impression that she and the guys have no plans to leave. I pick up Carter's discarded glass and Zak hands me the whiskey with a wry smile.

"Thanks," I say pouring a couple of fingers into the glass and knocking it back in one. A shudder runs through me as the burn warms my stomach. Whiskey isn't my usual medicine for a shit day, but with no tequila at hand, it will do.

Frankie comes back with Roxy behind him. “I’ve made up the other room for you. Second door on the right.” He reaches across the table and grabs the whiskey and a glass.

“Where’s Carter,” I ask as he brings the glass to his lips.

He pauses, thinks about answering then downs it. “Making a call.”

I get up planning to go and find him, but as I look to the doorway, he’s already there. His lips are turned down and eyes a stormy green as they meet mine. Whoever he was calling managed to piss him off more than he already was.

I haven’t forgotten his duplicity, but that is a conversation for just the two of us. I pour another drink, but it doesn’t make it to my lips. Carter snatches the glass from my fingers, swallows down the whiskey and slams the glass on the table.

I stare up at him, considering a knee to his balls, but I simply bid goodnight and walk away. Hushed conversation reaches me as I climb the stairs, but it’s the heavy thumps of footsteps behind me that have my attention.

Despite my lingering anger at Carter for not telling me about my boss, a spark of adrenaline rushes through me at him chasing me up the stairs. God I want to run from him. But I fight the urge because he doesn’t get to keep shit from me and then think he can fuck me as a way to alleviate my anger.

My attempt to shut the door on him is half-hearted as the door doesn’t even make it one third of the way closed before he’s there and wrapping an arm around my waist as he slams the door closed behind him.

“On a scale of one to ten, how pissed are you, princess?”

“Try the thousands and you might touch the tip.” One hand splays over my stomach as the other cups my chin, tilting my head up and back. My eyes land on a pair of carabiners attached to the beam above me. Each one has a rope running from the ring and draped in a loop where it is hooked to a beam either side of the room.

I close my eyes as a vision of me naked and strung up pushes its way into my mind.

“No good closing your eyes, Star. I see what you did. And, trust me, one day soon I’ll have you strung up, legs stretched wide and at my mercy while I fuck you. I’ll bring you to the brink of fucking heaven over and over again. I’ll fuck your arse and your cunt. You’ll be so full.... hmmm.”

He grinds his groin against my arse as his words tail off into a half hum half groan, and my thighs clench, rubbing together to create a little friction.

“You don’t play fair. I’m mad at you.”

He nips at my neck and nibbles on the lobe of my ear. “If this is how you respond to me when you’re mad, then maybe I should keep you mad all the fucking time.” He grinds into me again. “I want to fuck you so bad right now. But I need to go out.”

His words are a like a cold bucket of ice, washing away every trace of my hunger.

“Where? Is this to do with your call?”

He spins me in his arms. “There’s something I need to check out.”

I scan his face looking for more, but he’s not going to share. “Can I come with you?”

“Hell fucking no!” he snaps with a growl of determination that’s not to be argued with. “I need you here where I know you’re safe. Keep the bed warm and you’re pussy wet for me. When I get back, I’ll make good on that dirty little imagination of yours.”

“Maybe I’ll just wear myself out instead,” I tease knowing the kind of reaction I’ll get.

“I don’t think so, princess. You might not have caught up yet, but this”—he slips his hand inside my leggings, sliding a finger up and down my slit, which is slick with my juices—“knows exactly who it fucking comes for.”

My legs go a little weak, parting to give him easier access as he continues to tease me. Far too quickly he stops, and I let out a heavy whine of desperation.

He kisses me, adjusts himself, then says, “Enjoy trying to finish yourself off. I’ll be back soon.”

“Arsehole!” I curse as he shuts the door behind him. I quickly strip and climb under the covers, desperate to find relief. I run my fingers through my wet folds, dipping in and out a couple of times before finding my clit and starting up a rhythm usually guaranteed to have me coming in minutes. But not tonight. The fucker has not only left me high and fucking dry but also unable to satisfy myself.

“Son of a bitch!” I shove the covers off me, dropping my arms by my side with a huff.

I lay there staring up at the ceiling and hoping sleep will put me out of my misery.

I should have known better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CARTER



That was fucking painful leaving Star, and my dick is bitching about it with a persistent ache. Clearing the last step, I find I'm not alone like I'd hoped.

"Going somewhere without me? And there was me thinking we made a good team earlier." Zak says, stepping out of the shadows.

"Did you put a fucking tracker on me earlier or something?" I shove past him, heading for the exit.

"Nah, man, no need."

"No, and why's that then, Zak? En-fucking-lighten me please." A light mist has settled around the church, and only the tops of the gravestones can be seen under the pale light of the moon as I make my way to my car.

"Because if I was you, I'd be going to find Lev," he says, levelling me with a knowing glare over the roof of my car.

"Then I hope you've come prepared," I tell him, opening the door and climbing inside. I've already started the engine and have the clutch biting for release—just like Star was, my mind whispers—by the time he joins me.

Jesus, this better be worth my time, I think, shifting in my seat before setting off down the drive.

We head back toward the city centre just on the outskirts of Pavel Orlov's territory.

"What's the deal?"

I shift gear, turning down a side street. “We’re meeting Akim.”

“Pavel’s second? Why not Lev?”

I sigh, scrubbing a hand over my head. “Surprisingly, Lev isn’t answering my calls. Akim is the next best thing.”

“And you don’t think this could be a trap?”

“It could.” I pull up outside a small run-down house. “But I have a little something that Akim is keen to keep out of Pavel’s earshot for now at least.”

He nods, unclipping his seatbelt as I switch off the engine. “What is this place?”

“This, Zak, is your worst fucking nightmare. For men like you and me anyway.” I exit the car, meeting Zak at the other side as he gets out.

The outside is drab as fuck. Curtains crudely and haphazardly hung in the windows with a faint glow of red seeping out from inside. The front door has seen better days with scuff marks, which look like shoe prints, and the small window has a large crack right down the middle held together with tape.

As we walk up the path, the front door opens, and the cloying scent of floral perfume and sex assaults me. I chance a quick glance at Zak to see if he’s cottoned on yet and find his nose scrunched.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mutters under his breath.

The guy at the door is a big beefy fucker, one of Akim’s men who came to my garage before shit turned even more shittier.

With a greeting nod to each other, Zak and I step inside. “Is he here?”

“He is in the room at the end.”

The guy closes the door and follows us as we walk down the hall. The sickly scent is even stronger inside, and the

unmistakable sound of people fucking, intermittently peppered with a scream or cry of pain, gets louder the further we go.

The door to one of the rooms is partially open, and as we pass it, I look inside. A young girl, no more than eighteen or nineteen is on her hands and knees as a bald, pot-bellied guy fucks her from behind. But it is the guy ramming his cock down her throat that is the cause of the choking sounds and pool of saliva gathering on the floor.

The guy who let us in barks something in Russian, and while my Russian is a little sketchy, I understood that just fine; “*You can get your cock sucked later. Business now.*”

If the grunts and groans that follow are anything to go by, it’s too late.

I don’t bother knocking as we reach the door at the end and waltz right on in.

Akim stands as we enter, and the room becomes cramped as both the guy who let us in and his friend—doing his jeans up—join us.

“Carter,” Akim says, pointing to one of four chairs positioned around a square table.

I take the seat offered while Zak refuses and instead takes up a position just behind me with a view of the room and the three men.

“Where’s Lev?” I ask.

“I’m not his fucking keeper. What is this about?”

I look at the two other guys then to Akim. “What do you know about the hit on Perry Graham?”

He laughs. “And now you wish to talk.” Speaking in Russian, he orders the other two from the room. Once they leave, he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I know you took him out on Lev’s orders.”

“And does Pavel know this?” I rest one foot on my knee, relaxing back in my chair. I sense Zak’s unease behind me even though Akim is outnumbered.

Akim's eyes flick between us before resting on me. "Initially, no."

"But?" I press. "Come on, Akim. Or maybe I need to ask what your brother knows?"

His eyes narrow, and he huffs out a sigh. "Lev bought Kir in on whatever fucking deal he had going on. Pavel didn't know until after you took Graham out."

My brow lifts at that. "You telling me that Pavel had no clue what his son was up to behind his back? I find that fucking hard to believe."

Akim is nodding as I speak. "Lev was smart. He kept the circle to those who don't mix with his father. And he used Graham as the go-between between himself and the buyer."

"Which is?" I ask, not mentioning that Lev wasn't too smart as Perry Graham was skimming off the top.

"He doesn't know. Which is where you come in. Pavel sent me to you that day wanting to know what Lev had told you, but he wanted you to take out Mark Swanson the CEO of Medi Labs."

"Swanson is still breathing, so I'm guessing he changed his mind?"

"He's gone into hiding. No one has seen or heard from him since Perry's death."

I tap my fingers on the table. "And Kir?"

This time Akim's sigh is full of sorrow and resignation. "I've not heard from him since the shooting at Gambino's."

I gloss over that as it's clear Akim thinks his brother is dead. "And what do you know about the guns and where they were going?"

Akim's lips tighten, and it seems the lines of communication are closed. He's not going to share anything more with me. But I don't need him to.

"Very well. We're done here." I go to get up only for Akim to stop me.

“Lev told Pavel that there is another shipment due to be collected by the buyer tomorrow night.”

Or maybe I do. That explains where Lev is; being held by his father.

“You told me you don’t know who the buyer is, so how the fuck is Lev organising a drop with his go between dead and no idea who the buyer is?” I say, sitting forward and leaning across the table, making sure that Akim knows I’m getting pissed.

“We don’t. But the buyer knows who Lev is.”

“Well, that’s fucking interesting,” I muse, and now I’m even more convinced that something isn’t right with this whole situation.

The buyer has to be someone from Lev’s inner circle or have someone on the inside of it feeding back information to him.

“You know where the drop is happening?” I know what Akim is going to say before he even opens his mouth.

“No.”

“Bullshit!” I yell, getting to my feet. I rest my hands on the table and look Akim in the eye. “What is it, huh? Pavel tell you to only give me enough so I’d agree to be his fucking minion, or you don’t want me to know because there is more you aren’t telling me?”

He holds his position, jaw tight, staring back at me like he wants to smash his fist in my face.

“Neither. He wants you to put in a good word for him,” he grounds out reluctantly.

“Good word with...” The penny drops as Akim’s eyes flash over my shoulder to Zak, who has remained quiet. But with the realisation that Pavel wants an in with Kavanagh, Zak finally speaks.

“Yeah, that ain’t going to happen,” he says with a laugh. “Pavel has been stringing Aidan along since we stepped foot in Manchester. If he had a chance, he already blew it.”

“I hear he hasn’t been very helpful. Not how you want to play it if you’re looking to make a deal with anyone,” I say, pushing to my full height and done with this conversation.

I open the door and come face to face with Priscilla Queens.

“Ah, Carter. I knew you’d be back. But I didn’t know you’d be bringing a friend,” she drawls looking at Zak behind me. Her eyes light and she licks her red coated lips like she’s just seen her next meal.

I’d like to say she was wearing something, but as is usual with Priscilla, it leaves little to the imagination. Black fishnet stockings with a suspender belt, a barely there thong consisting of thin straps and a well-placed bow, much like the bra with no other material but matching bows over her nipples. Her long dark hair is pinned in a messy pile on her head that somehow looks perfect with a few strands falling freely around her face. In one hand she’s holding a crop, and she flips it against the palm of her other hand as she stands there, her hip cocked to the side in heels that place her at almost the same height as me.

“I’m always down for a little DP, especially with two of the finest specimens to come through my door.”

“That’s not fucking hard given the shit you let in your *door*. We’re just leaving. I’ve had my fill of cunts tonight,” I throw the words over my shoulder because if the shoe fucking fits.

She backs up against the wall as though to let me through, but as soon as I move forward, her leg comes up, placing her heeled foot on the opposite wall and blocking my path.

“But you’ve never had my cunt, Carter,” she whispers seductively, running the crop up her leg to the top of the inside of her thigh.

I turn my body toward her, and she practically orgasms at the thought I might finally take her up on her offer. But when my hand wraps around her throat, instantly cutting off her

ability to breathe, she realises her mistake, although there is still a small spark of pleasure in her eyes.

“Carter!” Akim warns, his path blocked by Zak.

“I wouldn’t touch your used up old cunt with someone else’s dick let alone my own. Now get the fuck out of my way before Akim over there has to explain to Pavel how his precious Madam fucking Queens ended up dead.”

“Let her fucking go, Carter!”

I release her, shoving her leg out of the way as she gasps for breath, clutching her throat. The two guys with Akim earlier come out of a room as we head down the hall to the front door.

The prick who was getting his dick sucked steps in front of me. But with one punch to his throat, he’s getting a small taste of what the girl suffered at his hands. I wish I had time to really teach him a lesson, but there is some place else I want to go before I head home.

While he splutters and falls back against the wall, the other beefy bastard gets a blade pointed at his throat when he tries to stop Zak.

“I don’t fucking think so,” Zak growls, and the guy steps back as Akim shouts down the hall at him in Russian.

Back in the car, Zak looks at me and around a smile says, “So, Priscilla seemed nice.”

“Yeah, a real fucking keeper that one.”

I head to my destination following the boundary between Pavel’s territory and that of the 51 Squad.

Zak looks out the window. “This isn’t the way back to the church, so where we going?”

“Akim and Pavel seem to have forgotten I don’t need them to find out what goes on in this city. The best eyes are those that others don’t see.”

I turn off the main road and into a car park, turning my lights off. At the far end is a large derelict office block, and I

come to a stop a few feet from what used to be the front door.

“What the fuck am I walking into here, Carter?”

“This place is the largest unsanctioned homeless shelter in Manchester. Unless you’ve got a pocket full of booze or drugs, no one in here will give a shit about you.”

“You’re really spoiling me with the sights of Manchester tonight. Who are we looking for?”

I laugh. “It’s only our first date. I don’t want to spoil you too much.” My reply is met with an equal rumble of laughter. “We’re looking for Shepherd. He’s the unofficial patriarch of this shit hole.”

“And this is his flock, right?”

“Exactly fucking that,” I say as we duck round the side of the building to a side door.

Raising my fist, I bang on it several times. To most it would appear random, but not to those inside. Shepherd is ex-military, and this is simple Morse code.

After a couple of minutes, the sound of locks being opened clanks through the silent dead of night and the door opens. Dull light pours out from inside casting a silhouette of a young lad.

“Carter!” he exclaims.

“Hey, Titch. Shep around?”

“Yeah, he’s inside.” He opens the door fully, allowing us in. “He wondered if you’d show up what with all the whispers going around.”

“That’s enough, Titch,” comes the deep smoky rumble of Shep from the shadows.

“I was just saying. Ain’t nothing you ain’t gonna tell him anyways,” Titch grumbles, rubbing his hand up his arm and scratching at the scabs on his forearm.

“Maybe,” says Shep, finally stepping out into the light. His cane knocks against the broken tiles of the office floor as he walks. “But it ain’t your place. Now scram.”

Titch says goodbye with an eye roll then hurries off down the corridor and disappears into a side room. The kid has been on the street for the last three years, and while Shep took him under his wing after finding him taking a beating, it doesn't look like he's been able to get him off the smack and out of this hell hole.

“What happened to getting him clean?”

Shep raises his chin. “What happened to you getting out?”

“We both know I was just blowing smoke. I'm never going to be anything more than a gun for hire.”

He nods, then looks over to Zak, scanning him from head to toe. “Not like you to bring a stranger in here. The last one is back to haunt you.”

I let his accusation slide because he's right. I've only ever brought one other person to Shep's door, and I didn't miss his veiled reference to Rook.

“He's a friend.”

“Ain't no friend of mine. He's a Lawler. And right now, his name, and yours, means a fucking shit load of trouble I don't need.”

Zak bristles at Shep knowing who he is, and I get it. I wouldn't be too happy if it was the other way round.

I scrape a hand over my chin, scanning the room we are in. It used to be a corridor, but the walls have been knocked down opening it up into a larger makeshift entry way. The corridor Titch went down is the only way further into the building.

“The fact you know who this is”—I point my thumb over my shoulder to Zak—“means I came to the right place. I need to know what you've heard.”

“Ha! What I've heard is you got yourself caught up in a little three-way with Orlov, the 51s and a dead guy over some piece of arse. It's a fuck fest for sure, but not the kind you'd usually be down for.” He steps closer, waving his cane at me.

“Fucking watch it, Shep,” I warn, making it clear that piece of arse he was referring to is off fucking limits. “And

what the fuck do you know about a so-called dead guy?”

“I know a guy, who knows a guy that might just have laid eyes on a very much alive ex Shadow. Ringing any fucking bells, Carter?”

“He here?” I ask, knowing that I’m treading on shaky ground asking Shep to put one of his own in my sights.

He holds my gaze for a moment, and I can see his mind working behind his eyes. He spins on his heels and hobbles down the corridor.

“Don’t make me regret this, Carter.”

I look at Zak over my shoulder, then follow after Shep. Passing the room Titch went into, I see him sitting in a giant bean bag cooking up his next hit. I shake my head at the waste of a good life spent poisoning your body. But it’s not hard to fall into when no one gives a fuck about you. It could have been me under different circumstances.

We pass several more rooms like that one, all set out like individual makeshift bedrooms, some are empty, and others have people getting high on whatever drug is their flavour tonight; whatever drug they can afford or get their hands on.

Piss and body odour coats the air like a veil of mist mixed with stale beer and the underlying sweeter air of weed, and I breathe through my mouth to try and stave off the nauseating stench.

“I can’t fucking wait for our next date,” Zak mutters as Shep stops outside a room in this fucking maze.

“Sketch,” Shep says as he enters the door. “Got a guy here that wants to talk to you.”

A cough comes from the room as the sound of clothes rustling drifts into the corridor.

“I don’t know anything,” he says, his eyes widening as I step into the room. “No, no, this is bad. Bad,” he says shaking his head and scurrying back on the filthy mattress he’s sitting on. “You can’t be here. He’ll know I talked then he’ll kill me.

Bad. Very bad.” He’s twitchy and panicked, eyes darting around the room and looking anywhere but me and Zak.

“It’s alright, Sketch. Carter is okay,” Shep tries to soothe him and ease his panic.

Sketch backs himself into the corner, hugging his knees and muttering under his breath. Aside from the dirty mattress and a small rucksack, the room is bare.

I lean over to whisper to Shep. “He’s so fucking strung out, does this guy even know what day of the fucking week it is?”

As though he heard me, Sketch lifts his head and looks at me. His eyes are fully focused now.

“I know you. The one he talked about. Wants you dead. Punish you for taking his woman. Ruined him. Shot him. Boom!”—he places his hands near his head, shooting them out like an explosion—“Broke his head. Chess. Likes chess. Poisoned pa...” He pauses, tilting his head as though trying to remember. Shaking it off, he continues his rambling quietly.

“Where is this guy, Sketch,” I ask, trying to refrain from shaking the information from him. If he knows anything more of use that is.

“Not telling you. Wants you to suffer.”

“Yeah, I fucking got that part,” I mutter, turning to Shep. “You got anything to help me find him?”

He blows out a breath, then indicates to the door with his head. Once we step outside, he speaks.

“You might want to be in the vicinity of Irlam tomorrow night. I heard there’s a deal going down over there. Other than that, I don’t know a fucking thing for sure. This place is like a school playground full of whispers and rumours.”

Zak and I share a look knowing that must be the deal Akim alluded to. Shep leads us back the way we came. At Titch’s room, I pause looking at him now slouched back in his beanbag with his head thrown back, eyes closed and a smile on his face.

“Judge all you want, Carter. But can’t help him if he don’t want it.”

You won’t get an argument from me on that. Shep continues back to the side door we entered through.

Pushing it open, Zak steps out. “I’d like to say it’s been a pleasure.”

Shep chuckles as I follow Zak. “Yeah, likewise, Lawler. See you around, Carter.”

The door slams closed with a clang.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

STAR



The kettle begins to boil, and the bubbling of the water inside is so loud in the cavernous room that I quickly flick the switch in case it wakes anyone.

“Make me one,” comes a voice behind me, and I almost piss myself as I spin around, kettle in hand.

“Jesus Christ! You scared the crap out of me, Roxy.” I grab another cup from the mug tree and add coffee and milk.

“What are you doing up?”

“I was going to ask you the same question, but I’m going to go out on a limb and say you’re waiting for the same thing I am.”

I place the kettle back on the stand and look over at her with a frown.

“Zak went with Carter,” she tells me, grabbing her cup and carrying it over to the sofa.

“Really?” I join her, tucking my legs beneath me. “Do you know where they went?”

“No. And that’s what is keeping me awake.”

“Because you don’t trust Carter,” I say, rolling my eyes and shaking my head.

“Actually, that’s not it at all.” She takes a sip of her coffee. “I would worry about Zak even if he was with Aidan or Maddox. It’s the price for the life we live.”

She's not wrong, and I realise that my relationship with Carter will place me in her shoes quite literally. A life forever thinking and worrying whether the man, or men in Roxy's case, you love will come home every time they leave the house.

“Are you ready for that?”

It takes me a minute to really grasp what she's asking. “You mean because I've spent the last five years running from that life? I wasn't running, Roxy. I just wanted something as close to normal as possible.”

“I'm so—”

“No. Don't do that. No more apologies, Roxy. They weren't needed then nor now. What happened to Mum, what happened to me, neither of those things were your fault. I never blamed you. But I needed to be free for a while. To live without the constant eyes watching over me.”

“I hate to tell you this, but I have a feeling that man is a step above anything Aidan put in place to keep you safe.”

Her words send a warmth through me because they mean she finally understands. She can finally see Carter as something other than a threat.

“But the difference is I won't feel stifled or resent Carter for it. Don't get me wrong I love Aidan like a brother, and I'm grateful for everything he and his family did for me. I can't imagine the pressure he was under to protect me on his father's word, but I grew to hate the restrictions. I missed you. I hated that you thought I was dead. But even after I returned, if only for a short time, it was the same, but then I had even more people preventing me from spreading my wings.” I sip my tea, then change the subject. “Where do you think they went?”

“My money is on Lev. But Carter keeps his cards close to his chest. There are things he isn't telling us. Like I'm guessing you didn't know his real name or what happened to his family?”

It's not an accusation just a statement of fact—a true one. “I did know about his sister. Nothing important or any details about what happened to them just that he has one” I pause a moment as I replay Carter's words to me earlier.

My sister Erica. They are easy because she's my sister.

“What is it?” Roxy asks.

“I think Carter's sister, Erica, is still alive.” I explain what Carter said earlier, using present tense when he was talking about her. “If she's alive, it's a good motivator for him to protect her at any cost.”

“Maybe. But I'm not sure it helps with figuring out what we are dealing with right now. Carter said that Rook used to be a Shadow. Whatever happened between Carter and Rook and Lennox, there's no way that guy doesn't have a hand in this somewhere down the line, it was enough for Rook to want revenge. It's at the top of the list for motivation. Trust me on that.”

I drain the rest of my tea, hugging the cup in my hands as I think about anything else Carter might have said that could give a clue to what's going on. But Roxy was right. He doesn't give much away.

Roxy and I go over what I know about my now dead boss and the money laundering. It's not much, and I'm pissed at myself for not realising it sooner. Roxy suggests that maybe Perry was skimming money and that's why Lev had him taken out. I mean it makes sense, but it seems flimsy if Perry and Lev were in on the deal together with Mark Swanson. And although it's a possible reason someone was hired to kill me, I don't think it's the whole reason. There has to be more to it. Perry never bought me in on whatever he and Mark were up to, and I might have been delivering the money to the dry cleaners but that doesn't mean I knew what was going on.

The rumble of an engine outside stops our conversation followed by footsteps and hushed voices out in the hall as Zak and Carter come in.

“I’m telling you I don’t like it, Carter. It’s too orchestrated. You need to tell us what the fuck happened between you and Rook. And where Lennox and Pavel fit into all this. Star and getting to Aidan are...”

His words trail off as they enter the room and see Roxy and I sitting on the sofa still cradling our cups.

My eyes skip over them both, checking they are both in once piece, then they fall on Carter.

“Don’t stop on our account,” I say, getting up and taking Roxy’s cup. “You want another?” I ask.

“No, got any beers?”

I look to Carter and Zak, but they already have the fridge open and are pulling out four beers.

“Make that five,” comes Maddox’s sleep laced growl as he walks into the room.

“This a private party?” Frankie asks as he enters too. “Let’s make it an even six, shall we.” He takes the cups from my hands, placing them in the sink as Carter hands me a beer. Zak passes one to Frankie and Maddox, then carries one over to Roxy.

Maddox and Zak take the spaces either side of Roxy while Frankie takes the only armchair. Carter drops down onto the small end of the sectional, dragging me with him so I end up in his lap.

Carter and Zak tell us where they’ve been and what they learnt from Akim and Carter’s friend Shep. Carter is explaining what Sketch told him about Rook, but it’s a jumbled mess and aside from it being clear Rook wants revenge on Carter, nothing else makes a lot of sense.

“He mentioned chess, which fits with what I know about Rook. I already suspect Gambit and Rook are one and the same. That means Rook and the 51s are working together. And the only thing I can think Sketch meant when he mentioned poisoned is the poisoned—”

“Poisoned Pawn variation,” Maddox jumps in and finishes for him.

Carter looks over at Maddox, giving him a nod. “It’s an opening chess play that appears to put the opponent at an advantage by sacrificing an undefended pawn. But the pawn is bait used to expose the opponent. But I don’t see it. Who the fuck is the pawn?”

“In his message to you at Koda’s he referred to Star as a pawn.” Zak says, then shakes his head. “But I don’t think that’s it. He obviously sees her as pawn in whatever game he’s playing, but he said she was unexpected so never part of his original plan. ‘Cause let’s be honest, this guy has been planning this for years.”

“I think maybe it’s time you told us the whole story of what went down between you and Rook,” Roxy tells him.

Carter doesn’t look too enthused by the idea, but I can see that he agrees with her. He and Frankie share a look, which I’m guessing means Frankie already knows this story. Frankie nods, then with a sigh, Carter begins.

“Lennox bought Rook in about six years ago, and he moved up the ranks fast. Like with all Shadows your past stays your past. You don’t share details of who you were or how you came to be a Shadow, so don’t think you’ll get any answers about who Rook really is or was. He became Lennox’s go to sniper, but he also got real fucking cocky with it. His ego pissed off a lot of other Shadows. Being a Shadow is a lonely fucking career, if you can call it that, but Rook and I stayed friends as much as doing what we do allows.

“Then about four years ago he met a girl, Luna, after a job. Luna was the daughter of a 51 Squad member who had been taken out the year before. But relationships are a big no no for Shadows, and Lennox is strict about that, so Rook kept it secret. Six months later Pavel hired a Shadow to take down a member of the 51s, but Luna was caught in the crossfire. Rook went fucking ballistic, shot up several of Pavel’s businesses. Lennox had him excommunicated as a way to calm tension between Pavel and the Shadows.” He pauses to take a

mouthful of his beer. “Rook’s revenge was to take out Harrison, Lennox’s second. The move was the nail in Rook’s coffin. I’d approached Lennox about getting out, something that normally doesn’t happen unless you’re in a fucking wooden box, but my entry into the Shadows wasn’t via the usual route and I’d paid my debt several times fucking over. Lennox ordered his termination, but he wanted me to do it as my final job as a Shadow.”

“That’s fucked up, man,” Zak says, sitting forward with his elbows on his knees, his beer bottle swinging between his fingers.

“My whole fucking life has been fucked up. I wanted out. And I was fucking pissed. Harrison had been good to me.” Carter’s eyes flick to Frankie, and the move draws the attention of the others too.

“Harrison was my brother,” Frankie states, stunning us all.

“But you’re not a Shadow?” Roxy questions curiously.

“No, I’m not. I took another path to Harrison and joined the military. I’m still a killer just a legal one in the eyes of the public,” he snorts derisively.

“Let me guess, the Shadow Pavel hired was you?” Maddox asks.

Carter nods, and his fingers tighten on my hip.

“So not only did you shoot his girl, you also tried to kill him.”

“Luna wasn’t the fucking target. And none of us even knew he was with her. But it wouldn’t have changed anything. Why do you think Lennox doesn’t like his Shadows to get involved with women.”

“Speaking of Lennox...” Roxy says, drawing the conversation back around to a topic that is now even more important.

“Don’t worry. He’s top of my fucking agenda tomorrow. Someone helped Rook after I shot him, and it could only have

been a Shadow. Lennox also gave the green light for the hit on Star originally.”

“Will he be able to tell you who hired them?” I say, asking the question everyone is thinking about.

“Maybe?”

“What the fuck do you mean maybe?” Maddox challenges.

“Some clients”—Maddox snorts—“prefer to be anonymous,” Carter finishes, ignoring Maddox. “It allows the Shadow Guard to remain impartial to a degree. Nobody wants to hire someone who has an allegiance to a rival only for them to fucking out you when you want someone taken out.”

“And you expect me to believe that Lennox Fortune isn’t playing his own game of chess and knocking pawns off the board to suit him? ‘Cause I call bull-fucking-shit at that.”

Carter shakes his head, a smile tugging at his mouth. “I don’t expect you to believe anything, Maddox. I’m telling you how the Shadow Guard fucking works. Something that if I were still a Shadow would end in me being fucking terminated just like Rook.”

I’ve never heard Carter so open and candid about the Shadow Guard or anything. My curiosity is certainly pique as to how the hell Carter got into the Shadows, but now is not the time. And I doubt very much he’d be up for sharing something I sense is so personal.

Zak changes the subject and asks about tomorrow night and what the plan is. Carter tenses and shifts beneath me before answering.

“There is no plan until I’ve spoken to Lennox.”

Everyone except Frankie is taken back with his answer even me, and I turn to look at him.

“I wouldn’t risk anything on a fucking tip even if Shep is reliable, so I ain’t fucking risking going off and leaving you without making sure it’s not a trap first. If Lennox knows anything, he will fucking tell me,” he states firmly.

After hearing his conversation with Lennox in the car on our way back to Manchester I believe him.

“Rook is smart and tactical. Every move he makes will be for a purpose. Zak was right when he said Rook has had years to plan this. That kind of time for a man like Rook is fucking dangerous. But he’s a showman too. He’ll want to make a big fucking song and dance about the whole thing. Whatever he has planned will be for maximum fucking effect.”

“I’d have just fucking shot you and be done with it,” Maddox says casually.

Carter laughs as I spin my head to glare at Maddox.

“The fuck you would. You’d have made it as painful as possible,” Carter says and there’s no malice in his words.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’d have taken everything you care about and made you watch as your pathetic little empire was destroyed right under your fucking nose.” He points his finger at Carter, then twirls it indicating everything around us. “But Rook isn’t after just you, is he? He’s gonna want revenge on everyone that was involved in the death of Luna. That means you, Lennox and Pavel. In a game of chess that makes you the queen, Carter, and we’re all pawns.”

Something in what Maddox said causes Carter to tense again, and I can practically feel the anxiety in him. It’s not because he thinks Maddox is threatening him. No, it’s something much more than that.

“Hey, what is it?” I ask, laying a hand on his chest. I can feel his heart thumping beneath his t-shirt.

His eyes pierce mine before taking in my whole face. It’s a hesitation I’m not used to seeing from him. Then his eyes soften, and he wraps his fingers around my hand, squeezing tightly.

“Nothing.” His gazes shifts from me to everyone else. “I’m done. I’ll call Lennox in the morning.” With both hands on my hips, he gives me a tap for me to get up.

As soon as I’m up out of his lap, he’s taking our empty bottles and tossing them in the bin before heading for the

stairs.

Roxy looks at me. “What was that about?”

“I’ve no idea.” I shake my head. “I’ll see you in the morning.” I follow Carter and step into the bedroom just as he’s taking off his trousers.

His back is to me, and I take in the way his muscles flex beneath his tanned skin and the prominent veins in his arm as he tosses his joggers over the small ottoman style stool in the corner of the room. I push the door closed and lean back against it and just look at him.

He turns around at the click of the door closing, and for the first time since our night together at Illicit, he’s wearing underwear. Skintight hipster boxers that leave nothing to the imagination. My mouth waters as I trail my eyes over him. Down over his broad chest, the tightly packed abdominal muscles, the thin line of dark hair leading down into the top of his boxers where his cock bulges against the light cotton and Lycra fabric. I can see every ridge of his Jacob’s ladder. The sight is replicated as a physical feeling between my thighs as my pussy clenches remembering how it feels as he stretches me.

Oh god!

I wet my lips and try to push my dirty thoughts away and focus on what pissed him off.

“What happened down there? And don’t tell me nothing.” I fold my arms and cross one ankle over the other in a gesture that is meant to convey a clear message. Only I don’t think he’s buying it.

He steps toward me, and I fight like fuck with my body to not move away, to not run. I still don’t understand this crazy fucking reaction I have to him. Why he makes me want to run when he looks at me like I’m prey.

Because you are.

He wants to devour you.

It's the complete opposite of how I should respond to a predator. But not Carter. He's my predator.

"No, Carter." My no has him hesitating just for a second. "Tell me about your sister." The words fall from my mouth before I can stop them.

It's like a shutter coming down. Every emotion vanishes from his face leaving behind just one.

Fury.

He turns away from me, and I instantly want to go to him because I know whatever it is he's not saying is hurting him. And I never want to be the cause of his pain. I push away from the door and follow a few steps behind, stopping when he begins pacing the length of the room.

"She's still alive, isn't she?" I question, pushing him to tell me. To open up to me and tell me what demons he fights.

"It's not fucking living!" he spits out, placing both hands on top of his head, linking them together as he stands there in front of me.

"What do you mean? What happened to her?" Pain slashes across his face at my questions. "Carter..."

His eyes snap to mine. "Her pain is your pain."

Five simple words that splinter inside me.

No.

"He was my first kill! I tore him to fucking pieces." His face screws up, top lip curling into a snarl. "Now Erica suffers in silence, haunted every day by what that cunt did to her."

Now I go to him. Latching onto his forearms and gripping tight.

"I'm sorry." My words feel like a knife to his already damaged heart. They are empty because nothing, no words, can ease the pain of knowing what was done to his sister.

It's why I've never told Roxy what happened to me.

He stares down at me, my eyes filling with tears. I push up onto my toes and drop a soft, chaste kiss to his mouth.

He accepts it for what it is; a simple gesture to let him know I'm here.

“He beat the fuck out of my mum and raped Erica then set fire to our house. I came home just as the flames engulfed one side of the house. I burst through the front door and was met with a wall of fire. It was so fucking hot. I found Erica and carried her outside to the front lawn. She was naked and covered in blood. Parts of her skin had already begun to blister from the fire. Her face... I tried to go back for my mum, but the roof collapsed.”

“Oh my god, Carter. Stop. Stop.” I can feel his guilt breathed out with every word. It's tangible. A fucking menace, a virus. “Hey, listen to me. This was not your fault.” I shake his arms, then grip his face. “You saved her.”

“Did I, Star,” he asks defeated. “Or did I just trap her in another hell?”

He tugs free of my hold and goes into the bathroom, closing the door. It doesn't matter what answer I give him because he already believes that what he did has done nothing but cause Erica more pain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CARTER



I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I look old and tired. Worn out by a life lived with guilt and matched only by the burden of death.

I consider what I have to offer Star in the way of a life. The answer is simple, a visit from the Grim Reaper and a place at my graveside.

But it's a split-second thought that is shut down by the bone deep and soul destroying need for her. And Maddox's words earlier play on my mind. They were a reminder that Erica is part of my world, and even though I never told another Shadow about her, I'd be a fool to think Rook wouldn't look for my only other weakness.

I strip out of my boxers and take another shower if only to delay going back out to Star. If I take long enough, hopefully she'll be asleep by the time I'm finished.

I was a fucking idiot to believe that.

When I step out of the room thirty minutes later, there she is sitting at the end of the bed, her legs stretched out in front of her, ankles crossed, and looking at the floor.

She doesn't bother looking up as she speaks. "Feeling better?"

"Not in the fucking slightest."

"Didn't think so. Running away isn't the best medicine for dealing with your shit. Trust me I know."

She finally stops looking at the floor and turns to me, then gets to her feet and comes and stands in front of me.

“You know, some asshole once told me that I need to remember who owns my scars,” I say, reaching up and running my fingers through the scruff on his face. “You didn’t inflict those scars on your sister, Carter. Saving Erica wasn’t a mistake. Everyone deserves to be saved even you.”

I begin to shake my head, but her hand on my face stops me. “I don’t deserve anything,” I snap. “And there is no fucking saving me, Star. I’ve already got one foot in the grave. Are you ready for that? Ready to spend your life looking over your shoulder, ready for the day I don’t come home?”

I step into her, shoving her hand from my face. I advance forward for every step back she takes.

“I should have walked away, let you go, but I’m too fucking selfish. And now I couldn’t fucking walk away if I tried. So, you tell me how that means I deserve to be saved, Star?”

She stops walking backward at my words and stands tall in front of me. Her nostrils flare, eyes flashing with fire. Her hands land on my chest with a clap of flesh on flesh as she shoves me.

“Because I fucking need you.” She shoves me again, and this time the force of it has me taking a step back to steady myself. “I need you. I need you to breathe. I need you to keep my demons from my door. I need you to feel anything other than disgust and shame and...I need you to feel whole again.” Every sentence is punctuated with a slap of her hands on my chest, and each one stings, not physically. They are barbs aimed straight at my heart, the one that beats only for her.

I crash into her, sweeping her off her feet and into my arms as my lips smash against hers. It’s savage. It’s raw. It’s a taking and claiming all in one go. I don’t think. I don’t pause. I just feel.

I feel everything.

The strumming of her pulse beneath the skin of her neck as I kiss her there.

The stuttered breaths as I pin her to the bed and drive my cock into her.

The desperate cry that falls from her lips as she milks my cock.

The three words that she whispers to me when we come together.

I'm sitting at the dining table with Frankie's laptop when Roxanne comes in. She greets me with a grumbled morning then makes a cup of coffee before joining me at the table.

"I need you and Star to do something for me today," I say without looking away from the screen that is currently displaying a message from Koda letting me know he's back in charge of the server and doubled down on security. I'm waiting for him to reply to my last message, but regardless of the answer I need to move Erica.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" she says with an edge of distrust.

This time I raise my head and look at her. "My sister is alive, and if Rook knows, he'll use her."

"Ah, so that's what had you storming off yesterday." She doesn't waste time goading or questioning me about it. "What do you need?"

"I want her moved from her current house, but she needs medical care. She has a team, but I don't know if any of them are compromised."

"Who else knows about her?"

A message pops up on the screen.

KODA:

There was no breach.

“Lennox and Lev,” I tell her.

“Pavel?” She takes a sip of her coffee.

“It’s possible. But given what we know, it’s not really an issue if he does. I don’t think Pavel is anything other than a pawn in Rook’s game.”

She stares at the table for a few seconds, chewing her bottom lip. When she looks back at me, she asks, “Burns?” I nod. “I might be able to sort something. But I’m going to need some help.”

I have a strong idea of who she’s talking about. Her connection to Triple R Security is deep, and I’m aware that the partners of the three guys who run it are all involved in some form of rescue for victims of abuse, be that sexual or domestic.

“Fine but keep it to as few as possible. The less people that know the better.” I give her a quick summary of the care Erica requires.

“Jesus, Carter.” She finishes her coffee, placing the empty mug on the table. “And where are you going to be while Star and I sort out Erica?”

“I’m going to see Lennox,” I say as another message comes through from Koda.

KODA:

You might want to take a look at this!

There’s a link and when I click it, a video fills the screen. It takes me a moment to figure out who I’m looking at thanks to the blood and swelling on this guy’s face.

A voice bursts from the speaker, and though he sounds different, I recognise him.

“Say hello, Kir,” Rook demands, but when he doesn’t answer immediately, he stabs at Kir with a metal prong. There’s a crackle of electricity as Kir’s whole body is sent into a spasm followed by a pained groan. Roxanne gets up and comes to stand behind me on one side as Star also joins us.

“Funny how you don’t feel like talking now. But it’s okay, we’re all friends here, and I’m happy to tell everyone what you did. Let’s start at the beginning shall we. Carter, I know you’ve been wondering about who hired a Shadow to kill that precious little whore of yours. Well wonder no more. Here he is. But that’s not even the best part, is it, Kir?” He pushes the cattle prod into Kir again and this time holds it just a few seconds longer. Kir slumps over as Rook pulls the prod away. “Looks like he’s not up for talking again, so I’ll carry on. Lev Orlov ordered Kir to hire someone to kill Miss Kavanagh. And it couldn’t have worked out any better for me. I do love it when all the pieces fall in line. Please give Lennox my regards when you see him.” The screen goes blank.

“I’ve seen that guy before,” comes Star’s voice to the right of me.

“Yeah, he’s the guy outside Perry’s office after—”

“No, no, not Kir. The guy talking in the video.”

I’m confused as Rook never showed his face, and I turn around to look at her. Seeing my obvious confusion, she explains.

“Can you rewind it back.”

I turn back around and do as she asked.

“There. Stop!” she shouts, leaning forward and pointing to the screen. There is a mirror leaning against the wall across from where Kir is and in it is the clear reflection of a pair of Nike trainers.

“Star, do you know how popular those trainers are?” Roxanne says.

She rolls her eyes. “Of course I do, but how many have half the tick missing in that exact way?” she implores pointing to the left trainer’s reflection, and sure enough half the black tick is missing.

“Explain,” I demand, turning around again in my chair and suddenly feeling anxious that she’s been so close to Rook.

“I was using the GPS tracker to find where you lived after I ran from Gambino’s, but it led me to a set of garages. Before I could leave a car arrived and a guy got out then made a call. He was pissed about whoever he was meant to be meeting not being there and gave him an ultimatum to be there in an hour or the deal was off. Then while he was waiting, he got call but from someone else.” She pauses for a moment obviously trying to remember. “He mentioned a club, not by name though, and then said something about someone being the best there is and if your guy had killed whoever they were talking about, they wouldn’t be in this mess. I couldn’t catch all his conversation and only caught snippets.”

“Did you see who he met?” Roxanne asks.

She shakes her head. “No. While he was on the phone the second time, someone else arrived and knocked him out. As he was dragging the guy to the back of the car, I caught a glimpse of his trainers. I remember the tick because they were immaculate otherwise.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before? He was right fucking there. If he’d have found you—”

“Okay, let’s not think about that,” Roxanne says trying to temper my anger, or given the look on Star’s face, prevent an all-out row. I’m not mad at Star—maybe a little that she didn’t tell me earlier—more at the thought of what could have happened had they found her there.

“We can assume that the guy on the phone was Kir, right? But who was he talking to?” Roxanne continues.

“Lennox, Lev or even Rook. Take your fucking pick.” I check the time. “I’m going to meet Lennox in thirty, and I need you to do what we discussed.” I close the laptop, leaving it on the table then turn to Star. “Say hi to my sister for me, yeah?” I kiss her, cutting off any reply or giving her the chance to deny me because I know she’s mad. Breaking the kiss a second later, I give a pointed look to Roxanne. “Keep her fucking safe, both of them!”

I’m just loading the bag I prepared earlier, which I grabbed on my way out, into the boot when footsteps crunching on

gravel alerts me to someone coming. My money was on Star or Zak, so imagine my fucking surprise when I turn around and find Maddox there.

“I’m coming with you.” There’s no question in there merely a statement of fact.

“I don’t need a damn babysitter,” I say, slamming the boot closed.

“Good fucking job I’m not one then.” He walks to the passenger side and climbs in.

I sigh and get in the car knowing there’s no point in arguing about it. At least I’m not meeting Lennox at headquarters, or we would have a problem once we got there.

“Roxanne mentioned something about your sister,” Maddox says as we hit the main road toward the city.

“Course she did.” I focus on the road, checking the rear-view mirror for any sign of a tail. Seeing no point in holding off, I tell him about Erica without giving more details than necessary.

Talking about her is doing nothing for my mood. I’ve spent the last sixteen years protecting her from my world, making sure nobody knew about her and that she had the best care I could afford. Lennox used her as leverage in those first few years, that and the fact I took out one of his precious fucking Shadows. A Shadow that had gone off the fucking rails. He deserved to be put in the ground, but it didn’t matter because I’d cost Lennox one of his assets. In return for my loyalty to the Shadow Guard, Lennox paid for Erica’s treatment, her place at a top care facility with the best burns and rehabilitation unit.

Now though my loyalty has shifted, and I don’t need Lennox to survive or take care of Erica. What I do fucking need is to find out how much Lennox is involved in this shit with Rook.

Maddox doesn’t ask me anything more about Erica, but he does ask me about Lennox.

“He gave me an ultimatum. Told me that if I didn’t join the Shadow Guard, Erica would be left with no family, that’s if she even survived. I was pissed at him for a long time.”

“I can understand that,” he says gruffly.

I glance across at him. “Sounds like there’s a story somewhere in that statement?”

“Oh there’s a fucking story alright. Let’s just say that Zak and I know all about being held to ransom and leave it at that for now.”

“Very well.” I turn down a side street lined by large office blocks and check the rear-view mirror again. A second later a black BMW rounds the bend. The same fucking BMW that’s been following us for the last ten minutes.

Maddox looks in the wing mirror his side. “We got a tail?”

“Maybe?” I take the next left. “Let’s circle round and see.”

I take the next left, and there he is. But at the next left, which happens to be a crossroads, he takes a right.

“Either it wasn’t a tail, or he figured out we were on to him.”

“Whatever the fuck it was, let’s get to this meeting and not wait around to find out.”

Five minutes later, and with no sign of the black BMW, we pull into an underground car park. I take the ramp to the lower level and park.

“You got a weapon on you?” I ask Maddox.

“Not sure you need an answer to that, Carter.”

“Leave it here,” I tell him, and before he can argue, I add, “Leave it here or leave it in there. They find it on you, they’ll take it, and you won’t be getting it back.

“This is a fucking joke. Worse than The Watchtower,” he grumbles, dumping his gun in the glovebox.

“The Watchtower is Switzerland, but this place is more like fucking Russia.”

“What about you?” he asks as we exit the car.

“I could take a fucking bomb in there and no one would question me.”

I might not be a Shadow Guard anymore, but Lennox never revoked my access. Especially not to here. If it was headquarters that would be different, but this place is part office and part training, and just so happens to be where Lennox lives on the top floor. It used to be my home too, and besides, half of it is mine.

“I thought you could fight,” I tease as we walk toward the elevator.

“Fuck you. This is like bringing a knife to a gun fight. Not fucking cool, man.”

I laugh as I press my thumb against the pad beside the elevator. It turns green and pings, then the door slides open.

All humour dissolves as I watch the numbers rising to the fifth floor. When the doors slide open, Lennox is standing there waiting. He’s wearing a sharp black suit with diamond cuff links poking out from beneath the sleeve of his jacket where his hands are casually resting inside his trouser pockets. The white shirt he’s wearing is sans tie and open at the collar displaying his caramel skin beneath.

Either side of him is a Shadow, and they draw their weapons as soon as they see us.

We step out of the elevator and stop in front of him.

“Search him,” Lennox orders, pointing to Maddox.

One of the Shadow’s steps forward intending to search Maddox, who raises his arms.

“A bit OTT, don’t you think?” I say to Lennox as the Shadow finishes his search of Maddox and takes up his position beside Lennox. I ignore the compulsion to punch the fucker.

“No, Carter, I don’t. You bring a fucking Lawler to my place I’m going to search him.”

“Well then you should count your lucky stars it wasn’t Kavanagh ‘cause that was the other choice.” I arch a brow at him letting him know he’s had a lucky escape from being shot on sight. Especially given the prospect that Lennox is more involved than just providing the Shadow that tried to kill Star. There’s even a chance I might still shoot the bastard.

“You want to do this here or in your office?” I ask scanning the room and eyeballing several Shadows who are watching us closely.

Lennox spins on his heel and strides across the room, heading for his office. I nod to a couple of Shadows I recognise then step into Lennox’s office after him with Maddox behind. The two Shadows with Lennox enter too and close the door.

“I watched an interesting video this morning. Got any idea what that might have been?” I ask, taking a seat in one of the four chairs around a square coffee table. I’m relaxed enough being here even though there is clear tension in the room. Maddox takes the seat beside me, scanning the room.

“I’d imagine it’s the same one I received. What you think that has to do with me I don’t know.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Lennox. Kir hired the Shadow to take out Star Kavanagh. Are you telling me you didn’t know?”

He sits back in his seat, resting his foot on his knee, but his brow is creased into a frown. “Of course, I knew. I authorised it. But we already covered this shit when I spoke to you after you took out another one of my Shadows.”

“And I’m prepared to take out plenty fucking more if you don’t stop fucking me around. This fake arse innocent crap is starting to grate on me.”

“I’ve afforded you a lot of...lenience over the last few years. There aren’t many who have managed to leave the Shadow Guard and still be breathing. Our agreement—”

“Our agreement is built on a fucking lie. Rook isn’t dead, Lennox. He’s very much a-fucking-live and the mastermind behind all this shit.” I’m wondering if the video Lennox

received was the same one as I did. “Did you listen to the audio on the video?”

Lennox shakes his head. “There was no audio. What the hell are you talking about?”

Maddox and I share a look. I decide to try a different line of questioning because clearly we are not singing from the same hymn sheet.

“Who was the Shadow with Rook the night I took him out?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“Oh it fucking does matter. Who was he?”

“He’s dead, Carter. He’s the same Shadow that was hired to kill Miss Kavanagh.”

“Fuck!” I curse.

“There’s no way that’s a coincidence,” Maddox says.

“Absolutely no way,” I agree. “I need a laptop,” I demand, looking to Lennox.

Lennox nods to one of the Shadows by the door who quickly retrieves a laptop from the desk, giving it to Lennox, who then opens it and after tapping away for a couple of seconds passes it over to me.

I quickly log in to my message centre and retrieve the video Koda sent me, then I place the laptop on the table, positioning it so both Lennox and Maddox can see and press play.

The second Rook speaks, Lennox’s eyes snap to mine.

“That’s not possible.”

I take the laptop and find the message I received from Rook after I killed Brian.

“No, then explain this to me?” I spin the laptop round again. “Rook is alive, Lennox, and he’s out for revenge, on me, you and Pavel. Now let’s try this again, tell me about the Shadow from the night I shot Rook?”

There is the smallest movement from the taller of the two Shadows, the one who passed Lennox the laptop, and is the only warning I get before he draws his gun and fires.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

STAR



“Er...what the hell was that about?” I ask as Carter heads down the corridor. Before Roxy can answer, Maddox comes into the room having passed Carter in the corridor.

“Where the fuck is he going in a hurry?”

“To see Lennox,” Roxy replies. “I think you should go with him.”

Maddox’s brows raise as though to disagree. He looks between the two of us.

“Star and I are going to see Carter’s sister. He wants her moved, but I’ll explain later. Go before he leaves. We’ll be fine,” she assures him.

“Go, I’ve got this,” Zak mumbles through a yawn as he walks over. Maddox drops a kiss on Roxy’s lips then races off after Carter.

“What did I miss?” Zak asks as he refills the kettle and switches it on to boil.

“You missed the part where Star here was hiding out right under Rook’s nose.” She turns on me, hand on her hip and giving me a disapproving look.

“Hey, I didn’t know. And anyway, you can’t have a go after you just called Carter out.”

“I absolutely can,” she says.

“Not a kid, Roxy, remember? What is this about Erica?” I ask quickly changing the subject.

Zak carries over a tea for me and coffees for him and Roxy, then she explains that Carter wants us to move Erica to a new location, but she looks confused about something.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Carter never told me where Erica is.”

“Oh... Maybe Frankie knows,” I say.

“What is it I know?” Frankie queries as he strolls into the room.

“Where Erica is,” I tell him.

“That I do know. He told you then?” He comes over to the table and picks up the laptop, tucking it under his arm. “What’s the plan?”

We spend the next hour working out the details. Roxy calls Rick to organise a new location, and we agree to meet him there in a few hours. With Frankie’s help and thanks to a call that Frankie tells us Carter put into the current place this morning, we have a clear path to discharge her from there and move her somewhere new.

We are just discussing the logistics of moving Erica and the need to take two cars when Frankie comes back in. He left an hour ago claiming he needed to collect something.

“We ready to go?” he asks, a bag swinging from his hand.

“Almost. We are going to take Roxy’s car, and you and Zak can follow in yours. You do have a car I take it?”

He smirks at me like I just asked the dumbest question. “I do, but we won’t need it or Roxy’s car.” He rifles around in the bag, then tosses something to Zak. “You’ll be needing this though.”

Zak catches it and holds it out to get a better look. “A paramedic’s uniform?”

“Yep, and got nurse’s ones for you two,” he says, tossing hospital blue nurses’ dresses at me and Roxy.

“This is going to be like a bad episode of *Casualty*,” Zak says as he looks from his usual shirt and trousers to the dark green paramedic uniform.

“More like a Carry On film,” Roxy mutters as she and Zak disappear to their room to change.

“Ooh, Matron,” Frankie calls after them perfectly imitating Kenneth Williams as we go our separate ways too.

Ten minutes later we are all back in the kitchen dressed and ready to go, and none of us except Frankie looking overly impressed.

Outside, the lack of enthusiasm continues when we see the ambulance parked there.

“This is ridiculous,” Roxy grumbles as she and I head for the back of the ambulance where Frankie has opened the doors for us. “This was not part of the plan we discussed.”

“It’s all about perception, Roxy,” Frankie says with a wink as we climb inside.

“Sounds a lot like deception.”

“Yeah, that too. But to deceive you need to look the part. If Carter suspects that Erica’s safety has been compromised, then we need to at least look like we are the real deal.”

“And if this doesn’t work?”

“Then I hope you remembered to pack a gun.”

He closes the door with a clang and climbs in the driver’s seat beside Zak.

As we set off, I say, “What did Carter tell you about Erica?”

“Just what I needed to know to ensure the right care for her once we move her. I’m guessing you know more?”

I nod, but I don’t offer her anything else. I don’t feel like it’s my place to tell her. “It explained a few things about who he is. How he ended up a Shadow. But it’s his story to tell.”

“I can respect that. But was there anything you think could help us right now?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Her phone rings and she pulls it from her pocket.

“It’s Aidan,” she says before answering. “Hey, you good?”

I can’t hear his words, but his tone and volume are enough to tell me something is wrong.

“What’s going on?” I ask, but Roxy holds up a finger to quiet me.

“We’re on our way there now... I haven’t heard from him...”

The more she speaks, the more anxious I become.

“Okay... You too.” She ends the call, but before I can bombard her with questions, she says, “Half a dozen of Pavel’s businesses were hit last night. They even attacked his house.”

Zak is looking through the small window from the front of the ambulance. “The 51s?”

“Aidan thinks so. They didn’t get inside his house, but they took out several of his men before they were able to shut it down.”

“Sounds like Rook has played his next move,” Frankie states from the front.

The mood in the ambulance is even more subdued after that, and I can’t help thinking that Carter’s visit to Lennox is all just another part of Rook’s end game. Whatever the fuck that is. I’m not a chess player, but it seems that Rook is very clearly making moves to position everyone exactly where he wants them.

“We are going to be there in five minutes. Carter organised some false papers for a place down in London, and he has a guy who can intercept a call and confirm if they decide to check. All we need to do is get in and out with as little attention as possible,” Frankie tells us as we turn down a long drive littered with fallen leaves from the trees lining it.

The building at the end looks nothing like a hospital. It's a Gothic-style Victorian manor house with outward facing gables above angular bay windows. Terracotta mouldings wrap around the building, distinguishing the separate floors, and the small upper floor windows are decorated with pitches and terracotta finials.

It's a foreboding sight and made all the more so when a tall thin woman dressed in a fitted grey suit steps out as we stop out the front. Getting out I see her grey hair is pulled back into a tight chignon bun at the nape of her neck and she's wearing cat eye black-rimmed spectacles.

She steps forward to greet Frankie, shaking his offered hand.

"Ms Agatha Price, and you must be Mr Franklin. Mr Beckett informed us of your arrival. I assume you have the correct paperwork?" she queries, her face stern and unemotional. It seems the lady matches the house.

"Of course, the paperwork is all in order," Frankie tells her, removing several folded sheets from his top pocket and handing them to her.

"Please come in. Erica is awaiting you in the downstairs parlour." She turns and strides back up the steps and through the door.

"It's like stepping back in time a hundred years," I mutter to Roxy as we follow. Any further conversation is lost as I step inside. The inside matches the dark, eerie gothic vibe of outside with dark wood and forest green flock wallpaper in the interior hall. There is a large, overstuffed ottoman placed beside an ornate iron coat stand. But the masterpiece in this room is the grand staircase. Large carved newel posts dominate with rich railings leading to a smaller landing before more stairs split off to the left and right.

Staff walk busily past as we follow Ms Price to wherever she is leading us. Stopping outside a door, she turns to us.

"Please wait here. Mr Franklin, if you will," she says, opening the door and indicating for him to enter.

Frankie enters without a backward glance, and Ms Price follows closing the door with finality. Zak, Roxy and I each take a seat like naughty children outside the headmistresses' office awaiting our punishment.

Despite the slightly unwelcoming atmosphere, I get the feeling that Ms Price knows her job and executes it very well.

The thick solid wood door allows little sound to seep out aside from a faint muffling of voices. It also means there is no warning when the door opens ten minutes later, making me jump.

“If you'll follow me,” she states and walks ahead again. This time she leads us back to the entrance hall and into a room on the right.

Although a little lighter in here, it maintains the Gothic Victorian aesthetic. Plush rich-red fabrics adorn the high-backed chairs and seating. The same colour green from the hall is carried into here but in the form of fleur de Lys patterned wallpaper. An imposing cast iron fireplace at the centre of the far wall fills the room with warmth.

Stepping further into the room, I see a woman sitting in a wheelchair, her back to us and head covered in a plain black scarf, and flanked by a nurse, who immediately looks over at us.

She offers us a smile before turning back to the woman. “Erica, they are here to collect you,” she says, and I sense a note of sadness in her words.

A scratchy, raspy voice fills the room. “Thank you, Isla. Don't forget to let Gage know and say goodbye for me.”

“I will. He'll be sad he missed you,” Isla tells her as she moves behind the wheelchair and begins turning it around.

Nerves flutter in my belly even though Erica will have no clue as to who we are—who I am. At least I don't think she will. I get the first look at Erica as the left side of her face is revealed. Smooth, pale skin with full pink lips and a piercing green eye. I can see Carter there, but as she is turned to fully face me, the extent of her burns becomes clear.

The right side of her face is heavily scared, distorted and misshapen, and the once matching piercing green eye on this side is a pale hazed milky colour. The scars carry down the side of her neck before disappearing into her long-sleeve top.

The sight literally takes my breath away, and I have to hold back the sharp inhale of breath that is my body's natural reaction. Instead, I smile wide as her good eye takes in the four of us standing there. To her we probably look like a paying crowd come to ogle the once beautiful woman now disfigured by fire.

“Hi, Erica, I'm Star and this is Roxanne.” Thankfully, my voice hides my true feelings. Heartbreak. That is the only word for it. I wear my scars inside, but Erica's are external, visible. The problem with that is her internal scars are hidden by the more visible ones.

Those are the scars everyone sees and focuses on.

She gives me a small greeting nod before her eyes move to Frankie, and I see a flash of something. Familiarity maybe but it's gone before I can be sure.

“These are all her belongings,” says Ms Price, stepping forward to indicate the bags sitting off to the side. “There are some larger items that Mr Beckett has arranged the collection of at a later date.”

Zak and Frankie collect Erica's bags at Ms Price's less than subtle indication to move things along. Isla wheels Erica out of the room as we follow behind.

Once we reach the ambulance, Frankie and Zak load the bags inside while Isla stops at the bottom of the ramp.

“I can walk from here, Isla,” Erica tells her quietly.

“Very well.” She holds the wheelchair steady as Erica eases herself up to her feet. Her steps are a little unsteady to begin with, but after the first few, she settles into a good pace.

I stop beside Isla and watch as Erica reaches the back of the ambulance.

“Miss Independent that one.” She pauses before turning to face me. “Take good care of her for me.” Her voice wobbles, choked with emotion.

“I promise we will,” I tell her, giving her arm a comforting rub. As I walk away, I pray I can keep my promise. Not only for Isla but for Carter too.

Frankie has lowered the ramp for Erica to walk up, which she manages without any help. When I enter the ambulance, Roxy and Frankie have raised the stretcher to a more upright position, and Erica is just getting comfortable.

“What the fuck is going on, Frankie?” Erica says, confirming my earlier suspicion about her knowing who he is and showing a spark of fire.

“Not here,” he tells her, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. There’s nothing romantic about it. More of a brotherly affection just like with me and Aidan.

The moment we set off, Erica starts asking questions.

“What’s going on? Where are you taking me?”

Roxy and I share a look because neither of us are entirely sure what Carter wants us to share with her.

“Is Carter okay?”

I don’t hesitate to reply. “Yes, he’s fine. He just wants to make sure you’re safe.”

She doesn’t look convinced. “I’ve been there for the past fourteen years, so something must have happened for him to be moving me now,” she presses.

“I’m sure Frankie will explain once we get to your new place.” She holds my gaze long after I spoke, and I know she’s not convinced I don’t know anything.

“Who are you?”

“Friends,” I say feeling like that is the lamest thing I could have said.

“Friends? Carter doesn’t do friends unless you count Frankie. And he’s never brought anyone bar him to me

before.”

Frankie’s voice calls through the small window. “That’s ‘cause I’m special.”

Erica’s mouth twitches in an almost smile. “Special my arse,” she says.

“Sounds like you got yourself someone special too. Who the fuck is Gage?” Frankie asks with a little humour but mostly a cautious curiosity.

Her left cheek pinks slightly and she rolls her eyes. “He’s one of the therapists that’s all.”

“Yeah, and what’s his specialty seduction?”

“Fuck off, Frankie. He’s a nice guy. He understands me.” Her pain bleeds through her final words.

“I’m only messing with you. What’s he been helping you with?”

“My fine motor skills needed some work, so he comes in once a week and we draw, build Lego or play—”

Her words are cut off by the ringing of Roxy’s phone. As she pulls it free and sees whose calling, her eyes meet mine.

“Hey—” She doesn’t get a chance to say anything else as Maddox’s voice barks down the phone. Zak’s face appears in the small window from the front.

“We are almost there... Fucking hell... Okay we’ll be there as soon as we can.” She ends the call and immediately gets up and goes to the window.

I can’t hear what she’s saying, which only makes my fear of what the hell all that was about worse. Whatever she tells Frankie has him putting his foot down.

“Roxy, what the hell is going on?”

She turns around slowly, her face sullen. Her eyes flick to Erica, who has her back to Roxy, before coming back to me, and I know she’s hesitant to say in front of her.

“He’s fine. They are on their way back now, but we need to get back there as soon as possible.”

I narrow my eyes at her, trying to decipher what she’s not saying.

Erica on the other hand has no qualms about saying anything and making her feelings known. She bombards us with questions and demands answers for the next ten minutes, her voice getting hoarser and hoarser, until we pull up outside the address Rick gave us.

I shove the doors open and jump down needing some air. Something is wrong and I can relate to Erica’s frustration over being in the dark.

Roxy comes up behind me, her hand resting on my back. “He’s okay, Star. Lennox on the other hand...not so much. Let’s just get Erica settled here and head back.”

I give her nod as the soft rumble of the ramp being extended comes from behind us.

I look up at the house in front of me. It’s a complete contrast to the Victorian manor house we left behind. This is a modern newly built two storey house with clean lines and large windows to the front aspect.

The door opens and I ignore the voices of frustration behind me as Erica continues her barrage of complaints. Rick steps out pushing a wheelchair, closely followed by Jess, her face lighting up as she spots Roxy and me.

I let Roxy go ahead, but she falters as Jess steps out from behind Rick. Her small bump visible beneath the longline top she’s wearing over leggings.

“Oh my fucking god!” Roxy exclaims, her feet moving forward to meet them. She wraps Jess up in a tight hug before stepping back and laying her hands on Jess’ belly. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” She looks between the two of them, then slaps Rick on the arm.

“We wanted to wait and make sure everything was okay first. I’m sorry,” Jess says, and even from here I can see the tears swelling in her eyes.

Roxy looks back at me. “Did you know about this?”

“How the hell would I have known before you?” I say accusingly, trying to deflect from the fact I absolutely did know. She turns back to Jess, but I’m not fooled she believes me.

Rick steps away, stopping to hug me. “Thank you,” he whispers.

“I’ve got you,” I say lightly, although I have to choke back my own emotions. This is huge for them, and I’m so happy they are finally going to get the baby they’ve fought so hard for.

His eyes drift over my shoulder as he pulls back. “Jesus,” he mutters low enough that only I can hear.

“Yeah. She’s not too happy that we haven’t told her anything or why she’s been moved. We were hoping that Carter would be here to explain but...”

“I heard what happened,” Rick says, and I frown. “He called me to let me know that he’s been held up.”

“Why do I get the feeling that phrase is more literal?”

Rick laughs. “Something like that. Come on let’s get her inside. Jamie is inside with one of the other nurses.”

Frankie leads a still pissed Erica inside. She refused the wheelchair that Rick brought out and walks into the entrance where we are all standing as Roxy chats with Jess and Jamie. I’m not surprised to see Jamie here. She used to be a nurse, still is just in a different capacity now.

If Erica is surprised by so many people, she doesn’t show it. Rick introduces everyone before Jamie and the other nurse take Erica off to show her the place.

“Man, she is not fucking happy,” Zak states, tugging at the collar of his uniform.

“Can you blame her?” I say, watching as they disappear round a corner. “I’d be pissed too. In fact, I am. What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know all the details, but Maddox said a Shadow turned on them during their meeting with Lennox. He got hit, but if the shouting I heard in the background is anything to go by, I’m sure he’ll live.”

After spending a few more minutes discussing Erica and what happened at the meet with Lennox, I decide to go and find Erica, Jess and Jamie to say goodbye.

I find Jamie and the other nurse helping Erica get settled into her new room. It’s set up like a hospital room, but much more homely and less clinical.

“Hey, we need to get going. Everything okay?” I ask, stepping into the room.

The nurse is busy hanging Erica’s clothes in the wardrobe while Jamie checks off all Erica’s medications.

Erica watches me as I walk around the room, looking out the window and the lovely view over the river.

“It’s nice here,” I say, turning back to the room just as the nurse unpacks a small chess board with wooden pieces. A chill runs across my skin as she places a black rook in the corner of the board.

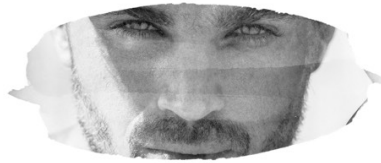
“You play chess?” I ask, attempting to keep my tone casual. I look over my shoulder to Erica when she doesn’t answer straight away.

“Yeah, it’s one of the things Gage does with me. He beats me every time,” she says with a smile.

That chill I felt earlier evolves into cold, hard dread, and I race from the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY

CARTER



“Son of a fucking bitch!” Lennox hollers as the bullet pierces his shoulder. The force and his attempt to move out of the line of fire has the chair tipped backwards, dumping him on the floor. I leap from my seat, dropping down behind the side of the chair as both Shadows begin showering us in a rain of bullets.

Glass shatters from the picture frames on the wall behind us as I see every Shadow outside the office turn this way at the sound of gunfire. Several of them raise their weapons ready to fire, but the tinted glass makes it impossible to see inside the office from out there. Not that it would make an ounce of fucking difference since the glass is bullet proof.

Maddox is behind his chair and Lennox is now on his knees fighting to pull his gun free. The door to the office flies open, but the Shadow closest to me, turns and puts a bullet in the head of whoever opened it.

Ducking down to peek round the side, I take my chance and fire at the legs of the Shadow in my sight. The bullet hits him in the kneecap shattering it in a shower blood and bone as his leg buckles from beneath him. He doesn't hit the floor like I'd hoped. Shadows are trained to fight to the death—even fucking rogue ones. But it's enough to give me a few seconds to poke my head over the top of the chair and see what the fuck is happening.

The shorter of the two Shadow's is in the doorway, ducking in and out as he takes shots at the Shadows out in the main room.

Bullets whizz through the air as Lennox calls to me.

“I want that cunt alive, Carter!”

“Course you fucking do,” I mutter with an eye roll. Although, I’m inclined to agree because these two cocksuckers are going to spill their guts before they take their last breath.

Fabric rips with a dull thump when a bullet hits a little too fucking close to my head as I try to position myself for a less deadly shot of the guy at the door.

I see Lennox rise, aiming his gun and I do the same, ready to finish this. Lennox hits the other knee of the guy I kneecapped, and this time he hits the fucking deck. I take my shot, aiming for this cock’s left arse cheek, only when it hits, so does another bullet. This one hits him right in the head, blowing a hole through his skull.

“God fucking dammit!” I curse, stepping out from behind the chair and firing off another round into the gun hand of the Shadow with both knees blown out as he raises it to fire at me.

The place falls silent except for the heavy breathing of the guy on the floor as he cradles his shot hand to his body. His knees are fucked, and if he had the remotest chance of surviving, then he’ll never walk again. But he doesn’t need to worry about his legs where he’s going.

Several Shadows from the main room fill the doorway, looking on at the carnage.

“Who the fuck fired that last bullet?” I bark, pointing to the dead Shadow behind me. A guy who looks around late-twenties steps forward, raising his chin at me and full of pride.

“I did,” he states confidently.

“You did, huh? Nice shot,” I tell him and watch as my praise lights him up. When he’s almost glowing with it, I piss all over it. “You’re a fucking idiot. I should put a matching bullet in your fucking head.”

That pride he was wearing is now shrouded in anger.

“How the fuck am I supposed to get answers from a corpse, huh?”

Lennox comes over, waving his good hand at me. “That’s enough.”

“Maybe I should have let him fucking k—”

“You do not want to finish that fucking sentence, Dalton,” Lennox warns, pointing his finger at this Dalton guy. Lennox turns back to me as Maddox’s hand wraps around my bicep. “Let it fucking go. We’ve got one, and he’ll give us what we want.”

I look to Maddox’s hand then to him, and he shakes his head. “Not worth it, man. He was just doing his job.”

A rumble of laughter comes from the Shadow on the floor. “Fuck you. Death will claim me before I give you fucking anything,” he spits, hatred in his words and his eyes as he looks at Lennox.

“It’s not death that will claim you, Shane. The devil owns your arse. But first you’re going to tell me where Rook is.” Lennox points to Dalton and two other Shadows. “Get him the fuck out of here.”

They lift him, not giving a shit about hurting him as they do. Good. I hope the pain is excruciating.

Once they leave, Lennox orders the rest of the Shadows back to whatever they were doing before the attack. His shoulder is a mess, and his white shirt beneath his jacket is soaked through with blood.

“You trust those three?” Maddox asks, nodding in the direction Dalton and the other two Shadows went.

“As much as I fucking can right now,” he replies, heading for the door.

“Where the fuck you going, Lennox?” I ask, following him.

“I’m going to see Blaze and get this fucking bullet out of my shoulder unless you fancy doing it?”

Maddox and I follow Lennox to the lift and down to the third floor, which is essentially a hospital.

Lennox shoves through a set of double doors where Blaze raises his head from where he's bent over a guy laid out on the table getting some sutures in a nasty gash to his arm.

"I hope the other guy looks worse," he jokes, going back to his sutures. He finishes, snipping the vicryl suture and dropping it and the scissors into a dish at his side. He dresses the guy's wound and sends him on his way.

Lennox climbs onto the other table as Blaze discards his gloves then joins us, giving me a fist bump.

"Good see you, man. Though this wasn't what I had in mind for our next catch up." He pulls on a new pair of gloves then helps Lennox remove his jacket. "Heard the shots from here. Should I be expecting more patients?"

Lennox winces as Blaze begins cutting off his shirt.

"Just corpses," I tell him.

Blaze nods and gets to work fixing Lennox up. While he does, Maddox calls Roxanne to make sure they got Erica and let her know to meet us back at the church as soon as possible, and I make a quick to call to Rick to let him know we've been held up and won't make it.

"I've never seen those two before. They new?" I ask, but all I get is a roar in reply as Blaze pokes about trying to locate the bullet.

After a few minutes, Blaze pulls the small bullet from Lennox's shoulder and drops it into a round tin tub on the tray beside the table with a plunk.

"Took them on about a year and a half ago."

"That's a long fucking time to have had access to here. They didn't get flagged?" I can't keep the accusation out of my tone, and I catch Blaze's side-eye. He remains silent and carries on.

"No, Carter, they fucking didn't. You can shove your accusations and assumptions where the sun don't fucking shine. If Rook is behind this, then how the fuck are you surprised?"

“Hold the fuck on,” Blaze says, waving a hand in the air. “Rook’s dead. Or did I fall into a time loop back to three years ago?”

“He ain’t fucking dead. *Someone* helped him that night and has been hiding the cunt ever since.”

“Fraser?” Lennox says with a grimace as Blaze starts suturing the gunshot wound now it’s all cleaned out.

“Yeah, fucking Fraser. Along with the Shadow that was with Rook the night I took my shot at him. And that’s not all.” Maddox steps up beside me, tucking his phone away. “Lev had a deal going with Perry Graham and Mark Swanson. Now, how much do you wanna fucking bet that Fraser and Rook have got something to do with it too?”

“Kir,” Maddox states, and we all turn to look at him. “You said you thought Lev had someone on the inside feeding info back to Rook. It has to be Kir. It explains why Rook took him at the garages when he threatened to end the deal.”

“Loose fucking ends. Okay, but that would mean Lev has been supplying guns to the 51s. Guns they’ve used to take out his father’s men.”

Maddox shrugs. “No better way to take out the enemy and with the highest level of satisfaction.”

“Tonight’s meet is the perfect fucking trap,” I say, running ideas through my head. Can’t call it off because Rook will know. And also don’t want to let our only chance at cornering Rook slip by.

I tug my phone free and send a message to Koda asking him to check the chat and forums for anything between Mac51 and Gambit.

Koda comes back a few minutes later.

KODA:

Nothing doing. Not a damn word anywhere from either of them. Seems fucking odd if you ask me.

Koda's right, it is odd as fuck. Too damn quiet. And nothing good comes from this kind of silence.

Blaze finishes up with Lennox as I relay Koda's message.

"We need to get back. And I need you to sort some Shadows to join us tonight. Ones you can fucking trust not to turn on us," I say, pointing a finger at Lennox. He offers me a scowl but doesn't argue. "Clean house, Lennox. Even the slightest suggestion that they are involved, cut the fuckers loose. And call me when that cunt talks."

I wave a goodbye to Blaze as Maddox and I leave. I'm just getting in the car when my phone rings. I set it in the cradle and answer as I start the car.

"Frankie, what's up?"

"Where are you?"

The question instantly has me on alert. Something's wrong. "Just leaving. What the fuck is going on, Frankie?"

A heavy sigh rumbles down the line. "The house is compromised." His words come out in a rush, but he doesn't give me time to answer. "We are moving her somewhere new now. We'll meet you back at the church in an hour."

I can feel Maddox eyeing me from the passenger seat, and he's smart enough to ask the question for me.

"What the fuck do you mean the house is compromised? You've been there five fucking minutes."

"Not a conversation we need to have while driving. She's safe. Just get back to the church."

The line goes dead. I daren't talk because the rage bubbling inside my blood is likely to set fire to this car and us along with it.

"Just drive, Carter. Rick will sort it, man."

I drive. Like a fucking bat out of hell. All the while my mind spinning, throwing questions as to how the fuck the house is compromised already.

If I knew where the fuck they were going, I'd turn this car around and head straight there. But I don't know, and that alone is making me fucking twitchy.

The two most important women in my life and I don't have a fucking clue where they are. Relying on others to keep them safe isn't something I'm used to.

I almost spin the back end of the car out turning into the drive, and come to a grinding halt round the back, kicking up dust and gravel.

There is no sign of the ambulance I know Frankie arranged, but there is a car I recognise parked up. He steps out of the car at the same time as me and Maddox. He's also not alone. Parker steps out of the passenger side and walks round to join him as he waits for us.

"Do you know where they are?" I demand as I reach them.

"No because Rick isn't stupid enough to tell me over the phone." He waves his hand toward to the door, indicating for us to go inside.

My eyes bore into his for a moment longer before flicking to Parker. Then with a nod, I storm past them and into the church.

"What happened with Lennox?" Aidan asks Maddox as they enter behind me.

I leave Maddox to explain because I don't have the capacity for filling in the blanks right now. Pacing is my limit.

"Here, you look like you could use this."

I spin around to see Parker holding out a glass and arch a brow.

"Exceptional circumstances are valid reasons for drinking whiskey at eleven in the morning," she tells me with a tilt of her head and extending the glass further toward me.

I take it and down it in one before slamming the empty glass down on the table. "Thanks," I grumble.

“You ever heard the name Kingsman?” Aidan asks grabbing my attention.

“American, right?” Aidan nods. “Yeah, I heard the name. Some fucking wealthy magnate in the states.”

Aidan nods again, folding his arms and leaning back against the table. “Seems his daughter has been building connections to the Gambino family. Daddy is looking to branch out from the states, and he’s been busy checking out the sale of ghost guns.”

“You think he’s the buyer?” Maddox asks.

“No, not the main buyer. I just think he’s someone we need to keep our eye on. No, your main buyer is someone called Gage Corbin.”

“Never heard of the guy. Who the fuck is he?”

“From what I’ve heard, and I’m surprised you haven’t heard his name before, he’s been buying up businesses in Pavel’s territory.”

“Sounds dodgy as fuck to me,” Maddox states, dropping down onto the sofa.

“Oh, he is, Maddox. Because not only does Gage like to dabble in property, but he also moonlights as a therapist at one particular medical facility.” His tone is calm and casual like he’s passing comment on the fucking weather.

My head snaps up, locking on Aidan, who simply raises his brows knowingly.

“Are you sure?” I grit out, my body tense and pulse thundering beneath my skin.

Aidan’s jaw ticks as he gives me a brief nod. “He’s been working there for the last year or so. Not too long after Lennox took on a couple of rogue Shadows from the sounds of it. Seems to be a bit of a coincidence, not that I believe that for one fucking second.”

There’s a pounding in my ears as adrenaline pumps through my veins, making me feel on edge, and my jaw aches from clenching my teeth so tight.

“How the fuck do you know this?” I say slow and controlled while inside I fight with the need to smash the fuck out of something or someone. To see their blood run like a fucking river in payment, revenge, retribution. That son of a fucking bitch has been near Erica. All this fucking time.

“Last time I met with Aldo he mentioned a guy called Gage who had been pushing for a meet with Angelo over a possible joint venture. I didn’t think anything of it a first, but after the shooting there and you mentioning ghost guns, something I know Angelo would usually be interested in, I decided to pay Aldo a visit and find out what he knows. Aldo didn’t know anything more than that Gage had a supply of guns and he wanted to do business with Angelo.”

“But everyone knows you have a deal with the mafia on gun running from the states to here, so why the fuck would he try to muscle in on a deal with the Gambino family unless—”

“Unless he plans to take them out along with Pavel and put himself and the 51s at the top of the fucking chain in Manchester,” I cut in, finishing Maddox’s train of thought. “The Gambino family are the next biggest fish in this city after Pavel and the 51s, and with them trying to align themselves with Aidan and the five families, it’s the perfect move to make them top fucking dog.”

Lights flash through the front arch window and I’m out the door in a second. Frankie parks the ambulance and he and Zak jump out of the front as the back doors open revealing Roxanne and Star. Every muscle in my body relaxes as I see she’s okay.

“Where’s Erica? Is she safe?” I demand of them all as I wrap Star up in a hug.

“She’s okay, Carter,” Star whispers, pulling back to look at me. “She’s pissed, but she’s okay.”

“Let’s get inside. We have some shit to talk about,” Roxanne says, heading for the door. I watch as everyone goes inside, then turn back to Star, lifting her as I slam my mouth down on hers. My thoughts from the last hour turn to dust as she settles something inside me.

“I was so fucking worried about you,” she pants, resting her forehead on mine. “Roxy wouldn’t tell me anything straight away because she didn’t want to worry Erica any more than she already was. It’s not hard to see she’s your sister though.”

Her back meets the side of the ambulance as I grind my hips against her. I kiss her again not wanting to hear my sister’s name from her mouth while my dick is hard as fucking stone and begging to sink inside her.

“Carter,” she whispers against my mouth. “He’s—”

“Don’t! I know.” Anger flares inside me, but I shove it aside needing a minute to just be. “I just need a minute. You and me, Star. Just need to fucking feel you. Need you to ground me before I lose my fucking head.” She gives me a minute and more to take what I need. Letting me draw from her, feeling her heat against my aching cock and settling the thunder that rages inside me.

It’s not until I put her back on her feet that I realise what she’s wearing.

“Fuck me. I think you should keep that outfit,” I say, running a finger down her neck to the collar of her nurses dress, popping open another button and showing me the soft curve of the top of her tits and ample cleavage.

“I have something better than this at my house,” she says with a wink while doing the button I opened back up. “You might want to do something about that before we go inside,” she adds, pointing to the obvious hard-on I’m sporting as she walks away.

Star Kavanagh is the only woman who can make me hard when everything around me is going to fucking shit.

She’s also the only woman I’ve ever loved.

I’m going to send anyone that fucking touches her straight to Hell with a personal message for the devil and written in the blood of his servants; she’s fucking mine!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

STAR



I straighten out my outfit and lock down the butterflies that being around Carter induces as I enter the church. It's clear that no one has missed us yet as the sound of half a dozen voices reach me.

Halfway down the corridor Carter catches up to me. I gave him the minute he needed, and I needed it too because what I need to tell him is going to destroy him.

We step into the room to a raucous symphony of voices all trying to talk at once, but they quiet within seconds.

"Where's Erica?" Carter asks, stepping into the centre of everyone.

"Rick didn't have another house suitable for her, so he's moved her to Seb and Jamie's. She'll be safe, Carter," Roxy tells him.

"Why did you need to move her in the first place? What happened?" He scans the faces of Zak and Roxy, then Frankie, but they all look to me.

He already told me he knows, but I'm guessing he doesn't know the full story, or he wouldn't waste time asking.

"Erica mentioned a guy, a therapist, who works at the facility who has been helping her, but it wasn't until we got to the house and started unpacking her things that I realised he might be connected. She has a chessboard, and when I asked her about it, she told me that Gage had been teaching her."

“I’m going to fucking kill him!” he yells, slamming a chair against the table.

“Carter...” I say, pausing because I know what I say next is not going to go over well at all. I look to Roxy, who gives me a nod of encouragement, both—no, all of us aware that he needs to know.

“Carter,” I say again, and this time he turns to me. His hands clenched around the back of the chair in front of him, knuckles white from his grip on it, and he cracks his neck from side to side, something I’ve never seen him do before and a clear sign of how angry he is. “I don’t think they are just patient and therapist.” He begins shaking his head at my words. “I got the impression that they are more than that.”

I don’t need to elaborate any further, he knows what I’m saying. My heart physically hurts that what I’m telling him is causing him so much pain, but he needs to know because the way Erica talked about Gage was like she was in love with him.

It’s sick and twisted as fuck that he’s crept into her life, a vulnerable, mentally and physically scarred woman, just to torment Carter and ensure he hurts him to the max.

He’s still shaking his head and closes his eyes. I know he’s praying that I didn’t just tell him his sister is in a relationship with the man who is set on revenge, set on taking everyone Carter loves and destroying them.

I watch as Frankie carefully approaches him. “Hey, man, let’s go out to the garage.” Carter shakes his head again, but Frankie doesn’t quit. “You do not want to do this in here. Move,” he whispers just loud enough for me to hear.

Carter raises his head, pushing up and releasing the back of the chair, and stares Frankie down, and the tension in the room becomes almost electric. One spark and the whole fucking place is going to go up. Maddox and Zak move into position behind Carter, and I know what’s going to happen if he doesn’t go willingly, so I step in front of him and grip his face, pulling his face down, eyes on me.

“Go with Frankie. You need to let it out. Do what you need to. I’ll be here when you’re ready.” I lay a gentle kiss to his lips. There is no softness to them, and he doesn’t kiss me back, but I wasn’t expecting him to. He’s too lost in his rage right now, but I know he heard me. I let go of his face and step aside.

Frankie, Zak and Maddox flank him as he marches down the corridor and out the door, which hits the wall with a bang.

I let out my breath as Roxy comes and stands in front of me.

“You okay?” she asks.

“No,” I manage to say with a wobble as my emotions crash over me. I scrub my hands down my face, swiping the tears away, then shake out my hands.

Parker pulls out a chair, indicating for me to sit, which I do, as a glass of whiskey is placed in front of me. I give a little laugh at the idea a few fingers of whiskey will solve all our problems. Because they won’t. But I drink it down, my body shuddering at the burn as it slides down my throat.

Aidan takes the seat across from me, tapping his fingers on the table. “Did she tell you anything else about Gage?”

“No. Once she realised that our interest was no longer friendly, she clammed up. She told the nurse, Isla, to say goodbye to Gage for her before we left, so he’s going to know we are on to him when he turns up there if he doesn’t already.”

“Does she have access to a phone or laptop?”

“No, Frankie took all her electronics before we left Seb’s, and I made sure that they all know she’s not to make any calls without clearing it with one of us first,” Roxy tells him sadly, and I know she’s thinking how sad it is that we are treating Erica like a child. It’s for her safety, though I doubt she will see it that way.

“Good. I have a couple of calls I need to make,” Aidan states before pushing to his feet and heading outside.

I drop my head into my hands and stare at the loops and swirls of the wood grain on the table, which match my emotions right now.

“This is so fucked up,” I say, raising my head and looking at Parker. There’s a loud crash and a roar from outside that has my head snapping toward the door. My body reacts involuntarily, rising from my seat, but Roxy’s hand on my arm stops me.

“Give him a minute, Star.”

I sit back down with a heavy sigh. “This isn’t going to help him with his guilt over Erica.”

“What do you mean?” Parker asks.

I look between them, then say, “He blames himself for what happened to her, but he thinks saving her has only trapped her in a life of misery.”

Roxy shakes her head. “No, I don’t think that’s true. Erica is strong. If anything, I think Carter’s only failing was hiding her away.”

“We all know why he did that, Roxy,” I snap agitated by her accusation.

“And I’m not criticising because I understand why. In this world there is no room for weakness, it’s survival of the fittest,” she says with a tilt of her head. “But equally, a weakness can become a strength.”

“She’s going need some fucking strength to get over this because Carter is going to destroy the one man that has shown her any affection, even if it is tainted with deceit.”

Parker and Roxy nod at my words. They both know men like ours don’t hold anything else above the women they love. You hurt them, expect to pay the price.

After that we change the subject and talk about happier things, like Rick and Jess finally getting the baby they deserve. Parker makes all the right noises, but something seems off with her. I don’t get a chance to ask her what’s going on as Aidan strides back in followed by Zak and Maddox.

“What’s going on? Where are Frankie and Carter?” I ask, looking down the corridor for them.

“Going a few rounds in the ring,” Zak says, then adds, “Braver fucking man than me. Carter is wired.”

“He’s fine, Star,” Aidan says attempting to calm me at the look of obvious apprehension on my face. “Once he calms down, we need to discuss plans for tonight.”

I tune them out as they chat, contemplating whether to go and find Carter, but the mention of a name pulls me back from my thoughts.

“Did you say Kingsman?” I ask Aidan, interrupting him and Maddox.

“Yeah. Do you know the name?”

I nod. “I’ve heard it recently. Are they connected?”

“Possibly,” Aidan states with a nod.

I turn to Roxy. “Hey, can I borrow your phone?” She frowns, then hands her phone to me. “Give me a minute,” I say before walking over to the sofa to make a call.

It rings several times before going to voicemail, and I leave a quick message.

“Toni, it’s Star. Give me a call on this number as soon as you can.” I end the call and head back over to give Roxy her phone.

Aidan, Maddox and Roxy are all looking at me, waiting for an explanation.

“My best friend Toni’s dad is dating a Lillian Kingsman, who has a son called Knight Kingsman.” I roll my eyes and smile remembering Toni’s words about naming your kid Knight.

“You think she knows something?” Aidan asks, his eyes narrowing.

“No, I don’t. I just need to make sure she’s okay.”

Roxy's phone rings, and she holds it out to me. "Think it's for you," she says.

I take it recognising Toni's number. "Hey," I answer, but her shouting cuts me off.

"Jesus Christ where have you been? You go missing for fucking days, then call me with a casual fucking 'hey'! I almost reported you missing, Star."

"I'm sorry. I'm fine. I had a few things I needed to take care of. You okay?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"We'll next time you need to take care of *things*, how about you take care of keeping your bestie informed first, huh? And I'm fine," she says with a sigh.

"You don't sound fine," I press, sitting on the end of the chaise lounge. "What's going on?"

"Ugh, Knight fucking Kingsman, who else. He's everywhere I turn."

"Why? I don't understand."

"There was a flood at mine, and I'm staying at my dad's until it's sorted."

"Oh," I say.

"'Oh' is fucking right. Let's go for lunch, Star. Rescue me from this nightmare," she pleads down the line.

"Er..." I hesitate, looking at Roxy, who is pretending she isn't listening in on my conversation. "Give me an hour. Where?"

"Well, we can't go to Gambino's after what happened there last week"—I wince and a shudder runs through me at the memory—"How about the little Greek place? We haven't been there in ages, and I could eat some Tzatziki. Maybe the garlic will keep Knight away from me."

"He's not a fucking vampire, Toni," I say laughing.

"No, maybe not. But he's a disgusting pig. I'll see you in an hour," she says and ends the call.

“Shit!” I mutter, tapping the phone on my knee, because now I have to convince everyone to let me go and meet her.

I’m just formulating a solid argument when Roxy drops down in the seat next to me.

“What are you up to?”

I hand her phone back, turning to face her more. “I want to go and meet up with Toni. And don’t say anything till you’ve heard me out,” I say as she opens her mouth to protest. Before I can explain any further, Aidan comes over.

“How involved are the Kingsmans?” I ask him as he stands there, arms folded and looking between the two of us.

“Enough to pique my interest. Why?”

I explain about Toni staying with her dad and that Knight is also staying there, then I lay it on thick that she needs to vent and maybe she’s heard or seen something that might be useful, plus I can field her curiosity, which knows no bounds, about where I’ve been.

He’s silent for too long, and I’m certain he’s going to say no, but to my surprise, he agrees.

“You’re not going alone.”

“Goes without saying.” I roll my eyes.

“Going where?” demands a voice behind Aidan.

And now I realise that it’s not Aidan or even Roxy that I needed to worry about. It’s Carter.

“We’re going out for lunch,” I say and get to my feet. When I step around Aidan, Carter is there, eyes narrowed and shirtless with blood dripping from a cut above his eye. “What the fuck, Carter!”

I march forward, snatching his chin and tilting his head to get a better look. He pulls away, catching my hand as it falls from his face, and my eyes land on Frankie.

“Okay, you two have some serious issues.” I shake my head as I take in his split lip and the beginning of a black eye. “We have an hour, so let’s go get cleaned up.”

“The food here is good. We’ve been a few times with Rick and Jess,” Maddox says as we step from the car.

Turns out that what Aidan really meant when he said I wasn’t going alone was I would be taking a small entourage with me. Roxy and Zak join Maddox and Carter and I outside the small taverna style restaurant simply named Athena’s.

Carter is wearing a frown like a damn forcefield around him, add the cut from his boxing match with Frankie earlier and you have yourself the most unapproachable guy ever. Not a great first impression for Toni, but we are here. Hopefully having Roxy here with the guys will keep her somewhat distracted.

“Roxy?” I question as she scans the street.

Her eyes come back to mine, and she gives me a gentle shake of her head indicating it’s nothing. Carter walks along beside me, his hand resting in the small of my back.

We are greeted by the mouthwatering scent of something sizzling on the grill mixed with aromatic notes of garlic and oregano. The air is tainted with a hint of aniseed as a waiter passes carrying a tray of Ouzo shots. The classic white and blue decor and simple wooden tables and chairs could almost have you believe you’re on a Greek island.

The waitress greets us and leads us to a large table in the conservatory come orangery with a glass ceiling that from the looks of it can be opened in the summer allowing the beautiful grape vine blossoms to scent the air. She hands out menus to each of us, and I explain that we are waiting for another guest before we order.

“Entàxei, entàxei. Okay, we wait,” she says in a combination of Greek and English.

When she returns a few minutes later, we order some drinks, but there’s still no sign of Toni. It’s not like her to be

late. She's the friend that arrives ten minutes early to everything.

Conversation around the table is a low rumble of nothing important, but my anxiety rises with every second that passes.

"Let me try calling her," I say to Roxy, holding out my hand for her phone.

No answer. I try again. Still no answer. I send her a message asking where she is and telling her to call me.

I place the phone down on the table and stare at it for the next ten minutes, willing it to ring or buzz with a message but it doesn't.

When the waitress returns this time, we go ahead and order.

"I'm sure she's just running late and will be here soon. We may as well eat now we are here," Roxy tells me after I reluctantly give my order to the waitress.

Carter's hand on my thigh startles me. He gives it a squeeze trying to reassure me.

"Something must be wrong, Carter. She's never late."

He leans into me. "Eat, then if you still haven't heard from her, we'll go and look for her."

I can't figure out if he's serious or just trying to placate me. He reads my thoughts effortlessly.

"I'm serious, princess," he states with a wicked smirk, knowing I hate it when he calls me that.

"You know I hate that," I tell him tersely, shifting to the side as the waitress places my food down in front of me.

"The use of princess, or the fact I can read you so well?"

"Both," I counter, pulling a laugh from him and drawing the attention of the others.

"Careful there, Carter, you'll break the mould," Maddox mocks deadpan, but it lightens the mood enough for me to at least eat even if I don't really taste it.

There is still no sign of Toni or answer from her phone by the time we finish eating, and my anxiety has grown into a tangled mass of worry.

I try one last time as the table is cleared, but this time it doesn't even ring. I hand Roxy's phone back to her with a heavy sigh.

"I just need to use the toilet. I'll meet you out the front," I tell them all as I push my chair back under the table.

The small corridor is quiet as I make my way to the toilets, but I can make out the faint sound of tinkling cutlery and pans crashing coming from the kitchen.

My mind is distracted with thoughts of where Toni is as I wash my hands and dry them under the dryer. It's a crap dryer, and I give up before my hands are completely dry. I'm wiping my hands down my legs to dry them off fully as I exit, so I don't notice the guy exiting the men's toilet as I make my way back down the corridor.

As I close in on the door, angry voices reach me and my footsteps slow. I can hear Carter and a voice I don't recognise, but I don't have time to think about it when there's a sharp tug on my ponytail. My head is yanked back, causing me to cry out, and something blunt digs into my side, silencing me immediately.

The voices up ahead are louder now, and I can hear Carter's angry cursing as the guy behind me shoves me forward, leading me with his hand wrapped tightly in my hair.

I can't see much with my head at this angle, but as we pass the door frame, he loosens his grip enough to allow me to look ahead, but he gives me a hard dig in my side with the gun I know he's holding there, just as a reminder for me to behave.

Carter and Maddox are standing next to our table, their faces hard and furious, eyes narrowed. Carter's jaw ticks as his eyes meet mine, and he steps forward, but the second he moves, a voice off to my right stops him.

"Ah, ah, you don't want to do that, Carter," he says, my eyes flicking sideways to try and get a look at him. The hand

at my hair tightens again, stopping me, and all I can see is him raise a finger and point at Carter.

Looking back to Carter, I finally spot what he was pointing at. There in the centre of his chest is a small red dot, the sight from a sniper rifle.

“Let her fucking go, Rook,” Carter says, pushing the words out past his clenched jaw, his hands fisted at his sides.

Rook tilts his head, bringing a finger up to his mouth as though contemplating the idea. He looks to me then back at Carter.

“I don’t think that’s going to work for me. You see, you owe me.”

“I don’t owe you fucking shit. You want me, I’m here, but leave her the fuck out of it.”

Rook looks over to me, then waves his hand to the guy holding me, beckoning him forward. I dig my feet in, refusing to move.

“I’m sorry but it seems she doesn’t care whether you live or die,” Rook says, his tone hyperbolically apologetic. Before I can back track and stop him, a shot rings out followed by a scream, a wail of terror and grief as the body of our waitress hits the ground in a heap.

“Now let’s try that again.” He waves his hand for me to come to him. “Unless of course you want me to reunite mother and daughter?” he says, waving his gun in the direction of the older woman now sobbing uncontrollably as she cradles her dead daughter in her arms.

I hadn’t even realised they were there. Before grief and sorrow, first came relief. I thought he was talking about Maddox or Carter. This time I move without hesitation. As I come to a stop, Rook turns to face me, and I get a proper look at him.

His hair is shorn short like Carter’s, but the right side of his head is scarred. There is a large surgical incision that runs up from behind his ear to the centre of his scalp along with a deep cleft in the side of his head. His right eye is partially a

white hazy shade, and it reminds me of Erica's. This explains how he was able to connect with her so easily, to gain her trust and for her to fall for his bullshit. His good eye is a dark hazel that watches everything. It's eerie as fuck and reminds me of the Eye of Sauron in *Lord of the Rings*.

"You fucking touch her—"

"And what, Carter? You going to shoot me again? I don't think so," he says with a mocking laugh. "You have no moves left to play. Star's big sister and plaything number one are outside enjoying the company of a couple of my friends, you know, entertaining them. While we have a nice little chat. But I never was one for small talk. Much like you. It's how Lennox made us right?" He nods to himself, then stretches out his neck like he's irritated by something.

"Oh for the love of fucking god shut the fuck up, bitch," he shouts, rolling his eyes, then points his gun and pulls the trigger.

I can't help flinching and squeezing my eyes closed as the other woman slumps over her daughter's body, and the asshole behind me chuckles in my ear. "Aww, what's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Thank fuck for that. I can finally think!" Rook says, smacking the heel of his hand on the side of his head a couple of times. "Where was I? Yes, that's right, little Star, or... should I call you Anastasia?" He raises a hand to touch my cheek, running a fingertip down it and under my chin.

Bile rises, instantly souring inside my mouth as the name washes over me.

"That's not my name," I snap, spitting the words at him like they are daggers and shoving his hand away from my face. He scowls at me, fury flicking in his eyes for a moment. But then it's gone. Replaced by something that chills me to my core.

"No?" he says questioningly, but the cruel smirk that curls his lip says there is no question. "It's the name I remember."

I feel sick. Memories force their way into my mind and cold seeps into my bones, freezing my breath inside my chest. I can hear Carter calling my name, but it's all just white noise.

“My brother and his friend couldn't stop talking about you. Little girls don't do it for me, but you're quite something now...” His words trail off as he appraises me, then he shrugs, ignoring the threats from both Carter and Maddox. I can't take my eyes off him. In my mind they are burning through his skull and slicing his brain into tiny fucking pieces, but my body is frozen, locked in place by fear. My stomach knots, desperate to empty its contents, but I refuse to let it, swallowing it back down.

“Fuck you,” I croak, my voice trembling, and it's all I can manage.

A hand connects with my face, stinging my cheek and forcing my head to the side. The move yanks at the guy's hold on my hair, causing my scalp to scream in protest.

Carter and Maddox are being held back by two of Rook's men, but it's the red dot dancing across their chests that has me relenting.

“Stop!” I yell, gaining Rook's attention. “Leave them, and I'll come with you,” I tell him.

He grins wide. “Oh I know you will. But just to be sure you understand...” He gives a nod, and another shot rings out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CARTER



“I’m going to fucking kill you, Rook! Get your fucking hands off her, you son of a fucking bitch!” My words are like drops of rain in an ocean—meaningless, inconsequential. A drop in the fucking ocean. And right now, Rook is the ocean. He holds something more precious to me than my life. I know there’s a sniper sight on me and Maddox, he knows it too, but it doesn’t stop us from fighting.

“Stop!” I hear Star yell, and it’s like time ceases. “Leave them, and I’ll go with you.”

“Noooo! Star, don’t do this,” I roar, turning and landing a hit to the guy behind me.

Pop!

“Arrrgh!” Maddox bellows, stumbling backward as the bullet connects with his body. The guy he was fighting with releases him, letting him fall to the floor.

“Maddox! Oh my god, Maddox!” Star’s voice echoes around the room as my vision narrows.

“Star! Star!” I watch as she struggles against the hold of the guy behind her, tears streaming down her face.

“I’d say this is checkmate, Carter, but Anastasia’s mate is much more fitting, don’t you think?” Rook laughs as he walks away.

“I’m sorry,” Star sobs as she’s dragged further out of my reach.

I don't get a chance to go after her as the guy I hit leaps on my back, wrapping an arm around my throat.

I fling my arms up, grabbing the back of his neck, then I bend over, throwing him to the floor. I'm on him in a second, pounding and pummeling my fists into his face until it's nothing but a bloody pulp attached to his body.

Loud, panicked voices fill the room. Hands touch me, trying to drag me back.

"Don't fucking touch me!" I growl, jumping to my feet and stepping back from the bloodied mass on the floor.

My eyes dance around the room, taking in Maddox, who is sitting up as Roxanne holds several napkins to his shoulder, to the two dead women on the floor, mother and daughter innocents, to the guy who was fighting Maddox that is now lying in a pool of his own blood.

My chest heaves with exertion, but my heart feels like a lead fucking weight inside my chest.

I throw my head up to the ceiling and roar out an anguished cry.

One filled with pain and anger and so much hate. It fills every empty space it can find inside me.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," Zak says as I run out of breath, letting my head drop forward to my chest.

I hear the sirens in the distance, and I wish I didn't give a fuck. But I can't do anything from a prison cell.

And I'm going to do something.

I'm going to level this fucking city. I'm going to be the grim reaper, a shadow, the stealer of life and breath.

Manchester is going to become a city of the dead.

Frankie has just finished dressing Maddox's gunshot wound as the door slams and pounding footsteps rumble down the

corridor. It's like thunder rolling in.

I turn, preparing for Aidan's wrath—it's not a fucking patch on my own—and I'm met with a punch to the face.

And another.

And another.

“You let him just walk out the fucking door with her! I'll fucking kill you, you spineless mother fucker!”

His hits, his words, they make their mark. Chipping away at my guilt. And just like sixteen years ago, I failed someone I love.

I don't even bother trying to hit him back. No, I'm saving all that pent up fury, all the soul eating guilt and the hate for those that deserve it.

Because while the outcome is the same—I failed Star—I have something I didn't have sixteen years ago.

Sixteen years ago, all I had was a broken heart, grief and a whole lot of rage.

Now I have knowledge. I have resources.

And I have a woman who is the other half of me.

The very fucking heart of me.

“Fuck, Aidan, stop! Aidan!” Roxanne shouts.

I see the next hit coming through blurred vision, but it never lands.

“Whoa! Enough!” Maddox shouts as Frankie and Zak pull Aidan away.

He shoves them off him. “It is not enough! Why the fuck is he still breathing?” he sneers, pointing a finger at me as he looks to Roxanne.

I spit a mouthful of blood on the floor and swipe a hand across my mouth.

“He's still breathing because it wasn't his fault. And if we want to get her back, then you need him.”

“The fuck I do!” he roars, pulling his gun and pointing it at me.

Parker steps in front of him, laying a hand on his arm, and he slowly lowers the gun, but he doesn't take his fierce stare from me.

“Aidan, enough. Now is not the time to be fighting amongst each other,” she tells him.

Roxanne hands me a tea towel, and I take it, mopping up the blood dripping from my nose and split lip.

“You good?” she asks, and I give her a nod. “We have more important things to talk about,” Roxanne states, levelling Maddox with a stare.

After we arrived back at the church and Roxanne had calmed down enough to listen to reason, Maddox explained what happened while Frankie saw to his gunshot.

I wasn't really listening, that was up until the point Maddox mentioned Rook knowing her real name. That in itself isn't the issue. Most people who know the Lawlers and Kavanagh know she's Roxanne's sister, but Rook's allusion to a brother who knew her as a child and after she was taken... That shit fucking had me listening.

“He called her Anastasia, Aidan. He talked about a brother, friends that mentioned her when she was held at the compound,” Maddox explains carefully, his nostrils flaring and mouth turned down in a grim sneer.

I thought I was mad when he touched her, hit her, forced her into going with him, but it's nothing to what the thought of what else he knows, what his brother and friends know, what they did to her.

“That's not possible,” Aidan says, shaking his head. “We destroyed everyone that ever had anything to do with that place.”

“Obviously fucking not!” I snap, tossing the towel in the sink and leaning back against it to face the room. After a moment, I push away from the counter and march for the door.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Aidan hollers after me.

“Out.” I hurry to the car, jumping in and peeling out of there before anyone can even make it outside.

I dig my phone from my pocket and hit call. Rook’s men took our guns but didn’t take our phones. No doubt he has a reason. Like me, Rook doesn’t do anything unless there’s a valid reason.

“Where are you?” I bark as soon as the call connects.

“Yeah, I’m good thanks, Carter. How—”

“Cut the fucking shit and just tell me where you are,” I demand, cutting Lennox’s sarcasm short.

“I’m at home,” he replies gruffly, but reading my mood well.

“I’ll be there in ten.” I end the call and floor it.

Nine minutes later, I pull into the underground car park again. It’s a little emptier than earlier, and my guess is Lennox sent most of the Shadows home while he cleans house.

Once inside, I pace the lift, willing it to hurry the fuck up as it climbs to the top floor. The lift stops, and as the doors whoosh open, I squeeze through the gap impatiently.

“Lennox?” I call as I stride into the main living area.

“Here,” he says from behind me, and I turn to find him pouring a couple of whiskeys. He doesn’t look up as I approach, simply pushes a glass toward me.

I contemplate it for a moment, then decide it will look better painting the walls of his kitchen. My arm sweeps across the counter, flinging the glasses across the room. They hit the wall, glass shattering and whiskey running like a stream down the wall.

Only I see a river of blood.

Lennox jumps back. “Whoa, what the fuck, Carter!”

I stalk toward him, every muscle in my body locked tight. His eyes scan my face, across my split lip and bloody nose,

and he frowns, eyes widening as my intentions become clear.

“Carter,” he says nervously. Not an emotion I’ve ever associated with Lennox before. But then I’ve never had my sights set on him.

“Who is Rook?” I ask.

He looks confused for a second, then stands tall, crossing his arms. “You know I can’t tell you that, Carter,” he says, tone firm.

“Can’t or won’t?” I tilt my head. “Sounds to me like you have something to hide.” I don’t give him time to answer before I’m speaking again. Keeping calm is becoming increasingly difficult. “You told me you knew who Star was when I asked you. And you obviously know who Rook is, and where he came from because you and Harrison did all the recruiting. Right?” He nods, and I watch as his Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. “Okay, so that leads me to think you know there’s a link between Rook’s and Star’s pasts?” I pose it like a question, but it’s far from it.

I give him a minute hoping he’ll make the right choice. When it’s obvious he’s not going to tell me, I step into him, almost nose to nose and poke a finger into his chest, I add, “He took her, Lennox. He fucking took her and shot Maddox, so whatever false fucking loyalty you think you owe him, or guilt you’re trying to absolve, fuck that!”

His arms come up quick, knocking my hand away. There’s only one way this is going to go.

I swallow down the betrayal I feel. “That’s how it is, huh? Okay then,” I tell him, and before he can respond, my fist meets hard toned muscle as it connects with his stomach. I follow it with another jab to the right kidney.

His responding left hook to my jaw knocks my head back, sending black dots dancing in my eyes. But I know Lennox. This is not the first time we’ve come to blows.

“I gave you my fucking life,” I snap, ploughing another fist into the centre of his solar plexus. “Sold my fucking soul for you. And this is the fucking thanks I get. Well fuck you,

man!” We dance around one another until he gives me an in, then I strike. “Fuck. You!” My words are punctuated with two quick jabs to his face, bone crunching beneath my fist and blood spraying from his nose.

It’s a short won victory as he parries with a couple of kidney jabs that have me wincing, and I barely miss the swinging right hook, stepping back as his fist misses me by an inch and casting a cool whoosh of air over my face.

“It’s complicated,” Lennox grits out between heavy breaths.

“Not fucking complicated, Lennox. The guy killed Harrison. You didn’t hesitate then to terminate him, yet here you fucking are now protecting him. What the fuck gives, man?” I ask, spinning away from him and landing a punch of my own to his left kidney. The hit takes the breath from him, and he stumbles, bent over and holding his side.

I don’t waste a fucking second of his vulnerability, kicking the back of his knee and causing his leg to buckle. He twists awkwardly as he falls, falling to his back and hitting the floor with a heavy thud. I pull the blade sheathed under my trouser leg, slamming a foot down on his chest. The tip of my knife meets the underside of his chin as he tries to sit up.

I raise my brows. “Name. Give me a fucking name, Lennox!”

He drops his head back to the floor with a heavy sigh. “His real name is Ralph Matthews.”

“Wasn’t so fucking hard now, was it? Family?” I ask, pressing my foot down on his chest when he doesn’t answer straight away.

“Father dead. His mother had another family, but she disappeared after their son was murdered.”

“What else? How does he know about Star?” Movement by the door catches my attention, but I keep my eyes on Lennox. I don’t need to look.

“Carter...” Frankie says, a warning in his tone.

“No, Frankie. He’s fucking protecting the bastard that killed your brother,” I say, stretching my neck as the tip of my blade nicks Lennox’s chin, causing him to wince. “The same cunt that took my fucking woman!”

“I know, but this isn’t going to solve anything, Carter,” Frankie says moving further into the room.

“It’s not him I’m protecting,” Lennox admits, his eyes bore into mine, imploring me to understand.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter. You—”

“It fucking matters, Lennox. Who the fuck are you protecting?”

“He’s protecting me,” comes a female voice from behind us.

Frankie pulls his gun, pointing it at the woman now standing in the doorway. I hear Lennox curse as my eyes meet hers.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Sloane?” Frankie says disbelieving and lowering his gun.

“Hey, Frankie. It’s been a while,” she says, cautiously stepping further into the room.

Lennox pushes my hand holding the knife out of the way, and I remove my foot, allowing him to get to his feet.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he protests, striding toward her. I hear a deep growl come from Frankie as they hug.

“It was time. I can’t hide anymore.”

“Somebody want to tell me what the fuck is going on here?” I shout, looking between them all.

“Carter, I’m Sloane Thatcher.” My head whips to Frankie at hearing his last name as he stands with his hands on his hips and looking murderous. “But I used to be Sloane Matthews. I’m Rook’s mother.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

STAR



“Maddox! Oh my god, Maddox!” I yell as he falls to the floor. Carter screams my name as hair is ripped from my head as I struggle against the guy’s hold on me.

“Shut the fuck up before I finish him off,” Rook threatens before turning back to call something out to Carter as the asshole behind me drags me away.

“I’m sorry,” I sob, tears running freely down my face. I’m forced down a corridor and outside where my hands are tied behind my back before I’m shoved into the back of a car.

Rook joins me, and I scramble across the seat away from him. I twist and turn until I’m in an almost sitting position, my head resting against the window. My chest aches. Silent tears continue to fall.

Rook looks over to me, a predatory gleam in his eyes. He turns slightly to face me.

“I enjoyed that. But I think I might just enjoy you a little more,” he whispers, his hand reaching out and trailing a path up my leg.

Every muscle in my body tenses at his touch, and I draw my leg up out of his reach. But he’s quicker, snatching my ankle with a sneer.

“No need to fret. What I have planned for you requires a much larger space than the inside of this car. I have something special planned for you, Anastasia.” His grip on my ankle tightens for a second before he releases me, tugging at the sleeve of his suit jacket.

I bunch myself up as small as possible into the corner. Everything in me is fighting not to vomit. It's a battle I don't think I can win if he continues to call me Anastasia.

While my body fights its own battle, my mind attempts to focus on where we are going and anything that might help later. I watch through the front windscreen as we head through town, passing the Trafford Centre and into Irlam. This is where the meet is meant to go down tonight. I don't know this area at all, except that it's 51 Squad territory, so I try to pick out memorable places.

The car slows and we turn into a large driveway. The house in front is huge, more like a hotel. A sign covered by overgrown hedges claims it's the old rectory house. A shiver runs up my spine at the irony.

Rook laughs beside me having followed my line of sight. "Not a fan of church buildings?"

"I've always found them sinister," I say, trying to keep any inflection other than disgust from my voice. His question could be completely innocent. At least I'm hoping it is because the alternative doesn't bare thinking about.

"You won't be here long," he says as the car comes to a stop. He gets out, and I let out a deep breath. But it's short lived as he ducks back in and leans down, reaching forward until he grasps my ankle again. I tense, anchoring my other foot into the leather seat and preparing for what's coming.

Rook gives a small tug, testing the water, before yanking so hard he nearly dislocates my hip. He drags me along the seat. Terror seizes control of me, mind and body, and I know once I'm inside that building, I will be fully at his mercy. I'll become the eight-year-old girl who witnessed the murder of her mother and was then kidnapped, taken to a place filled with unimaginable misery and sadness. A place so evil, so insidiously vile and unholy even the dead don't stick around to haunt its corridors.

Ignoring the cost, I slam my other foot into his face. I keep on kicking even after he lets me go, cupping his face and

roaring his rage. I'm so distracted enjoying Rook's cursing that I don't hear the door behind me opening.

Hands grab at me from behind, pulling me back by my t-shirt. I have no way to stop it, and a second later, my arse hits the gravel with an oomph. Before I have a second to catch my breath, I'm being dragged along the ground, stones digging into my backside and legs. I dig my heels into the ground, but it does nothing except scorch a path through the gravel.

My back hits something hard—a step—then another guy appears in front of me, snatching up my legs and lifting me. I twist and turn, struggling to get free. The sharp ripping of fabric fills my ears as my t-shirt tears. Hair covers my face, sticking to my wet face and making it impossible to see anything as I continue to fight, but it's pointless. As I'm carried over the threshold, a shadow falls over me, filling me with despair.

“Lock her the fuck up! I'll deal with her later,” Rook commands beside me. Fingers swipe through the hair on my face until I can see him. His face is smeared with blood, and a little spark of satisfaction blooms inside me. “I have the queen, and now it's time to clear the board and take out the king.”

I laugh, a slightly unhinged, mocking chuckle that has Rook contemplating me with a small frown before ordering his men to take me away. He thinks I'm the queen, but he's wrong.

I'm the poisoned pawn.

He's captured me thinking I'm his winning piece, but I remember the conversation about sacrificing a pawn to gain an advantage. I just hope that Carter and Maddox realise it too.

I quit struggling as Rook's men carry me through to a large room. I don't even put up a fight as they place me in the chair at the centre of the room, snapping metal cuffs around my wrists and ankles, and I shove back at the memory of the last time I was placed in a position like this. Of the poor girl forced to endure abuse as I was made to watch. My every denial to do as they commanded resulted in her suffering.

I understand it now. It's a sick and twisted way to breed resentment among the girls while the men were free to abuse us without a fight.

I close my eyes, shaking my head and try to block out thoughts of what my capture will mean for me and think only of how it will help my family and Carter. I know how this goes. I survived before—twice—and I'll fucking survive again. I have to.

I ignore their verbal jibes and crude comments as they circle me like sharks. I even manage to not flinch when they run their hands over my face, neck, shoulders and up my thighs. When they don't get the rise from me they were hoping for, they leave.

My breath bursts from my starved lungs as they close the door, and I take a moment to breathe deeply and calm my racing heart. My mind is going to be my biggest enemy here and the victor if I let it.

Focused enough, I raise my head and take in the room. It's a large dining hall that once would have been filled with tables and chairs, but now stands empty except for me. The back wall holds a serving hatch, which is closed.

Time ticks by slowly and the light from outside begins to fade to an orange glow as the sun sets. As the last bit of light vanishes, the door opens and in walks Rook flanked by another guy. I don't recognise him, but the large 51 tattooed on the side of his neck makes me think this is Fraser Mack, leader of the 51 Squad.

They stop in front of me as two other men enter dragging a girl between them. She struggles against their hold, begging them to stop, to let her go. I don't recognise her voice and relief shoots through me that it's not Toni. My heart plummets though because I know... I know what this is. My hands ball into fists as my palms sweat, causing the metal cuffs to dig into my wrists.

"Ain't you a pretty little thing," the guy with Rook drawls as he reaches out and snatches hold of a strand of hair, twirling it around his finger.

I keep my eyes on him as the other two men stop at the side of me.

Rook slaps a hand on his shoulder. “Fraser, meet Star, but I like to call her Anastasia. Really gets her going.”

“So, I’ve heard. The boys at the club house would like her. I think she’d be the perfect club whore when we’re done with her.”

My throat tightens, and a coldness spreads through my body as nausea swims in my gut. A cry to the left is like a bolt to my chest, and I swallow down the knot of guilt I feel already.

“I think we can do that,” Rook agrees before looking over to the two guys and the girl, giving them a nod. Then he and Fraser move to the right as the two other guys move in front of me with the girl.

“I heard that you’re good at this game, Anastasia. You were quite accommodating according to Aaron, but let’s see.”

The name sends another wave of nausea rolling over me and a cold sweat breaks out across my forehead.

“Come on now, Anastasia, my special little girl. Open up or Daisy over there is going to pay the price for your defiance.”

I shake my head as he pushes himself forward, but the scream that echoes around the room has me opening my mouth.

The memory slams into me, and I can’t hold back the heave that seizes me. My stomach tightens, trying to expel the vomit that is swirling inside my gut. I hold on to it—barely, while Rook and Fraser look on amused.

I try not to look at what the two men are doing to the young girl they are holding, but Fraser steps forward, snatching hold of my chin and forcing my head up so I have no choice.

“What does Carter know?” he demands.

I stare straight ahead, but I'm not seeing the girl or what is happening. My mind has shut down and is somewhere else completely. I pray to God, any fucking god, for forgiveness for what I'm about to do.

She screams again, but it's met by laughter and whispered words of perversion and vile promise.

"I asked you a fucking question. What does Carter know? Does he know about tonight?" Fraser's fingers tighten their hold on my chin, squashing my lips together in an almost pout.

"Fuck you!" I say, the words coming out like a growl forced up from my throat.

Fraser snarls, snapping my head to him and raising it to look into his eyes. "Wrong fucking answer, *Anastasia*," he sneers, slapping my face then turns me back to watch.

But I don't watch. I lock my mind away somewhere else, somewhere safe, while they torture and assault her.

Rook steps in before they go too far, realising that I'm not going to give them what they want no matter what they do. Fraser isn't happy Rook put a stop to it, and it gives me a look at the dynamics of their relationship and their character.

Fraser is ruthless and would happily have subjected that girl to anything if he thought it would give him the answers he wants, but Rook is smart.

He understands that I know what he was trying to do, but I'm not a scared little girl anymore. If he'd have tried this ten years ago, even five years ago, he may have got what he wanted. Not now though.

"What the fuck you doing?" Fraser demands, releasing me and stomping toward Rook.

"She's not going to give anything up, Fraser. That's if she knows anything in the first place."

"You ain't going to find out if you fucking quit before we get to the good bit," he sneers in Rook's face.

"Get her out of here," Rook barks to the two guys, who look just as pissed as Fraser. They drag the girl toward the

door, her clothes torn and bloodied and her head hung down.

I wish I could feel relieved, but I know that they'll do what they want to her anyway without the audience. Just like I know they would have even if I'd given up what I know.

“Have you at least found the fucking sister?” Fraser asks, his voice low but I catch it.

Rook shakes his head. “No, but I'm working on it. For now, we go ahead as planned. You take your guys to meet Pavel and leave Carter to me.”

“And Lennox?” Fraser asks as Rook turns to leave.

I keep my expression blank, dropping my head to my chest as I continue to listen in on their conversation without giving anything away.

“Taken care of, Fraser. She”—I see from under the curtain of my hair as Rook points to me—“is nothing more than incentive and a way to twist the fucking knife in for Carter. As Erica will be.”

Footsteps draw closer until I can see Rook's shoes toe to toe with my own. A hand wraps in my hair and slowly raises my head. He grins down at me.

“I can't wait to see how long Carter holds out later while you suffer the same fate as that poor girl. And to think, you could have saved her so much pain if you'd just answered the questions.”

He lets me go, and he and Fraser walk out the door.

Alone, guilt cuts through me with ease as I process what I just let that poor girl suffer to save another, and I let the sobs break free, silently wracking my body.

But this is different to back then. I wasn't sacrificing someone I love. I was sacrificing myself to prevent others from suffering. I was a child, and I was scared. I thought that by submitting to their demands I was helping the other girls, but all I was doing was giving the men what they wanted. Indulging their vile perversions and sick fantasies. The other

girls never thanked me, and most of them weren't so quick to return the favour.

I may not have been there long, but it was long enough to leave a bone deep scar on my soul, physically and mentally, and even emotionally to some degree. It stunted my ability to emotionally connect with people, particularly girls.

A little while later, loud voices and heavy footsteps reach me from outside the door as they pass by. As silence fills the space again, the door creaks open, casting a sliver of light from the hall before a shadow fills the doorway.

“It's game time, Anastasia.”

I visibly shudder at him using my old name, and he chuckles because he knows the affect it has on me. A second guy unlocks the cuffs at my ankles then wrists, and I consider the possibility of making a run for it.

“Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Haven't you been wondering where your friend got to earlier?”

I fail at masking my emotions, and that just makes Rook all the more pleased.

“She's currently sitting in a hospital waiting room full of worry over her father. They say it's touch and go as to whether he'll pull through you know.”

The guy finishes unlocking the last cuff, then hooks an arm under mine and pulls me to my feet.

“You wouldn't want her to be in a bed next to her father now, would you? Let's go.”

I'm ushered along by the other guy as Rook leads us to the front door and a waiting car. Once again, I'm bundled in the back with Rook.

I feel his eyes on me and turn to him. “What?”

“Curiosity,” he says, tilting his head at me.

I look away not wanting to feed his damn curiosity about anything. I can't quite figure out if he was always this deranged or if the bullet to his brain made him this way.

“I imagine witnessing the murder of your mother so brutally had quite an impact on you.”

I close my eyes and breathe deeply through my nose to calm my racing heart. It’s the only acknowledgment I give that I heard his statement.

“Not to mention what my brother and his friends did to you. It’s a wonder you aren’t locked up in a mental hospital, too traumatised to function normally.”

His attempt at triggering me earlier didn’t work how he wanted, so now he’s trying the psychological path. Trying to get inside my head.

“Your point?” I ask, finally turning back and giving him my focus.

A small curl of his lip shows he thinks he has me. “No point, Anastasia, just making conversation. You know, I understand how hard it must have been to grow up without a mother.” When I don’t respond, looking away again, he continues regardless. “She wasn’t around much when I was a kid. Too busy making a new family.” His tone is bitter and full of resentment. “After Aaron was murdered, she vanished. Poof, gone. I had my father of course, but a man is no substitute for a mother.”

I roll my eyes at the insinuating cliché. “Let me guess, you blame her for the way you turned out?”

He laughs; it’s a deep mocking laugh. “No, no, that doesn’t make any sense now, does it? If that were true, you’d be a drug addicted whore like your mother.” He pauses, as though waiting for me to respond, but I give him nothing. It’s not like his words aren’t the truth. “No, my mother holds a gold medal for being responsible for making me a Shadow, but the trophy for who I am today goes to Carter fucking Beckett. And tonight, he’s going to pay the price,” he finishes as his phone rings, and we come to a stop.

“Tell me what I want to hear,” he snaps down the line. He’s quiet for a moment as he listens, then there’s a loud thud

as his fist slams sideways into the car door. “And there’s no way to get in? ...Fuck!”

He ends the call and exits the car, slamming the door behind him. I watch as he paces, holding the phone to his ear again before he begins shouting when whoever he’s calling answers. It’s muffled, but I make out Erica’s name before he walks too far away for me to hear anything more.

I look at the driver, but his focus is straight ahead. I think about trying the door, but then dismiss that idea because even if it’s unlocked, how far am I going to get with Rook already outside the car. Instead, I look around the car for anything I can use as a weapon or give me an idea of what Rook has planned.

I’m just lowering the armrest between the backseat when light fills the sky to the left followed by a loud explosion.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CARTER



“That’s fantastic but unless you can tell me where the fuck your son is, this little...reunion will have to wait.” I’m shocked that Rook’s mum is here, but I’m even more shocked that she is friends with Lennox and married to Frankie. This is fucking insane.

“I don’t know where he is, but I do know that the meet with Pavel is a trap.”

“If you came out of hiding just to share that, then you shouldn’t have bothered. Not to mention whose mother you are!” I snarl, thinking about her being Aaron’s mother too. A man that... I shake the thought away.

“Carter,” Lennox and Frankie say at the same time with the same level of warning in their tone.

Interesting.

I point my finger at Frankie. “You knew all this fucking time? I should shoot the pair of you arseholes.”

He scowls at me. “The fuck I did. I’m just as surprised as you are.” His focus turns to Lennox and Sloane.

“It’s Fraser meeting Pavel not Rook. He’ll want you for himself, Carter,” Sloane tells me ignoring the glare Frankie is throwing her way.

“This is bullshit. I need to get in touch with Pavel.” I stalk from the room and call Pavel before I lose it and spill her blood.

“Carter. Now you wish to talk,” he answers sarcastically.

“I don’t have time for your games, Pavel. Tell me about the meet. And don’t think of screwing with me,” I threaten.

As Pavel fills me in on the meet with the buyer, who we now know is Rook posing as Gage Corbin, voices in the other room grow louder and louder.

“It’s a fucking trap, Pavel. You’ve been played. Gage Corbin is Rook, and he and Fraser have been buying up property in your territory while taking you out with ghost guns. Lev and Perry Graham have been dealing right under your fucking nose.”

Once Pavel stops cursing down the phone at me in a mix of Russian and English, I tell him what I want him to do. I don’t mention Sloane, or the fact Rook has Star because even though he’s been betrayed just as I have, I don’t trust him.

While I don’t trust Sloane completely either, I believe her when she said Rook will want me for himself. He’ll want to make me suffer.

I ignore the voice in my head that whispers how he’ll want to make Star suffer too. I can’t afford to let my thoughts run free.

Stepping back into the room, Lennox and Frankie are face to face and throwing insults at one another as Sloane tries to wedge herself in between the pair of them and prevent them from killing each other.

“Shut the fuck up. We don’t have time for this.” They both fall silent, Sloane pushing Frankie away. “Lennox, where’s Shane?”

Lennox drags his eyes away from Frankie and turns to me. “Still in the basement.”

“He give you anything?”

“Did he fuck! But I have his phone.” He pulls a phone from his pocket, checking it’s the right one, then hands it over to me.

I open it and look at his recent messages. The last one he received was from a number with no name attached and telling

him to get it done.

Guessing that's from Rook ordering him to take out Lennox, I type out a reply.

It's done.

The three little dots appear indicating they are typing.

Good. Now make sure Carter knows where to be tonight.

I respond with a copy of an earlier response.

Okay, boss.

Then I scroll up through the messages looking for a clue as to where Rook wants me. I find it a minute later and shake my head.

"Shane still breathing?" I ask Lennox, pocketing the phone.

"Barely. Why?"

"Doesn't matter. I need you to take some Shadows, trustworthy ones, over to the warehouse. Set up out of sight and take those fuckers down when they arrive. All of them!" I say, my tone icy and full of fucking fire.

"When you say all of them, you don't mean—"

I cut Lennox off. "Oh, I do. In the boot of my car are some grenades, and I already know you have some C4. Blow the fucking place. As far as Rook and Fraser know, Shane and his mate took you out, so this will be a nice little surprise for them. Pavel? I don't give a fuck if he gets hit in the crossfire. It's open fucking season."

"Carter, you know that's not how I operate," Lennox says carefully.

"No, but it is how I operate when they take what's fucking mine. I'm not telling you to put a bullet in his head that's your arena"—I raise my brows making sure he doesn't miss my dig—"but if he ends up dead, I won't lose any sleep over it."

Lennox hangs his head, scrubbing a hand over his chin. My phone rings in my pocket as Sloane places a gentle hand on Lennox's arm and whispers something to him. I turn away as I answer, spotting Frankie glaring at the two of them as he leans against the counter with his arms folded and nostrils flaring.

"Roxanne, I'll be back in twenty." I end the call before giving her a chance to bend my fucking ear about where I am.

Lennox and Sloane are still deep in a whispered conversation as I step in front of Frankie.

"Let's go. I need to stop off in the basement first, then I need to get back to the church," I tell Frankie as he lifts his eyes to me. His usual bright eyes are dulled with pain and full of emotion.

"I'm coming with you," Sloane calls behind me.

"Yeah, I don't think so," I reply, turning to face her. "I don't know you or trust you, but aside from that, I'm not so sure you want to be in a house with Star's family." My warning is clear.

"Sloane, that's not a good idea," Lennox adds agreeing with me, but I get the feeling it's not for the same reason.

She waves off his concern. "I can help. He's been looking for me for the last two years, and I..."

"Sloane," Lennox warns.

"You what?" I snap, stepping toward her and looking her up and down. She looks healthy, well dressed, not like someone who has been on the run for years. "You've been missing for almost a decade, and you're the mother of not one but two sons who have hurt someone they love. What could you possibly do to help?"

"I think this is a conversation best left for later. The meet is in a couple of hours, and if you want me at the warehouse, then I need to go now."

"Fine. But I'm still going with Carter and Frankie," Sloane states firmly holding my stare like I didn't just make myself

clear on the subject.

I'm about to refuse for the second time when Frankie says, "I think that's a great fucking idea. You can explain to me why my wife vanished on our wedding night."

"Seems to be her MO," I mock, waving a hand in the air. "I have something I need to take care of before we leave. I'll meet you in the car park in ten minutes."

I stride from the room and head for the basement. The Shadow on the door to Shane's cell gives me a nod and opens it.

My olfactory senses are assaulted by the strong coppery scent of blood and ammonia, and I'm greeted by a sight that feeds some of the fury still churning in my veins.

Shane is strung up and stretched out like Jesus on the cross. There's no crown of thorns or nails hammered through his hands, though it's an image that could easily be a reality. Instead, metal cuffs on chain links attached to carabiners hold his arms out like a star while his ankles are shackled to a spreader bar more synonymous with a BDSM dungeon. That thought has my cock hardening as I picture Star positioned like her name, desperate and begging.

It fans the flames of my own desperation to get her back. And I fucking will.

I take in his naked torso smeared with bloody slashes, but it's the torn flesh on his left pec where his Shadow Guard tattoo used to be that catches my attention. My own tattoo in the same spot tingles at the sight.

It reminds me of a scene from *Sons of Anarchy* only without the charred smell of burnt flesh. Shane raises his head as my footsteps echo over the concrete floor, showing me his battered face.

Before I came down here, I had contemplated all the ways I could torture this son of a bitch, but as I look at him now, I don't want to.

All I want is to end him then go get my fucking woman. The more time I waste here with this cocksucker means more

time Star has to endure whatever Rook is doing to her—a shudder runs through me at the thought—and the less time I have to plan all the ways I’m going to punish Rook.

“I ain’t telling you fuck all, Carter. Do your fucking worst!” he goads me, and for a man in his position, I have to respect his loyalty.

“Good job I didn’t come here for information then. I got all I need from your phone. Oh, and Rook seemed pleased to know that you and your little cunt friend succeeded in taking out Lennox.”

His eyes widen as he realises this is the end of the line for him. I pull my gun and point it at him, walking forward until the barrel presses against his forehead.

“Any last words, Shane?”

“Fuck—”

I pull the trigger before he can finish, blood spraying the wall behind him in a beautiful arc and dotting my face.

His death soothes just one of a thousand dark desires tugging at me. I take a picture of him with Shane’s phone certain it will come in handy later, then leave to meet up with Frankie in the car park.

When I arrive, I’m not surprised to find Sloane there with him, but him caging her in against the side of my car, his hips angled just right, is a little bit of a surprise.

“You can fuck and make up later,” I say opening the car and dropping into the driver’s seat. A minute later, Frankie joins me in the front as Sloane climbs into the back. “It’s your funeral,” I mumble as I start the engine and speed out of the car park.

I already know how well bringing her to the church is going to go down with Aidan and the Lawlers, but I don’t have time to think or care.

Rook plans for me to be at the same fucking place I shot him three years ago, but I plan to set my own trap.

The ride back to the church is silent yet deafening. The tension is off the fucking charts, and I'm certain had I not interrupted them that Frankie and Sloane would be fucking over the hood of my car.

He's got a lot of explaining to do, but so does she. After I get Star back, it'll be Question Time with Frankie and Sloane.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Roxanne hollers at me as soon as I walk through the door, then proceeds to stomp after me as I enter the main room, which is occupied by three extremely pissed off men.

I don't waste time with pointless platitudes and dive right in.

"This"—I spin round, waving an arm in the direction of Sloane—"is Sloane Thatcher, a.k.a Sloane Matthews, and Rook's mother. Apparently, Frankie and Sloane here are married. Who fucking knew? Not me."

"What the fuck!" comes from Maddox as he gets to his feet about ready to lay Frankie out.

Feeling is mutual on this occasion.

Roxanne is behind Sloane as I reveal who she is and walks round her, weighing her up. If looks could kill.

I hold up a hand. "That's a save it for later conversation. Right now, I need to know numbers. How many bodies can you get and how soon?"

"Explain, Carter," Aidan demands, and the tension that was in the car on the way has increased tenfold.

So I do. I give them a shortened version of what happened with Lennox, but I don't spare them the details of me ready to slit his throat or how I finished off Shane. It wasn't lavish by my normal standards but got the job done.

"I want you to take some men and tear up the 51's territory including their shitty little fucking clubhouse. But the timing has to be spot fucking on."

"And what will you be doing during all this?" Zak asks accusingly.

“Me? I’m going to play Rook at his own game and get my fucking woman back.” I don’t expand on that because I’m not sure what that looks like yet.

Having had time to think about Star giving herself up, I realise that she played Rook.

As though he can read my mind, Maddox pipes up, “Star’s the poisoned pawn. She gave herself up to give us an advantage, so I say we use it.”

I give him a nod. “Yeah, our poisoned pawn, not Rook’s like he planned. I need thirty minutes while you organise your men, then I’ll explain what I have planned.”

Upstairs, I splash water on my face, washing away the blood splatters from Shane. When I look up, I stare at my reflection, blowing out a breath as I lean my hands on the sink.

I grab the hand towel and dry my face, tossing it over the sink, then walk into the bedroom and pull out my phone.

“Koda, I need you to run a trace on this number,” I say when he answers. I give him the number from the messages between Shane and Rook.

He’s quiet as his fingers tap away at his computer. My heart pounds inside my chest that this works, and scenarios run through my mind.

“Got it. Current location is the old rectory over in Irlam.” There’s a moment of silence as I think, but Koda breaks it before me. “You want me to hack it?”

His question catches me off guard. “You can do that remotely?”

“I can. If it works, I’ll have access to calls, messages, contacts, the lot.”

“Do it,” I tell him without hesitation. If I know where he is, I can intercept him or steer him right where I fucking want him.

“Okay, give me ten minutes. I’ll call you when it’s done.” The line goes dead, and I spend the time thinking about the best place to corner him. I need somewhere relatively isolated,

or at least away from the public. I can't afford for innocent people to get hurt. I might be a killer, but Star would never forgive me if I took a life unnecessarily.

"Carter," Roxanne calls, knocking on the door before pushing it open.

"What is it?" I ask, concern lacing my words.

She steps inside. "Seb called, apparently Erica got a message on her phone from Gage asking where she is. He wants to know what you want to do."

"This could work for us." I quickly explain about Shane's phone and Koda hacking into Rook's. "I just need a place to lure him, and with the added bonus of thinking he's going to get my sister too, he won't be able to resist. His ego is too fucking big."

"I might have somewhere. Give me two minutes to make a call," Roxanne says before hurrying off back downstairs.

I slowly follow, hitting the bottom step as Roxanne begins talking into her phone. The atmosphere in here hasn't cooled much with Aidan on his phone in the kitchen, pacing back and forth, and Maddox and Zak sitting on the sofa and watching Frankie and Sloane at the dining table.

I stop and lean against one of the pillars, hands stuffed in my pockets. Frankie spots me and makes his way over, leaning on the other side of the pillar.

"I had no idea, Carter."

"If you had, would it have stopped you marrying her?" Forgetting everything else, it's the most important question and reminds me of a similar conversation I had with Star about knowing who she was that first night.

"No," he answers truthfully, and I respect that.

"Then everything else isn't important."

"That's very diplomatic of you, and not what I expected."

I shrug. "Sounds to me like you have enough shit to sort out, so no point in me giving you more. I have my own to deal

with.”

I push away from the pillar, checking my watch as I walk to where Roxanne is still talking on the phone. She spins to face me as she says goodbye.

“Well?” I ask impatiently as Aidan joins us.

“Rick reckons the original safe house he set up for Erica will work. It’s out of the way but close enough to not seem like a trap. Although he’d rather you didn’t destroy it”

“Can’t promise that, but I’ll pay for any damage,” I tell her, my mind turning to how this will work. I look at my watch again.

“I’ve got a dozen men plus Maddox, Zak and Frankie,” says Aidan, then looks to Frankie. “Being responsible for the death of your wife’s son doesn’t amount to wedded bliss,” he tells him with a shrug, then turns back to me. “And Rox and I will be coming with you.”

I’m shaking my head before he’s even finished. “No!”

He points a finger at me. “It’s not negotiable, Carter. You want him to think he’s coming for Erica, right? Then there’s no way he’d believe you left her so open after going to all the trouble to move her. That means he won’t be alone. And I don’t give a flying fuck how good you think you are, I’m not letting your ego cost Star her life.”

I rush forward, angry that he’d think I would be so fucking careless with her life, but Roxanne’s hand on my chest stops me.

“I’d put a bullet in your fucking brain before I’d let anything happen to her. The fact you would even suggest otherwise is bull-fucking-shit!” I spit at him, jabbing my finger into his chest.

Aidan smirks. “Spoken like a true villain.”

My phone rings in my pocket, and with eyes still holding Aidan’s, I answer.

“We’re all set,” Koda says.

“Good. Here’s the address. This is what I want you to do.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

STAR



“Holy shit!” I mutter, ducking involuntarily. A large plume of smoke fills the sky, and I can just make out Rook a few feet away stepping backwards as fire licks the night sky.

Whatever the hell that was, it went off like a bomb.

Carter.

The car door opens, and Rook drops back inside. His phone is still to his ear, but he’s not speaking. The unmistakable sound of a ringing phone echoes from the other end of the line before abruptly cutting off to voicemail when no one answers.

He waits a beat, then barks, “Answer your fucking phone, Fraser!” He taps the back of the driver’s seat. “Drive!”

“Where to—”

“Just fucking drive!” His knee jumps up and down as he taps the heel of his foot, but his focus is on the fire now raging just off in the distance.

We pull out of the small wasteland we stopped in and back onto the main road, turning towards the smoke and fire.

Rook puts his phone to his ear again but gets the same result. This time he thumps the driver’s seat jolting the driver forward and causing him to swerve across the road into oncoming traffic. He quickly swings back into our lane, white knuckling the steering wheel and blowing out a relieved breath.

A fire engine roars past us followed by another and two police cars. When they turn off at the next road, Rook tells the driver to follow them.

He taps away at his phone, looking up every now and then and cursing under his breath.

“Boss, we can’t go any further. There’s a roadblock.”

“Then go fucking round it,” he snaps as his phone rings. The pulse at his temple throbs almost violently thanks to the deep dent there, and he stares at the phone still ringing in his hand.

Having made the decision to answer it, he swipes the screen then lifts it to his ear. He doesn’t get one word out before an angry voice bellows down the line.

“You fucking blew my warehouse up! That wasn’t the deal, Gage. What the fuck happened? Where is Fraser?”

“You think I did this? You fucking idiot. Fraser isn’t answering his phone, so I reckon he’s fucking dead, don’t you?” His tone is sarcastic fury, but I can see he’s not as relaxed as he’s making out. The pulse at his temple throbs faster in time with his jittery knee.

“Did you at least get my fucking shipment before you fucked this up?”

“You’ll get your god damn fucking guns after I’ve taken care of my business.” He looks over at me as he says it and winks.

I don’t hear the next question, but Rook’s answer clears that up.

“She’ll be taken care just like we agreed.” He ends the call, then instructs the driver where he wants to go.

A couple of minutes later, his phone chimes with a message. I struggle to read his reaction from this angle, but then he turns to me and smiles. It’s sinister and wide with menace. But it’s triumphant.

“We have a full house. Now it’s checkmate.” He goes back to tapping away on his phone only this time it’s with fever.

Whatever the message was, it leaves me cold with dread.

Rook has the driver turn around and gives him another address. It takes me a couple of minutes to figure out why it seems so familiar.

The smallest gasp escapes my lips drawing Rook's attention my way.

"Something wrong?" he asks faking concern. He laughs. "You know I was quite surprised when Carter moved Erica. I couldn't quite figure out why because I was very careful to ensure she never mentioned me to him."

I stay quiet and listen as he theorises over the why and how.

"I was most upset that I might not get to really twist the proverbial knife in Carter's gut. But it seems Erica will have a starring role in her brother's end after all." He claps his hands, making me jump. "Although there is something a little odd about this new place. The lack of protection. So unlike Carter too," he muses, and there is an edge of suspicion to his words.

I keep my outward behaviour to one of concern for Erica, keeping up the facade, but inside I'm worried because although I know Erica is safe, I have no idea how he found out about this address or who might be there.

The rational part of me believes this is either intel delivered too late or a trap set for Rook. I'm praying it's the latter. Giving myself up so easily was for this reason. Because if there's one thing I know for certain, Carter would have sacrificed everyone else for me in that moment. The scariest part is that they would have let him too.

I don't know how I feel about that, but I don't get time to dwell on it as Rook tells the driver to stop a mile from the house we brought Erica to earlier.

I look up the road to where I know the house is then behind us when I hear the purr of an engine. There are no other houses on this stretch of road, so it's quiet. Car doors slam, and a second later a man appears outside Rook's side of the car.

He winds the window down, and I see it's the guy from the restaurant. His eyes scan my face and down my body like he's picturing me naked, making my skin crawl.

"Well?" Rook demands.

"Thermal imaging shows at least half a dozen bodies inside the house plus Erica, who is in the back bedroom on the ground floor."

"Hmmm." The sound is a low grumble at the back of his throat, and I can tell he's not buying it. Then he taps out a message on his phone and waits for a reply.

Several minutes go by before his phone pings. He reads it. Looks at me then back to the message. My palms sweat with apprehension because Rook is no fool. A man who can lay a trap this long in the making, biding his time, laying the foundations, is calculated, careful and doesn't move without considering every scenario first. He's a strategist.

"Light the place up, then meet me at the rectory." He winds the window up and taps the driver's seat indicating for him to drive.

My heart races as I realise he's not taking the bait, if it is bait. But what if they are really in there? Oh god!

"No!" I scream, tugging the door handle and banging on the window when it doesn't open. I spin in my seat to look out the back window as we drive away. "No," I whisper as I watch the men creep down the road then split off to surround the house.

Rook laughs beside me while casually tapping away on his phone. "You should consider a career change. You'd make a great actress," he sniggers, tucking his phone back into his pocket.

I launch myself across the back seat, fist aiming for his face. I almost fucking make it. My knuckles glance off his cheek as he moves at the last second, capturing my fist in his hand. He twists it's violently, wrenching a pained cry from me.

"No, no, my special little Anastasia," he chides, his tone vicious and full of gloating ridicule. His words freeze the

breath in my lungs, and I'm thrown back to the past. He releases my fist at the same time as his hand flies out, striking my face.

I cup my cheek as I try to scramble back to the corner, but he's not done yet. Diving for me, he knocks my hand away and grips my throat, pinning me against the window.

His grip tightens as he brings his face so close to mine our noses touch. "What's the matter? I thought you liked it *rough*. Quite the change from the docile little girl my brother described you as."

I force a swallow past his tightly curled fingers as bile burns in my throat.

"You were so eager to please according to Aaron. Do you still like to please, Anastasia?"

Fingers trail along the arch of my breast before he cups it, squeezing almost painfully. His good eye watches me and his lip curls. I struggle to pull myself from the dark memories.

"Or do you like to run?" he whispers.

Something snaps inside me at his words. Those are words reserved only for Carter, and I refuse to let this bastard take my peace from me. He will not taint what we have. I swing my fisted hand upward, making sure I hit him this time. There's a crack of teeth knocking together as my fist connects with the underside of his chin, and his head is thrown back from the force. His hands leave me, and I shove at him, pushing him away.

The car turns a corner, and he loses his balance, falling back into the seat and banging his head against the door. I rub at my throat as I shuffle into an upright position, legs pulled up tight to my body.

He rights himself just as the car comes to a stop, and I see we are back at the old rectory. I see his intention as he moves to come for me, his face twisted with anger, but he's stopped as his phone rings.

Tugging it from his pocket, he looks at the screen, then answers. "What?" he barks, his eyes never leaving mine. He

listens for a moment, then says, “As I suspected. Get back here.” He shoves the phone back in his pocket, then climbs from the car without another word.

His silent fury sends a chill down my spine. I watch anxiously as he rounds the car. I slowly edge along the backseat as he closes in on my side. The door opens, and I wait for his next move. But he simply turns and walks toward the house.

When he reaches the front door, he opens it then turns back to me.

“I can drag you in if you’d like, but I thought you might like a final chance at free will before I strip you of it.”

I look to the driver who is still sitting behind the wheel and see he is watching me in the rearview mirror. I quickly look away not liking the gleam in his eyes.

“He’s not going to help you. I enlisted old Ed there after he was arrested for rape and murder, and I’ll warn you, it wasn’t pretty. Ed likes ‘em dead to get off. Ain’t that right, Ed?” Rook lets out a twisted chuckle.

Whatever Rook has planned, I’ll deal with it, but I’ve got no chance if I’m dead. I slide along the seat and out the door, slamming it behind me, and walking back a couple of steps as Ed turns and offers me a smile.

“Smart girl,” Rook says as I reach him on the front step.

“Fuck you, you deranged piece of shit,” I snap as I stride straight past him. I know I should have kept my mouth shut, but if the safe house was a trap and failed, then my family could be dead. That means I have nothing to lose.

But I don’t think they are dead, at least not Carter because if that were the case, Rook would have no use for me.

The house is silent when I enter, which is strange, and I wonder where everyone is. I stop in the entrance hall, looking around and down each corridor.

Rook comes up behind me, resting an arm over my shoulders like we are old friends. His fingers dig into the flesh

between my neck and shoulder, squeezing the muscle there and sending a painful shock through my body.

He pulls me with him as he walks down a corridor and out into a bright kitchen area. It appears to be an L shape, and Rook pauses momentarily. The reason why becomes apparent when I feel the sharp point of a blade at my side just under my rib cage and he releases my shoulder to hold the back of my neck.

“Move and my knife will puncture your lung,” he warns as he leads me round the corner.

I was expecting this part to hold a dining table, which it does. But it’s not the kind of table you sit and eat at. It’s the kind of table you strap your victims to.

But that’s not what has me sucking in a sharp breath or Rook pulling up short as his grip on the back of my neck tightens.

“Hello, princess.” His words wash over me, and this time the name princess makes my heart literally skip a fucking beat.

“Carter,” Rook snarls.

“Surprised to see me, Rook?” Carter says as I finally take my eyes off him and look at who is stretched out on the table behind him.

“Not in the least. You almost had me back at that house.”

Carter moves to the side slightly, allowing us to fully see the man strapped down.

Fraser Mack.

His mouth is covered by duct tape and blood streaks one side of his face from a gaping cut to his head. He groans behind the tape, shaking his head and pulling at the cuffs holding his wrists and ankles.

“Using Erica was a good move. I’m guessing she confessed her undying love for me.” I feel Rook’s smile even though I can’t see him from this position. “I have to admit, it wasn’t hard to get her to trust me. We carry some of the same wounds. Because of the same person too.”

I watch Carter as Rook taunts him, and I see as he tries to hide the effect his words have on him. Rook sees it too, so he keeps poking at him.

“Fucking her was a struggle though. But once I had her on all fours, I just pictured Star here. Shot my fucking load like a bullet from a gun.” His lips brush against my ear. “It was easy to picture after I watched Carter fucking you that night at Illicit.”

I gasp and the movement causes the tip of his blade to dig a little deeper, and I wince as it nicks the skin.

Rook barks out a laugh as Carter’s nostrils flare, and he looks at me and shakes his head. I’m not sure if he’s saying it’s not true or he didn’t know.

“I’m glad you enjoyed the show, Rook.”

“Oh, I did. And now it’s your turn to sit back and watch me at work, Carter.”

“That your end game, Rook, huh?” Carter picks up his phone, which was sitting beside Fraser on the table, and taps out a message.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Rook asks, tensing behind me and unsure what is happening. A second later, his own phone chimes in his pocket.

“Well, this is my end game,” Carter says. “Go ahead. Take a look.”

Rook’s hand leaves my neck, but the knife remains, as he digs in his pocket for his phone. With it finally free, he jiggles it into a position that allows him to operate it one-handed, then he opens the message Carter sent.

He’s holding it to the right of me, his other hand still pressing the knife into my flesh, and a trail of something warm trickles down my side.

When the screen loads, there’s a guy with a bullet hole in the centre of his forehead. He scrolls to the next picture, and this one is of a building on fire, bodies litter the ground

outside. The next one is another building but the same thing, bodies upon bodies.

“You have nothing left to barter with, no leverage, no allies and no men to back you up.”

Rook launches the phone at Carter, cursing like a sailor when he misses. But Rook does have one thing left to use against Carter.

Me.

Rook withdraws the knife for a split second, then with a flick of his wrist, he slices across my side.

It's swift and I almost don't feel it.

Then the burning, stinging pain finally triggers a reaction in my brain, and I let out an agonised cry. My hand automatically gravitates to the area, cradling my side as pain ricochets through my body.

I'm bent over, holding my side with Rook's hand back at the nape of my neck and tangled in my hair as voices yell around me, and I just make out the sound of a gun being cocked. I wait for the gunshot, but it never comes.

“Ralph, that's enough,” a woman demands.

I'm spun to the side as he turns toward the female voice.

“Mother, dearest, how nice of you to join us. Looks like I'll get to exorcise all my demons tonight.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

CARTER



I knew sending him those pictures would be a risk, and I should have fucking waited. A dark patch spreads across Star's top as I yell at him and pull my gun. Fury seeps into my bones, and I point it at his head ready to fucking end this with one tiny squeeze of my finger. But then...

"Ralph, that's enough," Sloane says stepping into view.

How the fuck did she get here?

I don't have time to worry about that though as Rook turns to his mother.

"Mother, dearest, how nice of you to join us. Looks like I'll get to exorcise all my demons tonight."

Star is bent double, clutching her side as Rook holds her captive by her hair. His knife hand is raised, pointing in Sloane's direction now, and I could take my shot. I wouldn't fucking miss.

"Ralph—"

"Don't you fucking use that name," he spits at Sloane, pointing the knife at her. "You lost any right to call me that when you abandoned me. Sold out your own son and husband too. Have you had a nice fucking life, *Mum*?"

Sloane holds her hands out, keeping them low with palms facing the floor. "I'm sorry, but I had no choice. It wasn't safe. I did it for you," she tells him.

I don't know what her story is, but I'm not sure how much I believe that.

“Bullshit!” he shouts, his nose scrunched in disgust.

I look to Star, her face turned toward me just enough for me to see a combination of pain and shock. The realisation of who this woman is clear to her.

I watch as Sloane’s eyes drop to Star then back to Rook.

He doesn’t miss it either. “Ha-ha,” he barks with a chuckle. “Let’s have a proper introduction shall we.” He yanks Star up by her hair, the knife at her exposed throat, and she lets out a whimper but masks it quickly as she faces Sloane.

“This is Anastasia. How’s it feel, Mum, huh? How does it feel to look into the eyes of the woman that one son abused and the other is going to put in the ground?” He turns his face into hers and whispers something that I can’t hear. Star’s nostrils flare as she swallows thickly.

I’ve had enough of this shit. The second he moves that knife again, I’m taking the fucking shot. Rook knows it just like I know how swift and deadly he can be with a blade.

“Fuck you,” Star grits out between clenched teeth, her voice strained. “Your brother deserved to die. I only wish I could have been the one to fucking do it.” Her eyes find mine as she says her next words. “Be sure to tell him Bowser sends his regards when you see him.”

Rook snarls, his eyes narrowing with rage. In the blink of an eye, he’s lowered the knife and plunged it into Star’s side as she shouts out “Do it, Carter!”

Then everything slows down. Seconds tick by.

1...

Star lets out a piercing scream.

2...

Rook raises the knife in the air and throws it in Sloane’s direction as I pull the trigger.

3...

The knife twirls through the air heading straight for Sloane’s chest, but at the last second, she’s knocked aside,

falling to the ground. Rook's eyes widen as his knife plunges into Lennox a split second before my bullet hits him in the side of the head. I wish I had time to savour the sight.

The room fills with screams as I race to Star, dropping to my knees and skidding to a halt beside her as she's pulled to the floor with Rook, his hand still clinging onto her hair.

I untangle his fingers from her hair as his dead eyes stare off toward where his mum is and roll Star to the side.

Her eyes meet mine. "Did you get him?" she asks, her voice breaking.

"Hey, princess. I fucking got him." I push her top up to look at her wounds. Blood pumps from the deep knife wound with every breath and a thin trickle seeps from the slash Rook gave her earlier.

I tug my t-shirt over my head and push it against her side.

"Cart..."

"Shh, I fucking got you. Just stay still. You're going to be fine." The words taste like a fucking lie as my t-shirt becomes saturated with her blood, tainting my hands with blood that should never be shed.

"Hey," I say softly as Star's eyes begin to close. "Eyes on me, princess. Eyes on me." I let a little of my dominant tone slip through my words hoping they will be enough to keep her fighting. "This is not the time to run, Star. Stay with me. Fucking stay with me!" I press harder against her side, causing her to suck in a breath and her face to pinch in pain, but her eyes open, focusing on me after a second.

Loud voices carry through the house, barely audible over Sloane's sobs as she cradles Lennox. There's a pool of blood building beneath him, soaking into Sloane's trousers.

"Carter," Star croaks pulling my attention back to her.

"I'm here. Help is coming. You're going to be okay." I'm not sure who those words are for more. Either way, I have to believe them.

“I need to...tell my family I love...” Her words cut off with a cough.

“Don’t you fucking dare. You can tell them yourself.” I cup her face with my free hand. “I need you, Star. I fucking love you.” I press my lips to hers. Wishing like fuck they could heal her.

“Star! Carter!” comes Roxanne’s harried voice a moment before she rushes round the corner, coming to a sudden stop when she sees us.

“Oh my god no! Star” She drops down on the other side of Star, taking her hand in hers.

“Roxy...

“I got you. Everything’s going to be alright. I promise.”

Her eyes meet mine, and I know she’s praying she can keep that promise.

“You got a credit or bank card?” I ask quickly.

“Yes. Hold on.” She lets go of Star’s hand and digs around in her jacket pocket, pulling out a bank card a second later and handing it to me.

“Good. Take this,” I say, nodding to my blood-soaked t-shirt. She puts her hand over the top of it and gives me a nod to say she’s ready. “Now,” I say, and as she pulls the t-shirt away, I quickly place the bank card over the puncture wound.

Star’s eyes are closed again, and her skin is pale and clammy. She’s going into shock.

“Please tell me there’s a fucking ambulance on its way?” I grit out, my wet, sticky blood-soaked fingers pressing harder on the bank card, trying to stay in place as Star begins to shake.

Roxanne nods as Maddox appears carrying a blanket. She takes it from him and lays it over Star. “Any second,” she adds like she’s willing them to walk through the door.

“Jesus Christ!” Maddox exclaims, and I follow his line of sight.

Sloane is still holding onto Lennox, her forehead pressed against his cheek, but his eyes are dull and lifeless. The knife Rook threw, meant for Sloane, protrudes from Lennox's neck.

I look away. I don't have time to think about Lennox right now. The next few minutes pass infinitely slowly as we wait for the ambulance.

"Come on! Where the fuck are they?" I mutter, feeling like she's slipping away from me.

When they do arrive, Maddox has to drag me away so they can work on her.

Her heart stopped fucking beating, and so did mine.

Breath.

Chest compressions.

Breath.

Chest compressions.

It goes on and on.

They get her back and rush her out to the ambulance. Roxanne rides with her, even though she offered for me to instead.

But I can't.

I almost took Maddox's head off when he finally managed to pull me out of the way. I don't imagine I'll help anyone if I kill the paramedics if Star... I don't let my mind finish that thought.

I watch as the ambulance pulls away, then turn back toward the house just as they wheel Lennox's body out. Frankie comes out behind them holding Sloane up, her face turned into his body.

I don't even remember Frankie arriving. There's no sign of Zak or Aidan, and I momentarily wonder where they are.

Maddox steps in front of me. "You ready?"

I hold his gaze a moment as I think about if I'm ready to find out if I've just lost the other half of me.

I've never considered myself a coward, but I feel like one now as my mind tells me to walk away. Do anything to save my heart the hurt of losing the woman I love.

"I can read your fucking mind, Carter. You're not going to walk away because that's not who you are. Let's go."

At the hospital, we find Roxanne pacing the corridor near the doors to the operating theatre. Thankfully, the drive over here has given me time to give myself a good fucking talking to.

"Roxanne," I call, her back to us as we approach.

She spins on her heels, her thumb pulling away from her mouth as she marches to meet us.

"She's in surgery. The knife lacerated her left kidney, but they are hopeful they can repair it. If not, they may have to remove it."

"Fuck!" I curse, dropping down into a seat, elbows resting on my knees and hanging my head.

A shadow appears in front of me, then Roxanne drops to one knee in front of me.

"Carter," she says gently, and I raise my head just enough to look into her eyes. "She's going to be fine. Even with one kidney, she can live a normal life."

"I know, but..." I shake my head. "Jesus. I wish I could bring that cunt back to life so I could do some real damage to him."

"You're not fucking wrong there," Maddox says.

"What happened?" Roxanne asks, pushing back to her full height.

I blow out a ragged breath. "Sloane turned up and Rook was already riled up after I showed him what was left of his little fucking empire. He fucking stabbed her before I could take my shot. The son of a bitch knew I was going to shoot him, so he made sure to do as much damage as he could before I did." I rub my hands down my thighs. "What happened to Fraser?" I ask Maddox.

“I had someone come and take him out the house before the cops arrived. No one but us knows he was even there.”

I’m nodding as he speaks, but the fact I don’t remember seeing anyone else except Maddox and Roxanne shows how focused I was on Star.

“Zak and Aidan?”

“Taking care of some business with Rick, but they are on their way. Pavel is dead, Carter. After we destroyed the warehouse, Zak and Maddox searched the whole place looking for Lev, but there was no sign of him or Akim.”

“Shit. Have you checked Pavel’s?”

“Lennox sent a couple of Shadows there before he came to the old rectory to find Sloane.”

“What a fucking mess,” I state dejectedly. “This was not how shit was meant to go.”

Maddox slaps a hand on my shoulder. “Maybe not, but it’s fucking over.”

“For now,” I tell him. Because Rook might be dead, but with no sign of Lev or Akim and Mark Swanson still missing, there are some loose ends.

Flashes of those last few minutes flick through my mind. “Who is Bowser?” I ask, not really directing my question at anyone in particular.

“How do you know that name?” Roxanne asks, surprise clear in her tone.

“Before Rook stabbed Star, he’d been taunting her about Aaron and who Sloane was.” I can’t help the little laugh that pops free. “She goaded him right fucking back.”

“Sounds like Star,” Maddox scoffs full of humour.

“She told him to tell Aaron that Bowser sends his regards when he saw him.”

Roxanne and Maddox both laugh.

“B is one of our guys back in London. It’s a long story, and one I think Star should share with you when she’s ready. For now, you just need to know that he’s the one who killed Aaron,” Roxanne says.

Before I can reply, the doors open and a doctor wearing scrubs exits.

“Miss Lawler?” he questions, stopping in front of us.

I get to my feet, and my head spins with anxiety at what he’s about to tell me. I try to read his expression, but it’s blank. Not even a hint of a smile.

“Surgery went well. We were able to repair the kidney. Miss Kavanagh is in the recovery room, and once she is awake, we’ll move her to the ICU where she’ll need to stay until we are sure there is no further internal bleeding. Assuming there are no complications, she’ll make a fully recovery.”

My breath rushes from me on a curse. “Fuck! Thank god.”

Maddox wraps his arms around Roxanne, holding her as she cries tears of relief.

“Can we see her?” I ask, my words coming out a littler harsher than intended. Thankfully, the doctor doesn’t seem offended, which is good because I don’t need any more blood on my hands tonight.

He offers me a smile in understanding before saying, “Once she’s in the ICU, you can see her. But she’ll be groggy and need to rest to aid her recovery, so let’s keep the visitors to a minimum. No more than two at a time.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Roxanne says, and he gives her nod before heading back through the doors.

I drop back into my seat, holding my head in my hands as Roxanne and Maddox hug in the middle of the corridor.

That is how Aidan and Zak find us a few minutes later.

“Rox, is she...”

My head snaps up and Maddox and Roxanne break apart.

“No, no. She’s fine. Surgery went well,” she tells Zak as he scoops her up in his arms, and the relief is evident on his face as he takes me in.

Aidan stoically stands to the side, simmering rage under his cool facade. For the first time since I met him, he doesn’t say a word. But he does offer me a nod, which I return.

An hour later, I’m sat at Star’s bedside watching her chest rise and fall and listening to the beeping of the machine monitoring her.

The door opens and Aidan enters. He leans down and kisses Star’s head before taking the seat on the other side of the bed.

“I thought you might like to know that we found Lev. His body was in a cell at Pavel’s house, along with a couple of other unidentified bodies. Mark Swanson is a strong candidate for one of the John Doe’s, but it seems Akim skipped town. I heard he caught a flight back to Moscow.”

I’m not surprised Lev is dead. Pavel would have had no choice once the full extent of his son’s betrayal was revealed.

“And Fraser?” I ask not taking my eyes off Star as she frowns in her sleep.

“Oh, I have a couple of guys keeping him company for you.” Aidan leans back in his seat.

“Thanks.”

A nurse comes in to check on Star, and our conversation ends until she disappears again, obviously satisfied with her sats.

“I’m sorry about Lennox,” Aidan says once we are alone again.

“Are you?” I rebuke, finally looking him in the eye. “Or are you hoping it will be to your advantage?”

He tilts his head at me. “A little cynical, but not entirely wrong, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m not going to even bother asking how you know what his death means. So, let’s just leave the rest of this conversation until later.”

There’s a moment of silence between us, then he climbs to his feet, unnaturally silent, and leaves.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the edge of the bed and scrub my hands down my face. Aidan’s words have reminded me that I have responsibilities that will need my attention soon. My best guess at how he discovered I’m now in charge of the Shadow Guard would be Frankie. Or maybe Sloane. Her and Lennox seemed a little more than friends, something Frankie certainly picked up on. And given she’s his wife, that’s got to have been a fun conversation.

The bed sheets rustle, and I look up to find Star staring at me.

“Princess... Fuck!” I push to my feet and cup her face, kissing her head, her cheeks and then gently placing my lips to hers.

“Princess, really? That’s how you greet me after I nearly died,” she sasses with a half a smile and her hand coming up to grip my wrist.

“Do not fucking joke, Star. I nearly lost everything,” I growl against her lips before pulling back to look into her eyes. “Don’t think I’m not pissed at you for that stunt you pulled. It was stupid,” I state, my voice firm.

“Maybe but he’s dead right?” she asks, trailing her fingers through the thick scruff on my face.

“He is. It’s over.” I hold her gaze, and I don’t know what she reads there, but her eyes soften.

“And Lennox?” I shake my head. “I’m sorry.” She adjusts her position as I release her face causing her to suck a sharp breath in through her teeth.

“Me too,” I say truthfully. Despite our rocky relationship since I left the Shadow Guard, Lennox has always been there for me. The deal Lennox and I made if anything should

happen to him was signed before I left, but any doubt as to whether it still stood has been confirmed by Aidan.

Star frowns. “Oh god Toni,” she exclaims. “You have to find her,” she demands, attempting to push herself up in the bed with a cry as the movement causes her pain.

“Hey, hey. Calm down. Explain.”

“Rook said that her dad had an accident. And he had a guy watching her.” She pauses looking confused. “He talked to someone on the phone. He was angry about the warehouse—his warehouse he said. And the guns were meant to be for him. But...Rook told him the girl would be taken care of. You have to find her, Carter. She’s in danger.”

“Okay, calm down,” I tell her, the machine beeps rapidly as her heart rate rises. “I’ll see what I can find out and put a watch on her, but you need to concentrate on you. I can’t fucking lose you, Star.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I promise,” she tells me, and I lean forward, kissing her again.

A nurse enters, and I kiss Star again before reluctantly going in search of Roxanne to let her know she’s awake and to find out what I can about Toni.

I find her with Maddox and Zak at the small coffee shop just down from the ward.

I hold my hand up as she spots me, worry creasing her brow. “She’s awake. The nurse is with her,” I say, watching as her fear is breathed away with a deep exhale.

“You talk to Aidan,” she asks, wistfully looking down the corridor.

“I did. Go, Roxanne,” I tell her knowing she’s desperate to check on her sister.

She hurries off leaving me with Maddox and Zak. My phone pings in my pocket, and I pull it free to see a message from Koda.

“Everything okay?” Zak asks, nodding to my phone when I look up as he speaks.

“Yeah, just Koda letting me know there’s a lot of chatter about the 51s and Pavel, but for now it seems a war between the two is the obvious answer. The fact neither Pavel or Fraser have been seen since is causing a stir, but it will die down once news of Pavel and Lev’s deaths filters through.”

“Speaking of Fraser, what’s the plan?” Maddox asks.

“Right now, my focus is Star. After that, I’ll deal with Fraser.”

“And the Shadow Guard,” Zak questions, keeping his voice low as a nurse passes us by.

I raise my brow. “That’s a situation that can’t wait. For now, I need to make some calls.”

I leave Maddox and Zak and head outside where I call Frankie. I had been hoping that Star didn’t know about Toni. Hacking into Rook’s phone did more than just tell us what we needed to know. It threw up a whole other load of shit. Something that Aidan had already hinted at when he mentioned the name Kingsman.

I spend twenty minutes on the phone to Frankie. Neither of us mention Sloane but I guess she’s with him. Toni’s father is still in the ICU and Toni is fine. I have two Shadows on her making sure she’s safe until we can figure out what the hell she’s involved in, well her dad.

When I return to Star’s room, I’m pleased to see her smiling as she chats to Roxanne, Maddox and Zak. The relaxed visitation rules can only be a good sign. She tires quickly and the nurse ushers everyone except me out the door.

As soon as they leave, she asks me about Toni. “Did you find her? How’s her dad?”

“She’s fine. He’s fine. I told you not to worry. Now get some rest.”

“Stay—”

“Not fucking going anywhere. Rest, Star.” Satisfied with my answers—for now because I know she won’t quit until she

gets the answers she wants—she closes her eyes as I sit holding her hand and stroking the other over her cheek.

I almost say the three words that I've struggled to say until the moment I thought she was going to fucking die. But I hold them back. Not because of fear this time. No, I want her to be fully awake when I tell her them again.

They'll be branded on her heart.

EPILOGUE

STAR



One month later

“I say we skip dinner and I feast on you instead,” Carter drawls salaciously as he steps into the room, adjusting the bulge in his trousers.

I spin around and take him in as he saunters over to me. “I say that’s a great idea but hold that thought.” I tug at the collar of his suit jacket, straightening it out as his hands grip my hips.

“I don’t think I can wait any longer, princess. I want to—”

I cut off his words with a well-placed finger to his lips. “I’ve been begging you for the last two weeks to fuck me. This feels like karma to me. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, it feels like fucking torture. But I needed to be sure you were recovered before I execute my plan.”

“Ooh, colour me intrigued. And what is this plan you speak of,” I ask, teasing him as I rub my hand over his cock. Nothing like torturing yourself while doing the same to someone else.

A deep growl rumbles up from his throat. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

He’s too good at this. The man is a master at patience when it comes to sex—surprisingly.

“I hope this dress wasn’t expensive,” he croons as he nuzzles into my neck, leaving a trail of hot kisses down my throat.

“And why is that?” I ask innocently.

“Because it’s going to be nothing but strips of material by the end of the night. You think you can handle that?”

I hum my answer as he cups my breast, brushing a thumb over the thin silk fabric of the mermaid tail dress I’m wearing. I tip my head back, completely lost in the moment and ready to forget dinner when the front door opens and closes.

“Star! Carter! Time to go. Your chariot awaits,” Toni sing songs as she walks down the hall, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

“That woman’s timing is irritatingly impeccable,” Carter grumbles, then he drops a kiss to my lips a second before Toni enters the room.

“Am I interrupting?” she asks, knowing full well she was.

“Nope.” I grab my clutch from the table. “Let’s go.” I wave my finger in a circle at Toni, telling her to turn around and walk.

I follow behind her with Carter close on my heels. “Are you wet, Star?” he whispers in my ear as Toni reaches the waiting car.

I turn my head just a fraction. “Soaked,” I tease back, putting an extra swing in my hips as I walk the last few paces to the car. His resounding groan makes me smile, and I climb into the car satisfied he’ll at least be as uncomfortable as me for the rest of the night.

Tonight we are going to dinner with Toni and her dad Grant to celebrate his engagement to Lillian Kingsman. Something she isn’t happy about, which is why she invited us as a buffer. She’d be even less happy if she knew the full story about the family her dad is marrying into.

Carter only revealed what he knew a couple of weeks ago after he discovered the man that Rook spoke to on the phone that night was Lillian’s father, Piers Kingsman. I was furious that he kept it from me initially. I know why he did it, but I don’t have to like it.

Carter was only too pleased to tag along, and of course he has an ulterior motive. Taking over as head of the Shadow Guard following Lennox's death means he needs to be fully aware of what's going on in Manchester, especially if it's going to impact him and the Shadows.

I finally managed to convince Roxy and the guys to head home a week ago, but Aidan and Parker have remained here. I know that Aidan is curious about the Gambinos and where they fitted into what happened with Rook and the 51s, who have since disbanded. Although Carter thinks that's only temporary and once everything dies down, they'll reappear with a new leader. Fraser is gone too. Aidan had been holding him somewhere. The day before I was released from hospital, Aidan called to say that Fraser was dead.

Carter was livid and had thought Aidan or one of his men was responsible, but it turns out someone broke into where he was being held and killed him. They both suspect that Piers Kingsman has something to do with it. Another reason Carter was so keen to come tonight.

His hand on my thigh startles me from my thoughts. "Hey, what's got you thinking so hard?"

I let out a laugh at his choice of words. "It's not me that's hard," I mock with a wink. "Nothing important," I reassure him when he levels me with unimpressed stare.

The car slows to a stop outside the restaurant, and the driver gets out, opening the door for us.

Toni leads us inside where we are taken straight to the reserved table. Her father and Lillian are already there along with another man.

Knight Kingsman.

They stand as we approach, all except Knight, who leisurely rises to his feet after everyone else. His light brown hair is slicked back, a small curl hangs down from the neat style. He's wearing dark grey jeans and a white shirt, the top open and displaying the edges of a tattoo on his chest.

As Toni introduces us, I sense Carter and Knight sizing one another up. Their handshake is short and firm, but not a word is uttered between them.

Drinks are ordered and the atmosphere is light as we settle into easy conversation about their plans for the wedding. Toni is seated next to Knight on one side and me on the other. Her father and Carter are chatting about politics of all things while Knight is reprimanded by Lillian for being on his phone.

“Hey, you okay?” I ask her. She’s been quiet since we arrived.

“I’m fine. Just hate having to spend time with the dick beside me.”

My eyes flick to Knight who is wearing a smile on his face and listening to us rather than Lillian. My attention is drawn away from them both as Carter and Grant’s conversation changes.

“Yes, Lillian’s father had an investor but unfortunately he was caught up in whatever happened last month.”

“That’s a shame. What exactly is it he’s looking for?” Carter asks as I pick up my glass of wine and take a mouthful.

“Well, Gage was—”

The wine slips down the wrong way at the mention of Rook’s pseudonym, making me choke.

I feel Knight’s eyes on me as Carter strokes my back and Toni asks if I’m okay.

Thankfully the conversation reverts to lighter topics as our food is served, and the rest of the evening is reasonably enjoyable. If you ignore the tension between Knight and Toni, which I have every intention of asking about the second I get her alone.

At the end of the night, Carter declines Grant’s offer of the car to take us home, and I tilt my head as his eyes catch mine. He just smiles.

We say our goodbyes, and I promise Toni I’ll call her tomorrow. Exiting the restaurant, there is a car waiting for us.

“What are you up to?” I ask suspiciously before climbing into the car.

Carter drops into the seat beside me. “You’ll see.”

I let him keep his secret knowing I’ll find out soon enough.

“Well, that was interesting.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“How was Erica?” I ask. It’s a sore subject. She’s mad at Carter—the world in general if I’m honest. But I think she’s madder at Rook, Gage, whatever you want to call him. I was with Carter when he told her who Gage really was and what he’d done. She didn’t believe him. Thought he was trying to sabotage their relationship. She withdrew from everyone. Refusing to see Carter, to even speak to him. Last week, he’d finally had enough and marched in there, refusing to leave until she listened to him.

He sighs. “She’s still mad. I hate that I can’t help her, but she won’t let me in.”

I rest a hand on his thigh. “Give her time, Carter. Rook used her vulnerability against her. The very thing that has taken her chance at a normal life. I know how that feels. It’s soul destroying.”

He nods, and clearly not wanting to dwell anymore on tonight or Erica, Carter lifts my hand from his thigh and quickly pulls me across the seat to him. “No more talk tonight or anything else unless it involves you begging for my cock,” he whispers in my ear.

“That’ll never happen,” I say trying to be convincing but failing miserably.

“We’ll fucking see about that, princess.”

I roll my eyes because I know how much he enjoys thinking he’s irritating me. Secretly I love him calling me princess, but I’ll never tell him that.

Ten minutes later, we pull up outside a place I’ve not been back to since Carter and I met. Rook’s words that night float through my mind, and I snap my eyes to Carter.

“I checked, Star. He never saw us that night outside of the main room. I promise.”

“What are we doing here, Carter?” I ask, a nervous edge to my question and not entirely convinced but wanting to believe him. Part of me is also keen to revisit the place where it all began. I want to experience Illicit with Carter on a completely new level to that night.

“Do you trust me?” I tilt my head at his ridiculous question. “Then let me show you.” He pulls me into his lap, holding my face in his hands tightly. “I don’t know if you heard me the night I thought I was going to lose you”—I nod with my eyes, letting him know I heard everything—“but I vowed I wouldn’t say it again until I was certain you understood exactly what those three words mean.” He pauses, letting his lips touch mine. “I love you, Star. I fucking love you with my whole being. Without you, I’d be living in perpetual darkness. You’re the star that lights my dark sky. I’m going to show you how a true princess should be worshiped.”

A tear slides down my cheek. He brushes it away, kissing the wetness left behind. “I love you too, Carter.”

He closes the last fraction of an inch between us and claims my mouth. When I’m breathless and heady, he breaks the kiss.

“Now get your arse inside that club so I can pink it before I fuck you.”

I don’t need telling twice.

Do you want to find out what happens inside Illicit? Read the Illicit bonus chapter on my [website](#) using the password PoisonedPawnVIP

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Imogen Wells is a dark romance author from the East of England, where she lives with her husband, three children and the family dog and cat.

After being a stay-at-home mum to her three children, Imogen decided to go back to school. And in 2020 she graduated with a First-Class Honours degree in History and English Literature.

When she is not reading or writing, she loves to binge new shows on Netflix or catch up with old favourites, such as Friends.



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