



THE
SANCTUM

RECKLESS COVENANT

THE SANCTUM SYNDICATE BOOK 2

LILITH ROMAN

RECKLESS
COVENANT

A SECOND CHANCE MAFIA ROMANCE

LILITH ROMAN

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Reckless Covenant

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places, organizations, events, and products are intended
to provide a sense of authenticity and are used
fictitiously. All characters, incidents, and dialogue are
drawn from the author's imagination and not to be
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

*They're feared. Powerful. Ruthless.
And they don't just love... they worship.*

Welcome to [The Sanctum Syndicate](#) series of interconnected standalones. Reckless Covenant is book 2, a second chance mafia romance, that was previously published in 2022 in a multi-author collection. If the title or story will feel familiar, this is why. However, the novel has now been re-edited and it contains quite a bit of bonus content. I hope you enjoy Vincent and Morrigan's happily ever after.

Love,
Lilith

CONTENT WARNING

This is a dark second chance mafia romance with sensitive content including graphic violence, murder, emotional and physical abuse, gun violence, BDSM inspired scenes, cheating (not between MCs), fat phobia/body shaming, gaslighting, forced marriage (not MCs), female oppression, and mentions of sex trafficking of both adults and children. There is no cheating and it has a HEA.

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BLURB

In another life, I used to love him. Now, I just need him.

But will he break me all over again?

For years, I made sure to keep the handsome, black-eyed devil out of my life. I never expected to be the one to pull him back in.

What choice do I have when my own family betrays me?

I was building a life for myself, and now I'm trapped. But I refuse to run. I don't want to hide. And I certainly will not submit.

The only way to escape with my life is to threaten theirs. Only one man is powerful enough to help me—Vincent “The Serpent” Sinclair. My ex-boyfriend. My first love. And one of the leaders of his ruthless underworld.

So we make a pact for my salvation, only he doesn't tell me what he wants in return.

I may have sold my soul to the devil, but will he keep my heart too?

PLAYLIST

Broken Bones – KALEO
The Devil is a Gentleman – Merci Raines
Devils Got You Beat – Blues Saraceno
The Wicked – Blues Saraceno
Forgiveness Don't Grow on Trees – Bad Flamingo
Sinners and Saints – Andrea Wasse
Ain't No Devil – Andrea Wasse
The Hearse – Matt Maeson
Devil With Angel Eyes – Royal Bliss
Window – Bonefield
The Devil Never Sleeps – Blues Saraceno, Nine One
One
God Damn Better – The Dirty Diary
I Know His Blood – Vienna Ditto
Graves – Whiskey Shivers
Mausoleum – Rafferty
Shake off Your Flesh – The Huntress and Holder of
Hands
Blood Moon – Yoav
Devil Devil – MILCK
Every Breath You Take – Chase Holfelder
Murky – Saint Mesa
Bad Things – Jace Everett
God Be You – Nostalghia
The Killer – Kevin Costner & Modern West, Jaida
Dreyer
Devil Like You – Gareth Dunlop
Swamp Hymns – Osi And The Jupiter
Mount Everest – Labrinth
Love Is a Bitch – Two Feet
Twisted – Two Feet
Down So Low – Royal Deluxe
Been a Bad Woman – Black Casino and the Ghost

*To all of us who are too independent for our own good...
sometimes it's okay to let yourself be the damsel in
distress for the right person.*

PROLOGUE

VINCENT

8 years ago

THE UNMISTAKABLE CRACK OF BONES twists the sound waves, and my muscles, too, as I wince at the sharp vibration tainting the air.

Madds and I watch as the guy grabs onto his jaw on a pain-filled bellow, but the enraged curses the redhead spits at him almost shadow it. His screams fuel her. Her eyes fill with a familiar madness, yet... it's much richer than the reflection gazing back at me in the mirror. She's a fucking tornado of punches, slaps, and kicks as her small body shoves him in a frenzied attack.

She's goddamn mesmerizing—Morrigan O'Rourke—the girl with forest eyes and hair kissed by fire.

Even Madds gawks with starry eyes at the angry woman, wrapped in a tornado of wild curls.

And this bastard never admires anything.

But when she throws herself on top of the kid, her knee digging into his stomach as she leans onto the forearm she's locked against his throat, it's time to stop her.

I step forward, sliding my hands under her armpits to pull her off the guy who's at the brink of tears, his nose a bleeding mess. Only, the girl pushes me back with more force than should reside in her slim frame. She's on fire, and I might just let myself get burnt.

I signal Madds to replace me so I can *tend* to the guy bleeding on the ground, and he grabs Morrigan just as she pulls back her elbow, ready to land another fist in the asshole's face. She's yanked back, kicking her legs, screeching in frustration at the restriction, but Madds, with his tall, broad, and strong body, doesn't flinch. He lifts her effortlessly, her back to his front, an arm wrapped around her as she thrashes, willing him to let her go.

He doesn't. Even looks a little bored as he allows her to get it all out, while I press my boot on the stomach of the mangled piece of crap lying on the ground, pushing him back down.

"I'm gonna fucking ruin y'all! Send your asses to jail, fucking white trash!" He spits blood onto the ground, and splatters hit my shoes, the words slurred through the pain in his jaw as he pushes his broken body to get up.

My foot lands on his throat a moment later, and when his gaze meets mine, he falters, eyes growing wider as his body stills and tenses. There's fear in those dilating pupils, and I peek at my reflection in the car window to find what terrifies him so—it's all me. My eyes drip with the sort of malice that could make angels fall, villains rise, and summon armies.

Our army has been assembling for only a little while, and he's exactly the type of person who would be a target in our criminal endeavors. Only this pathetic pussy right here poses no advantage to our less than charitable cause. His dad though, yes... we could entice him with a deal he definitely can't refuse since he holds some information we could exploit. Maybe his kid is not useless after all.

“I wonder what your daddy would think if we threatened to expose his only son, the future of the Bray name, the heir of his business... as a rapist.” I press a little harder on his trachea as those words spill calmly off my tongue, and when his hands grab onto my leg, I increase the pressure. “Get your filthy hands off me,” I bite out in a low, guttural voice.

Only a gurgling sound comes out when his mouth moves, and he quickly taps his palm on the ground.

“Give him a chance, Vincent,” Madds says, laughing behind me, the girl’s screeches now having quieted.

I shrug and take my foot off his throat, his following coughs growing boring real fast.

“Spit it the fuck out!” I rasp, enjoying the wince that crumples his face.

“I didn’t ra—” he all but whispers as he rolls onto his front, pushing his no doubt aching body onto all fours so he can get up.

“Speak up, motherfucker!”

“I didn’t rape her.” He spits blood again, rising and sitting on his heels.

“Who the fuck do you think you’re playing?! I got one word for you: Rose.”

The seconds stretch as his shoulders tense, and he slowly turns his head toward me.

“She couldn’t go to the police,” I carry on, my eyes searing into his. “There wouldn’t be enough evidence for them, but there’s more than enough for her father and us, motherfucker. We were already coming for you, but catching you on Lover’s Lane with your tiny dick in your hand, as you’re about to force yourself on another girl who’s clearly refusing you, is some sort of cruel luck. At least we caught you before you ruined another —”

But I don’t get a chance to finish.

“I’m not goddamn ruined, asshole!” The girl sneers at me. Her attitude pulls at my lips, but I don’t turn for her to see it.

“She—she asked for—” Bray begins to speak.

“I’ll kill you, motherfucker! I’ll chop off your dick and shove it up your ass, you goddamn son of a bitch!” Morrigan shrieks with a sharp, angry voice, and I resist the urge to cup my own dick at the disturbing thought.

I have no idea how, but she slips out of Madds’ hold, and rushes to the guy, landing a fierce kick to his chest. He drops onto his back with a harsh thud, and a mere second later, a pain-filled bellow fills Lover’s Lane as she thrusts another strong kick between his legs. The poor bastard curls into a fetal position, crying in curses and threats that will never come true.

Reaching over, I grab onto her waist, attempting to pull her back. But in the next moment, the shock of an impact knocks me back a step, my ear ringing as I realize she smashed her elbow into the side of my face.

“Jesus fuck!” I rasp, ready to haul her ass over my shoulder and end this.

But when I catch her eyes, I’m trapped.

The fury looks too fucking pretty in those greens devoid of remorse. She delivers one more punch in the guy’s ribs, her gaze on me the entire time. And something far more shattering hits me. Only it doesn’t land on my flesh, nor in my bones, but within my fucking heart and soul, and I know... I’m ruined.

CHAPTER 1

MORRIGAN

Present Day

I FELT THE AIR SHIFT before my eyes caught on to the silent disturbance. The skin of my back prickled with an uncomfortable chill, even in this sticky humidity.

Now, it spreads up my spine, onto my shoulders, and grips my neck, forcing my body to turn. One by one, the surrounding people change their tune, either to silence or whispers, just as my gaze reluctantly lands on them.

It's almost impossible to think of the four men as individuals. They unintentionally carry themselves as one entity. Yet the shift in the air would make one feel they are a legion, commanding the attention of all who are around. They are not from the same family, but somehow cut from the same cloth, moving in unison like they share blood, muscles, bones, and DNA. Their arms sway in unison, their feet gliding in a matching beat on the moonlit asphalt, and fuck me if it doesn't feel like time slows down. If only to allow everyone to take in the creatures who bend the air into compliance.

Only, they aren't creatures at all... just four people forming one important faction—The Sanctum. The anomaly of the underworlds, four men ruling as one—

Carter Pierce, Finnigan Hennessey, Maddox Severin, and Vincent 'The Serpent' Sinclair.

Even thinking of that last name on the list leaves an awful taste on my tongue. It fills me with distaste and loathing for the man.

Queenscove, our southern, seaside city filled with period buildings and very few skyscrapers, is not the place where everyone knows everyone. Unless you're part of the fairly extensive high society of this wealthy place. Yet wherever *they* make an appearance, the world stands still. Only, it's not fear you're feeling, it's power. Fear is simply a byproduct. It stems from the rumors swerving about them and their Syndicate—violence, black-market deals, sex, secrets, murders—and no matter which you've heard, they amount to one thing and one thing only: *danger*.

No one knows how many of these rumors are true. None have been denied, or addressed, for that matter, and their presence alone is enough to make you believe all of them and more.

It annoys me that Queenscove feels safer because they're here.

I knew them once. Well, I knew two of them, one... far too intimately. But I remember all of them when they were young, still in school. I was a starry-eyed kid, four grades lower than them, but even then, they were a force of fucking nature. Even through the shivers they gave you, you still craved to throw yourself in the middle of their storm.

Their affairs aren't common knowledge, but my family's position in this society poses some advantages for me. Although nowadays I would rather not be part of this family at all, it does mean that I end up hearing all sorts of interesting things. I've built up all this information, piece by piece, and amongst other things, I know that their most profitable business is secrets. They harness them, keep them safe until the time comes, and

they have to use them to their advantage. Whether for new business deals or to manipulate other people. The wheel is constantly spinning.

Information is power and power is worth more than money.

The Serpent should know.

He's the only one of The Sanctum who didn't come from money. Instead, he built his reputation on pure talent. One he wields dangerously well. People say all he needs is his piercing gaze to gather all the information he requires from someone. Although, I'm pretty sure he doesn't shy away from physical torture. His intensity is brutal, and using it to manipulate his *victims* is what earned him his reputation. Both between the criminal world and the aristocracy.

He doesn't need *old money*. His pockets could be as empty as they were ten years ago, but the world would still bow at his feet. He *is* power.

The black-eyed devil himself—my ex-boyfriend.

And my first love.

The scar running across my palm itches at the sight of him.

Suddenly, I'm painfully aware of the man sitting next to me right now. He would probably kill for The Serpent's skill. And this is not a thought I would have had about him six months ago... but things change. So many things have changed.

The four men walk on the sidewalk, calm and determined, passing by the old-time cinema, a quirky flower shop, then one of the city's fanciest restaurants, before shifting directions to a dark and narrow side street. Hushed rumors have spread through the high society of Queenscove about a speakeasy they own, nestled in plain sight, somewhere in the middle of the city. Maybe that's where they're headed now. I have a vague idea of where it could be, a radius more than

anything, but neither me nor my family have been invited. Although, those who have been, cannot speak of it. So who knows.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued. That I wouldn't want a taste, a little peek.

The first man dips into the shadows of the street, then the second one, and after the third man follows, their black suit covered bodies absorbed by the darkness, The Serpent takes one more step and stops.

I swear time slows down just for him, his body turning ever so slightly, his eyes closed as he moves to look over his shoulder. Then they open... not wide, but the slits of a snake who found its next meal—and that's exactly what I am.

What happens when you gaze upon the devil... and he catches you?

When his eyes land on yours and he marks you as a target?

What happens when the devil doesn't look like a devil at all?

Dozens of people sit at the tables of this street-side bar terrace, yet his gaze landed straight on mine. I'm forced to take in his strong, almost square jaw that's dusted with thick hair, those full lips, and straight, wide nose. He's kept his black hair short on the sides, but the top is a few inches long, messily swept back, and I hate how good he looks.

Saliva pools in my mouth, but swallowing means moving, and somehow moving seems to be the wrong action right now. He's fixed on me. Unnaturally still. But the shadows of the street swallow him, as if the darkness is part of him, a coat he wears so well.

Whispers break out in unison on the terrace and the back of my neck heats up—they're talking about me. No one missed their presence on the street, so hiding this silent, yet powerful exchange is impossible.

Moments pass, the night breeze unhelpful as my eyes begin to burn with the need to blink. Only I have a fucking point to prove. I am not submitting to him. I will not break eye contact first.

“Darling?”

Shut the fuck up, Ryan.

“Morrigan?!” His tone switches to commanding.

The Serpent’s gaze suddenly darkens even more. I’m not sure how I know this, but I’m convinced no one else notices the subtle shift, the gentle scowl forming between his eyebrows. I’m also sure it’s not meant for me either, but for...

A hand waves in front of my eyes, breaking the connection.

Goddamnit, Ryan!

When that palm vacates my line of sight, The Serpent is gone, the side street empty.

Turning to Ryan, the ruckus of the terrace patrons fills the night again. Stealing a glance around myself, it’s impossible to miss how they watch me from the corners of their eyes, even if their conversations are not about me.

“Yes, Ryan.” My eyes land on him before I fully face him, and I’m met with his pursed lips, flared nostrils, and scrunched eyebrows.

There isn’t much more I can take from my relationship with him, even though I do kind of care about him. A year ago, I would have said with certainty that I loved him. Now, as the veil has been pulled away further, I’m convinced that love is far too strong of a word for what we have... *had*.

I’ve been ready to leave for a while. Ever since it all started to change. When *he* started to change.

However, our families seem just as involved in our relationship as we are. Actually... more than I am.

Leaving him seems like breaking a treaty between two nations. As I've been distancing myself, they seem to insist harder on meeting, pushing us together, forcing us to dinners and events. Every encounter breaks the confidence I've been trying to build. And it's just as difficult for me to break away from my own family.

"What the hell was that?!" he presses, struggling to control the distaste in his tone.

"I don't know," I say, shrugging.

I'm not fully lying. I don't know what it was from The Serpent's point of view, but I do know what it was from mine—hate. Luckily, this city is big enough that I managed to avoid him almost unintentionally over the years. We've rarely crossed paths, and I like it this way. Months must have passed since the last time I saw him...

God, I'm fucking fooling myself.

It's been exactly five months, three weeks, and two days—my mother's 50th fucking birthday. The elite were invited. The Sanctum, too. I was sure my parents did it as a power move, either to display some sort of fake alliance or because they were begging for a business deal.

Five fucking months and that night still haunts me.

If only it was the only one that did...

I focus on Ryan's murky brown eyes, like a marsh, with hints of green. They used to be kind of pretty, but now all I can think of is a swamp when I look into them. Nothing special sparks in them anymore.

"He was just staring at you," he speaks again, his tone grating.

Blinking, I turn my gaze back toward the dark side street.

Yes, he was.

“Answer me, goddamnit.” He lowers his tone, but almost hisses at me.

“You didn’t ask a question.”

He huffs so loudly I catch the people at the next table over briefly turning their attention to us.

“Don’t act like I don’t know your past, Morrigan.”

“My past?! What are you talking about, Ryan?” I ask, baffled by his insinuation. He knows about The Serpent and I, since we were all in the same school at one time, but he also knows how long ago it was.

“Don’t play stupid, you know very well what I’m talking about. I know you saw him at your parents’ party, too. If anything is going on, I swear...”

“Did you want me to keep my eyes closed throughout the entire night so The Serpent wouldn’t grace my line of sight?” My sarcastic tone is louder, and I don’t miss the bulging of his eyes as he subtly glances around us.

It seems to shut him up, and he shifts his attention elsewhere.

The Sanctum is fearless, seemingly indestructible, and that whole invitation must mean that my father is doing business with them, or maybe attempting to. For five months, I’ve been trying to figure out what’s happening with my family. They are dysfunctional in their normal state, but things have been changing. It feels different. Like we’re sitting at the edge of a cliff, and any moment now, a storm will tip us over.

I wish I wouldn’t think about it as *us*. I wish I wouldn’t be involved in whatever the fuck it is, but I seem to be pulled into it, if their recent cushy attitude toward Ryan is anything to go by. But if this is a game of chess, I’m no Queen in it. Not even a Knight—I’m a pawn. Not that I was ever anything more to my parents, my father specifically. I was never as important as my older brother, Cillian. He is the future of this family, the one to take over whatever businesses father has, and the

O'Rourke name further. Carry it deeper into our fucked-up family history. Even our ancestors were crazy sons of bitches. Some were worse than others. Cruel, despicable, lacking remorse, even slave owners a few centuries ago.

I'm not implying I'm a saint. I know where my soul belongs. But it doesn't mean my place is with them. My brand of sin is different from theirs, and as long as I continue to be careful, they won't know I'm trying to get away from all of them until it's too late to stop me.

It's funny how Ryan used to be my escape from them. Not anymore. Not since he realized he couldn't quite tame me, and his views started aligning with his father's... and my father's. My boyfriend's exertion of control these days runs deeper than I would care to admit. His time will come, and just like my family, he will pay, too.

If only I would actually get my fucking balls back.

"I think I'm ready to go home now," I say.

"Alone?!"

I mentally roll my eyes. *As if I'm ever alone.* There are constant eyes on me, especially as of late. Since Ryan's father passed away, he is slowly taking over the crooked family business and accepting his place as the head of it. Something is brewing, but no matter how hard I try, I can't find out what it is. All I know is that our families, before the passing of Jonah Holt, were working on something, a business deal. An alliance. Why or for what, I have no clue. But it feels like the terms have changed now that he's not here anymore.

"Alone, yes. I have things to do."

"Things?" He spits the word out like the lack of respect he has toward my work isn't already blatantly obvious.

Just because my branding and design work takes place exclusively online, it doesn't mean it's not work. I

majored in graphic design and took my talent to a pretty damn profitable business, banking at least a couple of grand per project. I'm quick though, and I've been pushing myself hard enough that I can take quite a few per month. But Ryan does not know that.

I get up before he can say anything else, then dip down and give him a peck on the lips. I know he won't let me leave without the mimicked affection. But he catches my upper arm just as I'm almost standing and pulls me back down, his lips crashing onto mine in a much deeper kiss.

It's a sort of claim on me, for everyone around us to see.

After The Serpent's earlier display, such a rare sight, I'm sure he feels the need to piss all over me. Mark his territory and make sure everyone knows who I belong to.

I allow the kiss mostly because I have no other choice. But it's for my own survival. I have to play nice.

Hopefully not for long.

CHAPTER 2

MORRIGAN

I SLIDE INTO MY CAR, eager to start the AC and escape the humidity, shutting the door as the engine roars to life. The busy street drowns the noise of it, but it's not like people didn't already turn their heads as I sat inside. They look at this car and instantly think it's either my boyfriend's or my daddy's. I fucking hate that they're not entirely wrong.

As I was finishing university last year, my parents suddenly decided moving about in taxis wasn't safe for their daughter anymore. They insisted they buy me a car, no matter my protests. I didn't want to be tied to their money, but the only way to escape their flashy choice, which would have ensured I would flaunt their wealth around the city, was to concede. After some negotiation, I managed to sway them from the same mid-life crisis red Ferrari my father has, toward this black beauty, a Dodge Challenger GT.

I love this car, but it's a constant reminder of their control over me. I fucking pray for the day I can just drop the keys on their table and buy my own. The day I'll be able to afford to move out and escape their damn clutches. Ryan's too.

Going to university was the loophole in that control. Their desire to raise good *stock* meant that they could

do little to protest my desire to attend university over 400 miles away, up north, well past the hills of Venator. I even stretched the time with a master's degree too. They attempted to protest, but that was a prestigious university, and they could do little to justify why they didn't want me so far away.

Early on, I started seeing that my family's values and their views of women, of me, are much different from modern society standards. I had to plan my way out. That temporary freedom allowed me to have a job without them knowing. Along with most of the allowance I've been saving since I was fifteen, that plan for the future was becoming clearer.

But now, all those savings are tied up in my first business venture in which I'm a silent partner. There's no way I can let my family, or anyone else, know that I'm involved. Not just yet. Lulu and I worked too hard for it.

I pull away from the curb just as my dashboard flashes with a phone call, Lulu's name popping on the screen. Turning the volume down, I press a button to answer.

"Give me a sec, let me put an earbud in. I'm in the car."

I fiddle with it and switch the connection on my phone as I stop at the traffic lights. These days, I'm careful we're not overheard, especially when it's about business.

"You good?" I hear her sweet, soft voice come through the other line.

It's deceiving. The woman may sound sweet, but she's vicious. Calm, but vicious.

"Yeah, all good. I was just thinking of you. What's up?"

"I'm just having a little trouble making a decision, and I wanted to ask if you can come in and help me out." I

hear her long nails tap one by one on a solid surface. She sounds impatient.

“Sure, give me ten, or actually, fifteen minutes. I need to—”

“I know,” she interrupts.

She knows my life all too well, including the regression of my relationship. I need to lose my tail, if there is one, since I told Ryan I’m going home. My friendship with her isn’t a secret, and neither is her location, but I would rather have a head start anyway.

The four-story period building looms, the beautiful details of the century-old façade hiding many secrets beyond it. On the top floor, Lulu lives with Luke, her boyfriend, the two floors below are unused, and on the ground floor, she opened a quirky little café, which brings her a constant stream of income.

I look around before I leave the car, a habit that has become second nature now—I wasn’t followed. Before walking into the café, I glance briefly at the windows of the floor under Lulu’s apartment, the one she insisted I should have. I didn’t want to bring my fucked-up life so close to her, but Lulu’s love is the only unconditional one I know, and in the end, I accepted her offer.

This place was an inheritance from her late grandmother, who had it from her own mother, and it’s been rotting since the 50s, stuck in time. Lulu took it upon herself to restore it to its former glory. Renovations started quite a while back with work on the structure and roof, then part of the ground floor for the café and lobby, alongside her apartment on the top floor. But when our business idea fully formed, all the financial efforts shifted, and the work on what’s supposed to be my apartment halted before they properly began. It doesn’t even have a floor right now, just bare beams that used to hold the rotting parquet floor.

“Hey, sugar!” I greet the bartender as I enter the ground floor café.

He nods and smiles as I pass by the bar he's currently wiping. It's placed by the entrance, at the front of the narrow space, giving the patrons quite a lot of privacy from the people passing by on the street, since the tables are located beyond it, toward the back. The space is much longer than it is wide, but people seem to enjoy the coziness.

The rest of the ground floor and the extensive basement area are being turned into something much, much more interesting. I can't help but grin to myself as I walk past the tables, toward the back door.

This location is perfect for our business, because even if someone was following me, going to see my best friend at her café or her place is nothing unusual.

After punching in a code, I step into the well-lit short corridor surveyed by two cameras, arriving at two other doors, both leading to two secure foyers. One leads to the front of the building for the apartment access, and the other, where I'm currently inputting the code on the keypad to get through, leads to the back of the building. To our new business venture—our fetish club.

As I pass through the door, my steps falter. The lobby wasn't finished the last time I was here. I turn my head in awe, admiring the black 3D diamond pattern covering most of the walls, bathed in a decadent, gold glow reflecting off some of the facets.

It's fucking beautiful!

To my left, black double doors, sculpted with an art-deco pattern, open up to the entrance hallway that leads to the private parking and courtyard at the back of the building, while to my right sits what will be a staffed wardrobe.

And right before me, stretching the entire length of the space, sits *la pièce de résistance*—the black marble and dark wood, semi-circle shaped reception desk with the most stunning backdrop I've ever seen. Although the backdrop itself, the wall, is the main event.

I step closer, in awe of the beauty our artist created on the black velvet covered wall, interrupted by two entryways, five feet away on either side of the reception desk. Bas-reliefs of naked bodies protrude out of the flat surface, the gold light absorbed by their sinful positions.

On the left-hand side, on his hands and knees, there is a bas-relief of a man with a leash clearly wrapped around his neck, held by a woman standing on the inside of the reception desk, her legs spread in an imposing stance.

On the right-hand side sits a woman, ass on her heels, palms on her thighs, a rope around her throat, held by a man standing on the inside of the desk.

And between these two scenes, centered on the wall behind the reception, is my favorite—a beast of a man standing sideways, tall and strong, the gold light bouncing off his sculpted muscles. He has one hand wrapped in the hair of the sinful, naked woman before him, bending her neck uncomfortably, while his other hand is lost in the relief, right where their hips join.

They are beautifully and flawlessly sculpted behind the soft fabric, enchanting and strangely hypnotic.

I pass through the left entryway into a wide corridor. There are a couple of sitting areas here, doors to the powder and dressing rooms sitting on the opposite side, but my attention is caught somewhere else. On the other side of the reception, against the same wall, right above the stairs that lead down into our club, one word is written in large, brushed-gold letters, telling you exactly what awaits you while you're down there—METAMORPHOSIS.

It shines discreetly against the black velvet, and its meaning is as much tied to our own evolution as it is to the experience of the people who will join us here.

With each step down the stairs illuminated by gold spotlights as a sultry rebel Blues song touches my ears,

my soul feels freer. The irony of finding my freedom underground doesn't escape me.

The moment the block heels of my knee-high boots hit the floor and my eyes sweep over the space before me, I clutch the handrail so hard my bones ache.

"It's ready," I whisper to myself.

"Tadaaaa!" Lulu cheers, startling me as she jumps from behind the bar.

It sits against the right wall, fairly close to the stairs, because we wanted to give people this proximity, as some could be overwhelmed when they first step into the fetish club. Even in normal clubs, most people run to the bar first. It's a comfort thing.

"I can't believe it's finished..." I whisper in disbelief.

Her icy blonde ponytail whips around as she dips behind the black marble-topped bar, and the music quiets. I walk toward her, but my eyes are gazing anywhere but in her direction, mesmerized by the reality of this finished space. I'm in awe, speechless at how insane the finished product looks. I mean, I'd seen it only a week ago, and it wasn't far from this stage, yet I can't help my shock. The implication of it being finished hits harder, more than the look of it.

"Is it really finished?" I ask in disbelief, whipping my head to Lulu, my excitement seeping through.

"It is! I was dying to tell you we would be done today, but I wanted to surprise you! It's fucking beautiful, isn't it?" She clenches her fists to her chest, an emotional look in her eyes as she glances around.

I rest my back against the bar, facing the expansive space filled with a combination of booths, sofas, and normal tables, with enough room between them for dancing. And in the center of it all stands a large, circular stage with two stripper poles. As much as it is a fetish club, everyone loves watching a woman with good dancing skills. I'm excited and apprehensive at the

same time. Lulu insisted we install them, and I know it's because she's trying to tempt me. I love pole dancing. Back in university, I visited the local studio several times a week, but she knows how hard I shy away from being seen doing it. I reckon this is her way of kicking my confidence into gear.

Either way, the stripping, the dancing, it will provide amazing background entertainment when the stage isn't being used for its main purpose—shows. Our inspiration comes from the club in Rosston, where we went to university. When we visited it, experienced couples or groups booked the stage for various activities, either actual play or instructional sessions. I'm excited to see this place in action.

"I can't believe we're three weeks ahead of schedule," I say, pushing away from the bar and walking around the counter.

My gaze lands on the bottle and glasses stashed behind it. The bar isn't stocked yet, but we kept Bourbon here for tough times. There's just under a third left... There have been quite a few tough times so far.

I pour two fingers worth into each glass, and hand one over to Lulu, clinking with her.

"Congratulations, Miss Dietrich."

"Congratulations to you too, Miss O'Rourke."

I take a large sip, then head toward the opposite side of the room from the stairs, where a wide corridor splits the wall in two. But it's not just a normal corridor. On either side of it, large windows cover the whole length of the walls, peering into each of the six playrooms. They're special double windows that allow the people inside the rooms to decide if they wish to see the crowd watching them, or if they want to turn it into a mirror. Only on their side, though. Some people love the intrigue of being watched, but don't enjoy seeing the people watching them. And finally, if they don't want to

be watched at all, one button pulls down a blind, and they have private playtime instead.

I drag my free hand over the dark wood paneling covering the wall, admiring the equipment sitting behind the windows—benches, St. Andrew's crosses, toys, crows, tables, and just simple chairs. The main reason this place has cost us pretty much all our savings is because we made sure all the equipment is of excellent quality, and comfortable, a lot of it handmade by a great local carpenter and tanner we found.

One of the things the club in Rosston was lacking was quality equipment. We're new to the business world, and we wanted everything about this club to scream excellence and taste. The last thing we need is to give someone an excuse to tell us we're not serious about this venture, especially since our market research showed us there's enough elite in this city seeking this kind of place somewhere else.

More intriguing was the fact that, after making all these items for us, the man who crafted all these pieces, decided he will be our first member. Still subject to vetting and interview, but he was pretty much our test subject, and we're very happy that he passed.

"We're keeping the same opening date, right?" I ask Lulu.

We reach the end of the corridor, which opens into a small hallway, to the right heading toward the bathrooms, a security desk, and the fire exit, and toward the left, where we're heading right now, is our office and private bathroom. Lulu walks in, sits behind the desk, legs crossed on top of it as she leans back in the chair.

"I think it's a clever idea," she answers.

I follow suit, sinking into the sofa and propping my legs up on the coffee table.

"It gives us time to reach our member goal, but we could potentially hold a pre-opening party for the ones

who have signed up so far,” I say to her. “There’s enough there for a solid event, and I’m almost done with their background checks. Interviews will follow soon. We should invite some people to play and put up a show to create an unforgettable atmosphere. Then we offer an incentive at the party for the current members, if they recommend another potential patron.”

“Those are some great ideas! I’ll ask Rose and Jasmine if they are available to entertain earlier than planned. And I’ll invite some experienced people from the club in Rosston, to set the tone.” The excitement is pretty damn clear in her voice.

“Are you gonna play?” I ask, watching as she downs the rest of her drink.

If she wants to, people won’t recognize her anyway. We want to give members the comfort of feeling free, without others knowing who they are, or seeing that they are in the presence of someone they know personally. Of course, it’s impossible to promise true anonymity since it depends more on them than us, especially when tattoos or distinct marks are involved, but the least we can do for them, and our staff as well, is to make masks mandatory; simple carnival style, or on the tasteful horror side, it doesn’t matter to us.

“I’m sure Luke would enjoy that, but no. Not now. The party and the opening are too important. I’ll have enough on my plate, and I have to stay focused. I can’t get involved as well.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agree.

I pop my glass on the coffee table and lie all the way down on the sofa. Damn, this thing is comfortable. I would rather sleep here than go to my parents’.

Lulu actually met Luke in the fetish club up in Rosston, and they clicked from the start. After university, he pretty much followed her here, not that it was a big move, as his hometown is about 200 miles up north, close to Venator. However, who wouldn’t want to

be here on this Topaz coast, close to the light blue waters and white sands it got its name from. The subtropical climate is such a welcomed medium, especially when it comes to the mild winters and breezy summers. Although we still have the humidity.

This place attracts a healthy number of tourists, but our mayor has limited the number of hotels that can be built, by local ordinance, to avoid ruining the landscape and infrastructure. Every single local agreed. That number was reached a few years ago, so even as a tourist town, it's fairly exclusive. And not many people move in, since most don't want to leave, and the real estate is through-the-roof expensive.

Queenscove is a corner of paradise.

These were some of the main reasons why I knew I had to bite down on my pride and accept my best friend's offer. It wasn't only that, though, but the simple fact that I didn't want to take advantage of her. Although she would smack me if I ever said this to her face. In the end, getting this apartment from her is a godsend... for the sheer amount of money I'm saving, and the time. She's freeing me from my family's control, Ryan's too. I would thank Lulu's grandmother, if I could speak to dead people, for leaving this building to her, along with some money to help with renovations.

The rest of the Dietrich family got an equal share of the inheritance, some property too, but none as large as this. Or as dilapidated, for that matter. It's like her grandmother knew that Lulu was the right person to take proper care of this beautiful old building. Long before our time, it was a small hotel, which Lulu's great-great-grandmother owned, only she decided she would make each floor its own apartment instead.

"You alright?" She pulls me out of my thoughts. "You want to crash at mine?"

"Nah, you and Luke need your space. Besides... I don't wanna give my parents, or Ryan, any other reason

to be suspicious of me.” I get up and down the rest of the drink. I really want more, but I have to drive back.

“There’s always space for you, Morri. But... I understand.”

I know she does, but Luke is kind of weird about his privacy. He was the same in university when he came to our apartment. I like him, but there is something about him that makes me feel like I’m in the way. Not just my presence, but me as a person.

“Thanks, honey.”

“Did you find out anything else?” She settles back into the chair, the expression on her face suddenly serious.

“Let’s not do this. We need to enjoy this huge victory. Our club is ready... *fuck!* It’s incredible! My family and darling boyfriend can wait for another time.”

I don’t miss the silent sigh as her chest slowly deflates.

“Come on. I want to show you something else.” She rises and strides out of the office without waiting for me to agree. All I can do is scramble to rush after her.

What the fuck?!

I follow her through the corridor, then the club, up the stairs, passing through the reception, and back into the small corridor I came through from the café. But she takes the door leading to the foyer for the apartments.

“Babe, I don’t want to disturb Luke... Maybe he’s—”

“We’re not going there.” She shuts me up.

Following her into the elevator, I watch as she presses the *No. 2* button—the floor of my future apartment. I turn my head to her, confusion straining my features, but I’m met with an impassive expression. The woman’s poker face has always been far too good. But I know her better than anyone. Even Luke. I can see the tinge of mischief in those golden eyes.

When the elevator stops and the doors part, she flips the switch of a faint, dangling light, and my mouth falls open instantly. I cover the sharp gasp that escapes my throat with shaking hands, unable to fully comprehend what I'm seeing.

"You... how? Where did you... Fuck..."

She laughs as she excitedly grabs my wrist and yanks me inside, onto the dirty, bare concrete floor.

"I made some calculations some time ago and realized I have some spare money to start the renovations slowly. Build some bones."

Lulu is smart with her money. She gives herself a salary from the café downstairs, and the rest comes from dividends from various investments, at her father's advice. But she no longer has expendable funds to waste on this slow-return investment. Renovating the actual building, the structure, the plumbing, electrics, and other bare minimum, is done at her expense. This was her decision. When she invited me to move into this apartment, we agreed, at my insistence, that everything from flooring to furniture will be paid for by me. However, since our priorities changed to the club, we halted everything to do with this apartment, or the one beneath it, and redirected all our funds to the business. The arrangement was that a percentage from the club profit will go into this apartment.

Only, it seems the vixen was cunning and already found money. I'm not entirely sure what's stopping me from screaming in joy and jumping all over this damn place. Maybe the pure shock. Or maybe the memories of the rotten, broken floor we deemed a hazard after Lulu's foot went through it when we were surveying the space. It's all gone now. Brand-new bare concrete sits under our feet, fully ready for flooring.

"Fucking hell... Oh, my God!" It's all I can express right now, and the wide smile on her face makes me wanna goddamn kiss her!

The walls are cleaned and scrapped back to the brick, and the mold which riddled every surface is gone. Even the wood frames for the walls are built, electric cables already weaving through some of them.

Fuck, this is amazing!

“The electrics will be done in about a week, maximum two, and the walls will be rebuilt after. It will take a bit of time. We’ll see what position we are in by then.” She walks straight ahead toward the tall windows on the opposite side of the room, the soft moonlight shining through them, filling the space with a deep blue shade.

I suddenly have the urge to steal some money, just so I can get this place done quicker and move in.

“Wouldn’t you want this space when it’s ready?” I ask, watching her as she stands by one of the windows, looking between the two rows of buildings toward the sea, only a five, maybe ten-minute walk away.

“Nah...” She turns to me. “I love the apartment above. I built it exactly as I wanted it. What’s the point in copying and pasting it here, since I wouldn’t change a thing about it.”

I shrug. She’s right.

“This is amazing, Lu! It speeds up this process so much!” My process. My chase for independence.

She nods and pulls me into a brief hug. She knows my situation all too well. If I wish to get out of my parents’ control, simply moving out and renting an apartment won’t do it. They have enough influence to tell most landlords in this city to fuck off and refuse me. Only they cannot treat Lulu as any other landlord.

No one tells a Dietrich what to do.

Her family might not be part of The Sanctum, or live in Queenscove, for that matter, but they have old ties to this place. Not to mention, a fierce reputation that still

bears a heavy weight within the high society and politics here.

When I returned from university, my family insisted I live with them. It was either that or live with Ryan. But he wasn't even on my short list of choices. Unfortunately, they noticed. I was naive thinking they were taking me in out of the goodness of their hearts.

No matter. I'm a step closer to freedom now.

CHAPTER 3

VINCENT

“WHERE IS HE?!” my voice booms, bouncing off the concrete of the basement surrounding us. “Where the fuck is he?!”

“Boseman?”

“Don’t fucking play with me, Finn!” I rasp, pointing at the blue-eyed pretty boy as I stop and turn. “I will not fucking hesitate!”

I haven’t been this angry, this out of control, in a long, long time, and he can certainly see it.

“Jesus, man... calm down,” he says, narrowing his brows as he rubs the back of his neck, under those messy, blonde curls.

“I swear to God, Hennessey!”

I can feel that vein pulsing in my temple, my throat strained with pain as I grit my teeth. I’m being unfair. It’s not his fault, nor his responsibility—that falls on all of us.

“I don’t know, Vin.” Crossing his arms, he surveys me.

I sigh as I go deeper through the concrete corridor of the basement. Although, it was built more like a nuclear bunker, since the thickness of the walls and the depth of

the space is necessary to ensure no noise escapes to the surface. The light reflects off the satin-finish walls, every step taking me closer to the son of a bitch who will pay for this. I even have a hole already dug up for the motherfucker.

He's not leaving this place, but parts of him will.

That thought brings me a bit of peace and a muscle twitches in the corner of my mouth. I don't feel anything in particular during the killing process. I do enjoy unloading the weight off my shoulders on someone's internal organs, but it's only a tool taking me to that decadent ecstasy—death. There's something about that finality, that brief flash when the pain seeps out of their eyes and serenity replaces it, before they're gone. When their light goes out, mine shines brighter.

"Serpent..." the piece of shit hisses through bloody teeth the moment I open the heavy metal door to the room that has probably seen more death than the cemetery downtown.

He is not the same piece of shit I wanted to see here. But he's connected enough that he could be useful, I guess. He's on the other side of the room, opposite the only door into this concrete box, tied to a metal chair bolted to the floor. Carter and Madds stand next to the only other piece of furniture in this space, a metal table holding a few... instruments.

"Mr. Crowley, pleasure to see you." I peel off my suit jacket and hang it on the hook on the door, pulling on a disposable plastic coverall to protect my clothes and shoes.

We keep a healthy stash here, since we went through a period of time where we were constantly burning clothes. The amount we were spending on new ones was getting ridiculous. Full body coveralls are a godsend.

I zip up the suit as I move toward Crowley, his eyes growing bigger with each of my determined steps. He

knows what all this means, this preparation, the simmering anger bleeding out of my eyes. And when my foot hits the ground in front of him, my fist connects with his cheek hard enough his head snaps to the side with a crack, and blood sprays out of his mouth.

Carter sneers, and when I turn to him, he's looking from his shoes to me, and then to our prisoner, annoyance and slight disgust shimmering in his eyes. I look down and notice the speckles of red.

"They're new. Fucking. Shoes!" Each of his words are punctuated by a booming step as he walks toward us and lands another punch to the other side of Crowley's face.

"Happy?" I ask, cocking an eyebrow.

"Quite, yes." Carter turns and goes back next to Mads, looking with distaste toward his fancy shoes.

He's gonna burn them later, yet he still pulls a handkerchief out of his waistcoat pocket and wipes them. With slicked-back hair and an undercut, dressed in the style of another era in his brogues, waistcoats, and breast pocket handkerchiefs, he looks like a gangster. He even has a pocket watch. But the son of a bitch pulls it all off effortlessly.

"You can kill me now. I have nothing to say to you." Crowley draws my attention back to him, before he spits blood on me.

I can't help the rumble vibrating from my chest through my throat, coming out in a menacing laugh. Violence is never my first method of extracting information, but there's something about today that makes me want to draw blood. Lots of it.

"I'm not entirely sure why you believe that the moment you die is a decision you make. No, Mr. Crowley, we have exactly"—I lift my left hand to look at the simple Vacheron watch wrapped around my wrist—"thirty-four minutes until I have to get ready to go out

to dinner. So, ten, maybe fifteen minutes, seems like a good amount of time for you to share where the fuck Boseman is. I seem to remember a deal we made when a certain transgression of yours was suddenly forgotten by the police. You have not delivered on your end of that.”

Crossing my arms, I take one more deep breath as I cock my head and regard the asshole before me. That jab to his cheek helped me release some of this fucking tension. It’s easy to see why Maddox likes to go in the ring of our place, *The Fightclub*, so much. It’s exactly what the name says—our fight club. And we all frequent it to some degree, either in private or public matches.

Crowley squirms in his seat, pupils dilating as he forces himself to hold eye contact. It’s quite interesting how silence sometimes seems to be enough to get people to talk. That constant, unbroken eye contact turns their blood cold as they squirm in their seats, their throats bobbing as they swallow invisible lumps. The anticipation of pain is sometimes torture enough, and they think they can avoid the physical one by spilling their secrets.

It’s more time-consuming, for sure, but oddly satisfying.

I don’t think this particular man is going to last too long. My frustrations are still simmering under my skin, and today doesn’t feel like the day I can be patient. I inhale loud enough that he flinches, eyes flickering from side to side, fighting the urge to submit to that voice in his head screaming at him to choose self-preservation.

Nothing like Miss O’Rourke yesterday— there was no such urge in her searing gaze.

Morrigan...

I narrow my eyes as that intrusive thought of the fiery redhead penetrates my mind. She needs to get the fuck out. This is not the time! But her intensity lingers and that need to draw blood comes back with a vengeance.

So I slam my fist into Crowley's gut with such force, my fist aches. It helps, seeming to push her image further back into my mind.

"Joanne. Fifteen Harrigan Road," I spit at Crowley. "She's home right now, cooking dinner. I believe it was beef roast, your favorite."

He flinches, his pupils dilating for a split second as he regards my words about his wife. I don't linger for the rest of his reaction. Walking to the table, I run my fingers over the few, but effective items we hold here—the disposal instruments, some chains, a couple of pliers, a cleaver, then right at the end, two knives, one serrated and one smooth. I pick the smooth one and head back to the man, eyes on his tied wrists, palms up.

"Normally, I would take my time, but like I said, I don't have that luxury today. Are you going to speak?" I ask as I clasp his left hand in a cruel handshake.

There's no surprise when three seconds pass and he hasn't answered. So I bring the blade to the outside of his wrist and sink it into his skin. His eyes bulge, blood vessels exploding over the whites as he barely holds in a scream and grips me hard. At first, anyway. But as I slice deeper, sliding the knife to the other side of his wrist, splitting open veins and tendons, his fingers lose strength and give out. His tongue too, wailing through gritted teeth like the bitch he is, blood and saliva sputtering.

When I repeat the process on the other wrist, all bets are off, and his teeth are no longer clenched as his bellows fill the room. This is not the first time I've done this particular cut, and I really do enjoy its effects. These men do so much with their hands, from killing, to striking their wives, stealing money, and shaking on deals. But once these tendons are split, the loss of control, of power, brings a cruel type of joy to me. Plus, the cut serves like a nice guide for later on when we have to remove the hands completely to get rid of the fingerprints.

“I guess the thought of us killing your wife doesn’t move you,” I say with a smirk. “Figures.”

“Fuck you!” he seethes, splatters of red staining my plastic suit.

Okay then.

His breaths stagger as he pushes through pain and blood loss, but I carry on. One by one, I slice the skin between each of his fingers, and when he finally starts pleading for me to stop, I use that desperation as motivation to keep going.

All the people who end up in this chair reach this moment—the first pleas when they finally give in, ready to spill their secrets. They all seem to have the same false belief that their life is in their hands, that they make the decisions here. Even if they think they’re ready to talk, it only matters if we’re ready to listen.

I’m not ready. It’s too early. Not enough agony has seeped into his bones. I’ve seen plenty of others like him who still backed up at this point and stopped talking again.

When I’m done with his hands and raise my gaze to his, his mouth is tightly closed, fury and fear staining his eyes, blood vessels broken as red spreads through the white.

“Scott is there, too.” His son’s name lands like a final blow, eyes bulging as he regards me. But it might be because of the blade I brought to the corner of his mouth.

I’m gonna make the words spill, whether he likes it or not. He pointlessly tightens his lips, but the tip of the sharp knife slides through his flesh with such ease, the tears pool in his eyes before I hear the broken cry he swallows. Slowly, I slice through his cheek as tears mix with the crimson flowing to the tune of his muffled screams, until he stares at me with a brand-new half

smile. It looks gruesome, more like something Carter would do, but I guess it's good to mix it up sometimes.

Crowley leans his head against his shoulder, forcing his mouth to stay closed, his light blue shirt turning purple fast. But his whimpers begin to bore me.

"Please... please, just... leave my son alone." Defeated sobs scrape my ears as he finally speaks.

I cross my arms and sigh, my patience already dangerously thin. Now that his son is the one being threatened, he's ready to talk. I'm not surprised. From what I heard, he would throw his wife to the wolves for a good glass of whiskey. Not that there's anything wrong with the poor woman. He's a misogynistic, abusive piece of shit, and apparently his ways have been brushing off onto his son, too.

"I lied," he continues as he spits the blood that's pooling into his mouth. "I don't know where Boseman is. I thought I could find out before you came to collect. I just wanted to get out."

I can barely understand what he's saying, the words not forming fully since his lips don't properly connect anymore. But I guess that's my fault.

"Get out? This is not the first time we've done *business* together, Crowley. Did you fucking forget who you're dealing with? Who. We. Are?!" Rage rattles through each word that breaks out of my throat. "We are The *fucking* Sanctum!"

I smash my fist so hard into his broken cheek, the slice rips even more, and I could have sworn I felt teeth dislodge under my knuckles.

"Do you think that if it was easy to find this motherfucker, we would have had any need for you?"

His cries bounce off the concrete walls, and somewhere deep in my soul, I do feel a little bit of pity for him. But he deceived us, wasted our time, and unfortunately for him, it negates that tinge of pity.

“Holt,” he groans.

My eyes flicker to Carter and Madds, whose attention snap back to us.

“Holt is dead,” I hear Finn say somewhere behind me.

“Mhm... son.”

“You’re saying his son knows where Boseman is?” I take a step back from the puddle forming at his feet. The guy’s bleeding all over the fucking place.

“Maybe. There was a party... few months ago. I was behind him when he was talking... on the phone. He spoke the name...” He spits another mouthful of blood onto the floor, pulling in pain-filled breaths. “I asked him about it... He pretended not to know what I was talking about. He was lying.”

“And Holt is now going into business with Liam O’Rourke too,” I say, mostly to myself as I try to piece two and two together.

Motherfucking O’Rourke!

These sons of bitches are playing mafia now. If O’Rourke is knowingly going into business with Boseman, then I’ll take it as a personal attack. But if Ryan is at it alone, then there might be a chance for the old man. We need to find out more.

Turning around, I stalk toward the door where Finn still stands. I shed the coveralls, throw them into the bin by the door, and grab my jacket from the hook.

I glance at my watch, then at the heaving man.

“Thank you, Mr. Crowley. You’ve been helpful, but it should never have reached this point. I’m afraid I will not have the pleasure of taking your life today, as I have my dinner to prepare for. Good evening.”

I nod, and his eyes go wide, brightening at my words. They fill with hope, even as the blood dripping out of his wrists drains him of life.

Turning to Finn, I meet his inquisitive gaze. I know what he wants to ask, but he's saving it for later. I'm violent, yet it rarely takes over like this. Carter is the carver, not me. Instead, he takes a deep breath, and I can see the question leaving his eyes. Then a wicked smile pulls at my lips, and his gaze fills with a menace that takes me aback sometimes. I almost chuckle—menace looks good on his pretty boy face. It turns his soft, bright blue eyes into ice.

Opening the door, I look at Crowley over my shoulder.

“Mr. Hennessey is going to finish carving that smile. I hear you put one of ours and Ekaterina's girls into hospital, then claimed ‘the whore deserved it.’ Our girls are anything but whores, Mr. Crowley, and Finnigan here sure does hate it when they're called that.”

The hope falls from his face, his mangled mouth parting, either from surprise that the escort he hired actually works for us, or that he's not leaving this room alive. I nod to Carter and Madds before I walk out the door, letting it fall closed behind me, drowning out a scream so excruciating, it makes my muscles tingle.

“We all pay for our sins eventually...” I whisper to myself as I walk back the way I came.

MORRIGAN

“YOU ALWAYS WERE A DIRTY liar. I can never believe a word you tell me.” Ryan’s tone is grave, fixing me with a disgusted stare as he sips his white wine.

He lets that silence linger long enough that it allows too many scenarios to run through my head, since nowadays almost everything I tell him is a lie meant to protect myself. But I grab my glass of dry red and sip as I force myself to hold his gaze.

“Please, do tell me what you believe I lied about.” My snippy attitude hides my dishonesty, but as much as I practiced it, I’m still anxious.

I wish I could say it’s only because I’m weary that he could find out about Metamorphosis. But that’s not the only reason. His behavior toward me has changed so much, that even his compliments are laced with poison. He threatens my freedom and safety more frequently, even though he’s never touched me beyond gripping my arm too hard or pushing me. His favorite form of abuse is the emotional kind. I guess I should be grateful that he insists on teaching me that physical violence is not always more effective than psychological.

“Spoken like someone who has a bit too much to hide.”

“Or someone who can’t keep up with your ridiculous mood swings,” I counter.

“I’m not enjoying this attitude of yours.”

“Really?! Funny, considering that my attitude was far more over the top when we met, when we fucking fell in love!”

“Keep your goddamn voice down.” His voice lowers to a chilling whisper, his furious gaze freezing my muscles in place.

“This has gone too far, Ryan. I can’t—”

“I said—” His hand wraps around my thigh, fingers digging hard enough into my muscles that I lurch over, swallowing my gasp. “Lower. Your. Voice.”

I don’t know what happened, when I slipped so far under his control. I’ve been focused on my parents for so many years, constantly seeking an escape from them, that I didn’t notice when my escape turned into a new prison. I glazed over so many comments he made and let them turn into contactless blows. He made me lose my confidence, but it’s my fault too. I let him. Not sure how, or when, but I did.

Sighing, he joins his hands, and I try to think of the last time he didn’t look at me like that, cold, detached, like he’s looking at an object he covets, not a girlfriend he should love. We became a couple just over two years ago, after knowing each other since school, but he was a different man. For ages, I beat myself up for missing the red flags—I didn’t, though. He simply hid them too well. The worst thing is that I still hold hope for the man he used to be. For my sake more than his, because I refuse to believe I was this fucking blind to who he really is, this goddamn stupid.

“Jesus, you think you’re such a smart fucking bitch.” He shakes his head, a worrying grin grazing his lips. “I think it’s time to tighten that leash.”

Excuse me?!

“You’re out of line, Ryan. Have you no shame anymore? No care in the world that you’re speaking to me like this in a damn public place?” I look around the fancy space, the most expensive restaurant in the city, and I’m not sure why he brought us here if his plan was to make a scene.

But then again, nowadays, he rarely misses an opportunity to *put me in my place* publicly, even if it is only calling me a derogatory term or stating some sort of failure he believes I have achieved. Like the clothes I wear... they never fit me well, always showing my fat belly... my thick thighs... my big ass.

“You didn’t go home yesterday, after you left.” He ignores my words.

“So?”

“Don’t fucking play with me,” he seethes. “You see too much of that... *Lulu*. When you tell me you’re going home, you’re going straight-goddamn-home.”

The fucking audacity of this man!

“Jesus Christ, Ryan, what happened to you? Do you fucking hear yourself? The bullshit leaving your mouth?!”

I keep telling myself that his behavior changed when his father died a few months ago. It’s not true, though. It started long before that. But since his dad’s passing, the escalation has been distinguishable, far too blunt. Like a noose that loosened all of a sudden. He didn’t turn into this abusive piece of shit—he’s always been one.

“You have such a filthy, spoiled mouth! For once, act like a damn woman, and have some class!”

“You don’t get to tell me how to talk, Ryan.” I lean in a little closer, my heart thumping violently in my chest, hands shaking as I force myself not to make a scene. “You don’t get to tell me what to do, who to see, or how to act. You don’t *fucking* own me.”

But the asshole laughs. He actually laughs and it takes me aback.

“I’ve owned you since that night in the woods, all those years ago.”

My heart beats faster at his words. That night is part of the reason why I’m still here with him. He knows too

much...

“You’re mine, darling. Always have been. Even your parents agree now.” He continues, a seedy grin pulling at his lips as he grabs my wrist under the table in a bruising grip. “And friends? You don’t need any. You have me.”

“You’re delusional! I’m going.” I attempt to pull my hand away, but he crushes it in his, my fingers twitching from the pain that makes me buckle over the table, my mouth open in a silent gasp.

“There’s nowhere for you to go, Morrigan. Your future is decided. You’ll learn that pretty soon.”

“Fuck you,” I spit through clenched teeth.

What the hell is he talking about? Learn what? Those are not just words thrown at me for the sake of it. His smirk tells me that much.

“I plan to.”

My eyes go wide for a split second. I’ve done a decent job at avoiding sex with him over the last couple of months. Except for one occasion... But I’m not sure for how long I can keep avoiding it before it’s going to get violent. I’m not a fearful woman, but there’s something about him that fucking scares me.

The grip on my wrist tightens even more, and this time, I can’t hold the wince as I feel a pop in my bones. I open my mouth to rasp at him—

“Good evening. How *nice* to see you here.”

That fucking voice. That low, slithering voice making people bow their heads in fear and submission, I would recognize anywhere. It awakens a fire Ryan has been slowly extinguishing over time, filling me with a need to draw blood—his.

That thought makes a part of me heat and throb. A part I wish would mind its own fucking business.

Ryan releases my wrist, and I resist the urge to rub it, as I hold it in my lap, leaning back in the chair as if I can get away from him.

“Hello. Nice to see you too.” Ryan shakes his hand, and I can’t help but notice the veins under The Serpent’s skin, menacing, like his grip could shatter bones.

I wonder if he could shatter my boyfriend’s bones...

The Serpent turns briefly toward me and nods once.

A second and a half, that’s all the attention I get, apparently. Christ, what do I have to do around here to be seen as more than just a piece of fucking furniture?

“Are we going to see you next week?” Ryan continues.

“Yes, we’re looking forward to it. This time of year can get a little... dull.” The Serpent’s eyes flash to me for another moment. Not to my eyes, but under the table, where my hand rests on my aching wrist.

I don’t dare look down at it, but something cruel seems to simmer in the black pits of his eyes.

“I couldn’t agree more. This one is definitely going to be entertaining. Talk of the season, for sure.” Ryan’s expression is peculiar as he speaks those words, his teeth gleaming with a disturbing sense of pride. “And with the demand of the business, I could definitely use the entertainment.”

The fact that I have no clue what they’re talking about makes me uneasy. I don’t have a good feeling about this.

“Business takeover is going well, I gather? My condolences for your father.” The Serpent’s politeness is borderline deranged, yet so natural.

It makes it worse. Not that I expect him to be some rude thug lashing out at people, but his interaction is so proper, it makes one question his reputation as a

terrifying organized crime boss. Or one of them. He and his friends all seem to be in charge of their mafia empire.

“Very well. The changes I’m making are quite... fruitful,” Ryan answers.

Since no one’s paying attention to me, all I can do is listen to them, feigning boredom as I study my nails. I wasn’t aware that these two knew anything of each other’s businesses. It shouldn’t surprise me though, the black-eyed snake somehow knows everything that moves through Queenscove. Even through the cryptic conversation they’re having now, I can tell he knows a lot about Ryan’s, or better yet, his late father’s business. And here I am, completely clueless about my boyfriend’s party, where even The Serpent is invited.

I look up at him, wondering why even after all this time it’s still hard—no, uncomfortable—to look at him. He’s always been stupidly handsome, but goddamnit, the years have been good to him.

Everything about this man is laced in obsidian, from his eyes to his hair, the thick stubble covering his jaw, and even his clothes. He wears a black tie over a shirt of the same color, and the dark jacket is fitted ridiculously well over his wide, round shoulders of his six-foot-something frame. I hate that I can note the trace of his pecs under the soft fibers of his shirt.

I snap out of it, pulling my gaze away since I have no fucking business noticing the lines of this asshole’s sculpted body. Only, my eyes stop on his square jaw, drawing along the sharp line of it, and up his soft, thick lips that seem tense. Then over his mostly straight nose, apart from a slight bump on one side of the bridge, and on those thick lashes that would make any woman jealous.

I’m ready to scream at myself to wake the fuck up, but there’s no need. Not when I focus on his eyes and

remember how they looked at me when he broke my young heart and shattered my entire world.

I can't deny The Serpent is attractive, but he better screw off and be attractive somewhere else, because I have a damn date to escape from. And my resentment for him is not improving my damn mood.

"Sounds good to me," Ryan says.

Wait. What sounds good? I should have been listening.

"I will see you then. Enjoy the rest of the evening." The Serpent ends the conversation, then turns to me, nodding yet again.

Only this time, he lingers for a moment longer on my hands. When his eyes draw back to mine, the gaze in those dark pits is... grave.

Does he know?

The Serpent's interruption wasn't on purpose. Right? No, it couldn't have been. A mere coincidence.

Is it also a coincidence that in the last seven or eight years, we've only ever interacted three or four times? One of those times was this year. Yet we've just met twice in two fucking days.

"What was that about?" I turn to Ryan.

"Nothing you need to know of yet."

Somewhere at the backend of his words, I find a bit more strength to fight with the man.

"Why do you do this? What happened to you to have changed you so much? This shift... You were never this person, never talked to me this way."

His expression is one of exasperation, as if I'm a problem and he's brainstorming a solution. Does he even care anymore? Only, a deviant grin spreads over his lips, a mad look in his eyes.

“I did not change.” Four words, only four words he speaks, and they’re enough to shake my soul. They imply too much, they change my view of him, our relationship, our past, they change everything.

Even my future.

CHAPTER 4

VINCENT

“TELL ME AGAIN WHY we’re here?” Finn asks. He’s standing beside me, along with Carter and Madds, in the grand doorway of the Rosenberg Hotel ballroom.

The aroma of fresh flowers and vanilla assaults me as I lazily drag my eyes over Queenscove’s elite. The way they’re not so inconspicuously stealing glances at us whilst forcing themselves to carry on their conversations is almost comical.

I push down a sigh as I prepare myself to lie.

“You know why, Finn. We need to find out what Ryan Holt knows about Boseman.”

“If we’re to believe Crowley’s confession.”

I turn at his words, catching as he wiggles one eyebrow at a beautiful bleach blonde woman passing by, her arm hooked around the elbow of a man three times her age. Her eyes sparkle at the sight of our very own surfer boy, bright, blue eyes, and shoulder length, curly hair wild against the contrasting tailored suit.

“That’s why we have to get close. Since Liam O’Rourke invited us here and, according to Carter’s sources, he’s going into some sort of business with Holt, then this is our best way in.”

Finn, or the others, for that matter, doesn't need to know the real reason I personally wanted to come. Yes, the O'Rourke and Holt part was true, but I could have arranged that any other time. I wanted to be here so I could see *her*.

I want her to look into my fucking eyes with the bright green of hers when she shares with the world why we were all invited here today.

But... that brightness was dangerously dull when I saw her last.

Truth is, I'm not sure what I'm hoping to achieve by coming here. The sadist in me needs to burn this place to the ground as punishment for the celebration that's to come. But it's the masochist side that decided to be here, to witness this—them. I broke my own fucking heart once; I wonder if I'm going to burn the leftover shards today.

I thought I had time to get to her... I really thought I had more time.

"Can't we just tie them to a chair and extract it the old-fashioned way?" Madds grunts, the slight amusement in his tone pulling me out of my self-destructive thoughts.

I don't need to look to know that amusement hasn't registered in his deep, amber gaze. Very few things make the man laugh, or smile even. Most happen within our inner circle, but outside of it... I don't think I've ever seen him smile at anyone else. Not for a long time anyway.

"I second that," Carter follows.

I catch a glimpse of the man, and his hazel eyes, bleeding into blue, are utterly impassive. He's serious. But then again, this man never, ever, says anything he doesn't mean. That is, if he says anything at all. I've known him for about twelve years, since we were around sixteen years old, yet I'm still not sure if his lack

of a filter is intentional or a sign of something that would require a diagnosis.

“We all know the answer to that,” I say to them.

I would love to. Eventually we will, because O’Rourke, that goddamn son of a bitch, deserves my fucking fury tenfold. And Ryan Holt... I’m starting to believe he may deserve it just as much.

I take a step in, and don’t miss the collective twitch in the crowd’s flesh. Like a pack of gazelles noticing the rustling in the bushes and the sparkling gaze of the lions peeking through.

“So we’re socializing,” Finn says with a sigh.

“Yes. O’Rourke is desperate to get into business with us, and by association, Holt is, too. If we play our cards right, we’ll find out not only what we need to know about Boseman, but why they’re so desperate too. Our business is based on a wealth of information that we accumulate and wield to our benefit or our allies’. But right under our noses, something is happening that we’re not privy to, and that just won’t do.”

As we walk through the middle of the crowded space, people don’t fail to make room, most of them averting their gazes, and I see O’Rourke and his wife noticing us.

No daughter...

I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s somewhere in the back, tending to the pristine look she’s adopted in recent years. She used to have this untamed aura about her, red curls flowed freely, makeup free fresh face, freckles on full display. Now, she’s different, her hair slick, no stray strand, no loose thread on her expensive clothes, makeup always perfect. It feels—it looks forced on her. She’s clearly changed, adapting to fit into this society she was fighting so hard to reject all those years ago. There’s a tinge of disappointment in the back of my mind.

I would much prefer to see her disheveled, with runny makeup, wild hair... tangled limbs between my sheets.

Fuck.

Clearly, I'm not quite that bothered about her new look. My cock certainly isn't.

"I'm struggling to figure out what the connection between Holt and Boseman is. How would they know each other, or *of* each other?" Finn asks, pulling my thoughts from that dangerous direction.

"Well, that's why we're here. This whole thing gives me a really bad vibe, and we need to get our foot in it. These sons of bitches can't move without us knowing about it," I say to him, just before we reach O'Rourke and his wife.

"Gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us!" His enthusiasm appears to be genuine, and I resist the urge to cock an eyebrow.

If I didn't know any better, I would say he forgot our past, what he did. Or maybe he thinks I forgot. No, he's just feigning ignorance since he now has something to gain from me, from us. No one forgets something like that.

I think the party we were invited to about five months ago was to test the waters, observe my reaction to him. Now he's diving all the way in.

One by one, he shakes our hands, pulling Finn's attention from yet another blonde in a skimpy skirt. We all nod to Mrs. O'Rourke, a woman in her early fifties, wearing a form-fitted dark blue dress that's just... too much. Too sparkly, too overfilled with lace details, too flashy and most likely an intentional choice. They're the type of people who have this burning need to stand out at all times.

What definitely stands out is the look O'Rourke gives her every time she touches that high neckline. It could

do with a little tugging down to give her some room to breathe, but he doesn't seem to approve.

"Thank you for inviting us, and congratulations to you both." Fuck, bile rises in my throat with those words. It hurts my vocal cords to say them, but I had to. He has to believe I have no emotional connection to that past.

Mrs. O'Rourke looks slightly flustered as her gaze flickers to her husband, unsure of her next move.

"Thank you. Sheila will take you to your table," he says with a nod, the movement staggered. "I do hope we can have a... drink together later. Enjoy your evening, gentlemen."

I nod in return and follow the woman.

The tables are all round, ranging in size from four to eight seats, and luckily, we are led to one which sits four. *Good, it will be just us.* I watch Mrs. O'Rourke as she moves away, and I can't help but wonder what that woman's life is like at home. She has this smug, proud aura about her, ready to flaunt her wealth and status, but when her husband looks at her, she's like a soldier—still, waiting for the next order.

Gripping the wooden frame of the chair, I start pulling it away, but freeze. I see her red, silky hair first, flowing in large waves around her alabaster skin, bouncing with each slow step. The tips of the strands touch the V-neckline that plunges low between her breasts, the black satin dress held only by two thin straps, covering just enough that you want to beg for more. The smooth fabric of the knee-length dress clings to her full curves without being tight, and in proper Morrigan fashion, instead of the pumps the women around us wear, the high slit reveals the end of thigh-high leather boots.

Never in my life have I noticed all these details in the way a woman dresses. Yet I always do with her. And I was right. There's no hair out of place—pristine.

Someone intentionally clears their throat, and as I turn, Maddox follows my previous line of sight, eyes widening and stilling. He takes one more moment before he turns and takes a seat. Finn, though, he has a stupid grin plastered all over his face, and Carter just... watches me. The scrutiny is uncomfortable. I might have a talent for making people talk, but I swear Carter just reads your fucking mind.

“She’s off limits, man. Especially now,” Finn whispers as we all take our seats.

There are no limits when it comes to Morrigan O’Rourke.

I swipe my gaze back to the redhead, her steps light as she heads toward her parents, arm curled around Holt’s, her green eyes stern. Only, the look in them shifts in an instant the moment they fall on me, her surprise evident before irritation replaces it. It brings me joy, seeing that flustered side of her, her control stripped, even if for a moment. I hold that gaze because it’s a challenge. She would rip her eyes out before she would submit to me. And doesn’t that sound fucking fun.

Her nostrils flare when she approaches her parents and has no choice but to look away. A tinge of a grin pulls at my lips at the slight victory.

“Jesus, she looked like she could gut you right here, right now,” Finn says with a smirk.

“Knowing her, she probably would,” Madds continues as he snatches the Bourbon bottle from the waiter after he fills his glass. I want to fucking punch him for what he just said.

“Sorry, but how well do you guys know her, exactly?” Finn slides his empty glass toward Madds, who regards me from under his eyebrows.

He is the only one who knows exactly who Morrigan was to me back then. Carter and Finn were at university, one buried in computers, the other probably

in pussy. Madds and I were still here, putting the bases down for what was going to become our empire, along with the man Finn doesn't allow us to speak of. They knew of her because it was impossible not to, but not of how deeply her and I were involved. If they did, they have never mentioned it to me.

It ended before they came home, before it could become more. So I never told them everything. It was better that way.

"*Knew* her," Madds corrects his previous words. "She was hard not to notice. A firecracker. We watched her beat the shit out of this guy once. She broke his jaw... put him in the hospital."

What the fuck has gotten into him?!

In all these years, he's barely acknowledged her existence or uttered two sentences about her. All of a sudden, he's in her presence for more than ten seconds and he speaks of the past with such ease that I want to shove that whole Bourbon bottle down his throat to shut him up. I know why, though, don't I? Morrigan O'Rourke had an impact on Madds even back then, when she was barely sixteen. He never said a word, but it was hard to miss it when this man never warmed up to anyone but us. I know he's been keeping his mouth shut out of respect.

"*Watched* her? You didn't intervene?" Finn asks.

Carter stays silent. He's paying attention though, far too closely for my liking, his head cocked as he files in every single word for future use. Or research.

"I didn't need to. She was doing fine on her own," Madds says with a shrug.

"That's not what I... fucking hell, man."

Finn's laugh turns some heads, even above the music that seems to be getting louder. Although people haven't exactly stopped stealing glances at us. Private events are not our scene, but O'Rourke wants to make

a statement with our presence. We're letting them have their moment until we get what we need.

* * *

My sweet tooth led me to the dessert table stacked with multi-level ornate cake stands, filled with macarons, meringues, fruit next to a decadent chocolate fountain, and dozens of different mini cakes in all the colors of the fucking rainbow. Now I understand why the crowd gathered around it the whole evening.

Just as the person who stands next to me begins to move away, I lean over and reach for a mini chocolate éclair, when my hand bumps into another, sending the tips of their fingers straight into the chocolate stream of the fountain.

“Fucking hell!” She curses loud enough that the person standing between us is gone in a split second.

I swallow my apology, when I realize before I even look up who that voice belongs to—Morrigan.

“You!” she seethes when her eyes land on me.

“Hello.” I allow a moment to take her in, her enchanting eyes gleaming with fury, the slight flush on her high cheekbones, and the freckles barely visible under the makeup. All framed by her smooth, brick-red waves falling over her bare shoulders, grazing the smooth skin of her chest.

I prefer the natural, wild curls on her.

“I don't get it. What the fuck are my parents playing at? Why are you here? All of you?”

That's one way of saying hello back... I guess.

She notices the chocolate dripping from her fingers onto the white tablecloth, and the vixen does the goddamn unthinkable. One by one, she slides those digits into her mouth, and I freeze. There's no sexual

intention in the gesture, but time slows down, nonetheless. I'm mesmerized. Utterly fucking mesmerized as I follow those lush lips sucking every drop of chocolate, leaving a faint red lipstick ring on them.

This woman... this goddamn woman.

The blood flow shifts from my brain to my cock, and I yank her fingers to me, hand wrapped tight around her slim wrist, stopping it inches from my face. She parts her lips to spit her protest, but her jaw locks as her eyes fix onto mine. I don't know if hunger gazes back at her, or pure fury that she did this in public, for others to see the magic, too.

I have to force myself not to drag her away, and make her do all that again, just for me. Instead, I break eye contact, still feeling her thunderous gaze on me as I grab a bunch of napkins from the stack farther down the table and push them in her trapped hand. I really don't want to, but I release her wrist before I do anything stupid, like clean her fingers with my own fucking tongue.

She snatches her hand away like she's disgusted by the contact, watching me without blinking, her lips parted with unspoken words that I know she would much rather shout at me. Yet to my surprise, she stays silent.

There's nothing left on her fingers beyond the red trace of her lipstick, but she uses the napkins to wipe anyway, looking at me as if she's about to stab me with a dessert knife. Better than a serrated steak one, I guess.

"You're welcome," I scold, as she shoots me the most defiant gaze she can muster.

"I'm serious, Serpent. What the hell are my parents involved in? Or getting involved in?" She forces her tone to stay low. "It has to be fucking atrocious if it's with you."

She throws my nickname around with such distaste. Even so, it comes out with a tantalizing hiss that I would very much like to hear again. She really doesn't like us. Well... me. But she's not exactly an angel, not with goddamn Ryan-fucking-Holt on her arm. Not with the man who now controls half the docks, his late father's business. From the sounds of it, his trafficking business has been growing since his death. She doesn't have a moral leg to stand on when she's involved with him.

I casually reach over to one of the cake stands and grab a mini-éclair. Shoving it in my mouth, I lean back against the table, and turn to the crowd dancing to some pop song I don't recognize.

"Atrocious... okay."

"You're not answering my goddamn questions!" Her words pour like lava, burning their way through the loud music, and drawing my eyes back to those emeralds of hers.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

There's an intentional bite in my tone, and judging by the fury searing through her gaze, she clearly didn't like it. But I did. She's beautiful on a normal day, but she's fucking gorgeous when she's in flames.

"*Concern* myself? Motherfucker! Am I just a fucking doorknob to you people? Grab me and turn me in whatever direction is beneficial to you! Like"—she leans in ever so slightly, her tone lowering almost to a whisper—"I don't know the rules of the *fight club*, the right way to do *laundry*, the fastest way to *take one's breath away*, or the best route when *escorting* someone?"

She raises one eyebrow, her eyes shining with mischief. She's clearly pleased with herself. She listed almost all our businesses—the fight club, the money laundering, the killings, but the one that bewilders me is... the escort service. As far as we know, nobody is aware of it. How the fuck did Morrigan find out? She doesn't even have access to our bar.

The trail leading to us is so thin, it's almost nonexistent. And that's because we don't directly run it, Ekaterina—Katya—does. It all started with her, and we decided that it needs to stay that way. Our secret weapon. Whenever we meet, she comes to Midnight, our speakeasy. And when we join her or one of the girls in public, to the prying eyes who recognize them, it looks like we hired them. Just as they do.

"I will take your silence as shock and pat myself on the back for a job well done." Her tone is far too smug for my liking.

She leans back against the table, facing the crowd as a song fades out and comes to an end. I can't stop looking at the smirk pulling at her pretty red lips.

"Still as reckless as ever, aren't you?" I ask, following her gaze to the dance floor.

Before she can bite back, her family and boyfriend pull her attention as they step in front of the stage, waiting for everyone to go silent. I turn back to Morrigan, watching as she stiffens at the sight. So I take the opportunity and strike again.

"You think you're so much better than me, than us? I've seen you get high on X. I fucking rescued you when some shithead was forcing himself on you. Then I watched you shatter his jaw with an utter lack of remorse, and you weren't even legal yet. Fuck knows what else you've done since. Especially considering your *association* with Holt." I spit out that last sentence and her grin falls. Did the mention of her boyfriend wipe it off, or the memories from our past?

"*Ladies and gentlemen!*" Liam O'Rourke's voice booms through the ballroom, and the party goes quiet.

"Get off your fucking moral high horse, baby," I carry on, "because you missed a few entries in that list you're so proud of putting together."

“We are sorry to interrupt your dancing,” her father continues, “but we’re quite excited to share the reason for this party, so we can start celebrating properly.”

Her shoulders suddenly tense, and she crosses her arms against her middle, like she’s holding herself together. But I immediately find out why.

“Welcome, everyone! It’s so good to have you all here for this special occasion.” Holt’s voice replaces her father’s but pauses for effect.

I quickly fill that silence, leaning in sideways, our shoulders barely touching as I whisper, “If tonight goes well, soon enough you’ll find out what else we do, since it will be your family business too... *Mrs. Holt.*”

I straighten just as she whips her head around in a flurry of red waves, and her eyes land on me like a sledgehammer. Disgust and fury bleed out of her gaze as her brows furrow, looking as if I insulted her. But none of those emotions have time to settle in her features as Holt continues.

“I am pleased to announce that Morrigan O’Rourke and I are getting married!”

When chaos erupts around us, the crowd bursting into cheers and applause, a shattering fear cracks her eyes. Time seems to have stopped for her. But suddenly, she’s blinking way too fast, vivid shock pulling her apart.

What the fuck?

Slowly, she turns as people gather around us, and we’re split apart when one by one, they pull her into congratulatory embraces. She hasn’t opened her mouth once, hasn’t said a word or made any sound. I’m not sure if her soul left her body or imploded into itself, but fear and anger still glaze over her eyes and I know one thing for certain—this wasn’t the shock of the happy news revealed too early out of excitement.

Her eyes find me through the crowd and the
desperation in them hits me like goddamn lightning.

She didn't know.

CHAPTER 5

MORRIGAN

A LUMP FORMS IN MY throat. It grows bigger and bigger with every “*congratulations*” I hear from the faceless people who hug me, or squeeze my shoulders, or kiss my cheeks. I don’t know where The Serpent went, but I find myself overcome with the need to disappear along with him.

He knew. He fucking knew before I did.

I’m a pawn in a game I’m not privy to. What are they doing to me? Why?

My family. My fucking family planned this! They all fucking sold me. Passed me on like some piece of goddamn meat. Did they also tell The Sanctum, or have they found out all on their own?

And Ryan... goddamn motherfucking Ryan!

He thinks he can just force me to marry him? Is this the nail in the coffin? The apex of all his lovely treatment?

It’s his ultimate display of control over me.

My mind is reeling with too many questions. I feel fucking dizzy. But my imagination is running wild with the despicable things I would love to do to him. It’s useless, though, because my body won’t budge. I can’t seem to make a move. Any move.

Goddamnit! Do something, you stupid woman!

I'm not even sure if my emotions are masked or if they're plastered all over my face. There's an impossibly big lump stuck in my throat, right at the base of my tongue, and breathing becomes difficult. My body begins to tremble as I force myself to look around for an escape, something, anything, to pull me out of this fucking nightmare. But a new song starts, covering the ruckus of debilitating congratulatory chatter, and it makes me pause as the first four words seep into the room.

Every breath you take...

It's a cover, not the original, but the disturbing meaning is unchanged. I catch Ryan's eyes through the crowd, a special evil residing in them as he walks toward me.

Every move you make...

The next verse of the iconic song gains new meaning in my soul. He chose this specifically.

He takes a few more steps and my heart beats so hard it shakes my flesh. I'm frantic on the inside, searching for something that could indicate I'm not awake right now. It's only a nightmare... this is not my life. It cannot be.

I look away from him, hoping to catch a glimpse of Lulu, or anyone to fucking ground me right now before I implode.

But the song continues with every step he makes toward me, the words resonating in such a way, like he's speaking them himself. It's a dedication, giving me an ominous glimpse into my future.

The crowd parts, all the ones who were congratulating me moving out of the way, clutching their hands against their chests, sweet emotions plastered over their faces for us—the happy couple.

I want to vomit. But even my stomach refuses to shift.

What is wrong with me?

The chorus ends with that sinister verse that cripples me further, because I know... *he'll be watching me too.*

Then he's here, crowding my personal space in such a silent assault, only I seem to notice it. His hands slide around my waist, like bruising tentacles constricting my insides as he pulls me toward the center of the ballroom. Bile burns its way up my throat as his lips press onto mine. They feel like the slimy underside of a slug. Have they always felt this way?

No.

Every single muscle in my body is tense to the point of pain, and all I can manage are shallow breaths that barely brush my lungs. He ends the kiss and captures my hand in his before I can step away. Pulling me into his body, he leads me into a dance on the rest of the disturbingly suggestive song.

"You belong to me..." Ryan whispers into my ear, at the same time as the song.

He holds my palm in a bone crushing grip, his hand on my waist unnecessarily firm, and I silently pray.

No—I beg, beg my goddamn soul to come back into my body, because this is not me. Whatever weak version of myself moves on this dancefloor is fucking pathetic, and I'm trapped inside of it. I'm banging my fists against the mental walls, but I can't seem to burst through.

The real me would have this hand wrapped around his throat, not his shoulder. Squeezing until his eyes would pop out of the sockets, and he would choke on his Adam's apple.

Instead, the pathetic me follows his fucking lead.

I used to have some love for the famous song The Police graced us with, no matter how creepy I find it. It's all gone now.

I can't look at him as he spins me around and around. My gaze drifts over his shoulder, seeking something to ground my soul. Anything could work, an object, a face, a piece of goddamn food, it doesn't matter. I just need to focus and remember how to breathe again.

Through the blurred faces, I finally see her—Lulu. She clutches Luke's bicep, completely still, looking at me with a shock that does nothing to settle me. It makes me even more uneasy, my breath staggering dangerously, because her expression is a mirror of mine.

But as Ryan spins me farther, a black shadow with a sharp, beautiful face breaks through the sea of blurred ones. It's still, fixed on me unlike anyone else from this room, because this one sees *me*. Not us, not this deception, but me.

He draws me in, commanding my attention with that dark, almost hypnotic gaze he's so well known for—The Serpent.

Dark pits of tar make me sink deeper and deeper, and pull me into the denseness of them, putting a deeply satisfying pressure on my soul. My throat softens, and the lump shrinks slightly. I come out of that hypnosis and actually look at him—there's no joy, no pity, no excitement, no shock in his expression. Only a calm severity, that somehow cheers me on. It's a silent urge to focus, driving me toward the right path as my muscles slowly relax, and that lump in my throat shrinks enough that I can control my breathing again.

I don't know how or why, but it worked. His presence... worked. And I hate myself for it. I hate him even more.

Soon, I'll have to have a little chat with The Serpent.

I take one deep breath and start to feel like myself.

"What the fuck did you do, Ryan?" I pull my head back, facing him.

"You think I didn't know you've been planning to break up with me?" he says.

I attempt to pull away, but he presses his palm on the small of my back and tugs me hard against him as the rhythm of the song increases.

"You're not going anywhere," Ryan continues. "You. Belong. To me." He finishes that sentence with a crooked quirk of his lips, his muddy eyes rabid with victory.

"You think that I'll go through with this farce, just because you made a fucking scene and put me in this situation?! You think I'll marry you against my will?! What the hell makes you think I will hesitate to leave you the moment this dance is over?" The son of a bitch knew exactly what he was doing; he knew how much it would fucking hurt my soul not to be able to lash out and rip his goddamn throat out. So he did it in front of half the fucking city, at a party that he apparently planned with *my* parents.

There's a strange sort of madness in his eyes. It's been infusing his features for a little while now and I'm not sure what to make of it. I don't know how to handle it or how to make it fucking go away. Because it's true lunacy, seeping in his words and actions, making him do stupid shit like announcing a fucking fictional engagement that will never take place.

"Try," he seethes.

Too many promises and threats lie in that one word, and I know for a fact that the man I knew is gone. I see no traces of him in the eyes staring back at me. This man right here would throw me to the fucking alligators

in the delta at the edge of the city without thinking twice about it.

He spins me with a little bit more force than necessary, but at this point, more couples have joined us on the dance floor and the move goes unnoticed. I think. I'm not sure, because my spine tingles with that feeling you get when someone's watching you.

"You see your parents dancing next to the Chief of Police?"

I follow his gaze, but when I don't respond, he squeezes my hand until I wince.

"Yes," I spit.

"They signed you off to me." Those words carry an amusement that I want to fucking strangle out of him. "They're not going to support you if you do something stupid. Not when you are a price they paid."

I turn my head to him fast enough that my hair whips around me, wrapping around my throat, and slowly falls against my chest as my gaze settles on him.

"I'm not goddamn currency, Ryan! You've gone insane!"

"Maybe. But I'm not about to reject the insanity when the prospect of it is so entertaining. And you have to understand something. You're mine, Morrigan. I fought hard to make you mine, to make you love me when I loved you for so long. And I'll have you forever."

"This is not love! This is madness, pure fucking madness! I'm a possession to you, not a partner, not a girlfriend. I am nothing to you, and I cannot figure out why the hell you want me. Why would you want a woman who doesn't love you anymore?" My tone grows just a little bit louder.

"Shh..." he whispers in mockery, puckering his lips. "Why do I want you? Because your freedom becomes mine, and isn't that just a lovely, lovely thing to own. Freedom is all we are. It holds our wants and needs,

our soul, our mind... our personality. It holds it all, like a little crystal ball, so full of wonder... so easy to shatter.”

He bursts into maniacal laughter, and the couples around us mistake it for joy as they smile sweetly. Ryan’s gone. He’s completely fucking insane.

“You can’t have me. I’m not yours. I haven’t been for a long time. And you know it.” My voice cracks a bit.

“I worked too hard not to have you, Morrigan. Breaking up is not an option. You’re either mine forever, or no one else can have you. There’s simply no other way.”

“I will not marry you. This will not happen.” I shake my head and fail to hold his gaze as an unfamiliar sting grazes my eyes.

“Oh, but it will, because if you don’t”—he turns toward my family, waving at them, watching as they respond with polite, devious smiles. Then he spins us and waves at my brother dancing with some girl, who responds with a nod—“they all die.”

And just like that, the song ends.

The dance ends.

My freedom ends with it...

VINCENT

THE GUYS AND I WALK around the dance floor of the ballroom, toward the corridor where O'Rourke waits for us a moment longer before he disappears through. He signaled to us after most of the guests finished congratulating him for marrying off his daughter. Funny, the things people celebrate nowadays.

I catch Morrigan's eyes following me as she stands beside her future husband, accepting even more congratulations from people ecstatic for her tragedy.

"Something's off, isn't it?" Mads questions on a low tone, and I find him watching the same person I am.

Both Finn and Carter, who walk in front of us, turn their heads to confirm what we're referring to, then hum their approval in unison.

"She didn't know," I tell them, but look at Mads most of all.

He had a soft spot for her back then. Because of all I know of him, I couldn't feel the jealousy I was supposed to. She was mine, yes, but he's my best friend. I trust him more than anyone else. Not so deep down, I was happy to know he cared for someone who wasn't us. And I carried a tinge of pain that he liked her, but she wasn't his. I think she cared for him too. There was always a spark in his amber eyes when he looked at her, and a strange curiosity in hers. He and I never talked about it, especially after Morrigan and I ended. So I don't actually know if he liked or just wanted her.

As Madd's looks at her now, under his olive skin around his temples and forehead, the veins bulge, looking like they could burst any second. His buzzcut

does nothing to hide them. It's the most anger he tends to show outside the fighting ring. He's fighting to control it now.

"What the hell do you mean? She didn't know about the party or—?"

"The engagement., I interrupt and answer his question.

"And we're just supposed to let this go."

Carter clears his throat, stopping the argument. We're walking through the corridor now, and even whispers might carry over.

"We need to see what her father wants," I whisper to Mads.

Outside the ring, he's always been calm in fights. But as years have passed, his composure has turned eerie. Even as he smashes someone's face in with his fists alone, he's calculated. He simmers that anger, debating the most efficient move, and I've seen many adversaries backing out before the first punch was thrown. Only because of his grim expression and throbbing veins. It helps that, at six-foot-seven, he looks down at pretty much everyone around him. He's stacked with muscles like a fucking bull and has a menacing scar going down from the middle of his forehead across to the outside of his cheekbone.

His only response is a guttural grunt as he looks over to the end of the corridor, where Liam waits with his son.

"Gentlemen, please, have a seat." O'Rourke leads us into a private lounge room that has its own bar, and we take a seat on the ornate sofa and armchair.

Only Mads chooses to stand. He usually does.

"I'm not sure if you've been introduced to my son, Cillian," he continues, nodding to the redhead.

I know who he is. His dad should know this too, since he's just one year younger than us and we went to the same goddamn school. The old man is pretending the past no longer happened.

I suppress an exasperated sigh, noting the sibling resemblance to Morrigan. Only Cillian's eyes are darker, and his wiry beard and ginger hair trapped in a messy bun at the back of his head is more muted in tone than hers.

"Cillian, this is Vincent Sinclair, Finnigan Hennessey, Maddox Severin, and Carter Pierce."

We all nod, but Finn speaks.

"We've met. I had the pleasure of breaking his nose with my knee."

Liam quirks an eyebrow, and a hint of that protective father figure peeks through. Cillian keeps a straight face, the flare of his nostrils the only hint of a reaction. But a smirk flashes in his eyes as he heads over behind the stocked bar.

"After I dislocated your shoulder in that legendary tackle," he says as he grabs a bottle of Bourbon.

"Fair." Finn smiles now. He has a talent in diffusing tension. But he's equally talented at building it, even in the most inappropriate of moments.

Cillian lifts the bottle to us, a silent question, but we all refuse the drink. Suddenly, the wooden door opens loudly and Holt walks in, his stride too proud for my liking. He lets it close slowly behind him as his gaze drags over us, one by one. Maddox stills. Not even his chest moves with his breaths. If he attacks, I won't stop him.

I expect Holt to linger on me, but he doesn't. He's oblivious to my desire to cave his face in right now. I saw the way he acted with his *fiancée* in that restaurant. It was enough to tell me exactly the kind of man he is.

And the announcement tonight... that just tipped the fucking scale.

O'Rourke starts the unnecessary introductions yet again, and a generic conversation follows. I'm listening but paying no attention. Let the others carry this shit. I'm focusing on not killing this motherfucker for touching her.

I have no right to be protective of her. She's not mine. She would cut me if I tried to help now. But I would happily bleed for her, because she was mine once. I've been telling myself that what we had wasn't mature enough, an infatuation, a crazy obsession. It wasn't deep enough to warrant the pain that lingered for so long after. I kept repeating that she was too young for what we had to be that real. I've started using these words as a mantra, hoping that someday they will sink in.

Around eight years have passed—they still haven't.

It's why I'm here.

I found out of the engagement, and I needed to see the look in her eyes as she told the world she's going to marry Ryan Holt, breed his filthy empire. I needed to see if the memories of us stained her gaze as she spoke those words.

What I got instead is both better and worse. Hate, fury, fear, and... hope.

It was disturbing to see the petrified look in her eyes as he led her onto the dance floor. She's fierce, reckless to a fault, and strong, but I've never seen true fear in her eyes until today. Even through her hate for me, she fixed onto my gaze, desperate for a lifeline. So I pinned her there and willed her to hold on to me through this invisible connection we seemed to share. She needed it, and it worked. It was like she took some sort of fucking life force from me, but it didn't feel like a loss. It somehow belonged to her already.

That's what gave me hope.

Madds' boots scrape the old wooden floor as he moves to stand behind me, and Holt's gaze lingers on him. I'm not going to look up to figure out why, but I can't help but wonder if those throbbing veins are still there.

"Congratulations on your... engagement." Finn's tone holds his usual charm, but I know even without looking, that the blue of his eyes has turned to ice.

"Thank you. We're looking forward to having a wedding as soon as possible," he says as he sits in the last empty armchair across from me.

We...

None of us say any more on that subject.

"Look, gentlemen, I'm going to go straight to business. I am looking to branch out my import business, and Mr. Holt and I are joining forces. However, we find that we need more... room to grow." Liam O'Rourke starts the conversation we're here for.

Okay, so he's not skirting the edge of the law anymore. He wants to dive straight to the other side—smuggling.

"Only, the one person that has the ability to give me more room at the seaside is... a ghost. All I have is a name, no face, no contact, and it's not enough to get in touch with the man."

The Ghost—Jonathan Rees. He controls the other half of the docks that Ryan doesn't have access to. Indeed, he is an enigma. To others, not us.

"We would also like to make a deal on transport, as we heard he holds the rails as well. It would be long-term business. Profitable for all parts," Holt adds, too much ego in the tone as he swipes his gaze over us.

The cargo trains are controlled by The Ghost as well. That means these two are looking to expand beyond

Queenscove. Why?

“What’s the load?” I ask.

“That’s none of your business, *snake*,” Holt all but spits at me, and in unison all three of us rise.

Madds is behind him in three steps, and I in front of him in two, my hand at his throat. The air in the room shifts, the lights appear dimmer, and the asshole’s body twitches, as he forces himself to stand straight. He can’t move, not with the *beast* behind him and a venomous *snake* in front of him.

“You’re a motherfucking cub in this jungle, Holt. You haven’t learned the rules, haven’t lived here long enough, and definitely haven’t earned your fucking place.” I wouldn’t usually get quite this heated, but it’s a combination of what happened out in the ballroom and the motherfucker’s insolence. “I don’t fucking tolerate insults.”

“Ryan, shit... gentlemen, my apologies,” O’Rourke says, but I don’t turn.

I’m not sure where Holt found his balls, but he better shove them back in their hiding spot before we rip them off and stuff them up his fucking ass.

“Maybe this was premature,” Carter says in an even, almost bored tone of voice.

“It is definitely premature for Ryan to speak before thinking.” O’Rourke’s tone is cold and stern as he tries to coax us into staying.

“No,” Carter interrupts. “Maybe this meeting was premature.”

I step back, looking at the old man. Holt may hold a dirtier business than him, putting him in our field, but he’s never controlled any of that shit until now. O’Rourke, though, skirted the law for long enough to know how the game is played. The only reason he hasn’t jumped fully to our side until now is because he’s been aware of how to play the system to his favor. His

mafia is a different brand from ours, but it's still mafia. He's a businessman through and through and knows all too well how to play his cards right.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Madds grab Holt's shoulder hard enough that he winces, but this time around, he keeps his mouth shut. *Snake* is not far away from *Serpent*, but one is a derogatory term and the other a title.

I am no snake. I have never deceived, never cheated in the life games we play. People fear us because they know exactly who we are and what we are capable of. We make sure they're aware that The Sanctum doesn't give second chances, especially not when we are disrespected. O'Rourke is well aware. Which is why the lack of repercussions will mean something to him. He'll see it as a favor. Usually, there are three options: they repent, they die, or they simply cease to exist in our line of sight. In this particular situation, dying is not yet an option, as we need something from them, from Holt.

As Finn and Carter step closer toward the door, ready to leave, we hear a grunt. Turning, I find Cillian looking straight at his future brother-in-law, a scowl deepening every wrinkle of his freckled forehead. There's something about the man, a brand of madness I've only ever recognized in his sister, shimmers in his eyes. Not as bright, though. But I've had the pleasure of seeing what she's capable of.

"I spoke without thinking." Holt finally opens his mouth. I can see how much it hurts him to submit. I revel in it. We all do. "I apologize."

I turn straight to O'Rourke.

"You need to make a deal for access to the docks and the lines. What are you moving, when do you want to start, how often, and how many? No one will even acknowledge a meeting without knowing the reason for it. Not that I can guarantee a meeting, or that I can reach him."

I can reach him.

“Rounds and dust. In about three months. The pattern will change—between one and two weeks. Two to four containers at a time to start off with. We just need to make sure we spread them thinly first. Test the territory,” Liam responds without hesitation, and I make a mental note.

“We’ll be in touch.” I nod, before I turn and head toward the door behind the others.

“Wait. You haven’t named your price.”

I turn just enough that I can see him when I look over my shoulder. “I’ll tell you the terms of the pact once I am assured I can grant your request. Have a nice evening.” I walk away, the door slamming on its own behind me.

I don’t miss O’Rourke’s booming voice through the thin walls.

“Boy, you will learn your goddamn lesson too soon, and it will be too harsh if this is how you think business is done! We need them if you want this business deal to work! You have no leg to stand on! Your business may be old, but you’re goddamn new, and you suddenly think you’re the big kahuna? Sit back in your place and learn how it’s done!”

“Old man...” Holt says something else, but he’s not loud enough for any of us to hear. Safe to say, from the way Cillian just rasped his name, it wasn’t good.

We walk away, back into the ballroom, where the lights have dimmed, turning into a nice party. We absorb the gazes everyone gives us as we head toward the exit, willing one in particular to hit my skin.

It doesn’t.

She’s not here anymore.

Good.

CHAPTER 6

MORRIGAN

THE SOFT LIGHT REFLECTS OFF the leather that barely covers my body and the five chains wrapped over it. I've been staring at myself in the mirror for too long now, but here, in Lulu's apartment, dressed this way, surrounded by the smell of jasmine that always seems to gravitate around Lulu herself, I feel more like myself than I have in months. Disregarding the couple of weeks since... *the announcement*.

That's how we refer to it now, Lulu and I—"the announcement." Impersonal. Cold. It allows me to detach from it, like it has nothing to do with me.

I check the wig again, making sure it's unmovable, the bobby pins tight. I chose to cover my easily recognizable ginger with sleek black. It's such a contrast against my pale, freckly skin, not that it will matter much in the gold light of the club. I love black. It gives me back the confidence I seem to have lost in the last few months. Plus, blondes are more memorable, and since I'm a silent partner, I'm trying to blend in with the other employees.

I slide my fingers over the leather bodysuit that's technically a bra and panties connected together. In the middle of my torso, there's a three-inch gold ring, to which thin strips are attached, two pairs spread over

and under my breasts, and four more are connected to the hem of the panties portion of the garment. From the same ring, five gold chains spread in almost the same way, two over the strips on top of my breasts, two others wrap around my waist, and one—the riskiest of them all—runs straight between my legs, up the seam of my ass, until it connects with the waist chains. I've paired the bodysuit with thigh-high velvet boots that make me feel less naked, and covered myself with a soft, see-through, long lapel jacket that has a subtle gold sheen that catches the light.

“Going to the toilet is gonna be a bitch in that thing.” Lulu walks in, but my jaw drops at her sight.

“Fucking hell, woman!” I exclaim, unable to stop myself. It takes a bit too much effort to reassure myself that I'm straight.

She wears a floor-length leather skirt that would be tight if not for the two slits on the front of each leg, running right up to the velvet waistband that cinches her waist. A velvet bra barely covers the rest of her, the straps meeting at the back of her neck, and the bottom band wraps behind her back before coming around to the front, where it's tied into a cute bow. It's simple, but damn... every man in that club will want to see what's behind those slits that make her legs look like they go on for miles.

“You look incredible, Lu!”

“You too, love. Look at you... those straps. You're gonna fucking kill it tonight.” She comes next to me, and we both turn to the full-length mirror, admiring our work.

“I'm nervous,” I confess.

“Because of the opening night party, or the dance?” She tucks her icy blonde hair behind her ears.

“Both.” I exhale as I pick up the mask from the side table next to the mirror.

“Yeah...” Lulu says, nodding before she picks up hers, and we help each other strap them on.

We chose venetian inspired masks, with black and gold details, from the same collection. It’s not as if we wouldn’t recognize each other in the club, but it made us feel better that, even though I will be pretending to be a random member of staff, we’re actually on the same level. My mask comes to a point at the tip of my nose and, from its lowest point between my eyebrows, it curves upwards above each one, to a sharp point in my hairline. Lu’s is the opposite, curving down her cheeks and raising into one sharp point just above the middle of her forehead, close to the hairline.

They fit.

We fit.

She smiles at me, and I feel like I’m swallowing my heart. This is it. Months of work have come down to this moment.

“I think it’s time to go.”

* * *

My heels fall heavy on the hard floor as I step slowly between the small crowds, observing them as they stand in front of the wall-to-wall windows. They’re so deeply enthralled by the couples enjoying themselves in the playrooms, that no one is talking to each other.

Some sway to the lascivious music, some couples rub on each other, and some are simply lost. Lost in the images they witness behind the glass. In the way the flesh trembles and the skin reddens when the leather paddle connects. In the way the arm muscles tighten as they pull on the straps of the St. Andrews cross. In the way her eyes roll to the back of her head as the orgasm shakes her body. The way his cock spasms at the pull of his balls when his mistress denies his own. Each and every spectator is either lost in themselves or the beautiful acts they’re watching. And two of the rooms

are occupied by guests, not the people we specifically invited to spice up the atmosphere. *That* is a success.

I step into the main club, the bar to my left surprisingly not as busy as the rest of the floor. I was expecting people to huddle there; however, everyone seems to be relaxed. Some of them captivated by the show the couple we met in Rosston is putting on up on the main stage. Others are joined in intimate dances between the busy tables. And at the back of the space, opposite the bar, the tables we intentionally submerged in shadows appear to be fully occupied. Most likely with people enjoying more private exhibitions.

The whole atmosphere is loose, comfortable, and enticing—so much better than we hoped this night would be.

“I can’t believe how incredible this is!” Lulu appears from behind some people she was engaging with, and grabs my hand, pulling me toward the bar. She leans in with a great big smile on her face. “Everyone came! I checked with the door a few times, and every single member who signed up was scanned in!”

Fuck!

“E—everyone?”

I didn’t think *he* would. Vincent, *The Serpent*, Sinclair—his name showed up in the membership applications and I had half a mind to reject it. I really fucking wanted to. But I didn’t want to cause any issues for Lulu, since no one knows of my involvement in the club, and technically, she has no reason to reject him. I don’t have one either, no real one beyond the flashes of memories from eons ago. I was so young, and he was building an empire with his friends... then one day, he was gone. And I... I changed my life forever.

I turn my head slightly, and swipe my eyes over the crowds, in the hopes that I’ll manage to figure out which one he is.

“Morri?! Are you okay?”

“Yes, sorry, I was just—” I quickly take a deep breath. “It’s incredible! Such a fucking success, and people are engaging too! Two of the playrooms are occupied by actual members!” I grab her forearms, shaking her lightly with girlish enthusiasm.

“No way! I have to go watch,” she squeals.

We worked hard on this club, and we have so much to be proud of. This party, the atmosphere... it’s perfect. Fuck it, it’s beyond perfect.

“Jaz told me that she and Richie are coming back!” she all but yells at me.

“But they live so far away.”

“They don’t care. They said this doesn’t compare with the club back home. The equipment, the quality, the intimate décor, it’s all better. I’m not complaining. They put on such an amazing show, I mean... look at them.” She points to the stage, where Jaz weeps from pain and ecstasy as Richie canes her red ass, finger-fucking her between hits. “And they’re perfect for BDSM education as well. We would be lucky to have them.”

“Yeah, I wonder how we can convince them to move here,” I say, laughing as I watch the middle-aged couple absolutely killing it on stage.

We met at the club in Rosston and fell in love with them, their interactions, their connection. It was incredible to see how in tune they were. There was no need for words, because he could read into the tenseness of her muscles, or the pitch of her voice, even the look in her eyes. He could tell when something was wrong. Like when Jaz was completely caught in the play, exhausted, slightly delirious from too much pleasure and a little too much pain, and her safe word, the same one she’s had for years, completely skipped her mind. But Richie took a few seconds to realize something was not right, and stopped immediately,

swooping her in his arms and dropping to the floor. She was curled up between his legs as he cradled and whispered sweet nothings into her ear, until she came out of it.

The whole crowd watched in silence, taking in that image filled with love, the understanding, the bond. That night, we were all proven just how much we had to learn.

It was them who encouraged us to build Metamorphosis when we told them about our idea. It didn't come from our passion to practice, but a different kind of desire. We want to offer people a safe, comfortable, and high-quality space. Along with the freedom they don't have in their real lives. Freedom to indulge, to push their limits, freedom to remove their everyday masks, put on the right ones, and unleash who and what they truly are.

There's nothing more important than freedom. Soon, I'll have mine.

"I have to go up there in a bit," I say, nodding toward the stage.

"How do you feel?"

"Anxious, but a good kind of anxious. Do you think they will be disappointed that I won't actually strip?" I tuck the hair of the wig behind my right ear, and signal to Rachel, one of the bartenders.

She knows who I am, but not that I'm her boss too. Everyone is on a need-to-know basis, so I'm simply Lulu's friend. She grabs a bottle of tequila and a bowl of lemon wedges on her way to us, then fills two shot glasses, before she pulls a saltshaker out from behind the bar.

I'm about to open my mouth to speak, to thank her, when my skin begins to tingle. Soft goose bumps burst between my shoulder blades, riding up to the back of

my neck. They wrap around toward the right, until they sizzle behind my ear, where cold air brushes my skin.

It's him. He's here. I just know it.

I want to turn, but my head is suddenly filled with voices screaming at me not to move, to stay put, and not meet the devil's eyes. Yet, self-preservation has no place under my masochistic skin.

So I turn, chin held high, and swipe my gaze slowly over the crowd. But no one stands out.

"Do you think he'll be watching you?" Lulu leans in, pushing a shot glass to me.

How did she know I was thinking of him?

"He won't know it's me. But, you said all members came, so..." I trail off.

The idea that The Serpent's watching me fills me with anger. It brings back more memories than I'm comfortable with. He used to watch me dance. Long ago, in a different life. I would rather pull out his black eyes than see him watching me as if he forgot who I was, who he was... what we were.

Only, he hasn't forgotten everything. As he reminded me before *the announcement*, he remembers very well how I smashed Johnny Bray's jaw. Until then, and at my mother's birthday party from a few months back, I didn't even think he still remembered my last name. I guess I was wrong.

I'm not in love with him or some shit. He just brings out parts of me that have no business being on the surface. I have enough reasons to be angry, without him adding onto it.

"In all fairness, he could just be in one of the rooms already." Lulu taps me on the shoulder in reassurance.

I don't care.

I don't care if he's in the playrooms, or at the bar, or dancing, or right in front of the stage, watching Jaz and

Richie's show end.

Even though I can't get his onyx gaze out of my head, the one that pinned me within its darkness as Ryan led me in that uncomfortable dance.

Even though it was enough to pull me out from the shock and momentary terror.

Even though it was him who calmed me down with nothing but his eyes...

No, I don't care!

I lick the skin between my index finger and thumb, sprinkle salt, swipe my tongue over it, and down the shot after cheering with Lulu. Rachel returns, tequila bottle clutched as she pours another one, and I drink it without bothering with the salt. Hell, I didn't even bother with the lemon after the first shot. I tap my glass on the bar before she moves away, and she pours a third as Lulu watches me with interest. I know that under that mask, there's a quirked eyebrow.

"Just... don't fall off the fucking stage." She pushes the shot glass away from me, then downs hers before gripping a lemon wedge with her teeth. "Are you ready?" she asks after she swallows the zesty juice.

I nod, then drag my hands all over my wig and outfit, making sure all is in place. Lulu weaves through the excited crowd, before she jumps on stage. She's been up there a few times already, first to welcome the members and start the party, and a few times after that to introduce the dancers, or various guests, like Jaz and Richie.

The lights dim and two assistants jump in to clean, as Lulu thanks the couple and the crowd bursts into cheers. They loved them. I'm a bit anxious to follow after them.

"Up next, we have something a bit more casual. Another person from university, actually." She presents me to the crowd, and I have to laugh at my cover.

“Someone who discovered pole dancing whilst there. I know, our expensive education has certainly taught us some useful skills, right?”

The crowd laughs, and I can't help but admire how nonchalant she is in front of an audience.

“She's a good girl,” Lulu continues. “You won't get to see the goods, but she has the body of a goddess and she'll make you wish you are that pole. So please... enjoy the show.”

As I walk toward the stage, the light dims more, hiding me in a welcoming darkness. My inhibitions slowly dissipate with each step that gets me closer, and Lulu gives my hand a reassuring squeeze when I pass by her. When my foot hits the first step up to the stage, “*God Be You*” by Nostalghia pours from the speakers, filling the atmosphere and my veins. My muscles respond to the slow, sultry beat, tingles spreading under my skin as I step onto the stage. They're good tingles. Like the ones you get before your first kiss with someone new, or the first touch in just the right place, or the anticipation of a cock slamming into you that first time.

The red spotlight hits only one pole, and as I force the rest of my nerves away, I dare a look toward the crowd, breathing out in surprise—I can't see anyone. The whole place is bathed in darkness, apart for the faint light under the shelves at the back of the bar, and the fire exit signs. It's almost like I'm alone. I sway my hips to the rhythm of the music, undulating as I slowly step toward the pole, and run my hands from my throat, and down my breasts. When I reach my waist, I untie the see-through jacket and let it drop to the floor, my leather strapped body on full display. I still don't have full confidence in my soft body, my plump belly, or my full thighs, but this has always helped me.

I'm a couple of steps away from the pole, and I throw my body into a handstand right next to it, swinging my legs around the metal on a collective gasp from the

hidden crowd. But I don't get up right away... no. Grasping the pole behind me, I let it spin as I tighten the tops of my thighs around it, legs falling almost parallel to the ground, and roll my ass against the metal. At this point, I forget there's a crowd. The music floods me, and the ecstasy takes over, filling me with lust. As I raise my upper body and grip the pole, I open my legs as wide as they allow.

I release the blocks in my mind, dancing against the metal bar, rubbing, splitting, dropping to the floor in moves that I would make for a lover only. Intense tingles touch my skin, almost like a sharp gaze that wants more than just to look. So I move for whoever that person is. I touch myself for them, roll my hips for them, lick my lips and suck my fingers for them. I hook one foot at the bottom of the pole and the other above my head for them, then open my legs in splits that make my muscles ache and tendons burn. And goddamnit, it's so fucking satisfying.

Before the song ends, I'm almost at the top, with my hands above my head. My breasts are squeezed together with the pole between them, and I bring my legs up, heels under my ass as my thighs grip the metal. Then I let go, sliding down fast, and on that last note my kneeling body hits the floor, legs open wide toward the shadowed crowd, palms on my thighs.

For a long moment, there's nothing but silence. Then the club bursts into cheers and applause, so loud the next song is completely covered by their enthusiasm. I can't help but blush. I've only ever done this a few times. Yes, I go to a pole dancing club, since I don't have one in my home. But actually dancing on stage, I've only ever done three times. That first time doesn't count, as I would rather not remember it. I laugh at myself as I rise to my feet, my muscles aching as the hired dancers come back to the stage to keep the atmosphere going in the background.

“You smashed it! You fucking smashed it! To the point that a few couples had to retire into the playrooms and the back tables, you were so fucking hot!” Lulu pulls me into a big hug as I step off the stairs.

When the lights come back on to a dim level, I notice all the heads that turn to me as we walk back to the bar—men and women. Yet when I reach our earlier spot and grab the shot that Rachel already poured for me, I feel that cold breath again, those tingles wrapping around my throat in such a possessive way that it makes me want to drop my head back, lean into it, and let it choke me. As invisible as it is.

I swipe my gaze around the crowd yet again, and just as before, not one person stands out, but there are definitely more eyes on me now.

Yet this feeling, it becomes as uneasy as it is intriguing.

CHAPTER 7

VINCENT

“ARE YOU SURE HE’S COMING today?” Finn asks as he sits next to me on the leather sofa.

“A password was requested, and Carter spoke with him. So, yes, he’s coming.” I pull out the little glass of Absinthe that I’ve been patiently waiting to be ready, the sugar now dissolved, and take that first satisfying sip that burns straight down my throat.

We’re at Midnight, the speakeasy we own in the center of the city. It’s a useful business when you want to have control over the patrons of your bar, and over information too. It was Carter’s idea. His whole aura seems to belong in the golden age, and he designed this whole space himself. The barroom is bathed in low lights, leather and wood furnish the space, and most of the antiques, paintings, and décor pieces were sourced through one of our first businesses, years ago. Expensive and rare drinks fill the bar shelves, and signature cocktails, that even Madds touches once in a while, are made by our bartenders.

But this Absinthe is Carter’s fault. He got me hooked on it. I didn’t know how to drink it properly until we opened this place and Carter found the right bartender to show me.

I take another sip and let it warm me all the way through. I know Jonathan Rees is coming, yet I'm still impatient. It's been a long time since I felt this way, but I want to close this deal with O'Rourke, so I can get my hands on Holt, and ultimately on Boseman.

I must say, I do admire Rees, how he managed to maintain his privacy all these years. He lives up to his nickname—The Ghost. The man has a peculiar way of doing business. Very few people outside his faction know who he is or what he looks like. He rules with an iron fist, and he's nothing most would expect. We've known him for years, mostly because of Carter, as he was his dad's best friend, but we don't normally do business with him. We collaborate sometimes and help each other out, but other than that, he's just a friend and frequent customer of our speakeasy.

"Even I'm not sure if he's going to be down for this deal." Carter comes from the bar, dropping into the wingback armchair to my left.

"He will. The speculations around why O'Rourke and Holt want to get in on his territory are enough to convince him, even without the information we offered."

"The money they're offering will help sway him too." Finn smirks.

"Yes, how lucky of Holt to marry O'Rourke's daughter, and get into business with him just at the right time." It takes effort not to roll my eyes or react in a way that tells the guys that I'm affected by this for a whole other reason.

But what Carter and his hacker team found was most enlightening. Turns out that old man Holt wasn't that smart with money, and his son needs this, or he and his wretched mother will lose everything.

"Money won't sway him. Jonathan doesn't care about money if the business is not the right fit," Carter counters.

“Will he do it for us then?” I ask, but Carter’s gaze snaps to the entrance.

I turn to find Jonathan and Anthony, his husband, walking in, gazing inconspicuously around the locale, as they make their way toward an empty table.

We don’t pounce on them right away. It’s not how this works.

“So how was the other night? You tried the new fetish club in town, didn’t you? Was it worth it?” Carter asks.

“I signed up,” Finn replies. “Five people already recommended it or invited me, and only three of them are women. That told me enough.”

“Yeah, that you’re a manwhore no matter the gender.”

But Finn winks at Carter. “I know you’re jealous, baby, but it’s okay, you can join too.”

I turn to him, catching the devious smirk as he shakes his head at Finn’s confidence. I don’t doubt that if Finn would try a little harder, he could probably get any of us in bed. The man is too pretty for his own good.

“The official opening is in a few days. I think you should join, try it out,” I agree. “It was much better than I expected. The owner did a pretty fucking good job. Even if you just go to enjoy the shows, it’s still worth it.”

“Who did you say the owner is?” Finn asks.

“You should really pay more attention to this shit, man. Especially considering the family she comes from,” I answer. “Loreley Dietrich is the owner.”

“Or Lulu. She’s O’Rourke’s best friend.” Madds shows up out of nowhere, dropping his bulky frame on the sofa next to me, and I notice the scraped, bruised hands right away. He fought bare-knuckled again.

“Liam’s?!” Finn gasps.

“Morrigan, you idiot.”

“Oh. Yeah, I remember Loreley from the party. She was holding on to this guy for dear life. I think she was just as shocked as Morrigan about the news,” Finn says, relaxing back in his seat as Madds hums his distaste for that entire situation.

“I think it’s time.” Carter nods toward Jonathan, and we watch as the bartender leaves their table after delivering their drinks.

I get up, grabbing my drink, and walk toward the man who can make or break our whole plan.

MORRIGAN

I BURST THROUGH THE FRONT door of the house that hasn't felt like home since a month ago, when my parents all but sold me off to the highest fucking bidder. And my mother, my goddamn mother, should have known better, because she's one of two people I told that I wanted to break it off for real with Ryan. One of two people I had the guts to admit why to. Now I understand why she was insistent on me holding off.

"I didn't love your father when I married him. Our parents worked in the same business, and back then... this is how you strengthened your legacy. By uniting two fronts, two strong families. I learned to love him. I would never take it back."

Fucking liar. She gave me that speech the last time I talked to her about this. I wasn't even the one to open the subject, she did. Now I'm convinced she discussed it with my father, and he told her to have this conversation.

"Have you lost your goddamn mind?" I storm through the house, straight to the living room, where I know she sits reading her magazine, as she always does at this time. "You're seriously going ahead with this charade? I just got a fucking call about a cake tasting."

"Language!" My mother barely raises her head from the magazine, her eyes flashing to me briefly before they return to whatever bullshit she's reading.

"Don't you dare! I will not bend to your will like I'm still that kid who took your word as law, and thought she wanted the same things as you, just because that's what you told her. I'm not marrying him! I'm not as stupid as you to ruin my life."

I'm fucking seething. When that bakery called me, I was in disbelief. I thought they had the wrong number. They had to fucking convince me that it was the right one, and it took everything in me not smash my phone, or everything else around me. But I was in the office at the Metamorphosis, and I worked too hard on that place to destroy it.

My mother watches me, her eyes colder than usual, emotionless in a way that makes me wonder if she's always seen me as their puppet. Has my only purpose here been for their strings to have limbs to attach to? I refuse to let them think they're my puppet masters. She cocks her head ever so slightly, her gaze deepening with the movement, and my spine urges my body to straighten.

"Are you done?" That eerie calmness transfers to her tone as well.

I wish her words would surprise me. Yet they only disappoint.

"For some strange, unknown to me, and useless reason," my father's deep, threatening voice booms behind me, and I stiffen, "you seem to believe that you have a choice."

I watch my mother's reaction to the man behind me, and one thing becomes clear—I'm not the only puppet here. I don't turn to him.

I'm completely still as I stand in the middle of the large living room of our—*their* house. They insisted so much on me coming back here after university. I foolishly thought it was their subtle love or some newfound protective parental instinct, and that's why they wanted to help me out, while I saved my own money to buy a place. But it was just as I always feared... all about control. Now they're refusing to let me move, unless it's to Ryan's house.

What a fucking idiot I was. Probably still am.

I'm not sure if I feel betrayed, disappointed, or just broken.

My father appears to my right, walking toward the gaudy, floral sofa where my mother sits, without sparing me a glance.

"I'm not your slave, of course I have a choice." My tone grows urgent, but I don't yell, don't raise my voice too high, which is a feat in and of itself since I can feel that all too familiar simmer under my skin.

My father sits down on the sofa, and I swear the grandfather clock at the end of the hallway has slowed down its ticking for effect.

"Mmm... true. You're not a slave, and you do have a choice. Many, actually." He speaks in a low, calm tone, and I'm about to don a victorious smile when he carries on. "You have the choice between Coveview Estate or Ruthford Hotel for the reception. You have your choice of lavish wedding dresses, flowers, jewelry, and decorations. You have plenty of choices for your inevitable wedding to Ryan Holt." He leans forward, as if he wants to make sure I hear him, his eyes darkening at the movement.

"No!" My self-control is but a memory now as my tone heightens.

"You have a duty toward this family!" My father's voice follows mine, an octave higher, and I have the urge to step back.

"Marrying a man I don't even want to be with is not a fucking duty! What Cillian is doing, training to take over your business, *that's* fucking duty! This is a forced union. A marriage of convenience, and it's not *my* goddamn convenience!"

"Not yours? So all we ever gave you, all we've provided, the troubles we got you out of, were not for your convenience? Or our protection, the university, the money, the car, the roof over your head, were not

either? What about the simple fact that you never had or have to work a day in your life, even though you keep fucking insisting on it?”

Now I do step back, just as he stands from the sofa. I've played this game before with him, and I know exactly what's coming. It's in these moments that the fiery attitude I'm known for sizzles out and bleeds into him. My body shuts down from years of this... this displaced dominance, the emotional distress that a father should never cause. As my eyes flicker to my mother, I can see that she knows what's coming as well.

“I didn't realize there were conditions attached to parenting. I didn't know there was a price to pay for being born, being your daughter!” I keep talking because I have nothing more to lose.

His brows furrow, but the deranged smirk on his lips screams *peril* as he rushes toward me, his steps falling heavy on the parquet floor. I back up quickly, and the moment my shoulder blades hit the wall, his heavy hand slams against the left side of my face. My head whips to the side in a flash of pain, and the metallic taste of blood flows over my tongue.

“There's always a price to pay, girl! Just be thankful that you at least like Ryan.”

“I don't,” I say quietly, licking the cut on my inner cheek, resisting the urge to rub my hot skin, or my aching jaw. But I've shown enough weakness to this man, and I'm not about to fuel his abusive ego further.

I catch my mother's eyes as she turns toward the window, a flicker of sadness in them. But it's gone as fast as it appeared. *She's fucking useless.*

“You will marry him, you will have his children, and you will do your duty to this family.” He steps back, but I refuse to bow to him, so I step forward.

“Why? Why are you so desperate to unite our families? Or whatever is left of his.”

“You always ask too many questions that don’t concern you. Those are answers you couldn’t begin to understand.” He looks bored under his bushy eyebrows.

I smirk. I don’t plan to entertain this misogynistic pissing game of his. “So that’s how it is. Fine. But if you care about me at all, don’t send me to the man who wants to break me.”

Blinking slowly, he reveals the terrible truth through his gaze. He doesn’t even bother to hide it.

“I’m nothing to you...” I whisper, moving a little closer. “I’m a tool, the right kind of currency for you to pave your way down the fucking lawless rabbit hole you’re digging... I’m nothing.”

He doesn’t speak, just shifts a little closer.

“Did you ever care? Was I ever anything else but a trade commodity?” My voice cracks, disappointment, fear, rage, all mixing together.

He blinks slowly like he can’t wait for me to shut up and bend to his will. I can’t take it anymore, and I slam the side of my fist against his chest.

“You fucking bastard! I’m your fucking daughter, goddamnit! Your fucking daughter, and you’re selling me without a fucking second thought!” I’m screaming now, a guttural sound that scrapes my throat. “You can take back all your shit! You can take my goddamn diploma, my clothes, my room, take it all! You’re stealing my fucking life away! Well, take back the price I paid and just leave me alone!”

I don’t see the next move coming. The moment his palm slams across the side of my face again, I’m thrown straight to the ground, my ribs hitting the side of an end-table, and all air leaves my lungs on a hitched breath.

I swallow the sharp pain, because I refuse to show him any more weakness.

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re not giving anything back. It will simply go to waste, so it might as

well stay with you. And you're not getting out of this. This is your forever."

I get up on a strained exhale, then push the ache away, and without blinking, I slap my father so hard across his cheek, his glasses fly off.

"You're no fucking father, not to me anyway. Not anymore."

I catch that stunned, furious look in his eyes for a moment. But I don't give him the chance to abuse me even more, and I turn on my heel and storm out.

When I rip open the front door, I almost run straight into my brother.

"Christ! What are you—?" He stops, narrowing his eyes and cocking his head as he takes me in.

"Welcome home, Cillian." My tone seeps sarcasm as I take him in. We look so similar; it fucking hurts to know that we share blood, yet we are so different.

"Morri, what happened?" He reaches over, his fingers just about touching the strands of hair partially covering my cheek.

"Don't. Just fucking don't!" I swipe his hands away. "Unless the next words out of your mouth are '*Morrigan, I'm your brother, I care about you, and I will help you get out of this bullshit,*' don't speak to me."

"I can't—"

"Yeah, I fucking thought so. And to think you're taking over this fucking circus when the old man croaks. Nice to know you'll carry on his legacy. Just do me a favor. Don't ever fucking have kids."

I push him aside and storm past, skipping down the front steps, then stop at the bottom, turning to him.

"I thought more of you, brother. So much more..."

CHAPTER 8

MORRIGAN

I DRIVE LIKE A MADWOMAN, swerving through the easing traffic, dinnertime clearing the roads enough that I can overtake both on the left and the right as an angry song from a random playlist on my phone reverberates through my speakers. I weave around the cars that honk, a blur of lights around me, my mind too far gone. Heaving breaths make my throat sore as I blink through the tears of frustration threatening to cloud my vision.

More honking sounds around me as tires screech on the asphalt, and the sun is now a trace of decadent lavender in the sky, the clouds in angry shades of burnt orange. The streets are clearer, and the roads bumpier. I avoid potholes rather than cars, the edge of the city much bumpier than the rest. But I don't care, I just... drive.

The playlist changes. A harsh voice singing the moody, modern blues soothes my ears. My soul is in flames, my heart broken, and my mind... my mind struggles to find reasons why I should hold back anymore.

Why... why in God's name am I holding back? How the hell have I become so conditioned? The transition has been so smooth, I completely missed their

manipulations. This includes Ryan too. This is not me. This isn't fucking me!

No one but Lulu cares. No one! My goddamn fucking parents care only as far as my auction value. If I wouldn't have met Ryan, if my father wouldn't have had dealings, or attempts at, with his family, who would I have belonged to now? Who would he have given me to? Sold me to?

"Aaah!" My screams get louder as my foot pushes deeper onto the gas pedal, the engine roaring just as viciously as I am. But it's more than that—I'm fucking hurt!

Suddenly, the music stops, and my phone rings, pulling me out of my rage. As I finally acknowledge my surroundings beyond driving on autopilot, I realize the sun's traces are almost gone from the sky. Shit, I must have been driving for at least an hour. The phone keeps ringing and Ryan's name flashes on the car's middle console display.

I would let it ring out, but I'm a sucker for pain.

"Yes," I finally answer.

"Why the fuck aren't you answering your texts?!" Jesus, he sounds furious.

"Why are you calling me?"

"Excuse me?! You're my future wife, my *fiancée*!" Fucking hell, that last word doesn't spill off his tongue. No, it scrapes its way from his throat and spits out at me like a medieval weapon only designed for torture. "I don't need to justify my call. Where are you?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"Driving."

"Get the fuck home, right now," he seethes.

"No."

“You fucking bitch, I said get home now, or I swear to God...”

“What? What are you going to do, Ryan?”

“Do not test me. I don’t have time for this. Move your goddamn ass home, to my house, right now.”

“Your house is not my home. And you... *you* don’t fucking own me.”

But what follows chills my bones. A maniacal laugh, one so familiar it even makes me picture the look in his eyes when those sounds work their way up from deep within his chest. The mania is most visible in these moments, and no matter how clear the vision of him is, I’m glad I’m not there.

“Oh, silly woman, it is your home, not your house, of course. There will be nothing in your name. I’ll make sure the prenup is solid. But more importantly, I *do* own you. All that you are belongs to me, and once we are married, I will have so much more.” His laugh booms through my car, and I swear I can hear unspoken words, secrets... He’s plotting something. “There’s no escape for you.”

“Fuck you!” I spit.

Only, he continues like he didn’t hear me. “I am trying to be a bit more courteous by keeping the leash loose while I’m busy reorganizing the business. But make no mistake, if you push me, I’ll lock you in a spare room. Push me even harder, and I’ll be the only person you will ever see, and my only use for you will be for that tight hole of yours. But careful, there’s better pussy than yours out there, prettier women, skinnier, more attractive. I might just use that leash like a noose if you don’t behave.”

The men in my life only know betrayal. Cunning, double-faced cunts, showing their true faces today. His words cut in strange ways, different from my father’s,

and just as the road before me sinks into darkness, my soul does, too. I can see the color of it now—fury.

I can't describe its shade, but this is what it is.

Fury.

“You seem so sure that this plan of yours will work. Father too. You confuse confidence for brains. This alliance is between you and him, not me. I shook no hand, signed no contract. I'm not yours. I'm not anyone's. Strap your leash on someone else, because I'm not your fucking bitch.”

My headlights light up the road out of town, the dense forest surrounding me as Ryan's unhinged laugh vibrates through my speakers, and suddenly his tone turns grave.

“You're so brave over the phone. But we both know you crumble in front of me. It took a while to break you, but I think I'm there. Just in time.”

A shiver runs up my spine. Months of little digs that turned into more than that. I can't even describe how it happened, but it did. Always putting me down, criticizing, humiliating me, pressuring me... controlling me.

“Tell me. Which version of yourself will you be when my gun is aimed at your father's head?”

The shadows of the forest seem to come down at me, swallowing the glow of the headlights.

“How about when your mother looks down that barrel?”

Shit! He was fucking serious when he said, “*If you don't, they all die.*”

“What about your brother? Will you be as brave? Or will you crumble at my feet and beg me to let them live?”

I slam my finger on the mute button and violently pound my hand against the steering wheel, the car

swerving dangerously on every curse I spit out.

“Son of a fucking bitch! He’s blackmailing me with my family’s lives?!” Another series of screams make my throat raw, but I unmute the phone before he starts believing I caved.

“They sold me off to you. What makes you think I fucking give a shit about them?” I finally reply to him.

“Because you might fool everyone else with that harsh exterior of yours, but you don’t fool me. You still believe they’ll come around.”

I truly don’t.

“And...” he continues, “you wouldn’t want your brother to die, would you?”

I lied. Secretly, I do think he will come around. He’s my brother...

“Go ahead! We both know your threats of violence and death are as empty as your fucking skull. You won’t touch them. Not now, not until you’ve set up whatever goddamn business you have with them. We both know you can’t do shit alone.” I finish in a low tone, and the grunt I hear on the other side is answer enough.

So I hang up, floor the gas once more, and the music returns to full blast as my pulse speeds on anxious beats.

“Fuck!”

I can feel the rush of blood in my veins, the pressure in my temples rising, my breathing staggered, my grip painful on the steering wheel.

“Goddamnit!”

I think... *shit*... I slow down the car and spot a forest road to the right, so I take the turn, the car making cruel noises on the uneven terrain. I press one hand on my chest, the pressure painful in my lungs, air not quite filling them.

Fucking hell, is this a panic attack? I push through that uneasiness, and drop the beam of my headlights, the adrenaline rising when the visibility dissipates.

I drive deeper into the woods, my headlights the only light here, as a slow, modern Blues song begins to blare through the speakers. Those heavy, sultry notes... they do something to me. They reach somewhere deep under my skin, brushing softly over my muscles, and they begin to relax.

My tires skid on the gravelly road as I follow the turns through the forest, and I know I'm gonna get lost. But fuck if I care. I don't just need to be lost, I need to lose myself.

My body begins to rock in the car seat, fingers tapping nervously on the steering wheel, and I'm running out of fucking air.

"I need to get out!"

I need ground under my feet. My brain feels like it's on fire.

I slam my foot on the brake, tightening my grip on the wheel to keep it from skidding as it comes to a halting stop. Before me, in the glare of the headlights, surrounded by grass and wildflowers, lies an eerie crossroads.

Right here, in the middle of the forest, where I decided to stop, two roads cross, with four directions to choose from.

Before my mind can sink further into the panic of my hypothetical road ahead, I turn the music as loud as it'll go, rip open the door, and rush out to the middle of this crossroads. The wave of panic slams into me from the inside out, and I fall to my knees, banging my fist into the ground on a painful bellow. It bleeds from the pits of my lungs, shrieking until my throat burns, until the desperation that taints it eases.

They betrayed me... they all betrayed me.

I take a deep breath that finally fills my lungs enough that it cools the burn in my brain, and slow drum beats fill my ears as they echo through the forest around me. The song coming from my car lulls my nerves, guiding my body to stand. My feet respond too, my hips following as the music carries me... it always does. I don't know the moment my whole body listened to the song, but I'm dancing like there is nothing but me in this entire world. Mad southern sounds guide me as I sway and spin, arms up in the air, t-shirt riding up as my hips roll on every beat, and the panic dissipates with every movement.

The damp smell of moss and wildflowers comforts my senses as a breeze makes its way through the branches of the trees. Their leaves rustle on the bass of the song, and I'm dancing along with them. With the hypnotizing, sweet scents of the forest, with the breeze that wraps around my bare stomach guiding me, the softness of the soil beneath my feet, my mind loses itself in the heathen beats echoing around me. But the only heathen here is me. Wild and... free.

Here... I am free.

But am I alone?

VINCENT

IT WAS THE BASS OF the music vibrating through the trees that called to me. But her scream, the pain and desperation... that's what summoned me. The last thing I expected to see when I found the source was the blur of red hair whipping around as she moved freely to the dark music, the dipped headlights bathing her in a strange light.

Morrigan O'Rourke.

Those wild locks I would recognize anywhere, but I certainly didn't expect to see them on my run tonight.

I stand in the shadow of the trees, hidden from the headlights. Even if she looks in this direction, she cannot see me. And I don't want her to.

She sways her hips, then rolls her whole body to a low bass, moving on light steps as she spins over and over in a hypnotic dance. I stalk through the shadows until I'm almost behind the car, my eyes glued to her luscious body swaying, every movement an exquisite shock to my cock.

But I force myself to focus on the recklessness of this woman. Christ, anyone coming from behind those headlights is invisible to her. They could attack her. What the fuck is she thinking?!

But my mind is drawn back to that scream... *She's not thinking of that. She doesn't care.*

Something happened.

I move behind the trees again and stop when her fingers run through her hair. She's pulling it up, exposing the soft flesh of her belly when her T-shirt

rides up, and when her body undulates on the notes of the song, all the blood vanishes from my brain.

I can't help myself from moving forward. She lures me in. My steps crunch on the gravel as I come out into the light and slowly walk in a wide circle around her, close to the line of trees.

With my next move, as the song quiets, her muscles tense all at once, and her eyes dart open, straight onto mine. I expect to see panic or fear in them, but I feel more like prey than the predator, with the fury so vividly painted on her features.

"Serpent..." she hisses, her shoulders falling when she realizes it's me. The fury stays put.

Interesting.

I continue walking around her, taking slow steps as she turns my way, keeping me in her line of sight. No words are exchanged. Not yet. She drags her gaze over me, head to toe, assessing my state, but she's blinded once I'm in front of the car. I stand between the headlights, and the stubborn woman still forces herself to look in my direction. As with wild animals, dropping one's gaze means submission. And that just won't do for Morigan O'Rourke. I can't help but grin, because the fire in her eyes burns just as bright as her hair right now.

There's something bugging me, though. She's stubborn as a mule, strong and feisty to the point of self-destruction, yet she's submitting to this arrangement her father made with her.

It doesn't fit. There's a story here, and I need to hear it.

A dark and moody guitar fills the forest in slow tones as I step toward her.

"What happened?" Finally, I speak, and she flinches.

"Don't pretend to give a shit. It doesn't look good on you," she spits fire at me.

“Why are you here?” I ignore her faint insult.

“It’s none of your fucking business, Serpent!” She crosses her arms, tight against her chest. “We both know you don’t concern yourself with feelings, so don’t pretend to give a shit now. Now, go! Leave me... alone.”

Damn, I’m a fool thinking that she has moved on from the shit I had to pull all those years ago. Judging by the look in her eyes, even if twenty went by, her disdain toward me would be just as vivid.

I hurt her...

“What did he do?” I can’t lie and say her situation doesn’t bother me. It does. A lot.

I don’t miss the hitch in her shoulders.

“Who?” She feigns ignorance.

Stopping a few feet away from her, I cock my head and watch. I won’t entertain that question with a response.

“Why do you wanna know? Seriously, what’s it to you?”

I have no answer for her. I barely have one for myself.

She sighs, long and loud, exasperation in her tone, but her eyes tell a much more painful story as she concedes. “I can’t get out of it...”

“Why? What’s holding you?”

“I can achieve many things on my own, but this...” She shakes her head, and for a moment, she looks away in the distance, taking a deep breath before continuing. “It’s bigger than I am, and I don’t know how big. I’m some sort of card in an unknown game, and I don’t know how many players are involved. I need an ally at the table.”

I nod. She’s caught in the middle of the game I’ve already started inserting myself into. I suspect somehow

this was meant to be. But there's a tinge of shame in those green eyes that look as black as mine in the night.

"You want to get away from Holt."

"Obviously! Don't you play games with me too. You were there, Serpent. You know very well what you saw." She sighs again, trying to rein in her anger. "I have for a while now."

Oh. Interesting.

I shove my hands into my pockets, narrowing my eyes on her. As I cock my head, the light that pours from behind me hits her pale face. Only, it's not as pale as it should be... not with the angry reddening on the side of it. The other side doesn't look intact either now that I'm seeing it more clearly.

"He hit you." My hands come out of my pockets, rolling into tight fists as I fight to hold in a growl.

She shakes her head, her expression honest.

"My father. Ryan is more creative with his pain." That fire in her eyes falters for a second.

Motherfucking O'Rourke!

"I'm gonna fucking—"

She puts her hand up, goddamn silencing me. "I don't need you to be my knight in shining-fucking-armor."

Reckless to the fucking bone. But I'm drawn back to her words about Holt.

"You don't need to be so stubborn. I'm just trying to..." I pause for a moment. I don't want to fuck this up. "What does Holt do to you?"

"Stop! I don't want you to pretend to care."

Fuck! That asshole is abusive, and I'm supposed to just... leave it.

“What *do* you want?” I ask through gritted teeth.

She debates telling me for a moment too long.

“I want to be free. Free of him. Of them. I can’t marry him.”

“Run, then.” I know it’s a useless thing to say the moment I open my mouth.

“Never!” she seethes. “That son of a bitch took one thing too many away from me. He doesn’t get to chase me away from my home. Away from my damn future! He has to pay. I *will* make him pay!” She spits every single word, hate vibrating in her throat.

“How?”

She stands there, cocking her head and watching me intensely for a moment longer than I’m comfortable.

“You.” She drags out those letters, like a spell she’s mouthing under the light of the moon.

And I’m thoroughly enthralled, taking a step closer.

They say the serpent tricked Eve out of Eden, tempted her with promises of power and desire. I think he was merely answering her call, an obscured need to escape the oppression of the man who didn’t want her to have a stray thought beyond servitude. Eve craved more. She had an appetite for the wicked. She wanted to be free, so the serpent freed her.

As I look into Morrigan’s eyes, I recognize it—I may be wicked, but she’s just like Eve... a heathen in disguise.

I can’t help the slight quirk in the corner of my lips.

“You want to make a deal with me. Just like that.”

I know she hates me. She doesn’t hide the feeling, so this is utterly disturbing. Even through that disdain, she looks at me with apprehension, as if she’s about to sign off her soul. I suppose she’s about to do just that. A deal with me is always an exchange, never free.

“Yes. I can do it... but not alone. I—I need help.” Those words pour like lava straight from the depths of her soul, and they pain her.

I step even closer, offering my open hand to her. Her brows furrow as she looks between it and my eyes, but then caves with a small sigh. The moment her soft skin touches mine, prickles trigger memories and sensations that I pushed back deep into my soul, ensuring prying them out would be near impossible. But I don't think it was the touch that made it happen—it's her acceptance.

She's giving herself to me... the Eve to my Serpent.

I tighten my grip on her right hand, lifting it above her head as I guide her in three slow pirouettes on the dark, southern tune, then pull her against me. Her free hand braces on my chest, holding me at a distance, and mine is on the small of her back. But I don't allow her a moment to rethink the stance. Instead, I follow the music, and lead her in a languid dance on its notes.

After all, a pact with the devil requires a seal, but I have a feeling she'll stab me with a rock if I try to kiss her.

I bring my thumb down to her pulse, watching as her eyes turn black, her pupils dilating to the max at the delicate gesture. But as I slowly drag it up her palm, she flinches slightly when I reach a thin strip of skin that seems rougher than the rest—a *scar*. The question is on the tip of my tongue, but something in her gaze gives me pause. I'll ask later.

She's antsy, waiting for a response as she pretends she doesn't enjoy the feel of me against her. The hand holding me away has softened. Not her eyes, though. They're burning my soul. I made my decision before she even told me her desire. There's no way I'm refusing the opportunity to insert myself into her life at her request. But I'm enjoying this moment, her skin electric against mine. Only, it triggers more old memories—her lips on mine, mine on her bare skin, her screams of

pleasure, her cries, my moans, her gaze on me hypnotizing as she unraveled... and so many more. I hope this is happening to her too, because it's a whole other brand of torture.

"I will help you."

I spin her in another pirouette, before I bring her back into my body.

"What am I trading for this dangerous pact?" she asks.

"What are you willing to give?" I'm testing her. She may be making a deal with the devil, but by God, I'll take as little as possible just to make sure this pact will be sealed. But what I want... that's a whole other thing.

She drops her gaze and turns her head to the side.

"I—"

"You," I interrupt.

Her gaze whips back to me. She tenses, and I can see in the flicker of her gaze the hope that more will follow that one single word... a complete sentence, maybe. She'll be waiting for something that will never come.

Her steps don't falter, though. They follow my lead to the music.

"Give me your trust and patience... for now. Before I can get rid of Holt, I need something from him. I will give you what you want, you have my word."

She narrows her eyes, lips parting, but I interrupt and dip her, leaning over, with my lips next to her ear and my breath brushing against it.

"For now..." she whispers back. "What about later? After you got what you wanted and made me wait."

I straighten, pulling her with me as I hold her cunning, green gaze. So many things I want from her,

but none I'm willing to take unless they're willingly offered. I need her to give herself to me.

"Deal," she says with a shake of her head aimed at herself, interrupting her own doubts.

Fuck. No one in their right mind would make a deal with me without knowing the terms. If I'm her only choice at survival, it says more than it should.

"You need to know that what I want from Holt might not be owned by him alone. Your father is involved now." The flesh between my eyebrows tenses as I await some sort of surprised reaction, only she doesn't move a muscle. I suspect by the end of it all, Holt will not be the only one paying, and she doesn't seem to mind.

"You may be The Serpent, but my choice is between losing everything to them, or losing something to you." She's desperate, agreeing on incomplete conditions.

Nodding once, I reluctantly pull my hand away from the small of her back, and spin her one last time, her feet kicking stones through the crossroads. When she stops, her palm is in mine, my index finger on her quickening pulse, and I keep my gaze on hers as I lightly press my lips on the top of her hand. A faint vibration passes through her tense flesh, and it goes straight through mine, warming me with her fire.

"It's a deal... Little Eve." I flash a faint, wicked grin as she narrows her eyes, and I don't miss the goose bumps that flare on her skin. But I let go of her anyway.

If I'm The Serpent, then this covenant is the forbidden fruit, and this forest is our Eden.

I take one last look at the fire in her eyes, then skip back into a jog, leaving her behind as I continue my trail through the dark forest.

Morrigan-fucking-O'Rourke just made a deal with The Serpent at some crossroads in the middle of the forest.

How fucking poetic.

This must be my lucky day.

CHAPTER 9

MORRIGAN

“JESUS, YOU SCARED ME, WOMAN. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to you wearing that wig.” Lulu sits back in the desk chair, a little rattled from my sudden presence in the office, as I pull off the mask. “I thought you couldn’t come tonight.”

“I managed to escape another grueling, show-off dinner. He got a call. I’m telling you, it’s harder and harder to get away from him.” I crash onto the sofa, resisting the urge to rub a hand over my freshly made-up face.

I didn’t need to draw the inky cat eye on my lid, or roll the mascara over my eyelashes, but sometimes the makeup serves as a switch to a different version of myself. A better one at times. Not the one that seems to have lost all levels of courage, or self-respect, in Ryan’s presence.

“Did he do something?” Lulu leans over the desk, narrowing her eyes.

“Not really. At this point, I’m sure he has a mistress. Wait. Is it a mistress if I’m thankful for it?”

“Probably not.” She leans back into the chair. “So he didn’t...”

“Not more than the usual slimy touches, grabbing my ass, my jaw...” There’s more, but I don’t burden her with the rest.

Luckily, he seems to take out any sexual tension he may hold on someone else. It doesn’t make me feel less like a victim, though. And I hate this so fucking much... the idea of being a victim, because a little voice in my head tells me I’m not worthy of the title.

I have to hold on. I know The Serpent is on it, even though I haven’t seen the bastard since the crossroads. But I have to trust him. I know this game is too complex for the results to be immediate. As much as I would love for him to just shoot Ryan and throw him in the middle of the ocean, we have to be smart about this.

“I just...” Lulu huffs. “I don’t know how you do it, Morri. I don’t get it. How can you take it? You’re not yourself with him, at least I don’t recognize you. Do you? You are a fucking force of nature, yet next to him, you’re barely a broken leaf carried around by a breeze. How is he doing it?”

Fuck... I wish I could explain in a way that doesn’t make me sound as if I’m wallowing in self-pity. Sometimes I can’t make sense of it either. His words cut. The threats, the degradation, unworthiness... constant waves of it. Like I’m floating in the middle of the sea and his rough waters bash me, over and over, with no time to breathe. I can’t explain, can’t make sense of it.

I do have one suspicion, though. A secret I’ve been holding for years, one that only Ryan is privy to. He hasn’t held it against me outright, but I still feel like that’s what’s happening. I don’t think Lulu will look at me the same way when she finds out about it... what I’ve done. Her, The Sanctum, this club, are the only things keeping me afloat. Everything else is just internal pain that causes a numbness I cannot shake.

“I don’t want you involved, Lu. The less you know, the better. I love you too much to bring you in the middle of this. But it’s being handled.”

“By The Sanctum.” She crosses her arms over her deep cleavage. She wears a tank top made of thin chain-link, and I can’t tell if there’s anything underneath covering her boobs.

“By The Sanctum,” I confirm.

“You made a fucking deal with the devil, Morri, and I fear you’ve sold your soul to him. Yet another man taking something from you. The Serpent, The Sanctum, they don’t give anything away for free.”

I laugh, because this is just fitting. “We’ve come full circle—this isn’t the first time he took something from me, and he was the first ever to do so.”

“You’re right. You were such different people back then that I forget it happened. It’s quite interesting how he suddenly appeared back into your life... when you needed him most.”

Funny... yeah. I’ve been thinking the same thing. The timing is impeccable.

“I’m not gonna complain, he’s useful now. Just... please, as I said before, do not whisper a word of this to Luke. No one can know of my involvement with *him*. It could ruin everything.”

Lulu nods, bracing herself against the desk. “You have my word.” She rises and I notice the chain-link is actually a dress, the hem right under her ass.

“Jesus, doesn’t your ass hurt when you sit?”

“Not gonna lie, it wasn’t meant for sitting. Wanna get a drink? Watch a show?” she asks as she winces, offering me her hand.

“Yes to both.”

“Let me see you!” She steps back, running her gaze over the see-through circle dress that covers a lingerie

set made more of straps than fabric. The panties rise in a V to my waist while the biggest piece of fabric of the bra covers only my nipples. “Morri, you look like you want to play tonight!”

I’m quite exposed, I know... fairly unusual for me. Plus, I never wear dresses this short, or this transparent.

“Nah, you know me, I love watching much, much more,” I say with a wink, watching her cheeks flush. “If I ever find the right person, maybe I will test out the equipment, but the chances are slim to none. Either way, this club is not for me, it’s for them.”

“Fair enough. Come on, let’s find something good to drink, and something better to drool over.”

* * *

We’ve spent some time observing the patrons, taking care of some business, watching the girls dance, and two couples engage up on the stage. I can’t suppress the unbelievable pride I feel when I see how comfortable and at ease our members are. This is why I worked my ass off with countless sleepless nights doing my freelance design work, after the part-time job, and university courses. This is why I want to fight back, not run. Metamorphosis is my future—our future—and he doesn’t get to take it away from me.

A crowd gathered by one of the playroom windows catches my attention, as a moody song fills the air, sending a shiver down my spine. I signal Lulu toward the playrooms, making our way through the crowd, and the sight greeting us behind that window forces me to steady myself against the bottom of the window frame.

Fuck...

I feel Lulu’s gaze on me, the same stunned expression most likely plastered over her face as well, but I can’t look away.

A dark green mask covers the eyes of the woman hanging from the ceiling hook, by the restraint that ties her hands together. Her legs are spread wide, heeled feet barely touching the ground as she stands over a triangle-frame bench that's maybe a couple of inches in width at the top. These are used for a specific type of pussy teasing, but they usually have a narrower piece laid on top, which has been removed this time. Instead, between the black-haired woman's spread legs, sits a dildo. A very thick, violent looking, monster-type dildo that's definitely inspired by hentai porn or monster romance novels, and the tip of it is buried inside of her.

Behind her, one of the hottest men I've ever seen paddles her ass in controlled hits. The man wears a disheveled white shirt, a few buttons opened at the top and at the bottom, tattoos running up to his neck peeking through, and black slacks. He looks like he swims every single fucking day, his shoulders wide, his body taut without being bulky, and he wears a black mask with glossy thin patterns on it. His tattoos would make him recognizable, but if he's willing to show them here, I have a feeling it's not something he does often.

They look so in sync, her trembles anticipating the hits, eyes sodden with ecstasy, and his attention on her is mesmerizing. I'm not sure if they chose to see the crowd on the other side of the window, or if it's their reflection staring back at them. But her eyes are aimed low, probably at the reflection of the girth she squeezes her dripping wet pussy around, and I think I can guess it's the mirror.

When the paddle slaps against her skin once more, we can hear the impact through the microphone they turned on inside. His technique is impeccable—he hits hard but pulls back at the same moment it makes contact, so not to push her over, slapping, rather than hitting. I can actually see the flesh of her perfectly shaved pussy squeezing around the thick toy. I can see the moment it just about pushes her over the edge as she struggles through that pleasure and pain.

“Remember, do not dare come.” We just about hear his deep voice through the microphone, mixing with the music of the club.

“Ye—yes, Sir.” Her flexed thighs tremble, and I realize she’s keeping herself from impaling her pussy, not because she fears the monster-dildo, but because she’ll come if she does.

A strange energy surrounds me suddenly. Tiny prickles cover my back, pouring in wave after wave over my skin, and I roll my neck, absorbing it into my body. There’s a lot of people around me, so the breath that touches the top of my shoulder as my hair falls to the side doesn’t surprise me.

Yet it does entice me.

He hits her again, and again... tears fall from under her mask as she bites her lips, and my pussy tightens on a long shiver as my fingers dig into the window frame. Again, the slap of the wood on skin makes her grip the rope above her head, and the muscles of her arms flex hard when she struggles to pull herself up. As her legs tremble, my pussy clenches.

The man moves to her side, his back to us as he brings the paddle down on her breasts, and her mouth falls open on a silent scream just as she comes down farther onto the dildo. Female voices gasp somewhere behind me, and I whip my head around out of instinct. It causes me to lose my balance and sends me straight into the man standing behind me. My shoulders press against his chest and my ass right onto his obviously hard cock. I gasp, catching a glimpse of him as his gaze falls on my profile, and he wraps his hand around my upper arm to steady me. The contact is fucking electric. Lightning searing through flesh and muscle, and a deep, primal craving grows within me, fed by the image of the couple behind the glass.

But he steadies me, gently pushing me away, and I can no longer feel his chest, nor his cock. Yet, his hand

is still wrapped around my bicep, and I don't dare turn to look up at his mask-covered face. I don't want to. Instead, I turn my attention back to the playroom.

When the paddle reaches the skin of her ass again, the stranger squeezes my arm ever so slightly, and the woman drops her head to the side, her eyes rolling to the back of her head for a split second before they come back. There's a lost look in them, filled with pleasure and pain, an ecstasy she's lost control of, now held by her lover. He ghosts his palm over her cheek, his thumb swiping over her lips, almost like he's discreetly checking on her, before it drops to her throat and grips possessively.

"Look at me," he orders.

And she does. In an instant. The look in her eyes is still lost, but he assesses her, rubs his thumb over her pulse, then dips in and touches his lips to her cheek. She smiles, her lips slightly parted, and just like that, his hand goes to one breast, squeezing her nipple before the paddle hits her clit on a sharp note.

I can't help it, a moan escapes my lips as my muscles tense, and I'm suddenly more aware of the stranger's grip on me. Or maybe he just squeezed harder, I can't tell.

Someone touches my hand and when I look over to my right, Lulu signals me to Luke, who now stands next to her—I forgot she was here. She points in the direction of the office, asking me if I'm okay here, and doesn't leave until I smile and nod. Then I'm left on my own, and a couple takes her place, embracing as they watch the scene unfold before them.

But I'm not alone, am I? As that paddle makes contact with one of her breasts, I feel *his* breath on my shoulder, and I can't help but roll my neck as goose bumps snake over my skin.

My gaze follows the man as he walks behind her, his eyes on the mirror, watching her, but God... it feels as if

he's watching all of us. He reaches in front of her, sliding his fingers through the wetness she drips onto the dildo, before he pulls away, and his hand disappears between them. Her mouth falls open on a hitched breath, eyes wide as her body stills, and suddenly I realize where those fingers disappeared, and I can't help but gasp softly.

I don't notice the stranger's front against my back until his hand grips my hip, steadying me once more as my body leans into him. His grasp is tight, yet I have a feeling that if I decide to move away, he will let me go. But I'm not going anywhere. I'm too enthralled in the way the man before me denies the woman's orgasm. In the way she skirts just on the edge of it and pushes herself to live in that permanent state of torturous ecstasy, without the knowledge of when the denial will end. She cries, she screams, she moans... and I moan right along with her.

The man who holds me pushes a little closer against me, and only now do I realize the slight reluctance he held in his body until this moment. The purpose of his grip on my arm wasn't just to steady me, but to keep me away too.

Not anymore.

With each thrust of the man's fingers in her ass, my body jolts with ecstasy and the stranger's fingers flex on my hip. I fail to control myself any longer, and my head falls against his shoulder. But when his hand glides onto the curve of my ass, my body thrums with such sweet anticipation. The man slaps the paddle against her flesh, finger-fucking her as my stranger's hand reaches under my short dress and grips my ass cheek with a firmness that makes me quiver.

I don't stop him.

I don't want to.

I don't even want to look at him.

I'm curious, but why break this spell?

I've never done this before. I engaged in some closed curtain play back in Rosston, but here, where so many people know me, it's different. Especially since I might be doing this with someone who might not be a stranger at all. The masks hold an eerie power in a moment like this.

He could be a friend.

Or an enemy.

He could be anyone.

My knees almost give out at the excitement of those thoughts.

His hand continues this gentle kneading of my ass on the same rhythm of the couple playing behind the glass, and I want to cry and beg him to do more, when his fingers snake closer between my cheeks. The adrenaline rises through my lungs when he dips lower, touching the sensitive skin beneath my ass cheeks, and brushes slowly toward my center.

It happens fast and in slow motion altogether—the paddle swats over her pussy on a strained moan, and my stranger's fingers dip between my legs, slide under my panties, and push inside of me on a brutal thrust. Too late I swallow down a scream as he presses his free hand on my chest to hold me against him. But I can't swallow the moan that sneaked its way out of me. I can only brace myself against the window frame as he continues to thrust in and out on the same rhythm as the man before us. They're looking into the mirror, as we watch them, and it's all kinds of incredible. I feel an achy stretch when he pushes in another digit, just as the rhythm picks up. He's harsher now, and my knees grow weaker with each assault, his hand on my chest feeling like fire on my flesh. I fix my gaze on the couple, only to brace myself and not fall to my damn knees.

I have a burning need to push onto his fingers, onto him, ride him. I—I want...

“More...” I whisper on a ragged moan.

Just when I think he did not hear me, my pussy stretches with the push of another finger, my lips curling inward as I bite back a screech.

It's so much... fuck... too much!

But it isn't at all. It's fucking perfect.

He holds me tighter as my legs shake, the tips of my fingers pained as my grip on the window frame tightens, and my body is dying to do anything but stand right now. Only, he thrusts harder, making me jolt with every brutal movement, and I'm floating on the precipice of a cliff... just there... at the edge. My whole entire being craves to dive into the abyss, into the unknown, into the filthy promise of ecstasy.

“Touch yourself.” A whisper brushes against my ear, so soft I'm not even sure if it came from him or from the inside of my mind.

I comply either way, without even bothering to gaze around and check if anyone is watching. I slide my hand over the front of my dress, lifting the hem enough that I can reach inside my panties, and go straight to that swollen bundle of nerves that aches for attention.

The moment the pads of my fingers touch that sensitive flesh, it spreads a current through every single part of my body, every muscle shaking at the contact, and I'm sure that any moment now I'm going to implode.

Suddenly, the man before me throws the paddle on the floor, pulls his cock out of his pants, and at the same time he presses his fingers onto her clit, he thrusts into her ass on her wanton moans. He whispers something into her ear, and she smiles through messy tears, sliding farther down onto the dildo on a crazed cry. My stranger finger-fucks me harder, faster, spreading those three fingers and rubbing against parts of me I had no

fucking clue existed. I watch as she looks into the mirror, right in my direction, and comes so fucking hard and fast everything shakes—her body, the bench, the toy, his own body too... And so do I.

I come on the stranger's fingers, on trembling legs and swallowed moans, as he drags them slowly through my orgasm, and for a moment there, I could have sworn I hear him moan, too.

I'm lost... my eyes closed as I lean against the stranger, and his hand on my chest glides just under my throat, holding me still when his fingers leave my drenched pussy. I feel that loss much deeper than I should, deep enough that my soul wants it all over again. It needs it. The release, this reality that should be mine in its entirety, not whatever the fuck I'm living outside of this club. This... this was incredible. Exactly what I needed without even asking for it.

I open my eyes to see the woman before me being released from the man's tight hold, and I don't even know when she left the narrow bench. Or when she ended up in his arms, smiling. Another minute passes and he walks her to the door and opens it for her. As they pass through, I still when his eyes land straight on me and the man I'm leaning against. I could be mistaken, but even behind that mask, they sparkle and hold my gaze.

My eyes flicker between the room and him, but then I catch the woman's gaze behind her simple pink mask—she's looking straight at me too.

Wait...

He nods, and she smiles.

Jesus fuck!

Was the mirror off? Were they watching me—us—all along?

Heat rushes to my cheeks at the knowledge that I engaged in some sort of fetish without intention. Yes,

the people around us could have been watching us too, but this feels different. The couple watched me as he held me, as he finger-fucked me, as I rubbed my clit right in front of them, staring at them. Her and I... we came while looking into each other's eyes, and there's something so dirty and satisfying about that.

I slowly turn around and the stranger releases me. He moves away just as I catch a glimpse of his black mask, thin green accents decorating it, but I lose him through the darkness.

Holy fuck.

Watching a show behind this glass will never be the same.

CHAPTER 10

VINCENT

THE BUSY RESTAURANT IS FILLED with a constant stream of noise—music, chatter, clinking of plates and cutlery. Some days, I enjoy this switch from the ever-calm atmosphere of Midnight.

“Evening.” Carter pulls a chair, distracted for a second by the waiter carrying a couple of plates of what smells like a very delicious steak. He sits across from me, taking off his sunglasses, and revealing tired eyes.

“Have fun last night?” I smirk, knowing full well the extents of his activities.

A shallow grin quirks his lips.

“Quite, yes. What about you?” He rests his elbows on the table, intertwining his fingers as he leans in.

“It was certainly interesting.” I grab the bottle of wine and fill our glasses.

Before I continue, I catch movement in the corner of my eye.

“—maybe it’s time to collect.” Finn’s voice reaches me before I turn in his direction.

He takes a seat next to Carter, and Madds shows up beside me a second later.

“Collect what?” I ask.

Finn leans in. “You made a deal with the O’Rourke girl. You didn’t consult with us, and we’re supposed to save her? We’re supposed to get involved between O’Rourke, Holt, The Ghost, and who knows who the fuck else, so she doesn’t get married to that asshole? Why? And more importantly... for what?” he rants almost in a whisper.

“Christ, you can hold a grudge. It’s been a month. Get over it already,” Madds says, rolling his eyes as he signals the waiter.

“No. Because I want to know exactly how this will affect us, our business... our lives. Especially since you bargained for nothing.”

Oh, I bargained for something alright, only it’s not for The Sanctum’s benefit.

“I admit it, this one was more for me than us.”

But I remember a time, long ago, when The Sanctum put everything on hold for Finn and his brother. The purpose was the same—women. I can’t remind him of that, though, not when his happy ending was ripped away, and he refuses to even speak of or acknowledge Ronan’s existence.

“Our deals are usually much more calculated than this,” Finn continues.

“You’re right,” I say, turning to Carter.

He’s the calculated one, the one who coordinates and plans. With his hacker team, he has a huge advantage over us all, but even without, he’s a goddamn wealth of knowledge. I know without asking that the man started writing the formula on the board long before I made the deal with Morrigan, because he doesn’t shift unless he knows at least the next three moves. Being calculated is a deep-set need, not just a desire, for him.

“That’s why we need to shake hands with Holt and O’Rourke on this business,” I continue.

“What? That makes no sense. I’m talking about one problem, and your answer is introducing another one.” Finn leans back in his chair, dragging a hand over his face.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense.” Carter shrugs as his gaze roves between all of us, like that conclusion is the most logical one in the world and he doesn’t understand why no one else sees it. “There’s a reason O’Rourke was so keen to hand over his daughter to his new business partner. This arrangement is new. It wasn’t part of the one he was making with Holt Sr., and we need to find out why. The logical explanation is that Holt has something O’Rourke really wants, or maybe their deal is much more ambitious and needed further payment.”

He picks up his glass and takes a polite sip as he glances around the busy restaurant floor.

Finn huffs from his chair, shaking his head. “I hate it when you make so much fucking sense.”

“I know.” There’s no smugness in Carter’s eyes. Only logical self-awareness. “They’ve arrived, by the way.”

I hum my acknowledgment. I caught a glimpse of Liam O’Rourke taking a seat on the other side of the restaurant.

“O’Rourke is the type of man who loves the limelight. And he certainly enjoys people knowing that he’s associated with us in some way. So I thought we would shake on the deal in public. Give his ego a boost. It will bring him closer to us, and we need him fucking close. What do you all think?”

They all nod without hesitation.

This is how it works with us, how it’s always been. We pick a direction together, we move together, and we lead together. We learned young that we move on the same tune, and we were smart enough to understand that the song shouldn’t be disrupted. We don’t always

agree, we challenge each other, and debate the best course of action, but in the end, we make all decisions together.

Except with her... but then again, Morrigan O'Rourke is not a business deal.

"Hello, gentlemen."

"Jasmine, Roxanne. Glad you could join us. Please, sit." Finn points to the empty chair next to me, then makes Carter scoot so Roxanne can sit next to him.

"How are you, darling?" I smile at Jasmine and kiss her cheek.

I don't miss the stolen glances from most of the men from the restaurant, and some of the women. This is the exact reason why we brought them here. Both brunette, with shiny, wavy hair framing their slim and chiseled cheeks and plump lips, both leaving enough to the imagination in their tight, yet fairly conservative dresses.

"Very well, thank you. Am I your date for the evening?" she asks politely.

"You are." I nod as she gives me her sexiest smile. She plays her role well.

We asked Katya to send two girls, because our plan is to get involved with Holt and O'Rourke from all fronts. We have our team of hackers, our vault of secrets, but most men forget themselves around the right women. And we have the right women right here.

"And whose attention am I catching?" She throws an electric gaze around all the tables.

"You'll see soon."

"Perfect." She holds her glass and settles into her role as I pour her some wine.

Our game isn't prostitution, but an escort service with a set of skills specific to us. Our business deals in information—and so do they. They're high end, intelligent, strong, and their beauty distracts all who can

afford to hire them. Katya is incredible at finding and recruiting people with the right skills and desires. She runs, trains, and takes care of them, but technically, Finn is the one in control of that part of the business. Just as Carter has the hackers and Madds, the fight club.

However, even Finn doesn't stand in Katya's path. She's the only one who knows exactly what should go into the training and how to take care of the escorts. She's been doing it for so many years, before we took her under our wing. The older Hennessey brother, who was part of our syndicate before we even called ourselves The Sanctum, met Katya when she was running this service on her own. It wasn't at this scale. She needed help to do exactly what she wanted. So we absorbed her business into our world, adapted it to fit our *mission*, and helped her make it better. But it's her advice we take when we make any decisions regarding the escort service. Her background is unlike ours, brutal in a specific way, as she was trained as an asset to her country. Her knowledge has been invaluable to our operation and the girls interested in it.

They're not like normal escorts, with one simple goal in mind and a clear path to get there. These women crave a level of control that they can only obtain through the risks they take and the power they wield. They're here to get under people's skin and extract just the right information. Their beauty and brains work in tandem, proving to be an irresistible weapon.

Katya, or Miss Ekaterina, as they call her, knows exactly how to harness these talents.

I catch Finn's eyes flickering to me, some distaste lingering. I'm not sure if this is personal, or if he's projecting. Only one other time did women get involved in our business, and it didn't end well for him.

"I want to make something clear about Morrigan O'Rourke—this was not *our* deal." I look at Finn in particular. "It was mine. But as it happens, she's one of

the cards in a game we're interested in learning, and she may be useful."

Finn narrows his eyes on me, takes one deep breath, and nods on an exhale. He seems to accept the predicament.

But it's Carter who pulls my attention with a sly smile in his eyes. "She's here too."

My gaze whips to their table in a heartbeat, fully struggling to be inconspicuous in front of the others. Only, I forget all about that when I meet the surprised gaze of one impossibly beautiful redhead.

I didn't know she'd be here.

She struggles to be inconspicuous too. Especially when I feel a slender arm wrap around mine, and some words I can't focus on are whispered in my ear. Morrigan's eyes darken, and she frowns as she scrutinizes the woman next to me.

Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?

My line of sight is quickly cut off. "What may I get you this evening? Would you like to start with an appetizer?"

I mentally curse the waiter, and we order quickly, adding another bottle of wine to the bill.

"I thought you guys wouldn't touch alcohol after last night."

I turn to Madds at his words, a grin on his lips aimed at Carter and me.

"It's not that kind of club. There are much better ways to quench your thirst there," I say, winking at Carter, who smirks at me.

"Yes, much more satisfying."

"You should come next time, Madds. Even just for a drink."

"I don't think it's my scene." He turns his attention back to the O'Rourke table on the far side of the

restaurant, dismissing the whole thing.

“I think it’s exactly the scene you need once in a while. Your only hobby these days is fighting in that ring... you need some diversity,” Finn chimes in.

“I’m sure there’s a particular blonde who wouldn’t mind visiting Metamorphosis with you.” Roxanne winks as she lazily brushes her long fingernails over Finn’s bicep, clearly referring to one of the girls who has a thing for him.

“Should we go give Liam the news?” Madds halts the entire conversation, clearly done with the fetish club subject.

“No, not yet,” Carter responds.

When I look back at the table, O’Rourke’s gaze is on me, a different brand of surprise in his eyes. I lift my glass, nodding to him, and he returns the gesture. Holt turns to me too, but I ignore him on principle.

“He knows we’re here. He either comes to us himself, or waits for our convenience,” I tell them.

He better wait, because I see a flicker of a red dress on my Eve, and I would very much like to see up close how it looks on her pale skin. I want to find out if it matches her hair, if it brings out her eyes.

But most of all, I left her in the dark since we made the pact, and I want to see if she’s squirming.

* * *

As we walk across the restaurant, the people who know who we are can’t help but steal glances. Men straighten and nod their hellos to us, while women can’t bat their eyelids any faster. We attract their attention in a whole other way.

I glance at Carter, who walks next to me, and find it fascinating how oblivious he is to their attention. He seems like it anyway. He has a unique vibe—well-

groomed and put together with his undercut, slicked-back hair, and expensive waistcoats, but his gaze is so sharp it feels like it slices you from the inside out. Yet as terrified as women are of his predatory vibe, they're attracted to him at an almost hypnotic level. But the man has a special kind of tunnel vision, because the moment someone truly catches his eye, he is so hyper-focused, he becomes relentless.

We stop at one of the tables, where an acquaintance greets us, and Carter speaks to him as his wife's eyes flicker to our table, where Finn and Madds still sit.

Finn is quite different from Carter; from any of us, really. He would bury himself in pussy if he could. He's rarely seen multiple times with the same woman, and he makes sure his arrangements are so strict, he doesn't even allow them to pine for him. Seven years ago, he was willing to lose everything to fight for the right woman, but that Finn died with her. Now, I think he relies on tourists to get a good fuck, because there's no way he hasn't gone through every pussy in this city by now. And I'm pretty sure Katya forbade him from using the women employed by our escort service, because I know for a fact he hasn't fucked any of them.

Then there's our resident beast—Madds. He's had women over the years, flings mostly, but no long relationships. None seemed to keep him interested. He comes across as broody and hard to get, which obviously makes women pile up to him. Add on his huge, intimidating frame, scarred face, and... *big hands*, and you've got yourself an irresistible concoction. He's selective, though, and never dives in.

We leave the couple behind and continue on our way to the O'Rourke table, my fingers tingling with anticipation. They're sitting at a corner booth table, the daughter and wife with their backs to us, Holt and Cillian O'Rourke on the opposite side, while the head of the family took his rightful place at the head of the table on the sofa.

The neat waves of red hair fall over the back of her chair, and almost like she feels us coming, she turns to look over her shoulder, but stalls at the last moment. She's still for a second longer, before she turns back, just as we stop behind her chair.

"Good evening. Pleasure to see you here," I greet them, swiping our gazes over everyone at the table.

I can't miss how her shoulders tense at my voice, yet she makes no attempt to turn to greet me, let alone look at me. Though, when Carter speaks, she leans back slightly so she can see him. That heats my blood a little more than I'm comfortable with.

"How are you all this evening?" His charm rubs off on Sheila O'Rourke in an instant, her smile shy as she greets us.

He's a man of few words, yet he likes these interactions. They give him a level of control he feeds off of.

"Gentlemen. It's been a while." There's a tinge of entitlement in O'Rourke's voice.

We made him wait, and apparently, he's been sweating for some news. He knew what he wanted required patience and planning. Yet he still couldn't control his impatient nature. The Ghost told us he's been trying to find other ways to get to him, which he, of course, ignored. But that was one of the reasons we decided to let him wait longer than necessary. This is on our terms, not his, and he needs to understand who is in control.

"It has indeed. Work has been keeping us quite busy," Carter says, giving him an insinuating smile. "Some deals are more time-consuming, and we tend to retire until we are satisfied they are successful."

At that, Morrigan turns to look up at me for a couple of seconds, her gaze leveled, but her thoughts are clear in her eyes. I slide my hand on the back of the chair,

under her hair, enjoying the way her muscles flex as she pulls her shoulders back gently. The table is oblivious since Carter and I flank her, and all eyes are on him as he continues the conversation. I, however, tune out, my gaze lazily moving between them, wherever I see lips moving, but my focus is solely on the woman before me.

She smells of the evening primrose that grows around my property—sweet, yet when the rain hits, a woody, spicy aroma envelops you. She smells as if she laid there in the rays of the setting sun during a wild summer storm, and I find myself craving to be right there with her. It's strange, but this scent awakens a recent memory I can't pinpoint. I can almost taste it, feel the pressure of it in my chest, and damn... it tastes good.

My thumb moves from the backrest of the chair, brushing over the skin of her back that suddenly loses its softness, bursting in goose bumps. She's tense, yet utterly and completely nonchalant, like nothing's happening. Like the devil isn't on her shoulder. Like The Serpent isn't brushing against her skin, enticing her with his touch.

The conversation Carter carries lives somewhere in the back of my mind, because the main sound that fills my ears is one that I can't actually hear. It's what I imagine the slow brush of my skin against hers sounds like. Back and forth... a soft abrasion, as I think of her lying on her stomach in my bed, my head on her shoulder, as I drag a finger across her spine. A minute passes, maybe two, maybe more, and the goose bumps and tenseness in her flesh have been replaced by smooth skin and enticing heat, as she all but leans into my touch.

I've been watching the men in the meantime. O'Rourke is nodding excessively, and Cillian's narrowed eyes are turning over each of Carter's words in his

head, repeatedly, checking for traps or dishonesty. When I get to Holt, he's staring right at me.

I've met enough arrogant assholes to recognize the ones who try to hide it, hell, I'm probably one. Yet this motherfucker before me... his arrogance borderlines so hard on stupidity that I'm not entirely sure if it's already crossed the line. He's slumped, head leaned back, watching me with such boredom in his eyes. He's truly delusional, thinking that he's better than everyone here, and the sheer disrespect breeds this urge in me to pull out my gun and shoot him straight in the gut.

It gives me yet another reason to wonder what the hell Morrigan saw in him? I'm baffled, but then again, I wasn't there for their beginning. Maybe whatever she saw disappeared in the meantime. I've certainly heard that story before. And it hits close to home.

I need to find out why she hasn't left him yet.

Looking at Carter, I catch his gaze flicker down to the back of the chair, his expression utterly unchanged. He doesn't give anything away, but the way his pupils shrunk told me he knows exactly where my fingers lie.

"Yes," he says, answering the most important question of the night. "As expected, some negotiations will be in order, however the terms have been agreed."

"We are ready to move to the next phase," I say, dragging my stern gaze over all the men, as a grin forms on each of their faces. Satisfied. *Good.*

"We should return to our table. Our guests are waiting for us." Carter follows, an inuendo in his voice as he shakes hands with the man.

Morrigan snaps her head to me. Her eyes bore holes when they latch onto mine, but she returns it to her plate a moment later. The bastard mentioned *our guests* on purpose. But she reacted. How very interesting.

"It was *very* good seeing you. Enjoy the rest of your evening," the oldest O'Rourke says with a great big

fucking smile, as I slowly slide my hand off of his daughter's skin.

I immediately miss the feel of it on the tips of my fingers. So I move away before they extend their hands to shake mine too. I can't have their touch taint the memory of her on me.

Do her family, or her fiancé, consider this behavior of hers normal? Or is her distaste giving us away? I wonder so many things about her. I wonder how she normally behaves with them. How she would be with me if I invited her to dinner. I wonder if it was her choice to wear that sleek red dress tonight. I wonder what she ate. Are garlic fries and a simple burger with far too many layers of pickles still her favorite foods?

I wonder how she's changed in all these years.

CHAPTER 11

MORRIGAN

WAS I HOLDING MY BREATH the whole time?

My lungs spasm, burning as I force my breathing to stay even when air finally fills my lungs. But that burn only reminds me of what I'm missing. That touch ghosting over my skin... *left, right, left, right*, moving like a pendulum, yet painfully slow. It was hypnotic, willing me to keep a straight face before my family. Ryan especially.

Torture—it's the only way I can describe his searing fingers—torture. Because I never thought I would refer to his touch as that.

Ever again.

It came out of nowhere, disrupting my balance and perfectly crafted stoicism. It felt as if it was the first time... all over again.

"So we're in." The enthusiasm in Ryan's voice makes me want to roll my eyes.

"Yes, we are. We'll set up a meeting and discuss all the details. The wait was worth it." Father's voice sounds somewhere in the background, my mind distracted by the strange prickle running under my skin.

"Especially since none of the other sources amounted to anything. It was all wasted money. Fucking

crooks.”

I swallow a large gulp of wine as I listen to my *fiancé*. I knew The Serpent and his Sanctum made a deal with them, but he’s already delivering. What about me? Every day that passes brings me closer to being permanently trapped with Ryan. Bile rises in my chest as I look at him, slowly burning its way up my throat, and I swallow it down with the rest of the wine. I could down three more and it still wouldn’t help.

“Excuse me.” Placing the glass on the table, I rise.

“Where are you going?”

You have to be kidding me.

I stare at him, with every intention of not answering. But I cave... “Ladies’ room.” I always fucking cave. Fucking asshole.

“Don’t be long.”

“I will be as long as I need to be.” Before he can spout anymore bullshit at me, I turn, catching my dear brother’s gaze.

He and I were never that close. Our four-year age gap separated us, and he never really took it upon himself to find out who his sister was. I tried, but he probably just saw me as his annoying little sister. I was a kid when he was in high school, then when I got older, he went to university. By the time he finished, it was my time to go away, and we never really synced. Holidays were not enough to maintain a close relationship. Yet, deep down, I hoped that he wasn’t cut from the same cloth as my father. I thought he would defend me.

I was wrong.

I head straight to the bathroom as the words he spoke to me a couple of weeks back, run through my mind. *“We all have our roles to play, this one is yours. And I know you’re strong enough to do it.”*

Bastard!

I shouldn't have any need to be strong enough to do this! This *role* should not exist, dammit! I shouldn't have to make a deal with The Serpent to save myself! There should not have been a need for any of this! Family, fucking family should be on my side, not... a stranger.

But he's not really a stranger, is he? His touch lingers on my back. It tickles me still, making this whole night, this situation, just a smidge easier to handle. But it fills my head with memories of him naked in bed beside me, running his fingers over my bare back, as we lie spent.

As I hurry to the bathroom, the loud clicking of my high heels is absorbed by the music and background noise, and I'm visibly heaving now. I step behind the wall that conceals the corridor to the bathrooms, and suddenly the air turns cold, and I can't breathe anymore. From the other end of the corridor, The Serpent narrows his black eyes on me.

My steps falter only for a second before I carry on. And so does he.

I'm not sure if time slows down or we do, the milliseconds stretching between the moment my foot leaves the ground and the next one finds it again. My gaze is on that bathroom door, walking on the left as a lump forms in my throat, one I need to swallow badly. The fabric of the flowy knee-length dress brushes against my skin, spreading goose bumps all over, my nipples all of a sudden pained by the bra grazing against them.

My palms dampen as he gets closer, and when his body slowly passes by mine, the breeze his movement creates, makes my hair and dress flow and graze against my skin. But that's not what makes my whole body shiver... but the ghost of a touch as the backs of our hands brush against each other.

One simple touch. One of many more before it. Yet somehow... the sizzling energy of it makes it feel new.

I can finally breathe. The pressure in my chest eases, and I pat myself on the back for resisting the urge to look back before I stepped into the bathroom. I check all three stalls are empty, and finally manage to swallow that lump in my throat as I brace myself against the cold porcelain sink. But my lungs fill with the excessively perfumed air that somehow reminds me of Ryan and his house, and anger fills my veins. I wish this anger would be more prominent in his presence.

I drag my gaze over my reflection, sighing at its pathetic look.

Who am I with him?

How deep has he crawled under my skin? Bit by bit, he's ripped out pieces of me, then replaced the voids with this unsettling cowardice. No one, absolutely no one, makes me feel so unbelievably meek. The only comfort I have is that I'm only this way with him. As my eyelids begin to burn, the person looking back at me in the mirror becomes even more unrecognizable.

"Who are you?" I whisper at her.

"Vincent Sinclair."

I flinch as those words taint the air around me. Then I inhale deeply, letting them taint me as well.

My fingers ache, my grip brutal against the porcelain, and the burn in my eyes is gone. At the sight of him, those feelings from mere moments ago, dissipate, and the woman in the mirror looks more familiar. Her shoulders are pulled back, her chin higher, and the green in her eyes shines with a feral darkness. That darkness smiles back at me.

Now her, I recognize.

"You're risking an awful lot, *Serpent*."

The man appears in the mirror in his expensive all-black outfit that fits him so well, tight against his pecs and strong shoulders. I bet it's tight against his nice ass too.

Christ, get a fucking grip, Morrigan.

But he doesn't answer. A ghost of a smirk brushes his cheeks, and I use that cockiness to fuel the anger I carry for this man.

"Someone could walk in. It could be my mother," I continue.

I don't know when this man noticed me again. Was it at my mother's party all those months ago? Was it on the street when I was with Ryan at that outdoor bar? At my surprise engagement? When did the devil's eyes become so focused on me?

He takes one step forward, and I cock my head at his reflection, noting the all too familiar shift in the air. I force myself to resist that dark gaze in the slits of his eyes, the one that penetrates deep, and makes most either freeze or tremble at the power he emanates. Only, that's not what I feel right now, but... the ghost of our touch out in the corridor. I feel his fingers brushing against my back as I sat at the table. I feel his lips against my ear as he whispered to me in the woods.

He steps behind me, invading my space, his front against my back, barely touching. Deep notes of bergamot and cedar cover the gaudy bathroom perfume, pulling me into a place I desperately wish to escape to. *The forest...*

His eyes trail over my features, following my pulse down my throat, to that soft spot between the neck and shoulder, and as my flesh explodes in an exhilarating shiver, I close my eyes, letting my head fall to the side.

I'm drowning in his proximity, and the moment warm air blows against my shoulder, my eyes dart open, and I straighten, the spell evident.

Fuck, what is this man doing to me?!

"I'm serious, dammit! What are you doing in here?!"

Suddenly, he swipes to the side the hair that lays against my neck, the tips of it tickling my skin and

sending another betraying shiver down my spine.

“Stop it!” I turn on my heels and slap his hand away. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but I’m not it. This”—I point swiftly between us, finishing with my palm pressed hard against his chest, trying to push him away—“is a business transaction. If you think I’m giving myself in exchange for your help, you’re sorely mistaken. I would rather die by my own hands than get trapped by another man again.”

“Die by your own hands? Seems a bit radical,” he says, pushing against my hand.

“Did you just confirm that you want *me* in exchange?” He better choose his next words carefully, or I swear to God...

I bring the other hand to his chest as well and shove him away. I’m heaving as I watch him take no more than two steps back, effortlessly, as if he allowed me to push him, my force barely affecting him.

“What makes you think that you would feel trapped with me? Is that how you feel with me now?” He cocks an eyebrow. The way that gaze molds his handsome features is fucking panty-melting, and I’m even more furious. More at myself than him, at my inability to suppress my attraction to him. But his non-answer unsettles me.

“This wheel doesn’t go around, *Serpent*. It’s broken. It cannot roll on the road that damaged it the first time around.”

There’s a flicker in his eyes, that charm cracking for a moment. I know he remembers our end, but I don’t know if it affects him in any way.

“Broken wheels can be fixed, *Little Eve*, especially when there was no intention behind the damage.” He takes a step closer, and I flinch on a hitched breath.

What the fuck is he talking about?

“No intention? You’re taking this metaphor too far and you don’t seem to understand the message—I. Don’t. Want. You.” I straighten my back, crossing my arms over my chest.

But as he takes another step, the fabric of his suit brushes against the hairs that stand on my arms, and I have to tighten them just a bit more. Just to hold myself together, and not make a liar out of myself.

“You only want my help.” He pushes his hands in his pockets, cocking his head as he looks down at me.

He’s a head taller, maybe a bit more. But I give him my best disdainful look from under my lashes and refuse to bend my head to look at him.

“I *need* your help.” There’s a difference.

He nods slowly as he straightens, and his hands leave his pockets. Then he moves and I stiffen. His chest presses against my crossed arms, pushing my body back as he leans forward and braces his palms on the marble on either side of me.

I’m out of air.

Entirely out of it, and a strange sizzle infiltrates my airways instead. It bends my will and turns my mind into this creature that I secretly wish to be. Because this creature craves him. Not just body, but soul and mind. The man before me bathes in this mysterious obscurity which my soul wants to touch... a delicious abyss it wants to be part of. It got a taste of it once.

As his head dips down, mine turns to the side, and his breath coasts over my shoulder. It’s velvet against my skin. Soft and heavy. Warm. Too warm.

Until it’s more than that.

Skin brushes against mine, and my chest rises on a long, heavy inhale. The air is not the only thing sizzling anymore—my whole body is too. His parted lips drag slowly along my shoulder, sensual and enthralling, catching me somewhere between intrigue and protest.

He reaches that sensitive spot at the base of my neck, and when his tongue touches it, I cannot hide my sharp gasp.

I should push him away again. Tell him to stop. I know for a fact that he would. But my protests are trapped in the same throat his tongue drags over. My breasts are pained under the pressure of my arms, and I cannot resist the urge to tighten my thighs together, reveling in the faint burst of pleasure. When he reaches my ear, catching the soft lobe between his tongue and teeth, my body shudders on a slow exhale, the treachery seeping deeper into my flesh.

Then, he moves away.

He fucking moves away. Leaves me cold, breathless and... furious.

“And you don’t *want* me.” His tongue slithers slowly over each of those words.

Son of a bitch!

No! I fucking don’t. He simply caught me off-guard.

“I *want* you to honor the pact. Help me get the fuck out of this situation.”

He nods once in agreement, but the smirk is not yet wiped off his face, his arrogant ass infuriating me.

“Okay, so now that’s fucking settled, what’s the plan? I see you’re keen to shake with my father and *fiancé*”—I don’t miss the slight scrunch of his nose at my last word —“but not me.”

“I thought we already shook.”

“Technically, yet it’s been a month and I’m still planning a fucking wedding!” My tone rises, and he takes a lazy look at the door.

“Careful...” he says on a low tone.

He returns his gaze to me, and I catch that subtle way in which he bites his lip, sending another shiver

straight down to my fucking pussy.

“Serpent—”

“I told you I needed Holt and your father first. I’ll send you a text in the next few days with a time and a place. We’ll talk then.”

With those words, he slips out the door, and I realize he doesn’t have my number. I’m left with less knowledge than when I first came in here, if that’s even possible.

But I have something else—hope.

Even with the memories of when I first lost it, sparking through my mind.

* * *

8 years ago

The moment I opened my eyes this morning the air felt different. Heavy. The pressure in the atmosphere is too high. Not even the sun’s out today. It’s the gloomiest of days, the clouds converging above our city like it’s protecting us from the fucking joy in the world.

It’s one of those days when the universe knows your fate, and it doesn’t want to give you hope that it might be a good day. It’s setting the scene for whatever demise awaits.

Could I avoid it?

No.

Because it will come tomorrow instead. Or the day after that. Or the one after. It will find me, eventually.

My movements are sluggish all through the morning, dragging out the moment I have to leave the house and face whatever pivotal moment awaits.

A knock sounds at the door when I’m finally dressed and ready for school.

“Yes?”

It cracks open, and Alex, my father’s trusty driver, peeks through.

“Morning, Miss O’Rourke.” I roll my eyes at the formality. The man has known me since I was ten. “We’ll be late if we don’t go now.”

I sigh and grab my school bag, swinging it over my shoulder. One more year, and I’m fucking done with this damn school.

Following Alex through the house as we walk toward the garage, the pressure, the anticipation seems to settle somewhere in my stomach. It sits a bit too heavy in there. It makes me think of Cillian.

There’s nothing wrong with Alex, but I miss doing this with my brother. Even though I’m not that sure he liked it as much. It’s all we had, though, because Cillian and I have never really been close. I don’t think either of us tried hard enough. Our four-year age gap contributed to that too. We were always out of sync.

Since he left for university, it got worse. I see him for the holidays and rare weekends. But even then, Father kidnaps him. He’s going to be the heir to the O’Rourke Empire... whatever the fuck that means. He’s being groomed for a takeover decades away, and he and I barely have a relationship. I would say it’s because of it, but it’s our own fault too.

So I cling to the memories of the drives to school. We used to bond then. I asked him about his plans, and he always deflected by asking about my bullies. Being ginger, with unruly curls, and a fat ass hasn’t earned me any favors in school.

It doesn’t matter now.

Since Cillian left, the bullying pretty much stopped. Not because he did anything about it, but because I did. Maybe being stuck with my controlling parents has

something to do with it. Day by day, they add more kindling to the fiery beast growing inside of me.

I like to blame pent-up anger and frustration, but it's all me. A need for violence grows inside of me day by day, and sometimes it truly scares me. But I love it too, because those bitches who used to make my life hell, now run for their fucking lives. I caught their leader in the showers at the end of gym class and smashed her face against the tiles, breaking both her nose and her brow bone. Then I told her nicely that if she even dares to breathe in my direction ever again, I'll come into her room at night and kill her in her sleep. She seemed to believe me. Especially after I made her best friends pay too.

It's not the only reason I like this anger, though. Love it even. It brought me to him. Vincent Sinclair, my boyfriend. He got his eyes on me during one of my rage episodes. He stopped me from going too far and killing the guy who intended to rape me. We've been together since, and he's the one who helped me manage this anger. He knew how it felt and spent years learning to control his.

But even thoughts of the man I love haven't helped me get through today's school day. Hour after uneventful hour passed, class after boring class, and nothing happened. Apart from the increasing weight in the pit of my stomach. It felt like the silence before the storm, and I kept looking out the window of each classroom I was in, half expecting to see someone there... watching me.

Then school ended, and still... nothing.

That weight shifted to my chest, even heavier than before, as I walked the twenty minutes to my contemporary dance class, in the old center of Queenscove. I kept looking behind me, wondering if someone was following me, or watching me. The hairs stood up on every inch of my body, but there was no one there.

The anxiety riddled me all through that class. The anticipation for whatever disaster the universe had in store for me, sat in my chest the whole way through.

Then it ended, and still... nothing. Fucking. Happened.

And Vincent didn't come to meet me either.

Our relationship is frowned upon. Being with someone four years older, who deals in some very questionable criminal activities, is not everyone's ideal. Naturally, this means my parents fucking hate him. So we pick moments like this to see each other without issues.

Meeting after my dance class has turned into a fairly regular thing. Sometimes he comes and watches me. Technically, no one is supposed to be there, but everyone, including our instructor, drools over the black-eyed devil. They definitely don't mind swaying their asses in front of him.

I do.

He's fucking mine.

But the whole time he's there, always leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, he's watching me. Sometimes I even forget it's a class and there are other people there... I dance for him.

He didn't text to tell me if he was coming today, but I guess I hoped that he was going to surprise me. Help me ease this goddamn tension, and break whatever spell the universe has me under.

I even went to the beach, to the spot we sometimes go to after dance. I waited there until the sun was catching fire at the horizon. But there was no sign of him.

That heaviness was sliding up from my stomach, lodging at the base of my throat, and I couldn't fucking take it anymore.

I took a taxi home, and I swear the clouds followed me there.

Not even a shower helped ease the invisible tension.

I felt like I was going goddamn crazy.

So I came to my only other happy place inside this house—the library. My parents don't ever come here unless they're organizing a party and want to brag about all the first editions they own, and never read. Not that they admit that to anyone. The huge room is on the opposite side of the mansion from the living rooms and kitchen, and because it's easily accessible from outside, this is where Vincent and I spend quite a bit of time. I feel like an idiot for having to sneak my adult boyfriend into my house. To say that I feel unworthy of him is an understatement.

Only, the man doesn't give a shit. At all.

When I walked in, the room was dark and silent. But I couldn't bear to deal with this tension in my bedroom. So I grabbed the horror novel I started a few days ago, snuggled on the sofa, and tried to get lost in the story.

But I drifted off with the image of Vincent in my mind, dreaming of our future. A life I never thought I would ever have, with a man I didn't dare think would love me.

When I wake up suddenly, startled by a creepy dream, I'm not sure how much time has passed. I'm completely submerged in darkness. But the moonlight streaming through the windows confirms I'm definitely not alone.

"Hi." His husky whisper is a caress over all my senses.

Vincent.

I swallow down the panic, only to find that the heaviness that has plagued me all day, is still fucking there.

Goddamnit! What is that?

“Vincent. What’s happening? What time is it?” I ask.

“Late.”

What the hell?

“Baby, wh—”

“Morrigan, we need to talk.”

It’s happening. His words work like a switch, sending that weight lodged in my throat, straight to my head. My temples throb with fear and bubbling anger.

“We need to talk, or... we need to talk?” I ask.

I’m fooling myself by pretending my question is necessary.

Now, I realize that I’ve expected this conversation since we had our first proper kiss. Even after we had sex for the first time—well, my first time. I’ve been expecting it for weeks, months. For the whole time we’ve been together. Everyone’s jealousy over me, and my own fucking insecurities, fueled this belief that I’m somehow unworthy.

But this beautiful, sinful, incredible man fed my confidence. He treats me like the most precious thing in the world, even as he scares the shit out of other people. So, I relaxed, truly believing that he wants to be with me.

I dropped my goddamn guard, and I shouldn’t have.

Because my heart doesn’t know what to do right now. Pressure grows somewhere behind my ears, a ringing splits through them, and I brace myself for what I know is coming.

“I’m sorry, but—”

“Turn on the lights,” I interrupt, my tone grave.

“What?”

“Turn on the fucking lights, Vincent. Do not dare do this without looking into my eyes.” Heat sears the back

of them as he stalks to the other side of the room and flicks the switch on.

The image of the man hits me like a punch in the gut. He's on his way to turning into a dark god. His eyes are the purest of obsidians, his chiseled jaw seems to get stronger month by month, and his body is turning into a work of fucking art.

He sighs as he takes me in. Only, he doesn't seem to be able to look at me for long. Either he's a coward, or he can't fucking bear it.

I rise from the sofa and move around the coffee table, standing a few feet away from him. I'm trembling, though. He hasn't said much, yet my soul is slowly pulling away from my body. He's my first love... he is everything. He is more than I thought he could be.

Everyone told me that what I'm feeling is just young love. The first obsession all people go through. And we feel like it's the end of the world when we eventually break up. Because no one ever stays with their first love.

But Vincent... his darkness speaks to mine. They have their own language and I stupidly thought we were different.

"Don't be a coward now, Vincent," I seethe at him.

His gaze shoots to mine and his viciousness shines. But something so much more dangerous flickers there... agony. It disappears before it can take form, and it makes me falter.

"I'm sorry, Morrigan, but I can't see you anymore."

"You fucking asshole!" I snap at him. "Why?"

"We just... can't be together anymore. Our worlds are too far apart from each other."

"Bullshit! You know as well as I do that's not true!" I shout at him, not caring who the fuck hears me in this house. Although everyone's probably asleep by now.

“It is. You don’t see it now, but you will someday. When you’ll be—”

“Don’t you fucking dare say it.”

“—older.”

I shake my head, the tears that burned behind my eyes now falling over my cheeks. He knows how insecure I used to be about our age difference. The gap is small, but I felt like he would find nothing in common with me. He never gave a shit, though. He always said that I was his forbidden fruit and fit so very well in his Eden.

“You bastard,” I whisper through the tears.

“I’m involved in things you shouldn’t be close to. Our business is taking a shape someone like you shouldn’t be aware of. And you need to finish school and go to university. Build something for yourself.”

“Who are you?!” I see him speaking, but I swear those words make no sense coming from his mouth. “Because the Vincent I know would tear the fucking world apart to make room for me.”

He drops his head, and the breath he inhales is so long and deep, he suddenly looks taller.

“There are many things you don’t know, Morrigan. And it’s better that you never will.” He looks at me with a coldness I’ve only ever seen directed at other people. It takes me aback.

“Did y—did you ever actually love me?” My voice breaks, but the crack in my heart is harsher.

His gaze pins me with such intensity, I want to cry out.

“It’s over.”

Those words threaten to swipe the legs from under me, but I stay completely still, clenching my fists at my sides.

I can't find the words. And I can't seem to take my eyes off of him either.

I'm memorizing every line of his face, every strand of hair, every flicker of his eyes, imprinting them into my memory.

"You promised me the world," I cry out.

"This is the only way I can give it to you."

Jesus Christ, I never thought that imaginary pain could rip through me with such malice. My breath is stolen from me at the same time as whatever pumped life force inside my chest bursts open, bleeding its feelings through my being.

"I love you..." I whisper, but it comes out as pleading.

For a moment, he parts his lips, and I think he's gonna say it back. But he closes his mouth and turns, his side to me.

"Goodbye, Morrigan."

Something cracks inside of me, fury and pain mix together, and I realize it's a whole other beast that's finding a home in my soul. Only he could breed that. No one else has this kind of power over me.

"I fucking hate you!" I shout after him. "I fucking hate you, Vincent Sinclair! I never asked for anything from you, but you insisted on giving it all. You gave me fucking hope, now you're ripping it away, and stealing my fucking heart too. I hate you."

He takes the slowest and deepest of breaths as he looks into my eyes, then he leaves for the last time.

* * *

Present

Throughout my life I learned that pain takes many shapes, but that was my first taste of the type of pain

that shapes a person. Because it sticks to your being and grows into a beast that's almost impossible to control. Even if one day you manage to rip it out, its claw marks will remain.

CHAPTER 12

VINCENT

THE UNEASINESS IN HER GREEN eyes is the first thing I notice as I rush out of the office at the sound of Madds' booming, urgent voice. I'm certain there's a quicker way for my brain to process what I'm seeing, only I haven't found it yet.

Morrigan is standing in the main area of Midnight—our *secret* bar. Fortunately, it's currently closed, but this is still confusing me.

With determined steps, I walk toward them, the look in Madds' eyes feral, but it's something more than anger that I see in them, and it concerns me.

"What the fuck?!" Finn rasps as he steps out behind me. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"Careful, brother..." I warn, and I swear I hear him hissing.

Carter rises from the sofa before we get to them, his eyes narrowed ever so slightly on us. There's barely any emotion on his features, but those tensed shoulders as he watches Madds and my Eve are hard to miss.

My... Eve.

When the fuck did that happen?!

The way she shadows that uneasiness from her bones with that cocky attitude that has gotten her into a fair amount of trouble in the past is fascinating. She's breathless though, cheeks flushed. Has she been running?

"What's going on?" My tone is low as I look between them.

"Tell him." Madds nods to her.

"My father... I don't know what it means." She swallows, catching her breath. "I don't have your number. It took me too long to find you."

"I found her rushing through the alleys, trying to find the entrance," Madds explains.

Carter suddenly appears with a glass of water for her. She downs half of it and carries on.

"I don't know what it means. I overheard a phone conversation. Maybe it was with Ryan, I don't know. He was angry. He said... umm... *He needs to be put back in his place! He's going after some bitch, Ekaterina or something.*" At that last word, we exchange serious looks, and Finn pulls out his phone immediately.

"What else did he say?!" His finger hovers over the phone screen, eyes wide and lips tense.

"He said..."—she rubs her temples, squeezing her eyes shut for a few moments—"I don't know who she is, but he thinks she's important to Sinclair, so he wants to mess with him." For a split second, she fixes on me. "*Boseman will fucking ruin everything! He's your guy, rein him in.*"

"Shit," Madds mutters.

"Fucking Boseman... Find Katya!" I almost rasp at Finn, who already has the phone to his ear. "Carter, we need to make sure they're all accounted for, and okay."

"We have to be inconspicuous," Madds interrupts. "We start rushing around now and we'll draw the wrong

kind of attention to us, to the girls. At this moment, Boseman, O'Rourke, and Holt think Katya is your woman. We cannot let them know who she truly is to us, and how we're involved."

I sigh and nod. Carter agrees too, and Finn paces like a cornered animal, phone to his ear as he curses under his breath. Morrigan, though, she's breathing easier and quietly observes us all.

"Katya! Fuck, baby, where are you?!" Finn finally gets an answer on the other line. "Fine, I won't call you baby. Where the fuck are you?! ... Okay, check in with all the girls, please. When you're done, call me. Lock your doors and windows, grab a gun, and wait for one of us. Okay? ... I don't know yet. But... Yeah. Okay. See you soon." He hangs up and rushes to us. "She's home. She's fine. I'm going to—"

"No. Madds has a point. We'll attract attention if we start running around town now."

He stops, narrowing his dark blond eyebrows, the wheels spinning in his head as his gaze goes from confusion to understanding, and he nervously runs his fingers through his wavy hair.

"It should be you," Madds says to me. "If Boseman thinks you two are together, it won't look unnatural. Go. Bring her here. Take an unusual route, and make sure you're not followed."

"Okay." I turn on my heel and rush back into the direction of the office, but her voice suddenly makes me halt.

"Who is Ekaterina—to you all, I mean?"

We go silent. I look over my shoulder, catching the forest-green that looks back at me, strands of red caught on her freckled cheek.

"And... Boseman?" she adds.

I inhale one deep breath, the tension and urgency ripping at me, but she gives me the smallest of nods in

understanding. With that, I turn on my heels and run to the hallway that leads to the back entrance.

“Maddox, stay with her!” I yell before disappearing through.

The sunset burns in shades of lavender, the humidity high in the air, and I inhale the warmth that lingers.

She came to warn us... even when she didn't know who against.

MORRIGAN

IF I WASN'T ALREADY CLUED in that they own this place, by the rumors and the fact that they're in here while it's closed, the scents of bergamot and cedar, lavender and... something else, something decadent, would definitely clue me in. This whole place smells like *him*. And the others too, but I can distinguish his scent the best.

The atmosphere is tense, but quiet, and since I'm not sure what to do after Maddox urges me to sit, I just swipe my gaze around. It looks like a giant, dark and decadent living room. I would imagine the Gryffindor common room looks something like this, which is surprising, since a serpent owns the place. Everything in here is made out of stained wood and vintage leather, from the mismatched chairs, sofas, and armchairs, to the coffee and dining tables. Even the low ceilings are split by rough wood beams. But the vintage, almost art-deco style bar, with the overly thick marble top and brass pump handles ties everything together. Right behind it, in the center of the wall, there is a gold décor piece made entirely of thin metal strips. Lines that form a starburst surround the shape of an eye, all inside a circle. It's stylized, in the same art-deco style, apart from the eye itself—that looks real. Too real. I swear it's looking at me.

I suddenly feel watched. Carter Pierce leans in, placing a glass of something in front of me on the coffee table, only my stern gaze is fixed on him. I may be coming from a point of assertion of my strength, but I'm also enthralled by the man. Everything about the way he looks and moves belongs perfectly in this space. Almost as if it's his world, and his world alone.

“Lavender Martini Vermouth, with a kick. It will calm your nerves,” he says in a monotone, gravelly voice.

“My nerves are fine, thank you.” I hold his strange gaze, a deeply saturated blue seeping into hazel, shadowed by thick long lashes.

But he holds mine too. It’s a fight for power here, only I can’t read the man. He’s still, in an eerie kind of way. Different from The Serpent. Almost as if emotions are useless in his world... *Almost*.

“If you say so,” he finally answers.

Just like this bar, the man has an old-world look about him, with his square, chiseled features, wearing suit trousers, a white textured shirt, and waistcoat. He nods, a slight quirk in his full lips, and I follow it up over the defined hollows of his cheeks, and strong, high cheekbones, to his effortlessly neat undercut, the longer hair on the top of his head slicked-back. It’s those hollowed, high cheekbones that give me a déjà vu feeling, though.

Carter takes a seat on the sofa, next to a gorgeous specimen of a man—Finnigan Hennessey. Every girl I knew in school had a crush on him. Hell, every teacher too. He probably fucked half of them as well. He has this surfer-boy look about him, with slightly wild wavy, blond hair, and shoulders that could easily carry you if he threw you over them. He’s a pretty boy through and through, but I bet he can throw a deadly punch.

“You came to tell us. I’m surprised,” he states, one eyebrow cocked above his beautiful bright blue eyes, his lips straight.

“Was I supposed to keep the information to myself?” I finally look down at my drink, the violet concoction served in a martini glass, with a sugary rim, looking so appetizing. I take a sip and hum in approval as the sweet, boozy lavender hits my tongue. “Damn...”

“You’re welcome.” Carter watches me, a smirk shining only in his eyes.

“You owe us nothing.” Finn ignores him.

He doesn’t like me at all. Unless he’s this bitchy and blunt with everyone he knows. Somehow, I doubt it. He strikes me like the kind of man who doesn’t bother to put a filter on between what he thinks and says. I have a feeling Carter is very similar, although more calculated.

I can’t help but sigh and roll my eyes. “You’ve been cooked up in this world of secrets, sins, and chaos, for long enough that you don’t seem to recognize human decency anymore, do you? I’m sure The Serpent told you by now about our little deal. You think I can sit around and watch your world burn to the ground, when I was offered help to keep mine standing?”

Silence falls upon the room, the only sound is that of drinks being sipped.

“I recognize it just fine.” He pauses, letting out a deep sigh. “Thank you.”

Well, fuck.

“So who is Ekaterina to you?” I ask again, but once again, all they do is exchange looks. “Okay, who is Boseman, then?” Once more... nothing. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, come on! She’s part of the escort service, isn’t she?” I rasp as I rise and look between the three men.

There’s yet another round of exchanged looks, and considering their expressions, I wonder if The Serpent told them I know of the escort service.

“You think you’re the only ones holding your secrets in your world, but—”

The memory hits me like a ton of bricks, and I fall back into the armchair, eyes wide, mouth open.

“Morrigan?” Maddox’s heavy footsteps move toward me. “What is it?”

“I was wrong...”

“About what?! Morri, talk to me!” The warmth of his large hand wraps around my entire bicep.

“My brother. Fucking hell, how could I forget this? How did it skip my mind?!” I sigh, bracing my elbows over my knees, mumbling under my breath. “He’s not on his side.”

“You have to talk to us. What about Cillian?” Finn leans in.

I focus back on the room, the men’s gazes impatient.

“A few months ago, maybe five or so, my mother asked me to take something to my brother’s house. When I got there, he wasn’t inside, but out in the pool. As I was walking through, I ran into his open laptop. He never leaves that thing unattended, but he wasn’t expecting me, so he had no reason to put it away. Anyway, I managed to read quite a bit before I went to him, and it was all about you—The Sanctum. A roadmap of your businesses and connections. One of them was the escort service, and only now did I make the connection. How could I forget this?! Ekaterina’s name was there—dead center. Only hers. She runs it, doesn’t she?”

“Yes,” Maddox responds.

“Might as well just give her our laptop passwords.” Finn sighs, annoyed.

“No, you don’t understand.” I shake my head. “My brother knows who Ekaterina is to you all. This was months ago, yet my father had no idea over the phone today. None at all.”

Then it clicks, for all of them.

“He’s not on his side,” Maddox says, sitting down.

“Then whose?” Finn asks.

Cillian’s words run through my head again. *“We all have our roles to play, this one is yours. And I know*

you're strong enough to do it."

"Hopefully mine."

CHAPTER 13

MORRIGAN

“DARLING, THERE YOU ARE.” I’m frozen, squeezing the cold metal of the door handle, as my heart tries to weigh the consequences of my next move.

Darling. To many, it’s a term of endearment. Once, it was one for me too. Not anymore, not coming from this man standing in the middle of my parents’ foyer, head cocked as his muddy eyes study me.

“I’ve come to take you *home*.”

My body hasn’t moved, but a burst of current splits me in a shudder at his words. I should have stayed with The Sanctum. I should have waited for The Serpent to return after he called Finn to tell us Ekaterina, or Katya, was safe, but I couldn’t stay too long. I couldn’t risk these people knowing I have any dealings with their underworld.

“I am home.” The words crack as they tumble off my tongue.

“Don’t be silly, darling. We’re getting married. It’s time you come and live with me.”

I still haven’t moved, my entire brain activity focused on how to get out of this. It’s been a month and a half or so since the announcement, and I managed to avoid his advances. Only I suspect it wasn’t due to my own

efforts. With his attention pulled on establishing the new business, he's just been giving me slack. Now, as that shudder lingers, my knees slightly weaker, I'm not sure how to keep him away.

"No." I don't think I can convince anyone with that whisper. I'm definitely not convincing myself.

"What did you say?" He turns his head, ear toward me, one brow cocked.

"N—No." It comes out louder this time, and he draws back.

He takes one determined step in my direction, and I still on a hitched breath.

"What are you doing standing there with the door open? I'm trying to keep the humidity out and this house cool!" I have never been more thankful for my mother's annoyingly high-pitched scolding voice.

I take the opportunity, shut the door, and step quickly toward the stairs, keeping to the edge of the foyer, away from Ryan.

"Morrigan." My foot pauses just above the first step, fingers digging into the warm wood of the ornate balustrade. "Look at me."

Taking a deep breath, blinking slowly as the air fills my lungs, I turn around and hold his stern gaze.

"This—"

"No!" I interrupt, my mother looking positively shocked at my daring attitude, and I do feel just a little bit sick. Not because of the attitude, that in and of itself is probably my most defining trait, but because I know... he'll use it against me. "You cannot have any more say in what I do with my own life, Ryan Holt. I was yours once... once. Not anymore."

"So you think you can stay here?" That voice sends chills down my spine, as the man who owns it appears in the foyer. "You have a duty to your husband."

I roll my eyes, digging myself a deeper hole. “He’s not my husband.”

“Yet,” Ryan punctuates. “I packed a bag. You’re coming with me tonight. You can return tomorrow, if you wish.”

Wait, what? This is not how it works.

“You’re coming for dinner tomorrow anyway.” My father fiddles with a letter opener, ripping open an envelope he carries. Who gets letters anymore?

“Of course. Not sure if Morrigan’s going to be doing much eating, though.” Ryan runs his eyes slowly over my body, an eyebrow raised, lips pursed, and my throat fills with bile. If my appetite wasn’t lost the moment I saw him here, it’s lost now. He walks next to the staircase and picks up a weekender bag I didn’t notice before. “Shall we, *darling*?”

My parents’ gazes on me are enough to drag me down the steps, as Ryan extends his hand to me. What choice do I have? There is no escape for me here, not amongst them. Cillian’s words echo through my mind as Ryan’s eyes flare at me— “*You’re strong enough...*”

Am I?

Everything that I am feels trapped in a tsunami, splashing violently around my axis, but when Ryan is around me... it dissipates, and breaks to the ground in an anti-climactic wave.

And I succumb.

* * *

“I’ve been busy and made your illusion of freedom too real. We’ll have to remedy that, won’t we? No Holt woman gets so much unsupervised freedom.”

Those words have been playing like a broken record in my mind since we came back to the beach mansion that has been in his family for at least three generations.

He forced me into his car, since mine offers a freedom he apparently doesn't agree with anymore, for the most part. He said that the freedom he allows is an illusion, but I'm beginning to think that what we once were was also one.

"I have a surprise for you." His grin curves his top lip in a way that makes him look... sleazy.

Has his lip always done that? Am I just noticing this? Or is it another aspect of his new personality that even Jekyll and Hyde would be envious of? *A surprise?* Nah... this version of Ryan doesn't prepare surprises, not good ones anyway.

"Thanks, but I'm good." If he's waiting for my enthusiastic response, he's going to wait forever.

I turn and begin to walk toward the library, the only place in this house that gives me a semblance of comfort. I'm not a huge reader, not of the books that lie on those shelves, but neither he nor his father ever spent time in that space. It's not tainted; it doesn't feel as if it belongs to them.

"It's in *our* bedroom," he says with such giddiness in his voice, it makes me uneasy.

I've barely made it five steps. I don't turn, though.

"Come," he insists.

I take a deep breath and move forward on a shaky step.

"NOW!" His voice changes its tune, booming through the grand space.

"Ryan, Morigan, you've returned." I'm startled by the sound of his mother's voice and turn to find her walking toward us from the living room. "Have you eaten? Should I get Pierre to prepare something for you?"

"Hello, Mrs. Holt." She hates being called by her first name, and even as a widow, when she should be called Ms., not Mrs. She still rejects it.

At least she's always hated me calling her by her first name. Although I think she just hates me... period.

"No, I've eaten and"—he swipes his eyes over me once more, lingering on my belly, as he does all too often—"Morrigan's not hungry. Dismiss the chef. You can go too."

Her gaze widens as she takes in those words, before she looks between him, the top of the stairs, and me. There's a peculiar, all-knowing look in her eyes.

"Very well. Have a... good evening." The woman actually hesitates to move away.

What the fuck is going on?

Involuntarily, I look at the top of the stairs as well, hoping that there's some sort of indication of the *surprise* that made even Mrs. Holt wary. Suddenly, I feel the need to make some excuse and bring her back. She's a good buffer. Only, she seems to be just another pawn in her son's life since her husband's death. I wonder if she inherited anything from him. If she did, I wouldn't put it against Ryan to take it away from her.

I know it's not going to work, but I begin walking away again.

"Morrigan, this will be much easier for you if you just listen to me." His tone lowers, deepening, and shakes my insides.

Sighing, I turn and walk up the stairs, then toward his bedroom at the end of the hall. At the thought of what could possibly await on the other side, I grip the door handle much harder than necessary, the metal digging into my palm.

You can do this. Soon, you'll be out of this.

I take a deep breath, attempting to force away a lump that made its way into my throat.

You'll be okay. Just... just relax. Even if he does anything... you've done it before, it will be quick.

“Open!” His rasp startles me.

So I do. I push that door open, ready to face the reality of my situation, the one I’ve been trying very hard to avoid for over a month. But the image before me stuns me in a completely unusual way. I’m confused, irritated, shocked, and slightly relieved, all bundled into one emotion I cannot name.

“What the fuck is this?” Against the left wall, on top of a white fur throw that covers the whole of his super king-size bed, lies a naked woman—spread eagle.

“This” —he pushes me into the middle of the room to face the bed, then walks toward it, his eyes meeting hers as she smirks and licks her lips—“is Jasmine.”

She’s the woman who was sitting next to The Serpent at the restaurant a few days ago. The one attached to him, who he kissed on the cheek.

She’s one of the escorts!

I thought she was, well, his date. No, she was fucking bait! Now I get why Ryan was so transfixed in the direction of their table. I know for a fact that Cillian hasn’t shared his knowledge on the escort service, so Ryan has no clue that she works for The Sanctum. This is all about pissing on The Serpent’s territory, because he saw that’s the woman he chose for himself. I used to be his woman too. Why the sudden vendetta?

He stops near the bed, and she swings her legs over the edge, then slides off it until she’s on her knees, her ass on her heels and hands on his belt.

“What the actual hell, Ryan? You talk to me of marriage and then—” My body’s suddenly awoken from the shock, and I rush to the door, ripping it open.

“If you dare step out of this room, I’ll fucking cut your head off and deliver it to Loreley myself. Then I’ll fucking cut hers off too.”

Shit.

“Shut that door.”

I turn to him and do as told, giving him the best disgusted look I can muster. The blonde kneeling in front of him is not phased one bit. She continues her task as she looks up at him, unbuttoning his slacks, and her hand goes straight to his cotton-covered dick, rubbing slowly up and down.

“Jasmine here is going to do for me what you refuse to.”

I can't help but roll my eyes, even through the bitterness of what he's doing, what's about to happen. “Well, shucks. Am I supposed to be sad about—”

“Until we're married,” he cuts me off. “Until those hips get smaller and that belly flatter, and I can stand to look at you naked again. Maybe the wedding preparations have stressed you out a bit too much, and you've been raiding the junk drawer. Because you seem to have added more pounds on top of the existing extra ones. Until you lose them, you will sit here and watch.”

Jasmine has his dick out and in her mouth by the time he finishes that sentence.

This whole scene is surreal. His words, his disgust, mine, this... cheating. Fuck. Is it cheating? I don't even...

I blink more times than I should, forcing away those hot tears threatening to sear their way out. It's impossible to settle on one feeling. Too many run through me, and my chest burns as I swallow each and every tear away. I'm not even sure why I'm shedding them. I don't love him anymore...

I *don't* love him anymore.

I don't love him!

Then why the fuck does it hurt? Why does it feel like he's ripping apart even more than he already has? Why does it feel exactly like it's not supposed to?

Because I cared about him. I thought he cared about me too.

“You’re sick,” I manage to whisper in a shaky voice.

“Maybe. But you’re going to stand there and be sick with me.” He grins, grabbing the woman’s hair and gagging her violently with his dick.

I turn my head toward the window, wondering what the fuck my life has come to, why am I here, why does it hurt, when will it stop. They all seem like rhetorical questions.

“Don’t you fucking dare take your eyes off. Look at me now!” he rasps as I hear the woman gag yet again.

I do as he says, all thoughts slowly dissipating... One by one, they leave me... until my features are void of feeling, until my muscles are limp, until I’m but an empty shell.

Or so I wish to be.

I want to be void of any emotion I’ve ever had for this man. I’m not sure where it hurts. Is it my soul, or my ego? A bit of it is in my heart. I just never thought that his disrespect for me would reach such lows.

Yet, the man threatened to kill my whole family and my best friend if I even dared to leave him. Why am I shocked by what lies before me? Quite literally, as Ryan pulled her up by the hair and laid her on the bed. He flips her over, pulling her ass up, then fists her blonde locks while throwing me the sleaziest smile he can muster. Then he impales her on a savage move, and her scream makes me cringe. I can’t even tell if it’s in pleasure or actual pain.

He does it over, and over, and over again... his eyes on me the whole time, guiding her by the hair so she can look at me too. I’m forcing myself to control the bile in my throat.

I’ve watched plenty of people have sex in the club in Rosston, and I fucking own one now, yet this... this is

different. It's malice; revenge; evil. This is a man I've been with for two years. I've cared about him, and we've known each other from school. But he's also the man who, at this very moment, carries in his gaze the promise that he will do to me exactly what he's doing to her.

Only I will not be willing, and he will not care.

This helps, though. I should thank him for this moment. It pushes me over the edge, killing off that part of me that still believed there was hope for the old him to return. That this period was only some sort of temporary madness, driven by the stress over the death of his father and the business takeover.

It's not. It's pure madness.

The man before me doesn't deserve any emotions from me, not even disgust. And I suddenly realize that even most of my reactions to his abusive behavior were tied to my lingering emotions, that lingering hope.

So I carry on as he orders—I watch him.

I watch him fuck the woman's brains out. Watch as he grins at me. How she moans her pleasure, or her fake one. I watch it all because he's making every decision I will have to make from this moment on so much easier. Every thrust, every sound as their skin slaps together, every grunt, every way in which he squeezes her flesh, kills another part of the person I am around him. My family, too.

So I smile at him.

He's just decided his own fate, and he doesn't even know he did.

CHAPTER 14

MORRIGAN

MAYBE I'M ALREADY DEAD, because this definitely feels like some sort of hell.

“It’s so exciting, isn’t it, Morrigan?”

My mother’s friend shrieks as she sits on the other side of the dining table, trying to smile, but failing miserably. Whoever the fuck injected that Botox into her face should have their license revoked. It looks revolting.

I open my mouth to respond, but my mother cuts me off.

“Oh yes, so very exciting! Organizing the wedding is a dream.”

The woman blinks once at me before turning to my mother. I can’t be bothered to be affected in any way, so I just stick my fork in another tomato and shove it into my mouth, chewing through her next question.

“So have you made any arrangements? Did you set a date?”

I chew the rest of that tomato, and again, I’m just about to speak, when Ryan’s voice booms next to me.

“We’ve made plenty of arrangements, and we did actually set a date as well. We are very excited.”

They're really scared I'll open my mouth and out them, aren't they? He grabs my thigh under the table, squeezing hard enough that my back straightens and my body twitches. I slap my hand over his, pulling at one of his fingers to try to get him off.

"But then again, there is no—" I begin.

"Point in waiting."

The motherfucker interrupts me again!

"We want to do it as soon as we can. We're just waiting for me to settle into the business." His fingers tighten so harshly, I'm struggling not to hunch over at the pain.

His gaze on me is a masked threat invented just for my benefit. It doesn't move me one bit. A heavy indifference has made a home in me since last night, and I'm basking in its chill. He doesn't like it though, and his bruising grip tightens suddenly, but I only allow a heartbeat to pass and I dig my fingernails into his skin with such force, dragging them down excruciatingly slow. His eyes bulge, pupils dilate, and he scrunches his nose, snapping his hand away.

I'm gonna pay for that. But at least I have the satisfaction.

"I agree," my mother continues. "There is no reason for a couple in love to wait too long to get married. Especially when you've known each other since school, and it's not like you have to wait to save money or anything."

I turn my gaze to the woman, an incredulous smile creeping on my lips. She's trying too hard with her deception. Does she think the people around us are blind? Fuck, maybe they are.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to excuse myself." Ryan peeks at his phone screen, his brows furrowing slightly, before putting it back on the table, screen down. "I'm

putting out fires everywhere nowadays.” He laughs at the guests, his gaze fixing longer on my parents.

“It’s to be expected. Picking up a new business, it takes a while to adjust and work out all its kinks.” My father takes a sip of his red wine as he places his knife and fork on his plate, next to the half-eaten steak. “I’ll walk you out.”

“Thank you, Liam, but that won’t be necessary. My fiancée will walk me out. Sheila, this was delicious. So sorry I couldn’t stay any longer. Everyone”—he turns to the rest of the guests—“it was a pleasure.”

His politeness just about turns my stomach over, but everyone else at the table swallows the bullshit, smiling and extending their well wishes. Goddamn idiots, all of them, with two notable exceptions—The Serpent and Maddox. They sit on the far right next to my father, and they nod at Ryan in such a slight way, you could blink and miss it.

“Morrigan.” He’s already pulling my chair back with me in it, forcing me to drop my cutlery onto the plate with a loud rattle.

I would very much like to make a scene right now. Only, after last night, I have little energy, and I would prefer planning my move.

I follow him out of the room, the rest of the guests continuing their meal and chatter as we head to the foyer. I stop a few steps away from the door.

“Walk me to my car,” he says as he opens the door, without even turning to me.

I roll my eyes and follow him out the door, and luckily his BMW is parked just to the right of it, on the circular drive. He opens the driver door, but doesn’t get in—instead, he comes out with a large brown envelope that he hands to me.

“I would advise you don’t open it around your parents, or anyone else, for that matter.”

“What is this?” I reluctantly reach over. It’s on the heavier side, but I can tell there’s paper inside.

“I figured that threatening your family’s or friend’s life might not be enough motivation for you to stop your refusal to marry me. So I’m threatening yours as well.”

What the hell?!

I don’t have time to react, too consumed by his words, when he grabs the back of my head and pulls me to him. His slimy lips press onto mine, and my attempts to push him away are in vain.

There was a time when kissing him was pleasurable. It feels as if eons have passed. The memories don’t feel like they belong to me anymore.

“By the way, they’re not the originals. You can stay at your parents tonight, if you need time to process,” he says, with a grin that lingers in my memory minutes after he climbs in his car and drives off.

I’m itching to open it. I would do it right now, but they expect me to go back to the table. If I don’t go, my mother is bound to come after me, and if Ryan *advises* me to be alone when I open it, then I can’t risk her presence.

No one really notices when I walk back into the dining room, all caught up in conversation. Except for two penetrating pairs of eyes. They didn’t miss the envelope I put away on my lap. I manage to finish dinner with minimal conversation, and even The Serpent and Maddox attempted polite exchanges. Enough not to seem rude, but not enough that it would allude to our current proximity. After all, both my parents are fully aware that we knew each other, long ago.

Now that dinner is over, my parents are inviting the guests to the formal living room on the other side of the house for drinks. And I take the cue to excuse myself.

“What’s that?” My mother’s voice stops me in my tracks, and I think the hand clutching the envelope is

beginning to sweat.

“Something... for the wedding,” I improvise. “I just want to go look it over. I’ll be back in a while.”

“Oh, I should look too if it’s about the wedding.”

Fuck!

“This is a bit more private—some honeymoon arrangements.”

Fire and ice hit my back at the same time, yet somehow, they both burn. I know in my gut whose gaze is doing that to me.

I move away before more questions are thrown my way, and the moment I’m out of sight, I all but run upstairs, heading to my room. My whole body feels hot, and there’s a lump in my chest urging me to scream, just to release this tension that has sat there for the last wretched hour.

Bursting through the door, I go to the bed, turn on the lamp closest to me, and throw the envelope onto it. It lands with a thud, threatening me somehow. It’s staring at me, that rough, brown paper hiding something he said endangers my life too. I know it’s not possible for it to be what I think. I fucking know it. Yet this man managed to flip a switch on the person he used to be, so he makes me believe in the impossible.

I rake my fingers through my loose hair and finally rip the envelope open. Large photos fall onto the bed, and my heartbeat thuds in my ears. It takes but a second to recognize what I’m looking at, another second for my breath to hitch painfully in my lungs, and another one for the shock to reach my heart. My hand is against it, pressing on my chest, yet no beat vibrates through it.

“Son of a bitch...” I say on a pained exhale.

A slight creak makes me jump and turn to the door. The tall, strong body that fills the doorway looks oh-so stern in his all-black ensemble. His darkness arrives with a rise in the pressure of the air, and as he steps

into my space, that pressure becomes almost unbearable. Yet strangely satisfying in a peculiar way. The type that quickens your heartbeat, that makes you forget to breathe, and makes your knees weak.

I don't move the moment he steps farther in and keep my back to the photos I try to conceal. His eyes still flicker to the bed, but they don't linger. Instead, he prolongs the torture as he looks around the room, his whole body tense as he takes in the parts of me that exist here, clearly curious by the insight. He pauses on certain things, only I don't care enough in this moment to figure out which, or what it could mean. This room has evolved with me over the years. There are no traces left of the teenager I used to be, the one he used to know.

That teenager died young.

And those photos laid on my bed show the reason why.

When he finally turns to me, in this room that holds secret memories we share, his dark gaze is savage. He looks at me as if I'm both good and evil, Heaven and Hell, love and malice, like I'm... everything. And my heart suddenly thunders in my chest, its beats shaking me to my core.

He closes the distance between us and grips my chin between two fingers, cocking his head as he holds me still.

"Private honeymoon arrangements?" he asks in his signature calm voice that chills bones. But what shocks me is that he does not hide the blatant jealousy.

I don't have the courage to speak, though, not when it means those fingers will leave my skin. Not when the alternative is for him to see how Ryan has just complicated things.

But he narrows his eyes and cocks his head, his gaze flickering to the bed. I sigh as he lets go and steps

to my side, and I wish I could stop him from picking up the photos.

“What is this?” His tone changes its tune.

He leans over, assessing each image as I run my fingers through my hair, grabbing two handfuls, feeding the sting on my scalp as I tighten my grip.

“That’s you.” He pins me with a stern gaze and throws the evidence onto the bed. “These were taken years ago. Who took them? And who the fuck is the person you’re burying?!”

* * *

One by one, the photos from the night I killed a man imprint in my memory. This outside perspective is so different from mine. It’s not as if I needed to be reminded I did it, as it’s not something one forgets. But I never truly regretted doing it, so I rarely ever think of it. And that’s what brings me true guilt.

“Tell me!” He raises his voice as high as he can in this room, but I hesitate.

Not because I’m afraid to admit what he can clearly see already, but because of how that story, what I’ve done, could affect him. Or maybe it won’t affect him at all, maybe he won’t give a shit about me, and that scares me more.

My lips part, but I’m interrupted by that slight creak in the floor again, and we both turn, shielding the evidence. My heart falls back in its place when I see Maddox entering and quickly shutting the door.

“What?!” He looks between us as he steps closer. “What the hell is thi—” he cuts off as recognition hits him, and his wide eyes snap to me. “What the fuck, Morri?! Is this who I think it is?”

The Serpent turns to me, and my eyes flash from one man to the other, both waiting for different explanations.

“Yes.” I sigh.

“We don’t have much time. You need to tell me what the fuck is going on.” The black-eyed devil tenses his shoulders as he regards me.

I pick up one of the photos and stare at it. I’m in the middle of the forest, a flashlight lighting me and the patch of ground before me as I dig the hole, the body of a man laid next to it. Even in this grainy image, you can tell there’s no life in that body. Only Ryan could have taken this, and the more I look at it, I realize that I know exactly when. All this time, all these years, this son of a bitch had leverage on me. All these fucking years!

“That’s Johnny Bray, isn’t it?” Maddox asks.

“Wait, is that the guy we caught almost...” The Serpent navigates around that particular piece of memory. “The one whose jaw you broke?”

“Yes.”

“When was this taken? For fuck’s sake, just tell us already! Stop prolonging this.”

“There’s a goddamn reason for that! It was taken not long after we... after you left.” After *he broke up with me* out of the blue. “When he noticed you weren’t around anymore, and I was no longer under your protection, he decided to get his revenge for that night I broke his jaw.”

Maddox quickly grabs one of the photos, bringing it closer to his eyes. “Is this your blood? Ripped clothes... Morrigan, what the hell happened?!” He slams his large hand on the bed, on top of the photo, his tone threatening.

Even if he is built like a beast, the scariest one of them all, who much prefers hurting a man than showing feelings, I know he cares. In a ruthless, rough around the edges, kind of way, he cares.

“In a way, I was lucky, because he came after me alone. Maybe he didn’t have the courage to tell any of his friends that it was a girl who broke his face that

night.” I lean over and gather all the photos back in the envelope. “I still remember the sick grin on his face when he told me that you’re not there to save me again.”

“Not that you needed much saving.” Maddox becomes slightly uncomfortable with my insinuation of what they saved me from that night, but the darkness in The Serpent’s eyes never shifts.

It may have looked to them like I didn’t need saving, but it didn’t feel the same to me. I was unhinged, definitely not in control, and only control can give you the confidence to win something like that. I had none of it, I was just... manic.

“Ryan used to be like a puppy after I became single, always following me, always around. Now I wonder if any of that was a normal crush, or if it was just a growing, unnatural obsession. It turns out that he was around that night as well. At least that’s my conclusion, because there’s no way anyone else would have found us there. And I’m sure Ryan wasn’t expecting what he saw when he did.”

“What *did* he find?” The Serpent speaks in a different tone now, lower, rougher, each word spilled slowly, punctuated, my skin responding with goose bumps before my brain even registers the need for a reply.

“Johnny knocked me out and put me in his car. I woke up in the forest, not far from Brook Lane, as he was trying to rip my clothes off.”

I hear the growl coming from Maddox before my eyes land on his fury. But it’s the darkness, the possessiveness in The Serpent’s eyes that pulls my attention.

“He didn’t intend to finish what he started. Believe me,” I continue. “He wanted to beat the shit out of me, humiliate me, and leave me for dead, naked, for the animals to find me. When I woke up and pushed him off, he got two more kicks in my stomach before I managed

to grab onto his leg and get him on the ground. I was terrified, heartbroken, and angry. I got onto my feet and took it all out on him. I guess Ryan saw his car at the side of the road and came into the forest. Maybe he thought he was coming to my rescue, but I wasn't the one in need of it."

I pause for a moment, catching my breath.

"I fell into a frenzy. I saw red and no other colors. He screamed, Ryan did, when he saw me bashing Johnny's head in with a thick tree branch. I couldn't stop myself. I'm not even sure I thought of stopping at all. I broke it on his mangled skull, then I picked up a rock, kneeled next to him and kept going until there was nothing there to recognize."

"Jesus," Vincent whispers.

But I don't know what to make of that reaction. He stands there, his eyes just a tad wider than normal, enough for that to be a complete shift in his demeanor.

It's strange, but I always think about Johnny Bray as my first kill, and this haunts me more than the memory of his cracking skull. I haven't killed since. He's my one and only, yet my brain seems to have already calculated the risks, considering my nature. Maybe it's just a matter of time. I wish that fact would actually scare me.

"Ryan helped me. He left to get shovels and some clothes, and I stayed in the forest. He helped me bury him. He helped me move his car, then took me home. I thought it was done. To this day, we never spoke of it ever again." I look at the envelope clutched in my small hands. "Now I understand why."

"So he's the one that took the photos," Maddox states.

"Definitely. I remember there was a point when he said he was going to the car to pick up something, since we had some fingerprints to wipe off Bray's skin. I was in the middle of digging. I didn't think anything of it, he

was so helpful. I was broken, exhausted, and that's most likely when he took the photos."

I turn toward the window, watching the clouds move slowly in the night sky, at the same speed as the breeze that moves the branches of the walnut tree hovering from the right-hand side of the window.

"The world moved on from Johnny Bray. He was so problematic, even his dad thought he ran away. No one even questioned the fact that he disappeared suddenly. More girls were coming out, accusing him of rape or sexual assault. Everyone just thought he ran away to escape a trial. I moved on too. Never did I think that it would come back to bite me in the ass this way."

"We need to get all the copies." Maddox speaks as he walks to the door, his ear close to it as he listens for movement. He opens it and peeks through, then walks out without another word.

We should go too. We can't risk my parents even thinking we're friendly any time but in their presence.

"We'll never get the copies. He's not going to tell us anything, you know that." I turn off the lamp and walk toward the door.

I stop when his arm wraps around my waist from behind, and the other pulls the envelope from my hand. My body hums in awareness, tense as I force myself not to sink into him. The corridor is lit, but here, in my childhood bedroom, we're bathed in the shadows. The same shadows that adore The Serpent so much.

"We'll get all the copies." His breath brushes that sensitive spot under my ear. "Then we'll get him, Little Eve. Then your parents. We'll get them all, pull them into our hell and burn them in your heathen fire. They'll all pay for their sins."

Each and every syllable slithers around his tongue, dripping from it onto my skin, as he whispers into my ear. Then he kisses the edge of it, sending electric

shocks through my whole body with that soft touch of his lips. When he releases me from his hold, my legs almost give out. Almost. I'm convinced. I'm not sure if it's his confidence, the tone of his voice, or his soft touch, but I believe him.

So I walk into the light, carrying his darkness on my skin.

CHAPTER 15

VINCENT

THE SCENT OF HER ROOM brought back memories I didn't think affected me anymore. It was another life, when my future looked different, fuller—because it still had her in it. But it was ripped away from me by the man I just cut a deal with—her goddamn father.

My fury toward him never went away, but being there enveloped in our past, it brought back *that* fury. What I felt all those years before, and I wanted to rip into him with all I had. Rip him away from life itself.

I couldn't do it then, but I can now.

Before I do, I will make sure to tell him why—*my* reason, not the new one his daughter gave me.

Morrigan... fuck, she felt like a dream. Her soft red curls brushing against me, the curves that turned the girl she used to be into this goddess, and her scent called to me like I was finally in the presence of what my soul has been searching for, missing all along. Every fiber of my being was screaming at me to fucking take her, then and there, rip her clothes off and fuck her in her parents' house, for all to hear. Wicked, lovely things went through my mind, and my cock was hard through the whole goddamn car ride.

I followed her Dodge as she drove to her friend's building. For her safety, but my curiosity too. I need to

know if Holt put a tail on her. If we're going to keep meeting, and we certainly will, I need to know if I have to give her instructions, how to take precautions. But as I got there, my curiosity was fed in a completely different way.

I walk into Midnight and spot Madds at our usual table.

"Why didn't you tell me that her best friend lives in the same building where Metamorphosis is?" I ask as I reach him.

"I thought Carter would have told you when you went there with him. He did the research before you guys signed up."

There're already quite a few people here, yet a bit less than usual at this time. Saturdays tend to be busy nights for Midnight. Everyone needs to let off some steam, only I have a feeling even more are going to go to Metamorphosis for that purpose. Carter arrives just as I settle onto the sofa, nodding his hello to us.

"Hell, maybe he did. I followed her last night, after we left her parents' dinner."

"Morrigan? You... followed... her?" Carter raises an eyebrow at me.

"Jesus Christ, get over yourself. I wanted to see if Ryan tracks her. It's to our benefit after all."

He says nothing, but he's clearly not convinced in the slightest.

"It's Loreley's club and building. What's so unusual about her living there too?" Maddox shrugs.

True, there isn't anything unusual about it. I just wonder if whenever she goes to visit her friend, she maybe... visits the club too. It's her best friend after all, right? Is she even into that world? I asked myself these questions before, but this was before I realized that the image I had of this Morrigan was pretty much a façade built by her parents. I thought the women I knew was

gone, and I didn't ponder the possibility that she could be frequenting Metamorphosis herself. Now, it's a whole other situation. She could have been there, the few times I've gone, and the idea that she could be *playing* with other men brings an unpleasant heat to my chest and a tension in my temples.

Goddamnit!

I have to constantly remind myself that Morrigan-fucking-O'Rourke is not mine.

But if I imagine her any longer strapped to a St. Andrew's cross while some random guy does filthy things to her, I'm definitely gonna make her.

I haven't caught sight of her signature red locks there, though. Maybe it's not her scene after all.

"I think I'm going to go out tonight," I say to no one in particular. Clearly, my curiosity cannot be contained.

There's a faint twitch between Carter's eyebrows, but he doesn't question me. He only nods, but I don't miss that sneaky sparkle in his eyes.

"I'm waiting for Katya. I need to catch up with her, then I'm going to go look into those photos," he says, signaling one of the waitresses, letting her know we're ready to get some drinks. They know not to disturb us until we ask.

"I'm going downstairs."

We both turn to Madds. If he goes downstairs to The Fightclub when there isn't a scheduled match, something has to be wrong. I suspect it has something to do with the story Morrigan told us.

When he says those three words, there's usually one of two looks in his eyes—the fairly placid one that says he's just supervising, or the one that hides the feral beast scratching its way to the surface. It's the beast we see now, not yet at the surface, and he needs to let it out, de-stress.

“Okay,” I say, lingering on his features a little longer. I can’t get a read on him, and it’s really pissing me off.

Sometimes it’s better for one of us to be there, just in case he goes too far. And he has gone too far, a few times.

“Stop fucking looking at me like that,” he spits at me. “Call Finn if you want. He can *supervise* me.” He leaves the table, his heavy footsteps shaking the floor on the way to the back rooms.

“What is going on with him?” Carter asks, but the waitress interrupts us, and we send her on her way with our order.

“I think it’s guilt.” I suspect it is because it’s been fucking plaguing me since I left the dinner. “Morrigan and him always had this... connection. What she revealed tonight stirred him.” Not that he would ever admit it.

“But you and Morrigan had a *connection*,” he says, narrowing his eyes on me.

“It was more like a wild beast recognizing its kind and latching onto it.” But her and I... we’re a different kind of beast altogether. I don’t tell Carter that, though.

“And you’re okay with it?”

I sigh before I answer, because I’m not sure how I feel about it. Even then, it didn’t really bother me the way it should have. And it’s only because it’s Madds. If it was anyone else, I would rip their fucking heads off for looking at her the wrong way.

“Is it strange if I didn’t feel that raw jealousy when it came to him? Don’t get me wrong, I feel some, but not the way I should.”

“It’s not strange at all. Your brain is trying to think of it through the window of societal norms, but you need to accept your own. You and Madds have known each other before any of us, you’ve pulled each other from bad situations...”

I've sacrificed too. But I don't tell him that.

"I'm no gonna pretend to understand relationships or emotions. But what you have is selfless, unconditional."

"It is. I would do anything for him. Any you as well, obviously, but Madds... I don't think he thinks he deserves anything good. He doesn't latch onto anything, ever. Only us. I didn't want to take her away from him."

"And now? What if he still wants her?"

"He's attracted to her, and I know he cared about her. Considering tonight, he still does. But no, he would never want to *be* with her. Not even if I was dead. Morrigan was never meant to be his, and he knows it."

He nods, then leans back into his seat.

"Why are you going to Metamorphosis, Vincent?" The man rarely calls me by my whole name.

The waitress sets our drink order on the table with a soft smile, not lingering once the last glass touches the surface.

"We both know why, Carter. Is there any chance she wouldn't support for best friend?"

"Maybe she's not into the scene."

"Maybe. But I don't play, yet I still go for the atmosphere."

He quirks an eyebrow. "If you don't, then wh—"

"Don't even say it. That was... an anomaly." It really was. "I was thinking that even at the pre-opening party, I saw no one with her recognizable red hair. Did you?"

"I can't say I have, no," he answers, a smirk pulling at his lips.

I nod, pondering the situation. "I don't know, something's just eating at me. I wonder if there's more to it all."

“Well, I hope you enjoy your journey finding that out,” he says with a suggestive look in his eyes, and I can’t help but laugh.

“I’m sure I will.”

* * *

The gold details shine in the darkness of the club. Metamorphosis was most definitely built with both style and comfort in mind, and as I sit on the upholstered barstool, sipping a glass of quality Bourbon, I have to give an extra point for that comfort. I didn’t think I would enjoy it much. I joined more because The Sanctum has to ensure it has a foot through every door in this city. But the anonymity is refreshing. Exhilarating even.

The music, the atmosphere, the people... it’s immersive.

The song changes, but it’s the rise in volume that stops me mid sip, and when the lights dim to the cusp of darkness, it pulls my attention away from the bar. The moment I turn in my chair, a wild scent envelops me. It’s fresh, reminding me of a flower I can’t place. So different from the smells dominating this space. It submerges me into a visceral memory, and like a warm summer breeze, it passes by me. A woman. Our eyes meet for a brief moment, before she disappears through the crowd. It was too dark to see more than the faint shine of her eyes behind the mask, but her scent lingers, and I don’t want to exhale just yet. I don’t want to let it go.

I recognize that mask, though.

Suddenly, she appears on the stage, the only light in the space aimed at her, but not blinding, just bright enough that it’s like an aura around her body. She wears a long skirt that looks more like multiple wide ribbons tied around her waistband, her luscious legs with thighs that beg for teeth marks, peeking through the high slits. The song intensifies just as she sprints

the small distance from the steps to the pole, and jumps onto it, clutching the metal between her hands and bent legs. The long skirt flows as she throws her head back, eyes closed, spinning around to an ethereal tune. She's pulled everyone's attention without even an announcement. All eyes are on the mesmerizing woman who I have seen dance once before.

The one I couldn't take my eyes from since the first time I stepped in here.

The same one who I finger-fucked as we watched Carter in one of the playrooms.

I recognize the mask, the hair, but most of all... I recognize her scent.

Her shiny, black hair flows in waves as she pole dances, switching positions slowly, following each note of the song. She's treating the pole as her partner, each movement a testament to her passion for dancing, evidence of her sensuality. She moves like she's all alone in this club, and considering the darkness around her, she probably feels as though she is.

I'm caught in this spell, and I feel guilty. Have I ever had this sentiment? I'm enthralled by this woman, while actively pursuing another—the one and only.

She lets go of the pole, filling the stage with an elegant, contemporary routine, but it's the borrowed ballet movements that make me drop down from my seat in an instant. The moment she flies into the air, doing the splits mid-leap, I head straight toward the stage, my heartbeat thumping in my ears.

"It's called a Grand Jeté, not jumping splits, Vincent."

I can practically hear her voice in my head, correcting me like she did years ago. She was behind the school. I came to find some asshole and teach him a lesson about the bullshit laced drugs he was selling, and instead I caught her dancing. It was the first time I allowed myself to talk to her. I asked her why she wasn't

in the dance studio, and she angrily muttered something under her breath about size as she rubbed her hands on her thighs, but never answered me.

I catch glimpses of her as I walk between the people gathered to watch the routine, and by the time I reach the steps, she's back on the pole. Before I get the chance to linger on her swaying curves, the beat drops... and so does she. She slides down the pole until her ass hits the floor at the same time the bass vibrates through my feet and straight to my damn cock. The pole is snug between her breasts as she holds on to it with her arms stretched high above her head, and her legs spread wide, the crowd getting a clear view of her red-fucking-lingerie.

This stirs a jealousy within me I should have no business feeling. Yet that's not the dominant emotion, because it stirs pride, too.

Cheers and claps burst in unison around us as she rises to her feet, her lips curving into a shy smile as she bows her head gently. My God, I just want to grab her and tell her just how fucking amazing she is, how talented, how gorgeous. Jesus Christ, am I really this sappy and soft? I want to roll my eyes at myself, but as the light returns to its usual dimness, she runs off the stage, and I refrain from the gesture. Her steps falter the moment she takes the first step down and notices me at the bottom.

Does she recognize me from the other night? She wasn't exactly facing me, so I would be surprised.

The closer she gets, the better I see behind the shadow of her mask, and her forest-green eyes are so much clearer.

The Eve to my Serpent.

My Eve.

She cocks her head as she stops right before me, and her gaze pins mine. I feel like I'm under some sort

of scrutiny, and I wish I could see her expression. But in a split second, the mood changes, and her hands shoot to the collar of my black shirt, pulling open the buttons with clumsy urgency.

Fuck. I don't need to see her expression—she knows. But I let her get her confirmation.

Morrigan pulls away one side of the fabric and brushes her soft fingers against the scar she left there, on my left peck, a few months before. Her eyes shoot back to mine, and I'm not entirely sure what I see there—anger, shock, annoyance... relief?

I think the music stopped playing because all I can hear are her heavy breaths. They echo somehow. Her chest rises and falls slowly, her nostrils flare, and I feel like I'm waiting for her to strike.

When she removes her hands, I button my shirt back up, never leaving her gaze. I'm thankful for the masks concealing our identities, because half of bloody Queenscove is in attendance and we can't be seen together. More so, they can't see me—The Serpent—left speechless by the youngest O'Rourke.

I am, though. I'm fucking speechless. What am I supposed to say to the woman I thought I last touched years ago, only it turns out it was much more recent than that? In public, of all places.

Yet, my pull to the creature behind the mask finally makes sense.

All of a sudden, she moves away, shaking her head as she steps around me, and the music and background noise seem to explode. Sighing, I follow her, touching the spot over my shirt that's a constant reminder of her.

The night she gave me this scar was when I realized she hasn't let go of the past. Until that moment, I thought she had, but I was stupid to believe that. After all, I left her out of the blue with someone else's lie on my lips as the only explanation.

I knew why I went to her mother's party that night, but her anger, her passion, confirmed without a shadow of a doubt the reason why I was there—I want her back.

But does she want me?

MORRIGAN

6 months before

“WHAT IS—ARE THEY DOING here?!”

Cillian follows my line of sight to where my mother and father are greeting our new guests. I can't fucking believe my eyes—it's The-motherfucking-Sanctum. Of all the people I expected to see at my mother's birthday party, a crime syndicate wasn't it. But more importantly... Vincent The Serpent Sinclair, my goddamn ex-boyfriend. They don't show their faces unless they're coming to collect, or—

“Please tell me this isn't what I think it is.” I turn to my brother, forcing down the rising anger.

“Depends on what you think it is.”

“Goddamnit, Cillian. Just tell me what the fuck is happening.”

“What are you mad about, Morri? Them or... *him*?” he asks, taking a sip of the amber liquid swirling in his glass.

“Are you going to answer my question?”

“They were invited by our parents.”

Jesus Christ, this was intentional. I turn and catch the smug looks on my mother's and father's faces as they absorb the gazes their other guests give them. This was some sort of power play on their part, using The Sanctum for a new ploy. But my father's business is legit, as far as I know. Although saying that, I barely know anything. I kept an ear in since I was a teenager, since my darling father is a misogynistic piece of shit who doesn't want to think of women as intelligent

creatures. There was no way I could learn everything, though.

“Are they going into business together?”

Silence.

I turn to my brother, and he’s pursing his lips, avoiding my gaze.

“It’s either that, or our father fucked up so badly, that The Sanctum had to come and fucking collect at Mother’s birthday party.” Is it bad that I wish it would be the second option?

It’s bad, I know, but Father and I never got along. How could we? He always hated me not just for the shit I used to get into, the fights, the mildly illegal crap, but because I have a backbone. He cannot stand women who dare to stand up to him. And I’ve been doing it since I was only a girl. Safe to say, he never shied away from corporal punishment; he has mean a palm, and an even meaner backhand.

When I look back toward them, my lungs drain of air in an instant, and painful prickles spread through my whole chest, up my throat, down my arms, and straight through my belly, until I’m utterly pinned in place.

He’s looking straight at me.

The Serpent’s black pits are wholly focused on me, and I’m taken aback by the feel of that gaping hole inside of me. I rarely notice the jagged edges of it anymore. Time hasn’t healed my wounds, but I sure as fuck have gotten used to them enough that I made myself skirt around the hollowness until it felt normal. But now, looking at the man who burned that part of me to a crisp, I’m painfully aware of it.

Yet nothing hurts more than the realization that his simple presence in my space and his eyes on me, are already smoothing the edges of that wound. No! No fucking way am I allowing any of this shit!

“Where do you think you’re going?” Cillian’s hand wraps around my wrist, stopping me dead in my tracks.

“To find out what the fuck he’s doing here, and then kick him out of my goddamn house!”

“Your house?”

If looks could truly pierce, my brother would be a dead man right about now.

“You’re just like him, you know.”

“Who? The Serpent?!” He’s taken aback, but he’s wrong.

“Father. Just let me know when you start hitting the women in your life too. At least I can warn them before they get too close.”

I didn’t think they would, but those words hit hard enough that his eyes bulge, he lets go of me, and if I wouldn’t know any better, I would think he looks utterly insulted. Shocked, too.

Good.

But this small fit of temper didn’t help the bubbling anger at the sight of the man who broke my heart and disappeared from my life without a goddamn care in the world. Just like all the other men in my life. I thought that after all these years I would have let it go, that the pain, disappointment, and embarrassment would have fizzled out. That’s what’s supposed to happen after a breakup. You move the fuck on.

I did. But it seems that my wretched heart didn’t.

The fact that we’ve never actually been together in a private space since then doesn’t help. I know I’ve been avoiding him, but I think he’s been avoiding me too. I’ve seen him in passing, at a distance, but very few times over the years. We’ve never spoken, never been in the same space. As far as I know, we’ve had no contact at all. Maybe it’s the lack of closure that’s making me so fucking furious, or maybe it’s just his godlike handsome

face that feels so goddamn right in my eyesight that drives this rage.

I started walking before I even realized, my heels digging almost painfully into the floor, and The Serpent simply... turns and moves away. He fucking moves away!

The fucking nerve!

He comes into my house, and he doesn't even give me the courtesy of a *hello*?!

I could scream right now. Oh, this man drives me crazy!

"Darling, have you said hello to all our guests?" My mother's voice comes from somewhere to my right, and I have to take a deep breath before I open my mouth.

"They are your guests, Mother."

"You live in this house too. You are also a hostess, and you should act like one. Please control your antics tonight. This is an exquisite evening with important guests, and your father will not be happy if you make a bad impression."

Nope, I can't do this. I'll lash out at her.

"Sure, *Mother*." I practically spit that word at her before moving away.

It takes only a few seconds to catch my father's gaze as I walk through the busy living room. There's no malice in his eyes, but his gaze just screams *I'm watching you*.

When I reach the dining room, the lush dessert table catches my eye and I head straight for it. Chocolate will solve everything. I don't smoke or do any kind of drugs, although I'm seriously regretting that right now, so chocolate is my only guilty pleasure that makes me feel better. Alcohol helps too, but I can't risk getting even slightly tipsy here.

I grab a small knife, and I'm just about to sink it into an éclair and split it in half, when Ryan's voice grits my ears.

"Are you sure you want to eat that?"

Motherfucker.

I can't catch a break today.

"I am, yes," I answer as I turn back to the chocolaty goodness.

"I'm not. All that sugar settles in all the wrong places."

I lift my eyes from the table and inhale slow and deep as I turn my attention to my boyfriend. How dare he make me feel like shit about what I eat or how I look.

"You have no right, R—"

"Sorry, darling, our fathers are signaling me over. Lay off the sweets, okay?" he interrupts me without even thinking about it, kisses my cheek, and disappears.

You have to be kidding me.

I'm moving again, heading straight to the kitchen, but there're waiters and all sorts of people trotting about, and my head is spinning. I can't be around them. Around anyone. I turn to the corridor that leads to the small library that's bound to be empty. The moment I walk into the empty space, my lungs finally fill with air. Pointlessly, because I start panting with the pent-up anger and my eyes begin to burn. Only, whatever tears sit at the back of them are not of weakness. No... it's goddamn frustration.

"Good evening."

The world stops in an instant.

"Serpent." I turn, seething already at the audacity of this man. "You're not welcome here. Leave."

"I was invited."

“Not by me. Not here.” I don’t move, but I don’t think I could even if I wanted to.

There’s no air in this room. No space for me to move where his energy wouldn’t reach me. I’m afraid it’s gonna pull me in if I get too close. It’s been fucking years, but—no! Get a fucking grip, Morrigan.

“Are you planning on doing something about it?” he asks, nodding to my right hand.

I’m confused, but when I look down, I realize I’m still holding the knife I was about to use on the éclair.

“Tempt me, and I will,” I answer, looking back at him and pinning those black eyes with my own.

Green against black, alone in this dusty space, untouched by the wretched people of this house. He and I used to come here and do despicable things on that sofa whilst my parents weren’t home. Sometimes even when they were. It was practical, since this ground floor window leads to a secluded area of the garden through which he could easily sneak without anyone catching him.

He takes a step toward me, and my breath catches. I need a distraction.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“I wanted to say hello.”

“But you completely ignored me when you entered my house.”

“You seemed to be in the middle of a conversation with your brother. I didn’t want to be rude and interrupt.”

I narrow my eyes on him. He’s different from the man I used to know, still himself, but... more chiseled, distinguished in a ruthless kind of way. I know his reputation, as it’s hard to miss. I know the rumors too, but the man before me is a whole other kind of dangerous. He’s calculated, and I can tell he’s been honing his talents.

“Why are you here, Serpent?” I ask again, my tone grittier. I can’t fucking take everyone’s attitude toward me anymore.

He cocks his head. “I was invited by your parents.”

“Why? Just fucking answer me, or I swear to God...” I trail off because I don’t actually know what I would do.

He takes one more step toward me, and this time around, I match it. We’re a step away from each other now.

“You’re overthinking this. I did not come here with an agenda. Your parents invited us, all of us, to your mother’s birthday party, and we came. If you want to know why we were invited, I’m afraid you’re going to have to ask your parents.”

“I’m asking you. Stop acting like you’re not The-fucking-Serpent and don’t know everything that moves in this world. Give me some goddamn respect!” Christ, I can’t seem to ease the tension building in my temples.

“You’re angry,” he states the obvious like it’s some goddamn revelation.

“I’m furious! You have no right to be here. All these years, all these fucking years, and you show up at my house, in league with... *them*?!” I’m bleeding my emotions in this godforsaken room, and I hate myself for it, but most of all... I hate him.

“We’re not in business with the—”

“Stop fucking talking if all you’re going to say are lies. Just like before. You’re lying to me about the future just like you did back then. I’m not an idiot, and you should know that better than *them*. Do not pretend this is not the beginning of some arrangement,” I seethe and shake my head, tightening my fists, the metal handle of the knife hot in my palm. “Out of all the people in Queenscove, you couldn’t find anyone else to do business with? Anyone at all?”

He moves closer, a mere foot away from me, and my eyes widen, burning yet again as I watch the tinge of familiarity in his expression. It fucking breaks my soul.

Then he reaches for me, wrapping his hands gently around my biceps, attempting to close the leftover distance between us. I'm suddenly so hot I can't bear the tightness of my own skin, my teeth are painfully clenched, and the pressure in my temples is close to agony.

"Don't you fucking dare act like I mean something. Get the fuck away from me!" I almost screech at him, but I couldn't control the coming frenzy even if I tried. I see red in all its shade spectrum, as I slam the knife straight into his chest.

I'm heaving loudly, suddenly feeling a bit better, especially at the sight of the surprise in his onyx gaze. But it lasts only a moment, because it transitions into a grin. The sick bastard is grinning at me! My ears are buzzing. I don't even look down as I pull the blade out of his flesh, step around him, and walk straight out of this goddamn room.

I was hoping the air would be lighter on this corridor, but it does nothing to erase his fucking smile from my mind. I hear footsteps. Moving quickly, I head straight to the powder room at the end of the corridor. The moment I step in and slam the door behind me, pain shoots through my hand.

The dessert knife hits the porcelain sink with a loud clatter, and blood follows, staining the white in bright crimson. I didn't realize that when I stabbed The Serpent, the knife slid in my hand and sliced my skin.

"Shit."

It's not deep, just like I'm pretty sure the wound I left on him isn't either, otherwise the motherfucker wouldn't be grinning. But I hate the fact that the wound I left on him, left one on me, too.

Yet another thing to remind me of the first man to ever break my heart.

CHAPTER 16

MORRIGAN

Present Day

VINCENT-MOTHERFUCKING-SINCLAIR!

Son of a bitch! I'm heaving as I make my way through the crowd, wishing I would be back in the middle of that forest. Because God-fucking-damnit, the rage is blinding. The scar on my palm itches, but right now I would happily risk re-opening it, just so I can stab this motherfucker again!

Did he know?

Did The Serpent fucking know that the woman he touched in the middle of my goddamn club was me?!

Wait...

My steps falter, and I slow down just as I reach the stairs that lead up to the reception.

Does he know it's my club, too?

I feel a grip around my wrist, but carry on up the stairs, shaking it off violently. He must be following, but rage makes its way through my bones. It's a beast I can't always control, but I can't let it take over, not right now. I cannot make a scene here.

So I keep going up the stairs, through the reception, where there're still people walking about, then I unlock

the door that takes me away from it all. Only, I'm not the one pushing open the door. Bergamot and cedar fill my nose and almost cloud my senses as his hand lands right next to my head, and he does it for me.

"Miss M?"

We both stop at the sound of that voice, and I turn slowly toward the receptionist.

"Everything... okay?"

A few more people turn their heads in our direction. She's aware of who I am and has seen me walk through here before, but never this angry, and definitely not with a man in tow.

I take a quiet, deep breath that was definitely a mistake, since all I can smell is him now, and answer her.

"All good, honey. See you soon."

She nods, returning to the customers talking to her, and I push through the door he kept ajar as that rage seeps back in.

"You!" I seethe as I whip around, pointing at him the moment the door closes behind us. I have no idea what else I want to say to him, but I'm only seeing shades of red.

Gritting my teeth, I turn back around, heading to the door that leads to the lobby, and punch in another code. I push it open myself when it unlocks, but this time around, I stop him as he tries to walk through with me.

"Did you know?!" I have one hand on the edge of the door, the other on the frame, blocking his access. "No, fuck, scratch that. I don't wanna know!"

"Know what, Little Eve?" I catch his grin, shadowed by the mask he wears, the low, even tone of his voice making me even angrier.

"Don't play with me, Serpent."

He places his palm on the door and pushes, only I hold it tighter.

“No, you’re not coming through here. This is where this ends.”

“Where *what* exactly ends?” Stepping forward, barely a foot away, he looks down at me.

“You knew, you fucking bastard. You knew!” The sentence finishes on a dragged-out scream, and I release the door frame, swinging my palm at his handsome face. But he catches my wrist. So I swing the other one too, and the bastard has both in his grip now.

I barely register when he pushes me into the room, turns me, and cages me against the wall. But I flinch when the door shuts next to us.

Our heaving breaths feed off of each other, our bodies too close as my chest brushes against him with every rise and fall. He has me pinned with both wrists above my head, held with just one large hand, and his whole front is now against mine, his free hand gripping my hip.

“I will ask one final time.” He’s speaking firmly, but I can’t meet his gaze. “Where. *What*. Ends?”

I swing my leg up, ready to knee him where it hurts the most, but he fucking predicts that too. The bastard pushes my leg to the side with his, his thigh now firmly pressed between my legs, and I’m cursing myself for allowing myself to be this exposed. *Fuck*.

“Little Eve, do not make me ask again.” His tone is lower, menacing, gravelly in a way it’s never been like before.

Ever.

It’s not a voice I recognize on him, and my body shudders from my throat, down my chest, through my hardening nipples, and my belly. But it doesn’t stop there. It goes straight to the one spot I really hoped

would not react to him anymore, then finally reaches my toes.

I swear he feels it, because his thigh presses onto my center, and I have to bite my inner cheek to keep from letting him know just what that does to me.

“This. Where this ends,” I spit, looking down between us. “You knew it was me, you son of a bitch, in the club when you—It. Ends Now.” I push out those last three words, because I somehow feel betrayed. He took advantage of me!

Didn't he...?

“This.” He copies me, his eyes dragging down to the point where we are joined, where he can feel my hardened peaks against him. “I wasn't aware it even begun. I did *not* know it was you when I played with your tight cunt as Carter and his partner watched.”

My mouth falls open, stretching wide while my eyes threaten to pop out of their sockets.

“Carter! Wha—Carter?! Are you shitting me?!” Sweet Jesus. “That was him?! Oh my God. Get the fuck off me!”

Only, I'm pushing against a brick wall.

“Listen to me. I didn't know it was you who put a fucking spell on me with those sinful hips. I. Did. Not. Know,” he says as he cocks his head.

His eyes are dark pits under his mask, his look utterly devilish since no light shines there. All that looks back is sincerity, and I have to avert my gaze. I just can't trust in it, not now when my body seems to listen to him more than me.

“I don't believe you!” I snap.

“It's the truth. Want to hear another one?”

My eyebrows furrow, but I stay silent.

“When I left you wet and satisfied in front of that window, I was fucking starving. I was dying to know what you tasted like. But you were a stranger... I couldn't put a stranger's cum in my mouth. There was something about you though, your soft body against mine, those lush hips, your scent that I haven't been able to forget.”

A wicked grin paints his lips as he speaks those words, and with each one, my breathing quickens, already knowing how it will end.

“So I did it. I tasted you. I brought those fingers to my lips, sinking them beyond... and allowed myself one taste. Just one. Little. Taste.”

I steal a glance in his direction and catch him as he licks his lips. I find myself licking mine at the same time. My mouth waters at the thought of the mighty Serpent sucking my cum from his fingers. His eyes flicker between us at the same moment a shiver runs through my breasts, and my perked nipples press a little harder into him. He did not miss that.

“I almost came back to you after that one taste. I wanted more. You felt different and familiar all at the same time. You tasted like I needed all of you. So I walked away.”

Why?

Slowly, he leans in, our gazes fixed on each other's, as the air feels heavier with each breath. Wickedness shines in his eyes, and he shifts his thigh against my pussy, rubbing down just enough.

Lord have mercy!

If I can feel my wetness against the thin slip of my underwear, he can definitely feel it too. He better not mistake it for neediness.

I most certainly am not needy for him. I make sure to hold my defiant gaze, but he shifts once again against me, and the moment our noses touch and his grip

loosens, I quickly rip my wrists away and push him off me.

Too goddamn close.

I rush to the stairs that lead up to the apartments, because there's no way I'm waiting for the elevator. Taking two at a time, I dash past the first floor, up the next flight, stealing a glance behind me... I can't see him. I keep going, reaching what will be my apartment, and punch in the code for the door, thankful I don't have to fiddle with keys, since it's easier this way with the contractors going in and out. Walking into the darkness, I push the door closed with both hands... but at the last damn moment, a shiny black shoe wedges in, and the door bursts open, throwing me back a few steps.

"I don't want you." The words fall too fast off my tongue.

Too fast for even me to believe them. Because here, in what will be my home, dressed in his signature all-black that hugs every inch of his lean body, he looks exactly like what I want.

Slowly, I step backwards, but he follows.

"You don't want my hands on you," he all but growls at me, taking another step. "My palms on your soft breasts."

Another one.

"My fingers stretching your pussy."

Another...

"My tongue sucking at your clit."

One more.

"My cock pressing inside of you."

I think I'm swallowing stones and breathing in water. It all feels too hard.

"No." My denial comes out harsh.

He's right in front of me.

"No..." he taunts.

He reaches up, and as his fingers touch my forehead, I'm afraid to move. Not fearful of him, but of what I might do as the image of him balls deep inside of me haunts my way too vivid imagination.

"You look good in black, sweet Eve, but stunning in red." He runs those fingers through the hair of my wig, and I hope he leaves it in place, because I'm not ready to be myself in front of him just yet.

He reaches to the back and tugs once, but it's my mask falling, not the wig. It hangs by its ribbon in his hand, and he holds it there as he reaches over and pulls his own mask off.

We're on even ground—Eve and The Serpent.

I blink once... twice... then push a hand on his chest once more, holding him enough away that I can catch every flicker in his eyes. Only, I think I'm actually holding myself from sinking into the enticing abyss of them.

"You didn't know it was me." I'm somehow calmer now, and I'll know if he lies.

"I didn't know it was you, in *your* club." No shift, no dilating of the pupils, no hitch in his breath, no change.

I believe him. I've seen the look of a lie in his eyes before. Even if he's gotten better at it, I think I would still be able to see a flicker of it.

Wait.

"My club?" I repeat, an eyebrow raised as I steady my pulse.

He only nods.

"It's not—"

"It is," he interrupts, cocking his head, his eyes boring into me once again.

Is it hotter in here? It feels hotter. I feel hotter. No, no, control yourself, breathe, for the love of God, breathe.

“No.” My voice is a little firmer, but not enough to convince him.

Fuck... I need to practice this. I can't be caught this way by my family, or by Ryan. Only, The Serpent is neither of them, is he? He never was. My subconscious knows my dirty secrets are safe with him, but I have to push back anyway. I think of the risks, of what I could lose, and of what Lulu has built.

“It's not my club.” I'm firmer this time.

“Only The Sanctum will know, no one else.”

I think I lost this battle before it began. There's no point. He's on a mission now and he'll find out anyway.

“Listen to me, Serpent! Does anyone else know? Anyone but you or your precious Sanctum?!” I grip his shirt, holding him tight.

“No one else. Not even The Sanctum yet,” he says with devious grin pulling at his lips. “I didn't know for sure until now.”

“You tricked me,” I all but whisper.

“I simply chased a hunch.”

My grip tightens, and I pull him to me as panic and fury simmer inside my chest. “You better not be lying. If this information gets to my family, or anyone else, for that matter, from yours or The Sanctum's mouth, I will fucking kill you myself. I may not be the strongest, the most terrifying, or fucking brightest, but I swear it—I'll kill you all.”

He nods. That's it. Just a simple nod of acknowledgment. Is he laughing internally at my threat? As long as he keeps this promise, he can laugh all he wants.

“How did you figure it out?” I ask.

“I’ve connected the dots. But your eyes don’t believe your lies, Little Eve. You’ll have to get better at that.” He grips the side of my throat, his thumb swiping over my bottom lip, and I swear he does it so he can feel my quickening pulse beneath his palm.

“I’m not your Eve.” I find my balance and step back.

“Are you not? Is a forest so different from a garden? Did you not seek an escape, or make a deal with the *devil*? Granted, I didn’t offer you an apple, but we still shook on it and sealed the deal.”

“We shook, yes, but I don’t remember sealing anything.” I’m playing with fire, because we all know the legends of how demons seal deals at the crossroads.

“Then I believe it’s time.”

It happens too fast—one short step, and he’s against me, grabbing the back of my head. The moment our lips touch, a dam opens, and desire floods through me in waves. Everything I’ve suppressed when I thought of him over the years, everything I’ve pushed away since he came back into my life, it all bursts through and I almost scream. His soft lips press harder against mine, bruising and demanding, and I let go of the grip on his shirt. Not for long though, because a frenzy takes over, and I grab onto anything.... Everything; the back of his neck, threading into his hair, his strong shoulders. And in all of this, he demands entry into my mouth, trying to break through that resistance.

I thought the devil seals the deal with a kiss. But this Serpent demands more. So much more.

And tonight, I’m going to give him everything.

Fuck denial.

Fuck Ryan.

Fuck my life.

Fuck it all.

I'm taking that fucking apple and giving in to sin in my own Eden.

Our steps fall backward until the back of my knees hit a ledge, but my shoulder takes another second to find a surface to lean against, and this one is cold, the thud unlike a wall. Our teeth clash as we fight each other in a game of dominance and lust, tongues swiping our words away, and our hands sink too hard into our flesh. But it feels divine.

When I open my eyes, he looks clearer, brighter, an electric blue shining through the black of his eyes. I turn my head, breaking the kiss to find that I'm pressed against the window, but I only catch a glimpse of the street below before his hand wraps around my jaw, and turns me to him.

We pant in unison, his dark eyes feral with a matching need, before his lips slam down on mine again, and his tongue pushes through, finally exploring every bit of my soft mouth. He reaches to my shoulder, his fingers wrapping around the straps of my top and bra, and doesn't hesitate as he pulls down, letting the brisk air caress my bare breast. Not for long, because his hand covers it in an instant, and at the feel of his skin against my pebbled nipple, a moan vibrates against his tongue—mine.

But he swallows it whole. Just as the next one. And the next one after that.

I swear he pinches harder, just so he can feed on my cries. He plays with me in a way that drives me mad. With lust. With need. Mad with the unknown of what's to come beyond tonight.

Letting go of my jaw, he exposes me fully, my lace bra now uncomfortably tight under my breasts. But I draw on that discomfort, delighting in it as he bites my bottom lip and pinches my other nipple.

Releasing my mouth, he pushes me down, and my ass hits the low windowsill. The man stands before me

like a dark god, not the devil himself, and the blue hues of the moonlight hit him in such an ethereal way, I allow myself a moment to take him in.

“I didn’t think you could get more beautiful than you were then.” His words echo hauntingly through the baren space. “I was wrong.”

I don’t have time to react as he reaches over, pinches my chin between his thumb and index fingers, and looks down at me with a need that all but bleeds out of his eyes.

I’m a second away from acting on what I think he’s insinuating, when the man himself drops to his knees between my legs. I gasp and steady myself, gripping the edge of the wood when he pushes my thighs apart. He runs his hands over my skin, and inches closer to where they join, his gaze on mine the whole fucking time. I could come just like this, from this tension, from this fervor dripping from him through me. He dips down on my breasts, his tongue flicking my nipples before he goes all in, sucking, licking... worshipping. It’s the only way I can describe it—worshipping.

He looks up at me and tiny prickles slither onto my cheeks, at the same time his hands reach the very top of my thighs and his thumbs touch the seams of my panties.

“Oh, beautiful Eve... Pleasure looks so fucking stunning in your eyes.”

I smile, because this is so goddamn perfect, it hurts my soul.

“And you, Serpent, look so fucking pretty kneeling at my feet.”

I’m definitely playing with fire. And from the flicker in his eyes, I know I’m gonna get burnt. Though I have a feeling I’m going to enjoy the heat of it.

The man smirks, his lips parted, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening as his tongue sweeps

over the side of his top lip. But the moment the dimples appear on his cheeks, I'm done for.

They're my fucking weakness when it comes to this man. It twists his already handsome face into something that was made just for me, perfectly to my taste. Like I gave some god a sketch and they made *him* for me.

I used to swipe my tongue over those dimples, force a smile on his lips just so they would appear for me.

He pulls back enough that he can get a better look at me, and quickly finds the small buckle that holds my skirt up. With one tug, he unravels it. Lingerie covers me and I expect him to rip it apart instantly, to get to his prize. Instead, he looks at me like I'm the most carefully wrapped present, and he's gonna take his time unwrapping it. He presses two fingers onto the dead center of me, dragging them up over the soaked fabric, and I clamp my mouth shut when I realize I was just about to beg him to tear them the hell off.

"The day you stabbed me almost in the heart, I wanted to throw you over that reading chair, and do exactly this to you."

He's not looking for an answer from me. It's a game of show and tell, as he leans in and swipes his tongue over the whole laced-covered center of me. I moan through the sweet pressure, letting my eyes drift closed and head fall back, as he grips the inside of my thighs, and the tips of his fingers dig into my flesh.

"You smell so fucking good..." he hums his approval.

"Good enough to eat, I hope."

VINCENT

THE DIM MOONLIGHT HITS HER from the side, the cheeky grin that pulls at the corners of her mouth beautifully lit.

Definitely good enough to eat, lick, suck, stretch, and fuck. More than good enough for it all.

“Don’t move.” I pull out the knife I hid in the small holster above my ankle, and look up at her, before pressing the blunt edge on the inside of her thigh.

Her mouth falls open on a hitched breath, echoing softly through whatever space we’re in right now, but she does as told. I drag that knife up her thigh until I reach the lace that covers what I crave the most right now. More than I should. I slide the tip under the fabric and drag it along, until it falls apart, careful not to nick her soft flesh.

Jesus fuck, she’s gorgeous.

I can’t help myself from making her squirm just a bit. I blow on that pretty pink cunt that glistens in the faint light, watching it tighten as goose bumps spread over her thighs, but her moan makes my dick hurt, constricted under too many layers.

Pressing two fingers on her center, I drag them down as she holds her herself from bucking forward, and I open up those pretty lips for me. Damn, I forgot how pretty her pussy is. It really does beg for some teasing. So I flip over the knife and press the slim handle onto her clit, the foreign object making her jump ever so slightly. But I rub it over the bundle of nerves, and her gaze darts straight onto it when I tease her entrance.

Her lips are parted, and she squirms, pressing herself onto the handle on the faintest of gasps.

“Goddamnit, Serpent, just... fuck me!”

Her impatience makes me laugh.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I will.” But I pull the knife away, holstering it while I revel in the utter disappointment on her features.

“Please...” Christ, her begging voice would put me to my knees if I wasn’t already here.

Without notice, I push two fingers inside her wet cunt, and her ass jolts off the windowsill, but I press my mouth onto her clit, holding her down.

This is my goddamn prize—her taste on my tongue, her pleasure seeping into me.

I slide in and out slowly, as I suck and bite that bundle of nerves that triggers the softest of mewls from her pretty lips. She squirms so much, I have to hold her down with my other hand wrapped around her hip.

“Oh God, please... Vi—”

I almost stall when I hear the start of my actual name on her lips, but she stops herself from that vulnerable moment, and on a tortured moan, she grips my hair, holding me tight as she starts grinding into me. I up my rhythm, and her walls tighten around my fingers, her cries growing louder, and the grip on my head stronger.

Fuck, she’s going to break me. Maybe in a good way, maybe in the worst kinds of ways. But I’m not going anywhere. The moment our lives reconnected, I knew she would be it.

It was reckless of her to make a pact with me, because there is no escape, not after the events of our past, and certainly not after today.

This covenant is forever—her soul is mine.

My tongue flicks her clit over and over, my lips pressing, rolling, sucking, as I pump those two digits harder inside of her, over and over and over. My forearm muscles tighten, a slight burn spreading through from the assault, but her cries intensify, and I'm loving every moment of it. As her walls grip me in bursts of contractions, and her legs gently begin to shake, I know—

"I'm coming..." she whispers through hard pants. "I'm coming! Hooooly fuck!" Her legs convulse, her pussy gripping me even tighter, and I slow my rhythm, dragging her through the pleasure riddling her body.

"There's nothing holy about this, Little Eve," I say as I get up, and lift her from under the armpits.

I don't give her time to come down from the high of her orgasm, and I flip her trembling body around.

"No, there isn't, is there?" The glass steams with her whisper as she steadies herself against the window frame, arching her back as I grip her hip.

It's such a pretty sight, her hair wild down her back, her ass perched out for me, with the view of the moonlit sea as a backdrop.

I release myself from my trousers and boxers in record time, and grip my dick painfully hard, willing it to calm as her delicious taste lingers on my tongue. I need to last more than ten fucking seconds, but as I watch her now, still catching her breath from the orgasm, with her lush hips, full ass, and that soft skin... I realize I might not last at all.

Fuck!

I fumble quickly with the condom I pulled out of my pocket, and give my dick a final squeeze, the pain doing a good job at keeping me sane. Then I drag the glistening tip down between her ass cheeks, and her head falls back the moment it reaches her pussy.

I can't hold myself back, give her time to adjust. I'm dying to be inside of her.

Wrapping a hand around her throat, the other around her hip, I slam into her in one long stroke, and the sharp cry that echoes through the dark space is enough to make me come right now.

"Holy fuck!"

"I thought there was nothing holy about this." She laughs.

I pull out and slam right back into her.

"This is as fucking close to it as I'll ever get." I pull out and slam right back into her.

The window rattles, the slapping of our skin a cheer, pushing us further and further into this depravity.

"More..." she moans.

And I give her exactly that, slamming into her with a force that I'm afraid might break that window. So I pull her up, wrapping my hands around her, and carry on with the assault we both so desperately need. It goes past the moment of craving. Past the moment of mindless lust. I'm not even sure if it was ever only that.

She moans her protest as I pull out of her and turns around with fury painted brightly in her eyes. But I grab her face, pressing a bruising kiss on her lips as I push her against the wall next to the window. Then I lean over, hook her knee on my arm, teasing her as I rub the tip of my cock along her wet pussy. I insist just a bit longer on that swollen clit, as her nails rake over the skin of my back and waist.

"Don't fucking play with me, Serpent. Fuck me or get down on your knees, either way... make me come!"

"Oh, you've got a filthy mouth on you, Little Eve. Is this what you want?" I slam into her, balls deep, and her body hits the wall with a loud thud, knocking the air out of her. I slide out slowly, and her pussy drives me crazy

as it grips every single inch of me. “Or this?” As I thrust harder, she yelps with a smirk on her lips.

“More!”

With one arm hooked under her knee, holding her beautifully spread for me, and the other braced on the wall next to her head, I give her exactly what she wants. I fuck her weeping pussy with harsh thrusts, her body definitely bruising as it slams into the wall, and her sharp fingernails sink hard enough into my skin that she must be drawing blood.

“Is this what you want?”

She only pants in response, a divine smile pulling at her lips.

Far too many times in the last few months, I imagined her wrapped around my cock. I’ve dreamt of it too since our little dance in the forest. Having her here, now, feels like a damn dream.

“Your cunt weeps for me, sweet Eve. Tell me how you want to be fucked.”

A shudder rips through her and her gaze pins me with such wanton need, fire shines through the green.

“Harder! Find the end of me, Serpent!”

And I do. I spread her leg so far back, she cries at the stretch, but when I drive into her, I’m fully fucking sheathed. She yells, either in pleasure or pain, or maybe both, but her core spasms around me, threatening to milk me dry as I repeat the motion, and I take it as my cue. Pressing my fingers onto her clit, I barely rub twice, and she explodes around me, pulling me into the deep and I shatter right along with her.

I rest my forehead onto hers as her whole body spasms, and she swallows her moans as she wraps both arms around my neck, holding herself together. My knees begin to shake, this pleasure too much. Everything is too much.

She moans filthy words against my mouth, one more intelligible than the former, and I could have sworn that one of them was my name... not Serpent. My actual name.

Gods, I wish she would say it. The hate I bred in her is keeping it off her lips.

We crash onto the floor together, her arms still around my neck as she straddles me, panting. She's slightly reluctant, but her body finally relaxes, and her head falls on my chest, as I wrap my arms around her. There's a voice in the back of my mind that wills me to tighten my hold, like she's about to wake up, realize what she's just done, and bolt. But I push it in the background, and instead enjoy what I have, drawing lazy circles on her back as we come down to earth.

I cannot think of a time when sex was like this, when I needed a minute, not to catch my breath, but to reel my mind back in, too.

Was it ever?

CHAPTER 17

MORRIGAN

“I HAVE TO GO,” I whisper.

“No.” That’s all Vincent says—short, firm, no breath wasted.

“I’ve disappeared for too long.” I push myself up, clumsily getting to my feet, and pull on my bra and top.

I have no idea how to feel about this. It was the most mind-blowing sex I’ve ever had, and I can’t believe I lost myself this way. Huge fucking mistake though. His touch will linger on my skin for too long, and the last thing I need is to crave this wicked man.

Using the moonlight, I find my skirt, and when I pick it up and wrap it around my waist, I realize how pointless this is. This thing is made of just eight or ten wide ribbons of fabric, hanging from what could only be described as a belt, and my panties are hanging from my hips, split where I need them most.

Fuck.

Time to improvise. I grab the two ribbons at the front, pass them between my legs and loop them around the waistband at the back, before coming back to the front for a second layer of covering. It will have to do, so hopefully it holds on.

“Do they miss you that much downstairs? I don’t think you can dance in that anymore.”

When I look back up at The Serpent, I find him watching me with a slightly impressed expression, as he points at my makeshift underwear. He pauses for a moment longer before he zips up his trousers and covers the scar I gave him as he buttons up his shirt.

“I’m not dancing anymore. Not tonight,” I answer, but my gaze fixes on his chest.

God, I was so angry that day. My family and Ryan had already made me feel like shit, and then he appeared. It was the first time I’d seen him in years, and his voice, his scent, his eyes, everything about him made me furious. His sheer presence in my space was an insult. But the worst thing was that it didn’t feel any different from all those years before—it felt as if he belonged right there, next to me. And that enraged me further. Ultimately, it was the reason why I stabbed him. He was getting too close, and I was terrified of how good that comfort could feel.

“How badly did I hurt you?” I ask, nodding to his chest, as I rub a thumb over my own scar.

“It only went in about an inch and a half. Could have been worse.”

“I’ll keep it in mind for next time.” I feel bad, but I don’t want to develop compassion for the man. No matter how well he just fucked me.

“It’s cute of you to think that it will happen again,” he says, cocking an eyebrow in that effortlessly arrogant way that makes me want to ask him to fuck me all over again. “Why are you in such a rush to leave?”

I try to look around for our masks, but this darkness is too thick. I know there’s a switch next to the unfinished kitchen cabinets, so I fumble my way over.

“It’s not the club I’ve disappeared for too long from.” I flip the switch and the open space fills with a soft light,

both of us blinking a few times to adjust to it.

“Then who?”

Suddenly, the door flies open.

“Moorri!” Lulu bursts through, panic in her voice.

She stops, panting as she looks between me and The Serpent, confusion slowly narrowing her eyes. But she shakes her head and points to the window.

“He’s here.”

“No, no, no. Fuck!” I flip that switch back off, then rush to the window, slowly peeking down, trying to confirm the bad news. “I have to go!”

“What the fuck is going on?!” The Serpent’s voice booms through the open space.

“It’s Ryan, he’s downstairs. Security alerted me that there’s someone in front of the building, trying to get inside the lobby of the apartments.” Lulu’s still trying to catch her breath, and I know she probably didn’t even wait for the elevator, she just ran up. “Wait. What are *you* doing here? Morri, what is *he* doing here?”

She turns to me, the light of the moon shining on her, bright enough that I can’t miss that scolding gaze.

“Just... sealing a deal,” he answers for me, and I can read the smirk in his voice even if I can’t see it. “Why is Holt here?”

“Because I’m not supposed to be. I have to go.”

I see our masks on the floor and pick them both up, handing one to him and mine to Lulu. I quickly unwrap my wig, flipping my hair over a few times and handing that to her too.

“I need a long dress, something I can quickly throw over this. All my clothes are in the club.”

“Come to my place. Quick!” She runs to the door, ripping it open, and it’s then that I hear the loud bangs,

rattling the metal of the lobby doors, way down on the ground floor.

“Listen to me, goddamnit!” The Serpent yells, his hand wrapping around my upper arm, turning me around to face him. “I can protect you. You don’t need to go.”

I shake my head, tears burning their way through my lids, and emotions I’ve never shown to Vincent slowly seep through. I’m terrified. Fucking terrified that right now I risk exposing our hard work to the man I want to rip out of this world. He’s threatening everything I am—my family, my brother, my best friend, my goddamn freedom. And I’ve disappeared for too long. I knew it was a mistake coming to the club tonight. I should have gone anywhere else. But then again, he probably would have searched here first anyway.

“He can’t know. Listen to me, he can’t know.” My tone is urgent, and frantic, and his usual dark slits widen for a moment. “You’re the last hope I have to take them all down. I won’t risk you. You’re my secret weapon, and it’s too soon to draw you out.”

I pull myself out of his grip and rush to the door, pulling it open.

“Come on.” I keep my tone low as I turn to him. With a deep sigh, he finally hurries to me and follows up the stairs.

We reach Lulu’s floor at the same time she comes out the door, a casual, long black dress in tow. I quickly pull it on and look between them.

“I’m going to try to talk to him. He knows that sometimes I spend the night here, so this shouldn’t be any different. Obviously, he will protest, but he usually gives up. He claimed I still get some freedom until the knot is tied, so I’m gonna try to reason.” I give Lulu a quick peck on the cheek, then look one last time at Vincent. The fury painted so vividly on his features

takes me aback, but I can't stay and ask if it's directed at me or Ryan, so I quickly rush down the stairs instead.

There was no way I was going to tell either of them, but a sickness has filled my insides, like never before. Ryan has never done this, and I have a feeling there will be no reasoning with him this time, no matter how hard I try.

But what choice do I have?

VINCENT

“COME WITH ME.” LORELEY GRABS my wrist, displaying no sense of self-preservation, no worry that she’s bossing the fucking Serpent around. What is it with these two women? Have they no fear?

The moment we’re inside her apartment, I pull my hand from her grip, and she stops, turning to me. Now, in this closed space, all alone, judging by the look in her eyes, she finally realizes who stands before her. I don’t miss the slight shiver running down her body.

“I know who you are.” She tightens her shoulders. “I also know who to come to if anything happens to her, because you two made a deal, and I know the terms.” She stands tall, unmoving, holding her ground.

“You know everything?”

She narrows her eyes but stays silent. Does she know about my past with Morrigan? Or about the guy she murdered? About the leverage Holt has against her?

My bet is she knows what she needs to.

“Come.” She finally speaks and runs toward the window.

The lights are off, so we’re slightly protected from whoever looks up from below. But the image before me breaks a part of me I didn’t know existed until now, and I grab onto those pieces, holding them tight because I need to put them back together eventually.

I’m losing her...

My hands tighten into fists, nostrils flaring with a painful tension that rips through my chest, as I watch

Morrigan. She's fighting off two guys as they grab each of her arms at Holt's orders. The moment Loreley cracks the window slightly, Morrigan's scream splits me in half, and my short nails dig into my palms painfully.

"Let me gooo! Dammit, Ryan, let me go, you're better than this. Just—"

Holt takes one step, just one step toward her, and she freezes. The woefully defeated, submissive look in her eyes, pushes me over the fucking edge. It brings back memories I've buried. Memories of a woman broken at the hands of a controlling, abusive man. But there's no way I'll let this situation get as far as I allowed it with my mom.

Ryan Holt is as good as dead. Just as my goddamn sperm donor will eventually be. Morrigan's, too.

His death sentence was signed already, but this might just warrant a more special execution.

A feral growl fills my ears, and when Loreley's head whips in my direction, I realize it was mine. But I'm already on the move. Only a few more steps, and I'll be out the door, ready to fucking end this right here, right now.

"No! Vincent, stop! She's right. You can't do anything now." There's such desperation in Loreley's voice. It cracks with a similar pain to the one ripping me apart at this moment. Its familiarity makes me stop.

She whirls around me, gripping my arms, her golden eyes pleading, as unshed tears pool there. That's her best friend out there and we share this pain. Her throat bobs, once... twice, and she swallows her breaths, as a tear falls onto her cheek. Then another, and another.

With no notice whatsoever from my brain, I shake off her hands and pull her in, wrapping my arms around her. Then she breaks. She cries into my chest, quiet whimpers of fear as I hold her. I'm tense, fully out of my

comfort zone, but Loreley is all alone in this, and I cannot just stand here and watch her break down.

“He will pay for this,” I whisper.

She pulls away, her lips parting to speak, but a commotion distracts us, and we rush to the cracked window. One of the guys is on his knees, clutching his crotch, and the other one holds both Morrigan’s hands behind her back. In the next moment, Holt’s hand slams against her cheek so hard, the guy behind has to hold her up.

I see fucking red, visions of crimson rivers of their blood filling these motherfucking streets, and I know one thing for sure—that’s not my imagination, it’s the fucking future.

“You’ll never see that Dietrich bitch ever again. You’ll never step foot here, or anywhere else, for that matter, unless you’re with me. I hope you enjoyed yourself tonight, because it was last of your freedom,” Holt spits at her before shoving her in the back of the SUV. *“Oh, and by the way, I moved the wedding date.”* He slams the door closed on her screams, and we hide as he turns to look up.

I have to get her back.

“She’ll be okay. She’ll be okay. My girl is strong. She’ll be okay.” Loreley repeats those words like a mantra.

She will be okay, right?

Tires screech on the asphalt, and we both peek out the window—they’re gone. She’s gone. And this complicates things.

“What are we going to do?” Loreley asks.

“We are not going to do anything. You will carry on as per usual, take care of your club, and whatever else you do. If you need any help with that in *her* absence, you let me know.”

“No offense. Morri might be desperate enough to make a deal with you, but I would rather not.” Her chin raises and her gaze is a far cry from moments ago when she was sobbing into my chest.

Like a switch, she flipped it and whoever she was a minute ago is buried deep. If it’s even buried at all. It might just be gone. It’s peculiar, but her sweet voice doesn’t quite match that stern look in her eyes.

“I’m not making a deal with you. I’m offering support.” I take a step forward. Not toward her, but to the door.

“Yeah. You seem to be a very... supportive man. I didn’t peg you as the type to hold a crying woman as you did.”

I turn my head to her, the muscles of my face slowly relaxing in their usual state that makes people around me uncomfortable, fearful.

“I’ve never claimed to be heartless, Miss Dietrich.” I move away, toward the exit, and stop before I’m out. “But I would still appreciate it if you kept that information to yourself.”

“Sure. We wouldn’t want people to know that The Serpent has a soft side.” There’s a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

“Not when his enemies could rip away the reason why he does.”

On the slight hitch in her breath, I walk out.

CHAPTER 18

MORRIGAN

THAT VEIL OF HATE HAS fallen thick over me, over us, over everything we were, are, and never will be.

Who imagines a relationship ending in a forced beginning? No one. Not even me, knowing I live in this world where the barrier between good and evil is drawn with chalk.

“You brought this on yourself,” Ryan rasps.

I’ve never seen him this angry, never felt the sting of his palm on my face until today, and I think that shocked me most of all. The fury in his eyes rendered me speechless when we were out on the street, because it’s not a usual emotion for him. Not with me anyway.

“I didn’t do anything!” My pitch heightens as I clutch the sides of my face, fear and anger mixing in a concoction that has the stupidest effect on me. I’m erratic and frozen at the same time and my brain can’t fucking decide on the next move.

“Oh, of course you did, darling. You made me go out on the streets looking for your trampy ass! Then you made a show out of it all where anyone could have seen.” He moves toward me, and I shuffle backwards on the bed in an instant.

But something marvelous happens—a victorious smirk creeps through his eyes, pulling at the corners of his lips, and it fuels me with such disdain. He does not get to win over me. He may have kidnapped me, but he does not get to hold the power. That smirk brings back the threads of what makes me... *me*, and the apprehension I felt toward him just seconds before, begins to dissipate. It's not completely gone, and it will not be until I'll hold back all the power. But this is a goddamn start.

So I hang on to that feeling and make a silent promise to the man who's trying to break me—*you will pay for this, Ryan Holt. I'll make sure you suffer before you take your last breath.*

“My trampy ass?! You screwed a woman in front of me to prove some sort of point that only made sense to you! You've gone mad. You lost yourself in this dark world, in the money it can bring and the power you will never, ever obtain. You delusional motherfucker!” My tone grows stronger with each sentence, and it only triggers him more.

“I didn't lose myself, Morrigan, on the contrary, I found myself. I goddamn found myself, who I'm meant to be, and it took me long enough to get here. Too long did I have to kiss my dear father's ass, until he was finally out of the equation, and yours, too. But you're not going anywhere. You always thought you were so much better than me, up there on your high horse with your rich, clueless family who bailed you out of all the fucking bullshit you've caused. And they don't even know the full extent of it yet. Like how you killed a man before you were even eighteen years old.” His arms are all over the place, waving in the air to match his tone and the wild gaze.

It engages my fight-or-flight response The former much more.

“And even without that knowledge, they still fucking hate you. Enough to sell you to me without a second

thought.”

His maniacal laugh echoes off the walls, the creases in his skin bizarre in the dim light of the only lit lamp in the room.

“I didn’t ask you to kiss my ass, Ryan. I didn’t fucking ask you for anything,” I argue.

“But I wanted you. Needed you! For so long, I waited in the background for you to notice me. Even in those teenage years in school, when you had eyes for anyone but me. Then I waited for you through goddamn university, and I finally got you. I fucked and ruined you, and I want more!” Madness shines in his eyes with those last words. “I want everything you are and everything you have! I want to destroy every fucking piece of you until all you’ll be is a shadow under my control.”

The veins in his temple and the ones in his throat are bulging, the pulse raging high as his eyes grow so wide, they look feral. A cold shiver runs through me, and I don’t know where to go from here. I’m shocked, confused, and definitely creeped out. I can’t make sense of him.

“Why? Why are you so intent on destroying me?” It comes out barely louder than a whisper.

“Because you said no.”

I’m stunned into silence, but I’m more confused than shocked.

“Are you jo—”

“You ignored me for so long, and when I asked you out, you said no. I loved you, and you said no. I worshiped you, and you said no! I always knew that we were perfect for each other, and you still fucking said no. You are my first love, Morrigan!” He’s strangely emotional, but it comes out as manic. Yet he still continues. “You only noticed me when the time came for me to help you bury a goddamn body. It felt like

betrayal. But betrayal tastes fucking bitter and you filled me with it.”

“Jesus, Ryan, what are you talking about? How did I betray you?”

“Don’t patronize me!” His sudden rage makes me flinch. Then he takes a deep breath and continues like nothing happened. “You only had eyes for the *snake*. Only for him... Then that night, you gave me exactly what I needed to make sure you will have no escape from me—you gave me leverage.”

“We were fucking teenagers! You cannot be serious. You’re doing this because of something that happened over six years ago? You have some sort of sick vendetta, even though we did end up together?” He’s insane, Jesus Christ, he’s insane. I—I don’t know how to deal with this. “This makes no sense, Ryan. You keep blaming this on me, but *you* ruined us.”

“We may have been young, but were we not human? We were. And I loved you and you went to someone else. Either way, after that night, I knew I needed to wait for all the pieces to fall into place—my father, the business, then you. I watched my father take too little risks, make too many mistakes over the years, and I knew I could do so much better than him. I could bring this business to a greatness that would control this whole fucking city and everything around it!” He raises his arms to the sides, palms up, like he’s presenting his victory to me. A megalomaniac in action... “And you fit perfectly in my new world, only your place is no longer on the throne, my love, it’s on your knees in front of mine.”

I suppress the retching, but it’s hard-fucking-work. He walks around the bed, and I stiffen as he leans over, swiping the backs of his fingers against my cheek. One by one, each of my muscles flinches in awareness as it prepares my body to flee.

“I loved you. You know I did, and you shit on everything anyway,” I say, holding his gaze.

“Until you didn’t and planned to leave me. I couldn’t allow that.” He leans in closer, planting his hands on the bed, and just as he’s about to climb up, a ringing blares through the room, making him pause.

He waits, enough to inhale and exhale his irritation, before he rises and pulls the phone from his front pocket.

He frowns at the name on the screen and answers. “What? ... When?”

I try to listen, hoping I can pick up something from the other line.

“And they want to throw in another dozen? ... Okay, we need the space... In the—” He catches himself, turning to me just before he reveals something I most certainly shouldn’t know. “Yeah, I’ll come now.” He grins at me and hangs up.

Walking around the bed, he stops in the middle of the room. “This is yours.” He gestures around the space. “You will not leave unless I allow you to. You will be out for meals downstairs and nothing more. You have essentials here, and if anything else is needed... well, you can try asking my mother. You will stay in here until I can trust you with me in my bedroom. It will not change your condition, but you will be allowed more freedom in this house.”

It’s a whirlwind. I’m pulled in directions I cannot even think of anymore. What’s up, what’s down, what the hell is going on? This night that started so beautifully crashed and burned in an unexpected way. All I anticipated was a heated reaction, not a kidnapping.

Ryan rips open the door, and before he disappears through it, he turns his head slightly.

“And by the way, there is no question that I will obtain the power I deserve. I will rip it right out of the clutches

of the *sanctity* that rules this city.”

And with that last spit off his tongue, he slams the door behind him, the pictures rattling on the walls in his wake.

The last thing I hear is the click of the locks.

VINCENT

I SHOULDN'T BE IN THIS state. Her absence should not make me feel like a savage, ready to burn down his fucking castle to claim her back. But it does. Goddamnit, it does, and I can't figure out when I fell. When the shadow of my obsession for her shifted forward. The one that always cast its darkness in a deep corner of my soul, noticeable even amidst the crepuscule that already resides there.

She's always been there. Always.

My little obsession.

The one I was forced to let go of too many years ago.

In the meantime, I had to move on. I convinced myself that she was too young for this life anyway, even though it was bullshit. The preconceptions that come with certain ages barely applied to her, and when they did, they gave her a sort of naivety that made her even more desirable. She was eager, headstrong in all the right and wrong ways, but perfect to mold with the right qualities. Not that she needed much molding. Morrigan O'Rourke has always been a force to be reckoned with, but I wanted to be the one to teach her about the afflictions of this world and show her how to corrupt them so they bend at your will. And goddamnit, she had will. Her fire was ravenous even then, and so dangerous, it took me too long to stop worrying that she'd end up in fucking jail, or... dead.

Eventually, I had no choice. And I managed to convince myself that, without me, she would stay out of this world, my world, and she'd be safer.

I still kept my eyes on her. I couldn't help myself. Not in a stalkerish way, but once in a while, I would *check in* and see what she was up to. She still got into fights. I would have thought that by now she would have actually taken some lessons, but no. Her bar fights are sloppy, violent, and brash, but she enters this state of delirium that fills her with adrenaline and she's unstoppable then. Last fight I saw her in was maybe a year ago, in Levane, the next town over. She was with Loreley in this dive of a bar that's stupidly popular, and some guy couldn't take no for an answer and crossed the line. She didn't know I was there too. It was pure coincidence, and I was fully out of her sight, but ready to jump and rip that asshole's head off. I didn't need to—she broke his nose with the peanut bowl from the bar, then absolutely destroyed two barstools on his body. The sight was utterly divine. It took two people to get her off him, and a fight almost broke out in the whole bar. She left before she found out I was there.

Yet here we are... magnets that finally turned the right way around and got pulled back together.

"You look rough." Finn's voice sounds somewhere next to me.

I sigh and look up. Bright blue eyes grin at me, only, the moment they actually catch my gaze, they darken.

"What's wrong?!"

You can always tell when Finn gets serious, because that pretty boy face suddenly becomes sharper, and his lean, wide shoulders pull back and seem to widen. His whole stance shifts, making you feel like you're in the savannah, out in the open, and a cheetah has its eyes on you. You want to run, and even if you do, you know there's no way you're going to be fast enough.

I open my mouth to speak as Madds walks in. "You know, one of these days, I'm going to walk into this bar and your faces are not going to look the way they do now. What the fuck happened now?"

I swipe a palm over my face, then settle my elbows on my knees, clutching my hands together.

“Holt took Morrigan O’Rourke.”

“Wait, what do you mean he *took* her? I thought they live together, future wife and all.” Finn sits in the opposite armchair, confused, and I narrow my eyes on him, slits warning him off.

“They don’t. Since the engagement, he and her family have forced her to stay with him, but whenever her parents aren’t paying attention, she stays at their house. Fucking gems they are.” Madds crosses his arms, looking a little uneasy.

“I don’t get it. Why doesn’t she just run away?” Finn asks.

Madds and I exchange looks, a silent conversation taking place. It’s not our secret to tell, but then again, it’s the one we need to, if the whole Sanctum is going to help her. Even if the deal was made just with me, I need my brothers in this. I can’t fucking risk her.

“Because Holt helped her bury a dead man and is now blackmailing her.” We all turn at the same time, watching Carter walk quickly toward us.

“What the fu—How the hell did you know?”

I agree with Madds. What is going on here?

“We’re in. I finally got into Holt’s personal computer, but I have limited access. He’s either not great with technology, or he’s paranoid. So he doesn’t back up into clouds or online servers. I only have access when it’s actually turned on. Tina and Jian traced it and got in about an hour ago. We didn’t have much time before we got disconnected, and only managed to copy about twenty percent of his drives. But one of the folders we copied—Carter turns his gaze to me—“is a photo album of a younger Morrigan O’Rourke, digging a hole in the ground and looking over a dead body.”

“Is there any way to find out where else he holds this information? If he copied it on an external hard drive?” I ask.

“Wait, you know of this?” Finn leans over, looking between us.

“We found out the other day, pretty much at the same time as her. She had no idea the bastard took photos and had them this whole time,” Madds responds.

“Wait, I understand why Vin would know, but why do *you* know?!”

“Because Holt decided to reveal this to her when we were at the dinner party the other day, the one O’Rourke invited us to. Before he left, he gave her an envelope of photos and we walked in on her after she opened it,” I explain, and he rubs his jaw as he listens.

“I have a feeling I already know the answer to this, but what the heck? Who killed the guy she was burying?” Finn continues the line of questioning.

“She did, and it was my fault.”

The room goes silent at those last words. Madds is the only one who knows the whole story. Almost the whole thing.

Jesus, I don’t want to be a sappy prick and bare my fucking heart and soul out to them. This is not who we are, no matter how tight our bond is. *Shit*. But they have to know something; they need some context.

“Fucking hell.” I swipe a hand over my face, sighing. “Look, you already know Morrigan and I were together. A long time ago, when you and Carter were in university. And... yeah, shit happened. We were at that point when all of this”—I point around us—“was starting, when we were making our first deals and establishing ourselves. And it ended.”

“You’re skipping a few parts of that story, brother...” Madds’ tone is lower, pinning me with his deep amber eyes from under his eyebrows.

Fuck, I know I'm skipping over a few parts!

I'm skipping over the fact that I noticed her years before we got together. I'm skipping over the way her green eyes stood out in school, no matter the crowds of girls who swooned over us.

I'm skipping over the fact that through those crowds, hers was the only face I saw. I noticed her when no one else seemed to, and I couldn't believe that wild red hair framing that freckled pale skin could ever be overlooked.

I'm skipping over how I broke up a fight one day between her and some kid who was bullying her, and she was winning. I stood there and admired the fire in her for a while, before I stopped her from making a big mistake. I'm skipping over how I pulled her away and dragged her behind the maintenance building to calm her rage.

I'm skipping over how I felt when her heaving breaths were turning to something else other than rage and I had to step away from her. Over how she ran to me after I turned to leave, jumped into my arms, and pressed her soft lips to mine. I'm definitely skipping over how pure and wild it felt. And over how she smirked at me and ran back to class, but not before telling me...

"I saved that one for you. My first one."

Her first goddamn kiss.

I'm skipping over how she left me speechless and confused. How I finished school and moved on. How I found her again a couple of years later, beating up the guy who was forcing himself on her. I'm skipping over how important she became in a stupidly short amount of time. How deep she crawled under my skin, seeped into my blood, and filled every part of my heart.

I'm skipping over how I got to ask her...

"Did you save this first for me as well?" As I looked down at where we were almost joined.

And she did. It meant more than I ever thought something like that would. Because it was her. Because everything she was, her mind, her soul, her heart, fit with mine like perfect puzzle pieces, and it made no sense how it was possible.

I'm skipping over all of this and more.

"Madds and I saved her from the guy we told you about a while back, the one whose jaw she broke. And we got together not long after, for a few months." I hold myself straight, pulling that shield up, strapping on the armor that contains The Serpent they all know. It's not a mask, this is all me, but that armor protects and conceals those vulnerable parts of me, the softer sides that enjoy their privacy. "When we broke up, that same guy came for her, because he knew she was no longer under my protection. He knew I was out of her life and was all alone." I briefly repeat the story Morrigan shared with us.

Finn has a sympathetic look in his eyes, whilst Carter... well, emotions aren't his strong suit, so that analytical look in his doesn't quite surprise me.

"Why did you break up?" Carter asks, cocking his head subtly.

"It doesn't matter now." My eyes flicker to Madds for a split second. "What matters is that Morrigan O'Rourke cannot leave. Holt threatened to kill her parents, her brother, and when she seemed not to care that much about that, he threatened her with jail. And there's no way she would get out on self-defense, not after hiding it and burying the guy. He threatened Loreley too... and she cares more about her than she does her own freedom. She's stuck, hence—"

"Why she asked you for help," Carter says as a matter of fact.

"Yes, well, she asked for my help when it wasn't even quite this bad. I think she still had some hope then. But I've seen how Holt treated her. He kidnapped her from

the sidewalk, threatened, and slapped her. And there's one more thing that has to stay between us only. She'll fucking kill me if it gets out."

They all nod in unison.

"Metamorphosis is hers too. She's a silent partner."

"Why silent? I mean, it wouldn't be unusual for two friends to go into business together. Look at us."

"Yeah, Finn, but none of us have abusive families and partners who want to destroy us."

Carter clears his throat in an all-knowing way, but I interrupt him.

"You know what I mean."

"Knowing her, she's doing it for Loreley more than for herself. Holt, even her family, would use the club against her," Mads says, nodding in understanding.

"What would they do if they found out we're backing them?"

Finn's words lay heavy in the air and grins form on all of our lips.

"As much as I will love seeing that, we have to hold off until the time is right. No one can know. No one."

CHAPTER 19

VINCENT

“HELLO, MY DARLINGS,” JONATHAN, *The Ghost*, greets us.

He’s a lean man, well into his fifties, very well-dressed in his tweed suit that Carter is currently admiring. Both men have style, but Jonathan definitely has an edge, and always wears some sort of flashy accessory. A little something to give him that touch of extravagance, whilst remaining tasteful. This time around, a filigree gold brooch shines on his lapel.

“Jonathan,” Carter says with a nod.

He’s the one who built this connection between the man and The Sanctum. When they were younger, Jonathan was Carter’s father’s best friend, but their relationship slowed down because of his mother. She was overbearing in a special kind of way. Life and Jonathan’s business got in the way after that, and they didn’t properly reconnect before his death. A year or so later, Carter’s friendship with the man started, just before he left for university, and although we don’t appeal to him too much in business, he is a very useful ally.

We all came here, at Jonathan’s urgent request, and we’re anxious to find out what the hell is going on. He’s never *ordered* us to hurry up, ever before.

“Come, come. Follow me.”

He leads us quickly inside a warehouse, and we're eagle-eyed as we pass large industrial shelves filled with packed boxes of all shapes, sizes, and materials. Some more heavy duty than others. But we don't stop at any of them, instead we go straight to the other end of it, where two of Jonathan's men stand by a sliding door that's probably about nine foot high and just as wide.

He stops and turns to us.

“This is one thing I won't work with, and I'm convinced you won't agree with it either.”

His men slide open the large door, and we're looking right at the back of a container, its doors cracked. Since it opens inside the warehouse, it's a clever way of checking the contents without having outside eyes on you. But when he opens up the container, we're all stuck for words.

The stench is horrendous. The image even worse.

Girls and boys are huddled together, all in a horrible state. They're dirty, scared, or just catatonic. None of them dare say a word to us or even make eye contact. They're completely still, clearly afraid that the wrong move would be fatal. Some of them look drugged out of their mind.

“How long have they been in there?!” Finn reacts first.

When I turn to him, I can't pinpoint his expression—his lips are parted, he's blinking rapidly, but he quickly shakes himself, taking a deep breath before looking away.

“The container has been traveling for three days. We fed them and gave them water when we found them. That was about an hour or so ago, and we haven't logged the receipt of the container yet. But I will have to soon.”

“Are you telling me that this is O’Rourke’s container?” I take one more step forward, swiping my eyes over the delicate faces that don’t dare look at me. They’re probably between ten and sixteen, at most.

“And Holt’s,” Jonathan confirms.

“But the deal was for ammunition and goddamn cocaine!” When I turn to Madds, he’s barely containing himself.

The man is a beast. He looks like one. He sounds like one, but he doesn’t act like one unless he’s in the ring of *The Fightclub* or he has a good fucking reason to waste his energy on killing a man. None of that applies to crimes against children, though, especially sexual crimes. The people involved in something like this are at the top of his ‘no questions asked murder.’

“That was indeed the deal. I’m supposed to be discreet too. But one of my guys heard crying when we pulled the container off the ship and set it in the docking area. I won’t condone this, Vincent.” He turns to me, a stern gravity in his eyes.

“I agree. It needs to stop now.” Madds steps forward and walks inside the container. Some of the kids cower instantly, trying to make themselves invisible, and it’s fucking hard to watch.

It’s just as hard to say the next words out loud.

“We can’t stop it now.”

Everyone freezes. When their predatory gazes turn to me, various levels of outrage and fury meet mine, but I continue before they start protesting.

“If we do, all hell breaks loose, the deal is off, we become enemies, and all of them”—I point to the poor souls in the container—“along with the ones before and the ones after, will be lost. They’ll find another way, probably a better one, and this operation will continue behind our backs. What we need is to find out more

without Holt and O'Rourke knowing, then end them and their entire operation."

"That's complete fucking madness!" Madds' voice booms through the small space of the container and some of the kids start crying. But he sighs, swiping a hand over his buzzcut, and I know he sees the reasoning too.

"Are you fucking saying that we're supposed to close these doors and let them go, wherever the fuck those assholes are taking them?!" The anger and pain in Finn's voice is unmistakable.

If anyone is going to be sensitive about this, it's definitely him. He's the only one here who has lost someone to this *trade*, and he's never spoken a word about it since. Not to me anyway.

"We don't have a choice. They can't know we're aware of this. This is the quickest way to find out where they're taking them, because this operation might be bigger than this one container. The hydra has many heads, and we need to cut the root and find all of them." As harsh as I sound, as horrible as this solution is, I know I'm making sense. From the looks I'm getting, it's clear that the wheels are spinning in their brains right now. "Saving just them will not save all the others. If there are any others."

"We need someone on the inside. But none of Katya's employees would fit in, none of them look remotely young enough." Carter cocks his head, swiping his gaze through the faces in the container.

"Jesus Christ." I hear Finn somewhere next to me, as he starts pacing around. I understand he's uncomfortable with this, but it's the quickest choice we have right now.

"I'll—I'll do it." We all turn at the same time a girl, one of the older ones in there, gets up on very shaky legs, and tries to walk from the back of the container.

Madds rushes to her, reaching over to help, but she pulls back quickly. No one speaks, so we don't freak her out more than she already is. Eventually, after a brief pause gazing into his eyes, she gently places her small hand in Madds' large one and walks forward. I don't miss the way every single soul in that container turns as she walks past. They quite literally look up to her. If she's the eldest, she probably protected them in there or before they were put in.

She steps out into the brighter light of the warehouse, and now we can see she's older than the others in there. She's maybe five-foot-three and slim, too slim, and she looks exhausted. One of Jonathan's men rushes away and quickly returns with a chair.

"I'll do it. If there's more"—she looks back toward the inside of the container—"I want to find them. But it has to happen fast. I can't risk them getting... I can't." She sighs, unable to finish that sentence.

"I know. I understand." I try to be comforting, but I don't think my current stern attitude works for her. I'm blinded by the disgust I have toward this entire situation. I turn to Jonathan. "How much time do we have until you have to let them know the container arrived?"

"An hour, tops."

"Okay. We need a tracker." I look at Carter who nods and wastes no time, rushing through the warehouse. Seconds later, we hear the car leaving. "We're going to put a tracker on you. It's going to be small. You might have to swallow it or—"

"It's okay. I'll do whatever it takes. Slice me open and put it under my skin, I don't care. Just... help them."

Not us, not me—*them*.

"What's your name?" I ask her.

"Evelyn." Her voice is calm, not defeated, but composed, as if she's been trying to hold herself together through all of this.

“How old are you?” Finn steps forward, the look in his eyes hard to pinpoint. Somewhere between anger, shock, and heartbreaking sadness.

“Seventeen...” She turns her head toward the container. “My sister is seven.”

“Fucking hell,” he mutters to himself, swiping a hand over his face.

Everyone in this room right now is broken in some way. I drag my gaze over all their faces, and even the two men I don’t know, Jonathan’s men, look as if they could cry and kill at the same time. We all may be criminals, but this is not our kind of crime.

“We’ll get you all out. That’s a promise. But you all have to be strong. I just don’t know what will happen as soon as you’ll arrive wherever they’re taking you.” I wish I didn’t have to say those words, but I can’t promise her she’ll be fully safe.

I attempt to comfort her again though and place my hand on her shoulder.

She flinches but doesn’t move away. Her eyes narrow on mine for a moment before she nods. Maybe she sees my promise in them. Or maybe the violence I plan to unleash on the people who did this to them. She looks up at Madds, and even as he stands beside her, she seems comfortable with that.

“Will they—will they get to the children?” She lowers her tone to a whisper.

Her big eyes, a thick, dark ring surrounding a bright gray seeping into amber, fix on me, begging for an answer I don’t have.

“I really hope not, but I don’t want to lie to you.”

Tears slowly fill her eyes, but she doesn’t cry, doesn’t even whimper. She lets them pool in her lids until there’s no more space and they trail down her dirty cheeks, before she finally wipes them with the back of her hand.

“I understand.” She turns to the others again, and nods once. A gentle reassurance she doesn’t really believe in.

“Where did they take you from?” Madds asks her.

“Various places. We’re not all from the same city... They just brought us all to the same place. My sister and I, they took us when I was picking her up from school after work.”

“What about your parents? They must be looking for you two,” he continues.

She shakes her head. “They, um—It’s only us two.” She pauses and inhales deeply, wiping more tears before they find her cheeks. “I can’t fail her.”

“You won’t. We’ll get you out before anything happens,” Finn promises as he approaches and squats down at a safe distance, his gaze leveled with hers.

But he shouldn’t promise that at all. As much as I want to guarantee it, I can’t. None of us can. We’ll do our fucking best, though. But judging by the look in Finn’s eyes as he fixes on Evelyn in a peculiar way, our best will not be enough. He’ll make it his fucking mission to save her and everyone else in there before anything bad happens. He looks at her like he’s making a silent oath.

Gods know what will happen to him if he won’t be able to deliver.

Not long passes and Carter returns with a small tracker, small enough that he managed to put it in a pill cartridge. I’m not gonna lie, the advances of technology are rather scary.

“It won’t dissolve; it’s specially made. But it will pass through. Keep it in your mouth for as long as you can. Swallow it only if they try to check your mouth, okay?” Carter explains, handing her the pill.

“We should go,” I say, swiping my gaze over everyone here.

Finn's gaze is fixed on Evelyn as Madds helps her up, and back into the space that's probably going to become her nightmare. She stops and turns before the container doors close.

"When it's done, I can't have the police knowing of me and my sister. It's only us, and they'll split us up. I'll lose her to the system."

Madds nods in acknowledgement. Considering what we're about to do, the police will be the last people to hear of this. Their idea of justice doesn't quite align with ours.

Terrified eyes look upon us as we're forced to shut the container doors. But I can guarantee that each and every one of the men standing here today are making silent vows and murderous promises for all those children.

"Carter?" I turn to him.

"It's already tracking. I texted Brendan and he confirmed. He's staying on it and following the girl's signal."

"We're going to get a team ready to follow, but do you all want to be involved as well?" I ask them.

"Yes," Finn answers without wasting a breath.

"We'll go change quickly in the Fightclub. Have a team on alert close by, ready to follow as they leave."

"We can't go in all guns blazing," Carter follows up. "We'll do recon to make sure we cut their communication and any surveillance they have, then take out everyone. We can't risk them, or Holt and O'Rourke, knowing we're coming or are involved in any way."

"I'll talk to Katya to look into a safe space to hide and take care of the children. I'll ask some of the girls for help as well. But we don't really know what number to prepare for."

“It’s not going to matter. They’ll just be happy to be somewhere safe,” I continue, turning to Jonathan. “Are you staying for the pickup?”

“No. The less I have to deal with this, the better. I have eyes on them though, constantly. But I’m happy to get my men involved, if you need extra power.”

We assembled an entire army as the years have passed; however, it will be wise not to use too many of them for this operation. So I confirm to The Ghost that his help would be much appreciated.

Apart from Jonathan’s guys who stay to coordinate the pickup, we all rush out of the space and straight to our cars. Carter opens a line with his hackers, shoving a small pod in his ear to listen to the running commentary, in case it all starts moving before we get to The Fightclub.

“Follow us,” I tell Jonathan. “We’ll meet at Midnight and figure it all out. Actually, meet us in the club, through the back entrance. It’s closed tonight.”

It sits deep underneath our bar, with its entrance at the back of the building, and a private one for us through Midnight. Besides an outlet this city definitely needs, we use The Fightclub to move money illicitly obtained or made. Madds is the one in charge of the fighting and Carter of the operation.

The fighting happening there is not pretty, clean boxing. Most of the time, it’s some form of MMA or bare-knuckle boxing. There are very few rules, and most of the time, it’s a fucking massacre. Some people barely make it out alive. It’s their choice to fight, though, and some people pay to be in that ring. But we’re just as selective with our fighters and clientele, as we are with the ones in Midnight.

It’s Monday, one of four times a week it’s closed, so we’ll have privacy. Plus, we have a change of clothes there, ones appropriate for what we’re about to do.

This is going to be brutal, and I can't help but think of Morrigan. I'm convinced she doesn't know of this human trafficking operation, and I wonder what she'll think of her family and fiancé when she finds out.

No matter how strong she is, I was already worried about her. We've had zero contact since she was taken. But if her future husband is involved in something like this, then how exactly is she being treated? Is she okay?

What the hell is Ryan Holt doing to her right now?

CHAPTER 20

MORRIGAN

THREE DAYS HAVE PASSED, and for three days, one thing hasn't left my mind: The Serpent.

I cling to memories of him because they seem to be the only thing keeping me sane in this surreal confinement. They bring me a strange sort of hope, and at the same time, anger. We made a pact that he would be the one to help me get out of this bullshit. But these new memories of him, of his touch as he dances me through the forest, of him fucking me against the window he didn't know belongs to me, all of these are infiltrated by that heartbroken teenager he left behind.

I'm not that girl anymore, but I fear he might just be the same man he was then.

The silverware clacks loudly on the fine china, pulling me into the grueling present, and the overly decorated formal dining room of the Holt's house.

My prison.

Although it's harsh calling it a prison since the actual conditions aren't fully lacking. I'm simply trapped in here.

Bringing my attention back to the sparsely filled plate, I move some bland steamed broccoli around. Nothing about this dish is appetizing enough to force my empty

stomach to accept the nutrients. I'm not entirely sure if I ate today. I think I did. Maybe? The last three days have been a strange blur. A nightmare I've been witnessing through someone else's consciousness. I did try tonight, but when I took a few bites, bile rose up my throat.

I look up at the row of windows opposite me, seeking comfort in the burnt orange and deep teal shades of the sunset reflecting on the calm sea. Flashbacks from a few weeks ago spring to mind, when once again, Ryan and I fought, and I ran out onto the beach. Not for theatrics, but for escape. Anger, that fickle bitch, seared my insides, but in his presence, it disappointedly sizzled out before it reached the surface. Again.

I remember the feel of the wet sand under my feet as the soft waves danced over it. It usually calmed me. Not that day. Too much pain, fury, and frustration piled up. They riddled my body. Like a virus, they tainted my blood, sickening and debilitating.

Then I turned to the beach mansion that was to be my home after the wedding, and a vision flashed, my imagination running rampant. Flames exploded through each and every window, spreading, hugging every wall, every bit of the structure, and a smile crept onto my lips. Relief grew in my chest. And so much goddamn joy flooded me that I couldn't help but be wary of it.

It made my darkness shine and sparkle.

When I blinked, it was all gone. The perfect white mansion was unscathed, and that dread seeped in once again. Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can still see those flames. They're my happy, yet fake memory, but it gives me hope nonetheless.

It's within that memory that The Serpent snakes through. I see his eyes carrying the same look he had when we were in my apartment and I told him I had to leave. There were promises and desires in his gaze that I wanted to ignore, because my fucking heart was beginning to betray me.

Or maybe I'm fooling myself with the desires of that teenager from long ago. The one who dreamed outside of her bounds, foolishly infatuated with the sinful and dangerous older guy she couldn't have. The one she had crushed on for years, and hoped would fall madly in love with her.

It was a sick love powered by a misfit soul and young lust. But a darkness crept through my veins, growing with me, and it found The Serpent before that was even his nickname. It recognized the kindred soul, and latched onto it, refusing to believe that it could never be.

Then suddenly... it was. He noticed me, too.

I couldn't believe it was happening, just as none of the popular girls from school could either. They all lusted for him too, and they always fucking hated me. Only, by the time I got used to the idea that he chose me, that he was mine, it was too late. He was gone, and I was left behind, foolishly in love.

It ruined me.

Will he ruin me again, or will he be my salvation?

Somewhere in the distance, a rough sound scratches my ears. Only it's not in the distance at all... it's Ryan clearing his throat. I don't bother turning to look at him. I may feel ill, I may feel weak, but that asshole can go fuck himself with barbed wire.

I look down at my plate once again, moving slices of steamed carrot around since that broccoli definitely got enough exercise.

"You better finish your food. You're not getting anything else."

Even his voice sounds wrong. Everything about him is just... wrong. I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I turn to meet his gaze. But those muddy irises hold a pleased, secretive grin. What the hell does he have in store for me now?

“We have to make sure you fit into the wedding dress I chose for you,” he continues. “Otherwise, we might have to hire another person just to stuff you and the fat on your hips into it instead.”

I ignore the shaming comments. I’m used to them by now. God forbid I ever eat a square of chocolate in front of him. The comments about my *fat* body never stop. He started with one every few months, simple remarks about me that I was able to overlook. Then they became more and more frequent, until they were happening every day, and the delivery was no longer simple.

At this point, I have no idea if what I see in the mirror is his vision of me or my own. I see softness, I see love handles, I see jiggle when I jump, I see a big ass that’s not quite round, a soft pouch on my belly. I see so much that never mattered to me before. But I pass over those words, because they’re not new.

However, his confidence in his plans I cannot ignore.

I believe there is nothing more dangerous than a powerful man riddled by delusions of grandeur that have seeped too deep into his brain. He’s truly convinced that I will allow this wedding to go ahead, and that this insane plan of his will have the end he envisions. This controlling behavior is being taken to a whole other level and the man he used to be has been completely replaced by the one next to me. One I hardly recognize.

“You can’t keep me locked in your house forever. Whatever plan you have is going to fizzle out eventually. And when it does...” I trail off, that darkness that lives inside of me getting a bit denser. Subdued fury has made a home there, and for these last three days, I’ve worked so fucking hard to be rational, when all I’ve wanted to do is slit his throat, cut his head off, and shove it on a spike on his front lawn.

That's another aspect of my imagination that puts a smile on my face.

"*Our*, not mine—*our* house." A tinge of exasperation touches the tone of his voice, and I can't help but roll my eyes.

The next second, a feral sound leaves his chest, a strange sort of growl, and I stiffen in my chair.

"You're such an ungrateful little bitch, aren't you? Your eyes will end up getting stuck to the back of your head if you don't cut this bullshit. There's only so much patience one can have." The flare of his nostrils and the look in his beaded eyes make me swallow my disgust.

"Language, Ryan," his mother calmly scolds.

I turn to her at the other end of the table, watching as she slides another piece of chicken into her mouth. *Language*. That's what she's worried about. Not the fact that her son has kidnapped a woman, the same one he is forcing to marry him, whilst bringing whores into her home. Fucking language.

I stop myself just as my eyes begin their all too familiar roll. God-fucking-damnit, I hate the control he has on me.

"I'll speak exactly how I please in *my* house, Mother," he spits as he cuts into that piece of meat as though it wronged him.

We're in *his* house now, I keep forgetting that little bit of information. In *his* lavish dining room, having dinner with his mother for the third night in a row. The mother he allows to still live in *his* house. It hasn't belonged to his mother since the moment the dirt covered his father's body.

I hold my fingers crossed that he'll get pulled away with business and leave me alone. Maybe tonight I'll manage to finally sleep.

The bags under my eyes seem to get heavier, and I swear I can feel them without touching them. My eyelids

are dying to fall closed and it's barely seven o'clock. But I can't let his fatigue get me. Not until I'm sure he'll be out for the night.

I've been lucky the first two nights. That first night he left just after dinner, and during it on that second one. Two veins bulged dangerously in his temples as he took that phone call the second night, and the sinew in his throat seemed to pulse.

I've seen him angry before, but that night, he was different. It had nothing to do with me, but his business. Something went terribly wrong, and I almost smiled when he grabbed me and shoved me into my bedroom without a word. But I didn't know when he was going to be back and if he would focus all that fury on me. Somewhere deep inside, I thought that whatever happened was some sort of distraction to get me out of here.

But no one came.

I never laid on the bed though, even as sleep threatened to take me. I couldn't allow that vulnerability.

The second night was the same. But my eyes betrayed me for a few minutes, and I woke up just as my back hit the soft mattress. It was at that moment, when I shot up straight to my feet, that I realized just what this man does to me. What he's made of me and what he took away.

When the second night passed and no one came for me, I understood that I could not wait for anyone to save me. I will always have to rely on myself. That was the only way to regain my strength in front of this man.

"I think everyone will have an early night tonight." Ryan looks straight into my eyes. "All of us."

"Fine by me." I place the cutlery on the plate and get up with a screech of the chair on the wood floor, his mother hissing at the sound. "Goodnight."

Just as I thought I was off the hook, the motherfucker speaks.

“I’ll see you in a minute.”

Something in the depths of my soul stiffens.

No fucking way.

* * *

The moment I’m out of view, I’m sprinting up the stairs, and burst through the door to my bedroom on a strained breath, leaning against it as I shut it behind me.

“Fuck.”

I’m gasping, but I don’t linger. Walking to the other side of the dresser that sits against the wall, I dig my feet into the ground and push the piece of furniture toward the door.

Only, a soft knock interrupts me before it opens without warning.

I stiffen as my fucking heart gets lodged in my throat.

“I don’t have much time.”

It’s not Ryan, but his mother. Though, I don’t feel any relief, just a different type of tension.

“He just took a call,” she continues.

I haven’t moved yet. In this house, I always expect traps, and Mrs. Holt is never a good sign of anything. But the woman holds a tray with a small porcelain cup of steaming water, a tea bag, and teaspoon on the side. She hands them to me, and I frown, my mind racing. Reluctantly, I take the tray and set it on the bed.

“I need more than tea, Mrs. Holt.” I hold her gaze in a tight grip. I don’t want her to look away, I don’t want her shrugging or brushing me off. “I need to get away from your fucking son. The man you raised into the savage he is.” I nod suggestively toward the stairs.

She blinks rapidly, taking in the insult and my crude words, and tries to look away. But submitting to another woman doesn't quite seem her nature.

"I—I didn't do this."

"Yeah," I scoff. "Just as my parents didn't raise me as cattle to take to the market and sell to the highest bidder. Pathetic. But then again, I guess they had no say in how my personality turned out. Your son, though, he's fucking certifiable."

Shaking her head, she finally breaks eye contact, and her eyebrows strain with a frown. She mumbles something under her breath, and the woman I usually see at the other end of the dining room table flickers away.

"I don't know how... I don't know what happened to him." She sighs.

There's a tinge of defeat in her eyes. I'm not sure if it concerns her failed son, or her inability to stay strong in front of me.

Has she been holding on to hope? Is she finally allowing herself to see the truth?

Sounds like me, not long ago.

"There's something wrong with him. I can't stop him." Her voice lowers, head shaking with exasperation.

"Oh, fucking hell. No shit! What tipped you off?" My tone rises with every word and the woman steps forward, eyes wide.

"Please," she whispers. "He's only downstairs."

"Then tell me why you're here, and what your son really wants from me."

I don't give a flying fuck about her regrets. This woman has never shown me an ounce of kindness in all the years since I've known her.

"I'm not sure."

“You’re a bad liar.” I step closer, getting right into her space, bringing us eye to eye. “What does your son want from me? I know his desire to take me as a wife has nothing to do with matters of the heart.”

She turns her head, listening for any movement or voices coming from downstairs.

“Some time ago, before my husband died, I found some files. Printed. I’m increasingly convinced that they did not belong to my husband,” she whispers hesitantly, still listening beyond the walls of this room. “I couldn’t look in great detail, but some of the files were quite complex in nature and others were documents.”

“Okay, so how does this pertain to me?” I frown, crossing my arms.

“Because they all bore your family name. All your names— yours, your brother’s, your mother’s, your father’s. They were all there, on bank statements, business documents, assets, contracts, deeds, birth and marriage certificates. Everything.”

That is fucking weird, and really concerning.

“And you think Ryan was gathering all that information about us?”

She nods, her attention half on me, half out the open door.

“What use could he have with that?” I understand the business documents. If I were to involve myself in a significant business deal with someone new, I would probably check them out as well. But birth certificates?

“I don’t know, but it was strange. All those documents in one place?”

“Like he’s counting assets,” I mumble.

“And how to get to them,” she says slowly, fixing me with her gaze.

Son of a bitch!

“Why should I believe any of this, Mrs. Holt?” Her name drips from my tongue like tar.

She frowns. “I never liked you, Miss O’Rourke.”

“My point exactly. Then why are you doing this?” I want to spit more comebacks at this woman, but her answer comes too quick.

“Because I was wrong.”

My turn to frown.

“About you,” she continues. “I was wrong about you. You saw the change in my son long before any of us did. I caught it far too late. And now, only blood binds my son and I, and it’s not thick enough anymore.”

“I don’t think you understand what you’re saying,” I say, narrowing my eyes on her in disbelief.

“He needs to be stopped.” She turns toward the open door. “Whoever that person is downstairs, it’s not him. That’s not my son.”

“There might be only one way to stop him.” Softness touches my voice this time around.

This whole interaction feels surreal. Only, the moment her eyes catch mine again, a different type of pain lives there.

“I think he killed my husband.”

My mouth drops open at the same time as my arms fall to my sides. But suddenly, the heavy steps from downstairs become a tad louder, and she walks out the door without another word or glance. I’m left wondering what the fuck alternate reality I’ve just fallen into.

Utterly surreal.

I shake my head and rush to close the door behind her, then turn my attention back to the large chest of drawers. The damn thing is heavy, but I plant my feet on the floor, and with a deep screech, it finally moves. It

only reaches the middle of the door, when a disturbing laugh echoes in the corridor behind it.

“Shit.”

“You fool yourself thinking that a piece of furniture will keep me away from you. If I want you, I will get you!” The door flies open, hitting the corner of the dresser that partially blocks it, and Ryan slips through.

I manage two steps before my back hits the wall, and his hand wraps around my throat, while the other one grips my hip.

“There is no escape from me. There will never be any escape for you. No matter where you go, no matter where you run, I will fucking hunt you down. Those photos of you burying the man you killed will haunt you. The video I took as you stood and looked at his corpse, with no remorse in your eyes, will fucking haunt you. I can destroy you. And that alone strips you of that freedom.”

The back of my tongue feels too big for my mouth as his grip tightens, and that hand on my hip suddenly hits bare skin, sliding upwards under my shirt. I’m not sure how many muscles one has in their torso, but all of mine tighten to the point my lungs refuse to take in any air. I claw at his hand, pulling it away from my skin with as much force as I can muster, but he goes back in, straight up to my bra covered breast, gripping it. A pained, strained scream escapes my throat, taking with it the last of the air I had in my lungs, and I can’t force him off now... not when he holds me that way.

“This is mine too.”

The elastic of my bra scrapes my ribs as he grips the cup and yanks it down, then presses his hand over my bare breast. My brain is telling me to launch at him. To kick him in the balls. To do anything but stand here in his grip and allow him to touch me this way. But my body isn’t cooperating. I can’t fucking explain it. It’s like in the nightmares I have once in a while, where I’m

getting attacked and I try to scream, but no words come out. Not because I'm mute, but because I'm frozen. There's a disconnect between my brain and my nerves and it happens when those muddy eyes pin me the way they're doing now.

"It took a while to break you. But look at you now... it was fucking worth it," he says with a wide grin pulling at the corners of his mouth as he leans forward.

His lips are almost on mine, and something inside of me breaks. The idea of him touching me like that is so utterly repulsive that my knee suddenly connects with his groin before I've even finished thinking about doing it.

Only it wasn't hard enough to get him off me.

As he pulls back and that frenzied gaze hits me, I understand it was definitely hard enough to piss him off.

"Sir." A knock on the cracked open door interrupts us. "Your guest has arrived. Shall I bring her up?"

"Fucking lucky you are," he whispers to me. "Yes, Gordon, take her to my room."

"Will do, sir."

"Would you like to meet this one too? Maybe you should. It will teach you a thing or two for when you're going to do your wifely duty."

"Fuck you." I'm seething. I swear it comes and goes at all the wrong moments. Never when I truly need it.

"Oh, you will. Not now, though." He releases me and steps back, looking me up and down. The corner of his lips curve downwards, and he cocks one eyebrow. It's a look that makes me want to cover myself in baggy clothes and run.

He turns, walking back to the door, and pushes the chest of drawers back in its place.

"Stop moving my furniture around."

When he pulls open the door, a tall, slim woman stops before it, with hair so dark it looks like a starless sky, and eyes a gray so bright, as the stars that fell off it. I'm surprised she's not afraid to make any movement in that dress. I would certainly be scared it would snap, but then again, it's short enough that it doesn't constrict her legs in any way. The deep red suits her, though.

"Hello, Raven," Ryan greets her.

She catches my gaze for only a split second, but when she turns to him, the most lascivious smile I've seen on a woman paints her lips. My eyebrows furrow, wondering whether her presence here is free of charge or not. But when Ryan's foot leaves my doorway, I don't linger on that thought and slam the door behind him.

Moments later, the lock clicks from the outside.

I cherish that lock.

Too bad I'm not the one with the key.

CHAPTER 21

MORRIGAN

THE DISTINCTIVE TURN OF THE doorknob wakes me up. Not a hard turn, not loud, only a faint click. I snap into a sitting position, the sheets gritty against my clenched fists, and wait. My breath hitches when a soft knock sounds on the door. Just one. The next moment, a small white paper slides on the floor, stopping at the edge of the rug the bed sits on.

My eyes flicker between it and the door, my broken mind waiting for the trap to come. Like the monster is under the bed and the moment my feet touch the ground, he'll grab them.

Nothing comes, only a barely audible sound of a door closing.

Maybe a minute passes and muffled voices come through from the other side of the wall, where Ryan's bedroom is. The tone of that voice makes my stomach tighten with disgust. I know what's coming. I heard it before I fell asleep, but at least the asshole didn't make me watch him having sex again.

I slowly step out of bed, trying not to make a sound, and grab the paper. It's kind of heavy, and it's not a piece of paper at all, but an envelope. I discard its contents onto the bed, and the moment I see it, my gaze snaps back to the door. A fucking key!

Who...?

There are only a few people in this house at one time: two guards, Gordon, who's more of a coordinator, Ryan, and his mother. None of them would have done this for me, not even his mother, even after our earlier conversation. When I pick it up, I find that it's smoother than a normal key, and lighter, like it's made of some sort of plastic. There's only one person who could have supplied this—Raven.

As I rub the key between my fingers, my gaze drifts out the window, to the dark clouds approaching fast, swallowing the puffy white ones until nothing is left of them.

Raven! Son of a bitch.

It hits fast and hard, and somewhere in my chest, my heart rushes, beating a million miles per minute the moment I realize what's happening. It all clicks into place, just as I know this key will click easily in that door, even without trying it. The Serpent is certainly sneaky, and I'm starting to understand that the women The Sanctum employs in their escort service have an even more important skill set than *escorting*.

I quickly change the blouse I fell asleep in and pull a comfortable T-shirt over my head. I have no sneakers here, no comfortable shoes whatsoever, so barefoot it is.

The noises from behind the wall become strained. Moans, slapping of skin, and others I would rather ignore. But they increase in intensity, and it's the perfect cover up.

I head to the door to try the key, grabbing the cold doorknob and twisting as gently as I can, yet it still makes a pretty loud noise for the quiet night. It makes sense why Raven didn't unlock it for me. Instead, she orchestrated the opportunity for me to open it myself without that asshole hearing. I wait for any sound in response from the other side, but I don't think any of the

guards are up here. Ryan doesn't exactly run this house like a fortress, and tonight he might regret that. The key slides in with an ease that makes me wanna jump in excitement, and the moment I turn it and the lock clicks, thunder rattles the windows.

I can't help but smile. It's like the gods are rooting for me. There's something about a summer storm that brings promises of delicious chaos and new beginnings. Fuck knows I need them both.

As I slowly open the door, the noises from next door are louder and I have to swallow down the only visceral sensation this man instills in me now—*sickness*. I must focus. The corridor seems empty, so I slip out, and close the door behind me. But I won't lock it. I can't have him know I had a key. He can go ahead and think I learned how to pick locks or something.

The foyer is underneath me, and from there, a grand staircase leads to a landing about halfway up, then splits into two smaller staircases that take a U-turn on either side, against the walls. I step closer to the handrail, looking down the main steps, which are dimly brightened by the moonlight from the landing windows. There's no one there. And I can't hear anything beyond the moans coming from Ryan's room at the end of the corridor, and the roaring thunder closing in.

I have to take a chance.

Turning to one of the staircases, I step down as carefully as I can, my attention on the ground floor that starts to peek through. There's no movement, but my heart beats like I'm running a marathon, muscles tensed to the cusp of pain.

I reach the landing and stand flush against the wall, trying to hide from the moonlight as I look for movement, the ground floor much more visible now. I can only see the left-hand side of the foyer, and as I lean in, I catch a shadow disappearing toward the right. Somewhere in the distance, a doorknob clicks... then

nothing. It might be the bathroom, since there's one around there, close to the kitchen.

I swallow my worries and rush down the steps, struggling to contain the elation the prospect of freedom brings. I can fucking taste it as my feet hit the marble floor. The front door is so goddamn clear in my sight, even with all the lights turned off.

Suddenly, a doorknob clicks again, and my head snaps toward the noise. But I only get to see a shadow, before a hand covers my mouth, and a huge arm encircles me. It traps both of mine against the sides of my body, then slams me against his front. I'm about to kick and scream, but he pulls me under the staircase before I get the chance, right in the sheltering shadows of the far back wall.

Fight-or-flight clouds my logic as I struggle against the man, but he presses his hand harder on my face, gripping my jaw, and holding me tight. The moment I feel his breath on the top of my ear, followed by the brush of his lips, something visceral erupts deep inside. That gesture throws me back in time, to a dingy bar at the edge of the city. I was drunk, careless, surrounded by questionable people with bad intentions, and dressed in ripped shorts that barely covered my ass and a flimsy T-shirt knotted under my breasts.

When the wrong people noticed me, he came out of nowhere, and wrapped his arm around my waist. Before I could protest, he pulled me against his front, and brushed his lips on the top of my ear, whispering...

"Reckless little Morri."

I knew that voice, I knew that smell, but that touch was new. I never felt it in that intimate way before.

Because I belonged to someone else.

Not anymore. Vincent left me a broken mess, made me into a killer, and my carelessness turned dangerous.

That same carelessness brought me here, all alone, for his friend to find me.

Maddox.

Another soft blow of air coasts against my ear, down the side of my throat. My body relaxes, coming off that flight response, but the man doesn't let me go. His grip only loosens slightly, enough that it allows my arms to bend, and I wrap my hands on his bare forearm he holds against my chest. My breathing doesn't steady, though. Memories of that night run rampant through my nerves—the dirty dancing, the sexual tension, the knowledge that he was taking care of me. No one took care of me anymore, not since Vincent. It made me wonder if he sent him, but I was so far gone, I didn't allow myself to dwell on the thought.

We didn't do anything more than dance, albeit in a very sexual kind of way. He has too much respect for Vincent, and as much as I wanted to get revenge, I was far too in love with the man then. We didn't even kiss, yet later on, I definitely regretted that decision. Even now I wish we would have. I wish we would've fucked. I wish I got my revenge. And I wish I got this angst toward Maddox out of my system.

I wonder what he's thinking of as he holds me to him. How did he know I would recognize him?

Steps sounding on the hard floor remind me of where I am. From within the shadows, I watch one of the guards pass through the foyer, toward the other side of the house. He's out of sight, but Maddox doesn't move, and I attempt to pull on him so we can leave already. But another set of steps comes from that direction, entering the foyer—the second guard.

Fuck.

I'm holding my breath, wary that he could hear even that, but the noises coming from upstairs of my *future husband* fucking Raven into oblivion, rip through the house. I can't help but feel for his mother. She's hearing

all this shit, the disrespect. Music suddenly mixes with that bile-rising noise pollution, and I can see the guard looking up to the second floor.

“Jesus Christ.” He shakes his head and disappears somewhere in front of the staircase, where we can’t see him.

All we can do is wait calmly.

Only, my calmness breaks and shatters the moment the darkness opposite us... moves. My feet dig into the floor, and I push against Maddox, as a shadow flows like smoke in our direction. But I seem to be the only panicked one.

Notes of bergamot and rich decadence slither through my senses when I take another slow breath, and as that darkness nears and the scent becomes denser, cedar mixes in the fragrance, and my heart stops.

Vincent.

The entire house is dipped in darkness, yet his black eyes shine, thriving in the shadows he seems to belong in.

Another step and he’s right in front of me, his body so close, yet not touching mine. I release one hand from Maddox’s forearms and reach for him, fingers gripping the edge of a smooth, dense material.

You came for me, I want to say to him.

He doesn’t move, though. Doesn’t let himself be pulled in, and keeps his shoulders straight, locked firm in an imposing stance. Maddox slowly drops his hand from my mouth, brushes it over my shoulder, grazing my waist, and pauses for a moment before it rests on my hip. Those memories of him rip through me once more, and even after all this time, that Bluesy dirty song we slow danced to that night floods my mind, making me squeeze his forearm involuntarily. I wonder if he still remembers it.

The Serpent reaches for me, and places his palm over my chest, right under my throat, as the steps of the guard sound yet again. Only, they don't leave the room. They pace through it, and that all too familiar frenzy begins to simmer inside of me. Adrenaline, fear, and desire mix into one, but a need for destruction takes over—I want to burn this whole goddamn house to the ground, with everyone but us and Raven in it. The guard sounds like he's getting closer, spiking my pulse with every step, and as The Serpent presses his fingers on the base of my throat, and drags them up until he holds me with his whole hand, I realize I would like to be the one to burn first.

In an entirely different way.

His grip is firm, possessive, and so goddamn satisfying that I instantly sink backwards. Right into Maddox's body. My head falls against his chest, and he instantly tenses. I can feel the flex of his muscles, and the soft hitch in his breath, but he doesn't move. And The Serpent doesn't pull me away. He grips my jaw, then slides that hand over my cheek, dragging his thumb over my lower lip, and Maddox's fingers dig harder into my hip. Goose bumps burst over my skin, and in these moments, I forget where I am.

The guard's steps get closer, my body becomes suddenly aware. Too fucking aware—my nipples peak against Maddox's forearm, and I know he felt them. Because his grip tightens on me, and with it, my gaze drifts into his. And right in that moment, when he looks down at me, The Serpent's thumb dips into my mouth, pressing on my tongue, almost like he's opening me up for his best friend. Against the top of my ass, I feel a distinctive twitch, just as the man before me presses his body onto mine, trapping me. His darkness dips slowly over me, his breath touching my lips as his thumb slides out gently. He's so close to me now. I swallow the heaviness that sits in my chest, and can almost taste his lips on mine, just as Maddox's hand slides from my hip over my lower belly.

Then movement in the corner of my eyes pulls my attention away, and brief, silent chaos erupts. The Serpent aims his free hand where my eyes drifted, and a muffled *pop* startles me. He shifts in a split second and catches the man in his arms before he falls to the floor, then pulls him into the shadow. A moment passes and the second guard steps back into the foyer, looking around for the disturbance. The Serpent moves out of the shadow with such fluid elegance, one that has no business being there, as he aims his gun at the man, and pulls the trigger before he can even open his mouth. He dips in, catching him before he hits the ground, and lowers him slowly.

This is our opportunity.

Maddox releases me, but I linger a moment longer against him, my eyes on The Serpent who's turned toward us. Only a moment. Just as tense. Just as suffocating. But this suffocation is welcome. Craved. Needed.

They came for me.

Vincent breaks the tension, and turns, moving away down the same corridor the last guard came from, and we follow.

"Shit." I couldn't stop that sharp whisper before it came out.

Both the men stop to look at me as I lift my foot off the ground, shaking the warm wetness from it as I realize what it is.

"Are you barefoot?" Maddox whispers, and I nod.

Before I can protest, he reaches down, and slides one arm against my back, then the other under my knees, lifting me to his chest. The Serpent doesn't move. His eyes turn to slits, narrowing on the man who holds me, and his shoulders seem stiffer than usual. I swear I feel that possessiveness in my bones as that gaze splits me. I bet Maddox can feel it too.

“We have to go,” I whisper through gritted teeth.

The dark slits turn to me for a moment, before he shifts on his heels, and starts running through the corridors, as thunder fills the night. Holding on to Maddox, I will my gaze to stay away from his, the intimacy of the moment we shared seconds before, leaving a lingering tension behind. I can feel it in the way he holds me, almost avoiding squeezing me too tight, or to touch me in the wrong place. Yet the rigidity in his thick muscles is unmissable.

We turn on the corridor, through some smaller service rooms, and when The Serpent opens the last door, the whole sky explodes in electric white. Lightning zips through the night sky, and the magnitude of it falters our steps. But we don't linger when the thunder splits the silence in its roaring boom, or when the rain suddenly crashes down on us, heavy and dense.

We're slipping between the house and some thick bushes, then stop right in front of the boundary wall of the property.

“What are we doing here?” I turn to Maddox.

He nods toward the wall, confused. “Escaping.”

Of course. What did I expect? For them to have driven on the driveway?!

The Serpent jumps, grips the top of the wall, and leaps in another impressively fluid movement, disappearing beyond it. Maddox then puts me down, grips my hips, and lifts me until I can reach the wall and climb over it.

When my feet touch the ground on the other side, and I turn, Vincent is right here, in my space, and he's looking straight at me. The possessiveness in his eyes is as clear as the lightning that splits this sky, and I can't stop myself. I simply can't do it. I don't want to.

He fucking came for me.

I rise on my tiptoes, grab his face in my hands, and when my lips crash onto his, my world turns upside down. It feels right. As if it actually turned the right way around. His intoxicating scent smells like home. So I kiss him again. And again. A second later, his arms take hold of me, and like a fucking python, they wrap and tighten around my body, taking my breath away.

He might as well keep it, because I think it's always belonged to him.

"Come on." Maddox pulls us from our spell.

I didn't even hear him jump over the wall. It's such a surreal night. Everything is happening so fast. Almost like we're in a movie. Only, I keep blinking and I'm in a different scene before I can settle in the previous one. We reach a car, and I quickly climb into the back seat.

"Fuck!" The occupied driver's seat startles me.

"Good evening." Carter nods at me.

"You scared the hell out of me," I say, panting.

"Are you okay?" The Serpent climbs in after me and finally speaks.

"Yes."

"Holt didn't—you're sure?" He's asking specific questions, without being specific at all.

"I'm okay. Is Raven yours?" I ask, looking between the men, Maddox now in the passenger seat.

"All ours. She did good, no?" Carter turns to me.

"Very good. Thank you," I say with a gentle smile on my lips aimed at each of them. They nod in acknowledgement, but none of them return the smile or say anything else, so I continue. "His mother came to me. She confirmed something I suspected. There's more to this arrangement than the sheer desire to marry me. Some time ago, she found paperwork. A lot of it. All about my family and I."

“What kind?” Carter asks, his empty eyes in the central mirror glancing back at me.

“Every single kind you can think of. Including birth and marriage certificates. Banks. Deeds. Business statements. Everything about each and every one of us. One might think there are ulterior motives for a future spouse to hold so much information on their betrothed’s family. Honestly, I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on it all.”

“And we believe this woman?” Maddox asks.

“I’ve never cared enough to put stock in her words, but she is very rude in her sincerity. I doubt she would ever bother to be anything but honest. This time around, though, there was genuine fear in her bones. It was palpable. Before she had to run away from me, because Ryan was coming, she said something else.” I take one deep breath, those words carrying consequences, and potentially changing the whole game. “She suspects Ryan killed his father.”

A synchronized sigh fills the car. One by one, the men turn, backs sinking into their seats as Carter starts the engine.

“I want to go back,” Maddox says quickly. “I want to find that paperwork.”

“It’s too risky. This is just my ego talking. None of it will help us in any way,” I tell him, shaking my head as nerves flood me.

“We don’t know. It might. And this storm is the perfect cover to roam through his house. We still have a little while before Raven is done with him,” The Serpent counters, pulling my attention to him. “Madds, go. But if the music stops, get the fuck out of there.”

Carter kills the engine as Maddox nods and slides out of the car. The guys seem to believe we’re hidden well enough here, so all we can do now is sit and wait for him to return. In their presence, the air seems to be

a little lighter, easier to breathe in, and my muscles are suddenly feeling the tension of the last few days. So I sink into the seat, praying to the gods that this night will finish well.

I cannot help but feel as though these men are risking too much for me.

Am I really worth it?

CHAPTER 22

VINCENT

WATCHING THE FIRE OF HER hair on my black sheets, her freckled, soft skin tangled in them, and the peaceful rise and fall of her chest as she sleeps, brings me a strange satisfaction. A calmness in my soul I haven't experienced in years.

She hugs the pillow under her head, and this peculiar sense of belonging takes over. I've been watching her for the last hour. When the sun was rising, the rays touched her, and made her hair look like she was on fire. The red shades of the sunrise matched hers. I've been lying here almost motionless. Afraid that if I wake her, the spell will be broken and my Eve will disappear.

A soft moan escapes her lips, and she blinks slowly.

"Mmm..." she hums, rubbing her cheek against the soft fabric as she slowly opens her eyes.

She smiles at first, as she pushes her nose into the pillow and inhales. Then her gaze widens, and a slight shock appears there when she realizes where she is.

"Good morning, Little Eve."

She lifts her head suddenly, quickly looking around us, and takes in the unfamiliar space, before she turns back at me.

"You're in my house." I attempt to calm her.

And I don't miss how her gaze softens for that split second before she catches herself.

"Um... how did I get here?"

"You fell asleep in the car. I brought you here, where you're safe."

"Okay. But how? I don't remember a thing," she asks, her gaze mixed with worry, confusion, but also a comfort she tries to hide.

"That's because you didn't wake up through it. Mads picked you up from the car, and even as he passed you to me, you were dead asleep. You just *nestled* into my shoulder, and I brought you in."

She looks at me in disbelief, blinking rapidly, before she slowly drops her head back onto the pillow.

"You could have taken me to Lulu's," she all but whispers.

"No."

"You're not making the same mistake as Ryan, are you, Serpent? Bringing me here and not letting me go?" She narrows her eyes on me.

"I want to keep you safe, that's all. And Loreley's would be a far too obvious place for you to escape to."

"Son of a bitch! He'll fucking hurt Lulu. He hates her! I have to go," she rasps as she throws the sheets aside and sits up, just about to jump out of bed.

Before she can make the next move, I catch her and slam her back onto the bed. "She's safe, she's okay. We sent people to keep an eye on her. Nothing will happen to her."

"No, no, I don't—"

"I give you my word," I say, my voice stern but gentle.

My arm is wrapped around her ribs, pinning her to the bed, and her body softens. Only, that look in her eyes turns darkens with a chilling edge.

“I’ve had your word before, Serpent,” she says ever so slowly, her eyes searching mine with a flicker of resentment. “And in the end, it meant nothing.”

Morrigan pushes against the arm I’ve draped over her, but I don’t waver. Instead, I slide one leg over both of hers and hold her in place. I had to let her go once, and there’s no way I’m doing it again. Not until she has all the information to make her own choice.

“It meant everything, and that’s why it hurt the way it did.” I finally speak through her attempts to push me away.

Her body’s strong, yet not strong enough for my will. And at this point, when it comes to her, my will is unmoving.

“That’s why it hurt *me*,” she spits.

“It hurt me too, Morrigan!”

At the sound of her name falling from my tongue, she falters, and her brows furrow, her expression strained with broken emotions.

We call each other made-up names. We call each other everything but who we are, because our names on our lips carry the weight of a love that never was. They carry promises and shattered dreams, and they sound too much like hope.

And the hardest fucking thing in this world is allowing hope to brush your soul.

Yet here I am.

“Then... then why did you do it?” Her voice breaks for a moment, and for some reason, it makes me feel better.

“Because I had to. I had no choice.”

How many times over the years have I imagined this exact moment?

How many times have I wished to find her, trap her beneath me, and tell her everything?

How many times have I almost risked it all and drove to her university?

How many times have I been forced to give up on her, on us?

Too many. Far too many.

“Had to? *Had* to?!” The fire returns in her eyes with the raised tone of her voice.

With all her strength, she shoves me enough that she slips out of bed. There’s so much rage in her eyes that it reminds me of the night Maddox and I found her at Lover’s Lane.

The night I knew she was mine.

I jump after her and close the distance between us.

“You *had* to leave me?!” She slams her hands against my bare chest, pushing me away.

The woman is relentless. She tries to slap me, and I block her hand.

“You *had* to tell me that you didn’t love me anymore?!” She pushes me once more. “You didn’t fucking love me!”

Her rage is filled with anguish, but I need her to shut the fuck up. I grab her and throw her on the bed before she even realizes what’s happening.

“I never. Fucking. Stopped!”

She stills, and props on her elbows, frowning. Her lips part, but she’s finally speechless, and I feel some relief. I know what I *had* to do to distance myself from her. I know how much it fucking hurt. Because no matter how brief it was, how inexperienced, or how young we were, we recognized that our souls lived in the same shadows and found their matching darkness.

“Your father forced me. He blackmailed me,” I finally admit for the first time ever. To anyone.

I remember it like it was yesterday. No matter how hard I tried to forget the day I was forced to break up with her, it's imprinted in my goddamn mind.

* * *

8 years ago

“You can't make me do this.” We've been going back and forth for fifteen minutes, but it feels like hours.

“I can. I'm her father, and you—” He looks at me like I'm the purest of filth. The definition of it. “You have no business in her life. This proves it.” He shakes the folder in front of me.

“I'm not fucking leaving her! She's the—”

“Silence!” Liam O'Rourke's voice booms at a level I've never heard it before. “Is she worth your boy going to jail?”

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. None fill my mind either. Yes, and no?

“You can't fucking make me choose,” I seethe.

“I'm not making you choose, boy. I'm telling you that you have to break up with her, make her hate you, and convince her that there is no chance for you two to ever be together again. Otherwise, Maddox Severin is going to be arrested for murder. Tomorrow. This is not a choice. It's this, or I'm going to ruin his goddamn life. Yours too.”

“You'll pay for this.” The threat vibrates through my chest.

But the asshole smirks.

“Sure. How are you gonna make me pay?” Again, the man looks me up and down like I'm shit on his shoe.

“You are no one. You’re nothing.”

“You don’t know me, old man.” I snatch the folder that contains the evidence against Maddox out of his hand and turn to leave. But I stop before the open door and look at him over my shoulder. “One day, she’ll find out about this, and the Morrigan you fear, will come for you. But when she does, I’ll be right there, her own fucking weapon to take you down. You will pay for this, O’Rourke.”

I let the door slam behind me as I walk out of his office and go to find my future ex-girlfriend. My first love.

And I fear she’ll be the last.

I watched her as much as I could all through the day. I went straight to her school, but I wasn’t going to break up with her there. I simply stood under the thick clouds that seemed to get more ominous by the hour and watched from under the bandstand. She couldn’t see me from her classroom windows even if she tried. But I was there. When I wasn’t watching the windows and main door to try to get a peek at her, I was flipping through the goddamn folder. Over and over again.

Then I followed her to her dance class. God, she was fucking stunning. The way she moved, how she glided, the way her hips swayed, and her arms undulated on the slow rhythm of the music, broke me every single time. She’s exquisite.

She’s fucking mine.

Only she won’t be mine for long... will she?

I’m so damn proud of her regardless. She never said the words to me, but I know she got kicked out from ballet because she didn’t fit their shitty body standards. I knew how much she loved dancing, so I found this class for her, and she fucking blossomed. It’s the only time her eyes sparkle almost the same as they do when they land on me. And I’m about to extinguish that light. Even as I stood like a creep across the street from the

building, where the class was held, I tried my fucking hardest to find a solution to get Maddox out of the issue and keep her too.

When I saw Morrigan's beautifully sad face as she came out of the class, looking around the street like she was waiting for something, I was close to running after her to confess the whole affair.

I stopped myself, though. She can never know that her father is holding Maddox, the man she's grown so attached to, against us. She would never put his freedom before us, just like I wouldn't. And telling her gives us too much strength. We would fail at staying away from each other, and Maddox would still end up in jail. Her father was fucking right; there is no choice. I can't put on her this shattering guilt and conflict that's ripping through me. She can't have a choice.

Instead, I followed her to the beach, watching as she sat on the same large driftwood we went for each time we came here together. Again, she kept looking around, but she couldn't see me in the shadows. When I realized that it was me she was looking for, waiting for me... I almost called Ronan, Finn's brother, to see if he could help me with this fucking situation. But I couldn't risk this information reaching Maddox. He would hate himself, and then he would sacrifice himself for her. For us. No one could help me. Our organization is not strong enough yet to take down O'Rourke.

But how was I supposed to do this? To break her? Break myself? How am I supposed to learn to live without her fucking smile, and forest-green eyes, when I barely just adjusted to the idea that she's truly mine?

Fucking mine!

The sting in my palms from my nails digging into it was nothing, and I needed more. I needed punishment, even though this is no one's fucking fault. I can't blame Maddox either. The guy he killed actually died a week later from complications, and it wasn't an instant death.

But the injuries were caused by him. I wasn't with him. He lost control and he still hasn't told me why. All I know is that the man he killed was his uncle, his mother's brother. I know enough about Maddox, his family, and his past, to trust that the beating was justified. It's not even recent. It happened about a year ago, so how the fuck it just came to light now, I have no idea.

After more than half an hour of sitting on the beach, waiting in vain, even though I was right there, she left. I caught the worry in her features, the sadness, and if I didn't know any better, I would have thought she knew what was coming. And it was coming.

I got in the car and followed the taxi that took her home. Then I waited outside their huge property to make sure she got in. Only, I waited much longer than that... There was a speech inside my head that I kept repeating, over and over again, like there was any chance what I was about to do would get easier. Then I went through the speech I'm preparing for Maddox, because he knows what Morrigan is to me, and I know what she is to him.

The sun has long set now, and I can't put it off any longer. If she's truly been waiting for me to appear all day, then there's only one place she will be right now—the library.

I don't bother hiding my presence. Her asshole of a father is probably home, but I couldn't give a shit. Normally, I would leave the car here, outside the bounds, and walk through the shadows of the garden to the other side of the house. Where the library is. Then I would sneak in through the window or one of the side doors. Not tonight. She won't see me coming since the driveway is on the other side of the library.

I park the car and walk straight through the front door. It takes only a few seconds, and the angry presence of Liam O'Rourke casts its shadow on mine. He knows why I'm here. He's not gonna kick me out now. It doesn't stop the anger in his eyes, though. I take

a deep breath, letting my disdain roll off me and straight into him, then turn to head to where I know Morrigan is.

There's no noise beyond the door, and when I finally open it, all the lights are off. It's complete silence. But she's here.

I step in farther and gently close the door behind me, before I walk to stand next to the dark fireplace. She's right here, lying on the sofa, sleeping all curled up with her hands clutched against her chest. The moon shines on her, and she looks so fucking peaceful, I don't want to ruin it just yet. So I stand here, blending in the shadows, watching the beautiful creature before me, and go through the whole predicament all over again. Just in case there is anything I missed, any chance that all our hearts could be saved.

Truth is, I can't wake her up because I need this. I need to take her in. Map out every line of her body, every curve, the softness of her skin, and the way her curls fall around her face. I need her for a little longer.

Maybe an hour passes, and I still haven't found any solution. When Morrigan wakes up with a start, the decision is made for me.

She looks at me like I hung the fucking stars in the sky, then lit up the moon, and for the first time ever, I'm going to lie to her.

* * *

Present

The pain that followed, I still carry on my soul. There are many scars there, but this one is the deepest. The only one that will never be mended. Even if I have her back now.

"He—wait. What?" Morrigan slides up in bed, almost in a sitting position.

“You know very well how much the man didn’t want me with you back then. It turns out that a cop friend of his found something. A mistake. The one and only that caught the eyes of the law, back when we weren’t The Sanctum. Your father gave me a choice—either break up with you, or Madds goes to jail for the rest of his life.”

Her eyes go wide at those words, and she clutches the sheets by her sides.

“Countless times, I thought of telling you about this,” I continue, taking a breath, “but I knew that there was no way we would be able to stay away from each other. We would have fucked up. We would have ruined it all. Ruined Madds’ life.”

“Our love in exchange for his freedom...” She pulls her knees to her chest, and wraps her arms around them, as she turns her gaze toward the window.

A charged silence settles. Questions linger in the atmosphere, and for the first time in a very long time, I can’t anticipate what happens next. Her lips are parted as she swallows dry sobs, gasping softly for air, and her knuckles turn white from the tight grip around her legs.

She climbs out of bed once more, but this time, there’s no rage. She holds her stomach as she takes tentative steps closer to the window, her breathing quickening. Running my fingers through my hair nervously, I have to force myself not to go to her. Not to pull her into my arms. Not to guide her in the direction I want her in.

Fuck!

I can’t force her to believe me, and to accept this. But goddamnit, how much I want to. I want to grab her delicate jaw in my large palm, wrap her fiery hair around my fist, and bend her into understanding. Force her to accept everything I tell her with no questions asked.

Make her fucking want me.

Make her love me.

Make her fuck me and never leave.

But I'm no different from Holt if I do any of that.

Morrigan O'Rourke is mine. She always was. I spent all these years building an empire with a lost empress, and now she's back.

The smart thing to do is to keep a safe distance, so she can take her throne by her own choice.

"Why now?" Her voice is smaller. "Why did you come back now?"

"The evidence is gone. The cop is under our control now. Madds is safe."

"And my father? After all of this? All he's done to Maddox, to us, you decide to go into business with him?"

"I told you, Holt has something I want, and him and your father are package deal. But your father's time will come, and he will suffer the consequences of his actions. There was never any question about that. I've envisioned the moment too many times over the years. Even if you and I weren't here right now, he would have still paid. If not for us, for Maddox."

"When did the evidence go away?"

I sigh. "About six or seven months ago."

In the reflection, I can see her eyes widening. She turns and looks over her shoulder for a few moments, before returning her gaze to the window.

"Six, seven months," she whispers.

"Mhm," I hum.

"My mother's party."

Slowly, I close the distance between us, and stand just behind her. I tower over her, but not by too much. Enough to see over her head, and watch our reflections in the window, through the dense forest and cloudless sky.

“There were rumors about what your father and Holt had planned. Rumors that they were sniffing around the docks. However, what they wanted couldn’t be done without the right connections. And The Sanctum has those connections. All we had to do was plant the seeds, and all of a sudden, all was forgotten by your dear father. Then we were invited to your mother’s birthday party.”

“Was it intentional? Your timing, I mean,” she asks, narrowing her eyes.

“Yes.” I don’t miss a beat. “It took me too long. The longest it has ever taken me to do a job. I didn’t care that you were spoken for. I needed to be around you. To see if there was still something there. And there was.”

She shakes her head but doesn’t turn. “I stabbed you. How would you possibly believe there was?”

“Little Eve, I knew I had a chance the moment you pierced my chest. It was that look in your eyes, not of remorse, but passion so dark I could see your hurt. And your love too. You wanted to sink that blade deeper, but you knew you would feel that pain as well.”

She rubs her right palm as I listen to her soft breathing. My fate is in those delicate hands of hers, and my blood pressure spikes. It’s all come to this moment, and I can’t bear the wait. The unknown.

“So what?” She finally speaks again. “If Ryan and I were in a different situation, you would have broken us up?”

“I would be a liar if I said that I wouldn’t have tried. I knew you were mine. I would have done my fucking best to make sure you knew that too. But, no. I wouldn’t have broken you up unless that was what you wanted. I’ve hurt you enough.”

“You broke me. You hold a power over me that I cannot understand. And I fucking hate it. I hate how deep you can reach inside my soul. How many layers

you can peel away and leave me but a shadow. I hate how long it took me to feel that I'm alive again. I hate that I could never truly love again after you."

She whips around, pins me with her gaze, and suddenly I feel as though I'm smaller. Weaker.

"I still hate you, because you're the only one who saw exactly who I was, and you pushed me further into that darkness. Then you left. And there was no one else like you."

"I never left." I'm finding it increasingly more difficult to stay leveled as I watch her spiral.

Tears fill her eyes, the green in her irises so fucking vivid it's like I'm lost in the forest outside of my window on a rainy afternoon.

"I had no choice, Morrigan. But I never actually left. I kept tabs on you as much as I could without arising suspicion. I knew how your life was going. How much smarter you were becoming. And how strong too. Through gritted teeth and a broken heart, I was forced to watch you meet others. And eventually, Holt. But I wanted to kill them all."

I fucking wanted to rip them apart into tiny little pieces, then drop them on her doorstep to show her what happens to the men who touch her without my permission. I wanted to fuck her in a sea of their broken limbs and desecrate their goddamn remains with our ecstasy.

I still do. Only, Holt can fucking die whilst watching as she rides me on his future motherfucking grave.

CHAPTER 23

MORRIGAN

I DELIBERATELY HOLD MY BREATH and force myself not to blink through the tears I cannot seem to stop from flowing. Just in case I miss a clue, any sign that he's lying to me.

Goddamnit... there's none. But he's The Serpent. Cunning in more ways than most would know or would recognize. What the hell makes me think that I would recognize betrayal on his features?

I give in and blink, pushing a steady stream of tears down my cheeks. My chest shakes, my hands are painful from the tenseness in my fists, and a deep pressure fills my head. Along with my own voice of reason.

You know you would have no trouble recognizing his deceit. You saw it the night he left you. You knew he was lying.

I fucking did. I did!

I don't know if he allowed me to see it, but deep down, I knew he was lying to me. I just didn't know about what. And my insecurities stopped me from accepting that what I was seeing was true. I had no trouble believing that he didn't actually love me.

My fucking Serpent.

All this time, I've hated him. I killed because of how broken I was. I did so many stupid things. I almost did his friend too—Maddox. I always had a soft spot for that brutal man. That gentle beast who kept an eye on me. And the reason Vincent and I never were. Although he cannot be blamed for it.

No one can, apart from my father. I would have done exactly the same thing Vincent did if I was in his position.

"So much time lost," I whisper, unable to drop my gaze from those dark pits of his eyes.

"Yet no love was lost," he whispers back on a long breath.

There's a warmth in his voice that makes a home inside my chest, and instant goosebump flare over my skin. I shake my head gently as my bottom lip quivers, and he cocks his head slightly. Reaching over, he brushes his thumb over my tears, then swipes his tongue over it.

Then he dips in, and I'm expecting a kiss to my lips, but he presses it to my cheek instead. He kisses away the tears that fell there, and microscopic currents burst beneath my skin. Like tiny electric shocks in the shape of his kisses, and he follows the trail down my face. When he reaches my jaw, a ticklish sensation explodes through me, and my body shudders, my hands grabbing onto his naked waist instinctively.

I could have sworn I heard a low moan somewhere deep in his chest at the same time I felt his muscles tense. He doesn't stop, though. He slides one hand into my hair, bending my head back, and continues to follow those stray tears. Right under my jaw, down my neck, until there's nothing left.

My fingers tighten against his flesh, but I only meet hard muscle there. Very little softness. Fuck, he didn't look like this all those years ago, with these defined muscles and wide shoulders. Now he's the kind of man

you expect to do at least fifty laps a day in the Olympic pool. My hands itch to explore, but I'm more intrigued by his own exploration.

I close my eyes as his grip on my hair tightens, pulling on it harder as he grabs my ass with his free hand. A tortured moan fills the room as he presses my hips into his. Mine or his, I'm not even sure. But then his tongue swipes over my clavicle, up my neck, and down again, sinking his teeth where it meets the shoulder, and a sharp pain pushes me into him.

"Vincent..." I mewl softly, and every single muscle in his body tenses.

Mine do too. I haven't called him that in years.

"Again," he groans his order to me.

"What?" I open my eyes lazily, and the look that meets me is feral.

Feral in a way that instantly hardens my nipples, painful against even the loose fabric draped against them.

"Say. It. Again."

Oh... A smirk creeps onto my lips.

"Vincent..."

I have no idea how or when it happens. It's all a blur of movement as he all but roars as he grips my ass, lifts me to him, and slams me onto the soft bed. Climbing over me, he traps my wrists in his grip high above my head, pressing them harshly into the mattress. His other hand cups my jaw, and his index finger dips ever so slightly into my mouth, pulling my bottom lip down.

"Fuck... *Morrigan*." My name slips off his lips like honey. "It's kind of poetic—the sound of my name on your lips, and the sound of yours on mine. Isn't it? Yet it in a fucked up kind of way, you're still my Eve, and I'm still the Serpent who lured you into sin."

“The original sin. Only I was always a sinner. You were just the devil who embraced me.” I smile, grinding my hips up to meet his.

He drags his hand down my throat, to the neckline of my T-shirt, and in one brisk move, he rips it. I hold in a cry as the fabric grinds my skin, but the leftover burn feels strangely good. Reaching the hem of my bra, he pulls it down, exposing my breast, and the moment the colder air brushes my nipple, I can't help but moan.

“Always a heathen.” He dips down, capturing that peak between his teeth, then sucks it to the point that pain seeps through, and my back arches just as he releases. “You carry a darkness that somehow found mine through the shadows. And it never let me go.”

“No love lost,” I whisper, my gaze fixed on his with an intensity I feel in my temples.

“None. Your darkness lives in my soul. If you take it out, I won't be whole.”

“I want to trust every word you say to me. I want to believe it all, and deep down, I know I do. But there is a part of me that has fought this bond for all these years. It's been trained to protect me, and it currently lives in disbelief. Almost as that teenager from long ago. The one who couldn't believe that you would look at me, that *you* would love me.”

He shakes his head slightly, swallowing, before he speaks.

“Trust is earned and I'm going to take my time earning yours.” He pauses, letting those words sink in. “But I saw you, Morrigan.”

He drags a finger over my breast, down my abdomen, and dips down over my belly. I fight to focus on his words, rather than that electrifying sensation he leaves behind, but he's excruciatingly sensual.

“I saw you long before you think I did,” he continues. “Only, I fought you, and our connection. I fought the

prospect of what we could be, because I didn't believe in it. I didn't want to, not after seeing what love does to people. But you, goddamnit, you wrapped so fucking tight around me, I couldn't shake you off even if I wanted to. My soul was yours, long before you became mine."

I don't have the right response for this confession. My soul feels like it's been thrown into a grinder, and my heart is close to bursting out of my fucking chest.

"Oh, Mr. Sinclair, you definitely know the right words to get into a lady's panties." This moment feels too heavy with confessions, with these matters of the heart. I'm not used to it.

He narrows his eyes for a moment, and I swear he can read my mind.

"I'm already in your panties, Miss O'Rourke." He mirrors my grin at the same moment he grips my pussy and pushes two fingers inside.

"Jesus... fuck!" I moan, my back arching once again, and my core grinds on his hand involuntarily.

"It's the devil fucking you now, baby." He pulls that finger out, then adds one more, slowly pumping in and out.

"Vincent, oh God... please!"

I can't explain it. I've had men finger me before, and I've done it myself plenty of times. Yet him, the way he spreads them, the way he curls them, the way he pumps in hard, and drags out slowly. Christ, it makes me melt.

"What the hell, Serpent!"

The asshole pulls out, completely.

"Oh, I'm Serpent again, then?" There's a cheekiness in his eyes that drives me crazy.

He lets go of me, unbuttons my jeans, and pulls them down, leaving me covered only by a bra and a ripped T-

shirt. But he solves that fast, ripping the rest of the fabric, before he undoes the bra and peels it off. I prop myself on my elbows to see him standing at the foot of the bed, staring at me. With one eyebrow raised, he looks famished as his eyes drag up and down my body.

Shit... I don't have the confidence for this.

"Vincent, I—" I'm just about to reach for the sheet and pull it over myself.

"You're so goddamn perfect."

I'm not, but the hungry look in his eyes comforts me. My muscles relax a little, and I smirk as my plump flesh flares with goose bumps. He doesn't peel his eyes off me as he drops his pajama bottoms straight down to the floor. Even though I've had him inside of me, the sight of him naked, in all his glory, standing before me, feels forbidden.

He's a work of fucking art.

I want to run my tongue all over him. Over his wide pecks, his defined abs trailing into that sinful V of muscles, even over his long, lean legs. But his cock... Christ almighty, his damn cock, with those soft veins, and the glistening, thick head. If you could ever call a cock beautiful, this would be it.

I finally drag my gaze back up, and when I reach his eyes, his head is tilted, a knowing grin pulling at his lips.

"You seem to like what you see too."

"Couldn't say for certain." I feign ignorance. "At this distance, it's a bit blurry. I can't quite tell."

The laugh that follows, loud and deep, shaking his whole body as he presses a hand over his belly, spreads a sort of warmth through me that I haven't felt in a while—happiness.

He steps right to the edge of the bed, and I quickly flip over. I'm not fucking around. My face is up close and personal with that beautiful cock, and I don't drag it out.

No... I wrap my hand around his length, and swallow him in one go, until he hits the back of my throat.

“Fucking hell, woman!” His legs shake, hands grabbing onto my hair, and I can’t help but feel a little pride.

Meeting his gaze, I slowly slide my lips back to the tip of him, and his eyes widen on me as his mouth falls open slightly. His chest rises and falls with staggered breaths, and I dip back in, sucking him until I’m choking. But I don’t waver. I drag my tongue over his cock as he hits the back of my throat again and again, letting spit fall down my chin, and I cup his balls, holding them tight to his body. Every choking sound I make, he matches with a groan, and as his grip on me tightens, he begins to thrust. His ragged breaths coax me on, and I would smile if I could.

Fuck, there’s nothing quite like subduing a man like this. Only, I’ve never really had a man so eager to fall at my feet, and this one looks as if he might.

All of a sudden, he pulls me back by the hair, forcing me to get up on my knees as my saliva falls onto my breasts.

“I—I can’t. Fuck! I may be The Serpent, but you’re a goddamn devil woman with that tongue of yours,” he rasps, gripping my waist, and in one swift move, he lifts me and throws me on my back.

Grabbing my legs, he pulls me to him until my ass is at the edge of the bed, and he sinks to his knees between my spread thighs.

“Vincent, just—just fuck me. Please.”

All I want right now, all I need, is to feel the stretch of his cock inside me.

“If my dick goes anywhere near you right now, I’m gonna come. And it’s too fucking early for that.” He doesn’t waste another moment. His head disappears between my legs, then his tongue swipes right over the

seam of me, and when it dips inside my pussy, I fall back on a sharp moan.

“That’s it, my darling Eve.”

I’m thrashing all over the place as his tongue assaults me, and he rubs my clit with such erratic precision, I’m fucking jealous he learned these skills on someone else. He pushes his hand on my belly to stop me from squirming but doesn’t stop.

Then he switches. His fingers fucking me methodically, rubbing that delicious spot inside of me as he gently presses on my belly, and I’m sure I’m going to fucking implode. When he adds another finger, the stretch is so fucking delicious, my cries are bouncing off the walls. It’s a satisfying fullness that makes me crawl backwards in bed and drives me to beg the devil for more.

“Goddamnit, Serpent! Fuck me.”

But he doesn’t listen. Instead, he presses his tongue hard onto my clit, before sucking it slowly, and my hips are only held down by the fingers he hooks inside of me. The rhythm rises higher, the strokes reach deeper, and the thrusts are harsher.

It hits out of nowhere. It rips through my belly like liquid fire, my core spasming uncontrollably, and my whole body follows. The orgasm takes control of me, and it explodes on such a high, my vision goes white and my ears ring. I’m blind to the image of him crawling on top of me; deaf to the sound that makes my throat raw the moment his cock impales me; speechless to the mixture of sensations and emotions I feel when he thrusts into me as I’m still riding my release.

It’s painful and ecstatic all at the same time, and all I can do is ride it along. I’m a slave to him, and it feels amazing.

“Vincent...” I moan as I plant my feet onto the bed, knees bent, and push my hips into him.

“Fucking hell, Morrigan!”

His cock reaches deeper, stretching my pussy just at the edge of stinging, and when I lift my hands above my head, he takes the cue and traps my wrists. Bracing himself on his other hand, he pistons into me with a raw force that brings me right to the fucking edge again.

I have no idea how much time passes. I’m fully lost in the strength of his body pressing against mine. His rhythm shifts, his hips grinding against mine, and he withdraws slowly before he drives back in with force. I look down to watch where we’re joined, and the image is enough to make me come again. I’m panting harder, losing myself in that delicious image, and my mind goes blank. There are no thoughts there, no worries, no... nothing. Only this moment. Only his body on top of mine, our skins touching, his cock inside of me. There’s only he and I. Only us.

And just like that, with one more thrust, my pussy pulses violently, sucking him in as another orgasm destroys my body. He swears under his breath as he drops onto his forearms, caging me in, and I force myself to hold that pitch black gaze, but I’m shaking with pleasure and my eyes drift closed. A guttural grunt vibrates from his chest and onto my lips as he presses them to mine, just as his cock begins to jerk inside of me. His release is just as violent, and the most satisfied of grins pulls at my lips.

So much warmth spreads inside of me, his cum filling me to the point that I’m sure it’s starting to spill out around his cock now. Implications of us fucking raw snake through my mind. I’m not worrying, though. With any other man, I would have had a problem, but not with Vincent. A man like him keeps himself healthy. But it’s not that knowledge that eases my mind, it’s the fact that I seem to trust he wouldn’t put me in a nasty situation.

“This,” he pants, “is... fuck. This was—” He swipes a hand over his face, clearly unable to form even the

shortest of sentences.

I can't help it. I laugh, instantly feeling the need to run to the toilet as his cum starts dripping out of me. But his cock feels far too good where it is.

"You're gonna push me out, woman." He looks down between us. "Shit. I'm sorry, I got carried away."

"It's okay. We're safe, and I'm okay. Clean."

He shakes his head. "I'm never this stupid, but Christ, fucking you bare is just—"

"I know." I really do.

He dips in, pressing his lips onto mine, and this kiss has a touch of sentiment to it. It's different. Deeper, even though it's soft in its delivery. I grab his head in my hands and hold him here, hold him tight, because there's no way I'm letting him go. Not again.

Not *ever* again.

CHAPTER 24

MORRIGAN

THE SUN STREAMS THROUGH THE large window, its rays warming us, and the only thing I can see is the tops of the trees. I have no idea where I am, where his house is, and I thought I would be much more concerned about that. Maybe I'm being stupid. Or maybe for the first time in a long time, I'm allowing myself to just *be*.

His fingers run lazy circles on my hip, goose bumps spreading from that caress over the rest of me, and I nestle closer into his side. My head rests on that soft spot at the edge of his chest, as I drape one leg over his, and my palm enjoys the slow beat of his heart.

Everything right here is a contrast from my life beyond this house, this sanctuary. The madness, the chaos, the pain, and the deceit all live somewhere far beyond these walls.

Here, we are different. Not because we're acting, but because here we can be ourselves.

He can be the man who softens when his eyes land on me, the one who cleans me up with a warm, wet washcloth after he fucks me into oblivion. The man who cuddles me when I'm spent.

And I... I can finally allow myself to feel hope. Hope for the little things. Like talking about my day, what I've

done at the club, the things I'm proud of in my old and new career. Hope that I won't be looked at and immediately criticized for my looks or lack of. Hope that I can finally be by Vincent's side, that I can support him as he does me, and that I can live the life I deserve.

Here, I can hope for freedom.

"I'm not sure why your organization is called The Sanctum, but this place, this moment, this feels like a sanctuary."

"It wasn't intentional." He shifts a little, sinking deeper into the pillow. "Before we were four, we used to be five."

"I have a feeling I know who you're talking about."

"Finn has a brother—Ronan. A while back, after you and I broke up, something happened, and he decided to leave. On the day he left, he said that, no matter what, this is our sanctum. Finn didn't exactly agree; they parted on bad terms, but he did say that we—the four of us—are The Sanctum. It stuck after that," he explains, but I don't miss how his gaze drifts. There is definitely more to that story, but I'll ask another day.

"It's quite interesting. Pretty original way of naming a crime syndicate," I say, laughing.

"Well, to be fair, even though that was technically the official moment, there was something else that sort of lead to it," Vincent continues. "When we were kids, Mads and I found this beat-up old tree house in this forest. We used to sneak up at night, or when things got bad, and we hid there. It was our sanctuary, our safe space. Carter and Finn followed shortly after. Ronan too, but he was older than us, and he had his own stuff going on. We had our backs always, and we were each other's sanctuary too."

Fuck. There's beauty in that sadness, I suppose.

"When things got bad?" I pry, hoping for more insight.

“Mhm. My father was a mean motherfucker. I didn’t care about how he treated me, but my mother... she went through a world of sorrow because of that son of a bitch. He was physical, but not extreme; however, there are other ways to abuse a person, and he mastered them all. She had no life, she wasn’t allowed one. She had no money, no friends, no job, and no self-esteem left. Toward their end, she had very little will.”

I stiffen, because all of that sounds like the journey I’m on, and it hurts me, knowing that this man watched his mother go through that. And now, when he came back into my life, he found me in a similar predicament.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t know about him. He wasn’t around when we were together.”

“No. I chased him away a couple of years before. I grew, matured, got some balls, and the slithering devil in me grew as well.”

“It’s been a while... have you seen him since? Do you know where he is?”

“I have not seen him, and no, I don’t know where he is. I kept tabs on him, but he went under the radar a while back. I do think he believes I grew complacent, and I will have to get rid of him for good.”

Does he mean—? “Kill him.”

“Yes. Leaving him alive the first time around was a mistake I regret to this day.”

I nod against him. It should bother me, this blunt confession, yet I feel nothing. There’s no denying I feel slightly disgusted with myself because of it. I don’t know if it’s not affecting me because of my growing hate for my own parents, or Vincent’s nonchalant attitude about murder is rubbing off on me.

“Your mom was a sweetheart when I met her, and so strong-willed. If you wouldn’t have told me, I would have never noticed in her the effects of years of abuse.”

“She recovered very fast. She only took it all before in order to protect me. Nowadays, she has no problem bossing around four grown-ass men, our security, and some of our scariest men. In reality, we’re all a little scared of her. It’s fucked up.” The way he speaks those words is endearing. There’s happiness for his mother, but pride also.

“What about the others? What bad things were they sheltering from?” I pry once again.

“They have their own stories, but they’re not mine to tell. Finn and Ronan were the only ones to have remotely normal parents. Absent, but normal.”

I nod in understanding. Although I know a bit of Maddox’s story. A bit, and yet it’s still hard to stomach.

My eyes bulge, and I suck in a breath, but quickly recover, before Vincent can notice the shift. Maddox... fuck! The scene from last night springs to mind, and I have no idea what to make of it now. No. No, I can’t think of that now.

But the questions spring in my mind anyway— Why did Vincent watch as his best friend held me, then pressed me into him himself?

A shudder curls around my spine, and I have to strain to keep it away from shooting to my core.

“Eventually, we will have to go out there and face the world,” I whisper, pressing my palm a little harder onto his chest.

I let the beat of his heart pulse through my flesh and push those thoughts away.

“Eventually,” he repeats.

I look up at him, and his eyes are closed, the sunlight making The Serpent look quite angelic. Black stubble covers his jaw, fading as it reaches his cheeks, his hair is wild around his face, and his thick black lashes give him a tinge of innocence. He’s a beautiful man, handsome in a way that makes you feel a little small

when you're around him. But here, wrapped in my limbs, calm and serene, he looks like a completely different man—*my* man. I feel strangely possessive of this side of him. I don't want anyone else to see it.

"Where are we, Vincent?" I ask him.

He doesn't open his eyes, but a glorious smirk crinkles the skin around them. Fuck me if happiness doesn't look breathtaking on this man. And I'm the one who made it happen. *I put that smile on his lips.*

"Home."

I need more than just this one word. On its own, it can mean too many different things. It can mean just that, or it could be an implication of a future I stopped envisioning long ago. A future I craved and cried for. One I gave up on when the pain became too much.

"Your home?" I ask, because I can't allow my mind to spiral.

Opening his eyes, he turns his head to look down at me before he answers. "Just... home."

He holds me in his dark gaze reminiscent of the moonless sky, yet there's a glimmer of stars in them, and it looks a lot like longing. He wraps his hand around my hip, giving it a quick squeeze before he reaches for my cheek, and rubs his thumb gently on my skin.

"It can be whatever you want it to be. It can be yours too," he adds.

I'm searching for the right words that would fit this situation, but I'm not sure if I can find them.

"I don't know what to say, Vincent."

"You don't have to say anything now."

"I do. Because it sounds as if just like that, we're together." It's not that I don't like the idea, it's just... sudden. "No question asked."

"I can think of a question to ask you."

My heart stops, and it wants to beg him to keep talking. Not my brain, though. No, my head wants to sit back and process.

“But yes, Morrigan, just like that. You can hate me all you want, but your eyes don’t lie,” he continues, to my relief. “Now, a month from now, or a year... no matter how long we wait, we will always end up right here. So, it might as well be now.”

Well, fuck. It’s hard to argue with logic. It’s not really that easy.

“Is that what you really want? For me to be here and live with you?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. The idea feels insane, after all this time.

“I’ve lived too long without you, my sweet Eve. Having you in my bed when I go to sleep at night would be a privilege I’ve stopped dreaming of. But it is a privilege nonetheless, so I’ll settle with simply knowing you’re mine. The rest can follow when you’re ready.”

I’m listening to his words, but it’s not where my focus is. I’m looking for a change in his tone, a hitch in his breath, or pupils dilating. A sign to identify not only a lie, but any insecurity. There’s none.

None at all.

I keep waiting, but it doesn’t seem to be coming. How have I reached this point? Mere days ago, my life was a stark contrast to this moment. Is it real?

“The night before Ryan took me to his house—”

“When we fucked against the window.” He grins at me, and I playfully slap his chest.

“Yes.” I smirk. “We were in my future apartment.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. Loreley owns the building, right?”

“Yes, she lives on the top floor with Luke. She insisted I take the apartment under hers. Plus, since we

own the club together, the proximity is useful. However, beyond all that, I like it.”

“I don’t remember it being finished.”

“No. We stalled when we got the idea for Metamorphosis and redirected the funds. Work has only just restarted,” I explain.

“But you will move in there once it is done.”

“Once I’m out of my predicament and the apartment is livable, yes. It’s beautiful. I can see the sea from there. I love its old charm and character, and it’s in an excellent location.” I don’t take my eyes off of him because I need to see how he truly feels about this.

“Definitely a great location. Not that far from Midnight,” he says as he lifts an eyebrow.

“Your speakeasy?”

“Yes.”

“What does it have to do with it?” I’m a bit anxious. I haven’t gotten the reaction I was hoping from him, and I don’t want yet another man who wants to control me.

“I don’t have to drive far after a long day, when I’ll need your comfort. Or your touch. Or the taste of your pretty cunt on my tongue.”

My eyes bulge and heat flushes my cheeks.

“I fully see the appeal. It will give you the independence you haven’t had before, and you deserve to experience it all,” he says in a more serious tone, his eyes softening.

There it is.

That’s what I need from him. Not that words are enough when actions are the ones that matter, but he’s not exactly known for deceiving people. On the contrary, he is painfully honest.

“Yes,” I agree, smiling back as I turn toward the window, and nestle deeper into him. Damn, this man is

so good to cuddle.

I've seen him kill a man in cold blood without blinking, yet here he is... cuddling me.

A small flock of birds suddenly flies away from the trees, pulling my attention to the window.

But really, where exactly are we?

I know there's pretty much just trees on this side of the house, but what about on the other sides? I reluctantly pull away from him and climb out, walking to the window.

It's only when I reach it that I notice I'm completely and utterly naked. It takes me a few more seconds to realize I'm not uncomfortable. I could never do this around Ryan. He would condemn me since I'm too plump for his standards, but now... I'm smiling. The man watching from the bed gives me a confidence I've been losing. I know if I turn, he'll be looking at me with hunger in his eyes.

As much as I know I shouldn't need a man's appreciation of my looks to give me confidence, it fucking helps after being put down for months.

"Are we at the edge of the forest?" I ask, noticing movement through the trees. Wait— "Is that a deer?!"

"Probably. There're quite a few around. Sometimes I see this stag, and its antlers are something out of a storybook. But no, we're not at the edge of the forest." His voice grows closer, until his warmth brushes against my skin. "We're pretty much in the middle of it."

I look up and over my shoulder in a bit of disbelief. The man looks like he belongs in the penthouse of the Rimbauer, the poshest apartment building in Queenscove. Yet he is here...

The forest stretches for miles. It's the only one at the edge of the city; I just never realized someone lived in it. I've walked through its trails many times, yet never even seen glimpses of a house.

Suddenly, a loud gurgle vibrates through my stomach, and I press my hand to it. When did I last eat a full meal? Being in Ryan's house made me feel sick enough that I haven't been able to eat properly.

"I think that's our cue to go downstairs." He rubs his hands on my upper arms and turns away from me.

I pull my gaze from the forest and swing around, stopping dead in my tracks when I catch how, one by one, his muscles ripple. With each step, his legs tense, his ass a fucking sight for sore eyes, and his back... *damn*, his back. He walks toward the dressing room, and I finally move when he disappears inside, the mirage over.

"T-shirt or button-up?" he asks, as I finally follow him in.

"I'm going to live my cliché and choose the button-up, please."

I don't miss the slight grin in his eyes. Am I missing something? Is shirt the right answer somehow?

He hands me a black one that I pull on as I walk over to my discarded jeans and panties, but I only put the panties on.

"I would argue that there's no need for them, but... who knows." I hear him behind me.

"Who knows? What do you mean?" I turn to him, watching as he pulls on a black T-shirt over his black joggers, while heading out of the room.

As we walk down the floating wood staircase, I wonder how the hell this man carried me up these stairs last night. Opposite the stairs on the ground floor sits a beautifully carved wooden double door. I briefly glance to the left, noting the huge wood dining table sitting in front of the large windows at the front of the house, and when we turn to the right, I note the kitchen. It's furnished with dark, rough wood and black stone worktops, and an oversized island in the middle.

But when I fully turn toward the back of the house, I stop dead in my tracks. Windows cover the whole length of it, only interrupted once every ten feet or so by thick wood pillars the same shade as the kitchen. It feels like I'm outside. And that view...

"Fuck..." That's all I seem to be able to express.

My mouth drops, too caught up in this view. A large deck sits right outside the windows, with a dining and sitting area, all overlooking the dense, vast forest. Nothing else. Only green, vibrant forest.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he asks.

It's more than that. I understand now why he's here. The atmosphere is broken out of a fucking dream, with the soft sway of the leaf covered trees, the pale blue of the sky, and the peacefulness.

It really could be... *home*.

CHAPTER 25

VINCENT

MORRIGAN WAS STILL BY THE window, looking at the view, when I left the bedroom. I do that sometimes too, especially when it rains. Living in the middle of a forest has its disadvantages too but being surrounded by that view beats all of them.

I turn on the espresso machine before I head to the fridge and pull out some breakfast ingredients. When I turn around, she's standing before the island, her head cocked, eyes fixed on me.

"What?" I stop in my tracks.

"You look... very domesticated. Unusual."

She takes a seat at the island, resting her forearms on it, still very focused on me.

"Unusual?" I drop everything on the worktop, bringing over some eggs, veg, and some utensils and bowls. "Did you think I would be surrounded by servants?"

She pulls her shoulders back, her eyes widening slightly. "Maybe a cook? Or a maid?"

"Is it still called a maid?"

"You're right. A butler would be more fitting for you." Her condescending tone makes me frown, but when I

see the tinge of amusement in her eyes, I want to smack her ass with this butter knife.

“A butler, really? Nah, no butler here. Sorry to disappoint. We do have assistants, and yes, I do get meals made for me sometimes, but I don’t have a live-in chef. Don’t get me wrong, I like having staff deal with a lot of the mundane shit I don’t have time for, but I didn’t grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth. Doing things for myself keeps me grounded, and I don’t like people constantly running around my house, except for the guards roaming the grounds. I enjoy the privacy, and there’s something about being surrounded by this lush green oasis that brings me so much comfort.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply anything. But I’ll be honest, in recent years, I’ve developed a pretty specific image of you. I guess it all looks different from the outside.” She’s not shying away from the underlying insult.

“Yeah, well... I’ve developed a certain idea about you too. I agree, everything looks different from the outside.” It wasn’t long ago that I thought she turned into the stuck-up version her parents always wanted her to be.

“You’re *The Serpent*. It’s hard to imagine you in a home like this one, cozy and beautiful, while cooking breakfast. Shit, I have a warped perspective on everything, to be honest. I’ve been surrounded by the wrong people,” she says, sighing as she intertwines her fingers, rubbing them nervously.

“There’s no denying that. But things will change. Soon. Very soon.”

God, her smile is infectious.

“So... it’s only you here. All the time?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Cheeky, Little Eve. Why don’t you just ask the questions you want answers to?”

“Maybe it’s not my place to be that direct. I’m trying to give you a chance to refuse to acknowledge the question, I guess.” She grabs a small bowl, cracks a few eggs in, and begins whisking them.

“If you’re asking me about women, then no. I do not bring women here.”

I can’t help but smirk when I catch her expression at my answer.

“Not here. Okay.”

“You know, jealousy looks good on you.”

She shoots me a look that tells me she might beat me with that whisk, but hell, I’m going to keep going because I know everything she does to me will feel good.

“No women here, don’t worry. I mean, apart from my mamaw and my ex.” I say that last word with a shrug, like it’s no big deal. But I almost burst into laughter when Morrigan violently whisks some egg out of the bowl.

“You son of a bitch, you’re doing this on purpose.”

I smirk as I continue. “Am I? Huh. Either way, other than them, only the guys and the security team come by now.”

“Who’s your ex?” She doesn’t waste a breath.

“She doesn’t live around here. Don’t worry, you won’t run into her.”

“Did you break up on... good terms?”

“Yes. She’s also married now, and we were only together for about eight months or so.”

I feel bad using that word—*only*—because Morrigan and I weren’t together for too long either. But Belle certainly didn’t feel like her. I got over Belle in days. I never got over Morrigan.

I turn to the coffee machine and fill two cups.

“Cream and two sugars?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Umm... no sugar is fine.”

Her tone sounds off. I whip around and narrow my eyes on her. “You don’t like it with sugar anymore?” I’m skeptical.

“I—I do. It’s just better for me without.” She’s fidgeting, chewing on her bottom lip as her hand presses against her stomach.

What the fuck is going on?

I drop two sugars in her coffee and round the island, straight to her. The moment I’m in her space, I rotate her stool, and spread her naked thighs, stepping between them. Then I slide my hands under my shirt that looks so fucking good on her, sinking my palms and fingers into her soft sides, right below the waist.

“I don’t know what you see in the mirror, Morrigan, but what I see is fucking stunning. No matter how much sugar you have, that will not change.”

She braces her delicate hands on my forearms, and before she can chew on that lip again, I catch it in a breathless kiss that makes me dizzy. When I’m done with her, she sucks in a deep breath, and I could have sworn her green eyes brightened. She doesn’t say anything, though, only a smile moves her lips, and it’s enough for me.

I head straight to the stove and begin frying some maple-cured smoked bacon that Mamaw always makes sure she brings to me from her favorite butcher. It smells divine, and judging from the twinkle in Morrigan’s eyes, and the growling in her stomach, she’s going to enjoy it too.

“How is your mom? June, right?” she asks.

I stop with the kitchen tongs in midair and turn my head to her. “Yes. You remember.”

“Of course. I know I only met her a few times, but that type of kindness stays with you. She lives in town, East Side, right?”

She’s not wrong. Mamaw is a sweet woman, too sweet sometimes, and she paid for it in the past. But the life she’s led has slowly toughened her up. The guys are all a little terrified of her, and she has them wrapped around her little finger. Maddox considers her his mother too, and she’s never called him anything but *son*.

“Not for a while. On this land, there used to be two dilapidated cabins, which I tore down. There was a big one here, where I built this house, and a second hunting cabin about two miles south, where I built hers. I like keeping her close to me. Safe,” I explain.

“That’s nice. I know you haven’t had an easy life, but you have a loving family—your mom, The Sanctum. It’s precious, you know.”

There’s a sadness in her eyes that I wish I would be able to wipe away. I wish I could make things better for her, give her a new life, and new memories.

I wish I could give it all to her.

I hope I will.

* * *

“Could we eat outside, please?” There’s another twinkle in her eyes as she points toward the deck, and I wonder if this is normal. For little things like this to pierce my darkness with her rays of light. Because if that’s the case, I’ll feed that twinkle so it becomes a permanent sparkle.

I don’t answer, I just grab the plates and head toward the back door, explaining to her how to unlock and open it. The air is crisp when we settle at the dewy dining table, but neither of us mind. It’s refreshing. Not many words are exchanged, both content to simply be in each

other's presence, the silence anything but awkward as we eat. Her eyes wander to the forest around us, to the birds that fly from tree to tree, to where the leaves rustle.

But my gaze stays right on her.

I'm happy observing her, every shift in her movements, her curious gaze when she notices something else to look at, the plumpness in her cheeks when she smiles, and the soft wrinkles in her features. I take it all in. Everything. Even the way she delicately slides the food off the fork with her plush lips, the way stray strands of her brick-red hair gently flow around her face in the forest breeze, and the barely audible moan deep in her throat when she bites another piece of bacon.

I'm mesmerized, trapped in this surreal image before me. Morrigan—my Eve, sitting on my deck, eating my food, and finally enjoying my company.

"I'm not letting you go, Morrigan."

Her head whips to me, hair whirling over her face, and she quickly swipes it away, revealing the slight shock, laced with fear, in her eyes.

"I don't mean out of this house," I correct myself. "I mean you... us. You're mine. I don't fucking care how condescending and possessive that sounds. I genuinely don't give a shit. I will fight for you. I will fight to get you back. Unless you tell me right here, right now, that it will never be what I want it to be."

I drop the knife and fork and stare at her, feeling the strain between my eyebrows, and the shadows deepening over my eyes.

"What do you want it to be?" she asks with a slight scowl.

"Forever." I don't hesitate.

She nods slowly, pursing her lips, and the lack of a response brings a whole other level of anxiety rushing

through me. One that I don't remember ever feeling. But I've thought of this moment before. The moment I reveal why I had to break up with her, that I never stopped wanting her, and what I want us to be. I've been perfectly aware that she could just reject me. Yet now, as I'm faced with the prospect, I realize that I haven't prepared myself as well as I should have.

Was I too smug about it?

My heart thumps louder in my ears, and a slight ringing starts to sound in there amongst her silence.

"I can practically taste your nervousness, Serpent," she says slowly, as her gaze darkens.

As I take in the image of her against the background, it hits me all at once—the color of her eyes is the same as the forest that surrounds us. Is that why I find so much comfort living between these trees?

"I think you're imagining things, baby." I straighten slowly.

"Am I?" She drops her cutlery on the plate, pushing her chair back with a loud grind, and stalks toward me.

She brushes her hand over my bare chest, and I know my heartbeat will betray me. Only, she doesn't linger. Instead, she continues her exploration down my abdomen, reaching over my cock that's been half hard since she slid my shirt over her naked body, and my toes curl when she gives it a squeeze. Even through the fabric of my joggers, it feels fucking good.

But she doesn't stop there. She tightens her grip once more, before she rubs her palm over the growing length of my shaft, then throws her leg over the chair, straddling me.

Her knees are braced over the armrests, her legs dangling over the sides as her ass sits far too comfortably in my lap. The minx doesn't waste a moment, and her hips begin this ruthless grind against my cock, just as her hand presses right over my heart.

Like she wants to feel the beats of it beneath her flesh, the effect she has on me.

“You’re doing a good job at distracting me,” I say, as I dig my heels into the floor and push, sliding my chair back enough that it gives her space to move.

My God, the smile she gives me is so fucking stunning. She reaches between us, sliding her hand under the hem of my joggers, and presses her palm on my cock before wrapping it around, dragging it slowly to the tip of me. *Fuck*, I have to keep my eyes from rolling to the back of my head as she pumps two more times, the feel of her is almost too much to handle. I’m at the precipice of slamming her on the fucking table and driving into her, but it appears she’s the one who wants to do the fucking now. And who the hell am I to say no to that.

“You’re gonna fucking kill me, aren’t you?” I ask as she shoves my joggers down, freeing me from them.

“You’ll die a happy man then, no?”

She grins as she presses my cock to her lace covered pussy, the grit of the fabric and the wetness of her so fucking enticing as she moves up and down.

“I don’t know. Will I?” I say, cocking an eyebrow, and she licks the corner of her lips, challenging.

She releases me, and my dick slaps against my abdomen. She presses her pussy to it, rolling her hips as she grabs onto my neck, and her back arches as she drops her head back, closing her eyes.

There’s no shame, no inhibition, no restraint as she gets herself off on me, and Christ if that’s not enough to push me over the edge. She’s using me for her own pleasure, and I’m a willing participant at the cusp of begging her for more.

I don’t. Instead I dig my fingers into her waist, and push her harder against me, helping her grind until her

moans echo through the forest. Until I know the security detail that patrols my land can hear every note of it.

Just as her legs begin to shake, when I can feel the pulse of her cunt against me, she reaches between us, and in one swift motion, pulls her panties to the side, rises, and impales herself on me.

“Jesus fuck!” I can’t help the rasp that leaves me. It’s almost covered by the pleasure filled cry coming from her.

I think I will die a happy man.

One stroke and I’m balls deep as she unravels around me, shaking and strangling my dick. Goddamnit, it’s a view to behold.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, all broken like that on my cock.”

When her pussy relaxes, she moves again, rolling her hips slowly, and rising until just the tip of me is inside of her. Fuck, it’s a different type of pleasure. Euphoric, almost.

I slide my hands under the shirt, one on her hip, the other on her breasts, and my head drops back, eyes closed as I savor the feel of her wrapped around my cock. She moves nice and slow, and I revel in every drop of ecstasy connecting us in this moment.

“You’re so damn handsome, all enthralled like that inside my cunt...” She moans those delicious words, and my cock jerks inside of her, making her gasp and twitch.

I smirk as her rhythm quickens, and when I open my eyes, the intensity of her gaze on me makes me flex harder. It draws out a violent cry from her lips, one that echoes a few times before the forest swallows it. I release her breast and clasp her throat in my hand, pulling her to me just as I push my ass up, my cock reaching much deeper inside of her at the same

moment I press my lips to hers and she screams into my mouth.

“Fuck me, darling Eve, take everything,” I coax her on.

The rhythm takes another turn, as she slams onto me, and I push up into her.

“Make me come, goddamnit!” she almost yells the command at me, and I can’t help but grin at my vixen.

I release her waist and reach between us, pressing two fingers on her clit, rubbing circles on it. I watch her lips part, her moans increase, and my fucking balls can’t take it anymore. Wrapped tight around my cock, milking me hard, I try to pull myself together and hold on, but goddamnit, it’s too much.

I come so hard my balls hurt, my cock jerks, my abs tighten, and I fucking roar the moment she screams and shakes, coming with the same rhythm. I release her throat and she wraps her arms around me, holding on for dear life as she presses her head in the crook of my neck and I hug her to my chest.

Minutes... so many fucking minutes it takes just for her pussy to stop twitching around me, and I can feel my cum slowly seeping out. She couldn’t care less.

Finally, she pulls away, just enough so she can see me, and she smiles—a glorious fucking smile that could move mountains and tame monsters.

There’s a sweet innocence to it that I’ve never seen in her before.

I want to keep it, preserve it until death comes and we get to continue our dance in the great beyond.

MORRIGAN

THE HUMIDITY OF OUR SOUTHERN city somehow feels fresh against my skin here in the middle of the forest. We're in the same spot. I'm draped over him, and he holds me in his arms, one hand threaded through my hair in a tight grip. Yet, I finally feel like I can breathe. The air is lighter than it ever has been. I'm out in the open, yet I'm safe.

"I have men out here, baby. Men that might have just watched you ride me. They most definitely heard us." He talks softly in my ear, his words wicked.

"Do you think we gave them a good show? Or should we try again for good measure?"

The rumble that shakes his chest as he forces himself not to laugh is endearing.

"I'm sorry, I keep forgetting you own a sex club now."

I pull away enough to see his handsome face. "Sir, please. I own a *fetish* club. While sex might be happening, not everyone comes there for it. They come to satisfy needs beyond it." I dip in slowly, my gaze switching to his lips. "Cravings." I touch mine to his, brushing left to right. "Fulfill fantasies." Then I press closer, sinking my fingers through his hair, his stubble a delicious scrape against my face.

"My apologies, Miss." He speaks between kisses. "And do you fulfill any of your fantasies there?"

"I certainly fulfilled one a few weeks ago. One I never knew I had. Being fingered by a stranger while watching another woman being fucked by a dildo and a man was definitely a highlight."

His grip in my hair tightens and he pulls down, deepening the kiss as he leans slightly over me.

“Mmm...” he hums against me. “How peculiar. I had a similar experience. I don’t know how I had so much chemistry with that woman, you know...” He’s dripping in sarcasm. “Why I wanted to taste her so badly, or why I wanted to press her against that window and fuck her while everyone watched.”

“Is that your fantasy, Serpent? Fuck me as everyone watches?” I lick his lips and pull on his hair just as he does the same to me.

“Oh, my Little Eve, I have many fantasies I wish to fulfill with you. And I have a feeling there’s one in particular that we share.” He jerks my head back and when I feel his lips on my throat, a shudder shakes me. “What fantasy fills that pretty little head of yours?” He licks me from the base of my neck to just under my ear.

“There are many,” I say on a shaky breath.

“I bet there are. Tell me the biggest one. The riskiest one. The most forbidden one of them all.”

“I don’t know...” I’m lying. I definitely know.

“What makes that tight cunt of yours wet when you’re alone at night?” He traps my earlobe between his teeth, biting just hard enough that my nipples perk up.

Oh, fuck.

“Dirty... filthy things,” I answer.

“Filthy,” he whispers against my throat, dragging his teeth down. “Who’s doing these filthy things to you?”

“You,” I moan as the scrape of his teeth gets me fucking hot all over again, his cock half hard under me again.

“And what am I doing to you, baby?”

“Vincent, please—”

“Am I finger-fucking that pretty cunt?” That crude word sends a tingle straight to it. It works magic every single time.

“No.”

“Am I licking it?” he asks.

“No.”

“Am I fucking it, Morrigan?”

“N—no.”

His palm reaches my center, cupping me in an almost bruising grip.

“Oh, you filthy little thing.” I can practically taste the smirk in his words. “Is it your ass I’m stretching with my cock?”

He squeezes my pussy harder, and I mewl, “Yesss.”

“That sounds positively divine, but definitely not like the riskiest, most forbidden fantasy.”

Shit. Please... don't ask...

“Are we alone?”

What?

“Yes.”

“Are you sure about that?” His finger rips through my pussy, sinking so deep inside of me, my body jerks up. But his hand in my hair holds me down.

“Fuck!”

He adds another as the heel of his palm rubs against my overly sensitive clit.

“Your cunt betrays you, beautiful. With my cock in your ass, it’s lonely in your delicious fantasy. Isn’t it?” He pumps in and out, and I swear he can drag the truth out of me through my goddamn pussy.

“It is,” I finally admit.

“Are we lying in bed, or are we... in the shadows of stairs?” The rhythm quickens, his thrusts harsher, and my brain shuts down as my body goes almost limp. *Wait, stairs?!*

“Vincent, I—”

“Focus on the fantasy.” He rolls those fingers over that treacherous spot inside of me, hypnotizing me. “Who else is in it when you fuck this pretty cunt of yours alone at night? Who else do you imagine?”

“I can’t. Please, don’t—”

“You can. Say it, baby.” He slams hard into me, his thumb now on my aching clit, and I think I’m losing my mind.

“Maddox!” I cry as a shudder rips through me.

I’m losing my mind. Did I just admit to him I fantasize about his best friend?! I don’t have another second to dwell on it, as he adds one more finger, stretching me just a little wider, and I yelp.

“Your pussy would have to take more than just three fingers to accommodate him, filthy Little Eve.” He bites into the side of my neck, his words sinking in at the same time. “He’s a mean motherfucker. He would stretch that pussy so hard, but I would be right there with him.”

“Vincent—”

“Yes, right here.” He pulls his fingers just enough to reposition himself, and suddenly I can feel one pushing against that tight back hole. It’s so wet from my pussy and his cum that was still inside of me, that it slides right in, and I don’t bother to hold in the lust-filled moan that tears from my throat. “I would fuck this tight little ass of yours, as he would pump into your pussy, and goddamnit... wouldn’t that be fucking beautiful?”

I must be dreaming.

He rolls those fingers with such skill that I've fallen backwards, my shoulders against the table, and his words... they fill me with the image of the man before me sharing me with the beast I've always craved. Just once would be enough to sate my hunger. Vincent taking my ass... Maddox owning my greedy pussy.

The orgasm hits with that image front and center, clawing its way through me so violently, Vincent has to hold me so I don't fall off of his lap. It feels... it feels dirty. This climax shouldn't be this strong. I shouldn't like this fantasy quite this much.

I'm wrapped in his arms and I'm not entirely sure when he pulled me there, but he holds me tight, lazily running his fingers through my hair. I shift slightly and kiss his lips, lingering for a moment longer.

"Did you always know?" My voice is soft as I ask, and I have to force myself to look him in the eyes.

He nods.

"Not always, but I saw the curiosity in your eyes even back then. I can always recognize lust in your eyes. I've always known you like him, just as he likes you."

"Vincent, it's not like that. No, not like you."

"I know, don't worry," he assures, a soft smile on his lips.

"How do you know? How does this not make you jealous, or possessive, or upset?"

"Oh, I'm possessive over you, don't you fucking think otherwise. I would happily cut the hand off any man who touches you. Which makes this whole predicament you're in very hard for me. But with Madds, it's different."

"How?" I ask, my question coming out shakily.

"There's something about the way he looks at you that gives me this sense of pride. Like... he appreciates

this amazing thing I get to have to myself, and I want to show you off. But beyond that, I trust him with my whole life, and I know that no matter what, he would respect any boundary I would set. And you, no matter how much you hated me, it was never me you wanted to destroy, so I trust you too.”

He pauses, his eyes scrutinizing as he watches for my reactions for a moment longer, before continuing.

“He cares about you. He sees something in you he relates to, and I know in my gut, he’s not a threat to your heart. Maybe it’s the reason why I’m not jealous of him.”

I’m not entirely sure how to respond to all of this, but all I can think is that this man never ceases to amaze me. This kind of freedom is so fucking refreshing.

CHAPTER 26

MORRIGAN

I MANAGED TO GET VINCENT off me in the shower and proved that I could wash myself on my own, although he insisted he could do it so much better. He's somewhere in the bedroom as I dry myself, but all of a sudden, I hear a door close downstairs.

"Vin, sugar, are you in?"

My head whips to the bathroom door, heart lodging in my throat, and *"sugar"* opens the door, looking at me with interest.

"Is that your mom?!" I ask frantically.

"It is."

"This feels like an ambush," I whisper. "Did you know she was coming?!"

"No idea. But sometimes she comes to bring dinner, because... well, she's a southern mother." He shrugs. "Your jeans are on the bed, along with your T-shirt, but you're welcome to keep my shirt on. It looks good on you." Those dimples make an appearance on his cheeks.

I just about melt, forgetting his mother is downstairs in an instant.

I quickly wipe the rest of my body, run back through the dressing room and to the bed, pulling on the jeans and his shirt as fast as I can. I tuck it in so it's not too obvious, then try to tame my frizzy curls.

Oh fuck, no matter what, I still look like I just came out of his shower.

“Here goes nothing.”

As I walk down the stairs, I can hear them talking in the kitchen, and my heart won't slow its thumping.

“Just reheat it and it will be good as new,” she instructs him.

I finally see them, and the sight is such a contrast to The Serpent's image to the outside world. I can't quite fathom it's true. She's a short woman, a few inches shorter than me, with curly black hair, just like Vincent's. Only hers is dusted with grays, caught in a loose bun at the nape of her neck. She looks unnaturally sweet next to this man, in her flowery knee-length dress draping over her full hips, while... pinching her son's cheek.

When she turns and her gaze lands on me, she scrunches her eyebrows, takes a step forward, and cocks her head.

“Mamaw, this is—”

“Morrigan?! Morrigan O'Rourke, as I live and breathe!”

Ummm...

“Come here, sugar, let me look at you!”

“Hello, Ms. Sinclair.” I walk quickly to the woman who holds her arms open to me, too shocked to say more than that.

“Oh please, call me Mamaw June. Everyone does.” She grabs me by the shoulders, holding me at an arm's length, her smile so bright it could turn a sinner into a saint. “You're even more beautiful than I remember.”

“I’m just surprised you remember me.”

“No one forgets a girl like you, honey. Truth be told, I’ve been wondering for years when you would be back.” She draws me into her arms before I can gasp at her words and squeezes me tight. It’s warm. It smells of peach pie and a summer garden.

She smells of love.

I hug her back, and only after she releases me do I remember her son is in here too. When I look at him, I can’t quite pin the look in his eyes. Somewhere between surprise and disbelief.

“Come, eat, you look a bit too skinny,” she says, pulling me along with her, toward the island.

I burst into a full belly laugh, all too aware of my soft, plump body. She ignores me, pulling out a casserole that makes my stomach grumble with its smell alone, along with a basket of biscuits.

“I guess we’re eating.” Vincent sits next to me and takes a plate his mother sets on the island.

“We might have to go for a walk after this, because I can’t help myself.” I’m not shy with the serving size, as it truly does smell incredible. I grab a couple of biscuits too. “Damn, they’re still warm,” I whisper to myself.

“There’s pecan pie too.” Mamaw June points to a dish in the far corner of the kitchen.

“Two walks,” I mutter to the man, ignoring his snickering.

“I’m gonna get out of your way, because I had no idea he had a guest, but you have to come for tea soon!” She steps over and gives me one more warm hug, and my God, this woman feels so... homey.

I almost forgot how sweet she is. I guess growing up with parents like mine, you forget how they’re actually supposed to act.

“Thank you for the food! It smells so delicious!”

“My pleasure, honey. Take care of yourselves.” She walks out the door after kissing her son on the cheek, and I grab a spoonful of whatever she cooked, moaning like I just got fucked all over again.

I turn to Vincent, my cheeks full, chewing excitedly, but stop when I note his glaring eyes.

“What?” I mumble.

He shakes his head, biting his lip as those dimples threaten to grace his cheeks, then turns back to his own plate.

Screw him, this food is more important right now.

And pecan pie!

* * *

Now that I spoke with Lulu, and made sure she's good and safe, my head feels lighter. No matter Vincent's words, I needed to hear her for myself. She agreed that a couple of days in hiding might not be the worst idea. And she has his number if she needs to reach me.

“When are you going to tell me what the plan is?” I slide my feet into a pair of flip-flops that Vincent's mom left in his mudroom, then follow him out the door.

Definitely inappropriate footwear for a forest walk, but I don't have anything else, and it's far too hot and sticky anyway. We walk down the deck steps, through his back garden, toward a path I can see through the trees.

The sun begins to set just as we enter the forest. I'm using this walk as a way to get some distance and clear my head. Even though I'm still with Vincent, I needed to be away from that house. I feared we would never stop fucking. As much as I enjoyed every second of it, I need to enjoy him beyond the feel of his cock filling me.

“A lot has happened, so now is probably the right time,” he answers me.

“I hope nothing has changed about my plan for Ryan. At this point, I don’t even fucking care if my father goes down with him.”

He steals glances at me as we stroll side by side, and he seems to be tense.

“I’m not going to lie, Morrigan, that’s where this is headed.”

My steps falter for a moment at his words, but I keep going as he takes in a deep, heavy breath. It’s giving me anxiety to see how he has to prepare himself for the words he’s about to speak.

Then he starts.

An hour must have passed, and I haven’t said a word. Just nodded, gasped from time to time, and even stopped dead in my tracks, shaking my head.

He eased me in, explaining why he couldn’t take out Ryan when we first made our deal, as they need him for his connection with another man—Boseman. Then he told me all about that bastard, their past, and more importantly, how he’s currently messing with the present. He’s been trying to threaten The Sanctum’s business, carrying minor attacks on them, and even on Mamaw June, but failing at all of them, luckily. It doesn’t make them any less frustrating and dangerous. Vincent said Boseman’s like a shadow, but I think he’s just a coward. As much as I hate that Ryan has not been dealt with yet, I understand the importance of finding Boseman and getting rid of him.

This is where the easing in ended. Because Vincent followed with details about my father and Ryan’s new drug and ammunition trafficking business, about the docks, and the expansion through the country.

My father is dealing with drugs... and I realized I had no idea who that man is. Or Ryan, for that matter.

Over time, I made a point to keep tabs on what my father was doing for work. More out of stubbornness,

because that man's opinion of women is that we're not worth much more than cattle. The only difference would be that he expects women to always be made-up and dressed to a certain standard, since he cares so fucking much about image. But since women have no place in business, and couldn't possibly understand it, both my mother and I were always kept in the dark. So I found my own way in. Something never really felt right with him and his organization. I knew he skirted at the edge of the law, but I couldn't see beyond that. And when I went to university, I couldn't keep a proper foot in, and I had no way of knowing if the man crossed the line into crime or if he was already there this whole time.

Is that really who he is? A man building his own organized crime empire?

Or is he just adding onto it?

It's not the crime itself that bothers me, it's his self-righteous, duplicitous ways.

But then the story got worse, crossing the line of insanity when Vincent told me my father and Ryan traffic much more than drugs and ammunition. My stomach almost turned inside out as I heard about the container, about the children, about all the others they found after.

We walked in silence for a bit because I needed to come to terms with *what* my father and Ryan truly are, before hearing more of the story. I thought I was done being shocked. God-fucking-damnit, I was wrong.

I've mulling over Vincent's words for a while, not even knowing where he's leading me through this forest. I've spiraled and come back, then spiraled again, wondering if I'm making a mistake. If my trust in him is blind. Because... Liam O'Rourke raised me and my brother. He's my goddamn father!

I finally take a deep breath, closing my eyes until my lungs are full, then release it and open them on the man walking beside me. As hard as it is to believe it, he has

no reason to lie to me in such a brutal way about my father. The trust I have in him is not blind. As horrifying as it all is, it's the truth.

“Okay.” I finally speak.

“I know it's so much to take in.”

“Yeah—yeah, it is. But I need to hear it all. I don't want to allow myself to doubt anything. I need the whole truth about who my father and Ryan really are.”

Vincent looks slightly apprehensive but continues anyway.

“After we closed the container and left, readying to follow it, we thought it would stay fairly local. Instead, we found out why the freight trains were imperative in their business deal with us and The Ghost. It's an easy way to traffic people, as you do not have to worry about transferring them between transport methods, or about being seen. With the trains, you just load the container on, and it's all done. We ended up following them about fifty miles east, to what seemed to be a sorting hub.”

“What do you mean by sorting hub?” I ask.

“Basically, a human warehouse, where they assess the *merchandise*. They evaluate them, check their condition, what type of work they would be fit for, if they should go on the streets, or private buyers, or auctions —”

“Jesus Christ, okay, and what happened after?” I'm going to fucking throw up if I hear more about the ways my father planned to abuse these children.

“We waited for all our reinforcements to arrive, scouted the place, and attacked. It was fucking hard. We lost a few men, luckily not too many, but we saved so many souls. So many fucking children.”

His eyes glaze over, and he looks pained. Like what he found that day scarred him.

“What happened with all of them?” I ask.

“We’ve kept everything under wraps and dealt with it ourselves. The police couldn’t be involved, or any other agencies. And Holt and O’Rourke—I mean Liam,” he corrects himself, using my father’s first name instead of the godforsaken family name we share, “can’t know it was us who rescued all those people and fucked over their business. We intend to keep it that way until we can lay our cards on the table all at once. So we’ve been taking care of the children and finding their families ourselves. Katya has been working nonstop with Carter’s team of hackers and got home almost all the kids. Only a few remain, placed with a great foster family, and we paid everyone off to keep it under lock and key.” “What about the girl who took the tracker and helped you?”

“She decided to stay a while longer in Queenscove, until she can get back on her feet. She’s not eighteen yet, and needs to stay away from CPS’ radar, otherwise they’re gonna take her little sister away from her. She’s safe. Traumatized, but safe.”

I cannot even imagine what she went through. The fear, not just for herself, but her little sister too. The trauma of having to willingly go in that *sorting hub* after she could have been saved. I’m really hoping nothing happened to her there, before the guys rescued her.

“I’m fucking afraid to ask this, but... here goes nothing. How many did you find there?”

“One hundred and twenty-three.” He doesn’t waste a fucking breath, and I swallow mine.

I stop dead in my tracks, my hand on my stomach as I process that number. Bile burns its way up my throat, and no matter how much I swallow, it keeps coming back with the image of faceless children popping in my mind.

One hundred and twenty-three.

It doesn’t even sound like a real number.

“But I thought they only just started this operation.”
My voice trembles.

“A few of them were Holt’s doing before he joined forces with your father and struck the deal with The Ghost. Not many, though.”

The path we’re on in the forest is wide enough that the moonlight hits us here, highlighting the disdain in Vincent’s eyes. Visceral disgust shines there, and his features are heavy with everything he’s been through since I’ve been taken to Holt’s house. When I think of The Sanctum, I think *crime empire*, not covert rescue operation of trafficked children. Seeing the impact of this on a man, who kills without blinking, is almost confusing. It pains me that I held on to the preconceived ideas about this man. About all of them. They may be criminals, but my father and my future ex are the scum of the fucking earth.

And one thing’s for sure—the conflicted feelings I had about making them pay are well and truly gone. Vengeance will be so much sweeter now.

We walk in silence for a while, and I allow the darkness that lives in my soul to feed on the horrors my vivid imagination is conjuring. It’s fuel for whatever revenge will soon come.

When the moon glows brighter, and the forest thickens around us, the dust seems to have settled and my head is clearer, my soul calmer.

“What happens now?” I break that silence.

“You can imagine that messing with their human trafficking business had quite an impact on them. So we decided to make them feel even shittier and hit two of their warehouses too. We burned them to the ground and took away all the ammunition. Now, we’re making sure they have no idea it’s us, then we’re going to take advantage of their state. Holt is frantic. It’s a massive financial loss, and they’re also losing trust with their *clients*. He’s bound to make a mistake, and it’s the

perfect time for me to find out what his deal with Boseman is, and when I can find the motherfucker.”

I realize something, and I turn to him, grabbing his hand. “You kept Ryan away from me. Every night I was there, he got pulled away on some phone calls that made him rage and leave the house. He never got the opportunity to do anything to me because he kept having to leave. Indirectly, you saved me from him.”

I’m fully focused on him as we keep walking through the darkness. The fact that he and The Sanctum are the reason for my safety in there, even unintentionally, makes me feel something indescribable.

“It didn’t feel like that from our side. Madds was worried that Holt was going to lash out at you, make you his outlet for the anger we were causing him.”

We stop in a clearing, my feet sore, since we’ve been walking for quite a while. But the smells of the forest, the crisp night, the starry sky... they make up for it.

“What about you?” I turn to him, our fronts brushing against each other, and I have to crane my neck to look into his eyes.

“Morrigan, when I look at you, I see something that most don’t. I see exactly what you saw all those years ago in me, and I in you—a darkness that matches mine. I see strength, fury, and resilience. When you were taken, I was terrified, and fucking riddled with guilt for what that asshole could be doing to you. It would have been all my fault. But this bond we seem to have clawed at me, and I had to trust that you could take care of yourself. Not because I was trying to make myself feel better, but because of who you are. You always fight back with everything you have.”

He sighs, shaking his head as he continues, “You say that we saved you from him, but in reality, there’s a reason why Holt hasn’t forced himself on you all these months. This man has seen what you are capable of, and the only way to get to you was to wear you down.

But even after all this time, he's unsure if he's managed to. It's why he's been putting it off. I've had the pleasure of killing a few men who thought they could just take what they wanted no matter how loud the word 'no' was shouted, and none of them were willing to put it off and wait as long as Holt has."

Fuck. I didn't expect this, his reaction, the pain, or his faith in me.

I grab his face, pulling him to me and out of that daze, and crush my lips onto his with such force, it hurts.

Because it hurts our souls, too.

It hurts to know what could have been and how much he would have hated himself for it.

It hurts to know this man is exactly what my soul needs—not the one to save me, but the one to help me save myself.

It hurts... seeing how much we have lost, but it's such a good hurt, knowing that we have found our way back to each other now.

Vincent wraps me in his arms, deepening the kiss, and I can feel its magic in my fucking soul, my heart aching for this to never end. But a gust of wind pulls us from the spell, bringing with it a humid scent that usually means rain in these parts. We both look up, but luckily, the skies look fairly clear. Then I skate my eyes around us, releasing him when I realize where we stand.

"The crossroads!"

"Little Eve, are you telling me that you really didn't know where you came that night? Where you were?" A smirk pulls at his lips.

I shake my head, inhaling that scent of wildflowers. "I had no clue. I went off a side road, ended up in the forest, and just drove."

“I was convinced that you came here specifically to find me.”

“And this is part of your land?” I ask.

“Yes. You missed the private road and property sign that night.”

“So you really were just out for a run. Shit. Here I was thinking you were some creepy guy stalking through the forest.”

“Well, just because it’s my forest, it doesn’t mean I’m not.” He shrugs, and I feel a rumble of laughter growing in my chest.

“It may sound crazy, but it feels like it was meant to be.” I almost laugh at the ridiculousness of my own words.

“It is crazy, but I thought about that too, and I think I agree—it was meant to be.”

“You know, I’m still not sure what the price was for the deal I made with you.”

“You,” he answers too quickly, reminding me of how he uttered the same thing that night. “You willingly gave yourself to me at these very crossroads, Morrigan. You knew it too, it’s why you never really questioned me or insisted on the terms. You gave me a bit of your soul”—he grips my waist and pulls me into his hard body—“and little by little, you willingly offered more, until you became mine. Such a beautiful, beautiful gift...” he murmurs, trailing off.

“My soul is mine, sir, thank you very much.” I lift my nose and quirk my eyebrows as I regard him, palms pressed on his chest.

“Oh, baby, it’s so very sweet that you believe that.”

The grin he gives me, with those devious dimples, is devastating. Truly and utterly devastating.

He presses his lips onto mine, his arms wrapping me in a possessive hold, and I fear that my soul has been

his long before we struck a deal for it.

CHAPTER 27

VINCENT

SHE TAPS HER FINGERS, one by one, on the marble top of the coffee table, making me a bit uneasy.

“And you’re sure this plan will work?” Morrigan asks me for the second time now.

I’ve shared with her all the details of the plan we’ve set up. She knows everything The Sanctum does, even if I had to work harder to convince Finn that she needs to know. He has a bit of a stick up the ass when it comes to her, but I’m not fully convinced if it’s Morrigan he’s not warmed up to, or the idea of her—what she represents.

However, the plan she’s asking me about now, is one I’ve only shared with her—a backup plan. An insane, batshit crazy backup plan, and judging by the look in her eyes, she thinks so, too.

“We’ve considered as many risks as we could think of. We have all these bastards in a tight grip, but if something goes wrong, then this it’s the best solution we have to protect you,” I confirm again, staying as calm as possible, as I know that what I’m suggesting is not a simple matter.

“Sorry, I don—I don’t mean to sound like I don’t trust in your judgement. I just don’t want them to slip through the cracks. They have to pay. It’s not only about me

anymore.” She sits back on the sofa, head falling against the edge as she rubs her palms over her beautiful face.

Oh, her worries are not same as mine. I’m more concerned about the impact it has on her, but she’s thinking about all those bastards and our payback.

“They won’t. The Sanctum is bigger than they think. It’s bigger than you think as well. There is no chance for them now. You will certainly not marry that goddamn piece of shit, and all the children they have wronged will be avenged. You have my word on that.”

She seems satisfied with the reassurance, but I can still see the turmoil in her eyes. “Make the arrangements, then.”

“It’s all been arranged, baby. One text to confirm your approval, and we’re ready.”

“Then I believe it’s time for us to leave our sanctuary, Mr. Sinclair.”

Indeed, it is. I nod once, rising from the armchair, and offer my hand to her. She takes it with a smile on her face, and goddamnit, her acceptance of me, our bond, was worth the fucking wait.

* * *

The evening offers the cover we need, and by the time the wheels of my Camaro hit the asphalt of Queenscove’s downtown, it’s just past nine. We’re heading straight to Midnight to meet the others, along with Loreley. Morrigan demanded to see her as soon as possible.

No one can see my Little Eve through the tinted windows of the car. She’s safe here. But I do worry that someone might spot us walking into Midnight. As secret as that bar is, The Sanctum is not the only one in this city with access to information. Our only advantage is the fact that as far as we know, neither O’Rourke nor

Holt know that Morrigan has any involvement with us. It's never safe to assume.

The chirping sound of my phone disturbs her focus. She seemed to be trapped deep in thought, and I would very much like to find out what pulled her away like that. Instead of asking, I pick up my phone from the center console, but the number on the screen gives me an unsettling feeling.

I think she catches on to it, looking at me with a cocked eyebrow as I slide my finger on the screen.

“Everything o—” But I’m interrupted by angry and terrified cries. “What the fuck happened?!”

“Vincent?!” Morrigan’s eyes are wide as she clutches my thigh. Something in that gaze tells me she already knows who’s distressed on the other end of the line.

“We’re on our way! Stay away from it!” Fuck, fuck....
Fuck!

“What happened, Vincent?! Was that Lulu?!” She turns in her chair, but I ignore her, pressing my foot on the gas as I weave through traffic, ignoring the honking, and flying through too many red lights.

“Put your seatbelt on!” I rasp to cover the sound of the angry engine, as I whip my forearm over her chest, and press her back into the seat.

“Goddamnit, Serpent! What the fuck happened to Lulu?!”

Oh, reckless Morrigan has come to play. I can feel her fire touching me, her rage growing with every second that passes. It fucking terrifies me right now, because we were doing so well... so goddamn well.

“Fuck.” She’s gonna hate me.

“We’ve passed Midnight,” she breathes out, as she looks back to the turn we were supposed to make. My tires screech on the asphalt when I take the next turn,

and she instantly whips her head back at me, recognizing the direction. “The apartments... the club.”

I sigh, exhaling a breath that strains my throat, as I pull onto the street that takes us closer to what she just recognized.

“The club is burning,” I tell her, dejected.

A gasp, that’s the only sound that comes out of her mouth. Nothing more. And her usual searing gaze turns cold.

I stop the car and look at her, only I’m met with her profile, too stern and sharp, her chest rising and falling in panting breaths she’s struggling to control. I’m used to her lashing out, screaming, raging, beating the shit out of people, but this... this is fucking terrifying, because it’s a stage I’ve never seen her in.

The fire truck lights shine from the back of the building, where the parking lot for the club is. But I pulled in at the side of the building, since I don’t want to risk being seen at the front, or at the club’s entrance. The moment the car doors open, we can smell it. Burnt wood and leather fills the air, but there are no flames out here. Maybe it’s a good sign.

We disappear in the shadows, quickly slipping through a side entrance that’s fairly concealed, and once that door opens, the thick, choking smoke hits us first. Then the heat comes.

“Morrigan, you can’t go in there!” I grab her forearm, pulling her back to me.

But the woman shakes herself so hard, she escapes my grip, giving me a look of hurt that hits my soul.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” she yells, then runs through the corridor.

I realize we walked in through the fire exit, ironically, and I follow her down some steps, and through a corridor. At the end of it, I find the playrooms that luckily look intact.

“Nooo!” Morrigan’s cry splits the air, shattering some part of me that’s too connected with her. She’s fucking heartbroken.

And I can see why. The flames have taken over the entire bar area, along with the storeroom in the back of it, and most of the stage. The seating area that surrounds it was also in flames at some point. Only black, scorched wood and melted leather remains there.

“Ma’am, you have to leave right now!” A fireman pops out of the gap in the flames and grabs her upper arm just as I get to her. The moment he sees me, he freezes for a split second. “Please, it’s not safe.”

Other firefighters are battling the flames that engulf the bar area, the heat so strong, it scorches my airways. But Morrigan is just frozen in place, watching the disaster before her in utter disbelief. I shake her, but she pushes back at me, angrily.

“For fuck’s sake, woman! This is not the time nor the place.” I’m not fucking play anymore. “And Lulu is not here! We need to get the fuck out now!”

Holding on to her upper arm, I force her to me, following the suited man toward the stairs that lead to the front entrance. I’m definitely bruising her flesh right now, but I don’t give a shit, and even through her protests and screams, I keep pulling her after me. I only care about getting her to safety.

We reach the foyer, but the smoke is still so damn thick, I can’t see anything. There’s no one but firemen moving up and down the steps.

“They’re in there.” One of them points toward the service door that leads to the corridor Morrigan took me through before.

She tugs away from me, and rushes for the door, punching some keys on the number pad. But the electrics must be screwed because nothing happens,

and she bangs her fists onto the door, screaming at it like it could magically open.

And it fucking does.

One of my men opens it reluctantly, and his shoulders relax when he sees me, nodding as he steps to the side to let us in.

“It’s open.” He points to another door, and I don’t have time to ask him any questions as Morrigan sprints to it and rips it open.

Fucking hell, this woman would jump headfirst into any fucking situation. I don’t know what the hell awaits after that door, and she has no regard for her damn life. I follow her and end up in a small café, catching the moment Morrigan screams for Lulu, who’s sitting at one of the tables.

“Are you okay?!” She holds her friend’s face in her hands, forcing it in every direction so she can examine her. Then she continues patting her body, searching for any sign of injury.

“Morri! I’m okay!” Loreley rasps.

She grabs onto her, her boyfriend reluctantly leaning in his chair, far away from them. Only when his eyes land on me, they widen for a moment too long.

Suddenly, Maddox and two of my men walk through the same door we came from and it’s my turn to contain my surprise.

“What happened, Loreley?” I ask, stepping closer as I clasp Morrigan’s shoulder. Only she shrugs it off, throwing me a look that very clearly spells *fuck off*.

“Ryan happened. We saw his men on the cameras. He watched as they ran out after setting the place on fire, then the motherfucker had the audacity to smile at the camera.” The disdain in her voice matches exactly what I’m feeling.

“Lulu, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I should have never kept you anywhere near me! This is all my fault. Goddamnit, it’s all my fault!” Morrigan’s voice breaks into painful sobs.

But her friend shakes her head, wrapping her arms around her. I step away, leaving them to comfort each other, since Morrigan fucking hates me right now. I turn my attention to my best friend instead.

“Why are *you* here, brother?” I whisper to him.

His lips part for a split second, his amber eyes darkening as they flicker toward the women.

“The men called me,” he answers.

Right, and you came for... the men.

I hold his gaze for a moment longer, before returning my attention to the girls.

“It’s all my fault, all my fucking baggage, and I knew it was going to crash onto you to someday. I’ll make up for it all. I’ll pay you back and help you rebuild, then I’ll be fucking gone. I’ll leave, because you don’t deserve this.” Morrigan’s pain roughens her voice, tears streaming down her freckled cheeks, and I can’t stand her dejection. I want to wrap her in my arms and help her through this.

“Don’t be fucking stupid,” Loreley rasps, rising to her feet. “You didn’t do this. That motherfucker who’s forcing you to marry him did. And if you don’t make him pay”—her golden eyes turn to me—“I sure fucking will.”

Her eyes flicker to Maddox, brows narrowing for two seconds before returning her attention to Morrigan.

I have a feeling that if I don’t do as she pretty much just ordered, she’ll make me pay too.

Loreley’s family name carries weight too, even if she’s not participating in the family business. Her father rarely gets involved in shit around here. His business lies elsewhere, and his money as well. Usually, if he

does poke his nose around Queenscove, it means something is very, very wrong. And Mr. Dietrich is one of our prized allies outside of our city.

“Goddamnit, Lulu! This, all of this, is on me! If I didn’t let that asshole control me the way he has, and turn into this goddamn monster in front of my eyes, none of this would have happened. You don’t fucking deserve this.”

Then the woman turns to me, and I’m taken aback the moment her palm whips my head so viciously to the side, my neck aches. My ego snaps into place just as she’s about to do it once more, but I catch her wrist in mine, pinning her in place.

“You!” she seethes with palpable fury and something else.

Something that pulls at my fucking soul—disgust. She slams her fist against my chest when I don’t let go of her, but then continues anyway.

“You fucking promised me she was safe! You looked me in the eyes and told me she was taken care of, that you had people protecting her, and I had no reason at all to worry. You fucking promised me.” Her voice booms through the barroom.

“Morri, it’s not his fault.” Loreley grips her shoulder to no avail.

“It is! You fucking promised, and I was stupid enough to trust you. Goddamnit, Serpent, she could have been there. Lulu could have been downstairs! She could have fucking died!” She spits the words at me like I’m made of fire, and she needs to put me out.

As hurt as I am by her distrust, and all this anger focused seemingly just on me, it comes from a place of fear. Nothing I could say right now will make any of this better for her. She tries to strike me again, but I grip both her wrists, holding them to my chest as she works through her loud, heaving breaths. Tears spill over her plump cheeks, and her green eyes glow more vivid than

ever. They seem to emphasize the pain she's feeling. And all I can do is hold her through it.

This is not the time to rationalize with her. It's not what she needs. What will help her, what has always helped her, is to let those demons out. Fight it out. Shout it out. Just... let it out. All she can see right now is what could have been, how her best friend could have ended.

Although, something's nagging at me.

Loreley was here all day, up until the moment one of our guys took her to Midnight.

Almost immediately after, the fire happened.

Did Holt know Loreley wasn't in the club?

CHAPTER 28

MORRIGAN

MY RAGE HAS SUBSIDED, if only for a few moments, enough to hear what the firemen who came into the café, have to say.

“It’s all extinguished. But I hope you know insurance might not cover the damage. It was no accident, I’m afraid, but I believe you are already aware.”

Lulu nods, gripping my hand.

“It didn’t all burn out,” he continues, and we let out a joint relieved sigh.

“There’s plenty of damage, but some areas were untouched, thankfully. It looks like you have some floor fire barriers and most of them did their job. Please be careful going down there. The stairs are safe, but I cannot guarantee the whole ceiling or the floors are. Okay?”

“We have some hardhats upstairs, from the apartment renovation. I can bring them,” Luke states, and Lulu nods to him.

He joined us a few minutes ago, and no one missed how his steps faltered the moment he saw who else was here with us—Vincent and Maddox. He didn’t know that the security guys who have been keeping an eye on Lulu were The Sanctum’s. We decided that it would

be best to say it's her dad's, as we still don't want anyone else to know of my association with them.

"However," the fireman continues, "the car from the parking lot... I'm afraid that one is totaled."

"What car?" My voice raises an octave, and my eyes bulge as I take in the look of pity on Lulu's face.

"Your car, Morri... I'm sorry."

Only hours ago, I was in relishing pure and total bliss, isolated from the world, from the reality of my situation, and it's hard not to think that this is some sort of punishment. I was finally living something I stopped dreaming about long ago. We were making plans, setting up contingencies, we were discussing my freedom and the rest of our lives. But as I look into those black eyes now, all I feel is fury. The type that will not push me to attack but walk away disappointed... and never come back.

Shit. I fucking loved that car.

But after the things Vincent told me about my father, it feels like it was bought with blood money. Being burnt to a crisp and removed out of my possession might just add to the clean slate I need.

The firemen leave, and we're left all alone to deal with our pain and anger.

"He probably thought that you came here after you escaped," Vincent says. "Your car at the back confirmed it to him. Do you have any idea what he knew about the club?"

My lips tighten into a thin line at The Serpent's question.

"Morri?" Maddox asks, a slight warning in his voice.

Fuck's sake!

"Whilst I was with him, he's never mentioned it," I answer with a scowl. "Anyone who wanted to know the information could easily find out it's Lulu's. It's a legal

establishment, after all. However, when it comes to my involvement, only *you* knew.” I narrow my eyes on The Serpent, my brain fighting to believe anything else but the obvious conclusion.

He doesn't miss the accusation, and I don't miss the hurt that suddenly appears in his eyes. It has to be him. Or one of The Sanctum. There's no one else.

“Don't insult me.” Each word lands with a harsh bite, and with his gaze trained on me, a freezing cold seeps into my bones.

Right now, that's exactly what I wish to do—fucking insult him.

“Come on!” Lulu rasps, pulling my hand. “Let's see the damage.”

“Let me go get some helmets.” Luke steps away, but she stops him.

“Fuck the helmets. Get them later. I need you there with me,” Loreley pleads, and he looks at her, then at the door, lingering for a moment. He nervously fiddles with his fingers, as he turns back and comes to us. I can't blame him for being worried about safety.

“Here, I got some flashlights from the storeroom.” Beau, one of our security guys, hands them to some of us, and carries on walking at the front.

“He was here,” Lulu leans in and whispers to me as we walk back into the foyer. “They followed him, and waited until he went to the bathroom.” We walk down the steps of the club, the smoke almost cleared now. “Then they trapped him in there. Literally trapped him. He could have fucking died, burning to death in a goddamn toilet, Morri. This was not The Sanctum's mistake, nor your fault.”

Shit, I can't blame the poor guy. I could blame The Sanctum for not having more men in the club, but then again, their priority was Lulu. They had her all protected. I guess it was fucking lucky she was already

out of here, by the time Ryan came to burn the place down.

Lucky.

I stopped believing in luck a while back. I guess there's still something to it.

As we reach the bottom of the stairs, the smell of wet ash, scorched wood, and burnt leather, seems to stick to the inside of my nostrils. In the eerie glow of the flashlights, the image before us is dire. With each step farther in, Lulu exhales small gasps, or clutches her belly, cheeks, or chest, and holds back little sobs.

I already saw the untouched playrooms, and as she notices them too, a wave of relief washes over her. The windows and walls are black from smoke, but that whole area is still standing, and it gives me a slither of hope.

But no matter what... we're closed for business. And fuck knows how I'm going to get the money to rebuild and start over. The bar was a fucking work of art, the furniture was custom made, and the stage was perfection. This was the only public place where I felt truly and utterly comfortable pole dancing, and that bastard took it away from me. I didn't think I could hate him more. I was wrong.

I take a few more steps into the space, trying to find anything salvageable. But it looks like every single table and chair has to be thrown away, the floors need replacing, and—

“Watch out!” Arms wrap around my waist and chest from behind, and I'm whipped backwards just as one of the large light fixtures crashes in the spot where I stood a second before.

Even through the stench of wet ash, I can still scent the bergamot wrapped around The Serpent. I can also feel the strong rise and fall of his chest against my back,

and I would shrug him off if he wasn't holding me so tight.

He may have just saved me, but it doesn't negate the promise he almost failed to keep. Or the fact that he may be the reason this happened in the first place. I put more force into my movements, and shake away from his grip, reaching for Lulu.

"We'll be okay. We'll rebuild. We'll come back stronger than before. I'm so sorry... So sorry." I don't know what else to say to make this better.

I rub her arm, looking up at her sweet smile. Even through all of this, she's still smiling at me. I don't fucking deserve it.

"You've lost the club too, not just me. Fucking Holt took it away from us. This is not your fault, Morri."

I hear a hitched breath from the other side, where Luke stands with his arm tight around her waist. Only, I could have sworn it sounded more like a scoff. When I lean in ever so slightly to look at him, he quickly averts his gaze.

How fucking bizarre.

Lulu didn't seem to notice it.

But I catch Maddox's gaze, and it's narrowed in on the guy, sizing him up.

"What are *they* doing here?" Luke's not bothering to hide his distaste as he whispers to Lulu, pointing his head at Vincent, Maddox, and his men.

"We're here because we are in business with Mr. O'Rourke and Mr. Holt. And we"—Maddox steps up closer to us, the red glare from the emergency lighting making him look more menacing than usual—"always keep an eye on the people we associate with."

"And you just... happened to be in the area?" Luke asks, sarcasm dripping from his tone.

“You don’t seem to be fully aware of who we are. But I assure you, we are *everywhere*.” Maddox glares at him, and I swear I’ve never seen him react like this.

“Luke, for God’s sake, stop it. If it wasn’t for them noticing the smoke, this whole place, this whole building, would have been up in flames. Morri and I would have lost everything.” Lulu tries to put down subject, well aware that Luke shouldn’t find out about my connection with The Sanctum, or the fact that the security following Lulu is not her dad’s.

Luke scoffs, rolling his eyes. “I’ll go see if the firemen are still outside and find out what the next step is, since it’s obviously an accident.” He says it with clear disgust in voice.

Lulu may not be blaming me, but Luke definitely is.

“Alright.” She nods reluctantly and pulls away from us, walking over to the burnt-out bar as he leaves.

Maddox’s gaze follows him without bothering to hide the fact. He really doesn’t like him.

The moment Luke reaches the top of the stairs, Vincent nods at one of his men and he leaves quickly, following him. All of a sudden, he wants to make sure everyone’s safe now. I shake my head, rolling my eyes, but manage to suppress a huff.

“I’m not sure what to do here...” Lulu says, pulling my attention back to her.

“We’ll figure it out. We’ll talk to the insurance company and convince them to cover us.” I move around the broken light fixture, my feet slushing in the wetness left after the firemen put out the fire.

“I’m not sure about that,” Vincent chimes in. “Even though it wasn’t your doing, considering it was criminal, the insurance company will launch a full-on investigation with the police. It could be a long time until this is sorted, as they need to prove it wasn’t one of you who did it.”

“Fuck.” I swipe a palm over my face, wondering how I’m going to make this work. “That will open a whole can of worms. And delay things.”

I spent pretty much every penny I had on this. Nowadays, I’m not exactly making money, since I’ve been unable to work. I’m fucked. And she’s fucked too, just because of me.

For the first time today, Lulu cries.

Not hard, not loud, but a few whimpers escape and tears fall. She wipes them quickly, like she has no right to break down.

I don’t remember the last time I saw her cry. Have I ever? She’s the strongest, toughest person I know, and her emotions are always in check. Always. Even if she gets mad, she’s cold as fucking ice. I feel even more horrible now.

“I’m sure we can find a way, honey. We’ll find an investor. The club proved how profitable it can be in the small amount of time it was open. Everything will be okay, Lu, I promise you.”

Most of her inheritance went into restructuring the building, renovating her apartment, starting the renovations on mine, and Metamorphosis. It was too early to get any profit from the investment. Whatever money she has left, or profit from the small café at the front, is not going to reach very far into renovating this place.

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull her to me, powerless to make her feel better.

Silence falls upon the charred remnants of the main room of the club. Apart from her soft whimpers.

“The Sanctum will invest,” Maddox’s rough voice booms through the dark space, and my gaze instantly darts between him and Vincent.

I can tell Vincent is taken by surprise by the statement, but he composes himself quickly enough,

watching his friend.

“We’ll front you the money and assist you in the renovations to ensure everything is done properly and in a timely manner, so you can reopen quickly,” Maddox continues.

“Don’t be mad!” Lulu exclaims. “You’re asking us to be in business with The Sanctum?! No. This is Morrigan’s and my business, no one else’s. Not even Luke is involved in this.”

“We don’t want to be partners. Return the investment when the money comes in and you are able to do so, and we’ll be out of your hair. No commission, no partnership.” Maddox is now a few steps away, his eyes fixed on Lulu, not on us. Just her.

“So you can come and claim some sort of interest on me? I know how you lot work, racketeering and all that shit. Nah, I’d rather step on my pride and ask my father.” Jesus, she’s feisty, but in front of Maddox? That’s a bit risky.

My whole body freezes the moment I hear a smirk from Vincent’s direction. I look at him, and he bites his lips, trying to keep serious, but his eyes fail him. *He’s fucking laughing!*

“Doll, you don’t seem like the type of woman who believes rumors that fly around. We don’t deal with racketeering,” Maddox counters, a smirk on his lips too.

Even through the red emergency light, I swear I can see Lulu’s cheeks flushing. And it doesn’t look like embarrassment. But then she hisses, actually hisses at the man.

“I am not. Your. *Doll!*”

Maddox smiles, then turns his gaze to me.

“What do you think, Morri?”

“Lulu and I will discuss it and we’ll let you know. Thank you for the offer, Maddox. Should we get out of

here before the ceiling collapses on us?”

“We should,” Vincent speaks. “We’ll leave the detail. They’ll stick to staying out of sight, but we cannot risk Holt or O’Rourke finding out we’re... too close.”

“We have to meet Holt anyway.” Maddox follows. “I believe he may have what we’re looking for now, and it’s time to pay up on our investment.”

“Perfect timing. We have to see if he says anything about this.” Vincent points around, stopping at me.

“What if he knows about us?” I ask. “Or what if he has surveillance to see if I was going to return here? It could have all just been a ploy to draw me out. What if he sees you guys leave, or—”

Fuck! I was expecting some things to go wrong. But this? This was definitely not on that list.

“We’ll keep to the story we told Loreley’s boyfriend. After all, we did not get where we are today without knowing all that moves around the people we associate with. Your father knows this by now,” he answers with a sigh. “I’ll leave the way I came. I’ll talk to you later.” When he steps closer, I know he can see my apprehension.

I hold his gaze, wishing he would just go, because my mind is a mangled mess, and I’m not sure if he’s the right one to trust right now.

“Morrigan, he will pay for this. They will *all* pay for this. Of that, I can assure you.”

“Will you pay for this too?” The words spill off my tongue before I can stop them, and the hurt slashing through his dark eyes tears my heart in two.

He shakes his head, then twists on his heel, walking away. Maddox follows him, and even he looks hurt by my words.

Did I really get this wrong?

No one else knows. There is no other explanation.

“We need a drink.” Lulu takes my hand and pulls me away from the chaos surrounding us.

I guess we’ll deal with the cleanup later.

CHAPTER 29

VINCENT

“SO, WHY DID YOU SAY you were so adamant on finding this Boseman character?” Holt asks after we go through brief pleasantries.

We met in a parking lot downtown, a random spot that’s actually not random at all. It’s one of our many public spots under surveillance.

“We didn’t.” Finn squashes his curiosity then and there.

“Right.” He warily looks between all of us. “Well, if you’re looking for him, then I’m just glad I didn’t end up getting into business with the man.”

“What did he offer?” I ask.

Holt looks at me for a moment too long. Just when I think he won’t answer, he opens his mouth.

“Too many terms and conditions. We didn’t like either.”

I nod. I would say that it sounds like him, but in truth, I have no goddamn clue what he sounds like now. The man I remember wouldn’t have a leg to stand on in front of the elite of this city. Not to mention, me or The Sanctum. He’s changed. Still stupid, as always, since he’s gone after my family, my Sanctum, and my goddamn fucking territory. But he’s definitely changed.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have had business connections with the likes of Holt and O'Rourke.

But his balls are growing bigger than his brain is, our little spies talking of takeover and infiltration into business he has no place in. But *he wants* a place. So we need to find him and eliminate him before his claws dig too deep and leave a mark.

"Do you have something for us?" Carter asks, ending the pleasantries. I welcome his lack of patience, as we need to move this along.

"The bastard was hard to find." Holt nods, grabbing an envelope one of his men gives him, then he hands it over to me.

I pull it open, inspecting its contents: an address and a name—*Jackson Davenport*. I raise an eyebrow at Holt.

"That's the name he's living under." He preempts my question.

"Interesting choice," I say, cocking an eyebrow.

It's hard to keep from rolling my eyes. Jackson fucking Davenport?! Good ol' Lester Boseman chose a pretty fancy name there, and it matches none of the man he actually is. Carter reads the name and looks at me with a stern expression, before he slides the envelope in his inner pocket.

"Posh, I know. I guess it bodes well if you want to go into business with the right crowd. Some years ago, *my own pops* pulled the same stunt. He needed a pseudonym for a certain shell corporation and gave himself a high society name to fit in with the investors he was chasing," Holt says with a scoff as he slides his hands in his pockets. "Turns out, most people don't give a shit what name you go by."

His own pops...

Fucking bingo! My mind goes into overdrive at Holt's story and choice of words. But I keep my face straight,

resisting the urge to look at the others.

This changes everything. I can't wait to find out if the others caught onto it.

"Names don't cover sins," I respond, feeling the spark that threatens to reach my eyes. Adrenaline, or enthusiasm, I don't know what it is, but I need to get the hell out of here now. "Pleasure doing business with you." I end the conversation.

"Have a good night." He nods, his eyes swiping over us all.

We turn on our heels and head to our cars. Madds came in his, Finn and Carter together, and I'm alone in mine. But we're not going to the same place, and I need to talk to them about this meeting, and Holt's slip up.

Madd's is about to go pick up two lovely women and bring them to the man waiting patiently in the basement of our safe-house, and we're all dying to hear what the hell he has to say to them.

Only, the women have no idea what's coming, and their reactions will definitely determine if the plan Morrigan and I discussed earlier is still going to happen.

As it stands... I doubt it will. She seems convinced that I told Holt about her involvement in the club, and it fucking hurts. Does she really think that I would double cross her like that? That I would cheat her in this way with the man I'm trying to save her from?

Fuck.

Can I blame her?

When your parents pretty much end up selling you off to the man you're trying to escape, just to enable some fucked-up business transaction, trusting others is difficult. Especially the man who left you all those years before without another word.

"Finally!" I rasp, as all their cars start moving.

We weave into traffic, heading toward the safe house, while Madds rushes in the opposite direction.

It's been quiet on our front recently. There haven't been any other attacks or attempts, but I'm still anxious about Madds being followed. Especially after he picks up Loreley and Morrigan.

But the blood buzzes through my veins, and I'm fucking ecstatic at the turn this night took.

* * *

"You better have a good fucking explanation for why we were practically dragged here by this neanderthal, Serpent!" It's Loreley's melodic voice that splits our ears, and Maddox rolls his eyes.

Her and Morrigan are at the entrance into this concrete corridor, and the echo of her words is shattering. Both Finn and I cringe slightly at the sound, as we stand at this other end, waiting for them to come.

She walks with such determination in her step, making her look as imposing as us. A businesswoman. Fearless.

Morrigan, on the other hand, has such a straight, controlled expression, the fury in her green eyes fucking shines. She's fixed on me, and I'm not even sure she blinks as she walks over. Her face is frozen, no scowl, no crinkle, no twitch moves her skin. But my gaze drags down the length of her and notices her hands rolling into fists, over and over. I've seen fury in her before, but when she's controlled like this, I'm not sure what she's capable of.

"You cannot demand us to just do whatever the hell you want, got it? Luke is gonna be worried." Loreley keeps shouting as they near us.

"Oh, I very much doubt that." Finn smirks next to me.

"What?!" She quickens her step. "What the fuck did you do to him?! Is this your goddamn ploy? Your way of

convincing us to take your money and bring us into some shady fucking business?!”

Madds slips by Morrigan and catches Loreley by the upper arms just as she’s about to lunge at Finn.

“I swear to God, you brute, if you don’t let me go right now, I’ll chop your dick off!” She shakes her body as she tries to get a good look at the man who’s a head taller than her, and I have to give it to her... she has balls.

The scar that sweeps down from his forehead to his cheek, just about missing his eye, gives his powerful and grave look a menacing touch. Not that he needs it. His six-foot-seven frame, wide and packed with fighting muscles, is enough to make people twitch. He scares the living daylights out of most people just by leaning his head in the right direction. Yet Loreley doesn’t seem to flinch around him.

“Luke is here,” Finn says, his hand pausing on the door handle. “But he has nothing to do with our proposal for Metamorphosis. On the contrary...” he trails off dramatically and slowly opens the door.

“The contrary?” Morrigan finally speaks.

She’s been quiet up until now. I was expecting her to lash out already. I guess her recklessness chooses its battles after all.

“Luke!” Loreley screams as she rushes past us.

“What the fuck did you do, Serpent?” Morrigan’s voice is almost a growl as she whispers to me.

She stops only for a moment, not meeting my eyes. Her lips settle in a straight line and her eyebrows furrow. Her expression is caught somewhere between anger, and what I’m quite convinced is apprehension. And that particular sentiment is definitely not directed at me.

Without lingering, she steps into the room, taking in the image before her—bleeding out of his nose, with a swollen eye, and split browbone, Luke is tied to a chair

in the middle of the sterile room. Two of our men keep watch, including Beau, who was at the club with us.

Carter quietly lingers, leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his broad chest, but he looks positively bored. I know why. Luke cracked too early. He was no fun for The Carver.

“Baby, untie me! Get me out of here!” the asshole pleads with his girl.

“What did they do to you?” Loreley frantically touches his body, assessing the damage.

“This is all your fault, bitch!” he spits at Morrigan who just walked into the room. “You fucking ruined everything for my Lulu!”

Morrigan doesn’t respond, but I don’t miss the flinch of the muscles in her back.

“How about we tell these lovely ladies what you so graciously told us after only two punches. What do you say? Or better yet, let’s start with the phone call you made when you were *‘going to talk to the firemen’* when Sinclair and Severin were at the club with you all.” Finn walks around to the table and grabs Luke’s phone.

“Baby, don’t listen to them. They’re all lies. They’re trying to fool you, turn you against me, and get in the middle of us!” he almost begins to beg, a pathetic sort of desperation clear in his eyes.

Does he really think his girlfriend is stupid?

“Let him the hell out of these ties!” She swings around, heaving as she looks at Finn.

“Give us a moment, and then you can decide for yourself what you want to do.” Finn brings the phone and stands next to the chair.

“Start explaining. I’m losing my damn patience here.” Morrigan is behind her friend, a shield protecting her from us.

“When darling Luke over here went upstairs to supposedly talk to the firemen, he actually went to make a phone call,” he responds, a wicked smile pulling at his lips, but it’s doused in cunning satisfaction.

“You probably remember that we sent one of our men to go after him.” I take over, stepping around into their view.

“I do.” She nods. “For his protection.” But I can see she doesn’t believe her words.

“For confirmation,” I clarify, and she scowls. “When we left you, we found him restrained by two of our men. He was trying hard to get away, spouting all sorts of bullshit. But the one who followed him confirmed my suspicion. He caught him on a call, about to throw *you*”—I point to Morrigan—“under the bus.”

“What?” she asks, brows furrowed, interrupting me.

“Beau, could you please share with the ladies what you overheard?” I turn to the man standing tall against the wall.

He takes one step forward. “His exact words over the phone, were: ‘*Morrigan is out of hiding. She came back, but she’s not al—*’” He pauses and steps back.

“Beau’s timing was fucking impeccable. He took Luke’s phone away just as he was about to reveal our dirty little secret.” I try to not be too condescending, because I don’t want to throw in her face that she was wrong about me. As much as I want to, I’m revealing a harsh betrayal, and it probably lands with a healthy dose of heartache.

“Surely you don’t expect me to have blind faith in your man’s words. Or yours.” That last one was a hard dig at me. “This means nothing.” Morrigan keeps her tone level now. But I can see the wheels are spinning in that pretty head of hers.

“Finn, give Morrigan the phone,” I instruct him.

She takes it, confused.

“Check the number. Call it if you wish.”

She waves in front of Luke’s face to unlock it, then checks the call list. Her eyes go wide instantly, shooting straight to Loreley. She’s frozen. Her lips part, but I can see the conflict riddling her body, faced with the task of telling her best friend that her longtime boyfriend betrayed her. She has to break the news that she’s about to lose who she loves, the one she shares her life with, her house, her bed.

“Morri?” Loreley’s voice is meek, begging almost, pleading that the reality she sees plastered all over her best friend’s expression is not the same one we presented to her.

She pulls the phone out of her hands and looks for herself.

“The timestamp fits. Morri, whose number is this?” She pauses, waiting on a bated breath. “Answer me!” she rasps when the response doesn’t come.

“It’s Ryan’s number...” It’s almost as if she’s afraid to speak the words that spell betrayal.

The soft, broken threads on Loreley’s pale features morph until they settle on one vicious emotion, as she turns to face her boyfriend. Her cheeks are flushed, a deep crease gathers her eyebrows, her golden eyes seem to glow, and her lips are pursed tightly. I’m surprised she’s not snarling. And with that phone in hand, she pulls back then smashes her man right across the jaw, whipping his head to the side with enough force that we hear the crack of the phone screen.

Morrigan goes to pull her away, but I grab her hand and shake my head at her. We’ll stop her if it goes too far, but for now... Loreley needs this. She looks at me, emotions clear in her eyes, but it’s not the time or place to talk about this. Sure, I would like an apology for her belief that I would betray her in such a way, but then again, the man Loreley has been living with for quite

some time has done exactly that. The ball most definitely isn't in our court tonight.

"Why? You goddamn son of a bitch! You motherfucker!" She doesn't wait for a response.

The crack of Luke's nose echoes through the concrete room, as Loreley smashes her fist right in the middle of his face.

"Answer me!" she seethes but doesn't give him the chance to respond.

She goes again, sinking her fist into his stomach as he spits blood on his T-shirt.

"For you! For us. Because I love you! I want it to be the two of us, as we're meant to be!" he shouts as his bloody nose drips into his mouth.

"What?" she yells, but we're all confused at this point.

"I wanted that bitch out of our lives!" he spits, turning toward Morrigan. "I fucking hated you since the moment we met. I knew you would get in my way. Too many fucking opinions, too much advice, too much influence you have on Loreley. We would have been more if it wasn't for you, always in the fucking way, always around. And now in business together, living under my goddamn roof, spending our money! I couldn't have you live a floor below, no fucking way could I allow that."

"*My* roof! *My* goddamn money! Not yours, *mine!*" Loreley pulls his attention back to her. "You're telling me you did this because you were jealous of my relationship with my friend?"

"I loathe her! She's a horrible influence. Always pulling you down, into her fucking drama, her issues. And now she's dragging you into a crime syndicate, of all things?! I wanted to make it look like you lost everything because of her. I wanted you to see the same thing I do when I look at her and drop her. Send her fucking packing! Away from us! Away from you. You don't need friends! You have me! You don't need

anyone else to get in our way! I want it to be us two, just us, forever!!!”

At this point, we’re all a bit flabbergasted, watching the ramblings of this man who has a few too many control issues, and they’re not even the good ones. Fair enough, I would be wary of who Morrigan associates with, but this is weird.

“That’s it. You wanted to have me to yourself. Forever,” Loreley states with the same disbelief we’re feeling. “You wanted Morrigan out of my life, *our* life. And your solution was to tell the man forcing her to marry him, the one who abuses her, the one who fucking kidnapped her in front of my eyes, that she’s in business with me, so he can hurt her? Then you wanted to ruin things further by telling him that she’s involved with the only people who can help her out of it. Do you forget what family I come from, you motherfucker?” She’s eerily calm as she basically spells out this explanation for him.

Luke’s gaze becomes clearer as his eyes widen, the realization that he fucked up only now dawning on him. Yet, he still seems to have some hope in there as he begins to plead with her again.

He doesn’t get the chance.

Loreley falls into a frenzy of punches, slaps, and kicks, probably hurting herself more than him. And just as I’m about to jump in, Madds closes the distance between them, wraps his arms around her, and pulls her away, even as she kicks and screams.

“What do you want me to do with him, doll?” he quietly asks Loreley.

“Oh, I know what I would do to him.” Finn pulls out a gun and sticks the end of the barrel to Luke’s temple.

The man freezes in place, his mangled eyes barely opening, and his gaping, bloody mouth showing one missing tooth. He’s not from our world—Loreley’s, too—

so he doesn't fully grasp our ways. I'm sure he's never even seen a gun before, let alone felt the cold metal of the barrel against his skin.

"No!" she shouts. "I want him to pay, but no death. Please, no death."

"Thank you, my love, then—"

"How dare you call me that?! You will go as far away as possible from me, from us, from any family I have on this continent." She reaches for Morri's hand, and she quickly grabs it. "You will never contact me, never fucking think of me, never dare step foot, even in the neighboring towns! If you do, The Sanctum will be the least of your problems. You will disappear from my life, unless you wish to disappear altogether." And with that, she turns on her heel and leaves the room, taking Morrigan out of my grasp with her.

Finn, Carter, and Madds follow the girls, but I stay behind to talk to Beau and our other guy standing guard.

"Do not let him go until we tell you. Set up a schedule to watch him. Don't break him. When our plan has ended, throw his ass as far away from this town as possible. Got it?" They all nod, and I walk out after the others.

He's a liability, and we can't risk him going to Holt or O'Rourke before we get to them ourselves. And goddamnit, my hands are itching to get to Holt. The gun strapped against my ribs hums, begging me to go and blow his fucking brains out right now.

Only, I can't. He's my only way in with Boseman. Because if the address he gave me for him is a trap, which I suspect it is, I have to keep him alive until he gives me what I want. Although I think I may have to fight with Morrigan over who gets to end Holt.

A smirk pulls at my lips, because it sounds like the good kind of fight.

MORRIGAN

WE'RE IN A SMALL ROOM at the end of that barren corridor, my arm wrapped around Lulu's shoulder as I watch the man who I thought betrayed me, walk in. I was pretty much convinced it was him. The tiny part of me that thought he wouldn't do this to me, was mainly made of hope, not conviction.

I went to the worst-case scenario in two seconds flat, and as his obsidian eyes fall on me, I'm not sure how to apologize.

I realize that it's not because I can't find the right words, but because I fear that it will not be the only time something like this will happen and I will automatically throw the blame on him because of past events.

Do I not trust him?

Do I not believe in him?

Because if that's the case, maybe our involvement should end the moment the pact is fulfilled.

"Morrigan." He speaks first, but pauses, that deep voice penetrating my soul, sending a shiver to pass through me.

There's a warmth in him that seems to show only for me. One that exists beyond those straight lips and grave gaze. He didn't lash out. He didn't even get angry as I accused him of betraying me to the one man I hate most in this world. He simply waited until he could rectify the situation.

Just like he did for the last eight years—he waited until his friend was safe and the time was right.

We stare at each other, both of us unable to find the right words. I should apologize, but I can't seem to do it.

I snap out of it, because this moment is not about us. I need to be there for my best friend.

"I think Lulu and I need to go." I finally speak. She's my priority right now.

"Will I see you the day after tomorrow?" I can just about hear a hint of uncertainty in Vincent's voice. Or is it concern?

It does something to me.

"Yes," I answer.

That one single word seems to trigger a sparkle in the depths of his gaze. And that does even more to me. It means that I have the same impact on him, as he does on me.

Our secret plan will go ahead, and I have more to say to him, but not now. I need to clear my head, and make sure this is not the biggest fucking mistake of my life, made out of pure desperation.

"Eleven," I add, then turn to Maddox. "Will you pick us up about half an hour before, please?"

"As soon as I find out what you're talking about, sure."

Oh, they will. All of them will, soon enough. And I reckon they're all going to call us crazy, with Lulu in the lead.

* * *

We're nestled on Lulu's comfy sofa, in what has suddenly become only *her* apartment, sipping some hot chamomile tea. It calms the nerves, as her grandma taught her. Maybe it's an old wives' tale, but it does feel like it's working.

“Lu, I’m not even sure what to say. However much you’re going to try to convince me, I will still feel responsible.”

“Why?” She scrunches her eyebrows at me. “Look, the man is clearly insane. I just...” She huffs and rolls her eyes. “There were red flags, I’m not gonna lie. But I ignored them because it was never something too crazy, too deep, or too concerning.”

“I can’t believe he hated me that much.” I never thought anyone could. I’ve never done anything to him.

“Did you ever see anything that could indicate... this?” she asks.

“Well, sort of. I knew he didn’t like me pretty much from the start. But it wasn’t me he needed to like, it was you. So I just got over the weird things he sometimes did or said. However, I’ve never seen anything to indicate this level of madness.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” she says with a smirk, and it’s the first hint of a smile I’ve seen on her face since the club caught on fire. “We both ended up with such insane men, obsessive, completely off their rockers.”

I chuckle at the realization.

“I always knew we had similar taste in men, but this is a bit over the top.”

My snickers turn into a full belly laugh. I wonder how fucking deranged I look right now. Lu joins in, and we laugh our asses off at the terrible situation we’ve gotten ourselves into. How the fuck did it happen? One crazier than the other, and here I thought getting involved with The Sanctum was the worst thing I could do.

How fucking wrong I was.

And how right it feels to be involved with them. One, in particular.

“How do you really feel?” I ask her once we calm down.

“I’m not sure. I think if it was a normal breakup, or at least a normal betrayal, I would have a harder time. But this... it’s so fucking surreal that I’m struggling to focus on my broken heart. I’m mostly angry.” She finishes her tea and sets the mug on the table. “It was getting rocky with him, you know? It wasn’t the same for me... He was becoming a bit too possessive, a bit too controlling. I don’t know if it was because of the club, but he always wanted to have eyes on me, see where I was, who I was with. And that spark just wasn’t there anymore.”

“I think that, in your subconscious, you did add two and two together, all those red flags. I’m pissed off it reached this point where he had to burn down our club to fuel his delusion. But I’m glad you’re rid of him,” I rationalize her train of thought.

I don’t want her to slip into a spiral. She’s strong, but her heart is precious. I’m relieved he’s not in her life anymore. I never liked the guy. Not just for her, I just never liked him and his vibes.

She pulls the throw from the back of the sofa and drapes it over herself, turning her attention to me.

“What about you, canoodling with a mafia boss?” She winks at me, and I can feel a blush creeping over my cheeks.

“He’s not a *mafia* boss. Also, he’s not really the boss at all. The Sanctum functions differently from what I’ve seen—they rule together.”

“Honey, you can call it whatever you want, mafia, a syndicate, organized crime. It all amounts to the same underworld,” she says with a shake of her head and a roll of her eyes.

“You should know,” I counter.

My gaze darkens, and she stills for only a moment. The name Dietrich is spoken in hushed tones in some parts of this country, and no matter how much she was

allowed to do her own thing, Lulu is very much aware of her family's *heritage*.

"Don't make me tap into my roots and smack you, woman!"

"Fine, fine!" I say, suppressing a laugh. "I'm actually worried I fucked it all up... I thought it was him. I feel like shit, but at the same time, I don't know if I trust him."

"He didn't seem upset in the least when we left." She shrugs. "I think you're scared. You know very well how I feel... or felt, about The Sanctum. But even I have to admit that they've done all they could to be there for you. For us."

"I wish he would just yell at me so we can get it over with."

"Vincent Sinclair does not seem like the type to yell at a woman. Let alone you."

I rub my hands over my face, pressing a bit too harshly, like I could wipe all this anxiety and doubt away. But Lulu is right. Vincent is not the type of guy to yell at me. Not in a situation like this anyway.

Maybe I can get him to punish me in some other way.

I'm blushing just thinking about it, but I do feel like I need to get it out of my system. Admitting I was wrong and apologizing would be the ideal way, but not the easiest one.

"And what's the deal with the offer *that guy* made?" she starts saying, but trails off.

I cock an eyebrow when she pauses for too long. She knows his name, but I think she prefers to call him a brute instead.

"I think the name you're looking for is Maddox."

"Yeah, whatever. What was that all about?" she asks with such annoyance in her golden eyes.

“He wants to help. Madds is a pretty good guy.”

“He’s a brute, Morri.”

I blush, because that doesn’t put me off at all. On the contrary.

“What the fuck was that?” she rasps, shocked.

“What?” I’m confused.

“Did you...? Wait, are you fucking blushing? You like him!” She’s squealing now.

“They’re all hot, Lulu. Don’t fucking pretend they aren’t.”

“We’re not talking about *they*, we’re talking about *him*. The guy I believe is your man’s best friend.” She’s smiling, but still pretty shocked.

But something else catches my attention: *your man*. I never thought of Vincent as *my man*. It has a fucking delicious ring to it.

“Can we please not talk about this?” I argue.

“Oh, damn, what would The Serpent think?” she taunts me.

I blush so red now, I can feel the heat spreading throughout my body, and her face falls in an instant. Christ, this woman knows me all too well.

“Drop it, Loreley.”

She’s even more shocked at the sound of her full first name on my lips.

“Fine.” But she’s scowling dramatically. “What was Vincent saying about the day after tomorrow, by the way?”

“About that...”

My back straightens as I brace myself for her reaction to the sound of the plan The Serpent and I have devised. But I’m going to ease her in and start with

some spicy details about what happened at his house. That will butter her up.

* * *

“Vincent just asked me if I would like to go have dinner with him. At his place.” I set my phone on the island, looking at Lulu for some guidance.

“Someone’s impatient.” She flashes her eyebrows suggestively. “You gonna go?”

We woke up this morning feeling a bit lighter. We talked, we planned, we talked some more. It’s been a pretty damn good day so far.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to spend time with her, without Luke. And last night she reacted surprisingly well to the plan Vincent and I devised. At least after the initial shock. She was, probably still is, apprehensive about it, but she said that she can see that this is the best safety net for me. It felt like a boulder was lifted off my chest. I needed that. Not her approval, necessarily, but she’s my Lu, and I needed to see the look on her face to know I’m not fucking over my life.

She reacted even better to the dirty little tidbits I shared, like the mind-blowing sex and his skilled fingers.

“I don’t want to leave you,” I say to her.

“Oh please. I’ll be fine. Someone from The Sanctum is probably lurking in the shadows, watching over me. And to be honest... I wouldn’t mind some alone time. I have to get used to it anyway.”

“Are you gonna break while I’m gone? Will I come back and find you crying in that big bathtub of yours?”

“Yeah, tears of joy!” She raises her eyebrow in that *obvious* way. “Nah, seriously now, you know me. I might cry to get this frustration out, but to be honest, I’m more susceptible to going back to Luke and killing the

motherfucker. Now that the shock has passed, the Dietrich part of me is fighting to come to the surface.”

I was a little surprised that she stopped Finn from taking it too far down in the basement. I guess she has some sort of moral compass. Unlike me.

“Go. Seriously. Enjoy that hunky man of yours, and I’m gonna enjoy a bottle of wine on my own.”

“Okay. I will. I’ll let him know to send someone for me. I love you, you know.”

“I know. After all, what’s not to love.”

“Epitome of modesty,” I say with an eyeroll and a laugh.

She hugs me and smacks my ass as I walk toward their—*her* bedroom. I have no clothes here, so finding something to fit me from her closet might be a bit of a challenge. Where she has lean, beautifully sculpted legs, I have thick thighs and round hips. And my boobs would be a bit too strained in her tops. So I need to dig deep for a loose dress.

I’m anxious about this *date*. Vincent’s invitation felt charged. Like he was holding himself back from sharing something important. But I could have sworn there was excitement in his voice.

He said he has something for me.

A present?

I don’t want anything from him. I don’t need anything from him.

But he told me that I definitely want this.

CHAPTER 30

MORRIGAN

WHEN I ARRIVED AT VINCENT'S house earlier, I almost skipped on my way up the steps. But I was so fucking apprehensive as well.

Only, the man welcomed me with a cheeky smile on his full lips. No sign of upset, or anger in his obsidian eyes. Though he is The Serpent, expecting him to not know how to mask his emotions is truly ridiculous.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" he asks, as I dab my napkin around my mouth, careful not to smudge whatever's left of the deep red lipstick I'm wearing.

"Delicious. And highly intriguing, which is why I have trouble believing you prepared it," I answer him, with a playful smirk lifting my lips.

The appetizer was oysters, and they were such a tasty surprise. Then, what seemed to be an intricate pasta dish, that left me utterly confused with its shrimp and smoked pancetta combination. I have no idea what to make of it, but I really wanted seconds.

"You were there when I finished making it," he said, laughing at me.

I don't miss the way his gaze darkens. He looks ready to flip me over his knee and spank me into obedience.

“Hey, I only saw you stirring a pot. I don’t know how those ingredients got in there.”

He rolls his eyes, and I have to bite my lips. He’s been the perfect gentleman, but the night is young, and I’m hoping he’ll turn into a deviant once dinner ends.

We’re sitting on opposite sides of the dining table, unable to touch, and barely reaching to cheer our wineglasses.

My skin itches for him.

It’s been goddamn hard.

Even harder finding the right time to apologize for doubting him.

“Vincent... about what happened.” I can’t wait any longer.

The man places his napkin on the table, and settles back into his chair, one eyebrow cocked. He knows what’s coming.

He’s expecting.

Almost demanding it.

“I was wrong. About thinking that you were the one who betrayed me... I was wrong.” I exhale with enough force that his napkin flutters slightly. “I’m not gonna lie, it was a peculiar instinct, an involuntary reaction driven by the past. You dropped me... just like that. My brain is now fully aware of the reason why you had to, but my heart is taking a little while to catch up. Because, no matter what... it still broke me. And after all of that, all I had was my family and their *endearing* qualities that are bound to leave scars when it comes to trust. Then, it was all topped by Ryan...” Shit. I’m less coherent than I thought I would be. “I know, I know you’re not any of them. I know... Fuck! Look, Vincent, I’m... I’m so sorry.”

He straightens, dropping his elbows on the table, and laces his fingers. Only, I can’t read his expression. I feel as though I’m looking at The Serpent now, not Vincent.

“I really am sorry. I didn’t want to believe it, but I hope I can make it up to you,” I continue when he doesn’t say anything, my heart speeding up as I wait not so patiently.

Suddenly, a wicked smile tugs at his lips, and he quickly glances at the time on his wristwatch.

“I think you can make it up to me.”

He pushes his chair back, rising elegantly, then rounds the table, and stops behind me. I have no idea what’s happening, but the moment his hand touches my almost bare shoulder, swiping to the front of my throat, I don’t fucking care. That touch is electric, and it’s doing something to me I can’t quite explain. It’s hypnotic and so utterly soothing. He applies a little pressure, tipping my head back, then the man dips in and kisses me on a ragged inhale, turning me into a puddle.

“Come, Little Eve.” He offers me his hand, and I take it willingly, following him toward the stairs.

He guides me up and turns me as we head to the bedroom I’m comfortably familiar with now. But he stops me in the open doorway and turns to me.

“I want to see the heathen in you tonight.”

I almost freeze at his words, but the sharp rise and fall of my chest betrays the stillness.

“I can be a heathen for you, Serpent.”

I can almost feel the grin on his lips, as they touch my shoulder. And I let my head fall back against him, as I absorb the shivers he spreads all over my flesh.

“And I want you to trust me,” he adds.

When he stops me just as I begin turning to him, I see a strip of black before the light goes out. He covers my eyes with the softest of materials, a thick sort of silk that molds against my face and takes away one of my senses.

“Trust me.” His whisper brings another wave of goose bumps as his breath caresses the nape of my neck.

He stops me once again from turning, and I drop my hands from the blindfold. I’m both intrigued and a bit frightened.

“Is there any point in asking what you plan on doing to me?” I question as he gently pushes me into his bedroom.

“*With* you, Morrigan. What I plan to do *with* you. I may have taken your sight, but you will be a willing participant.”

I may be scared, but it doesn’t trump the excitement of the unknown. Unless he’s planning to slit my throat here, I think it’s safe to say that he’s forgiven me for not trusting him.

His hand runs over the middle of my back, and I hear the delicate zipper of the dress as he drags it down, then swipes the straps off my shoulders. He tugs it down over my breasts, then over the full hips it pauses on, and eventually it falls to the floor.

Then there’s nothing. Only dragged-out moments of silence.

I can’t even hear his breathing.

My arms are suddenly too heavy at my sides, and I fist my hands, resisting the urge to lift them to cover myself.

“I’ll never tire of looking at you.” His hoarse voice just about startles me. “I almost don’t want to do it for too long because I still want to discover new things about you later.”

“Vincent—” His admission sends a sensation through me that has little to do with lust and more to do with that muscle that hurries its beat inside my chest.

“Take your panties off,” he interrupts.

Inhaling slowly, I hook my thumbs on the waistband, then pull down as slow as I possibly can, bending over at the hips as I step out of them and rise. His heavy breaths follow the rhythm of my heartbeat, and fuck if they don't sound like music to my ears.

His footsteps approach, and I feel the vibrations in the hardwood floor as he circles me. I'm not sure I've ever felt so exposed. I could be in a room full of people, and I would have no clue. The air is heavier to breathe in, and my spine tingles in such a brutal way, like a predator is just at the precipice of devouring.

A hand on the middle of my back startles me ever so slightly, then pushes me gently until my legs hit the upholstered bed.

"Climb up. On your forearms and knees," he orders.

Again, I do as I'm told, and when I reach the position, my back rolls with the thrill of the exposure. With my ass up in the air, every part of me is on full display, my bare pussy the main event. My ass too.

"So *fucking* beautiful, Morrigan."

He's behind me, not touching, but somehow his energy is there. His eyes are traveling down my body, and my back arches in anticipation.

When his finger swipes through the seam of my pussy, I feel how dripping wet I am for him. Digging my hands into the sheets, I fist the fabric, readying myself, because I know so much more is coming.

Then, in one long stroke, he pushes two fingers into me and the mewls spilling from my lips are almost embarrassing. He's determined and goes in straight for the kill, assaulting that treacherous spot that makes my legs shake. He curls those digits until the sounds coming from my drenched pussy turn into the backup melody to my moans. When he pushes one more inside me, I throw my head back, the slight stretch so goddamn exhilarating, sending another shiver through

my whole body. The sensitive buds of my nipples revel in the soft scrape of the lace of my bra, adding to the sensations.

But the bastard pulls out of me without warning, and I fucking curse myself for whimpering at the loss.

Only, my protests stop the moment the bed dips and his wet tongue swipes through me. And by God, this man could make me come just with a flick of his tongue. He licks me, sucks me, eats me fucking whole, and I just want to lie down on a fucking platter for him.

He swipes from my pussy to my ass, sending yet another shudder through my body, that tight hole tensing even more at the feel of him there.

“This will be mine tonight, Little Eve. I’m gonna fuck you until you scream, and when you do, I’ll fuck you even harder.”

At that declaration, my pussy clenches around nothing but air, and I can feel it... the wetness slowly dripping down my thighs.

“Look at you, so fucking ready, aren’t you?”

Then he leaves me. But I don’t move.

I hear some shuffling behind me, and the distinctive sound of a metal clasp, then nothing.

“But for now, I’ll have your cunt.”

His hand grips my ass cheek, fingers bruising my flesh, as the thick head of his cock presses against my entrance. Just like that... on one long, deliciously painful thrust, he drives home, and my head whips back on a vicious cry.

“You were made for me, Morrigan. You are the Eve to my Serpent.” He withdraws until just the tip of him remains. “And even your sweet pussy agrees with me, trying to suck me back in.”

He’s right. My muscles tighten around the head of his cock, and I revel in the groan that shakes his chest.

“Fuck me, Serpent. Fuck me until I’ll forget my own name!” I beg, but it sounds more like an order.

“You better fucking remember mine,” he all but growls, as he fists my hair, and slams into me with too much force. Yet somehow not enough.

He goes at me like a wild animal, and I need it. I need to feel him everywhere. I need to hurt. I need to cry. I need everything! His brutal thrusts make me lose my balance, and I collapse onto the bed, although it feels more like my muscles are dissolving into it. But his arm rounds my belly, and jerks me up, forcing me back into position. He fucks me like he can’t get deep enough, yet I know he’s reached the end. He insists, though, as his other hand roves my body and he grounds his hips into my ass, using my hair for leverage. I want exactly what he’s searching for—more.

I need more.

More of us.

More of him.

There’s so much pleasure zapping through my body, that my brain is caught in a storm of ecstasy. And with each rough thrust, his cock massaging my overstimulated walls, my consciousness becomes trapped there.

All I feel is him, and I want—

“More!” I demand on a hoarse breath.

“Hold the fuck on then.”

My whole body shudders at his crude order, but I fist the sheets, bracing myself just in time. He withdraws until the very tip of him remains, and when his hips slam against my ass, my head is jerked back by my hair. My scalp burns at the same time my pussy does, but one is pain, the other is pure euphoria.

“Yes... yes... yes...” I whisper like a mantra, thanking the goddamn gods for the divine pleasure rocking

through me.

I'm not even sure if I'm close to an orgasm, but I truly hope I'm not, because there's no fucking way I want this to stop.

Gripping my chin, he dips his thumb into my mouth, and I suck on it, rolling my tongue around, before he pulls it out. As his rhythm slows, I flinch when he pushes that digit against my ass. He gives me time to adjust, until the discomfort, the tension, turns arousing.

He keeps fucking me, moving in and out of my ass, and when he releases my hair and brings his other thumb to my mouth, I know what's coming.

"That's it... you look so damn pretty with my fingers stretching this tight hole." He has both in there, pulling in opposite directions, sliding in and out.

Not sure if I feel pretty, but I sure do feel goddamn incredible.

I hear the sound before I feel his spit hit my ass, and then he pulls his thumbs out, rubbing it there. The pressure comes with more force now, definitely more than just two thumbs, spreading as they draw out.

He's getting me ready.

That thrill sends heat into my pussy.

My moans are getting hungrier and hungrier, demanding more, because having him fill me this way is a whole different type of pleasure. I bring my fingers to my clit, pressing against it as he drives into me, and mere seconds pass before I'm screaming like a little whore. I'm coming on his cock, strangling the damn thing with all I have, and relishing the delicious feel of his fingers in my ass.

I fall onto the bed as he pulls out of me, but he barely gives me any time to breathe before he climbs behind me.

“Come to me.” He pulls me onto his body, my back to his front, and drags his hands all over my flesh. He’s kneading and rubbing as I relax deeper into him. “I’m nowhere near done with you,” he whispers.

My eyes would dart open, but I’m blindfolded and it makes no difference.

“Get on your knees, Morrigan. Straddle me.”

“You’re gonna kill me tonight, aren’t you?” I say through a strained laugh.

“Hopefully not. I have more planned for you.”

For me.

I want to ask what, but I’m interrupted by the sound of something squirting.

“Is that...?”

It is.

I can hear it as he rubs it on his cock, and then the cold feel of that lube covers my asshole, and I flinch. But he doesn’t stop, and I relax as he dips inside of me again, slipping easily now.

Damn, that feels so good.

Only, I know what’s coming, and I can’t help being apprehensive about his thick cock going inside my ass. Intrigued, too.

I don’t have time to linger on that thought, though. He pulls his fingers out and grips my waist, guiding me to rise right where he wants me. Where I crave to be too. I’ve been fucked there before, but not with this much attention. And definitely not in this position. Because, when he releases my waist, and I feel the tip of him against my ass, I realize I’m the one in control here. Yes, he can manhandle me in the best of ways, but I can take my time to adjust. To feel good. As I press down, there’s a different type of pleasure that stems from this. The lube makes it slightly easier, and I’m probably not halfway in when I realize the ache is one I

crave more of. So I press down, taking more inches of him, savoring the curses that come from the man beneath me.

“It’s too much...” I moan.

“Oh, you can take it,” he coaxes me on.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t,” I say with a smirk he can’t see, then he groans when I push down hard, and my ass hits his hips.

I’m so fucking full. Deliciously so.

When his cock twitches inside of me, I brace myself on his legs, and begin to ride him slowly. I’m probably moving excruciatingly slow, but I don’t care—this pleasure is all mine, and I’m gonna fuck him exactly the way I need to.

I can hear every groan, every breathy curse, and I wish I could see the look in his eyes right now.

“Oh, Little Eve, you ride so very well. You’re so goddamn beautiful on my cock,” he praises me, and I swear it’s like pushed a button.

My ass slams onto his hips, my rhythm quickening, and he lets me do it a few more times, before his hands go to my hips, slowing me down. Then he circles my waist, gently guiding me backward, and I pull my legs from under me, planting my feet on either side of his thighs. I don’t bother bracing my elbows on the bed, because Vincent wraps an arm just under my breasts trapping me against his front, as his other hand grips my hip. Slowly, we find a new rhythm, as he pushes up and into me, and I roll and grind back into him. The angle hits a whole other part of me, my pussy now missing the feel of his cock, but getting a slight taste of it, as it rubs on the other side of its wall.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, startling me from this reverie.

His tone is sultry, but firm. I feel all too aware all of a sudden. My skin sizzles, and my nipples perk up under

the lace of my bra.

“Y—yes.”

“I would never do anything you don’t want to. You know that.” His tone softens just enough to comfort me.

“I do.”

“Trust me to give you what you want. What you need.” He pauses for a moment. “What you desire.”

Those words dip into recent memories, and I’m about to ask if he’s being serious, when I hear footsteps on the wooden floor. I stiffen, but Vincent doesn’t. He carries on fucking my ass, and it suddenly hurts.

“Relax, Morrigan.”

I trust him, right? I do... he wouldn't do anything I don't want, and he would stop if I asked him to.

Not only are we not alone in the room, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that we never were. Not this evening. Not when I stepped foot in Vincent’s bedroom. I didn’t feel it before; I was too wrapped up in him, but I know it now.

My ass grinds into his hips ever so slightly, the realization taking over in a scary yet thrilling way.

But then the bed dips, and now I know we’re not alone here either.

I lift one leg, instinctively trying to close them, but Vincent widens his, blocking me. The instinct to cover myself, like the soft pouch of my belly, is strong.

“Trust me,” he whispers, tightening his hold on my ribcage.

I’m not sure how his words work so easily, how they affect me, but they sink in immediately. And as they do, that second person comes so close I can feel their body heat. When a calloused hand presses against the base of my throat, it startles me, pulling a gasp from my chest.

But that touch... that scent... I recognize them.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Vincent asks.

“Goddamn gorgeous.”

Maddox.

It’s fucking Maddox!

Between my spread legs.

With his hand on my throat.

Looking at my dripping pussy.

While Vincent fucks me in the ass.

I swallow my moans, because I fear that the wrong sound will ruin this moment. No. It won’t. There’s no denying where this is headed.

Maddox drags that hand from my throat and down between my breasts without touching them. He’s slow, taking his time exploring me, and when it reaches just above my pussy, he stops.

“This is the moment when you tell me to fuck off. And I’ll go,” he says to me, a grit in his voice lighting me up inside. Not Vincent. Just me.

My lips part ever so slightly, pausing at the range of thoughts flying through my head. My mind is muddled by the cock that’s making me feel too good, by the fantasies that live in my thoughts, and the cravings I’ve always had for Maddox—my man’s best friend. But there’s also the fear of having two at the same time, the implications of it, and the impact it could have on us.

But then it all goes back to Vincent and my trust in him. This is not a decision he made on a whim. He thought this through, including the possible repercussions. He’s thought it through so I don’t have to.

I can’t do it. I can’t say no. I can’t tell Maddox to go away.

I want this so fucking much. More so because Vincent wants it, too.

“Stay,” I whisper, and Maddox doesn’t spare a second.

Just like that, his thick fingers slip inside my pussy, and on a loud moan, my head falls back against Vincent’s shoulder. I have no idea how close these two men really are, but the barrier between my ass and my cunt is thin as fuck, and those fingers are definitely rubbing against my man’s length.

A shudder rips through me, and I whimper just at the mental image of it. Holy hotness, I would love for someone to film that close up, just so I can play it on repeat every time I want to get off when alone.

They sync their rhythm, and I’m not entirely sure how I’m supposed to stay sane as Maddox spreads those digits every time he almost pulls out. But then a third one pushes in, and I’m lost.

I know for sure his fingers are thicker than Vincent’s, because a wicked sting lays in their wake as he stretches me. I’m so lost in the feeling, that it takes me a moment to realize that I’m rolling my hips onto them, just as much as they’re pushing into me.

Fuck.

Those digits leave me on a low groan and all movement stops. Vincent holds me, adjusting me slightly, and a moment later, what presses against my entrance is much, much thicker.

Maddox’s cock is just about to impale me, and it feels bigger than anything that has ever been inside me.

I have flashback of Vincent and I on his patio, his fingers spreading me open, whispering to me that *I have to take more than just three fingers to accommodate him*. I mean, I believe him, but this is not what I expected.

He slowly pushes inside, and the burn begins, the stretch already too much. Yet, I want more. I want it all, no matter the sting, because even without Vincent telling me, I know this will never happen again. I don't think I want it to either. So I will take my fucking fill now.

It's surreal, though... I can't believe this is happening.

"Take it off," I rasp without thinking, and both men stop moving in an instant.

"Take what off?" Vincent asks, confused.

"The blindfold."

I feel the brush of the fabric against my face, and when I open my eyes, blinking a couple of times to adjust, he's there—Maddox. His intense honey eyes are on me, guiding his impossibly large, condom-covered cock inside of me. He's fucking beautiful. A beast of a man, with this bulging, stacked muscles, and handsome, scarred face.

A small grin tugs at the corner of my lips. It mirrors in his eyes, yet the man still looks feral.

And I'm a little scared. But a whole lot of desperate for more.

"Lift your legs." His words come across more as growls, and I do as told.

I go to brace myself on my elbows, but Vincent presses his hand on my chest, whispering in my ear to let them do the work. Then he captures my breast in his hand, distracting me with his touch as Maddox wraps a hand against my hip, and the other around my thigh, pulling it close to his torso.

I don't even bother to understand where all our legs go, but mine seem to be on top of theirs as I lay between them.

Then Maddox pushes that scary cock of his deeper inside of me and I'm not entirely sure if I begin to disassociate, but the fullness... fucking hell, the

fullness! The stretch... it's a bundle of pain, pleasure, sweet torment, and ecstasy all at once.

Then he's all in, and I'm sure he's rearranged an organ or two on his way there. The sensation of both of them inside of me is nothing like what I expected. I can feel them against each other, but I can't quite understand how.

The moment Maddox begins to move, I don't care how.

"Jesus Christ..." I moan and he takes that as his cue.

They both do. They move almost at the same time, and my mouth falls open as the strain and bliss spread like lightning through my body.

Maddox tightens his hold on my leg as his thrusts quicken, out of sync with Vincent, their pace primal. I'm both limp and frantic—my legs have stopped functioning, but my hands are wildly clawing and grabbing at everything in their reach. Vincent's pinching my nipple between his fingers, holding my throat in his other hand, as he whispers beautiful, sinful things into my ear.

"You're such a good girl, Little Eve. You're taking us so fucking well."

"She's a goddamn dream, brother," Maddox adds, and I whimper through a shudder, as a weird kind of pride warms me.

"Is this everything you ever fantasized about?" Vincent asks, panting with his wild thrusts.

"Yes," Maddox and I answer at the same time, and our gazes shoot to each other's. Our grins are mirrored, and it feels both sweet and crazy at the same time.

"Good." Vincent's voice turns gravelly, filled with a lust that drips off his tongue and straight into my bloodstream.

The feel of them almost rubbing against each other inside of me is such an unexpected turn-on. And so fucking hot, especially knowing that these two are straight. But obviously completely unbothered by their proximity or contact.

They thrust harder into me. One grunts, the other one growls, and I'm just the little toy between them, taking everything they've got. And by God, they have a lot to give.

"I would have never thought..." The man above me speaks through heaving breaths, but never finishes.

"Me neither," I moan.

I drop my head against Vincent's shoulder, turning my head to look at him. His wicked grin tugs at one corner of his lips, and I reach back to grab his head, and pull him into a bruising kiss. This seems to coax them both on, and they drive harder into me until I almost scream into Vincent's mouth. But the man dips his tongue in and feeds on each sharp note.

I want this moment to last for days, the euphoria of it, but those electric threads begin to pull at me from both ends. They're wrapping around my core, around my ass, and I break the kiss, my eyes fixed on Maddox. He knows immediately what he needs to do.

His shoulders, arm, and chest flex dangerously as he braces himself on one hand on the bed, reaching with the other between us. The moment his roughened fingers begin rubbing against my clit, I shoot up, propping myself up on my forearms, and closer to the man before me. His head drops, our foreheads almost touching, and our gazes so fucking transfixed, I'm mesmerized. The magnitude of this moment is too much.

Too fucking much!

"Oh my God!"

My cries fill the room as my whole body begins to shake. My pussy and ass convulse violently around the men who stretch me, and I grind my hips against both of them on a frantic, demanding rhythm. Their groans and growls follow my cries, and as Vincent pulls me down against his front, he replaces Maddox's fingers on my clit, his touch slow as he guides me through the orgasm. The other man wraps his hand around my thigh in a bruising grip, pulling me harshly to him. It feels like they're using me for their pleasure, while bleeding me dry.

It feels godlike. Utterly divine in its depravity.

They both begin to twitch as they sink deep inside of me. I don't know who comes first, but the feel of those jerks against one another while I'm riding this incredible high, can't be matched by fantasies. I revel in each and every one of them, concentrating on every single pulse, every sensation, every breath, every groan and grunt.

I focus on them all, because I know this will never happen again.

I don't think I would even want it to.

It's perfect in each and every fucking way already.

"Thank you... thank you..." I whisper, heaving.

When I finally open my eyes, the men begin to pull out of me, and I don't think I've ever felt this empty. Physically. I look between them curiously, still in a haze, and I'm met with mirrored smiles on their lips. I can't help but laugh.

What the hell just happened?!

CHAPTER 31

MORRIGAN

THE ATMOSPHERE TODAY HAS BEEN peculiar. And not because it was awkward, or bad in any way, but because it wasn't any of those things. It was... normal. Light. Almost perfect.

Vincent's plan has been set into motion, and somehow the entire day flowed like a strange, beautiful dream.

I'm now sitting at Lulu's kitchen island, looking out the window at the sea through the row of beautiful period buildings, and I wonder when the next step will be. Ryan is bound to make his move, and since we returned from Vincent's house, we've been on edge.

My *darling fiancé* hasn't made an attempt to contact me. He is still, as far as we know, unaware of my connection to The Sanctum, but he knows I'm here, at Lulu's. I insisted for her to stay away. Stay at Vincent's place, or anywhere else with The Sanctum until it's all finished. But in true Lulu fashion, she refuses to cower away from the conflict, and wants to be in the middle of it all. She's not fooling me, though; I know she wants it because I'm here, too.

I love her, but sometimes she's just as careless as I am. Only, in different ways.

It's the middle of the afternoon, and I'm not sure if it's in my mind, but the world seems to have gone silent. It's eerie and slightly disturbing.

The sudden vibrations of my phone on the marble countertop startle both Lulu and me.

"Christ on a cracker." Lulu rubs her forehead as I shake my head at her.

I think she feels this strange tension in the air, too.

"Yes?" I answer.

"I'm going to Midnight soon. I can send someone to pick you up if it would make you feel safer. The guys are already there." Vincent's voice eases me.

"It's not a good idea. If he's going to make a move, the last place I should be at is Midnight..." I trail off, stating the obvious. He knows this, but he wants me near him. I do too.

He sighs on the other line. "I know. But it doesn't mean that I can easily wrap my head around putting you in harm's way intentionally. I feel like you're the bait and this is a huge mistake."

"Serpent, it's unlike you to be... shall I say, insecure?"

"Never!" he scoffs. "Maybe... Fuck." He pauses long enough that it brings a giddy smile to my lips. "I just got you back, Morrigan. If something happens, if I lose you —"

"Got me back? I don't think we established anything, dear sir. You're getting a bit ahead of yourself there," I say sarcastically, and can't help but laugh. As much as I know I'm full of shit.

"You're mine, Morrigan O'Rourke. Whether you're ready to accept it or not. Your soul knows it's mine. Your heart has always been mine. And eventually... your beautiful brain will allow you to realize it too. No matter what, you will still end up next to me, with your hand on

the scar you left above my heart, and your lips on mine. Maybe then you'll also recognize that I've always been yours too."

"It's not in my nature to easily accept my fate, but I think I've al—"

A loud bang interrupts me, and I whip around, looking for the source, but I'm only met with Lulu's confused gaze on the other side of the kitchen island. Then I realize it was coming from the other line.

It was loud.

"Vincent?" My voice trembles, but no answer comes. "Vincent!" I shout it this time, dread filling my stomach. "Goddamnit, answer me!"

Another blast echoes through the already loud commotion I hear on the phone, and my shouts turn relentless. I'm fucking pleading for a reply. For any noise.

Something that sounds like him.

"Goddamnit, Serpent! Say something!"

But the line goes dead. The silence deafening.

Eerie.

I knew something was wrong.

Panic rushes through my blood. It touches my bones and seeps into my marrow, until every part of me is filled with a destructive range of emotions.

And when regret joins in... I break. Never have I felt the paralyzing fear that splits me now.

"I just got you back..." His words ring in my ear.

I call him over and over again, yet it goes straight to voicemail every single time.

"I just got you back..."

Now I'm shouting at my phone from the depths of my lungs as I wait for Maddox to answer the fucking call.

And as I hear a sound that's just a bit different than the normal ringing, I just start talking.

"Something's wrong! Go to Vincent! There were two blasts! I couldn't hear him anymore! Go the fuck now!" I shout my pleasing orders without even knowing if somebody's listening.

"I just got you back..."

"Morrigan, what are you talking about?!" His deep, gravelly voice just doesn't seem urgent enough.

"Goddamnit, Maddox! I was on the phone with Vincent! It went dead!"

This time, he doesn't linger. He starts shouting at the group, ordering around whoever else is there with them. Then chaos erupts on his side of the call as they all sound like they spring into action.

"We'll send someone for you."

"I'm okay! Just go to him! Grab everyone, dammit!"

Madds hangs up, and I pace through the open-plan space, back and forth, threading my fingers through my hair as I force myself to cope with this helplessness. Even Lulu has no words for this. She stares at me with a worried gaze, but I can't fucking bear it.

The possibility shining in those golden eyes cripples me.

What if...

No, no, no. He's fine. He is fine!

He's The—*motherfucking*—Serpent. He is fine!

No one can touch him.

But what if...

No!

The internal battle pulls at me, tugging in different directions, and I wanna fucking scream.

Tears fall from my eyes as I chase away those devastating thoughts. I realize that my fear of losing him, when I didn't even acknowledge that I am his in this call, trumps the question I haven't answered to myself about trusting him. It fucking squashes it to the ground. Because I can build that fucking trust. I can kill my insecurities and find out who *this* man is. Not the one I knew so long ago.

But my heart? My heart already bleeds for him with the most decadent, unhealthy kind of love. I'm his, no matter what.

I am his and he is mine.

And I didn't get to tell him that...

* * *

Too much time passes, yet I know it's not a lot at all. Not even enough for the guys to drive from Midnight to Vincent's house in the woods.

It still feels like too long.

I've kept calling, but that goddamn voicemail was the only sound at the other end, gritty and irritating. It took everything in me not to smash this phone on the ground.

"It will be okay. You'll see, everything will be okay."

I shake my head at Lulu's words, wiping the tears off my cheeks and eyes.

"Fuck... Luke was right. You should not be friends with me. I should be thousands of miles away from you, on the other side of the damn globe, because you do not deserve this. Look at me! I'm a fucking mess. And you're getting dragged into this bullshit. Fuck, if Ryan hurts you because of me..."

I trail off, slapping my palms against the windowsill, somehow searching for an answer in the faint shades of burnt orange that start appearing in the sky. All that fear,

panic, and anger mix into this explosive feeling, that seems to be denied a proper release.

“What will you do?”

My soul leaves my body as the sound of that voice slices through my eardrums. A shiver shakes my flesh as I turn around slowly, like I’m afraid I’m going to spook him, and he’ll make the wrong move if I turn too fast.

There he is—Ryan Holt. In the middle of Lulu’s apartment, with one arm wrapped around her from behind, the other holding a knife to her throat. Three of his men stand tall and firm behind him.

“Let her go,” I demand of him.

I’m trapped. We’re trapped. The detail The Sanctum had on us probably went to find Vincent.

“Where would the fun in that be?” he taunts me, the grin lifting the corners of his lips and eyes truly disturbing.

“Drop the knife, Ryan.”

I heard somewhere that attackers respond favorably when you use their names. It reaches them at a deeper level for some reason, like you’re reminding them of their humanity. That they’re still a person.

“But it would sink so beautifully into her soft skin.” His smile turns grim, his expression like puppy eyes on a rabid dog.

“And if it does, you will never have me. I’ll remove myself from this plane, if one hair on her head is disturbed. Let. Her. Go.” I squeeze my fists as I will myself to keep my tone even. For Lulu’s sake.

He narrows his eyes ever so slightly as his features become more serious.

“If anyone gets the privilege of removing you from this earth, dear fiancée, it is me, and me alone.”

“Try me.” My foot lands on the floor with a determined, loud thud as I step toward him.

I may have become a different person recently, obedient and low-key afraid of this man who threatens to kill my best friend. But the thought of Lulu being involved has brought a whole other type of courage to rise within me. Even if my insides are shaking.

It’s strange how one person could have this invisible hold on you. It’s as if my soul knows the consequences of his madness, and it wrapped a rope around itself, just so he can’t do it himself. Only that rope is loosening, slowly turning into a noose, and I will not stand for that. Not anymore.

Cocking his head slightly, he regards me with a bit more seriousness. He begins pulling the knife away, but just at the last moment, Lulu hisses, and a red line appears in the trail of the blade. The motherfucker cut her!

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I nick you?” He feigns distress, but that mad smirk lives happily on his face.

He pushes Lulu away, and I catch her, checking her throat. It’s a cut, but it’s shallow.

“I’m so sorry...” I plead to her.

“Come! I spared her life, now come. Before I change my mind.” Ryan reaches for me, waiting impatiently.

“Don’t, Morri. Please, don’t,” Lulu begs, holding my wrist as I move toward the man that is to be my husband. The one who only plans to keep me until my family fortune is his.

“I have to. I can risk myself, but not you, Lulu. Never you.”

I’m yanked away while Lulu’s screams echo through the space, mixing in my mind with the blasts I heard on Vincent’s call. I wonder if any other devastating sounds will be added to the pile by the end of today.

A day that started in such a surprisingly wonderful way, when in the middle of the forest, Vincent and I made our pact. All after an absolutely insane night with him and his best friend.

It's all fading into nothingness now.

* * *

I sat in the backseat of Ryan's Mercedes, unable to control the tears that fell freely from my eyes. Vincent's last words on the phone ran on a loop in my head, until my chest hurt too much to contain myself. I've clutched my hands together so tight, my nails drew blood from my palm, and my shoulders cramped from the tenseness. On the inside, though, I feel empty. Numb. Broken.

I had him. For a moment, a split moment in time, I had him. Vincent was mine. He came back to me. Even when I didn't want him, he came back to me.

There's an aching pressure in my chest, causing tears to fall in waves. But they all stem from frustration. I'm mad. I'm fucking livid at the man who's about to marry me.

Or so he thinks.

I'll fight him to the end of the fucking days. I'll kill him in his sleep. I don't even care if I make him suffer or not, I just want him dead.

Vincent was supposed to be here... to help me. I have no clue where he is. Or if he's still alive.

The stone walls of the back room of the church absorb my heaving breaths. My pain and fury taint this space that should be filled with happy memories, with a sorrow that only seems to grow heavier.

I opened a dam, and I cannot seem to stop it.

"She is my sister! You will let me in now, or I'll make sure that old mausoleum at the back will have a new

inhabitant!” Cillian’s voice sounds from the other side of the thick wooden door, which separates this room from the corridor leading to the main hall of the old church.

The wood creaks as one of the doors flies open, and I quickly swipe a sleeve over my eyes, rising from the chair to go to the window.

I don’t think my brother has seen me cry since I was seven. I fractured my wrist punching one of my father’s friends who told me that, since I’m a girl, I should smile more, otherwise boys won’t like me. I’ve rarely heard Cillian laugh the way he did that day. Not at me, or at me being hurt, but at my reaction. There was pride in that laugh, and it was the only thing that encouraged me to be brave in the emergency room. My parents didn’t come. They had company. Our housekeeper was sent with us instead.

I don’t know what happened to Cillian and me. To him.

“How are you, Morri?” I don’t quite recognize the tone of his voice.

There’s a level of care in there that I’m not sure if I should take as manipulation.

“Peachy, brother.”

I don’t turn as I hear him walk away from me. What is he doing?

I peek to my right and he’s inside the small bathroom at the end of the room, signaling for me to come in. Narrowing my eyes on him, I finally make a move, watching me rolling his. When I walk in, he turns on the tap to the max, and comes closer. Not touching, though. My brother never really touches anyone, for that matter.

“He has not been found at the house,” he whispers, and my eyes widen, my heart beginning to race.

“What? What the hell are you talking about?” I almost rasp at him.

“I’ve spoken with his friend,” he cuts me off, whispering again and gesturing for me to do the same. “I gave him an address for the man who is responsible. He might be there.”

Vincent. He’s definitely talking about Vincent and Maddox. I clutch the shirt over my heart, somehow more at ease than I was thirty seconds ago. If he wasn’t at the house, maybe... *fuck*... maybe he’s not gone. However—

“Why are you telling *me* this, brother?”

He blinks, once... twice... three times, then sighs. Hidden pain flashes in those light green eyes.

“Because I had a feeling that when I abandoned you, you found help elsewhere. But I got confirmation when the friend contacted me to deliver this message to you.”

I felt utterly betrayed by my brother. No matter our distance, we had only each other, and then it was only me. He has barely been present in this affair. Never really lent a hand apart from some fleeting words of encouragement. And suddenly, he’s helping The Sanctum. This feels wrong. But I recognize it’s because of my issues with him.

“You really aren’t aligned with them”—I nod toward the door—“are you?!”

He shakes his head once, his eyes fixed on mine.

“I was never given any reasons not to trust Dad. Not until the last year or so.” He seems to drift to a dark place in his mind. “I slowly realized that even though he’s been grooming me his whole life to take over the business when he’s dead, things have shifted. I thought I was imagining it, but slowly I could see myself being kept at arm’s length—*need to know basis* only. I get half-truths and incomplete information. So I started gathering my own.”

Shit.

“I—I think I saw some of it, when I came over a few months ago. Your laptop was open.”

He nods and continues. “I know you did. I have cameras at my place, Morri.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me?”

“It was too early. I needed more. What you saw was recon. I couldn’t get you involved and risk your life. If I wasn’t able to find the information I needed about our father and his new business, I was going to look for outside help. In the end, I realized I had to keep quiet, because it felt off. Like we are only one head of the hydra, and I was the only man who could gain this one’s trust. Plus, my *army* is not big enough to take Ryan, and to ensure that Dad doesn’t find someone else to continue the same sickening business. But I had enough, so I reached out to one of your *associates*.”

“Did you? When?” Vincent didn’t tell me any of this.

“A few days ago, after some of Dad’s and Ryan’s affairs started crumbling. Literally. The business was getting hit left and right, and I was fucking ecstatic. The plan was to come and break you out after talking to *them*, only to find that somebody beat me to it. I met with them, and I was told they were waiting for the last of the group to discuss. Only he was... unavailable.” There’s a tinge of a smile at the corner of his mouth as he says that lost word, and I could have sworn I felt the rush of a blush on my cheeks.

“You wanted to save me.”

“Too late, it seems. And you had to rely on someone else...”

An uncomfortable silence falls between us. I cannot blame him, yet he is not without fault either.

“Why didn’t you run away?” He finally breaks that silence.

“Like you, brother, the man controls too much. He held too many things against me. Including you.”

“Me?” he asks, confused.

I nod, continuing. “If I was to run, hide, or even kill myself, he threatened to murder you all. This includes Mother, Father, and Lulu, of course. As you can imagine, at this point, I would erase Father from his earth myself, and I couldn’t give two shits about Mother. But you and Lulu? I couldn’t risk you. Even if I hated your guts.”

Pain flashes in his eyes, his skin a shade paler as he takes in my confession. He failed me, and it’s painted so vividly on his face.

“I’m sorry,” he finally whispers. “I can’t believe I... we are the reason you’re caught in this bullshit. My God, Morrigan, you could have saved yourself. You should have said something, and we would have found a solution.”

I smirk and shake my head. “I tried speaking with Father once, and all I got was two hard slaps across the face. Plus, it wasn’t only the threat to your life that held me here. First of all, I refuse to run. I would rather fucking die than give Ryan the satisfaction of breaking me. Second of all, he holds something on me. Something that could land me in jail for a very, very long time.”

Cillian furrows his eyebrows.

“Do I dare ask?”

“If I ever end up getting out of this situation”—I wave around me—“maybe I’ll tell you. Although, the fewer people who know, the better. However, what are you going to do now that you know all of this?”

“The problem is that the most recent events have pulled all resources away to find the missing *man*. I’m unsure when my backup returns. But rest assured, sister, one way or another, you will escape this.”

Suddenly, a hard knock sounds on the door and my body goes stiff. But Cillian runs out of the bathroom to

check it out.

It's rather surreal. I feel like I got my brother back, only to find out that he didn't really go anywhere. We were just absolute shit at communicating with each other, until it was too late.

Mrs. Holt appears in the door frame, sighing with such sadness in her eyes, and I can't help but match it.

"I thought you got out..." she whispers, walking toward me, and stops a foot away. "I was told to come help you get ready for the ceremony."

Those words seem to hurt her. I've never seen Mrs. Holt quite like this, but I guess once you crack the door open, letting some feelings out, it's hard to close it.

"I thought so too."

My mind drifts to the night I escaped. Or better yet, when I was helped to escape. Maddox and Vincent under the stairs come into my mind, yet it's only Vincent that I see vividly.

And I may never get to see him again.

CHAPTER 32

MORRIGAN

THE WOMAN GLARING BACK AT me in the mirror, covered in the hideous, sparkly, princess style wedding dress, looks nothing like me. It should be someone else's reflection. She's living a nightmare. Her green irises shine too bright from dried tears, her eyes so red and swollen that even the rushed bridal makeup doesn't succeed to mask it.

Mrs. Holt left my wavy red hair loose, only pulling together two thick strands from my temples. She braided them at the back of my head, and fixed a long, thin veil into it with a sparkly comb.

The hair is the only thing I like about this image.

"You look beautiful," she says to me, her tone sincere.

I look at her reflection as she stands behind me, but I have no words for her. We haven't spoken since the moment she walked into this room. Nothing would have been appropriate for the situation, the atmosphere too tense and somber.

I still have trouble believing this is the same woman I met years ago. It seems like whoever she used to be has slowly died, as the belief that her son killed her husband has strengthened.

I want to answer her and be polite. The words don't come, and neither does the will to find them.

The whole time I spent with her in here, getting ready for this ridiculous affair, I've dissociated deeply. I'm caught somewhere in the recent memories made at Vincent's house. I'm in his bed, between his sheets, then in his shower, and finally in the forest. Where it all began for the last time.

A tear forms and falls too fast for me to blink it away, and I watch in the mirror as it pulls with it some of the makeup that covers my face. I don't bother fixing it. Mrs. Holt doesn't either. She simply puts her head down and turns away.

This day would have gone to plan if Vincent wasn't missing... or potentially dead. Not anymore. There's no one else to save me now.

Technically the backup plan is still in place even without him, but there's no guarantee.

Even the anger has abandoned me, and all that's left behind is hollowness. Only, it can't truly be called hollow if anguish and grief reside there.

I hold on to some twisted hope that the pact we made must be fulfilled. Like a thread of fate wrapped around us the moment we sealed that deal, and it won't allow him not to keep his word to me.

He cannot break the covenant.

He cannot...

I feel like I should be distressed, more emotional, cry in anguish or rage, but nothing comes. I wrap one arm around my middle, looking down as I wait for my end. Metaphorically, of course. It's the end of my life as I know it. Of my family ties and my friendship. Of my business too. Well, it will be Lulu's business.

The only thing I can do is focus on myself. I cannot allow myself to break. Even if Vincent will not be here to save me, if he will never return... I cannot break.

Eventually, I will save myself. When I've devised a plan that won't land me dead or in jail, I will find my freedom.

A knock on the door startles me, but I only lift my head to look out the window at the burnished sky bathing the world in shades of fire.

Too bad it's not all up in flames.

"It's about to start," Mrs. Holt announces.

The end of my life—that was the knock that signaled it. The emotions I was willing into myself seconds before, seem to rush into me all at once. Anger, fear, and even hopelessness filling every vein and nerve with their dangerous concoction. It spikes my adrenaline. I straighten, turning to Mrs. Holt, who now stands closer to the door.

Yet, I can't seem to be able to move. My feet are glued to the floor.

"We must go," she pleads, more with her eyes than her voice.

But I can't. I can't go. Not to him, not ever. I shake my head as the knock on the door turns to slight bangs.

"Go away!" I finally shout, but I can't fully recognize that voice.

The knock is harsher, rattling the hinges and shaking the door, and even as I watch it, I still flinch at the sight.

When the door opens with a loud bang, swinging so far, it hits the wall, Mrs. Holt almost falls to the floor as she jumps out of the way. The guard standing in the door frame holds an arrogant look in his eyes. I recognize him—he was there the night Ryan kidnapped me in front of Lulu's building. He held me as his boss hit me in the middle of the street. *Son of a fucking bitch.*

"It's time. Mr. Holt is waiting." There's exasperation in his tone, and I can't imagine why. It's not him waiting at the damn altar.

"No." I stand firm, looking him straight in the eyes.

“There is no time. Move. Now!” He stalks closer, and he’s only a couple of steps away when my ass hits the desk.

I brace myself on it, and he sighs, coming straight into my face. He rolls his eyes as he grips my left arm, yanking me away. Only, I grab onto the desk, plant my feet onto the floor, and pull back as hard as I can.

“Fuck off, you asshole!” I shout.

Gripping the wood harder, I reach farther back as I force myself out of his hold. But my hand slides through a stack of papers, and I’m just about to lose my grip, when something smooth and cold grazes my hand. I grab onto the thin, long metal, and with the adrenaline growing a little higher, I stomp my heel onto his foot, and watch as he stumbles back, just about yelping in pain.

“You fucking bitch!” he rasps as he regains his balance.

He doesn’t waste a breath, reaching for my throat with his large hand, but I knock it off before it touches me. I’m not fast enough to catch the other one, though. He wraps it around my windpipe, holding tight as he steps back and pulls me toward him. I push onto his chest, trying to force him away, but the fucking wall of a man doesn’t move. Even banging my fists against his body doesn’t make him flinch.

“Stop fucking fighting,” he tries to order me. But I don’t listen to men like him.

Loosening his grip, he uses it to guide me toward the door, and through the dark corridor that takes us to the main room of the church. As I look for the light at the end of this tunnel, I swear it seems to lengthen before my eyes. Three words echo repeatedly into my mind as a slight dizziness clouds it—*dead man walking*.

This is the path to my electric chair. My noose. My damn lethal injection.

And I'm not. Fucking. Ready.

As the man who holds me in his grip is about to force me through that corridor, fire fills my veins, and I strengthen my hold around the metal object clasped in my hand. Just as I swing my arm up, hoping it has a sharp fucking end, I jam it straight into the side of his throat. He gasps like a fish out of the water as he releases me, the shock so beautifully clear on his face.

The moment I pull away from him, I take that metal with me, sliding it out of his flesh.

And crimson becomes my new favorite color.

It sprays like a goddamn garden hose out of his throat, on the sweet notes of Mrs. Holt's screams. It splashes all over my hair, my face, my chest, and as the man collapses onto his knees, it paints a morbidly beautiful, abstract painting all over my pristine white dress.

It's finally beautiful. I'm a crimson princess, and it feels like it was meant to be. It almost matches my hair color.

When he falls flat onto the floor, gasping one last time for air, I take a step back away from his body and realize... I'm smiling.

The pool of blood beneath him is not large. Most of it is soaked into the many layers of my dress, and I wonder... should this bother me? Should I be disgusted? Run and hide and freak out that I just killed *another* man?

Maybe it should.

Yet as I step over his body, watching the door at the end of the corridor swing open and two more men walk through, I realize I feel nothing for him. No guilt. No disgust. No fear. That numbness inside of me, the one filled with anguish and grief, revels in the ruthless, careless rage that took over. It feeds on it. Because

feeling even the most damaging of emotions is better than feeling nothing at all.

Tucking what appears to be a letter opener somewhere in the folds of my dress, I walk straight toward the men who entered the corridor. I'm completely unfazed by their presence. Somewhere in this rage, I found the courage to take this whole thing head on. I have nothing else to lose.

Nothing at all.

They might see that in my eyes, too. Or maybe it's the blood on my dress, or the splatters staining my freshly made-up face, that makes them pause and look at me with apprehension. They even make room, pressing against the walls as I stride between them, and to the room where the man I loathe waits at the altar.

I bask in the drama, pulling open that door into the small foyer where my father gasps loudly as he waits to walk me down the aisle. My main instinct is to continue my path, but the heathen in me wants to give him a moment to take me in. He drags his eyes over my bloody form, and by the time they return to my face, my smile is fucking menacing.

He's stunned, and I take that as my cue to join my goddamn fiancé at the end of that aisle. I confidently move past my father, glancing at every single person who just stood up and turned to me in the pews of the church. Watching the smiles fall off their faces the moment they see me is a beautiful thing to behold. And I hold each and every one of their gazes as I make my way down that aisle, convinced that I'm leaving splatters of blood over the stone floor behind me.

There aren't many people here anyway. My mother, my brother, and maybe a dozen others I don't recognize. I doubt they're friends, maybe guards, maybe associates. Truth is, I don't care. The chief of police could be here, and I wouldn't give a shit.

The man of the hour stands at the altar, trying but failing to contain his astounded expression. It quickly morphs into displeasure. The priest, a step behind him, is completely pale as he takes me in, and I kind of feel for the man. I know him. He's a good man, and he was definitely forced into this situation. Just as I was. Only, he doesn't look like he just slaughtered something—I do. Yet again, that thought widens the smile that pulls at my lips.

My steps don't falter when I reach Ryan. I stand right next to him, my eyes fixed on the priest, who seems to flinch at this contact, and forces his gaze back to the bible he holds. But I don't miss how his eyes flicker on various bloody spots on my dress.

"What the fuck happened?" I hear Ryan's gritty voice next to me, and with a serene feeling settling deep in my chest, I turn my head to him.

"The man you sent after me... he spilled." I should get an award for how eerily calm my voice is.

I shrug, then turn my attention back to the priest, who closes his mouth just as I look at him. His eyes are wide enough that I'm sure it hurts.

"You killed him?" Ryan doesn't sound happy with my reply.

"Oh no. He died all on his own." I pause for a few seconds, then turn completely toward him. "Is there a problem?" I grab onto the sides of my dress, lifting it ever so slightly, and look down at it. "I think this looks rather pretty, better than it did when I first put it on."

My theatrics are fueled further as I begin to twirl on the gasps coming from the pews. When I stop, facing Ryan once more, he takes a step back with a disgusted look on his face. Two bright red spots stain his white shirt, just under the collar.

"Stop it!" he rasps between gritted teeth.

My grin falls, and I cock my head, utterly focused on him. His eyebrows flinch, narrowing at me, but what they leave in their wake is not rage. Not even annoyance. It's apprehension.

“Wait a damn second, *fiancé*.” I spit that word at him with utter revulsion in my tone. “Did you think that I would make this easy for you? You goddamn gaslighting, abusive piece of shit. You and my degenerate father are both delusional if you think that I will allow you to use me for your benefit. You thought you could kidnap me—twice—then burn my fucking house and business down, even put my best friend in danger, and I would just roll over? Ask for more?”

He tries to speak, but I raise my hand, shushing him, and when my father attempts to protest, I talk over him.

“I am done, *darling fiancé*. You've put me down long enough, and the funny thing is... when one realizes that there's nothing left to lose, all bets are off.” I take a small step toward him, feeling the growing insanity seeping out of my gaze. “And they are definitely off. You better pray that this arrangement won't take. You may abuse me, you may beat me, and you may rape me. But I will make sure that you will fear going to sleep each and every single fucking night for the rest of your life. This is my vow to you.”

All of a sudden, the heavy double doors of the church burst open, pulling our attention. Bright light floods the space, and a man is violently thrown in, sliding halfway down the aisle.

But then I get to witness the most beautiful sight. One that makes me want to jump in joy.

They're like warriors returning from battle—dirty, bloody, muscles rippling with heaving breaths. Their steps are thunderous and confident as they follow the blood trail of the stranger who curls into himself, moaning in pain on the stone floor.

They command the room into stunned silence. Some of the witnesses drop their gazes to the floor, wishing they would be invisible right about now, as the group stops in the middle of the aisle. Right where the broken man is lying. And their attention is right on us.

They look vicious. Yet there's an eerie calmness in their bones, in their muscles, in their stances. Like their assurance was profoundly boosted by whatever trials they've just faced.

Then there's *him*. The man whose terrifying gaze is solely on me. He has no business looking that fucking hot covered in bruises and blood.

And I greet him with a calm, sweet smile on my lips.

“Hi.”

CHAPTER 33

VINCENT

“HI,” I GREET HER BACK, and her smile spreads impossibly wide. It’s almost sinister, but it looks stunning on her. She doesn’t even notice the scowl on Holt’s face at our interaction.

Something swells in my chest at the thought that I put that happiness on her beautiful face. I would crumble to the fucking ground and kiss her feet if that son of a bitch wasn’t standing next to her right now. If none of them were standing around us right now.

When I walked in, and my gaze fell on the bloody princess standing in front of that altar, the shade of red I saw before my eyes was more visceral than the one staining her skin and dress. In that moment, all I wanted was to put a bullet in every single person who simply stood here, watching her agony.

My fucking Eve...

He hurt her. They all fucking hurt her, and I was ready to burn them all.

Until I got a better look. A bright sparkle filled the green of her eyes, and it dawns on me that the blood splattered over her freckled skin, looks goddamn gorgeous on her. It belongs in her chaos. That smile, the way she stands, strong and proud, painted in

crimson, told me all I need to know—the blood isn't hers. She was simply the cause of it.

My crazy, beautiful Eve isn't hurt.

And she's looking at me like I hung the fucking moon.

The whole room goes silent, apart from the moans coming from the waste of space lying on the floor before us, as he tries to get up on his feet. My gaze moves to Holt, and I cock my head, waiting for him to understand who he's looking at.

“What is the meaning of this?!” It's O'Rourke who gets up first, feigning some sort of confusion at the situation.

I force my attention to the old man.

“We were hurt we were not invited to this... happy affair. So we decided to invite ourselves. With the help of Holt's friend over here.” I hear Finn behind me.

“What are you talking about? Who is that man?” O'Rourke continues.

“Oh, my apologies. The bruises on his face might confuse you. Although I believe you've never actually met my guest, not in his current identity as Jackson Davenport,” I answer him, watching the confusion muddle his features. “Although I doubt that in his real identity you ever got to know him. He used to run in very different circles than you. However, I guess introductions are in order. Liam O'Rourke, meet Lester Boseman. Your business partner, and Ryan Holt's best man. We thought you might need him at the wedding, so we graciously brought him to you.”

I don't miss the way Ryan fidgets slightly, and if I were him, knowing what he knows, I would too.

“You might be confused, Mr. O'Rourke. You thought you were Holt's partner, and I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you're just the bank account. Nothing more, nothing less,” I continue, then kick Boseman so he can slide farther onto the floor, and I can get closer

to the altar. But I also do it because I really fucking enjoy hearing him moan in pain.

“I don’t know what you think you know, Serpent, but you need to leave right now. This is a private family event, and business will be discussed another time.” Holt’s tactful approach puts a tinge of a smile on my face.

Interesting. Is he trying to diffuse the tension and avoid the crash and burn of his whole plan, with pleasantries?

“Who said anything about business? I enjoy a good event, a good party, and I would very much like to bear witness to the fall of the O’Rourke family. Or the attempt at it anyway.” I swipe my gaze over the people sitting in the pew to my right, pausing a little longer on Cillian, the man to whom, apparently, I owe a debt now.

“What are you talking about? The O’Rourke’s will never fall!” the head of the family rages at me.

“Holt, care to explain your cunning plan to your business partner? Or shall I do it for you, starting with him?” I grab Boseman by the hair and lift the lump of meat enough so he can look in the direction of the family.

“You need to get out of here, right now, Serpent!” Holt seethes. “Take them out! Now!” He waves at three of his men, ordering them in our direction, and they comply.

One by one, they rush around the pews, down the aisle, and toward us.

And one by one, they fall to the ground on the distinctive silencer pop of Carter’s gun and the yelps of the women present.

I cock my head at the man holding *my* woman by the arm. “You must have more than that up your sleeve. Right? Or was all your security based solely on Boseman’s people? Your daddy really left you high and dry, didn’t he?” I say, holding in a laugh. “In hindsight,

mine wasn't much better. I do regret not stomping on the back of his head when I made him bite that curb, before I chased him out of town."

His eyes twitch. He wants to look away, look down to the man writhing on the ground before me, but he can't. I have a gift, part of the reason why people fear me so. I can hold them here, dangerously enthralled in my gaze, until I know their bones shake. Until what I have to say is etched in them.

"You're going to go to jail! All of you! I'm calling the police, right now!" O'Rourke's wife shouts, interrupting me with her fear and desperation.

I ignore the woman and continue, my gaze on Holt. "When we last met and you fulfilled your end of our deal, you slipped up. I haven't figured out if it was intentional or by mistake, but it's irrelevant now anyway. In case you're lost, I'm speaking of the comparison you made to your *own pops*."

Holt shifts his weight from one leg to the other, blinking a couple of times more than he usually does in these few seconds.

"With those two words, you gave away your actual level of knowledge regarding Boseman, and your closeness to him. You knew who he was to me all along. This raised some interesting questions, simple ones like *how* and *why*? In the end, it made me realize that your bullshit about it taking months to track him down and give me the info I needed from you, was just that—bullshit. Because you knew all along not only who he was, but where he was, and exactly what he was doing."

I kick Boseman once more when he looks like he might succeed in rising on his feet. He crumbles back onto the ground as I continue, wielding the silence of all the others in the room.

"You tried to play The Sanctum. Play me. Motherfucker, you thought we wouldn't find out he's

been your partner long before O'Rourke joined the game?! Overconfidence doesn't suit you at all. You can't just slap some shiny new gloves on, then walk into the ring, and think you can box."

"Jesus, how do you have time to make this stuff up? You have an overactive imagination," Holt says, laughing a proper belly laugh. This seems like a glimpse into the gaslighting behavior Morrigan told me about.

"Imagination? Am I imagining what's happening at this moment in this church? Am I imagining your empty bank accounts that only see action when Boseman transfers his dirty money into them? Or the debt collectors threatening to break your bones? We both know I'm not. Just like I'm not imagining the containers of children we opened in the docks. Or the houses and warehouses you filled with them." I pause for a moment, watching as that information sinks in, and he realizes who's been causing all this mayhem for them.

"It was you!" He points at me, venom dripping out of his mouth, his eyes bulging, and his veins threaten to burst in his temples.

Mrs. O'Rourke pauses with her phone in hand, her gaze flickering between Holt and her husband, the shock vivid on her face. *I guess she didn't know.*

"It was us, yes. And since I did not imagine any of that, I know for a fact that I also didn't imagine the fact that you're the one who brought back Boseman into your lives. Although I'm not yet certain who gifted him this newfound power."

It makes no sense to me. Boseman didn't have power. Yes, he was working his way through some seedy circles, but he's always been a lowlife. Somewhere, between his sudden departure and now, he made some new friends. I'm convinced of that, because there's no way I'm going to believe that he can raise an army or build an empire.

“You lost us tens of millions!” Ryan pulls me from my train of thought.

“Hundreds, I believe,” I say with a smirk. “It’s your own fault. You could have stuck to guns and drugs, rather than branch out to children.”

“Is that it? That was the reason why you decided to ruin everything for us?”

“No. I had something much bigger to gain,” I confirm, my gaze flickering to the crimson princess standing next to him.

The one I would do this for all over again.

“But let’s not digress. This is your moment, mine will come a little later. You see, Mr. O’Rourke,” I continue, turning my attention to the old man, “Holt killed his father. I’m sure you had your suspicions about Jonah’s untimely demise, but I can confirm it for you. Our source tells us that he despised his father’s control over him, his business style, and the fact that he wasn’t allowed to be as involved as he wanted to be. Once he was out of the way, he was ready to take over his mighty empire. Only to discover his daddy not only left him penniless, but in a mountain of questionable debt too.”

The wheels seem to be turning in O’Rourke’s head. He doesn’t attempt to speak over me anymore, and his wife is trying to make sense of it all, pausing her efforts to call the authorities.

“Holt is your fifty-fifty business partner in name only. Your actual financial partner, and the man who’s been pulling the reins, is him.” I lift Boseman by the head a little higher, enjoying the hiss of pain.

“You’re wrong.” O’Rourke finally speaks, and I let him this time. “I already know they work together, but his role is very, very small. A source of information only.”

“Oh, you poor bastard. Maybe Holt is better at manipulation than I thought he was. I wonder, whose

idea was it to traffic more than ammunition and drugs?" I ask him.

His nostrils flare as he snatches the phone out of his wife's hand and turns his attention to Holt.

"You better tell me right now if that's true, boy."

"He's just trying to fuck up the rest of our plans. Just as he's been doing all along. You know very well who Boseman is—my associate. Like you said, a source of information. Everything else has nothing to do with you." Holt is shaking slightly as he tries to control his anger. Or his madness. They both peek through, though.

"Is he, really? Because he seems to know an awful lot about our business, and the way you're sweating right now doesn't give me much fucking confidence." O'Rourke grips the back of the pew in front of him, the wood creaking under his hands. "Are you broke?"

Holt takes a deep breath, and I think he's just about to blow, but he sighs instead. Not defeated but exasperated. He rolls his eyes, and there's a finality in his expression that makes me wonder if we can move to the next part of our day already.

"Goddamnit, Lester. You were supposed to kill him." Holt finally cracks, turning to the man bleeding on the floor. A crazed look grows in his eyes, at the same pace as his rage. "You've been obsessed with the idea of destroying The Serpent. You even put your—our—whole operation in danger for your obsession with him. After he got us our deal with The Ghost, you had the green light. And you fucked it all up."

He's seething, his face red as he looks at the man, waiting for an explanation. A gurgled noise comes, nothing more.

"Fucking answer me, old man!" he shouts, and Boseman frantically shakes his head, blood splattering onto the stone floor.

“He can’t,” I answer instead. “He lost his talking privileges. Along with his tongue. He’s here for dramatic effect, to be honest.”

Someone gasps in the *audience*, and I continue, suppressing a grin.

“His mistake, and yours too, was assuming I was the same boy who chased him away ten or so years ago. As you know by now, Mr. O’Rourke,” I say, directing my attention to him, “Lester Boseman is my sperm donor. Since he and my mother never married, and he never claimed me as his own until long after the birth certificate was issued, she was free to give me her family name. A fact that, as you can imagine, I’m very thankful for.”

I look down at my father, pulling him back by the hair, until he can look into my eyes.

“But I’m done with you now,” I tell the man who I should have killed long ago.

I pull him up by the collar, and bring him to his knees, his back to me as he faces the altar and our audience. No one makes a sound, no one protests, or at least I can’t hear them. All I hear are his heaving breaths echoing through the space. I grab his head with both hands, and in one harsh move, I twist so far to the right, the blood-curdling crack replaces the echo of his breath. I let go, and he falls to the floor with a loud thump.

Finally.

An eerie, calm silence descends in my mind. Like a door I closed on a chaos I could never truly escape.

I’m definitely not the boy I used to be. That boy knew what had to be done, but he didn’t have it in him to do it. Not because death was a stranger to him, but because he thought it was the right thing to do. He still had a heart and didn’t see the truth in the darkness. That boy is gone. The only remnants of him are reflected in the

forest-green eyes of my Little Eve. I will always have a heart for her. It's hers and hers alone.

“What did you do?!” Holt rages.

He takes two steps forward, dragging Morrigan with him, and gapes at the lifeless body of the man who was helping him build an empire and get his fortune back.

“Patricide is your thing, you should understand why I had to do it. Especially since you already planned for another father to drop at your hands.” I step over the corpse, stopping next to the pew before the one Liam O'Rourke sits in, and give him a suggestive, fleeting look.

“None of this concerned you! None of it! I fulfilled my end of the bargain and gave him to you. No matter who Boseman is—was—to you or me, it was done. You had no right to ruin my goddamn wedding, or my business for that matter. None of it concerned you anymore! Now get the fuck out, and clean up your goddamn mess! Your business with Liam and I is done, so you have no reason to be here,” Holt shouts at me.

He's crazed, his behavior turning erratic now that he's backed into a corner. It's fairly understandable since he can't see the whole board, and there's a whole game being played on the rest of it.

It's time for the final move.

“Who said I was here for either of you?”

CHAPTER 34

MORRIGAN

ME. THE SERPENT IS HERE for me!

My heart swells. Not only because he's alive, or that he came for me, but because he finally got his closure. His deadbeat father lies dead on the aisle, and I can't help the smile spreading over my lips, or the shiver running down my spine.

I feel like that teenager from years ago. The one who turned into a puddle and got butterflies in her stomach when Vincent Sinclair swiped a lock of hair from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear, before he even spoke two words to her. I want to run to him, jump into his arms, and claim him in the middle of this goddamn church. He locks his eyes with mine, and I swear he looks as if he wants to do the exact same thing with me.

I'm enjoying this show, though. All these revelations, the confessions, it feels like watching a fucked-up reality show on TV. Only, I'm in the center of the action.

Might as well add some fuel to the fire.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, how the tables have turned."

"Keep your mouth shut, bitch." Holt jerks me, his grip on my forearm tightening. I ignore him.

"One deadbeat dad down. One to go." I grin at my father, looking him dead in the eyes as everyone's

attention turns to me.

“One to go?” he says, scoffing at me. “So what, you’re gonna get rid of me now? Are you gonna do it?”

He’s laughing out loud, mocking me without even considering that it could be true. I could do it. But he loves putting me down. I’m not touched by his behavior anymore, nor the fact that he’s doing it with an audience now.

“You stupid, ignorant man. You’re convinced you’re the most intelligent person in every room, yet you let yourself be played by the sociopath you’re forcing me to marry. You’re his damn piggybank! Our whole family is!”

Ryan forces me in front of him, violently attempting to cover my mouth, but I manage to push him away and continue.

“You stooped so fucking low for him. I mean, you were already scum in my eyes, but now you’re child trafficking scum!”

With every word, my voice rises to a loud, gravelly note, and I bite Ryan’s hand away when he tries to cover my mouth again. He grips my throat instead, holding me tight enough that he can keep me from moving away from him.

I don’t miss Vincent’s eyes moving between his hand and face with such a vicious look in them, even I’m fucking shaking.

“You ungrateful little bitch!” My father pushes my mother out of the way, trying to get out of the pews and come at me, but stops before he even makes a step.

“I think not.” Only three little words my brother speaks as he presses a gun against the back of father’s head.

“Cillian? What are you doing, son?” Father’s voice shakes ever so slightly.

He doesn’t reply right away. He looks between Vincent and I, giving us time to protest, then cocks the

gun when neither of us says a thing, and Father flinches against the slight vibration.

“You’re asking Morrigan to be grateful to you? For what? Selling her to a man who plans to wipe your entire family off the face of the fucking earth? Starting with you? It feels a tad idiotic. Don’t you think?”

Father’s nostrils flare at those words. I wonder how it feels to be betrayed by your own daughter, son, and business partner. All in one blessed day. He has no one else to trust. Yes, he has his wife, but she doesn’t mean anything to him. She’s not a bargaining chip or a business deal.

“You’ve done some really terrible things, Father,” Cillian continues, “and I’m tempted to let Ryan put the beginning of his plan in action, just so it saves me from doing it.”

“Cillian!” Mother gasps and covers her mouth. But our father stays silent.

“It’s true, you know,” I continue and can’t help but smile, “the business partner you’re selling me to plans to kill you, your son, then mother. In that specific order. This to ensure the whole inheritance goes to me. Once all the assets and businesses are secured, he plans on killing me too, so he can gain everything we ever had, and finally have the fortune his father lost.”

“That’s enough!” Ryan roars. “Stop getting your nose in business you don’t understand. Fucking paranoid woman...”

He wraps his hand tighter around my throat, and I catch Vincent take a short step forward. But I quirk my lip at him. I want to be here next to Ryan, because when the time comes, when the ball drops... the motherfucker is mine.

“Is it all true?” After an awkward pause, my father asks Ryan. “Was that your end goal? To kill me for my money?”

“Isn’t it obvious?! They’re working with each other, inventing insane scenarios so they can get Morrigan out of this wedding. We made a deal. Your daughter is mine, and our business is ours. It can’t be undone. Not now, not when my other business partner is... out.” He pauses, and his tone changes. It’s maniacal. “Not when I know what I know about you, and your involvements in such... heinous activities.”

The motherfucker actually snickers as he speaks those last two words.

“You son of a bitch!” my father snaps. Truly snaps. He rages at Ryan whose hand is now tightening a bit too hard around my throat. “I’m fucking saving you from bankruptcy. I let you into my house, gave you my fucking daughter, and blackmail is my thanks?! You ungrateful, entitled little shit, I’m going to end you!”

“Oh no, Father. *You* don’t get to end him. Nor do you get to judge him, not after all you’ve done.” I ignore his comment about *giving me* away.

He stops his rant and looks at me like I have the audacity to talk.

“And you do? Your dear father might not know what you’ve done, but don’t ever forget that I do.” Ryan pulls me by the throat and brings me to his right side, turning me so I can look at him as he tries to scare me.

“You dare threaten me too? Don’t worry, *darling*, after tonight, none of it will matter,” I say with a smirk, not even feeling when he squeezes me a little tighter as he grits his exposed teeth. “I may be a sinner, and I will pay someday. But today is all about you and Father. It’s judgement day.”

“I’ve been lenient with you,” Ryan says, scoffing at me. “I’ve given you freedom and allowed you more than I should have. You’re taking advantage of my kindness, and I’m losing my goddamn patience. We’re getting this pitiful excuse of a wedding done. Now!”

He rolls his eyes at me, the exasperated expression appearing more desperate than he thinks.

“I believe the word you’re looking for, Ryan, is deranged. More and more, I’m convinced that you’ve always been *this*,” I say with clear disgust dripping off my tongue, “but it was your father who was unwittingly keeping you in line. Forcing down this side of you.”

“You b—”

“There will be no other vows tonight, apart from this one,” I interrupt him. “I vow that your soul will leave this church today, independently of your body. Because that lump of meat is going in the graveyard at the back. It’s my vow to you too... Father.” I slide my gaze to the man who stands between the pews.

My brother is behind him, but the gun is no longer aimed at his head. It’s in his hand still, though.

Ryan tries to pull me to him yet again, heaving as he grabs me with the other hand, but he stops the moment Vincent’s voice fills the church with menace that could freeze blood right in the veins.

“I wouldn’t do that if I was you.”

God, that man’s voice penetrates so fucking deep beneath my flesh, I’m convinced he’s the devil, because he’s touching my soul. The husky tone is like the smoothest of caresses against it, teasing and alluring.

Fuck.

I look toward the man I love and still when I see all of The Sanctum, including some of their guys in the back, with guns aimed right at us. Ryan tenses for a moment too, and when he tries to step behind me, the cocking of Vincent’s gun echoes gently through the stone-walled church, making him rethink the move.

“I should have sent Severin to jail all those years ago. And you too, Serpent. Then maybe I wouldn’t have had to deal with this goddamn charade now!” my father rasps.

Maddox steps right next to Vincent at the sound of his last name. His eyes are dead set on his friend, the questions so vivid in them. Yet he doesn't say a thing.

I'm angry for him. He has no clue why my father looks at Vincent with such certainty. And now was not the right time to find out about this.

My blood rushes through my veins, my pulse thrums somewhere behind my ears, and my fingers and palms itch in that particular way they do when they feel the need to smash someone's face in. Memories flash in the back of my mind, from those moments in time when I was a girl in love. All that anger, the confusion, the regret... the goddamn heartbreak, they all flood me at once. Then there's Vincent. He's gone years of living with this knowledge. Without us.

"There are many sins for which you will pay tonight, Father. Taking Vincent away from me by blackmailing him is one of them."

I can almost feel the frenzy in the strain of my eyes. I'm done with this. I'm done with the fucking chatter. I'm done with my father, with Ryan. I'm done with it all.

"Wait. How the hell does she know that I threatened to send Severin to jail? I know for a fact she wasn't aware then." My father turns to Vincent, and I love the grin that quirks his devious lips.

"Because I told her." He looks at Ryan and that grin has a destructive confidence in it. "When we helped her escape your house, and brought her into mine, where we stayed... for days." He finishes that sentence in an almost lewd tone.

"Yo—you and The Serpent?!" Ryan hisses at me, and I can't help the beautifully wide smile that forms on my face. "That's it! I'm fucking done with this insolence! Father, get us fucking married, right now!"

He tries to turn me toward the priest, who seems to have taken a few steps back from the altar, keeping his

distance.

“No!” I hear my brother shout in the next moment.

“Don’t worry, Cillian,” Vincent speaks, calm and collected. “He can’t marry them, not legally anyway.”

“What the hell do you mean?” My father takes a step forward past my mother, just as my brother aims his gun back at his head.

Vincent throws a devastating smile at me.

“She’s already married,” he says, the room falling silent. “To me.”

The collective gasps are positively exhilarating. They’re not of congratulatory joy. They are pure, delicious shock.

“As of this morning, Vincent, *The Serpent*, Sinclair is my husband.” I let that sink in for a moment. I’m a sucker for that dramatic effect. “It was a beautiful ceremony. After all your effort, Father, after all you’ve done, we still ended up together. You blackmailed him away from me, forced him to leave me to protect our friend, and then”—I laugh—“all these years later, it was you who brought us back together. I guess in a cynical kind of way, we have you to thank for it.”

“You whore!” Ryan rasps and raises his hand at me.

I cock my head. “You’re sure you want to hit *The Serpent’s wife*?” I ask, just as he’s about to swing at me.

“Fuck, that sounds good.” My husband’s husky voice fills me with a bit too much delight.

Ryan rethinks the move but gives me a look that used to infuse me with terror.

It doesn’t work now. I don’t know if it’s because I’ve been gaining back the confidence I thought I lost, or if it’s because Vincent is here with me and I finally have hope. Now I just use Ryan’s gaze as kindling on my fire, and I want to make him burn.

“I’m a whore? Says the man who forced me to watch as he fucked another woman.” I don’t miss the outraged gasp from one of the women in this room. “Spare me the righteous bullshit. This was our backup plan. If something went wrong and he was unable to get to me before you said *I do*, at least on paper it wouldn’t be legal. Your whole plan, your only plan, is ruined.”

“You’re a disgrace to this family!” my mother shouts from the pews, as my father suddenly charges out.

He stops in the middle of the aisle and looks straight at me.

“I knew you were a lost cause. Always so rebellious, always so disrespectful, but I never thought you would do something like this behind mine and your mother’s backs. You ruined everything, as you’ve done since the moment you were born.”

My father perches himself on that high horse and it almost makes me laugh. But when he reaches inside his coat and aims his hand right at me, I realize I’m staring at the barrel of a gun. Maybe a second passes, and two consecutive pops split my eardrums, the sound bouncing off the walls of the church, and blood splatters all over me. It adds to the carnage already painting my skin and dress.

The first pop knocked his hand away and the gun fell. The second one was the fatal blow. I catch the moment of disbelief in his gaping eyes. That very moment just before the light goes out, when realization strikes. Then he’s gone.

He crumbles onto his knees, then falls face down onto the floor, on a loud crack as his head makes contact with the stone.

A blood-curdling shriek makes me roll my head in discomfort, as my mother launches herself on top of my father’s lifeless body. The man who oppressed her for so long is gone, and all she sees is loss, not freedom. *Jesus*. How fucking pathetic.

As her screams still fill me with exasperation, she reaches somewhere under my father's body, and when she pulls her hand out, that gun is yet again aimed right at me. My muscles stiffen.

I expected this from Father, but not from her. Not my own mother.

When another pop makes my body flinch, the bottom of my dress gets splattered with yet another shade of red. Then my mother falls face first over her husband.

Somewhere in the backs of my eyes, I can feel a subtle burn as I watch her body go limp. Did I have hope? Did I think that without my father, she would be a different woman? The one she suppressed during the years she spent under his iron fist... maybe.

Did I think that she would finally... love me?

I did.

She was my mother.

My gaze flickers to my brother, whose gun is no longer aimed at anyone. He looks up at me, and we stare at each other for a few moments. It hurts.

It hurts that it had to come to this. That we were nothing to the people who birthed us. It hurts that nothing could be done to save any of them. That they didn't love us as normal parents do, even though, somewhere deep down, we still had hope.

I realize that I have no idea who shot either of them. Was it my brother? Was it Vincent?

The idea that my brother was forced to shoot either of his parents fills my stomach with sickness. No matter how horrible these two people were, no matter if they deserved it, killing a parent carries a different weight on your soul.

Do I want to know?

Does it matter?

It does. I will have to find out, because if it was my brother, I refuse to let him carry this weight on his own. I bear the responsibility too, even if I didn't pull the trigger.

I see movement in the corner of my eye, and I realize there is only one man left in this massacre. Slowly turning, I swipe my gaze from my parents' dead bodies to the man I blame for most of this. Then I take a small step toward him.

"What now, *darling*? Your plan is ruined. You have no money, no life, no one who cares. You'll lose your house, your cars, racketeers are on your tail. You're done." I get closer, but this time, he takes the same step back. "Almost done."

"I'm going to make you pay for this." He grabs my arm, his fingers digging hard into my bicep. "You'll pay for destroying my life. You've been the poison in my blood since the first moment I laid eyes o—"

Before he finishes the sentence, I pull out the letter opener, and with a hard swing upwards, I sink it under his chin. In between those muscles that fill the hollow space inside his mandible, where it connects with the throat. His mouth falls open with shock, and I can see the sharp metal inside it. It pierced his tongue, hitting the roof of his mouth, and blood pours out of it with a speed I didn't quite expect.

For those few moments, the horror keeping him from reacting to the pain is utterly satisfying. I was expecting screams, begging, swearing, lunging at me, but for those few moments, it's silent.

Then chaos descends as he hauls me to him, his hand still gripping my upper arm, and I pull the metal out of his mouth before he manages to. When his hand reaches for the letter opener, I knee the bastard in the balls. The moment he instinctively bends over, I grab him by the bow tie, hold him tight, and sink the

motherfucking metal straight into his left ear as hard and fast as I can.

The screams that follow are so visceral, I would feel sorry for him if this wasn't exactly what the asshole deserves.

Only, he doesn't fucking die!

My breathing quickens, my whole body taken over by a raging heat that feels a lot like desperation, and I lunge back at the metal. I push his hands away as he tries to pull it out, so I can pry it out myself and shove it in all over again.

He needs to fucking die already!

But an arm wraps around me, pulling me back against a warm body that smells of enticing bergamot, and he holds me so tight. In such comfort. My lungs seem to slow down their effort, smothering whatever fire started inside of me. Then another arm extends on the other side of me. At the end of it a gun is aimed at Ryan, writhing in pain in front of us.

My fidgeting stops.

The end is in sight.

I sigh and sink back into the man who keeps me safe.

"End it." Two words I whisper, and the pop of the silenced gun sounds like sharp metal on metal, sinking through molasses.

Just like that... it's all over.

He falls at our feet, limp. Blood puddles underneath his head, spreading farther and farther.

I hear voices around me. Orders and instructions. There's movement too. Only, I'm stuck here, watching him, unable to pry my eyes away.

Just in case... Just in case he somehow gets up.

Just in case I'm imagining it. Dreaming it. Hallucinating...

Just in case it isn't over.

"Come on, Little Eve. Let's go."

"What if—?"

"It's over. He's gone. They all are. Just as I promised you." Vincent pulls me away gently, and my body complies.

Yet even as I move, my eyes are still stuck on the limp man. Blackness fills my vision, blocking my view of him, then two warm hands grip the sides of my face and guide my head up. The most beautiful, dark and vicious black eyes meet me, carrying more emotion than I thought possible.

"It's all done, Morrigan. All done." He crushes his lips to mine, hard and possessive, holding me there for a moment longer than needed.

When he breaks away, leaving me panting for air, there is something in his eyes I cannot quite place.

Is it relief?

Or is it worry?

CHAPTER 35

VINCENT

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN weeks... months... maybe even years, I wake up and the world isn't spinning aimlessly. The dust has settled. The woman who's haunted my dreams for far too long is wrapped tight in my arms.

I brought her to my home last night. Mamaw June was in the house, riddled with worry. Maddox called to tell her I'm alive as soon as he and the guys found me. But she didn't see me for herself until I came home.

She stopped in front of me, red eyes still wet with tears, and couldn't bring herself to come too close. Instead, she took Morrigan by the shoulders, looked her over, and pulled her to her chest. She hugged her so tight, until my Little Eve broke down. They stood there as she finished crying, and I felt completely helpless. In awe too. I'm used to reckless Morrigan. I'm used to her anger, her violence, her outbursts, and her sass. But seeing this vulnerability, after the actual victory showed her in such a different light, it's a different type of strength.

Mamaw June made sure we ate, then in her true fashion, quite literally sent us to shower and to bed before she left. Like we were nothing but children, not two grown-ass adults who pretty much came from

battle. Morrigan still had blood on her face, even though we tried to wash it off in the back room of the church, as our clean up team were working their magic on the church. Carter and the guys were handling the leftover people. Luckily, most of them were useless security.

We left everything in order for Father Brown, but nothing can scrub those memories from his mind. Safe to say, I don't think we're ever going to be welcome in church.

As Mamaw was leaving my house, she stopped and turned in the doorway, both pain and relief shining in her eyes. In that moment, I actually felt sorry for the life I pulled her into.

"I can't ask you to stop this, to choose a different path anymore. This is it for you, I understand that, but I want you to know I'm proud of you. I'm sorry you had to do it, but I am proud of you."

I was expecting the first part of that speech, but not the second.

"You did all of this for her. You did it for her life, for love, you did it to save her. But I know you did it for me too. You used that darkness that dominates you for selfless reasons. I hear how people speak of you in this city. They say you're evil. You're not. You never were. You're simply strong enough to make the hard choices."

Then she finally hugged me. She wrapped her arms tight around me, my aching muscles hurting, but I couldn't tell her that. She thought I was dead.

Just as Morrigan did.

When I went upstairs, I found *my wife* standing in front of the shower, still dressed, just looking at it. At that point, I don't think it had hit her yet that it was over. Truly over. That she is free.

She's been living behind a wall for the last year, at least. She's thrown behind it all the shit her family put her through, then her boyfriend. Even in university, she

pretended that all was well, and that a different life wasn't actually waiting for her when she returned home. As she stood before that shower, for the first time ever, she was truly free. And I don't think she knew what to do with herself.

So I took over for her.

I undressed her whilst she watched me, her eyes never leaving me. Then I undressed myself as the room was steaming up and pulled her with me under the spray. I washed her body, cleansed the blood off her, and then her beautiful red curls. There was nothing sexual about it; I just needed to care for her. Then I washed myself, and just as I was about to get us out, she wrapped her arms around my waist, stopping me. She pressed her head against my chest, and... held me.

Nothing more. Nothing less. She just held me.

I thought that it was only her who needed this intimacy, this comfort. As she squeezed just a little bit tighter, the memories of the day started flooding me. One by one, they poured in—the attack inside my house, the gunfire, being struck unconscious and taken to Boseman's safe-house. Yes, I got out, but not unscathed. I'm a bit broken and bruised. I'm pretty sure I have a few fractured ribs, but I got out.

Because all I could think of when I was tied to that fucking chair was Morrigan. I didn't wait for all those years just so it could end in a few hours.

Then there's church. My fucking father is finally dead. Her family, too, and Holt. Motherfucking Holt is dead. All of this didn't just end for her. This was the end of a large chapter of my life as well.

This wasn't just her revenge, it was mine too.

So we just held each other under the warm spray of the shower, waiting as it washed away some of our sins, and some of our sorrows. I think it worked. We fell

asleep instantly after we got out. Both naked, skin still damp, glistening in the moonlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Now, as I watch the sun streaming in, it really does feel as though it's the first day of the rest of my life. As cliché as it sounds.

And I can't fucking wait to start living it.

Hopefully, with this vixen by my side.

"Mmm..." she moans softly, rubbing her cheek on that soft spot between my chest and shoulder.

When she opens her eyes and finds me looking straight at her, she stops mid inhale.

The seconds that pass feel more like time itself stands still.

Desperation seems to fill her all of a sudden, and she grabs me by the hair, tugging at me to meet her lips. She crushes them harshly to mine, until they ache against my teeth, but I don't stop her. She only releases me for a split second to take a breath, before she dives back in, and kisses me hard and fast, frantically pulling at my hair. My scalp aches, yet I can't help but smile through these urgent kisses.

When she finally releases me, I realize she's smiling.

My Little Eve.

"It's over, isn't it?" Hope shines so fucking bright in her eyes, the grin is more vivid than ever.

"It is. You're free to do, well, everything."

I rub a thumb over her smile, because I forgot how beautiful the genuine one looks on her. When I run my fingers through her red locks, she hums softly and pulls herself to my lips again.

"Can I start by doing you?" she whispers against me.

The laughter that bursts out of me gains me a hard slap on my chest.

“Maybe not, then.” She tries to pull away from me, but in one swift move, I yank her whole body on top of mine.

She scrambles to prop herself up and straddle me but tries to push away.

“Oh no, don’t you dare. You already offered. You can’t take it back,” I tease.

“Watch me,” she bites back, pursing her lips.

“Indeed, I will, Morrigan. I’m going to watch you... as you take me.”

I take her by the throat and pull her to me and shut her up with a deep kiss. I force my tongue into her mouth, battling her own, before she finally melts. Her small hands grip my throat, tightening, taking my breath away as her hips grind onto mine, her pussy getting wetter against my growing erection.

Grabbing one ass cheek, I press her harder against me as I push my hips up and swallow the sharp moan that drips out of her. *Fuck...* she sounds so goddamn beautiful when she’s filled with ecstasy.

I slide my hand between her ass cheeks, past her ass, and straight to her tight, wet cunt. When I slip two fingers inside of her, her back arches and she breaks our kiss as she whips her head back on a loud moan. Her lush tits push right into my face, and I don’t miss the opportunity to swipe my tongue over her sensitive nipple.

“So goddamn beautiful.”

I lick my lips, watching as she rolls her hips against mine like she’s on that stage in *Metamorphosis*. My cock swells between us at the stunning sight. And when her eyes drop down to mine, the flames of fucking Hell itself stare back at me.

“Fuck me, Serpent.”

That smile spells menace, and the Morrigan I know, the one she never lets out for long enough, comes to play.

I pull my fingers out of her, grip my cock, and guide the head to the wet center of her. The tip of it is barely in, when in one long stroke, she drops down the length of me. Balls fucking deep.

“Goddamnit!” I release her throat and grab her ass as my own back arches.

I push myself so fucking deep inside of her, I think I saw Hell, Heaven, and goddamn fucking Valhalla, all rolled into one.

She doesn't waste time. I'm holding on for dear life so I don't come right here, right now, and she just fucks me with no care in the world. She rises, then slams down onto me with such harsh movements, I swear I can feel the end of her on the tip of my dick. But she's lost in the pleasure, probably a bit of pain, too, and all I can do is hold on to her hips. She leans back, propping herself on my thighs, and lets her head fall back, her long hair tickling the skin of my legs. Then she fucks me so roughly, the only way I can describe it is her using me to get off.

I'm her goddamn toy right now.

She uses me for her own pleasure, rolling her hips in all and every direction it suits her, and I'm just enjoying the fucking ride.

And what a ride it is.

Her moans fill my bedroom. A sinful song along with the slapping of our skin. Her cunt is so damn tight around me, especially when she does that wicked thing where she squeezes as she lifts herself up, and my tip is the only part of me inside of her.

My fingers bruise her hips, but as my grip tightens, her movements are more vicious. Her moans are louder, her cunt tighter. The pain seems to fuel her.

As her heaving breaths show exhaustion, I reach over and grab a fistful of hair, then pull her to my chest. I grip her ass cheek in one hand, and brutally thrust up into her. She screams against my skin and sinks her teeth into my shoulder.

“Fuck, Little Eve!” I growl, fucking her through the pain in my flesh.

“More,” she moans as she drags her tongue over the edge of my ear.

So I give her more. Not fast, but hard, long strokes as I piston into her, pulling her head back. Swiping my tongue over her exposed throat, I release her ass and slide my free hand between us. The moment I reach that sensitive skin that covers her clit and press hard on her, she shakes. Not in an orgasm, but with the realization that she’s so terribly close.

And so am I.

My balls draw up. The only thing keeping me from spilling inside of her is the fact that I have to get her there first.

I rub two fingers against her clit in fast, small circles, enjoying the way she squeezes her eyes shut, and bites her lip as she swallows a long cry. When her legs begin to tremble and her pussy spasms around me, I’m at my wit’s fucking end.

She falls on top of me, crying out in ecstasy against my chest, and my cum spills into her in strong bursts that seem to be sucked out of me by her weeping pussy.

“I could never tire of this,” I whisper because I can’t possibly find my voice right now.

“Never...” she pants.

Our loud, heaving breaths work in unison as we come down from this high. Even though I know we need to move at some point to clean ourselves up, I could just lie like this forever. With her soft body on top of

mine, skin against skin, our hearts beating too fast, too hard, too loud... *fuck*.

This is it for me, isn't it?

MORRIGAN

“WHAT NOW, VINCENT?”

We cleaned up, and despite his protests, I covered myself with one of his T-shirts. Now we lie in bed again, yet it feels like a strange limbo.

We’re married. I’m married... Only, it’s not quite a real marriage, is it?

“Now, I think we should go get some food,” he replies, and I narrow my eyes.

“That’s not what I meant,” I say, shaking my head. “I know it was your idea for us to marry, as a precaution in case something happened and ruined our plan. But... you’re free to get out of this arrangement now.”

He regards me for a few moments, and his lack of blinking is rather disturbing. I feel like I’m under scrutiny as he quite visibly gathers his thoughts. I could have sworn a tinge of regret flashed over his expression. But I blinked and it was gone. Did I imagine it?

He was forced into this, just as I was. Only I don’t—

“We can get an annulment,” he interrupts my thoughts. “I told you, Morrigan, you’re free now. Free to make your own choices, build your own path outside anyone’s control, and I will not stop you.”

“Really? You wouldn’t stop me or protest if I told you right now that I want an annulment? You wouldn’t be angry, or hurt, or upset?” I’m struggling to rein back my disappointment in his response. “It wouldn’t affect you in the slightest?”

“I wouldn’t stop you. Wouldn’t be angry or hurt. And if I would be upset, I definitely wouldn’t tell you. Us getting

married was about your protection. Just another union forced on yourself because of circumstance. There's too much fire in you, and it was never given enough oxygen to burn at its true potential. I definitely will not be the one to hold you back, if that's what you wish."

He sighs, shaking his head, and the expression in his eyes shifts all at once. A veil falls, uncovering truths, desires, and fears.

"But I can't lie and say I wouldn't be affected. I want you, Morrigan. I want you by my side now and for the rest of time. I want a life with you. You're the Eve to my Serpent. Everything I forced myself not to dream of all those years ago. That's what I want. I want to be the first thing you see in the morning and the last thing you see at night. I want you in every way possible."

He swipes a hand over his face, and yet again, he sighs, then continues.

"I just... I want you so much it fucking hurts. But this is not about what I want, it's about you. I will never be the same as the men we killed for your freedom. No matter how much I would love to tie you to my bed and never ever let you go, I will never do that unless it's your wish."

My lips part in shock. He looks at me like we're two universes that have finally collided after a millennia of trying to find each other. Lovers who had to travel through time until they found the right one where they're supposed to be together.

There isn't just love in those eyes. There is an obsession that eats at him, because he has to subdue it like a caged beast. And I cannot do anything but admire how much he forces that just for me. To give me space, to let me grow and be whoever I need to be. He holds back out of fucking respect, and there's no way I would need anything more than that from the man I love.

"However"—he stops my train of thought yet again—"don't mistake my respect for lack of passion.

Because I will do everything in my power to make you mine. I will go through what we've been through all over again if I have to. Because we belong together, and I know you know it. You are meant to be my wife and I your husband, and I will wait for you to discover yourself. But make no mistake, Morrigan, my ring will still end up on your finger. No matter how much you will delay it... you are *mine*, and I am yours."

I cock my head slightly, lifting one eyebrow as I look at the man who was always meant to be mine.

I'm not sure if he caught on to the slight insecurity in his speech, no matter how confident he is. There is a tinge of fear in it that I will reject him, that I will ask for that annulment.

One corner of my lips quirks up, and he narrows his eyes in slight confusion, like a man feeling mocked. I can't help but release the smile I've held back, because he is so fucking right—I am his.

We're restarting our journey somewhere in the middle, but it's exactly where I need to be.

"You are mine, Vincent."

His features morph altogether in that utterly devastating smile.

"Till death do us part?" he asks.

"Till death do us part."

EPILOGUE

MORRIGAN

3 months later

“KEEP THEM CLOSED.”

“Last time you restricted my sight, you and your best f—”

“I’m not about to fuck you in this parking lot, Morrigan,” Vincent interrupts, a sweet bite in his tone as he leads me through the back door of Midnight.

“Oh.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” I can practically hear the roll of his eyes.

I snicker under my breath as I let him guide me. I love teasing him, and the night when I was sandwiched between him and Maddox is a prime little weapon. He enjoys it, though. It gets him so fucking hard, and the funny thing is, that it’s also the tinge of jealousy that gets him there. It’s a strange type of masochism, and he enjoys the fuck out of it.

As much as I think Maddox is hot as hell, he and I got it out of our systems. Now, we’re just close, and I would kill for that man. As I know he would do for me.

“Okay, you can look now.”

I drop my hands and I'm just as confused as I'm faced with... surprise, surprise... the parking lot. Vincent's Mercedes sits a few spaces to my right, and there are a few more ridiculously expensive cars dotted around. Midnight patrons, of course. But the most ridiculous of them all is the one I'm about to drool over, if I don't avert my eyes soon.

"I don't get it." I turn to him, cocking an eyebrow.

"Happy Birthday, wife," he says with a sly grin, pointing to the opposite side of us.

No.

Uh-uh. No way.

It takes me five more seconds to actually turn my head in the direction of his index finger. Mainly because I refuse to believe he's pointing at the dark green beauty my mouth waters for.

But he is.

"Th—the Pontiac?!" I didn't expect my question to come out as a squeal, but there we go.

I whip back around to him, my hair a whirlwind as I stare into the obsidian of his eyes and wait for confirmation. He nods once, and my mouth falls open as I turn back to the vintage beauty.

It sits so fucking proud, surrounded by the modern cars that can't possibly outshine it. A dark jewel-like green, the 1967 Pontiac GTO Judge, shimmers with its pearl paintjob.

I hear the jingle of keys, but I can't peel my eyes off the lines of this car. I just close my fist around them when Vincent presses them into my palm, then walk slowly toward the gorgeous piece of machinery.

But I stop halfway there, jolting out from the mirage.

"Vincent, you can't be serious. You did not just buy me a car for my birthday. My God, it's too much."

“I didn’t buy you a car. I bought you *the* car.”

Of course I know what he means. *The* car. The car I had a poster of in my bedroom when I was a teen. The one I still catch my breath over every time it appears on TV or on very, very rare occasions, in town. It’s been my dream car for as long as I can remember.

“I know what you’re going to say.”

But I say it anyway. “I wanted to buy it for myself. I *needed* to do it.”

This car was supposed to be my reward to myself, bought out of the profit I was going to make from *Metamorphosis*, my baby. My hard fucking work.

I feel slightly robbed by the pride I would have felt.

“Like I said, I know. You’ve been dealt too many bad hands, Morrigan—your parents, Holt, all their deaths, the fire at the club, your apartment renovation, and then all the unpredictable costs that came with the repairs. I wanted to show you how fucking incredible you are. I wanted to reward you now. You’ve been putting every penny into the club and your apartment, and I want—scratch that—I need, I need to help.”

Even though we are legally married, I’ve been adamant that we were going to take the time to actually build a relationship. I’ve been dying to rush into it, my soul has been screaming for it, but I’ve been shutting it down every step of the way. My mind needs to get up to speed with my heart. It’s not just about letting myself process what’s happened in the last year, but also to accept that Vincent is really not going anywhere this time around. Adding onto that the damage control from the shit Ryan put me through.

It’s been about three months since his fortunate demise, even though it feels like an eternity, and I’ve been doing well at building myself and our business up. No matter how rich Vincent is, and how many of these Pontiacs he can afford, I wanted to buy it for myself to

prove that I can, to have something of my own. Something that doesn't feel like a handout.

Holding on to my apartment, finishing the renovations, and making it into my home, was part of that too. Vincent almost insisted on this particular side of our deal. He couldn't give a shit about money, but having my own space, finding my independence, again, had to happen. It was my right of passage.

I think it was one for him too. He needed the reassurance that without our pact, without living in the same house non-stop, I would still want to be with him. It's confirmation that I wasn't conditioned by circumstance.

I wasn't.

"I'm sorry I robbed you of the satisfaction," he adds when I don't continue. "But this is for me too. You've worked so fucking hard in the last three months. I need to make your life easier."

"I don't know what to say," I finally admit. I'm slowly learning how much Vincent likes to take care of the people he loves, and I can't shoot him down.

"Say thank you, then take me for a ride, Morrigan."

I grin and look down at the keys in my hand.

"That, I can certainly do." I throw my arms around his neck, press my body into him as his hands grip my hips, and crush my lips against his. I make sure to leave him breathless when I break the kiss to speak again. "Thank you, husband."

* * *

I spent about fifteen minutes just admiring everything about this car, before I even turned the engine on. I was edging myself, because I knew the moment it purred to life it would fucking vibrate straight through my pussy.

And Jesus Christ, it did.

The roaring of the engine was not just music to my ears, it sang to my soul, too. We drove for about forty-five minutes before Vincent told me we should head home, to my apartment. I asked why the rush, and he shrugged and said Lulu was waiting for me, since it's my birthday and all.

Only, this man suddenly found the dark green leather of the car door very interesting, and was not looking for a second at me. Something smelled fishy, and it wasn't from the ocean breeze coming through the open windows. But I did as he suggested and headed to the apartment. Although keeping the little smile off my lips was a feat.

“One of these days I'm gonna have to fuck you here.”

I stop dead in my tracks at his words, almost missing the step, as we walk up to my apartment.

“Here?” I point at the step. “Why?”

He shakes his head, his eyes fixed on my ass. “You have no clue what you do to me, do you? The way those hips sway, that ass right in my face as you walk up, drives me fucking crazy.”

He grinds his teeth and suddenly slaps my right ass cheek, making me yelp and climb up another step.

“So what? You'll just bend me over—”

“On all fours, baby. I will shove my face between your cheeks first, eat your pussy until you fill this stairwell with screams of my name, then I'll fuck you until Loreley will definitely want to move.”

The sound that escapes my mouth, heats my cheeks, and makes me feel goddamn sixteen again, because I just fucking giggled. I... Morrigan Sinclair... giggled. It's not even the dirtiest thing this man has ever told me. It's not even that dirty. But the fact that he can barely restrain himself, keep his hands off of me, and be around me without fucking me after watching me... walk up some stairs, is a beautiful thing.

I hope this never stops.

I hope he'll be desperate for me and my body until we grow old and wrinkly.

He slaps my ass again and urges me up the stairs before he really does fuck me here, and by the time I get to my apartment door, my thighs rubbing together have not done me any favors. At all. I really need him to fuck me right now, but I have a feeling whatever he's been avoiding revealing to me about tonight, will stand in my way.

I open the door and the shouting makes me flinch, even as I kind of expected it.

“Surpriiise!”

I touch my chest, mouth gaping as I look over the people gathered in the large central open space of my home, and heat fills me. It has nothing to do with Vincent, but... all these people here. All the ones I love more than my life, the ones I would die for, and the ones I would kill for.

“Happy Birthday!” They carry on the unsynchronized cheers.

“Thank you so much!”

Who would have thought that this would be mine, this family of mismatched people who actually give a shit about me. It's the family I never had, and they give me more love and attention than the one I lost.

Not Cillian, though. I didn't lose him, but the opposite. I feel like I gained a brother even though he was already mine. But now he's ever present. Week by week, our relationship grows and it's shocking how much of a different man he is outside of our father's shadow. Turns out he was planning his exit for quite some time, but he didn't have the resources yet. He was gathering them, and apparently, even The Sanctum was included in his plans. What happened with me just sped things up. I also found out that he did fire one of the shots that killed

one of our parents. He didn't say which one, though, and I didn't press.

He's the first one who rushes to me. He wraps his arms around my waist and lifts me to him before he spins us around a few times.

"Happy Birthday, Morri." He gives me a bruising kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, Cillian." When he puts me down, I pull him to me again, burying my head in his chest.

I missed him. I missed this. Even though we never really had... this. I still missed out on it and having him in my life now is the best fucking thing in the world.

"Morri!" Lulu squeals, pulling me away and into her arms. "Tell me, are you surprised?"

"So surprised."

"You bitch!" She slaps my shoulder. "You knew, didn't you? Did Vincent spill? Or did that brute?" Her eyes flicker somewhere behind me, and I know exactly who she's scowling at.

"None of them did." I laugh. "I just had a feeling."

"You and your feelings..." She sighs, shaking her head.

"If it makes you feel any better, I only suspected it on the car ride here."

"Okay, yeah," she says, nodding as the brightest of smiles spreads over her face. "That does make me feel better."

After a few minutes with her, I spent a healthy amount of time saying hello to every single person here. Katya shocked me by wearing flat shoes for the first time in her life. That woman seems to permanently live in high heels, and she finally looks more casual.

Raven came too, the black-haired, stunning woman who helped get me out of Ryan's villa all those months

ago. I would turn lesbian for that woman. She's sharp and cunning, but so sweet, and we've gotten quite close. Lulu adores her too, even though she was slightly jealous at first.

Maddox, of course, pulled me into a tight hug that made Vincent raise an amused eyebrow, and it was even more amusing to watch Lulu's reaction to him. I'm convinced those two are going to kill each other.

Rachel, one of our bartenders from Metamorphosis, is here too. She's been so good at helping us coordinate the renovation of the club after the fire. We hit a few snags, especially since we had to do some work on the structure, which was definitely unexpected. Even though we were paying all our staff during the process, with no expectation to work since there was no work, she insisted. She's fantastic, and sweet as anything. Becoming a friend was so easy with her.

Beau, one of The Sanctum's guys joined us too. We've clicked in Midnight, and it's been entertaining watching the man attempt to court Tina, one of Carter's hackers, who is here too. I say *court* because it's literally what happened. The man, as handsome as he is, hasn't ever had to try too hard with women. But Tina is a bit of a recluse who couldn't care less about men, and she ignored him for a month before the guy started shoving flowers in her face to get her attention. Carter hasn't been too pleased with the distraction one of his key team members has been facing, but I told him to sit back and enjoy the show instead of moaning about it.

Interestingly, he has. He's not watching them now, though. He's been quiet for a while. I mean, he is usually quiet, it's his nature, but he seems a bit lost in thought. It worries me slightly, but Vincent assured me it's all good. There's nothing going on, no major threats, or anything. I've even noticed it on Katya too. They both seem to focus harder on us, although they seem to watch Finn more than anyone.

And that's exactly where Carter's gaze is now—on Finn, who's currently looking at me with his flirty blue eyes.

"I have a confession to make," he says, looking down at me.

"Go on..."

"I didn't like you at first."

I press my hand to my heart, letting my mouth drop. "Oh my! I had no idea!"

He rolls his eyes and flashes me his charming smile. "Alright, alright. Christ, you wouldn't win any acting prizes."

"Fuck you, Finnigan."

"You wish."

"Do not let Vincent hear that. He'll fucking scalp you," I say, laughing, but my lips quickly straighten. "What did you have against me?"

He takes a deep breath before answering. "Everything. I don't think it was you, specifically. Although I was quite skeptical. I didn't like what you represented... to Vincent."

"I'm not taking him away from you, Finnigan." I reach over and rub his arm, soothing.

"No. I think that's when those feelings start going away. When I realized you weren't going to change a thing. Well, obviously, some things have changed."

"They will, of course. For all of you, eventually," I say to him.

"Nah, not for me, darlin'. I'm happy as I am."

"Fucking everything in sight and never getting attached to anyone?" I push.

"I have standards, Morrigan. I don't fuck *everything*."

“You’re avoiding the attachment thing, though,” I say, cocking an eyebrow.

I know he is. He doesn’t need to confirm it. He’s a proper playboy; he defines the fucking thing. I’m not judging, but this man deserves so much better. He’s selfless, even if he hates admitting it. But I guess not everyone is built for relationships.

“Avoiding would entail a prospect. I simply make sure there is no prospect. Ever.”

“Whatever works for you, buddy.” I smirk, and he draws me into a hug.

“Happy Birthday, Morrigan.”

I smile at him just as my gaze gets pulled to the front door.

“Evie!” I exclaim and wave.

“Who?” Finn asks, his eyes narrowing.

“Evelyn Shaw. You know her, the girl you rescued.”

But his eyes widen slightly the moment I finish speaking her full name and he turns slowly in her direction. I open my mouth to ask him why he’s looking at her like that but shut it the moment the scowl hits his gaze.

What the fuck?

“What exactly is she doing here?” he asks.

“She’s my friend. She also lives in the apartment underneath with her little sister, and works downstairs?” And from the looks of the huge box Maddox is relieving her of, she brought the birthday cake. She bakes a mean fucking cake.

“In Metamorphosis?!” His wild, surfer boy hair whips around him as he turns to me.

“No. In the café. Finn, what—”

“What do you mean she lives here?! Since when?”

“About a month ago. We took her in, to help her out while she’s saving some money.” I’m so confused. “How do you not know this?”

Granted, after the rescue operation, it wasn’t his job to keep track of everyone. They have people who kept an eye on all the children. But I’m surprised Vincent didn’t tell him. Or Maddox, who actually helped her move in.

“I guess... I tuned out.” The scowl goes back on his face as Evelyn walks in our direction.

She’s a natural blonde, with smooth, wheat-colored hair that grazes her waist, slightly taller than me, and with a thin frame that reminds me of a ballerina. Her big, hazel eyes sparkle against her medium-toned olive skin. She and Maddox could easily look like siblings with their almost matching skin tone. Her stride is confident, her hugely oversized cardigan, draped over faux leather leggings and band T-shirt, adding onto her attitude. She looks like a delicate rocker chick, dressed in all-black, with a clear edge and she wears it all so fucking well.

“Morrigan! Happy Birthday! Sorry, I’m late, I was adding the finishing touches.” She pulls me into a quick hug.

“We barely just started. Thank you so much for coming. You remember Finnigan Hennessey?” I grab his forearm to pull him a little closer, but he doesn’t budge.

“Hi.” She doesn’t even turn her head to him, just shoots him a quick, barely polite glance.

“Hello.” He seems to do the bloody same, then turns on his heel and leaves.

What the hell is happening here? What am I missing?

“Are you guys okay?” I ask.

“I barely know him.”

That doesn’t answer my question.

“How’s your birthday party going? Did they actually manage to surprise you?” She changes the subject quickly.

“No,” I say, laughing. “But to be fair, I didn’t catch on to something until I was on the way here. So that’s definitely a success.”

“I told Loreley this would happen.” She smiles at me, her gaze drifting over everyone drinking and laughing. “You have a good bunch here, you know.”

“I love Vincent to the ends of the Earth, but having this... you guys around me, is so fucking precious.”

Evie nods but doesn’t add onto it. There’s a slight sadness in her eyes.

“Where’s Maya?” I ask.

“Downstairs, with Mamaw June. She offered to babysit so I could come here.”

“Oh, yes, of course. She mentioned something about being busy tonight and that’s why she insisted on seeing us in the morning, to give me my present.” I can’t help but laugh to myself, as the puzzle pieces fall into place. “She’s a good egg.”

“She reminds me of my mum.” Evelyn’s gaze turns back to me, and there’s both sadness and a bit of hope in there. “Maya has fallen in love with her. I swear these days she wants to spend more time with her than me.”

“It’s not the worst thing in the world, you know. You’ve given a lot of yourself away. This is an opportunity to take it back, live a little. Don’t get me wrong, the responsibility is still there, but... you’re not alone anymore.”

She turned eighteen two months ago, but her adulthood started long before. She never got to be a proper teen, not even a big sister. She was basically a mother in the shittiest of situations.

“Easier said than done, right?”

I nod, but Maddox pulls my attention.

“Is he asking for me, or you?”

“Me.” Evelyn waves to him. “Probably something to do with the cake.” See you in a bit.

She leaves, and I look around the room, catching sight of Finn, who follows her with his gaze, but pulls away quickly, shaking his head to himself. I pop my drink down and turn, heading to the corridor leading to my bedroom. I don't bother turning on the lights as I walk straight through and to my bathroom. I use the toilet, wash my hands, and I'm barely out the door and into the bedroom, when the scent of bergamot and cedar fills my senses.

I don't have time to react before my hands are trapped behind my back and I'm slammed forward, against the wall, Vincent's warm hand over my mouth.

“You've turned me into a weak man, Morrigan *Sinclair*.” He pronounces our last name like it holds much more power now that we share it. “I cannot stand being in a room with you and not touching you. Your absence burns my fucking skin,” he seethes into my left ear, but only his breath touches my skin.

I mumble into his hand, trying to bite back at him, but he doesn't even attempt to remove it.

“Then there's this ass, your fucking legs, and your filthy mouth. Jesus fuck, woman, all I want to do nowadays is sink my cock into every hole you have for me, or slide it between your tits, mark your body as mine. Every second. Of every. Fucking. Day.”

I moan against his palm, but this time, there are no words trying to breach the barrier. My ass responds, though, pushing back into him, and feeling his thick cock right away.

“You want it?” he asks.

I shake my head, and on a hitched breath, he bites down on my earlobe. It sends shock waves of pain

straight into my core and the whimper that comes out in response, was spoken by my body, not me.

“Too. Fucking. Bad.”

When his hand releases my wrists, he rushes straight to the button and zipper of my jeans, pulling at them with harsh tugs. Yet, he’s got them open and the waistband pushed down against my thighs in mere seconds.

His fingers rush to my core from behind, and of course, I’m still fucking wet since we climbed those damn stairs. He plunges inside of me harshly, and I moan with need into his palm. I know it’s gonna tip him over the edge before the sound finished leaving my throat.

I’m right.

He pulls me against his body, his hands staying in place, and bends me over the dresser. Three pumps of his fingers later, I hear his zipper through the cloud of pleasure swirling through my mind, and the tip of his cock prods my entrance. I smile against his palm, but it falters too goddamn quick when I realize the bedroom door is open. Anyone could come by at any second.

That thought has only a second to linger in my brain before his cock thrusts into me with such force, the dresser moves a little, and I have to bite down a cry.

His moves are torturous inside of me. His cock twitches, and instead of fucking me harshly, Vincent grinds his hips against my ass, rubbing his cock inside of me, against all the nerves that drive me insane.

I can’t even protest, with his hand still covering my mouth. I don’t even dare, considering the door he fucking left open. Anyone could hear us. And the motherfucker chooses this moment to pull out and slam into me. Thank fuck for his palm covering my cry. I tell myself it’s enough to keep it from leaving this room. But I’m not so sure.

When my knees begin to shake from his cock's delicious assault on my weeping core, I'm biting down on my lip to keep the moans in.

"What would you do, Little Eve?" His husky voice sends more shivers down to my core. Like I needed any more. "What would you do if someone showed up in that doorway right now?"

A whimper I didn't manage to swallow slips out.

"Would you make me stop?" he asks.

Thrust.

"Would you push me away?"

Thrust.

"Would you look them in the eyes as you come all over my fucking cock?"

Thrust.

I'm off. Before I even register what's happened, my core spasms around his length, and my knees give out. I'm digging my fingers into the wood of the dresser, holding on for dear life as my body shakes. I'm not falling. I'm completely pinned in place as Vincent's thrusts quicken. With one rough buck of his hips, the lowest of growls rumbles in his throat, and he spills inside of me. His cock jerks repeatedly, and it teases my easing orgasm, pushing it just a little bit further.

When he finally releases my mouth, I'm panting like I ran a damn marathon.

"You're such a dirty little thing, aren't you?" he whispers softly, running his hand over my back as I come down from the ecstasy.

"I wasn't the one putting those filthy scenarios in my head, dear sir."

"It's you who puts them there. It's not fair not to share them."

Well, fuck.

He helps me up and guides me to the bathroom. He proceeds to clean me up, like he does almost every single time we fuck, and I'm sinking in this ritual of ours more and more. My eyes are closed as I lean into his soothing touch, enjoying our intimacy.

When he's done, he pulls my jeans up properly, and fastens them, before running a hand through my loose curls, guiding my gaze into his.

"Will I ever tire, Morrigan?"

"Tire of...?"

"Your evening primrose scent. The softness of your skin. Your green gaze into mine. The tight grip of your pussy and the way you unravel around me. Or the feel of you against me. All of you. Every second of every fucking day. And the nights when you seek me in your sleep, even if you're just hugging one arm, you seek me. When you don't... I do."

He takes a deep breath in, the intensity in his black eyes adding onto the sting in mine.

"Will I ever tire?" he asks again.

"You already know the answer."

He smirks, pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

"I'll always crave more," he admits.

"It's only fair, Mr. Sinclair. We're equals, after all."

"Indeed, we are, Mrs. Sinclair. Indeed, we are."

* * *

Thank you for reading Morrigan and Vincent's story.

[Manacled Hearts is up next. Pre-Order](#) to see who's going to help heal Finnigan Hennessey's heart.

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See you in the next one.

Love,
Lilith

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lilith Roman is a romance author who lives with her husband and fluffy bear-dog in the UK, where she writes stories laced with a little danger, intense passion, and dark themes, always ending in a Happily Ever After.

She's an introvert with an addiction for pretty hardbacks she never reads. A lover of anything with chocolate, cursing, and steamy books. And her love for horror movies convinced her without a shadow of a doubt that... even the monster under the bed needs a love story.

Sign up for her newsletter to be notified about releases, books going on sale, events and other news!

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