

RECKLESS HEARTS

JAGGER COLE

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A DARK ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS MAFIA ROMANCE

DARK HEARTS

BOOK SIX

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Reckless Hearts

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DARKSIDE - Neoni

How Soon Is Now? - The Smiths

Help I'm Alive - Metric

Closer - Nine Inch Nails

Lose My Faith - Gold Brother

Family Tree - Ethel Cain

There, There - Radiohead

Not - Big Thief

Uninvited - BELLSAINT

Burn - The Cure

Disarm - The Smashing Pumpkins

Bodysnatchers - Radiohead

Panic Switch - Silversun Pickups

Die For You - LÉON

Plans We Made - Son Lux

Roll The Credits - Danielle Ponder

This Place Is A Prison

I Could Give You All That You Don't Want - The Twilight Sad

Theatre - Etta Marcus

give me hell - Sam Nelson, X Ambassadors, Madi Diaz

As the World Caves In - Sarah Cothran

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains darker themes and graphic depictions of past trauma, including mentions of SA/CSA as well as scenes involving CNC. While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your triggers, and read with that in mind.

DAHLIA

FULL MOONS in the fall always raise the hairs on the back of my neck.

But fear isn't always necessarily a bad thing.

Sometimes, it's a good thing. Or at least, an important survival instinct. Fear of the dark, way back when, led to us discovering fire. Fear of the unknown teaches us to conquer it, and fear of death makes sure that we look both ways before crossing the street.

A healthy respect for fear goes a long way. My problem—at least, for the last six years—is that I flirt with fear just as much as I'm afraid of it. It's like I'm drawn to a tightrope over an abyss I know damn well I'm supposed to stay far away.

Deep down, I think that's why I like it, though. It's that ambiguous, swirling, intoxicating mix of excitement and genuine, actual fear. That frenzied, buzzing, chaotically blurred space where the rush of adrenaline that you might get from watching a scary movie bleeds into the bloodcurdling scream of your psyche's survival instinct, as if you're milliseconds away from being run down by a freight train.

It's not that I'm a danger or adrenaline junkie—far from it. I've never been one to go out and actively put myself in

harm's way chasing a brain chemical high. Base-jumping? Skydiving? Shark-caging? Yeah, *hell-to-the-fucking-no*.

But the fluttery, heart-stopping thrill that I get from that forbidden in-between is fantastic. It's why I love horror movies, but hate big crowds. Why I'll listen to a blood-soaked true-crime podcast till the cows come home, but warily side-eye every stranger I pass on the street. Considering that I live in New York City, that's a *lot* of side-eyeing.

Of course, there's a second reason full moons in the fall raise the hairs on the back of my neck and make my pulse skip a little faster.

Him.

My villain. My darkest fantasy. The one who shattered me. The devil of the darkness who sent me running six years ago.

Blood on his hands.

A body at his feet.

And the threat spilling from his perfect lips.

“Are we doing another?”

I pull myself from my thoughts as I glance across the small candlelit table at Raph. Raph, to whom I've spoken about my oddities—at length—and who calls me “a conundrum of the human mind”. Which I suppose is his very polite way of calling me a fucking weirdo.

We're not *best-best* friends, and we sometimes drift apart. But we always drift together again, and after knowing him for seven years, I consider Raph one of my closest friends. So, he can get away with it.

“Dahlia? Are we doing another glass?”

I clear my throat and make a face. “I’m gonna go with...yes?”

“Was that a question?”

I grin. “Erase the question mark. Yes. I’ll do one more quick drink, but then I have to jet.”

My stepbrother rolls his eyes and dramatically lifts a wrist to a cute passing waiter.

“*Deux de plus, s’il vous plaît,*” Raph purrs in an overly-emphasized French accent—something he can get away with, considering that he *is* French. The waiter, who’s been eye-fucking my stepbrother about as hard as Raph has been eye-fucking *him* all evening, blushes a little and grins before he nods and scurries off.

I roll my eyes as I watch Raph’s gaze follow him to the bar.

“Down, boy.”

“Oh, *what,*” he sighs, smirking at me. “He reminds me of the one who got away.”

I snort. “And who might that be?”

“Oh, who can even remember these things.”

My eyes roll again as Raph exhales and reaches across the table to take my hand in his, shaking it a little. “But enough about me and my wandering libido. How are you doing?”

Goddammit. I’ve been quite enjoying the fantasy that Raph and I are merely out having a few drinks for the hell of it. And not because, well, the sky is falling.

Or at least my sky, and my mother’s.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

“Do you want to practice that and try again in a few?”

I give him the finger. Raph smiles sardonically and squeezes my hand harder.

“Dahlia, talk to me.”

“Permission to speak freely?”

“Always.”

“Your dad is a real fucking asshole.”

Which sucks to say out loud, because I used to consider him the closest thing to a real dad I had.

Raph frowns, nodding slowly. “I completely agree with you.” His brows knit deeper as he looks across the table at me, the overhead string lights of the rooftop garden lounge we’re sitting in twinkling above us. “I’m truly sorry, Dahlia. I never once thought he would pull something like this.”

I’m aware that I’ve beaten the odds—and cheated death—to be even sitting at this table at Gallow Green right now. Never mind living in New York in my gorgeous apartment, or wearing such nice clothes, or attending Columbia Business School.

Twenty-five years ago, I was born—as the blues singers like to croon—under *a bad sign*. Conceived through violence and horror, to a seventeen-year-old French cleaning girl and the forty-year-old Iranian businessman who employed her, and then later assaulted her.

Somehow, Mom and I beat that. I managed to come back from the horror that happened to me later, when I was twelve. My mother, Adele, found a way to be human again, and to stand tall. To use the money we got when my monster of a father was killed and his fortune landed in our laps to give us both a new life and to start a foundation that helps women like her.

She even—somehow—found happiness, with an incredible, loving man who saw past every single one of her demons and scars and loved her for her heart: Raphael's father, Gerard Dumouchel, a handsome, charming, big-hearted French businessman who swept my mother off her feet seven years ago.

And who as of last week has gone completely radio silent with her.

...Radio silent, that is, aside from serving her with divorce papers and a stack of legal motions that essentially say he's stealing her entire fortune out from underneath her.

"May I still speak freely?"

"About my father? Please."

"*Fuck* your dad!" I spit venomously, startling the cute waiter as he arrives back with our glasses of Viognier.

Raph pats my hands and then turns to wink at the waiter. "*Merci.*" He turns back to me after the young man leaves again. "Look, Dahlia, he and I have had our differences, especially when he left my mom. But..." He sighs and shakes his head. "You *know* if I'd ever had the slightest inkling of something like this, I'd have warned you, right? Adele too, for that matter."

I nod slowly, gazing into my wine as I twist the stem of the glass between my fingertips.

"How's she doing, by the way?"

I smile wryly. "She's a Frenchwoman. How do you think she's doing?"

"Hiding her feelings, outwardly putting on a nonchalant, carefree front, and stabbing her pillow with kitchen knives

behind closed doors?”

“Nailed it.”

What I don't mention to Raph are the tears. My mother has never been one to cry, choosing instead to always put on a brave face. She learned young to do that. But when we've Facetimed over the last seven days—her in our townhouse in Paris, me here in New York—I've seen the puffy redness not even her fancy Parisian concealers can hide.

It's not the fact that Gerard is leaving her. I doubt it's even that he's trying to royally fuck her financially on the way out, either.

It's that after a lifetime of closing her heart off, she finally... *finally*...opened those doors to him.

And then she got betrayed for it.

“What's, the, ahh, state of your personal finances?”

I raise my eyes questioningly to Raph, who clears his throat.

“What I mean is, are you okay for money right now?”

I smile. “Oh, yeah, no, I'm totally fine.”

I'm totally *fucked* is what I am. Attending business school in New York takes up an enormous amount of my time. Which means I don't have a job, at least not until I can secure an internship, which is part of my school program. Even if it's paid—and that's a big if—it will only pay peanuts anyway. So for now, my money for food, the nice clothes, my fancy apartment, and everything else, comes out of an allowance doled out by the trust that holds my mother's and my money.

A trust that, as of five days ago, has been frozen, thanks to Gerard's legal motions. And *that* means I'm going to be living off a credit card until, well, fuck knows when.

So. No, I'm not fine at all. And if Gerard manages to succeed in robbing us blind—and the prognosis on that isn't great—I have less than zero idea how I'll pay for school, or any of the rest of it.

Raph gives me a look. “Just ask.”

“For?”

“*Money*, my dear.”

I wave him off. “Raph, I'm totally fine, but thank—”

“My God, you're as stubborn as you are proud, aren't you?”

Yes.

“Raph, I don't need your charity.”

“Oh, it's not a gift, honey,” he grins. “It'd be a loan. And I charge a steep interest rate.”

I smile as I pat his hand. “I'm good. Really. But thank you. I appreciate the gesture so much. You have no idea.”

He lifts his shoulders and hands elegantly in surrender as I glance at my watch.

“Shit, I've gotta run,” I hiss before downing the rest of my wine in one gulp.

“Ahh, yes, to your mafioso friends,” Raph sighs.

I give him a look. “Really? As if your dad isn't good buddies with Andre LeBlanc, not to mention the rest of the French mafia.”

“Yes, dear, but I don't get invited to their twenty-first birthday parties, now do I?”

Touche.

Raph grins. “I’m just giving you a hard time, Dahlia. I’m happy that you’ve found this little tribe of yours. You deserve it: I hope you know that.”

I smile as I pat his hand. “Thanks, Raph.”

I haven’t historically done the most spectacular job of making friends. When I was a kid, it was mostly just my mom and I, and of course Aunt Celeste and Uncle Adrian. School wasn’t usually a barrel of laughs, either. When everyone knows the sordid tale of your conception, not to mention your family ties to British mafia legend Adrian Cross, they’re not exactly lining up to make friends with you.

When mom met Gerard, his connections and her money got me into the infamous Knightsblood University here in the US, which Raph attended a year ahead of me. But even there, in a school *notorious* for its student body full of mafia heirs, I was the weird one, an outcast.

And then I was literally cast out.

By *him*.

But then, a year ago, I found real friendship with an awesome girl in my program—Eilish Kildare, an Irish mafia princess and all-around incredible friend. We clicked immediately, and she and her older sister Neve and I have been close ever since. And through them, I also became great friends with their sister-in-law, the *Greek* mafia princess whose twenty-first birthday party I’m on my way to tonight.

That’s where things get complicated.

Complicated, and downright *dangerous*.

“You won’t be too proud to call if you need anything, will you?”

I smile. “No. I promise.”

We stand, and Raph hugs me close. “Again, I’m so damn sorry, Dahlia. Please, *please*, tell your mom that I’m on your side. And whatever you guys need, I’m here, okay?”

I leave Raph with his gaze lingering on our waiter and make my way to the elevator. I do love Gallow Green, where we’ve been sipping wine, and I appreciate that Raph picked this spot on a quiet night midweek, since he knows my thing about big crowds.

Downstairs, I shiver as I step out into the cool autumn air and raise a hand to hail a taxi. I swallow as I glance up at the big full moon looming over the city, and a chill creeps deviously up my spine.

It’s not Halloween yet, but it’s close.

Devil’s Night.

His night.

And it reminds of a Halloween night six years ago. A night of devils and darkness, of mayhem and death.

The night my life changed forever.

A short cab ride later, I’m pulling up outside the forty-story building on Central Park South. That same creepy chill finger-walks up my spine as I step out of the car and smile at the doormen and Drakos family guards, who all know me well by now.

In a parallel universe, one where I have any sort of sanity, I never even cross paths with Calliope Drakos, much less become friends with her. Not because she’s not an amazing person and one of the best friends I’ve ever had, and not even because her family is Greek mafia.

No, it's because six years ago, I crossed paths with the very devil himself. And that devil happens to be her brother.

Deimos Drakos.

My terror. The prince of darkness who stalked my shadows and haunted my inkiest dreams back at Knightsblood, not to mention has continued to do so virtually ever since.

Every story has a villain, and he's the one in mine.

Callie is the youngest in her family with four older brothers—and all five of them were named after various Greek gods, muses, and titans. Her oldest brother, Ares, who runs the Drakos empire now and is married to Eilish's sister Neve, is named after the god of war and courage. After him comes Hades, the god of the underworld...though I have to admit, Callie's wild-man of a brother has certainly chilled out a fair bit since he got together with his fiancée, Elsa.

Kratos, my friend's largest brother, is well-named after the god of strength and might. Meanwhile Calliope and I joke all the time about her being named after the muse of “eloquence, epic poetry, and harmony of voice”, because my brash, sassy friend is possibly the least eloquent person I've ever known, and much as I love her, she can't sing for shit.

And that leaves Deimos: the god of dread and terror.

There has never, ever been a person so aptly named.

Run from this place, now. And if you ever speak of any of this, I'll destroy everything you love.

I shiver at the memory as the elevator rises to the roof of the original building atop which the Drakos estate sits. Almost a hundred years ago, Callie's great grandfather used his newfound criminal wealth to buy a neo-classical mansion in England, take it apart brick by brick, and then transport it to

America and rebuild it on the roof of this forty-story building overlooking Central Park.

It's *stunning*.

Sprawling, massive, with panoramic views of all of Manhattan and Central Park. There are *grounds*, complete with classical Greek sculptures, *two* pools, a tennis court, and rose gardens. It's without a doubt one of my very favorite places on earth.

Except...

I shiver as the elevator doors open revealing the foyer of the gorgeous estate.

Except there's no escaping the tingling sensation I get whenever I'm here. The warning light blinking on and off in the back of my mind.

The feeling that a malevolent spirit is about to emerge from the shadows, snatch me up, and drag me down to Hell.

The thing is, I didn't know who Callie was when we first met. Or rather, I didn't know who her family was. Eilish invited me to a bar early on in our friendship, and just introduced me to her friend Callie.

We hit it off instantly, like we'd been friends our whole lives. We hung out again. And then a third time. Then she friended me on social media, and my heart just about choked me to death.

Callie, as in Calliope *Drakos*.

As in little sister to my very devil.

Thinking about it now, I should have cut my losses and run. But again, I don't make friends easily. And besides, Deimos lives in London, running the Drakos family's European enterprises.

Six years ago, he told me to stay away. I feel like the entire Atlantic Ocean between us is enough, right?

Right?

“Dahlia!”

I flinch, my pulse spiking. The dark images of Deimos’ dark, vicious, lethally gorgeous face swimming feverishly through my head melt away as I turn and force a smile to my face.

“Hey!”

Eilish gives me a big bear hug, beaming as she grabs my wrist. “C’mon, we’re all outside on the veranda.”

I make a face. “Little cold to be outside, isn’t it?”

She shrugs. “You know Dimitra.”

I grin. *Do I ever.* Callie’s bird-like grandmother, who technically owns this mansion, is a hoot. But part of her obsession with honoring her family’s Greek origins is dining *al fresco* under the arbor in her rooftop rose garden basically until it starts to snow.

“There’s heat lamps, don’t worry.” Eilish winks at me. “And *lots* of wine.”

I swallow back the ominous feeling that I get from time to time in this house, along with the swirling images of Deimos’ snarling face. A grin curls my lips.

“Well, in that case, lead the way!”

She frowns. “Hey, how’s Adele—” She stops when she sees the look on my face. “Oh. Well... You know I’m here whenever you want to talk about it.”

“I know,” I reach out and squeeze her hand. “Thanks. But first...”

“Champagne?”

“*Lots* of champagne.”

SOON ENOUGH, SURROUNDED BY “THE TRIBE”, as Raph put it, that I’ve found, my apprehension has melted away.

He’s not here.

Honestly, he’s never here. Which is the only reason I haven’t cut and run when it comes to my friendship with Callie. She’s mentioned before that for some reason Deimos *hates* New York City with a passion bordering on concerning. That, and the fact that he runs the entire European side of the Drakos empire single-handedly, means he’s never here.

Apparently not even for important family birthdays.

Thank God.

But even minus one brother, Callie’s beaming when she steps out of the house to an enthusiastic cheer from all of us. Which is great, because for a long time, her twenty-first birthday was a black spot on the horizon none of us wanted to think about. A decade ago, Callie’s late father made a deal with a vile, cruel, and *way* older Italian Don, Luca Carveli, promising him Callie’s hand in marriage when she turned twenty-one.

A few weeks ago, though, rumors started swirling that Luca was dead from a heart attack, which means no more arranged marriage between my friend and that ghoul.

So, birthday aside, that’s cause enough to celebrate. I give Callie a huge hug and wish her a happy birthday as Ares passes us all flutes of champagne.

“I *really* want to know what the fuck is going on with your mom and Gerard,” Callie hisses in my ear, pulling me aside. When I give her the same look that I gave Eilish, she sighs and nods. “Okay, totally get it. Maybe later?”

“How about we just enjoy your birthday tonight, yeah?”

She smiles wryly and gives me another hug.

“Not to mention the glorious death of your late and unlamented arranged marriage.”

A weird sort of look flashes across her face, but just as quickly disappears.

“Oh, definitely,” she blurts. “We’re definitely drinking to that.”

A second later, though, she’s being pulled away for pictures with her grandmother. I smile as I watch the Drakos clan joke with and jostle each other. Next to them, the Kildares—Eilish, Neve, their uncle Cillian and his wife Una, and of course their former bodyguard who might as well be their older brother, Castle—do the same thing.

Sometimes—okay, a lot of times—I’m jealous of the big families my friends have and have had their whole lives. But then I remind myself just how lucky I am to be a part of all this, even only on the periphery.

So, I smile as they all take photos, sipping my champagne as I turn to the side table Dimitra has had set up near where we’re all eating, filled with framed pictures of Callie and her family growing up. I grin at one of her at maybe age ten wearing the infamous “Drakos birthday hat”—this absurd Cat-in-the-Hat looking monstrosity that for some reason they all traditionally wear on birthdays, and that Callie *hates*.

There's one of Ares and Hades riding their bikes as kids. Another of a teenaged but already *massive* Kratos hoisting Callie out of a pool. Another, of baby Callie in her grandmother's arms, has my lips spreading into a wide grin.

And then I get to the next framed photo, and my heart turns to stone.

It's *him*.

The shot is of six-year-old Callie, with Deimos' arm slung around her shoulders.

And he's positively *glaring* into the camera.

My pulse thuds in my veins as I swallow thickly. He must only be something like twelve in the photo. *Twelve*, and he's already got the look of a combat veteran with several hellish tours of duty under his belt. The look of a full-grown man who knows death far too intimately.

The haunted look of the very devil himself.

My devil, staring right into my soul.

I swallow the sudden hard lump in the back of my throat with a largish gulp of bubbly. That same ominous feeling, like I had when I first walked in, returns with a vengeance. It's as if having a picture of him here has conjured his malevolent spirit here, too.

It's like I can *feel* him.

Like I can sense him.

A dark, inky spirit of death slipping between the branches of a gnarled tree with outstretched claws ready to sink into my jugular. I shiver in the chilly fall air and start to go back to the warmth of the heat lamps and the smiles of my friends.

But I don't make it.

Because the second I turn, something tall, dark and venomous slides between me and everyone else, like a dark cloud blotting out the moon.

Like a dragon swallowing the sun.

Like black ink on wet paper, slowly bleeding into the pulp.

Something broad-shouldered and looming with fierce dark eyes, chiseled cheekbones, and a lethally sharp jaw. Something that smells like bergamot, pine, leather and spice, with black tattoos swirling like warning signs up his neck.

Something with a lean, muscled arm with the sleeve rolled halfway up that stabs out, stealing my breath and arresting my pulse when a powerful hand wraps its iron grip around my throat.

Everything dims. The rest of the world goes silent and frozen as Deimos lowers his terrifying and illegally beautiful face to my chilled and horrified one, his black eyes narrowed at me like death itself.

“Exactly what the *fuck* are you doing here?”

DAHLIA

I KNEW THE RISKS.

It was a little over a year ago, after that third time hanging out with Callie. We'd just had an absolute blast screaming our way through Madonna, Taylor Swift, and the Talking Heads at karaoke. I was back home, sweaty from all the dancing, hoarse, and slightly buzzed, when my phone lit up with the friend request.

That's when the record scratched, and my heart went still when I realized that the "Callie" I'd been having such a grand time with all night was *Calliope*.

As in *Calliope Drakos*.

I'd even checked her profile just to be sure. But of course it was obvious in seconds, from the family pictures and the "also friends with" section where his dark, black eyes lanced right out of my phone screen and straight into my very soul.

It was a frozen moment, one that I knew even a little drunk was my fork in the road. I could ignore the friend request and let our fledgling friendship fizzle before it even got started. I could fade away and make damn sure I'd never chance crossing paths with Deimos again.

Or I could take a breath, and an even bigger leap.

Obviously, that's what I did. I hit "accept friend request", and the rest, as they say, is history.

Part of it was that I really liked Callie. Another part was that, as I've said, I'd never had an easy time making friends. And now my group of two—Eilish and Neve—could potentially expand to *three* whole friends.

But another big part of it was my obsession with riding the line between excitement and fear. My ill-advised need to tiptoe as close to the edge of the cliff as possible, feeling the tug of gravity right before it yanks you over into the abyss.

So, no. I didn't befriend Callie or allow myself to be welcomed into her family without knowing the risk. I *knew* deep down that there was a chance I'd find myself in front of him again. Even if I played as carefully as I could.

I have a social media presence, but I don't have any photos of myself up, nor do I use my real last name of Roy. That's not because of Deimos, either. I've done that since before my brief time at Knightsblood.

Because there's *way* too many demons in my past to make it wise for me to put pictures of myself up on the internet.

But even still. Even with no photographs, and my new friends knowing how I felt about that and honoring my request not to post any pictures with me in them, and even with using the obviously fake "Dahlia Gahlia" instead of Dahlia Roy on my profile...

There were risks. And I knew them. And I still took that step out over the edge.

And now gravity is coming for revenge, for cheating it all this time.

My pulse jangles in my ears, the color fading from my face as I lift my wide eyes to his lethal, menacing, dark orbs. I remember thinking when I first laid eyes on him that they were like a shark's eyes—midnight black and glinting with a dangerous edge, just like the teeth that come with them.

And in this moment, just like any other time I've ever found myself locking eyes with this devil, it's like I lose the ability even to move.

I've been a complete idiot. There's no running from Deimos. There's not even any *blinking* around Deimos. Or breathing. Or remembering how to force your mouth to make words.

His lips curl up dangerously at the corners. But it's not a smile. It's not even one of the supremely off-putting grins I've seen on his face before.

It's pure malice. Sheer anger. Utter destruction. It's war, famine, pestilence, and death—all four horsemen of the apocalypse together, etched across his face and haunting the black shadows in his eyes.

He's classically beautiful, too. Which I always thought was such an outrageously fucked up thing for chance to have to done to a man like him. That something so malicious and devious—someone so cold and calculating and *inhuman* inside—could have won the genetic lottery and have such a physically perfect exterior.

Full lips. A strong, sharp jawline, with high cheekbones and deep-set eyes. The shock of dark hair which only makes his pale skin look even paler, almost supernaturally so. The height, and the broad shoulders. The *muscles*. The tattoos snaking up his neck and down his forearms.

The flash of completely straight white teeth, like a wolf before the pounce and the tearing of the jugular.

That's what he is, and what he's always been: a wolf. A beast masquerading as a human being.

"I'm going to ask this *one more time*," he rumbles quietly, his deep, rasping voice like leather and velvet, like smoke and whiskey as it teases into my ears. I choke back a gasp as his strong fingers and veined hands tighten just a little more around my throat. The overhead string lights glint in his eyes. "What the *fuck* are you—"

"D!!!"

The change is instantaneous.

Deimos has never once been accused of being remotely charming, smiley, or jovial. And plenty of people have been unnerved by him, if not more than a little scared.

But I know I'm one of a very select group who've truly seen the darkness behind the mask. I've looked the devil in the eye and seen the true psychotic nature he hides behind that beautiful face.

It's Ares who interrupts us. And the second his voice hits Deimos' back, the looming, throbbing malevolence on his face fades to its normal stony coldness. His hand drops from my neck, leaving pulsing tingles of danger on my skin as his darkness rearranges itself into its usual blank facial expression.

He turns away from me as Ares approaches. And it's not until those eyes stop looking into mine that I realize I've been unable to breathe since they first eviscerated me.

"Ares," he says calmly, even smiling a little as he extends a hand. His brother rolls his eyes, knocking Deimos' hand away and hugging him fiercely.

“Dude, I wasn’t sure if you were actually going to come!”

“Well, here I am,” Deimos growls quietly, with all the excitement of someone attending a funeral.

“Callie’s going to *freak*, bro. She doesn’t know I was trying to set this up.” Ares grins at his brother before his eyes slip past him to me. “Oh, shit—have you met Dahlia? She’s one of Callie’s besties these days.”

Deimos turns away from his brother and back to me. And once again, those eyes stab right into me as the darkness throbs under his face. The change from semi-normal to psycho—for my eyes only—is so abrupt that I physically flinch and find myself backing up against the table full of pictures. My throat works as I vainly try to swallow the cold knot that has instantly formed there.

“*Is she, now*,” Deimos murmurs, flaying me alive with a look.

I say nothing. I *can’t*, not while he’s looking at me like that.

“Hey, come on over,” Ares tugs on Deimos’ arm, chuckling. “Callie’s going to lose her *shit*, man.”

He pulls his younger brother away, heading in the direction of the rest of the party. Deimos hurls one last cold, piercing, look at me with all the force of a class five hurricane, then he’s turning away and Callie is shrieking in surprise.

I have to get the hell out of here. *Now*.

MY FATAL ERROR is stopping by the kitchen before I leave. My hands are shaking as I pull open the wine fridge and pull out one of the dozen or so bottles of champagne chilling inside. I pop the cork deftly and quietly with the help of a hand towel,

and then pour generously with hands that are still shaking into a plain water glass.

My pulse is still thudding in my veins as I lean on the counter by the farmhouse-style porcelain sink and knock back half of my glass.

This was a huge mistake. I never should have come—

“I’m curious.”

I almost choke. The champagne stops halfway down as my throat closes, making me sputter and wince as I finally manage to swallow it awkwardly. My face goes white as I whirl, my heart thudding, to see Deimos and his wrath filling the doorway.

Oh God.

It was dark outside. But in here, with the lights on, I can see every detail on his cold, beautiful face.

Every dangerous, toxic, monstrous detail.

It’s been six years since I last saw him. And in that time, I swear, he’s only grown darker, more gorgeous, and more hauntingly terrifying than before. His face is a little older, and a little more etched. His eyes are a little colder and fiercer. His body is bigger, and more muscled. *Definitely* more muscled.

The dark energy swirling around him is the same, though: like a bomb about to explode.

His lips curve up—again, it’s not a grin, or a smile. It’s not even a deliberately scary smile meant to instill fear or suggest a threat.

It’s just as if there’s so much malice in his face that the sheer toxicity of it pulls at his facial muscles. Just the lips, though.

Cover his mouth, and you'd never in a hundred million years guess that his lips were curled up this way.

"Exactly *what* are we celebrating here?" he rasps, nodding at my glass in one hand and the bottle of champagne in the other.

Before I can even open my mouth in an attempt to speak, or before I can think to escape, he crosses the kitchen toward me. And then, there's no way I'm running.

There's no way I'm physically *able* to.

I'm frozen to the spot, like his gaze is a spear through my heart, pinning me to the counter behind me. He doesn't rush, either. He knows that *I* know I'm caught, and he approaches like a tiger padding with amusement toward a prey that's already lost all ability to flee.

"I—" I swallow, or try to, at least. But I can't do even that, never mind speak as he moves closer and closer, until he's looming over me, mere inches away. His dark eyes stab down into mine, freezing my pulse.

"*Well?*"

I shiver. "I..."

"I recall you having no issue speaking before, Dahlia..." he growls.

My name coming from his lips sounds like a curse.

"So, unless you've gone mute—and if you have, we most certainly *do* have reason to celebrate—then I'm curious why it is you seem to be un-fucking-able to articulate *precisely* why it is you are in my grandmother's house, drinking her champagne, and mingling with *my fucking family*."

Speak. Say something. Anything. Give him ANYTHING.

“I...” I swallow. “*I was just leaving.*”

His face curdles into a snarl.

“The fuck you are.”

Wait, what?

“*I promise,*” I whisper. “This was a mistake. I made a mistake. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.” Fear has me rambling. His proximity has my brain glitching out like the Matrix. “I’m going now, I promise.”

I knew the risk. I didn’t care. I was blinded by my desire to finally have friends.

“I’m leaving—”

“Ah, *not* mute,” he murmurs almost to himself, like he’s making a scientific observation. “But maybe you’ve had a head injury, or something genetic has turned you fucking stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

I spit it with utter clarity, my voice laced with fury. It’s an automatic response over which I have no control, because being told I’m stupid, or being questioned as if I am, is a huge trigger point for me.

It’s been like that since grade school, after Nasser died and Mom and I were finally free from his wrath and reach. She enrolled me in this super ritzy and exclusive private school for London’s “most gifted and promising” young students. Because, as it happened, I am *very* smart.

I’m a little too smart, to be honest.

Except “gifted and promising”, in most cases, really just meant “filthy rich and insufferable.” And when those little shits

found out who I was—and who my parents were—it was open fucking season on Dahlia Roy.

Back then, I'd completely shut down in the face of any bullying. So when they'd lay into me, I'd close myself off and stop talking. Which of course only got them accusing me of being deaf or mute. But then they found their favorite one: that I wasn't responding to their bullying because I was stupid.

It lasted until I was in Year Ten. At that point, I was a year younger than everyone else in my grade, I was the top of the class by a mile, and I had zero friends.

But that's also the year I stopped accepting it when people called me stupid.

One of my teachers, a Mrs. Willard, found me in the bathroom one day, trying to get the chocolate milk that one of my bullies had dumped all over me out of my uniform. And I'll never forget what she told me:

“Dahlia, my, dear. There are a lot of things those little beasts, and other older beasts, can and will call you over the course of your life. Some of it may be true, even if it's cruel and beyond your control. But you are not, and you never will be, stupid. Don't let them have that one.”

A week later, I got my first and only detention, for hitting a girl for calling me just that. The bullying never really stopped entirely. But after that, they stuck with rape-baby, mafia whore, and the rest of it, and they never called me stupid again.

I never once regretted the decision that led to that detention. But the second I open my mouth and spit the words at Deimos, I feel nothing *but* regret.

His eyes narrow. And his outrageously perfect lips curve into the closest thing to a smile he gets.

Which is objectively, genuinely terrifying.

“*There* it is,” he purrs roughly, his teeth flashing. “There’s that fight I remember so well.”

I swallow with difficulty. “I—just let me go, please. I’ll leave right now, okay?” I choke out. “And I never...I mean, I’ve never said anything to anyone about—”

“And *as I said*,” he growls, “you’re not going fucking anywhere. In fact, you’re going to walk back the fuck out there, sit your ass in a chair at the table, and stay until you’re the last fucking one here.”

My brows knit. “I—”

“It would *seem*,” he snaps, “that you’ve ignored every threat you knew damn well I could make good on and wormed your way into Callie’s good graces.”

My face pales. “I... I never meant to. It was an accident—”

“I don’t fucking care.”

The pure venom in his tone feels like a blade across my skin.

“You’re not leaving, because *accident* or not—though I haven’t the slightest fucking clue how you ‘accidentally’ befriend someone—you seem for some inexplicable reason to be one of her nearest and dearest these days. And if you ghost her party on her fucking birthday and make my baby sister sad, believe me, there is no length to which I will not go to make you *severely* regret it.”

I gasp as he surges into me, until our bodies are literally touching. I shudder, feeling the rippling muscles and sheer

power of him throbbing against me as his powerful arms shoot to either side of me, caging me against the counter behind me.

“And I know you’re clear *exactly* how far that is.”

It’s at that precise moment that movement catches my eye. I flinch, my eyes somehow ripping away from his to look past his looming, broad shoulders...

...To where Callie is standing in the doorway to the kitchen with a puzzled expression on her face.

“*Callie...*”

I croak out her name. Instantly Deimos stiffens, his lips curling in a dangerous snarl. But then, his hands drop from the counter. And I watch, transfixed, as the psycho look on his face melts back into its usual unemotional state, just like it did with Ares.

He smiles thinly at his sister, who frowns curiously before glancing back to me again. I swallow, feeling my face heat.

“I...was just looking for the bathroom,” I blurt. I cringe the second I utter it, realizing how fucking stupid it sounds, given that I’ve been to Callie’s house fifty or so times.

Callie looks like she can’t tell if she’s amused, confused, or concerned. “Uh, it’s still where it was the last dozen times you’ve been over here?”

“Oh, right. Yeah, thanks.”

I slip away from Deimos, though I swear I can still feel his malevolent energy clawing at me, trying to drag me back. But I power through those feelings as I turn to go, shooting Callie a quick and slightly awkward look.

“Happy birthday,” I blurt. “*Great party.*”

In the guest bathroom, I shut the door, lock it, then sink against it, my heart hammering a mile a minute in my chest. I exhale heavily and feel the tension twisting my muscles slowly uncoil.

I shudder as I move to the sink, running cold water as I grip the sides of the marble vanity. My hands slip under the chilly stream, and I lean down and gasp sharply as I splash a little cold water on my cheeks, gently so as not to wreck my makeup, then reach for a towel.

I blot my face with slow, careful, pats before I pull the towel away. My eyes meet my own reflection in the mirror, and I shiver.

How the fuck will I survive this?

I only barely survived Deimos Drakos the first time. And the only way I did was to swear he'd never see me again.

Now I've broken that promise.

Will he break his?

I swallow the lump in my throat as I look into my own eyes again. I'm hoping to see strength, or bravery, or resolution, but all I see is fear.

Not the good kind, either. Not the kind that discovers fire, or makes sure you look both ways before crossing the street.

I just see cold, naked, dangerous fear. I see a little girl still scared of the dark and the things that go bump in it.

Things like *him*.

DEIMOS

I LOATHE THIS CITY.

The way it smells. The way it lingers on my skin like an oily residue that takes weeks to get rid even after I leave.

I'm aware that shitting on New York City doesn't make me unique. But my *reasons* for shitting on this godforsaken place might set me apart from the rest. I don't hate New York because it has a constant hard-on for itself—thought it does, and that gets real old real fucking fast. I don't hate it for its pretentiousness, or its naked corruption. Nor do I hate it for the subway rats and cockroaches, or the junkies, hustlers, and predators that prowl its streets.

No, I hate the city I was born in because it's here that I died, in a sense, when I was twelve. It's *here* that I learned far too young that hell was all too real.

My siblings all glommed onto this fucking city like it was Rome at the height of the Roman Empire. But me? I couldn't get away fast enough, first to Knightsblood University and then to England, when our father—may God piss on his grave—moved the Drakos empire to London for a while.

After his death, and what happened to our uncle Vasilis here, my siblings couldn't *wait* to move back to New York.

But I couldn't wait to never see it again in my life. And that was *before* I knew Dahlia fucking Roy was part of the equation.

“What the fuck was all that about?”

I frown, blinking as I raise my eyes to Callie. I've missed my baby sister. I mean, yes, I've missed all my siblings, and our grandmother, of course. But Callie and I are the two youngest. And even though I'm six years older than her, I'm the closest to her age, which had a way of making us partners in crime when we were younger.

It's sobering to see that “baby sister” of mine standing in front of me as a twenty-one-year-old woman.

“Deimos.”

I smile, lifting a noncommittal shoulder at her pointed and obvious question.

“Just introducing myself to your friend, Callie.”

She squints at me suspiciously. Of all of them, Callie comes the closest to seeing the real me, probably because I was the closest to her when we were young, before whatever I'd been born with for a soul was torn from me.

Maybe it's because she's the only girl. Or maybe it's because my mask and my walls aren't quite as strong with her as they are with Ares, Hades, and Kratos.

“Why was Dahlia scared of you?”

I smile a little more broadly as I stroll over to her, forcing the darkness and the monster back into its carefully forged cage as I pat her on the shoulder.

“Everyone's scared of me.”

Callie rolls her eyes. “Don’t do that, D.”

“Do what?”

“That thing you do where you pretend everything’s fine when it clearly is not.”

Shit. I’ve been away from her too long. I’d forgotten my sister has always been a bloodhound when it comes to sniffing things out. She’s also direct to a fault, with all the tact and subtlety of a pipe bomb.

“You’re imagining things, Cals,” I grunt with as charming a smile as I can muster. Which isn’t very charming.

“Okay, but why are you even talking to her?”

“I’m not talking to her. I’m talking to you.”

She glares at me again, but I just smile and squeeze her shoulder. “See you out there, birthday girl.”

I’ve been more than content to live in London, drowning myself in the rigors of running the entirety of our family’s European empire by myself. Honestly, it’s a testament to my love for Callie that I came to this hellhole of a city tonight at all. I’m not sure I’d have come back for any of my brothers’ birthdays.

And if I’d known Dahlia was going to be standing in my goddamn house with my fucking family, I abso-fucking-lutely wouldn’t have come. That’s for damn sure.

Back out at the party, I smile when I should, laugh when the others do, and make jokes in my own dry way. I’m hugging Ya-ya—my grandmother—when I look up just in time to see a white-faced Dahlia timidly step back out into the gardens.

My jaw grinds.

I'd love to say it's another testament to my love for my sister that I quite literally told Dahlia in no uncertain terms *not* to leave. To stay, for the sake of my sister and her birthday, instead of throwing her off the fucking roof myself.

But while I can lie as easily as breathing to the rest of the world, when it comes to myself, I'm brutally and nakedly honest. I'm incapable of lying to me myself and I, or convincing myself of a non-truth, even if it helps to soothe a pain or save me from myself.

I wish I could. But I can't. Not even when it comes to Dahlia.

The thing is, there's no lie with her. There's just two opposing, mutually exclusive truths. One, that I hate her. And I don't mean dislike intensely, I mean *hate*. I hate that behind that "poor little girl with the tragic backstory but a heart of gold and a plucky attitude" *bullshit*, she hides a venomous snake. She's a thief of truth. A conniving little cunt who got as deep into me as anyone or any weapon ever has. And I *loathe* her for that, almost as much as I loathe New York.

But then there's the second truth: that in the process of cutting her way into me, Dahlia Roy flayed *herself* open to *me* as well, in a way no person ever had before, or has ever since. And try as I might—and holy *fuck*, have I tried—she refuses to leave my subconsciousness. Like a nasty little addiction, an obsession I can't shake. And I hate that six years on, *far* after I should have purged her from my system, she still lives rent-free in my goddamn head.

Like a tumor. A disease. A plague.

And yet...despite all that... When I see her step outside, I smile in spite of myself.

I *like* that she's heard my threat and heeded it well. She hasn't run. She hasn't ghosted Callie on her birthday because of her own fear of me. Now I just need to figure out what the fuck I'm going to do about that.

She probably should have left.

No, scratch that. She *absolutely* should have left, and run, and kept on running until this city and my goddamn family were far, far behind her.

But she didn't.

Ya-ya pulls away with a final pat of my cheek. She walks over to a little silver bell hanging from the arbor, beneath which the dinner table is stunningly laid with candles, boughs of greens, flowers, shimmering silver confetti, and lavish food and wine.

"Now, we eat!" she crows, clearly a glass deeper into the champagne than she'd usually allow herself to get.

Which is precisely when I make my move.

It's a subtle one: nothing overt or crazy. But humans are so much easier to herd and control in subtle ways than any of us like to believe. We all think we're the masters of our own choices; free thinkers, the lot of us. But we're not. We're sheep.

... Well, most people are, even the ones I love.

Some of us are wolves.

The crowd of family and friends begins to walk over to the table that I happen to be closest to. And so I do one simple move: I reach down, pluck up one of the forks, and set it on top of the salad plate it's sitting next to.

Then, without batting an eye, I round the table to find a seat directly across from it. Where I sit and *wait*, like a crocodile

lying just beneath the surface, waiting for its prey.

There's no place cards. The rest of my family and their friends and significant others take whatever seats they like around the table. Ares sits next to Neve, her sister Eilish sits beside her newish beau, Gavan Tsarenko, head of the Reznikov Bratva. He and I actually have some friends in common, though it's unclear if he's aware of that yet.

I nod at Cillian Kildare when he and Una take seats almost directly across from me. I know more about him than I'm sure he realizes. Because that's what I do: I watch people. I learn about them and their darkest secrets and memorize the things I'm sure they'd rather keep to themselves.

Cillian, for example, is a lot like me. Dangerously so, in fact. I believe the current fashionable term is “neurodivergent”.

Personally, I'm quite fine with old word they used to use for people like Cillian and me.

Psychopaths.

Cillian keeps his true nature hidden about as well as I do, though, not *quite* as well. Those closest to him—Una, his nieces Neve and Eilish, and his number two, Castle, who I gather is basically family to him at this point—are aware of what Cillian truly is. Or at least, mostly aware.

None of my family knows what I am.

They never will.

I glance down the table to where Callie is—to my laser-focused mind—*painfully* obviously saving the seat next to her. I even know who it's for. And when he—Castle James, that is—looks right at it, and then right at her before moving to the opposite end of the table, I allow myself a smug feeling.

Not, obviously, because of the crestfallen look on Callie's face that she tries to chase away with wine. Even more obviously, if I didn't know for a fact that this...this *crush* she has on Castle isn't the least bit reciprocated, he and I would already be at the far end of the rooftop, where I'd be showing him the express route down to Central Park.

Again: I know everything. And I don't mean that to sound arrogant, it's just merely the truth. Although, yes, I suppose a bit of arrogance sort of comes with the territory with my... *neurodivergence*.

Or, if we're being blunter, "non-societally conforming psychopathic tendencies with a ludicrously high IQ, childhood demons up the ass, and a God complex".

And I won't ever apologize for any of that.

Soon enough, just about everyone has seats. My lips curve up just a hint at the corners as I drop my gaze to the still-empty chair across from me. As I said, humans are sheep. Clearly, there's nobody sitting there. But all it took was one thing "off"—in this case, a fork out of place on the otherwise perfectly laid table—for everyone to unanimously pass on this one seat.

Slowly, my eyes drag up to where Dahlia has just stepped under the string lights of the arbor. She was furthest away from the table when Ya-ya rang the bell.

There's now exactly one seat left.

She swallows as she comes to a stop right behind it. Her eyes raise to mine, and she trembles a little when she realizes I'm staring right at her.

"Dahlia, please," I say, gesturing with a hand. "Why don't you have a seat and join us?"

She just stands there, and I look at her so hard it's a wonder she doesn't spontaneously combust. But of course, the moment is lost on the rest of them as they all dig into their dinners. I even join in, letting Dahlia finally take her seat and sit there knowing I've got her exactly where I want her. And I can tell she's so discombobulated by my even *being* here that she's incapable of talking to anyone around her, or taking a bite of food, or even a sip of champagne.

I, on the other hand, readily and easily carry on a lively conversation with Hades and Elsa to my left. My older brother's been a *hell-raiser* his entire life. But I have to admit, Elsa Guin seems to have—well, I won't say quelled that, because one, no one's capable of doing that to Hades, and two, because he'd never fall for someone who "tamed" him or made him into something he's not or any of that bullshit.

But what she *has* done, it's clear to me, is complete him.

I won't lie: I envy that. Or at least I understand that I *should* envy that.

But even as I chat with Elsa about her recent promotion to partner status at Crown and Black, the law firm which bears the name of my own personal attorney, Alistair Black, my attention is half-directed across the table, to Dahlia.

And I hate that it is.

I want so badly to erase her from my psyche. To forget her completely and be done with it. To *not* have my attention pulled to her over and over again, like a moth to a deadly flame. But six years on, it appears I'm still incapable of doing any of that.

It doesn't help that in those six years, she's gone from beautiful to stunning. She's grown more into herself than when

she was a somewhat shy nineteen-year-old, when we were at Knightsblood together.

She's grown into a woman I'm quite honestly having a hard time keeping my eyes away from.

Dahlia's mother is French, and her father was Iranian. She was blessed with the best of both gene pools: full, dark brows and lashes that match the mane of thick black hair falling past her shoulders in waves. High, aristocratic cheekbones and an elfin chin. A lean, regal nose, plump, swollen red lips, and big green eyes.

For a moment, I pull myself away from my conversation with Elsa and Hades, turning my head and allowing my eyes to stab across the table into Dahlia.

Instantly, something sours in my core.

Because as gorgeous as she is, and as alluring her whole little "tragic backstory, innocent with a heart of gold" schtick is, I know now what I didn't know back when I tangled with her six years ago: that the woman, despite all of her beauty, is *poison*.

A toxin. A deadly venom for which there is no antidote. An incurable, transmitted-on-contact, terminal *disease*.

Six years ago, I didn't know that.

But I sure as *fuck* do now.

After I saw the truth. Or rather, after I was *shown* the truth, in high definition, where it burned itself into my brain like the shadows of the dead on the sidewalks at Hiroshima, destroying what I believed I knew about a girl I thought I understood.

Who I thought understood *me*.

Six years ago, I told her to run. I told her stay the fuck away.

She really, *really* should have listened to me. Because now?

I turn fully, letting my piercing gaze eviscerate her across the table. Her eyes meet mine and a shiver runs over her body as her face goes chalk white.

Now, I'll destroy her.

DAHLIA

Six years ago:

“YOU KNOW SHE’S A RAPE-BABY, RIGHT?”

I flinch, stopping in my tracks just before rounding the corner to my dorm room. My face contorts, biting back the pain as the sound of other girls laughing fills the high-ceilinged hallways.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard the term used to describe me, but it still hurts. It still sucks to hear it out loud, especially when it’s immediately followed by cruel laughter and ridicule.

“You know that makes her a total slut, too, right?”

“Uh, *tell* me about it,” Amanda groans with a knowing tone. “Why do you think I barely ever sleep in my own dorm room?”

My mouth pulls to a thin line as anger and hurt boil inside of me. My roommate Amanda spends half of her nights out of our room because she’s in *someone else’s* room.

Several someone else’s, actually.

The “rape-baby” comment is callous and horrible, but at least it’s rooted in fact. Being labeled a slut who apparently keeps

my roommate out of our shared space because of my endless sexcapades, however, is firmly rooted in *fiction*.

Except, it's one of life's greatest catch-22's for a woman: if I own up to the fact that I'm a nineteen-year-old virgin, then I'll be branded a weirdo. A freak. A prude. We're talking serious "No wonder you don't have any friends, Dahlia" territory. But then again, *not* being a virgin apparently makes you a whore and a slut.

There's literally no winning in this situation, and it fucking sucks.

"Also, her mom is totally one of those Instagram whores who gets flown out to Dubai to fuck rich Saudi guys for money."

Enough is enough.

My blood turns to fire.

I'll put up with the sneering looks and mean girl comments. I'll put up with having no friends here, because I fully appreciate that just being here at Knightsblood University is a privilege and a *huge* advantage. I'll even put up with the fact that my roommate Amanda is the leader of the meanest mean girls on campus and apparently decided before we ever even met that I was the shit on the sole of her precious Louboutins.

But my mother is a *superhero*, and one tenth of the horrors she's overcome in her life would have broken fucking Amanda in half.

This is my goddamn line in the sand.

I'm not by nature a violent person. Or even a confrontational one. But my fists ball up as I start to lurch around the corner.

That is, until one last comment slaps me sideways.

“Well, like mother like daughter. You *know* she’s probably doing the same thing. Probably just a matter of time before someone puts a fucking rape-baby in her, too.”

I blanch, bile rising in my throat as they all start to laugh.

“Yeah, well, it’s not rape if they’re willing, is it?” Amanda snickers. “You know she wants it all the time with anybody.”

Jarring lights flash like strobes in my vision. My brain glitches, my breath choking off as my throat closes up. The hallway spins as I find myself falling back against the wall, clutching at my chest.

You know you want this, pretty girl.

Air. I need air.

All of the fight floods out of me as I whirl and bolt down the hall, bag in hand. Outside the dormitory, I go stumbling past other students who stare at me like the crazy, has-no-business-being-here girl they all already see me as.

But I don’t care. My feet pick up the pace until I’m sprinting across one of the greens, far away from the sprawling, beautiful Jacobean Revival and Georgian-style towers and buildings of Knightsblood University.

I crash through a glade of trees, and then across another green, running first past the riding stables and then some further out-buildings. Blundering through another glade, I finally come tumbling out beside a sprawling rose garden full of hedges, old, crumbling walls and statues, and a fountain.

It’s only here that I finally pause, my breath coming fast and sweat slicking my back.

I’ve never been to this part of the campus before.

When I stop running, it's like the emotions I've been fleeing finally catch up to me. An enormous sob rips from my chest as I wipe away a tear, moving quietly toward the rose garden.

Fuck Amanda. And fuck the rest of them. Fuck this whole goddamn snooty, moneyed, connected school.

The worst part is, in a lot of ways, I was really looking forward to being here. Knightsblood is one of those places that most people haven't ever heard of. But then, "most people" aren't the type who come here.

Ostensibly, Knightsblood is an old-money, old-school private college nestled on the wooded, quaint southern shore of Connecticut, just like a hundred other such private schools.

But there's nothing quite like Knightsblood.

Because the students who come here aren't just rich and connected. They're...*connected*.

As in, "made".

Mafia. Bratva. Yakuza. Cosa Nostra. Cartel. Not all of them directly, of course—I mean, look at me. But in a way, almost every student here comes from money, power, and criminal connections.

I have absolutely no idea how the entire criminal world unanimously and spontaneously decided to start sending their heirs and offspring thirty miles north of Manhattan to the idyllic and preppy Gold Coast. But here they—we—are.

Personally, I'm here thanks to my mother's money, a little bit because of my Uncle Adrian's reputation as one of the biggest crime bosses in the UK, and a *lot* because of Gerard's influence.

Gerard is Mom's new husband. And I never thought I'd say this, but I adore him. I also never thought my mother would ever *date* again, never mind get married. Not after my father. Or after what happened seven years ago.

I shiver, pushing that dark cloud away.

No. That's over.

It's done.

He's dead.

They both are: mom's monster and mine.

I exhale slowly as I step into the quiet rows of roses and statues. My phone dings. When I pull it out, I smile curiously at the text that pops up.

CHASE:

I had a great time getting lunch with you yesterday. I'd love to do that again sometime soon.

My teeth drag across my bottom lip.

Starting fresh at any new school as an outsider sucks. Believe me, I know: I've done it enough times. But Knightsblood has been...*extra*. Extra hard. Extra shitty. Extra mean.

Extra keen to make sure I understand I do not belong here.

Message heard loud and clear, fuckers.

My roommate and her shitty friends have been the worst, clearly. Then there's the faceless classmates and upperclassmen who don't even look at me. Raphael, my new stepbrother, is here, and he's pretty nice. But we don't really know each other that well, and besides, he's got his own thing

going on, his own group of friends. Plus he's a year older, so we hardly ever run into each other.

But curiously, there is one person who always goes out of his way to smile at me. To notice me. To say hello. And he's the least likely of them all.

Chase freaking Cavendish.

Charming, charismatic, outrageously handsome, rich, and the toast of the entire school. He's also a senior, and the president of Para Bellum, which is a huge deal.

Right—that's another thing about Knightsblood. This school *loves* its semi-secret student clubs. Which are really more like factions, or tribes, or gangs. There are four of them: Para Bellum, The Order, Ouroboros Society, and The Reckless. And considering that Chase is the head of the numero uno club on campus, the star quarterback, *and* the student body president, the fact that he seems to be actively *courting* me—taking me out to lunch, texting me, going out of his way to cross paths with me—is...odd, to say the least.

I mean, I'm *me*. Weird. Shy. Unpopular. Quirky. Shitty backstory. Chase is the Jake Ryan to my Samantha Baker. But real life isn't a John Hughes movie. The popular jock doesn't actually ever fall for the weird nerd. There aren't any improbable happy endings, comic sidekicks, or heroes.

I swallow, shivering a little as something electric prickles up my spine.

There's no heroes. But there *are* villains.

My cheeks flush as my thoughts drift all the way to the other end of the spectrum from Chase Cavendish. You see, as popular and loved as he is, Chase isn't the only prince at this school.

There are two of them, one a golden prince of light—that would be Chase—and another one, the exact opposite of him.

A prince of darkness.

A dark, swirling, malevolent force of nature that I've tried to stay away from ever since the day school started. Not just because almost *everyone* on campus seems to be scared of him, which by extension, makes *me* a little scared of him, too.

But because he doesn't quite scare me as much as I know he *should*. And because even when he does scare me, he also excites me, in traitorous, dangerous ways.

Deimos Drakos.

He's the polar opposite of Chase. Dark and gloomy, cold and malicious. Where Chase is the charming, smiling quarterback, Deimos is the snarling, chilling antisocial shadow who eschews sports and other student organizations, though it's rumored that he's the undisputed king of the "alleged" underground fights that happen on the occasional weekend night.

Chase's family is only loosely connected to the mafia in that his father runs a hedge fund that happens to invest and move a lot of money for the Mexican Cartels and the Italian mafia. But Deimos' family literally *is* the mafia—Greek, specifically, and powerful at that.

Where Chase is the president of Para Bellum, Deimos is the ruling mad king of The Reckless, the club most fundamentally opposite Para Bellum. Para Bellum is full of the golden and gilded stars of the school—sports team captains, oldest heirs to powerful families, top students. The Reckless is where the damned and the devious end up.

Two princes: one light, one dark. With absolutely nothing in common...except one thing.

It's nothing I can prove; nothing I know for an absolute fact. But deep down in the throb of my pulse and the pit of my gut, *I know*.

What they have in common is an interest in *me*.

Chase is overt about it. Meanwhile, Deimos has never once spoken to me. I don't think I've ever seen him even looking in my direction.

But somehow, I know he's interested. I can sense it. Like claws dragging down your window at night, that are gone when you go to look. Like the creak of a floorboard behind you, which is only a shadow when you whirl with a gasp.

With a sigh, I sink onto one of the stone benches in the rose garden. I drop my head back against the ivy-covered stone wall at my back and close my eyes, grateful for a moment of peace finally. Which is, of course, when my phone dings.

RAPHAEL:

Fuck, I'm so sorry, Dahlia

My brows furrow.

ME:

For?

RAPHAEL:

Shit. don't go on KnightNet

Almost all social media is blocked on campus, for the security of the students who go here. Instead, the school has a

somewhat lame, dated message-board style “social” site accessible only to students.

Which, of course, I immediately log onto.

...And *instantly* regret.

It’s the top post, right at the very top of my screen, and my heart stops. It’s a picture from some porn site of a woman in a hijab, on her knees with her boobs out, holding a monstrously large dick in each of her hands.

Someone’s photoshopped my face onto hers.

I can’t tell if I want to scream, throw up, or both. It’s a combination of disgust at seeing my face on something so vile together with rage at the obviously intended racist element. I’m not the least bit religious, and I’ve never once worn a hijab. But of course, that’s the cheap, easy dig they go for when they come after me: the man who raped my mother was Iranian. So let’s bring on the shitty, racist hijab jokes.

I almost throw my phone. But instead, I lurch to my feet, grab the closest rock off the ground, and spin around, hurling it against the stone wall I’ve just been leaning my head against.

And then I pause, my brow furrowing.

My thrown rock has bounced off the wall and rolled away. But right next to where it struck, one of the bigger, ivy-covered stones set into the wall has *moved*, and is now pushing out a little.

The fuck?

Peering curiously at it, I walk over and grip it between my fingertips. It slides out easily. Instantly, my brows lift.

Whoa.

The space behind the rock I've just slid out of the wall isn't empty, or full of bugs and dirt. There's a book sitting there, small and battered, with a faded orange leather cover and one of those elastic straps keeping it closed. When I take it in my hands and open it, I blink.

It's a diary.

No name. No "this book belongs to". No phone number in case it's found. And even though I know I'm not meant to read it, my eyes drop to the first words on the first page:

"Sometimes I feel as if I'm the only real person wandering a whole planet of replicas. A single fish in a tank, with the glass painted to look like the ocean around me."

I'm instantly hooked. I sit on the bench and I read until the sun begins to set, devouring every single hand-written word.

Eventually, when the shadows begin to lengthen and the sky begins to darken, I realize it's time to go, knowing that I'll be back.

I carefully put the book back exactly as I found it and slide the rock back into place before I pick up my bag and walk out of the garden. I head through the glade of trees, across one of the fields, and then plunge through another thick clump of woods on my way back to my dorm.

...When suddenly, something dark materializes out of the trees right in front of me.

I gasp, my heart leaping into my throat and stifling my scream as I lurch backward. My eyes widen as they lift up to his...

And something explodes in my core.

A mix of terror and excitement. Fear and curiosity.

Run, or stay?

My mind can't decide. But as the seconds tick by with me staring up through the gathering darkness into Deimos' eyes, I realize I'm not sure if it's that I *can't* run right now, or that I simply don't want to.

And I'm not sure which is more terrifying a thought.

Seconds turn into almost a full minute. Neither of us says a thing as we stand there, barely three feet apart in the rapidly darkening woods. I try to swallow, but I can't. I wet my lips, and his eyes focus on the motion, like a hawk spotting a mouse scurrying across a moonlit field.

"I..."

I'm astonished that I actually manage to make a sound, even if it's just one syllable. One letter. One tiny utterance. I swallow again, shivering as his eyes stab into me, filling me with fear and something else as I realize I'm completely alone in the woods with the terror of Knightsblood University.

"Have you been spying on me?"

The words burst from my mouth even as I try to shove them back inside. Deimos says nothing, and the silence around us only grows. The cool air prickles my skin, yet my palm feels sweaty as it grips the strap of my school bag.

"I...I mean—"

"You don't belong here."

It's the first time I've ever heard him speak. His voice is like whiskey and leather. It's so much older than the rest of him, too. So much more weathered, and stoic, and world-weary than any twenty-one-year-old has any right to be.

“I—”

“You shouldn’t be here,” he growls, his voice rasping in a way that drags over me and electrifies my skin. “You should leave.”

My jaw sets. Great. Yet another asshole at this school full of assholes who wants to chase me out of their little cool club. He might be a bit terrifying, and the cold, unblinking intensity in his eyes is more than slightly unsettling.

...But at the end of the day, apparently the infamous and dastardly king of The Reckless is just another class A jerk.

“Says who?” I snap.

His lips curl as his head tilts slightly to one side.

“Says reality.”

And then just like that he disappears back into the woods. I whirl, my eyes scanning the now-dark trees, waiting for him to jump out and scare the ever-living shit out of me. But it never happens. He’s just really, actually gone.

After that I run, and I mean *run*, all the way back to the dorm. Mercifully, Amanda is out. But my bitch of a roommate’s made sure to print out a copy of the disgusting post on KnightNet and tack it to our door.

I rip it off and storm inside, flinging myself onto my bed.

I’m not crying. I’m not shaking in fear from my run in with the campus’ resident devil.

I’m just thinking about the little orange diary.

And the person who wrote it, who’s *just like me*.

DAHLIA

Present:

“I’LL SWAP you my notes for Professor Carlsen’s European Financial Markets lecture for yours from that Strategic Innovation roundtable thing with Professor Cho.”

I groan, slumping across the study room table between us as my eyes snap to Eilish.

“Fuckity-fuck-fuck, I completely forgot that I still haven’t done that analytics breakdown for Carlsen’s class for next week.”

Eilish winces. “Oof. I did it a few days ago. It sucked. You wanna copy mine?”

“And get us both kicked out of school?”

“I mean, not word for word, or even use my exact subject matter,” she snickers. “Just grab the framework for the breakdown presentation.”

I nod, frowning as I sort through the reams of study notes in front of me. “Okay, yeah, I’ll take you up on that. Thanks.”

“Any time.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how the hell that slipped my mind.”

Except I do. I know *exactly* how and why it—and several other important things, if we're keeping score—have slipped my mind in the last few days.

The easy excuse would be what's going on with my mom and Gerard. I mean, that's the obvious one. There's also of course the *major* shit that went down at the end of the evening at Callie's birthday party. Luca Carveli, the slimy LA mafia don she was betrothed to marry is, in fact, dead. But Callie's birthday dinner wasn't even finished before the whole party got a visit from Massimo Carveli, Luca's son, demanding that she marry *him* instead.

That, too, isn't going to be happening. Because, cue the mafia-world chess moves: Cillian's stepped down as the head of the Kildare family, Castle's been made the *new* king of the family, and he and Callie are now about to get married in order to get out of any lingering contract she might have with the Carveli family.

I mean, I got a small taste of the drama in the mafia world through Uncle Adrian and Aunt Celeste, and later at Knightsblood. But good *lord*.

“Really?” Eilish snorts sarcastically. “You have *no* idea how you managed forget to do some dumb busy-work school project with everything you've got blowing up in your life right now?”

Like I said, those would be the easy reasons. My mom and Gerard. Callie suddenly marrying Eilish and Neve's ridiculously good-looking, and much older, former bodyguard to avoid a mob marriage.

Yeah, those are big.

But the biggest thing occupying the most real estate in my head right now is something else.

Or, should I say, *someone* else.

Deimos.

The ghost from my past, who sent me running with threats to never once look back. That same ghost that I told myself I could survive dealing with for one birthday dinner, because he hates this city so much he'd be leaving as soon as it was over.

But then he didn't.

Maybe it was because of what went down with Massimo threatening Callie like that. In fact, that's almost *definitely* why Deimos is, apparently, staying in New York. But I can't help but wonder if there's another reason, as disgustingly narcissistic as it is to think it, given everything going on with Callie. But I can't help it.

I can't help but wonder if part of the reason Deimos is still lurking in this city is *me*.

Me, and our past.

What I saw.

What I swore never to talk about, and, in fact, never have.

Sometimes, I imagine a life where things played out differently. An alternate dimension where the events of my brief time at Knightsblood played out more like a teen drama. Because for a while there, it was so perfectly scripted, so very *Hunger Games*, or *Twilight*, or *Divergent*. The girl with the troubled past, caught between the good boy and the bad one.

It's pathetic. And super messed up, and probably speaks to a mental condition I'm not prepared to address in myself. But

there were times back at school, after I first found that diary, where I used to imagine it was Deimos’.

I used to fantasize that maybe, somehow, it was his journal I was reading. That it was *his* soul and innermost thoughts I was privy to in a way I wasn’t supposed to be. That *he* was the author of those dark and poetically brutal words: the words that at first I read, and then later responded to, until it turned into a written conversation. For a while there, I was sure of it. That my mysterious diarist-turned-penpal *had* to be him.

I was wrong.

Of *course* I was wrong.

Those words speaking from a soul so very much like mine belonged to another. A man who truly understood me. Who *saw* me. A man I might have loved.

Until the night it all came crashing down.

When Deimos *killed him*.

“What in the fuck is *strategic conscientious synergy*?”

I start from my thoughts just as Eilish groans and looks up from her study notes. We both turn to glare at the source of the interruption: a tall, good-looking, built, tattooed guy with dark hair and golden-green eyes sprawled in a chair by the study room door.

Since Callie’s birthday, both the Drakos and Kildare families have bulked up on security—which makes sense, considering the festivities were interrupted by Massimo Carveli landing a freaking helicopter on Dimitra’s front lawn and threatening Callie.

And that means that Gavan, being the obsessively over-protective fiancé that he is—which, not gonna lie, is crazy

romantic—has his second-in-command, Korol, shadowing Eilish’s every move. Including her study time with yours truly. Needless to say, as much as she loves Gavan, Eilish isn’t exactly thrilled about the shadow.

“Is that my copy of *Global Business Strategy* or Dahlia’s?” she mutters, narrowing her eyes at the massive textbook in Korol’s tattooed hands.

He shrugs and makes a face. “Honestly? No idea. This shit is gibberish, though.”

Eilish rolls her eyes. “Well, maybe you should join our class and then it would make sense, Korol.”

He snorts. “Yeah, me and formal education get along about as well as I can understand whatever the fuck this book is talking about.”

“*Imagine that,*” Eilish mutters under her breath. “Well, some of us need silence to study, so...”

“Right, heard loud and clear.” Korol glances at the front page of the book—it’s my copy—before grinning and sliding it back onto the table next to my other course work.

My phone dings.

“*Shit, sorry,*” I wince, making a face as I snatch it up and turn off the ringer. The notification is for an email, though, so I thumb open my screen and bring it up.

My eyes bulge when I read it.

“What?” Eilish blurts, seeing the stunned look on my face.

“I... I got an internship!”

She shrieks. “That’s awesome! Congrats!”

The grin threatens to split my face in half. It *is* awesome. Landing a real, business-world internship isn't just a big part of our program, it's required. Eilish found herself a loophole and is technically "interning" at Gavan's company. Which, yes, is sort of bullshit, because I'm guessing by her perpetual shit-eating grin these days that she's spending more of her time bent *over* a desk than working at one while she's at his office.

But I'm not really mad about it. After all, she's one of my best friends, and with all the crap she and Gavan have gone through, yeah, she deserves it.

"Who's it with?!" she gushes, leaning across the table toward me with wide, excited eyes.

"Hmph. Thought *some people* needed silence to study," Korol mutters to himself.

"Shush, you." Eilish rolls her eyes again, holding up a finger. She grins at me. "Well??"

I scroll further down the email from my academic advisor. "It's with..." My brows knit together. "Laconia Logistics?"

Eilish frowns. "I don't think I know them."

"No," I shake my head. "Me neither."

She shrugs. "Well hey, at least it's an internship, right?"

"Yeah..."

Except something's off with this.

Eilish chuckles. "Dude, it's just an internship. It's not like it needs to be with Facebook or a legacy company. It's just a course requirement."

“No, it’s not that.” My brows furrow as I glance up at her. “It’s just... I haven’t submitted my final internship paperwork yet.”

As in, the paperwork required for the school and my advisor to *place me* in an internship at all.

Eilish frowns. “Well... You must have.”

“I swear, I didn’t. I was still working on my personal mission statement.”

“What the hell is a personal mission—”

“The door is *right there*, Korol,” Eilish mutters, jabbing a finger at it without looking away from me. “Wait, you’re positive you didn’t?”

“Completely. I was going to work on it tonight.”

“Huh.”

Yeah, *huh* is right.

“Well, screw it.” She shrugs and grins at me. “I mean, if your advisor says you got it, then you got it. Whoo hoo.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Hey, Dahlia?” She smirks at me. “Do me a favor and take the wins when they’re served up to you on a silver platter, yeah?”

I roll my eyes and grin back. “Facts.”

A second later, I’m firing off a reply email to my advisor, graciously accepting the internship with a company I’ve never heard of.

Because Eilish is right. Sometimes, you’ve just gotta take the wins. And who knows? Maybe this is a sign that despite the shit going down with mom and Gerard, and all the craziness happening with Callie and Castle, and the looming presence of

the devil himself lurking behind every corner I pass on the street...

Maybe things are going to be just fine after all.

DEIMOS

Six years ago:

“THEY’LL BE through here any second.” Diego sucks on his imported Spanish cigarillo—his one and only brand because it literally bears his grandfather’s name on the carton—before exhaling smoke out of the corner of his lips. “We still doing this?”

“Fuck *yeah* we’re still doing it,” Ivan growls next to me.

The three of us—Ivan, Diego, and I—are lying in wait behind one of the many hedgerows that meander across the Knightsblood campus.

Knightsblood—what a fucking pretentious name for a school. From what I remember, vaguely, from freshman orientation, or perhaps it was in the literature I got in the mail before I arrived here, the place was founded in the early 1800’s by scholars from some of England’s finest universities.

The original idea was to foster a “true English university in America” for the sons of lords, dukes, and other powerful “royally adjacent” families who were immigrating here. A school to match the likes of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in academic merit, while also maintaining a *rigid* and strict adherence to royal lineage.

“To the blood of king and crown, cross and knighthood”.
Hence, Knightsblood.

Over the years, it...evolved. Though some might use the word *devolved*. Some might say the very fact that you’ve heard quite a lot about Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, but *nothing* of Knightsblood, means that the original idea of theirs shit the bed, hard.

And maybe it did. But then another, bigger and grander, truly unique, and maybe even more important idea took root and flourished.

This place is no longer about “royal blood” in the sense that its students are the heirs of kings and queens, or children of dukes and barons. Now, it’s a place that the offspring of a...well, shall we say a *new* sort of monarchy come to grow, learn, and *play*.

Diego’s family, for example, is Barcelona Mafia. Ivan’s uncle is a top *avtoritet* for the Kalishnik Bratva.

Mobsters, mafiosos, Bratva, Cartel...no matter where they’re based, if they’re part of the criminal underworld and they have college-aged kids, those kids are here, at Knightsblood.

I might prowl this place like a demon stalking the halls of hell itself. I might look on the surface like a monster pacing the bars of its cage aching to break free. But the truth is, I fucking love it here.

I mean, I’d love anywhere that isn’t New York. Because fuck that place. And I know when I leave here, there’s a whole other, wider world that I’ll need to conquer in my own way. But for now, in this little mini universe—this microcosm of the larger underworld outside these walls—I’ve risen to become *king*.

As have others, I suppose. But I established a place in my kingdom, as head of The Reckless, when I was just a sophomore.

That's a first, by the way. Historically, the presidents of the four main student groups have always been seniors. But apparently, with a reputation, bloodline, and social non-conformity like mine...well, you tend to scare people. And if their fear scares them into giving you the seat of power? Well, who am I to be so ungracious as to refuse?

Technically speaking, there's not supposed to be any fighting or hostility on campus. Yes, some of the students here, even if they are friends while attending, will go on to become mortal enemies outside these walls. But while we're here, there's not supposed to be any violence.

But then again, I'm pretty sure there's not supposed to be any illegal narcotics, either. And yet Diego turns a tidy profit each year bringing in as much cocaine as this place can snort, ensuring that every student who wants to be is thoroughly yakked up to the gills, should they be so inclined.

Other students bring in liquor, or porn, or any other contraband you could think of. Allegedly, there was even a guy a few years ago who was managing to bring in "working girls"—and boys, because equal opportunity—for anyone who might need a bit more *comfort* while studying for midterms.

Personally, my line is somewhere north of literal prostitution, but I'm not going to judge. Plus, should I need "comfort", there's usually a lengthy list of members of the female student body quite ready and willing to drop to their knees and open wide.

Or, they think they're ready.

But they're not. Not for me. Not for my demons. Not for my...
tastes.

"D."

I frown at Diego, pulling my gaze away from where I've been staring through a concealed gap in the hedge.

"Patience *is*, in fact, a virtue, Diego."

My VP of The Reckless grins at me around his cigarillo.

"Right. Because I'm known for being so virtuous and pious."

"Well, *some* of us couldn't sleep at the mansion last night," Ivan mutters, glaring at our Spanish friend. "Due to the *two* young ladies in your room screaming 'oh God' about a million fucking times, your *holiness.*"

Diego crosses himself—the wrong way, and with the wrong hand—before touching Ivan's forehead. "Confess your sins, my son."

Ivan wrinkles his nose and brushes Diego's hand away. "You literally still smell like pussy. Touch me with those grubby fucking hands again and I'll have a sin to confess real quick."

"Nah," Diego chuckles, sniffing his own finger. "That's merely holy water."

"That's *hoe* water. Take a shower, you fucking degenerate," Ivan mutters.

"Are you suggesting that women who enjoy themselves sexually are hoes, Ivan?" Diego shakes his head dramatically.

"That's not very progressive of you."

"I'm suggesting that the Venn diagram of female Knightsblood students I see leaving your room in the morning and female Knightsblood students who are infamous for being batshit nuts and fucking anything that smiles at them is a perfect circle."

“Will both of you please shut the *fuck* up so I can actually look for these shitbags?” I hiss, glaring at them. “Please and thank you.”

They shut the fuck up.

I turn back to the hole in the hedge, my eyes scanning the green littered with various groups of students between classes.

For the most part, the rivalries between the school clubs—notably, the one between us, The Reckless, and the pompous, cleft-chin fuckbois in Para Bellum—are confined to mostly harmless pranking. They leave a bag of burning shit on our front door; we set off the sprinkler system during one of their parties. They let rats loose into our basement; I find and kill those rats, let them marinate in a plastic bag for a week, then cut that bag open and leave it hidden in their mansion’s air vents.

You get the idea.

Except this past year, since that smarmy fuck-head Chase Cavendish became president of Para Bellum, things have started escalating. And they *keep* escalating. Now, the pranks are becoming less “jokes” and more “how much physical harm can we inflict before the school becomes involved”.

And the three of us are testing the limit in about ten minutes.

We’re hiding next to the path that Chase and two of his buddies and top Para Bellum leaders—Brad Hathaway and Spencer Campbell—frequently take from the cafeteria to their afternoon classes. Where the path enters the rows of hedges, it makes a circle around a pleasant little pool with a fountain and dotted with lily pads.

Hidden beneath the idyllic little pool, fountain, and hedges, though, is one of the water mains to the cafeteria kitchens. It

runs right up through the base of this very fountain. And it contains water flowing at a fairly dangerous three hundred PSI, which is basically the force with which water comes out of a fire hose.

There are currently two charges wrapped discreetly around this high-pressure piping—one that would burst it in the direction of *one* path. And the other aimed to burst it in a slightly different direction at *another* path, since Chase and his pals take either, at random. I know. I've checked.

Is purposefully bursting—via the remote detonators in my pocket—dangerously high-pressured water directly into the faces of three unprotected humans less than ten feet away slightly more than a prank?

Most certainly. In fact, there's a decent chance one or more of them will lose a fucking eye in the execution of this "prank".

Between us, I'm halfway hoping for that.

This is the exact sort of escalation I was talking about. But they moved it up a notch first. We're merely retaliating. At the last fight night, which a few of us hold in a clearing in the woods behind the stables, Para Bellum put up one of their own—Ian Winstead—against one of our guys, Vincent Marchetti.

As bloody as it can get, fight night means a fair fight. Or, it's supposed to. Except last time, Ian, on the direction of Chase Cavendish and his little fucking friends, stuffed his hand wrappings with metal.

Vincent is now nursing a broken jaw, arm, three cracked ribs, and a half-shattered hand.

So *fuck* Para Bellum. They're about to reap what they fucking sowed.

I glare through the hedge, watching for them, waiting to see which path the fuckers take so that I can detonate the right charge and, with luck, blind the lot of them. But suddenly, without any warning, something catches and utterly arrests my attention.

It's *her*.

The new girl.

Dahlia Roy.

I can feel my jaw tighten. *Shit*.

This has happened before—though never with a girl. I call it my “fixation mode”. It's when I latch onto something and become utterly obsessed with following it through to its end, come what may.

It's how I was with the gardener who was without a doubt stealing from my grandmother. With the boy Callie went to middle school with who was trying to take pictures up her skirt.

With Quentin Harpsworth, a senior who crossed me my freshman year at Knightsblood and in so doing landed fully on my radar. Quentin was a car nut, and *obsessed* with a rare Corvette that was up for auction.

So I started a shell company to drive his bid higher and higher, past any rational price for the car, before finally letting him win. When it was safely in his possession and lovingly tucked away in its forever home in the garage on his father's Hamptons estate, I lit the whole garage on fire, and let his shiny new toy burn to ash.

It was never about the car itself.

It was about seeing things through. It was about my fixation.

And now, I fear, for her sake, that *Dahlia* might be the next fixation.

This isn't the first time I've noticed her. In fact, the number of times I've "noticed" her has become so plentiful that I've long since lost track of the actual count. What I haven't lost track of, though, is the number of times those "sightings" or me "noticing her" isn't simply running across her, or happening to see her by chance, like now.

It's times I've actively sought her out. Actively stalked her.

Actively *hunted* her.

For all of the chaos that flows in my veins, nothing I do is random. I don't *do* spur of the moment, or off the cuff. And she's no exception, even if I'd love to be able to tell myself it's random, just "something that keeps happening".

But, as I've mentioned, I'm not capable of lying to myself.

I know her background. Of course I do; everyone on this campus knows about her unfortunate parentage, and her connection to both Adrian Cross through her mom and Andre LeBlanc by way of her stepfather, Gerard Dumouchel. But it's not her background or considerable baggage that I see when I lay eyes on her.

It's *her*.

The tanned skin and jet-black hair. The dark brows that seem to be perpetually arched in a way that give her a slightly mischievous, mysterious look.

Big green eyes. Full, pouty lips that I have on *far too many* occasions imagined wrapped around my cock while she gags and drools all over it.

Regal, aristocratic bone structure. A petite frame with just enough curves in all the right places to make my blood flow directly to my dick no matter where I am or what I'm doing when I spot her.

Not a week ago, I found her in the woods. It was almost dark, and she was alone, and she looked at me with this mix of fear and excitement, as if she knew damn well what finding herself alone in the woods with the likes of me could mean.

And not only was she not afraid of it, she was *eager* for it.

I don't even remember what the fuck I said to her. Something stupid like "you don't belong here".

Because she doesn't. Clearly. I mean Christ, just watching her now it's painfully apparent that here at Knightsblood she is *very much* out of her element. And the students here are going to fucking devour her over the next four years, if she even makes it to Christmas break.

Maybe it's my own arrogance and ego—not going to lie, it frequently is. But when I look at Dahlia, I see with crystal clarity that *I* and I alone in this place actually understand her.

She's *not* like the rest of them.

And neither. Am. I.

"Well? Where the fuck are they?"

Shit.

I rip my gaze away from where Dahlia is sitting alone on a bench. My eyes quickly scan the green, trying to spot Chase and his two walking cum-stains before they enter the fountain area, so that I can blind them properly. But I don't see them.

"You three losers jerking each other off or something?"

Son of a bitch.

Chase's voice comes from behind us. When I turn and see him, my jaw grinds.

Fuck. They're already well inside the fountain area of the hedges, past either point that the two detonators are aimed at.

Fury swells inside of me.

I was distracted. By *her*.

Again.

“Well, those of us in The Reckless sometimes *need* one or two extra hands besides our own,” Ivan shrugs. “You know, for sheer coverage of all that square footage down there. I’m assuming you don’t have that little problem in Para Bellum.”

Chase rolls his eyes. “That was fucking stupid even for you, Antonov.”

Diego, fiercely loyal to his friends to a fault, angrily flicks his cigarillo at the three douchebags, hitting Brad in the face as he advances.

“Say it again to my face, *hijo de puta.*”

Brad bristles and takes a step back, along with Spencer. Chase just folds his arms over his beefy quarterback chest, smirking at us.

“Better get your dogs on tighter leashes, Drakos.”

“I’m sure your mother has all sorts of choking devices. I’ll ask her next time I’m over fucking her ass while your father jerks off in the corner.”

Chase bristles. That was a low blow, I’ll admit. Which is precisely why I said it.

A few months back, someone hacked Chase's father's company. Most of their financials and mob shit was secure enough that it didn't make it to the news. But other private, *sensitive* information did.

Like the fact that his parents are practicing swingers. His mom, for example, likes to get fucked by other men while insulting her husband as he films it.

I guess Chase is still a little sore about that getting out.

"I'll ask again," Chase mutters. "What the fuck are the three of you doing back here?"

"Shit, is this *not* where we're all meeting for the gang bang with your mom?" Ivan frowns. "Fuck, I really don't want to miss that."

Chase twists his mouth into a smile, the muscles in his neck straining as a vein pops on his forehead. But he doesn't explode. I'll admit, I'm mildly impressed at his ability to cage his baser emotions at times.

He glances past us, moving closer and ignoring the way Diego spits at his shoe. He looks through the hole in the hedge, smirks, and then pulls back, turning to level his eyes on me.

"Ahhh, I see."

Shit.

He grins a little wider. "Were you just staring at who I think you were staring at?"

I say nothing. Chase sighs, shoving his fingers through his blond hair. "Dahlia Roy. Interesting." He glances back at his buddies. "Should we expand the pool, gentlemen?"

Brad smirks. Spencer tips his head to the side slightly. "I guess we could."

My jaw clenches. “What *pool*.”

“Why, the betting pool, my friend,” Chase grins widely. “You’re aware of the time-honored freshman tradition at Knightsblood of *prima nox*, aren’t you?”

I most certainly am. I hate it. It’s not just that it’s a stupid, archaic, fratty tradition. It’s that I *abhor* activities or intended activities that verge on rape or anything even close to it.

And that’s almost exactly what *prima nox* is.

Ivan frowns. “What the fuck is *prima nox*?”

“It’s for losers like these so they can continue pretending they’re not George Michael singing ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’ at an Elton John concert gay for each other,” Diego mutters.

Chase ignores Diego and just smiles at Ivan. “It’s the king’s right. It literally translates as the *first night*. At the beginning of the year, an assessment is made of incoming female freshmen. Those who are confirmed to be or thought most likely to be virgins are put on a list. If you *fuck* one of them, you move up in rank. If you fuck one that is higher rated, your score goes up even more.” He swivels his toxic little face toward me. “Are you aware who the crown jewel of the pool is this year?”

I swear to God, I’m going to hurt him.

Badly.

“The one and only Ms. *Dahlia Roy*.”

It takes more effort than I’d ever expect to stop the roaring in my head. To stop the violent urges that explode through my veins and almost cause me to make a rare unplanned move.

But I bite it all back.

For now.

“What do you say, Drakos?”

Chase’s lips curl wickedly.

“I’ve laid the groundwork and am already well on my way to claiming the top prize. But if you’d like to make things a little more interesting for me, I’m sure I could make things exciting for everyone involved.”

My teeth grind.

“The current pot for fucking the crown jewel—that would be dear little Dahlia—is a hundred thousand dollars.” He grins at me. “If you manage to pop her cherry before I do, I’ll *triple* that.”

His hand stabs out, his eyes lancing into mine.

“So, do we have a deal?”

Over the last two minutes, I’ve been slowly edging to the side, which has kept Chase and his dipshit friends moving over as well. Because people are mostly sheep, and they can easily be herded if you do it subtly enough.

I’ve been herding Chase, Brad, and Spencer to the left, until they’re standing with their backs just ten feet from three hundred pounds-per-square-inch of water pressure.

“Well?”

“Hey, Chase?”

He frowns. “What?”

“Bend over.”

His brow furrows deeper. “For?”

“Your enema.”

I hit the button in my pocket, setting off the charge and sending gallons of water blasting at their backs.

Sadly, it's not at the proper height to sodomize the three of them. But it's definitely enough to send them shrieking away, and satiate the blood lust inside of me.

Unfortunately, it's also enough to send half the students out on the green running for cover, as if someone's just set off a pipe bomb.

Dahlia included.

Present:

"I DON'T FUCKING like this at all."

I pull my eyes from the work stuff on my phone to look at Hades, sitting next to me. We're back in the gardens outside Ya-ya's house. But today isn't another birthday.

It's Callie's *wedding*.

"What don't you like, Hades," I mutter in a bored tone, glancing back at my phone. I can feel him glaring at me.

"Jesus...do I really need to make a full list?"

"Just the highlights will do."

He grunts. "How about the fact that our baby sister is marrying that smug, blonde, Captain America motherfucker who's twelve years older than her?"

I mean, I'm not *pleased* with the idea either. But I understand completely why it's happening, and it's one hundred percent the best—in fact, arguably the only—way to sever Callie from

our father's contract with the Carvelis. Also, I know it's making Callie *absurdly* happy.

What with her enormous crush on Castle and all.

I need to carve out some time to explore *his* feelings a bit more, because I'm not sure if those feelings are reciprocated or not.

If they are? Well, maybe we're past the point of me throwing him off a roof. But at minimum we'll be having a strongly worded conversation.

And if that fails, there's always plan B, aka off-the-roof.

"Hades, relax. He's the head of the Kildare empire, a former Army Ranger with five years of combat experience, he spent ten years being bodyguard to Neve and Eilish, he's saved the lives of..." I frown as I start to tick them off on my fingers, trying to remember, "I mean, basically *everyone* at this fucking wedding at least once, including said baby sister." I arch a brow at him and shrug. "I'm really failing to see the problem here."

Hades scowls, jabbing a finger to where Castle is waiting at the small altar with the Greek Orthodox priest Ya-ya insisted on, even if this wedding is all for show, for the sake of the Carvelis.

"That little shit is going to fuck our sister."

"And what if our sister *wants* him to fuck her?"

"Dude, gross?"

I roll my eyes again and go back to my phone, sighing. "She's an adult, Hades. Adults tend to have sex."

"Okay, can we drop this?"

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Well, I wish I hadn’t.”

“Believe me, on that we can agree.”

Elsa takes a seat next to my brother, reaching over and giving my arm a quick squeeze as she does.

“What are you two muttering about over here?”

“Callie’s sex life.”

“Okay, why?”

“Can we *please* drop this already,” Hades groans.

I already have. My fingers fly over my phone as I begin to nudge another piece of my plan into place. One trap has already been set. One brick wall to box her in has already been laid and the mortar has dried. The rest are rapidly getting higher.

Soon, she’ll have nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

No way to escape me.

Slowly, I allow my eyes to raise and to rake across the gardens to where Dahlia is sitting with Eilish and Gavan.

Looking...*delicious*.

Fake wedding or not, everyone’s dressed to the nines for the photos that Ya-ya insists on, and that Ares believes are crucial in selling this whole thing to the Carvelis. If my own intel on Massimo Carveli and the LeBlanc French mafia family is correct—and I’m almost sure it is—then “selling” Callie and Castle’s marriage isn’t anything anyone needs to worry about. But who am I to step out of my lane?

Back to Dahlia. She’s in this olive-green wraparound gown—the tone of which goes *perfectly* with her skin, her dark hair,

and her green eyes. It's not overtly sexy, but it's not a burlap sack, either.

It's fucking distracting, is what it is. Very, *very* distracting.

Soon, my darling.

Soon.

The thing is, wanting her isn't just about taking what I was denied before. It's *punishment*. For the pain she knowingly caused me. She alone is the *one* person in the history of my life who's managed to fool me and get past my defenses.

And I've spent years hunting her, looking for my way to take revenge. By sabotaging her happiness. Stamping out the slightest spark of a flame that dared to flicker between her and any other man.

For the last year and change, I was distracted from my plan. I had the running of our operations in Europe to attend to, which, as you can imagine, is a *superhuman* task that requires literally all my focus. It's the only reason I somehow missed that she'd cozied up to my sister.

Like a fool.

The music begins to play. Deftly, I type a few more directions on my phone and then raise my gaze to her back. She tenses up, and as the music plays, and my sister begins to walk down the aisle toward Castle, Dahlia senses my eyes on her, suddenly flinches, and turns. Her eyes lock with mine immediately, then go wide as her face turns white.

I just smile as my thumb taps the final button on my phone before I slide it into my pocket, sealing her fate.

The last wall of her prison just slid into place around Dahlia Roy.

And she has *no fucking idea*.

“I JUST CAN’T BELIEVE you’re not freaking out right now.”

Sprawled at her end of the big couch, Callie shrugs dismissively. “I mean, I’m not *not* freaked out. And I was way worse before. But...” She lifts her shoulders again and sighs. “I dunno. I guess maybe because I grew up so firmly in this world, it’s not *that* insane to me?” Her brow furrows. “I should probably talk to someone about that, shouldn’t I?”

I smile as I reach over and squeeze her hand. “You’re talking to me about it right now.”

Some people just can’t catch a break. First, Callie gets betrothed to a pig of a mafia don who’s like three times her age as part of an agreement her dead father hammered out with him. Then, when said don dies, his asshole son drops in on Callie’s birthday party to claim she’s magically “his” now.

Which is why she had to marry Castle. And, I mean, Castle is outrageously hot, don’t get me wrong. And he’s a nice, decent man. It’s also pretty clear to me by now that Callie’s been harboring a massive crush on him. But still, crushes are one thing. Being forced to marry someone with just two days’ notice in order to break a mafia blood marker is insane.

And as if that wasn’t enough, two weeks ago, barely after their wedding, someone opened fire on the Kildare family

brownstone, almost killing them both before Castle started shooting back and scared the gunman off.

Long story short, Callie and Castle are holed up together in Konstantin Reznikov's penthouse apartment for now. Konstantin, Gavan's half-brother and co-head of the Reznikov Bratva, is currently in London with his very pregnant wife, Mara, who's about to give birth to twins. Their *pied a terre* here in New York is a freaking *fortress* , and it's guarded like Fort Knox. Even I had to be put on an "okay" list just to get through the front door downstairs without getting shot. And that's by Kildare guards who know me.

"Well, if ever you *do* want to freak out, you know you can call me."

She grins. "Thanks. I'm okay, I guess. Just bored and kinda over being stuck in this place."

That's another part of the deal. While they're staying here, and while everyone's out there tracking down whoever the fuck might've taken a shot at her and Castle, Callie can't leave. As in literally cannot leave this one bedroom, one bathroom, normally-occupied-by-a-married-couple apartment, under strict orders from Castle, not to mention all her brothers.

"I mean, I figure if *you* wouldn't freak out, I'm going to be just fine," she winks at me.

Callie knows a lot of my backstory. Not all of it, but she knows the part about my mother and Nasser El-Sayed. She knows how when I was a baby, my Aunt Celeste, who was at the time fake-married to Nasser's son, Amir, was forced to trot me out as their daughter for photo ops, with my mother playing the part of "nanny". Until Uncle Adrian helped Celeste break free of all of that and saved my mother and me.

I snort. “You seriously think I wouldn’t be freaking the hell out right now if I was in your position?”

“No. You wouldn’t be.” She shrugs matter-of-factly. “Because you’re such a total badass.”

I blush and grin. “Well, I mean, guilty as charged.” We both laugh as I let my eyes wander over the frankly *stunning* glass—bullet-proof, of course—and steel modern apartment with views of pretty much all of Manhattan.

“Dude, there are seriously worse places you could be cooped up. This place is incredible.”

She makes a face. “Yeah, it’s fine. I guess.”

“Did you move my fucking razor again?”

We both whip our heads around as Castle comes storming out of the lone bedroom in the apartment, bare-chested with a towel wrapped around his muscled, grooved torso. He stops abruptly when he sees me.

“Shit, sorry,” he grumbles. “Didn’t know you were stopping by, Dahlia.”

“Surprise?” I smile weakly. “Sorry, I’m totally barging in.”

“It’s my house too,” Callie says flatly to him. “I’m allowed to have guests.”

His brows knit. “I never said you couldn’t.”

“And I have no idea where your stupid razor is.”

He glares at her as her face heats. “Let’s tone down the attitude in front of company, shall we?”

“*Yes, Sir,*” she mouths back.

Castle’s eyes flash. Callie’s face turns beet red. A second later, Castle’s whirling around and stalking back into the bedroom.

“Nice to see you, Dahlia.”

The door shuts firmly behind him. I turn to raise my brows at my friend.

“What?” she mumbles.

“You’re joking, right?” I snort. “Callie, that was the closest thing to a threesome I think I’ll ever be a part of.”

She blushes deeply, rolling her eyes in a vain attempt at deflection that utterly fails.

“You’re imagining things.”

“I am not.”

“Can we please change the subject?”

I giggle, letting her off the hook. For now. “Sure.”

“What’s going on with you and my brother?”

I almost throw up, the question hits me so unaware, right in the gut. I blanch, my face turning white as I stare at her.

“W-what?” I finally choke out.

Callie frowns. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask ever since my birthday. But then, you know...” she waves her arms in the air eloquently. “Gestures broadly at everything.”

I swallow. “There’s nothing going on with me and Deimos.”

“You know each other, though, right?”

I bite my lip, trying to figure out if it’s better to lie through my teeth, or just embrace enough of the truth to sweep this away.

Let’s go with option two. It has a better chance of not blowing up in my face.

“We went to school together. That’s it.”

Her brows fly up to the ceiling. “*Hold* up. How have we seriously been friends this long and I am just now learning that you went to fucking Knightsblood?!”

I deflect with a wave of my hand. “Because I only went for one semester. Half a semester, even. It really wasn’t for me.”

There’s zero lie there.

“Deimos and I weren’t friends or anything. I think he was a senior when I was a freshman.”

Callie’s brow furrows. “Whoa, wait—you were there when there was that big fire that killed those two guys?”

I can still feel the heat. Smell the smoke.

Taste the blood in the air.

It wasn’t fire that killed them.

“Yeah,” I mumble quietly. “Yeah, that was...insane.”

She exhales. “It’s just crazy. Deimos never once mentioned you guys knew each other. And neither did you!”

I brush it off with a laugh. “Honestly, I never realized I *hadn’t* mentioned it. But it wasn’t like we were friends or anything.”

She nods, satisfied, and then glances at the clock. “Do you want to order in some food?”

I make a face. “Can’t. I gotta head to an advisor meeting on campus real quick, and then I’m off to my orientation for my internship.”

“Ooooh.” Callie waggles her brows as I stand and grab my bag. “How exciting.”

The door to the bedroom opens, and Castle, now dressed in charcoal gray slacks, a matching vest, and a crisp white dress shirt, no tie, with the sleeves rolled up, walks out. It is not in

any way, shape or form lost on me how greedily Callie's eyes sweep over him. Castle makes a huge point of not looking back at her, turning his gaze to me instead.

"Are you headed out, Dahlia?"

"Yeah, class stuff."

He shrugs. "Well, if you're going uptown toward Columbia, I can give you a lift. I'm headed into Harlem myself."

"Yeah? That'd be awesome, actually. Thanks."

Not having to pay for a cab right now, given the unsure future of my finances? Yes, please. My mom's been putting up a brave front, but the silent war with Gerard continues. And now that mom's financial advisors have gotten a chance to really dig into things and see what's happening, we've got a much better idea of just how bad the damage could be.

Spoiler alert: real bad.

Gerard, the asshole, is coming after *everything*. The one saving grace is that the holding company that controls my mom's foundation that helps women escaping abusive situations is technically in *my* name, not hers. So Gerard can't touch that. It's not like it makes any money, but what it does for those women means more to my mother than any cash.

Callie sighs loudly and dramatically. "Yes. *He* gets to leave the house. *He* gets to go places."

Castle rolls his eyes, looking at her like she's a brat that won't stop pushing his buttons. I get the impression that's *kinda* her exact game plan.

"Roll with the Irish mafia for your whole youth, go to basic training, and then spend five years in active combat zones with

the Army Rangers,” he tosses back at her. “Then, yeah, by all means, you can leave the house.”

Callie flips him off. Castle sighs and flashes me an exasperated “help me” look.

“C’mon, Dahlia. I’ll drive you to campus.”

I glance back at my friend. “Call me anytime.”

“Yeah, you can tell me how a fresh breeze and unfiltered sunlight feel on your skin. I’ve forgotten,” she mutters, glaring darkly at Castle.

AFTER A QUICK CHECK-IN with my academic advisor, I decide to take the subway to the address I just got for my internship with Laconia Logistics. There’s literally *nothing* about them online, which is beyond weird. My advisor mentioned they were a last-minute addition to the pool for internship placements. She also mentioned that they waived the need for a mission statement, which is how I landed it without finishing that part.

Taken together, it doesn’t exactly paint a very professional picture of them to me. But hey, I’ll find out soon enough.

I’m charging around the corner of the academic building when I slam right into someone. The girl gasps at the same time as I do, both of tumbling backward as papers and books go flying everywhere.

“Oh my God!” she chokes, looking mortified as she struggles to her feet. “Fuck, I’m *so sorry!* I was looking at my phone like a complete asshole!”

“No, no...” I wince as I get off the ground and to my feet. “No, it was totally my fault, I wasn’t looking where I was going and running way too fast.”

“Oh please, no, this is all on me,” the girl gushes, looking super apologetic as she stoops to start grabbing up her papers. I kneel down to help, and she continues to stammer. “No, seriously, I can—”

“Hey, it’s cool.” I smile at her as I hand over a stack of her papers. “I’m Dahlia, by the way.”

The girl pushes her dirty blonde hair out of her face, revealing big bright blue eyes. “Victoria, hi.”

“Do you go to school here, too?” I ask, my gaze dropping to the Columbia University tote bag over her shoulder.

“Yeah, undergrad. Senior poli-sci major.”

I grin widely. “No way! I’m in the business grad program now, but I was a poli-sci major in undergrad here, too!”

She beams. “That’s crazy!”

We both stand, dusting off our clothes. I’m relieved to see my skirt-suit still looks okay.

I clear my throat. “Look, this is maybe super weird, but I still have basically *all* of my notes from my senior year. If you ever want to look at them...”

Her eyes light up. “Are you serious?”

I laugh. “Please. It’s the least I can do for body-slammng you.”

She blushes fiercely. “Oh my God, you’re an angel. I missed a bunch of classes at the beginning of the year for some family stuff, and I’m still playing catch-up.”

“It’s honestly my pleasure!”

We swap numbers and then laugh again.

“I have to run to this internship thing. But, seriously, call me any time about the notes.”

“I will! And thanks so much!” Victoria gushes. “Good luck with the internship!”

Twenty minutes underground later, I’m in midtown, hustling down the sidewalk toward the offices of Laconia Logistics when my phone rings. It’s Bethany, the CEO of mom’s foundation and the holding company that operates it.

“Dahlia, hi,” she chirps in her signature clipped tone.

“Hey, Bethany, I’m just about to jump into—”

“Do you have just one minute? This is important, and I felt that it was appropriate for you to hear it from me.”

I stop right outside the building I’m about to walk into, my heart pounding.

“Uh, okay, what’s up? Mom was just telling me last night that Gerard can’t—”

“We’ve just sold Roy Holdings Limited.”

It feels like the sidewalk is about to crack open and swallow me up. A ringing sound fills my ears as I go numb.

Roy Holdings Limited is the holding company that controls my mom’s foundation. The only thing that Gerard wasn’t going to be able to get his hands on.

And now it’s gone.

“*What?!*” I scream into the phone. “Beth, you can’t—”

“I...can, actually,” she exhales heavily. “Look, Dahlia, I’m so, *so* sorry to be the one telling you this. And I’m truly sorry it played out this way.”

“You can’t!!” I scream again, startling passing pedestrians.

“Dahlia, hon, listen to me, I *can*. I’m the CEO, or at least I *was* the CEO, and with everything going on with your stepfather, I’m afraid I have to think long-term strategy. Not to mention what’s best for everyone involved with the company. I know how much the foundation means to you and your mother—*believe me*, I know. It’s why I took this job, because I believe in the mission. But this isn’t a foundation that pays for its own operations, Dahlia. It relies one hundred percent on revenue from your mother’s other assets, investments, and holding companies. Without that, you’d lose the foundation anyway. And soon.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as I lean against the building behind me.

Fuck.

“The offer came through a few weeks ago. I ignored it, because that wasn’t an option for us at the time. But then things progressed with Gerard’s legal motions, and it became clear exactly how quickly the foundation would run out of cash. Then that same party upped their buyout offer, and I’ve accepted.”

“*Beth...*”

“It was a huge offer, Dahlia. Thirty million.”

My eyes start from my head. *What?*

“After the shareholders get their cut, and after the employee severance packages—”

I wince. The foundation employs over fifty people. *Fifty* people who are now out of work.

“And the C-level exits—”

I bark a laugh. C-level exits, as in a nice way of saying massive payouts for the company executive team.

“So, you’ve sewn yourself a nice little golden fucking parachute, I assume?” I snap.

She sighs heavily. “After all of that, there’s still twelve million left for you and your mom. Look, I understand it’s not enough to give you the same lifestyle you enjoyed after your mother received Nasser El-Sayed’s fortune—”

“Don’t you dare utter that prick’s name.”

She takes a beat. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. Look, Dahlia, it’s still *twelve million dollars*. That’s a very, very good life.”

“And how big a check did you cut yourself, Beth?” I snap, shaking with anger. “Enough for another beach house in—”

“The terms of my exit package are actually legally defined, Dahlia, and beyond my control. But even so, I redistributed my payout to the other exiting employees.”

Oh.

Now I feel like a little shit. I bite my lip.

“I’m *not* the enemy here, Dahlia,” Bethany exhales, her voice strained and weary.

“Well, who is, then?” I mutter. “Who the fuck would pay thirty million for an foundation that doesn’t even make enough to support itself?”

“I’ve never heard of them. But they’re a Canadian company, with a new office in New York—”

“*Who—*”

“—called Laconia Logistics.”

Everything goes still. My pulse throbs in my temples as I slowly turn my head, swiveling my gaze to the discreet brass plate at the entryway to the very building I’m leaning against. The one listing all the current business tenants.

An accounting firm. An allergist’s office. A graphic design company, a political strategy consultant, an advertising agency...

And *Laconia fucking Logistics*.

I don’t believe in coincidence. Not at this level, at least.

Someone’s fucking with me. And I’m about to find out who.

“Beth? I have to call you back.”

I hang up and storm inside with all the wrathful force of a hurricane. I blurt who I am to a terrified front desk clerk, who waves me through security to the elevators. My thumb jams against the button for their floor. I crack my knuckles and try to calm my breathing as the elevator rises to the twentieth floor, where Laconia Logistics from fuck-knows-where, *Canada*, has their fancy new big-city offices.

When the doors open, I explode out, ready to rain down fire and fucking brimstone with the fury of a vengeful goddess.

...Until I step off the elevators into *nothing*.

No fancy big-city offices. No offices at all, even. No cubicles. No perky receptionist. No ubiquitous ferny plants, or bland, inoffensive, corporate wall art.

Nothing.

Just a single chair sitting all by itself *way* across the open space near the wall of windows overlooking the city, next to the single land-line phone sitting sadly on the floor.

It's utterly silent.

What the fuck is—

“I hope you found the place without problem.”

I scream, jumping almost out of my skin as I whirl at the sound of his voice. Deimos slips away from the wall beside the elevator doors he's been leaning against, lurking in the shadows.

Like he always is.

He doesn't step so much as ooze from the dark into the light, his eyes glinting malevolently as they latch onto me.

Honestly, I've been waiting for this to happen ever since I heard he was staying in New York. And I kept telling myself that he was staying, despite his hatred for this city, because of everything that's going on with Callie.

But deep down, I knew—*knew*—that it was more than that.

And so I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop—waiting for him to lunge out from behind every tree or out of every alleyway I pass. Waiting for every shadow in my peripheral vision to be him, coming for me.

The *truly* fucked up part is, I've been hoping he would.

And that right there is the single most twisted part of my horrible, shattered, smoke-filled, charred, and blood-soaked background with Deimos Drakos: that as much as I hate him, and as terrified of him as I am...

I also can't ever truly cut myself free of him. I can't ever lop off that cancerous part buried inside of me that refuses to stop thinking about him.

Dreaming about him.

Fantasizing about him, for God's sake.

Whether that's *because* he evokes this fear and excitement in me, or in spite of it, is a conversation I've never really been prepared to have with myself.

But now, here we are. And those very daydreams—or nightmares—of shadows that materialize into Deimos are playing out in real life, right in front of me.

“Hello, darling.”

DAHLIA

TIME FREEZES. The world grinds to a stuttering halt around us as Deimos stops barely two feet in front of me. Once again, I'm struck by the sheer power that swirls around this man like a dark, ominous cloud.

A plague.

If this were a movie, there'd be lightning crackling around him and thunder booming with his every step. Movie or not, actually, I'm almost surprised Deimos hasn't subverted every single law of physics and chemistry in order to make that happen anyway.

His dark eyes spark with viciousness. But it's the glee mixed with it that truly sets my nerves jangling. I shrink under his gaze. And yet, at the same time...

God help me, I'm sizzling under it, too.

Some things never change.

"What is this?" I manage to croak, after what feels like an eternity of silence.

The corners of his perfect, devilish lips curl cruelly. "*This* is you getting in on the ground floor of a *fantastic* new business opportunity, Dahlia."

My throat bobs up and down as I try to swallow the thick lump caught in it. My tongue drags across the back of my teeth as my brain tries to form words, even as I'm weighing if it's even wise to speak.

"Do you like our offices?" he murmurs with all the sincerity of a punchline. "I thought midtown might be a bit overdone. But, well, appearances are everything in this world, aren't they?"

"What *is* this," I mutter again.

A prank? A sick joke? Fucking with me for the sake of fucking with me? Or something much worse? Maybe it's part of something much crueler this psychotic monster has in store for me.

Because he *is* psychotic. I know that now.

Before, when we were at Knightsblood, I—and, I assume, everyone else—chalked Deimos' unnerving, scary, and at times downright cruel disposition up to him being a narcissistic mafia prince with anger issues. Like, well, *most* rich and powerful mafia princes, which is to say most of the student body at Knightsblood.

But over the years, as I've thought about it—so much more than I ever should have—and rehashed those encounters and considered his mannerisms over and over, I realized there was much more to it than just a rich kid with a chip on his shoulder and a penchant for deviousness.

Deimos isn't just twisted. He's *unhinged*.

He always came off as smart. But then there'd be these little glimpses that you got, where you realized he wasn't just smart, he was *really, really* fucking smart. And even smarter, knowing to hide it a little. Calculating like a machine, and ruthless to a fault. Vengeful, too. It was only years after I'd left

Knightsblood that I realized Deimos' penchant for—if not obsession with—revenge wasn't just a mafia tough guy act.

It was a compulsion. A hunger he needed to feed.

Ordinary bullies and tyrants use brute force and cruelty as a shield to hide their insecurities and fears.

Deimos? He has no insecurities. There's no fear inside of him. He behaved the way he did because he *enjoyed it*.

And apparently, he still does.

“Deimos—”

“Judging from your dramatic entrance, I assume you've spoken to Bethany Pietro by now?”

I can't even speak. I can only glare at him and hope that my gaze will ignite him into a column of fire.

“Dahlia, we've established already that you're not, in fact, a mute. Is it more head trauma?”

“*You bastard—*”

“I prefer the term *boss*.”

I swallow, flinching as the word rasps from his lips.

“As Bethany I'm sure explained, I now own Roy Holdings Limited, in its entirety.” He winks at me. “But don't change that channel, viewers, it gets better.”

My veins turn to ice.

“What have you done?”

His mouth curls into a shark-like smile. “In about, oh, the next hour or so, I imagine you'll start getting phone calls from, well, quite a number of people, really. I'm going to spoil the

surprise just a *little* for you, and let you know that all of these people have one thing in common.”

I shiver as he effortlessly moves closer to me, sending a rippling of something foreboding teasing up my spine.

“They all run various companies, funds, and investment portfolios belonging to one Adele Roy.”

My mother.

He smiles. “Would you like to know *why* they’ll be calling?”

I nod, my motions slow, as if I’m drowning in tar.

“I’ve been *shopping*, Dahlia. You know how it is; allowance money burning a hole in your pocket.” He shakes his head ruefully.

Oh God.

“Now, the good news is, because your mother and her accountants were savvy enough to split her wealth across a diverse portfolio, it’s not all in one place for greedy little Gerard to plunder. In *further* good news, out of the fourteen companies and funds that it’s spread across, I’ve now taken six of them out of this chess game with your stepfather. Which, incidentally, are collectively worth about three hundred million dollars.”

I stare at him, my mouth falling open. Deimos smiles that shark smile again.

“*Please*, ask.”

“How...”

“How did I manage to buy three hundred million dollars’ worth of your mother’s assets for, well, substantially *less* than three hundred million dollars?”

I nod silently, my eyes wide and my heart thudding in my chest.

Deimos looks around the room nonchalantly, seemingly not caring that my world is crumbling around me.

Because if it wasn't bad enough that mom and I are losing everything to a man we allowed ourselves to trust, now, another devil has joined in the plunder. And while Gerard is probably doing this purely for the money, I have a horrible, sick feeling that Deimos is doing it for no other reason than he can.

Because he finds it amusing to torment me, for some fucked up reason.

“Trickery. Bullshit. Lies. Bullying and blackmail. In any case, you're welcome.”

I blink, staring at him.

“*Excuse me?*”

His eyes drag over me. “I said, *you're welcome.*”

“For?!”

“For stopping step-daddy dearest in his tracks before he can take everything.”

“Sure, by scooping it up for yourself,” I snap coldly.

“I prefer to call it *rescuing assets.*”

“Them being stolen by you instead of him doesn't make them any less stolen—”

“You'll get them back.”

I tense. My heart skips as my pulse thuds in my ears as his very presence sucks the oxygen from my lungs.

“What?”

“I said you’ll get them back.”

“How much,” I grit through clenched teeth.

Deimos’ lips curl at the corners as he shakes his head.

“I think we’re getting a teensy bit ahead of ourselves, don’t you.”

“And I think you invented a fake company just to screw with me.”

He chuckles quietly, and I shiver as he steps even closer to me. His hand comes up, and I bite back a gasp when two of his fingers brush the underside of my chin, making me raise my eyes to his.

“Well, well, well,” he growls. “Look who grew a spine in the last six years.”

“Fuck y—”

I jolt, adrenaline exploding through my body as Deimos’ powerful, tattooed hand grips my jaw tightly.

His scarred hand.

The hand I saw him cradle protectively as it dripped blood on the night of the fire.

The night he destroyed it all.

“For a girl who’s a business student at the graduate level,” he rasps, “you’re being shockingly cavalier and unprofessional with someone who is now *your boss*.”

I shudder and then bark out a cold laugh. “You’re not my boss.”

“On the contrary. I have your internship acceptance contract sitting in my email, signed by your academic advisor, that says I most certainly am.”

My eyes lance into his. “It’s an unpaid internship, and I’m completely free to quit any time I—”

“Actually, this internship *does* pay.” My body shivers as his hand grips my jaw a little tighter and he leers down into my face. “It pays three hundred million dollars, to be exact. Isn’t that astonishing.”

I stare at him.

You son. Of. A. Bitch.

“You’re joking.”

He says nothing. But his hand releases my jaw. A cold sensation ripples up my spine, my skin turning to gooseflesh as Deimos slowly begins to walk around me. Part of me wants to turn my body to follow his steps, as if he’s a wild animal who will pounce the moment I take my eyes off him.

But another part of me refuses to let him pull my strings. Because I know he does this. I’ve watched him do it before: herding people, getting them to play directly into his hand in subtle, conniving ways.

So instead, I stay right where I am, facing forward, my chin held high.

“I’ll be giving the companies I snatched out from under Gerard’s nose back to you and your mother.”

“How very charitable of you,” I sneer.

He steps back into my line of sight, a cold, unnerving smile on his lethally gorgeous face.

“I am many things, Dahlia,” he growls quietly. “But I can assure you, *charitable* isn’t one of them. As I was saying: I’ll be giving the companies and assets back to you both, for a price.”

That shivering sensation walks its way up my spine again as he continues to circle me, a lion closing in for the kill.

“And again,” I say icily. “*How much.*”

“You’re going to be mine.”

My pulse skips as something twisted lurches awake in my core—deep in that dark, dangerous place I work so hard to keep locked down tight.

“Excuse me?”

I flinch as his slow, methodical walk brings him to a stop directly in front of me.

“What the hell does that mean?” I breathe.

“It means whatever I want it to mean. You’ll do everything I ask. Answer my phones. File my paperwork. Clean, cook, do my fucking taxes if I ask you to. I’ll *own* you, completely.”

I bristle, my teeth flashing as he slowly moves around until he’s behind me.

“I’m not—”

“You’ll even be my *whore*, if I ask.”

My breath catches with a sharp inhale as the words rasp directly into my ear. The heat of his body and the bergamot, spice, and leather scent of him drowns me in his proximity as the empty office goes silent.

Sweet fucking God, he really did just say that.

You’ll even be my whore, if I ask.

I want to say it's rage and indignation surging inside of me. And maybe part of it is. But that's not the only cause of the sudden explosion through my core.

"You—"

"Can't? Oh, but I can." He comes back in front of me and stops again, looming over me with his black eyes stabbing into mine. "Yes, Dahlia, I fucking *can*. The choice is yours." He hands me a plain, matte black business card with nothing but his name and an address printed on it in gold leaf. "Be at my place at eight tomorrow night, or there is no deal."

I'm speechless, my pulse thrumming in my ears as Deimos turns and casually begins to head over to the elevator.

"I've got some business to attend to." He turns to smile coolly at me. "You see, I have six brand new companies to familiarize myself with, after all."

It's an effort not to scream.

"Why don't you stay here, though..." He frowns, gesturing broadly past me at the completely empty office space with his hand. "If you could get everyone settled, maybe get IT in here to get the email system up and running. Oh, and if you could color code my schedule for the next week and maybe get a general org chart going, that'd be *great*. Thanks a *bunch*."

He's crazy. Not just an asshole, and a narcissistic egomaniac with a God complex. He's legitimately fucking *nuts*.

"Any questions?"

I slowly shake my head, staring at him in disbelief.

"Is that a no—"

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" I breathe.

His cold, malevolent smile drops in a flash. I shiver as that cruel, shark-like gleam flickers in his eyes like black mercury. His jaw tenses up, and I jolt as he suddenly surges right into me. His big, strong hands grip my face tightly at the jawline, making my eyes bug out as his power envelops me in its black cloud of poison.

“I told you what would happen if we ever crossed paths again,” he snarls viciously. “I fucking *told you.*”

“I lived here first!”

“And now *I* do too.”

“That’s not my problem!” I spit back.

His lip lifts in a slight snarl. “Oh yes, it is,” he murmurs dangerously. “Yes, it is very much your problem. Now, again: what did I say?”

I swallow thickly, feeling my legs shake and my skin throb where he’s touching my face, consumed by an illicit heat and naked fear.

“*What. Did. I. Say. Dahlia.*”

“That you’d take everything,” I whisper, shuddering, my breath catching in my throat.

If I ever see you again, I’ll take it all. I’ll take whatever you love and hold dear. I’ll take everything, darling.

He nods slowly. “Well remembered. That I did. But I’m feeling generous.”

His lips curve up just a hint. My breath turns choppy as he grips my jaw tighter and suddenly dips his mouth right into the crook of my neck. His lips and his stubble brush across my cheek, and the planet wobbles on its axis as he whispers low in my ear.

“It won’t actually be everything. Just *you*.”

DAHLIA

Six years ago:

I READ IT TOO FAST.

The day I discovered that diary, I devoured at least a third of it before the sun began to set. A few days later, when I went back to read some more of what might become my favorite book of all time, I realized I had to slow down.

It's like being served the most delicious slice of cake in the world. You could stuff it in your face all at once and immerse yourself in the full effect of its taste for a moment. Or, you could savor it slowly. You could take your time, and enjoy each and every bite, stretching each moment out as long as you can.

That's my new approach to the diary, and to the mysterious and emotionally complex person who wrote it. And so for the last few weeks, in between classwork, avoiding my cunt of a roommate, still trying to make sense of why the most popular guy in school keeps talking to me and offering to carry my books to class, and jumping at every shadow imagining it's Deimos, I've been trying to make the diary last longer when I come here to read. Each time I come, I only allow myself one bite: one entry.

But even so, I've finally gotten to the end. A few days ago, I read the last entry, which was a several-pages-long thing ruminating on the point of competition. The author—who I'm positive, based off the handwriting, is a man—questioned why it is we as humans in the twenty-first century, with access to unimaginable technological wonders and the power to feed the whole world, still fight. Why do we wage wars? Or compete for anything at all? Why do we *celebrate* that competition?

It's freaky. Whoever this person is, they're *me*, almost literally.

It was driving me nuts to think I'd come to the end. But then I came back a few days after that last entry about competition, and there was another entry—this one brief and angry and full of rage about something that happened in their past that they're still trying to bury.

I mean, again, it's *me*. It's me to the point that I had an insane dream the other day where I really *was* both author and reader of this diary. Like some sort of crazy psychological plot twist straight out of *Fight Club*.

I am Tyler. Tyler is me.

Not really. I mean, I might have my issues, but I'm not *that* kind of crazy. I don't think I am, at least.

It's been five days now since that last entry. And there still hasn't been another one. That's twice as long as the author usually goes between writings.

Today, I slip into the secret garden and do my now customary routine. I check the area to make sure I'm really alone, and then carefully pull out the loose stone concealing the diary. I open one of my own textbooks and put the orange leather book inside that, just in case someone steals up on me.

Every time I do this, I not-so-secretly wish for the author himself to walk in on me reading it. I mean, yeah, they'd probably be pissed, or embarrassed, or both. But I know if I could just show them how crazy alike we are, then maybe we could be friends.

Maybe more than that.

At this point, having crawled so deep inside of this person's psyche, their thoughts, and their dreams, it's not just that I know them more intimately than I've ever known anyone else in my life.

I think I might actually be in love with them.

Whoever they are.

...Yeah, like I said: issues. Welcome to my insanity.

I sit on the bench and flip to the last angry entry about the past. Gleefully, I flip to the next page, seeing the writer has added something new. Instantly, my smile drops from my face and my heart turns to ice.

Diaries are supposed to be private, you know.

Who are you?

I snap the book shut with a choked gasp. My heart leaps into my throat, sending my pulse skyrocketing. I lurch to my feet, quickly shove the diary back into its hiding place, and cover it with the rock before grabbing my bag and bolting from the garden.

I make it just four steps before I stop.

The campus grounds around me are utterly silent and empty, the sky gray and the leaves turning orange and red as fall

settles in. I glance back at the bench and the hiding place behind it.

Who are you.

Who are YOU, my author friend?

They say curiously killed the cat. Then again, they say all sorts of weird shit. So I shove that thought aside, take a seat back on the bench, and pull the diary back out. I pull a pen from my bag, bite the cap off, and open the diary to the last page with the last question.

I am you, in a way. An outcast. An outsider. Someone who doesn't fit, like you, it would seem. I'm very sorry for prying into your personal thoughts. I found your diary by accident a little while ago, and I can't stop reading it. It's like you're writing from inside my head.

Who are you?

I have my answer the next day.

I am Tyler. Tyler is me.

You've read my most private thoughts. I want to know yours. Fair is fair, right?

Tell me something about you that nobody else knows.

The fact that this person used the exact same *Fight Club* line that I had in my head makes me grin. Also, they're totally right. I don't even know who they are, but I do have some seriously heavy, personal insight into their private thoughts and feelings.

And that's how it all starts. I share a piece of myself. He reflects on it, and shares another piece of himself in turn.

We don't arrange to meet. We don't know the people behind the correspondence within the diary.

But finally, I have a friend here.

Present:

“So, how's everyone doing in New York? Are there any updates on that horrible shooting—”

“Mom...”

She pauses mid-stream. “*Oui?*”

“You're doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

I say it all the time, but it can't be said enough: my mother is a *superhero*. Originally from a poor family in the Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, Mom found work at sixteen with some faked papers as a housekeeper for an ultra-rich middle eastern businessman. Nasser kept a house in Paris that he used maybe five times a year, which made it an *amazing* job, given that Adele was paid as full-time staff.

Then one day, Nasser came to his home in Paris, and my mother didn't leave the house again for eleven months.

I don't know all the details. I think only Aunt Celeste and my mother do. But I do know that Mom considers me her lucky break, because she conceived me early on. And once he learned that she was pregnant, Nasser never touched her again.

She spent the next nine of those eleven months locked in a basement suite of that huge Parisian mansion, reading and singing to me in her belly. And then when I was finally born, after all of that, I was torn away from her.

Well, sort of.

Nasser's son, Amir, was in love with an Italian woman without the right connections or family ties. Then Nasser made a business deal with Jean Margaux, Celeste's father, under the terms of which Celeste would marry Amir.

For the next few years, while Celeste and Amir jet-setted around the world living the Instagram billionaire lifestyle, I was portrayed as *their* baby girl for the paparazzi. It was easy: I had the same French and Iranian heritage from Adele and Nasser that I would have had if I really was Amir and Celeste's kid. And they needed a baby to "sell" their fake marriage.

Luckily, Celeste made damn sure that my mother wasn't cut out of the picture entirely. She convinced Amir to demand that his father allow them to bring Adele around the world with them as my "nanny" until we managed to break free of all of that, with the help of Adrian Cross.

And now, years later, with every reason to be a shattered woman, my mom still stands tall. Even after what happened when I was twelve. Even *now*, with the love of her life stabbing her in the back and taking everything.

She remains unbroken. Unbent.

She's honestly my hero.

"*Dis-moi, Dahlia,*" she sighs. "What is it I'm doing?"

"Fixating on how you can help other people with their problems instead of confronting the ones you're dealing with

yourself.”

There’s a moment of silence before she sighs.

“What? I’m not allowed to be concerned for the Kildare family and the fact that someone shot at your friend Calliope, just because that *sac à merde* Gerard finally showed his true colors?”

I shake my head. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“Eh,” she mutters dismissively. “Don’t be. He can go fuck himself.”

This is Adele putting on her Brave Face; being flip and shrugging things off as if this is merely a man who stood her up on their second date. Not a man she married and finally opened her heart to, who’s now stabbing her in the back after years together.

I know she’s dying inside, though, even if she’s keeping a stiff upper lip for our phone call. Because I’ve spoken to Celeste, who was a lot more candid about my mom’s emotional state concerning everything that’s going on.

“Look, I was going to ask...have you talked with Uncle Adrian about—”

“Your aunt and uncle have done more for us than I will ever be able to repay, Dahlia,” she murmurs quietly. “I won’t ask them for anything more.”

“Mom—”

“He can’t solve all of our problems, sweetheart.” She sighs again. “Anyway, I’m not done fighting. I’m reaching out to some old investors today, and some of the board members on a few of the trusts.” She swears in French. “If only I could stop

some of these cowards from jumping ship and selling our assets to the first bidder!”

It’s half that I don’t have the heart to tell her, and half that I literally don’t know what words I would use to tell her that a psychopath I once went to school with, and crossed, is the one using shell companies to buy up her assets. Yes, this “saves” them from Gerard. But at what cost?

Oh God...

Me.

Me, and whatever Deimos demands of me. That second part I’m most certainly *not* talking to my mother about.

But whatever sadistic shit he has planned for me, I’ll take it. I *can* take it. For my mother’s sake. She’s done and given everything for me.

Now, it’s my turn.

“But enough of that. How’s school, sweetheart? And how’s your new internship?”

I glance at the time and make a face. Shit, I need to get going.

“It’s good. They’re both good. Actually,” I groan, “I need to let you go. I have a...a meeting, with my new boss at the internship.”

“So late?”

I swallow, feeling warmth spread up my neck.

“Uh...yeah.”

“Well, I won’t keep you, then.”

“Mom, you know, you could always come here, stay with me for a bit.”

She laughs her musical, silvery laugh. “You’re too sweet. But, *non, ma chérie*. I’m at my best in Paris. And I’ve got Celeste and Adrian just a short train ride away in London.”

I nod.

“*You’re* okay though, Dahlia?”

“I’m great.”

“You sure are, *ma chérie*.”

I flush as I roll my eyes. “Love you, Mom.”

After I hang up, I shower quickly, shave my legs, and blow-dry my hair. I apply make-up in the foggy bathroom mirror, and it’s only when I’m standing in my closet looking in despair at an open drawer at my frankly abysmal collection of anything you could even generously call “lingerie” as opposed to “underwear” that it really hits me.

Jesus Christ.

I’m *primping* for him. I’m getting dolled up, like I’m going on a freaking date. I mean, I just shaved my legs and bikini line.

You’ll even be my whore, if I ask.

I know—I mean I really, truly know—that he’s not being metaphorical there. I remember Deimos’ reputation at school: there wasn’t a girl on campus who wasn’t ready to worship at his feet for just one wink or flash of that predatory, psychotically beautiful smile. And I’m sure, as he’s gotten older, more powerful, and even more *outrageously* gorgeous, that his penchant for blowing through random women has only grown.

I know precisely what me going over to his house tonight means. The fucked up thing is, I’m not disgusted by it. I’m not furious, or ill. I’m not appalled that this man has calmly

invited me to come over to his house to trade my body for his mercy.

I'm trying to get there, in my head. I'm trying to force myself to feel what I know I should be feeling about all of this.

It's not working. Nothing I try to remind myself about power imbalances, or sexual slavery, or even the word "prostitution", does a single thing to force the negative feelings to the surface.

I mean, I could say no. I could just not show up tonight, and ghost Deimos and the whole internship. And there might be consequences to doing that, but they'd only be monetary ones. It's not like he'd actively hunt me down, tie me up, and force me to have sex with him or something.

At least, I don't think he would.

But while I *could* say no to all of this, I know I won't.

Not when there's a chance that me doing this saves my mom's companies and foundation.

In the end, I settle for my only set of matching black lingerie, a knee-length burgundy tartan skirt, a simple black top, and a light blue cardigan. I look put together, but not glamorous. Cute, but not sexy.

Half an hour later, the building security guard at the address on the matte black card is ushering me into the elevator. I rise smoothly to the twelfth floor of the elegant Soho loft building, and when the doors slide open with a discreet *ding*, my eyes almost pop out of my head.

Holy. Shit.

The space is stunning, honoring the building's heritage as a factory before it was turned into lofts for millionaires. I live in

what I consider to be a nice apartment on the Upper West Side, with a decent amount of space for New York City.

But Deimos' place *dwarfs* mine.

The sheer square footage is jaw-dropping, with rehabbed original wood floors, brick walls, and exposed beams on the high ceilings. Expanses of old black iron factory windows run the full length of two of the walls, and there's even a door that leads out to a private patio terrace.

The lighting is dim—almost too dim, because there's only three lights in the whole place. There's also barely any furniture in here at all: just one tan leather couch, a matching chair across from it, and a small desk to one side next to a bar cart.

And in one corner, a simply *gorgeous* gleaming, all-black, baby grand piano.

My bottom lip retreats between my teeth as my eyes linger on the piano, remembering. Deimos wasn't just Knightsblood's resident psycho and head of The Reckless. He was also an *astounding* pianist. I heard him play, as part of a school concert once.

He was breathtaking. Like seriously jaw-dropping, heart-stopping amazing. Apparently, there was even talk about him going professional. I guess mafia work paid better.

I exhale as I glance around the apartment. It's not like he's got *no* furniture. But in a space of this size, it feels very sparse and empty which just those pieces in here. The amount of open floor space is crazy. Like, you could easily ride a bike around this place, or host relay races.

“I believe the aesthetic is called ‘minimalist vintage’.”

I shiver, snapping my head around to see Deimos drifting out of the shadows next to a support column. Jesus Christ, how does he keep doing that? Like a ghost appearing out of nowhere. It scares the shit out of me.

I take a shaky breath and regain my composure as I glare at him.

“Is that on purpose, or have you just not bought the rest of the furniture yet?”

I don't *know* if Deimos had a place of his own in New York before, but I doubt it, considering he lived full-time in London. Which means he's bought this place in the last few weeks.

His only answer to my question is a lift of his shoulder. “I haven't decided yet.”

“You haven't decided if you need furniture yet?”

“No. And?”

I frown. “And nothing. I mean, it's your apartment.”

“Yes. And here you are.”

I swallow thickly, stepping away from the elevator doors as they slide closed behind me.

Deimos raises the crystal glass of what looks like whiskey in his hand, sipping it slowly as his eyes slide over me.

Burning me under his gaze.

“Would you like a drink?”

Yeah, sure, let's add alcohol to this mix. Fantastic idea, Dahlia.

“No, thank you.”

One corner of his mouth raises. “You sure?”

“Yeah, let’s just get this over with.”

My heart is racing a million miles a minute, even if I’m trying to pretend it’s not. Because the truth is, I am very much in over my head here. I don’t know exactly what’s coming next, or what his plans for me tonight are.

But whatever they are, it’s going to involve me jumping into the deep end with no idea of how to swim.

Deimos takes another slow sip of his drink, his eyes dragging over me once more. It’s not an overtly lewd or salacious look. But there’s no mistaking the intention behind it, or ignoring the fire in his gaze.

He moves to the sofa, sitting in the middle of it and sprawling casually—one arm up on the back, and his legs spread wide. He nods with his chin to the space in front of him.

“Come here.”

Heat pools in my core while something teases up the back of my spine. It’s warm in here. Too warm. And too dim. Actually, maybe it’s the perfect amount of dim. Enough that I can hide.

But do you want to hide?

There are a hundred different conversations and conflicting arguments roaring in my head as I walk over in front of him, standing between where he’s lounging on the couch and the chair across from him. I drop my hands to my sides, then bring them to my front where they fidget together, before they move back to my sides, tapping my legs nervously.

“Well?” I blurt, glaring at him. “Now what?”

He smiles thinly. “My, my. So eager to be my whore.”

My face warms, and my lips curl back. “I *not* a—”

“I never said you were *a* whore,” he growls quietly, interrupting me. “I said you were *my* whore.”

I roll my eyes. “This isn’t *eagerness*, trust me. I just want to get this over with. I have other things I need to do tonight.”

His eyes twitch a little. But then his lips curl into a venomous smile.

“Of *course* you do.”

His heavy sarcasm pisses me off.

“Look, I don’t have any interest in games, okay? You told me to come here, we’re both adults and understand what this means and what this is. So, let’s get it over with, I can take back what’s mine, we can part ways, and you never have to see me—”

“Take off your clothes.”

My eyes fly wide open, my mouth dropping into an “O” shape as any reply gets caught in my suddenly closed-off throat.

“I...” I blink, my pulse jumping from “fast”, where it was before, to “Olympic sprinter” level. “I...you mean...”

“I mean *take off your clothes*. Right now.”

Suddenly, all of this is so much more real than I ever thought it’d be.

“If not, there’s the door,” he growls, nodding again with his chin. “Although needless to say, in that case I’ll be doing what I please with the companies I’ve recently acquired, not to mention their employees—”

“Okay.”

He smirks, arching a brow. “Okay *what*, Dahlia.”

“Okay, I’ll do what you say.”

“Wonderful. So again, and this is the very last time I’ll be asking...” His eyes stab into mine over the rim of his crystal glass as he slowly takes a sip. “*Take off your fucking clothes.*”

DAHLIA

“TAKE OFF YOUR FUCKING CLOTHES.”

For one brief second, I toy with the idea of running away. Of just dropping this whole absolutely *insane* thing, bolting for the elevator, and never once looking back.

It only lasts for a second, though. Then, my hands lift to the buttons of my cardigan.

But deep down, I think that decision was made before I even came over here.

I pop the buttons open slowly—not to be a tease, but out of nerves. Because I have no idea what I’m doing, or how to be sexy. Which of course leads directly to annoying thoughts like “but why the fuck do you *want* to be sexy for this?”

This isn’t a date. Deimos is not a prospective boyfriend.

This is a deal with the goddamn devil himself.

I toss the cardigan away and clear my throat as I untuck my top. I swallow and pause, my brows furrowing.

“Can I actually have that drink?”

“No.”

My eyes raise sharply to his. “What?”

“No, you can’t. Continue.”

My lips purse. “You literally just offered me a drink a minute ago.”

“Correct. Maybe next time you’ll take what’s offered *when* it’s offered.”

I stare at him. “You’re serious.”

“And you’re still dressed. Fix that.”

Asshole, I mutter to myself. I pull off my black top, blushing as I feel his eyes on my bra. I kick off my flats, then drop the skirt to my feet and wriggle out of it. My skin burns where his eyes slide over me, drinking in every detail, every flaw, every hidden part of me.

Every buried secret. Every private desire.

When he doesn’t say anything, I glance down at myself and bite my lip. Compared to the rest of the underwear I own, what I have on now seemed ridiculously sexy and alluring back at home. Looking at it now, it looks more like regular plain old underwear that happens to be black and involve a few bits of lace.

“You’re still dressed. You don’t get to stop yet.”

I blush and turn away from him, unclasping my bra and dropping it. My panties follow, and my entire body pulses with embarrassment as my hand covers my pussy and one arm goes across my breasts.

“Turn around, Dahlia.”

I do so, shivering and squirming under his fierce gaze.

“This may surprise you, but I’ve actually seen a naked female form before. You don’t have to protect my innocence.”

My lips purse as I take in the smug look on his face.

“Drop the arms. Now.”

I take a shaky breath, and then I do as he says, dropping them to my sides where my fingers twist and my fists clench into balls over and over.

“Good,” he growls. His eyes shamelessly drag over every part of me, lingering on my chest and then between my legs. I squirm under his gaze.

But this isn't so bad. I can do this.

“Now sit, spread your legs, and touch yourself.”

I'm sorry, what??

My mouth drops open, my eyes going wide as I stare at him with shock all over my face.

“Pretending to be deaf is in extremely poor taste, Dahlia, not to mention insulting to my intelligence—”

My mouth opens even wider as I stare at him. “I am *not*—”

“And the next time you pathetically insist on trying to pretend you are, I'll immediately bend you over the nearest chair, couch, park bench, railing, mailbox, or parked taxi, rip your panties off, and spank your ass until you can't sit down for a week.”

Holy. FUCK.

Something explosive and deadly, like napalm, floods my core.

“Is. That. Clear.”

I nod quickly, swallowing the knot in my throat. “Yeah... I mean yes.”

“Excellent. Now sit your ass in that chair, spread your legs, and show me your fucking pussy.”

There’s no charm to this man when he doesn’t need or want it as a means to an end. No softness. No seduction. Just brutality and coldness. Danger and fear.

I wish I could say that was a turn off.

It’s not.

Slowly, my face throbbing, I sit in the leather chair across from him, my knees still jammed firmly together.

“If we have to go get your ears checked, I’m taking you to the doctor as-is, right now.”

I glare at him, my face bright red as I chew on my lip.

“I heard you just fine. You don’t have to be such an asshole.”

“Yes, but I *enjoy* being one. And you’re still not following my instructions.”

“*Fine!*” I snap. “Here!”

I spread my legs. Wide. Deimos’ gaze drops between them, and I shiver when I see something feral and wild ignite in his eyes.

“Hmm.”

My jaw clenches as embarrassment explodes in my head.

“*Hmm?* What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you have a very pretty pussy.”

Sweet Jesus.

If my face was blushing before, it breaks the fucking chart now. It heats so much that I swear even my vision goes a little pink at the edges.

“And now, I’d like you to touch yourself.”

There’s no breaks with him. No gradual easing into any of this. Just zero to a hundred. In less than a minute, I’ve stripped and spread my legs for him. And now he wants this?

I start to open my mouth to protest. But then I realize I’m not sure what to say, and that I’m just going to stumble over my words, and I stop. Because this psycho megalomaniac control freak will just accuse me of “playing deaf” again, and there’s no way he’d miss a chance to make good on his threat of me not being able to sit down for a week.

I shiver as something wicked and hot tangles inside of me.

“*Touch* yourself,” he growls quietly, his eyes throbbing with dark energy.

“This is really fucked up.”

“Then why are you so *wet*?” he smirks.

There’s something beast-like in his eyes; a sadistic, feral light that excites me.

“I...I’m not.”

But I am.

Mortifyingly so.

Deimos chuckles as he drains the last of his drink and sets the glass on the floor.

“Shall I prove it to you?”

My face ignites as my eyes bulge.

“*No...*”

“You’re not following directions, Dahlia.”

He nods to where my knees have somehow drifted back together.

“You *do* know how to touch yourself, don’t you?”

My lips purse. “*Yes.*”

“Well, then.”

Swallowing, I slowly spread my legs again, shameful warmth spreading from my face all the way down to my bare chest. I look away miserably, because there’s no way I can look him in the eye when I do this. My hand drops between my thighs, and I shiver when I cup myself.

My heart thuds against my chest.

This is a first, doing this in front of him. In front of anyone, to be honest.

All of this is a first. And whatever comes next will be, too.

Whatever he does to me...with me...will be a first that he claims.

Yeah.

After what happened with the monster when I was twelve, I didn’t exactly have an interest in exploring things, sexually I mean, with anyone but myself. This wasn’t exactly a huge problem, considering I was always the weird outcast new girl at countless schools. It’s not exactly like people were lining up to take me out and, oh, I don’t know, fuck me for the first time or anything. Or finger me. Or even coerce me into an awkward, toothy first blowjob.

For a while, at Knightsblood, I thought that might change. When Chase, despite being just another dumb, handsy, popular jock, showed me a part of himself that no one else got to see, a door inside me opened that had been locked for years.

But then after everything that happened at school, I shut back down. I finished college here in the city instead of at Knightsblood, happily keeping to myself. Over the years I've tried here and there to find companionship, or yes, casual sex.

But for some reason it's never panned out. I've never really been that interested anyway, which is good, because something always derails it. They flake. They show their true colors. They turn out to be a creep. Whatever it is, *it* has never happened.

But there is no fucking way in hell I'm telling any of that to Deimos.

"Dahlia, I'm beginning to think that you're a twenty-four-year-old woman who doesn't actually know how to pleasure herself. It's concerning."

I glare at him, trying to ignore the disconnect between doing that and sitting across from him with my legs spread and a hand covering my bare pussy.

"I'm confident I'm *much* more adept at eliciting pleasure and orgasm from a vagina than you are," I snap.

Deimos' lips pull wide.

"I sincerely doubt that. But if you're so fucking sure..." I shiver as he leans closer, his elbows on his knees. "Then *show me*."

Something teasing ripples up my spine. And slowly, I nod.

"*Fine*," I breathe.

The middle finger of the hand covering my pussy begins to move, sliding up and down my lips.

He wasn't wrong; I'm *soaked*. And, I mean, if I was alone, this wouldn't be a problem. But it's more than a little strange

sitting here with an audience of one, three feet away from me. Watching me. Judging me, like he's assessing my technique.

"I'm waiting, Dahlia."

"What do you want from me? I'm *doing* it!" I hiss.

Deimos snorts, raising a brow.

"You're joking, surely."

I stop moving my finger, glaring at him. I mean it's *my* fucking pussy, for fuck's sake. The audacity to suggest he could do it better than me...?

"Look, if you're so insistent that I do this, can you just stop talking and let me—"

"This is a train wreck. I'm intervening."

Wait, what?

Before I know what's happening, he's off the sofa, surging right into me, and shoving my thighs apart with his. My eyes go wide, and my mouth falls open as Deimos grabs my hand, twists his fingers with mine, and in one motion, curls both our hands deep between my legs.

Oh. My. Fucking. GOD.

Two fingers—one mine, the other his—sink right into my slick, molten heat. My face explodes in a rush of crimson, embarrassed at how wet I am, and that he knows now. But then before I can say a word, his finger curls alongside mine, and my eyes roll back into my head.

Oh my sweet *fuck*.

Both of our fingers rub against my g-spot.

And I can't help it. I moan.

I try and suck it back in, then I cough, trying to cover it. But there's no getting anything past this man. There's no hiding from the devil himself as he strokes both of our fingers in and out of my dripping wet pussy.

"There we are..." he purrs darkly. "I knew you had it in you."

"Fuck you," I blurt.

"Oh, no, darling," he growls with a devious smirk. "We're fucking *you*."

Our fingers ram in a second time. Another mortifying moan tears from my lips as our fingertips hit my g-spot again.

And as with everything else, there's no breaks or acclimating with Deimos. There's no letting me get used to it, even if he has no idea that I've never fucked myself with anything bigger than *one* finger before. He rams our fingers deep, without apology, without mercy.

And the really fucked up thing? I've never been wetter.

I'm so wet I'm almost worried I've peed myself. But there's no time to freak out about that, or hope this isn't so abnormal that he himself freaks and drops this whole thing.

He just keeps fucking me hard with both of our fingers, and when he grinds my own palm against my clit after pinning it there with his own hand, my mouth falls open in a silent scream of pleasure.

Oh fuck...oh fuck...

Oh FUCK.

I'm going to come.

The lewd, wet, squelching sounds of our fingers fucking my greedy pussy fill my ears together with the echoes of my own

moans. I'm so close I can taste it. I'm teetering on the edge, my face a twisted mask of pleasure and my legs spasming, when suddenly, Deimos' mouth drops toward mine.

I'm sure he's about to kiss me. But that's not what happens.

At the last second, he twists his head to the side, drops his mouth to my collarbone, and *bites*.

Hard.

He bites so hard I'm sure he's broken the skin or taken out an actual chunk out of my flesh, like the fucking psychopath that he is. But that sharp piercing sensation, and the resulting adrenaline spike that stabs through my core, sets off the very last fuse I have.

And a millisecond later, I'm exploding.

I scream the roof down when I feel myself come. My pussy clenches tight around my finger and his, my hips bucking with a mind of their own as I erupt all over our hands. My back arches, my head dropping back with his teeth still firmly embedded in my collarbone.

Suddenly, air floods my lungs and I gasp, sucking it in as I feel Deimos pull away. His hand slips from between my legs, as does mine.

I collapse back into the chair, my legs splayed in the most unladylike pose imaginable, but without a drop of energy to move.

Holy. Fucking. *Fuck*.

What the hell *was* that? I mean I've had orgasms before, but not a single one of them was one tenth of whatever the actual fuck that just was.

Blinking, I'm suddenly acutely, painfully aware that Deimos is now standing over me, smirking as I lie in a heap on his chair. I flush, struggling to sit up. I avoid his eyes as I reach for my clothes.

“Not yet.”

I gasp when he lowers himself close to me. For a moment, I think he's going to grab my chin again, or my throat—both ideas sending a disturbing and horrendously traitorous throb between my thighs.

But suddenly, he does something else.

...He slips his fingers between my lips.

And then I taste it. I taste...*me*. I instinctively go to push his hand away, but he grabs my raised hand and holds it firmly in place.

“No no, darling,” he murmurs. “I want you to taste your messy little cunt. Now *suck*. I promise you, you taste *divine*. Now *suck*.”

My throat bobs as my tongue tentatively licks at my fingertip. I can taste myself. Sweet and earthy.

Slowly, *his* finger still in my mouth, he pulls *my* hand close to him, opens his lips, and sucks my finger—the very finger that was just inside of me—into his mouth. I stare at him with wide eyes and a throbbing face, still tasting myself off of his finger.

This shouldn't be so erotic.

So intimate.

Finally, he pulls away. And just like that, the spell is broken. He turns abruptly, picking up his empty glass and walking across the almost-empty loft to the bar cart. As he pours

himself a drink, I quickly pull on my bra and panties, along with the rest of my clothes.

He arches a quizzical brow as he turns back to find me clothed.

“That was fast.”

I chew on my lip, avoiding his gaze.

“Well, we’re done.”

“Are we, now.”

I glance back at him and nod brusquely. “Yep. I did what you asked. Now, you can transfer ownership of those companies back to—”

Deimos starts to laugh. Coldly. Mirthlessly. When I just stare at him, he arches a brow in amusement.

“You’re joking, right?”

My brow knits. “I...”

“We’re so far from done, Dahlia, that you can’t even see the tunnel yet, at the end of which you may *one day* see a pinprick of light.”

When the horrible realization dawns on me, I want to say it hits me like a slap. But part of me knew that this was too easy, if tonight was all it took. That was just wishful thinking on my part.

Or is my real wish for this to keep going...

I shove the treasonous thoughts way down deep as I clear my throat, hold my head high, and look right at him.

“Well? How long, then.”

He casually takes a sip of his drink. “As long as I like.”

“No,” I mutter. “That’s no answer.”

“Are you attempting to negotiate *after* I’ve already...” his smiles darkly. “Made my *acquisition*? They’re not teaching you very well at business school.”

“How. *Long*,” I growl.

“Dahlia, these discussions take place—”

“HOW LONG!”

“A year.”

I stare at him, and the world goes silent as the ground bends under my feet.

“*What?*”

“I have you for *one year*.”

“That...*no*.”

“Again, you seem to be under the impression that we’re in the negotiating phase. We’re not. It’s this, or that. *This* is you keeping to our agreement, after which, you’ll get back control of your former companies. And *that* is the door, through which you can walk and kiss goodbye any chance of seeing your money or your companies or your foundation ever again.”

I stare at him, my mouth agape as I slowly shake my head. “And what about all of the people who *work* for those companies?”

“I quite honestly couldn’t give a fuck about them.”

I blink back hot tears. “You’re a fucking monster,” I hiss.

“And you were just *coming for me*, like a greedy little slut,” he snarls, surging toward me.

I gasp when his fingers wrap around my throat, and instantly, the heat I felt before explodes again, deep in my core. My thighs quiver as wetness pools between them.

And he *smiles*. Like he can tell. Like he knows.

“You like being my little whore, don’t you.”

I purse my lips. “You’re a pig.”

“And you’re my eager little slut.”

I shiver as my thighs clench. Deimos chuckles.

“I’ll have to remember you like being called that. Now tell me...” He lowers his lips to my ear, making me bite back a whimper. “What else gets that messy little pussy completely worked up?”

I clamp my mouth shut.

“What if I were to tie you up, or pin you down and fuck you without mercy?”

Oh God.

My breath catches in my throat as the darkness I keep locked deep inside me begins to hammer relentlessly against the door I’ve caged it behind.

“*Interesting...*” Deimos muses.

“That’s not...I mean, I don’t...”

“Oh, no, of course not,” he chuckles. I gasp sharply when he nips at my earlobe with his teeth. “My mistake, *I’m sure*. What else, Dahlia?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“What if I were to chase you, and catch you...” My breath becomes ragged when his hand slides up between my legs. It

slips underneath my skirt, and I whimper quietly when he cups my slick pussy through my panties. “And *fuck you* like an animal in heat, heedless of your pleasure or consent?”

Oh my sweet fucking God.

The man is ripping into the most private places of my mind, yanking out my darkest, most fucked up and deviant fantasies, and putting them on display for all the world to see.

“Please,” he growls into my ear. “Lie to me. Tell me the idea of me *catching you*, stuffing your mouth full of your soaking wet panties, and then fucking you bare and raw without mercy doesn’t turn you the fuck on and transform this greedy little cunt into a puddle. *Lie to me*. Because I can feel your dripping little pussy soaking right through your panties.”

My eyes roll back in my head as his fingers start to twist my clit underneath the lace.

“And of course, I could always find you while you’re most vulnerable...while you’re asleep, Dahlia. And you could wake up with my cock ploughing your deliciously tight pussy, or with my balls emptying my cum deep down your pretty little throat.”

My breath catches. My legs shake as a second orgasm threatens to explode through me.

Which is exactly when Deimos stops cold, drops his band, and steps away. I literally almost fall over, my legs are shaking so hard.

“Work starts promptly at eight tomorrow morning. Be on time.”

I blink, trying to focus on him as my head spins.

“I... Sorry, what?”

“Work, Dahlia.” He smiles thinly. “You didn’t think our arrangement was *only* going to be you getting finger-fucked in the comfort of my home, did you?”

I stare at him. “What work?”

“Your internship. Laconia Logistics.”

I wrinkle my brow. “That’s...that’s just a gag, isn’t it? A fake company?”

“Yes, I leased ten thousand square feet of prime office space in midtown fucking Manhattan for a *prank*.”

“Okay, but what am I supposed to do—”

“Whatever the *fuck* I tell you to. There’s the door. Don’t be late tomorrow.”

He points to the elevator.

Asshole.

I shoot him a glare, or at least, I try to. But it’s difficult when my entire body is on fire, and I’m so wet I can feel the slickness on my thighs as I wobble toward the elevator.

I turn to face him as the doors begin to shut between us.

...Which is exactly when he wraps his lips around one of his fingers and sucks it clean with a malevolent glint in his eye.

“Pleasant dreams, *darling*.”

DEIMOS

Six years ago:

WHEN WE WERE KIDS, before I'd perfected the art of not being caught, whenever one of my older brothers would catch me spying—either on them, or someone else—they'd call me a sneak.

I'm not really bothered by names or insults. But I never much liked that one: *sneak*.

Sneak has a negative connotation to it. It reminds me of snitch. It sounds like a pest you eradicate from your kitchen with traps and poison.

I am *not* a sneak.

I'm just good at spying on people. I'm good at hiding somewhere without being seen. Not because I *have to*, due to an inability to defend myself if caught, even though I won't be. On the contrary, in the unlikely event that I *am* caught, I'm quite ready and *very* willing to defend myself physically—something the mouse stealing cookies in your kitchen can't do.

I don't do what I do—skulking through the shadows, passing unnoticed, and seeing without being seen—because it's something I *have* to do. I do it because, quite simply, I enjoy it.

I really, *really* enjoy it.

Especially right now.

Steam fills the dorm bathroom Dahlia shares with three other girls. One is her roommate, the particularly cunty Amanda DiBella, of the DiBella mafia family out of Chicago. The other two roommates I have no issue with, because they keep away from Dahlia. Those are Yvonne Moreau, of the Marseille mafia, and Song Je Hwa, whose family I gather is connected to Jo-Pok, aka the Korean mafia.

Currently, though, Dahlia isn't sharing this bathroom with anyone.

It's just her.

And my eyes.

Her dorm room, and the adjoining bathroom that is shared with the dorm room next door, are on the second floor of the building. Which is why I'm perched in the tree directly outside said bathroom, cloaked in darkness, with my eye to a small notch I've made in the frosting of the window.

What? I'm not *sneaking*, or peeping.

I'm merely...watching. Gathering information on a target of interest.

Learning more about a curiosity, that has piqued mine.

A girl I'm unable to stop thinking about, or obsessing over, or lurking around. And I need to know why. Because that's never happened to me before.

An obsession with objects, or winning some sort of battle or competition? Sure. With an enemy or a problem? That too. But never with a girl, which is why this needs...investigating.

The shower turns off. Inside the bathroom, Dahlia steps out, and for one moment, my eyes sweep across her bare, tanned skin. The pertness of her full tits, capped with rosy-red nipples. The way her taut stomach curves down to her hips and delves toward a small V of black hair between her thighs.

This...obsession is getting out of hand.

At least I'm aware of the fact. It's not lost on me just how fucking pathetic and stupid it is for me to be lurking in a goddamn tree like a Peeping Tom, staring into a bathroom at one specific weird girl. Not when this campus is *littered* with regular girls. More specifically, regular girls who would quite happily take their clothes off for me—at the very least—without necessitating me climbing trees like a creep.

And yet, here we are.

If I could lie to myself, I'd probably start by trying to convince a lesser, baser part of me that this has nothing to do with her and everything to do with that fucking pool that Chase and his buddies have going on. That I'm here to protect my stake in that ridiculous competition—making sure no one else is trying to take that prize.

It certainly wouldn't be the first time I've...*deleted* a competitor.

In the last few weeks, more than one other shithead has tried to make their move. One in particular, a corn-fed good ole boy from Missouri named, I shit you not, *Trayden* McAndrews, whose family is Dixie Mafia-adjacent, was getting a bit *too* close.

A bit too handsy when he'd slide in next to Dahlia in line at the cafeteria. A bit too forward with asking for her number over and over.

A bit too sloppy in his...*liberating* of her underwear from her laundry basket when she wasn't looking.

Naturally, I had to get this under control. Nothing crazy, of course. Nothing murderous. I merely cut the brakes of his piece of shit muscle car that he keeps on campus for weekend joyrides.

He didn't *die* or anything when he wrapped that Thunderbird around the telephone pole. I mean, his half-promising career as a pro baseball pitcher is probably toast. But hey, there's always a fallback career selling meth to truckers, like the rest of his shitty family.

But I digress.

He'll live.

He will *not*, however, be touching Dahlia Roy.

I shake Trayden and any other thoughts from my head as I focus through the small unfrosted corner of the window. This is important. Not just because I thoroughly enjoy seeing Dahlia in the nude, but because I need to focus. I need to observe carefully and learn everything about her.

To feed the dangerous obsession I'm quickly developing.

She leans against the vanity and drops her towel. She traces her hands up her sides, cupping her breasts and hefting them with a small frown on her face. She pinches a bit of skin on her hip and sighs.

Really? I mean, for fuck's sake, the girl is a goddamn *goddess*, and she's standing there pinching zero point five ounces of fat she's somehow managed to find and decide don't belong on her body.

It makes me want to put my fist through the glass and tell her exactly that.

I don't, obviously.

I continue watching as she blows her long dark hair dry. As she checks her delectable, bitable, and very fuckable ass in the mirror. As she slips on bra and panties, then leggings and a t-shirt, and exits the bathroom.

Her cumdump of a roommate, Amanda, comes in next. But I'm long gone before she starts to disrobe.

My dick has no interest in morally bankrupt cunts like that. Actually...and this is odd...my dick seems to have no interest in much of anyone the last month.

Only her.

Dahlia.

But now it's time to go, and fade into the night. I've got a paper to write, a piano sonata to practice, and of course, mayhem to plan.

And Dahlia to fantasize about.

Present:

I ALLOW myself a smug smile as I look at my phone. It was so painfully easy to hack her Wi-Fi.

“*Naughty girl...*” I murmur quietly to myself. I can see what she's looking at on her phone on my own, having paired it to hers via the hacked Wi-Fi. But I raise my eyes from it and look through her window instead.

The live show is *much* more interesting.

Inside her bedroom, Dahlia writhes under the sheets, moaning quietly as she fingers her greedy little pussy.

I grin. She almost didn't make it home after I teased her right to the brink in my loft. She was barely through the door before she was stripping down, bringing up porn videos on her phone that have *severely* piqued my interest and curiosity, and fallen into bed with her hand firmly jammed between her thighs.

When she rolls onto her front and arches her back, sending her luscious ass high in the air, I reach down and finally allow myself to free my cock. When she moans into the pillow, only half watching the video on her phone of the man in the mask fucking the absolute living shit out of a petite girl on her knees with her hands bound behind her back and her panties stuffed in her drooling mouth, I begin to stroke.

Given that Dahlia's Upper West Side apartment, unlike her dorm room back when she was in school, is on the tenth floor, not the second, with no convenient tree branch a hundred feet up, this has proved a trickier spot to get to.

But, obviously, not impossible.

The window-washing apparatus that lowers from the roof five stories above us was simple enough to break into.

So I watch. And keep watching. I jerk my swollen cock, licking my lips as if to capture the last remnant taste of her pussy from earlier, when I sucked both of our fingers clean.

She tastes like heaven.

Like the rapture.

She tastes, in fact, like my undoing.

On her bed, Dahlia twists and writhes, burying her face in her pillow, the video long forgotten. The sheet slips off her, and I

grit my teeth to stop from groaning as I watch her fingers roughly work and fuck her pussy. Her legs shake, her toes curl.

And when she comes, so do I.

My hot, sticky white cum sprays against the outside of her bedroom window. And when Dahlia rolls out of bed and pads lazily to the shower, and I depart, I leave that cum right where I sprayed it.

A mark to any other creepies or crawlies or things that go bump in the night that might come calling.

She's spoken for. She's taken.

She always has been, and she always will be. Even if that's the thing I hate about myself the most.

DAHLIA

I TAKE A DEEP, slow breath as the elevator ascends to the floor housing “Laconia Logistics”. Aka, Deimos’ bullshit faux office for a sham company that probably does nothing at all.

Nothing but screw with my life, that is.

There’s still a small voice in the back of my head whispering for me to hit the stop button, go back to the lobby, and run—not walk—out of this building and never, ever look back.

Even after last night. Even after the way Deimos crowbarred his way into my most secretive, dark fantasies and held them up to the light.

What if I were to tie you up, or pin you down and fuck you without mercy?

What if I were to chase you and fuck you like an animal in heat, heedless of your consent.

While you’re asleep, Dahlia.

He shouldn’t know those things about me. Nobody should. I shouldn’t *want them*. But that’s not the issue right now. The issue is, Deimos Drakos somehow is holding my darkest desires in the palm of his hand. And I can already feel him squeezing as his fingers tighten around them, and me.

I should run.

Cut my losses and *run*. But I can't, and I won't. Not after everything my mother's gone through to get me where I am today and give me the amazing life I have. She's gone through hell and back for me.

I can survive Deimos for her.

The doors open to the office. I step out, half expecting him to jump out of the shadows of the empty office again and say boo.

But this morning, things are different.

It's still not a functioning office. But it's not empty anymore. Boxes and crates of what look like basic office infrastructure—chairs, desks, cubicle walls, and more—fill the space on one side. On the other, there now stands an l-shaped glass wall, boxing in a corner of room by the window.

And sitting inside it, at a massive wooden desk, a wall of bookshelves already installed behind him, is the dark prince himself.

Deimos looks up when I wander into the midst of the boxes and bits of unassembled cubicle walls. His eyes flash with a sort of malice as he stands from his desk chair and paces leisurely to the open glass and black metal door to his new corner office.

“You look tired.”

I frown, glaring at him as he walks out. Wow. He always dressed well when we were in school, but Deimos the man—the boss standing in front of me—cuts a *seriously* sharp figure.

A blacker-than-black, surgically tailored suit jacket and pants, with a gunmetal-gray vest beneath, a crisp white shirt with

French cuffs, and a thin black tie.

I flush as he prowls toward me, instantly replaying what happened last night.

The possessive, controlling feel of him gripping my hand and fucking me with his and my fingers.

Making me taste myself.

Tasting me himself, too.

“What?” I blurt as he comes to a stop in front of me.

“I said you look tired, Dahlia.”

“Well...” I shrug and look away from him as I set my bag down on a box. “I didn’t sleep well.”

“Maybe you should go to sleep at a reasonable hour instead of staying up jerking off like a horny teenaged boy.”

I wish I had the self-control to brush off his comment like it’s nothing. But I don’t. There’s no halting the way my head whips around to stare at him, my eyes bulging in horror.

“*W...what?*” I choke out.

Deimos smiles coldly, but neither says nor does *anything* to address the shock and shame on my face.

What the fuck, is he spying on me?

“Your office attire...”

I swallow back the heat on my face, forcing myself to focus.

“What’s wrong with my office attire?”

“That’s Dior, isn’t it?”

I cock a brow, glancing down at the best skirt suit I own. Because just like last night when I was primping and shaving

and, God help me, *manicuring* for him, I've gone out of my way to dress in my absolute best for my first day here.

Which, again, is probably some sort of mental health issue I need to seek therapy for.

"It is. And?"

"A shame."

I frown. "I'm not following—"

"Today, you'll be unboxing all of these desks, chairs, and cubicle walls, assembling them, and beginning the task of setting this place up into a proper office."

I stare at him. "I'm sorry, I'm doing *what?*"

His cold smile fades. "You're doing whatever the fuck I tell you to do, in case you hadn't really wrapped your head around that basic concept yet. And today, what I'm telling you to do is that."

"You want me to be a handyman."

"I'll admit I prefer the Dior over baggy overalls and an undershirt, but sure. Call yourself whatever you want."

"I..." I suck my bottom lip between my teeth. "I'm not exactly handy."

"Well, there's a first time for everything, isn't there. I'd get started if I were you. This is just the first shipment," he nods past me at the gargantuan stacks of boxes.

My heart sinks.

"If you need anything..." His lips curl. "Well, actually, if you need anything, I trust that you're intelligent and resourceful enough to figure it the fuck out for yourself. I'll be in my office."

He turns abruptly on his polished heel and strides back toward his glass castle.

“I... Sorry, do I have an office? Or, will I have an office?”

Deimos halts, turning slowly to level a cruel smile at me. “Of course you will, Dahlia.” He nods past me at the pyramid of cardboard. “It comes with some assembly required.”

I glare daggers at his back through the glass door as it shuts between us.

Asshole.

I start to tear open some of the boxes and organize the pieces I find by what furniture they are. The chairs look simple enough: just a frame that requires you to screw on a padded back and seat, along with the apparatus on the bottom for the five little wheels.

But as soon as I roll up my metaphorical sleeves and get to work, I hit a roadblock.

I don't have a screwdriver.

Deimos glances up at the sound of my knock and sighs with exasperation.

“*What,*” he grumps.

I crack the door open. “Hi, yeah, I—”

“So I see you're *not* resourceful enough to figure your shit out for yourself?”

I blink, taken a little aback at the sheer venom in his tone.

“Uh, *okay...*”

“From your tone just now,” he growls quietly, “and from the way your eyes are barely restrained from rolling back, I can

only assume you'd like to say something to me. Some feedback, perhaps?"

"Honestly?"

"By all means."

I smile curtly. "I don't think there's any reason for you to be such a dick."

His jaw tenses. A not-so-little voice inside my head screams "what the fuck is wrong with you, you idiot" about five times in a row.

"Dahlia," he growls quietly. "Have you ever known me *not* to be a cold-hearted, mean, dick of a bastard?"

"No," I blurt quickly.

"And what exactly would lead you to assume things would be any different in my personality department today?"

I purse my lips, saying nothing.

"Because if it's that my fingers were inside your pussy while you came all over them like a horny little slut last night, you're sadly mistaken."

Jesus fucking Christ.

My jaw drops halfway to the floor as I stare at him.

"I...that..." I stammer. "That's not what I—"

"I've got a very full day, Dahlia. What. Do. You. Need."

I swear to God, I'm going to choke this douchebag with his God complex.

"I need a tool."

Goddammit. Really?

The second it flies out of my mouth, I wish I could shove it back in. But I can't, and so I have to stand here withering under the smug grin on Deimos' face.

“Interesting way to proposition your boss. And given that the rest of the staff hasn't been hired yet—”

“For putting all of that shit out there together,” I hiss with steaming hot cheeks. “Like a screwdriver.”

“And you assumed I would have one in my office?”

“I, uh, well...” I frown. “Yes?”

“Guess again. Also, not my problem.”

“It's *your* office.”

“And *your* job.”

“For which I'm not being paid, may I remind you.”

Deimos sighs, bringing a hand up to rub his temple. “Dahlia, I have a headache.”

“Really? Good.”

He ignores the jab. “If you'd like to make a complaint about internships in general as a social construct or institution or whatever, I don't know, go whine about it on the internet or something. But don't do it to me. Again, *your job* is to do what I tell you to do. Today, that means putting together the desks and chairs out there. And now, I'm getting very stressed out because of all the shit *I* have to do, and there are only two solutions to that. Would you care to know what they are?”

“*Why not,*” I mutter.

“Solution one, you crawl under my desk on your hands and knees and swallow my cock while I fuck your face until I come down your pretty throat.”

Holy. Fucking. GOD.

“Or, solution two, you get out of my office, go find yourself a screwdriver somewhere, and solve the fucking problem yourself.”

He pushes his chair back from his desk and glances down at his crotch pensively before flashing me a malicious grin.

“Decisions, decisions.”

I purse my lips, my face throbbing. “I’ll be back.”

Forty-five minutes later, after trying to track down the nearest hardware store, which in midtown is about as easy as finding a taxi during rush hour, I’m back in the office with the new tool kit I just bought.

I ignore Deimos when he holds up his wrist and taps his gleaming watch like an asshole. Then I get to work.

Two hours—*two fucking hours*—later, I have exactly one chair and half of a desk assembled. I’m also sweating like a pig, even after I’ve gotten rid of my heels and stripped off my jacket. My hair’s a mess and sticking to the sides of my face as I groan and try to stretch out the kink in my back.

My eyes lift to the massive pile of boxes looming over me, and I groan.

This is going to take me a fucking month.

Yes, and your mother would have quite literally killed someone for her biggest hardship to be merely assembling furniture.

Fuck. I can do this.

I power through. I lose my sweaty silk blouse, stripping down to my bra and camisole, and even roll my skirt up a little more to give my legs some air and better maneuverability. I’ve

shoved my hair back in a messy ponytail. I finish my second desk and third chair.

It's only then that I realize the sun is already low outside. I glance at my watch and blink.

It's *four*.

I could cry. It's taken me all freaking day to assemble two dumb office desks and three lousy swivel chairs.

"Now, I know they say Rome wasn't built in a day..."

On my knees, I grit my teeth as I turn to glare up at him. "What?" I hiss, shoving a stray lock of hair that's escaped from the ponytail out of my face.

"...but do you expect to be done this fiscal year?"

My jaw clenches as I squint angrily at him. "I'm trying my best, okay?"

"If that's your best, I wouldn't brag about it."

"You are *such* an asshole!"

He sighs and shakes his head. "As soon as I hire an HR person, I'm reporting that, you know."

"Go ahead!" I snap back. "But I'm really trying, okay?!" I turn back to the fourth chair I've been working on and angrily start to twist a screw into the back pad, my wrist screaming in agony from being used so much today. The screwdriver slips, and I cry out when it stabs into a finger on my other hand.

"*Fuck!*" I hiss, jamming the finger in my mouth and sucking.

"Well, I'm happy to see you're multitasking, at least."

"What?" I grunt around the finger.

“Putting the furniture together *and* practicing being on your knees...” He smiles demonically. “*Sucking.*”

My face goes red, and my core tightens. Deimos pauses for a moment, then nods at the stack of boxes.

“You feel as if this sort of work is beneath you, don’t you.”

I frown. “No, I just—”

“Tell the truth. Don’t fall back on some lame excuse. This isn’t about you not having the skills, and I’m not asking for a sermon on social equity between the educated class and the working class, so don’t bore me with one. You simply think this sort of work for your internship, given that you’re a very intelligent, highly educated woman, is beneath you.”

“Can I be honest?” I snap.

“That’s literally what I just asked you to do.”

“Then, *yeah*,” I say. “I do think it’s beneath me. Which I know is exactly why you’re—”

“*Good*,” he growls with a grin.

Instantly, I’m on my feet. I can deal with Deimos’ bullshit, damn it. I can try and predict the weather when he flips between making me come on his fingers and then bossing me around like I’m some sort of slave.

But I *don’t* need to be set up for failure just so he can bring some popcorn and watch.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” I hiss.

Deimos chuckles. “Did it take you all day to put that thought together? You know, like it took you all day to put those four shitty-looking chairs together?”

“*Fuck you.*”

“We’ll get there, fret not.”

Asshole.

“Why are you doing this?” I spit.

Whatever traces of mirth and amusement were on his face vanish.

“Why, Deimos?” I continue. “Because I had the gall to start a life here in New York and that in a city of nine *million* people we happened to cross paths again? Is that what you’re so bent out of shape about?! Are you *kidding*—”

I gasp as he closes the distance between us and clamps his fingers around my throat. Heat and something wicked and sharp rakes up my spine as his black eyes burn into mine.

“*Perhaps, Dahlia,*” he rasps viciously. “It’s simply that I am *exactly* the villain you always thought I was. And this is just what I. Fucking. Do.”

He leans close, so close that not for the first time, I think he’s going to kiss me. But suddenly, his fingers are leaving my throat, and he steps away.

“You’re dismissed.”

My brows arch sharply. “Are you firing me?”

“If I was firing you, there’d be no ambiguity about it.” His lips curl. “Get out. We’re done. For today.”

And then, without another word, he turns, walks back to his glass castle, and shuts the door.

TWO HOURS LATER, I’m finally home, and relieved to be in for the night. But I’m still beyond livid about Deimos’ bullshit

earlier today.

It's the bizarre ping-pong match back and forth I can't keep up with. One minute, he's biting my skin and sinking his finger deep inside of me, wringing the single most explosive orgasm of my life from my body, and the next, he's got me doing menial grunt work while he lords it over me being a giant dickhead.

Yeah, if this is what working for Deimos is going to be like, I'm going to have chronic whiplash.

I'm sprawled on the couch in front of some mindless Netflix show when my phone dings. My scowl fades a little when I see Victoria's name on the screen—the girl I crashed into on campus.

VICTORIA:

Hey! I hope this isn't super needy to text so soon, but I was wondering if I could take you up on that offer for those class notes? I swear, I can even pay you for them if you want!

I grin as I type a reply.

ME:

Omg, please. Not at all! They're all yours!

VICTORIA:

You are THE BEST. Can I at least buy you a drink or two?

ME:

lol, deal.

VICTORIA:

Would now be too pushy?

Victoria, you have no idea how good a drink sounds after the day I've had.

ME:

Actually a drink right now sounds more perfect than you can imagine. Where do you live? I'm on the upper west, but I can meet wherever.

VICTORIA:

Omg, Lower Harlem! We're so close! I'll come to u, though. I know a great place!

We make plans to meet at The Owl's Tail, a seriously cool little cocktail bar a few blocks from my apartment that I've never actually checked out. I dig my old class notes out of the back of a closet and change into yoga pants and a hoodie before grabbing my keys.

Instantly, my phone dings with another text. My pulse skips when I see Deimos' name.

DEIMOS DRAKOS:

I have work for you more befitting Your Majesty's station.

I roll my eyes. He's seriously incapable of not being an asshole.

DEIMOS DRAKOS:

I left some physical documents at the Laconia Logistics office. I need them brought to my loft.

I start to type a curt reply about my personal time being *my* time. But then I erase it and pause to think of a better way to phrase it.

DEIMOS DRAKOS:

I saw that. While you try and compose a perfectly biting and sarcastic reply about personal time, or boundaries, or whatever the fuck you were going to reply with, let me remind you: you're not just my intern. I OWN you.

My lips curl into a sneer as my thumbs hammer on the screen.

ME:

I hope you know I'm screen-shotting this conversation for when you do hire that HR person. Boundaries, Deimos. It's seven in the evening.

DEIMOS DRAKOS:

And where precisely were these precious boundaries of yours yesterday, when you were moaning like a whore while your greedy little pussy came all over my fingers.

Good *lord*.

DEIMOS DRAKOS:

This is a useless discussion, because this is neither a discussion nor a negotiation. I need those documents immediately. I'm making it your literal job to go back to the office to get them and then bring them here. Now.

I squeeze my eyes shut and then jam my middle finger up in the direction of the screen.

"You fucking *prick*," I mutter out loud.

This is ridiculous. But then, I think of my mom. I think of what she'd do in this position. I know for certain she'd just go get the damn papers. Not because she'd be scared of Deimos. Not because she's a pushover, either. But because she knows how to pick her battles.

Running menial errands for Deimos is almost as obnoxious as putting together office furniture. But the goal is still the same: play ball, and get my mom's companies back under our control.

I groan as I text Victoria with a scowl on my face.

ME:

Hey, I'm so sorry. I need to take a rain check on notes and cocktails. I feel awful doing this after we just made plans, but my internship boss is a giant asshole and needs something.

VICTORIA:

No problem! Totally get it! Let me know when you're free!

Well, at least there are still *some* good, normal people in this world.

Twenty minutes in a cab later, that I most certainly will be expensing—if Deimos' fake company even *does* business expenses, that is—I'm walking in the front door of the building. The single security guard waves me through when I show my ID badge, and I punch the button for the office's floor in the elevator.

What an asshole. What a total fucking asshole bastard.

The doors open to the darkened offices, and I step out.

...and instantly go stone-still, my blood turning to ice, my heart dropping through the floor. My eyes stab across the main floor, to where a redheaded woman is currently bent over Deimos' desk.

She's facing away from me, but it's not really her I'm looking at. It's the shirtless man with dark hair, his back to me, giving me a full view of his large dragon tattoo—the Drakos family crest that Deimos already sported even when we were in Knightsblood—who's currently *fucking* that woman across the desk.

Bile rises in my gut. I stare in horror as he rams into her over and over, his arm muscles rippling and his pounding hips making her thighs shake as she moans in pure ecstasy.

There really isn't a limit to Deimos' ability and eagerness to be a complete. Fucking. Asshole.

I whirl, lurching back into the elevator and slamming on the lobby button with the heel of my hand. The doors close just before I throw up.

DEIMOS

THE FINGERS of my right hand wander slowly over the black and white keys. The taut strings inside the Steinway baby grand tinkle like broken ice as I toy with the melody. Then my eyes drop to the back of the hand, and my jaw tenses.

There's tattoo ink covering it now. But you can still see the scar—the mark left behind from the night it all shattered and went up in smoke.

The night I lost my gift.

A gift. That's what Ya-ya always called it. We all took lessons on various instruments when we were kids, my siblings and I. Clarinet, piano, whatever. Ares fancied himself a heavy metal guitarist when he was obsessed with Metallica at some point. But none of them stuck with it.

But I did. Because I saw the piano as a puzzle to be deciphered. A code to be cracked. Also, it came absurdly easily to me, to the point that by the time I was seven, they were tossing around words like “virtuoso” or “savant”.

There was even a moment in my teens when I considered leaving all of this behind—all the violence and the darkness that come with the family I was born into and the blood I was

born with. To drop all that and truly see how good I could be with my gift.

Now, the thought is laughable.

Because what I am is *who* I am. Who knows: maybe I should thank her for playing her part in the events that led to that dream being destroyed along with my hand, clearing my vision of any blinders or distractions. In a sense, she helped me see with utter clarity that it's the violence and the darkness that *is* who and what I truly am.

My fingers dance over the keys again. I'm still good. Very, very good. But I'll never be great. Even after a dozen surgeries, physical therapy from the best of the best, and the laser focus only someone like me is born with. Which is a shame. For more than just making my grandmother smile with pride, piano was my outlet to help me deal with the storm inside of me. The rage. The pain and the abuse.

And she took that from me that night I saw who and what she really was.

The night I killed.

My jaw sets as I pull my hands back and close the lid over the keys.

What are you doing.

I mean really—what *am* I doing? My hatred for Dahlia Roy is one thing, and I think I could make a pretty decent case to any jury as to why it exists like a cancer in my heart. But if it was just blind hate, this would all be easier.

I'd have simply destroyed her. Her, and everyone around her that she loves. I'd have either allowed her stepfather to pluck her mother's fortune and her future from their hands, or even helped him do it.

But no, I pushed it further. I went and involved myself. I bought those companies, funds, and trusts that he was trying to steal. Which, I have to say, was an extremely impressive feat.

Twenty-two shell companies. Several bribed board members. A couple of CEOs with one too many skeletons in the closet. They were more than happy to sell majority shares in their companies to keep those hidden.

I imagine it would have taken a financial titan like Carl Icahn or Warren Buffett six months to orchestrate a corporate assassination of this beauty and perfection.

I managed it in two weeks.

Why? Because I *cannot* seem to let her go. I've never let any fixation of mine go, mind you, so I'm not sure why I ever thought I could do it with her. Especially when I clearly never let go at all six years ago.

Stalking, spying on, meddling with, and keeping other men away from Dahlia Roy for six years is *not* indicative of "letting go".

And that's both the problem and the source of this all. I'm forever trapped in this light and dark battle with her. Wanting to have her. To consume her. To sully and mark and claim her in every possible way.

And also to destroy her, for what she did.

I'm not sure what I thought bringing Dahlia back into my immediate orbit would achieve. Revenge? Taking by force what was denied me before? If that's the case, why *haven't* I fucked her yet? Why haven't I taken every warm hole she has until I've had my fill, only to drop her like a bad habit and cement that revenge?

I don't know. If only I could lie to myself, I'm sure I could conjure a pretty tale of "dragging it out" or "making her squirm". But I can't lie to myself, and despite turning it over and over in my head, I honestly don't know what the true reason is.

Just as I don't know why it is that since I *did* bring her back into my orbit—or rather, since I walked into my grandmother's garden those weeks ago and found Dahlia already *in* my orbit—my usual appetite for debauchery and depravity of the carnal type has gone...

Well, it's just *gone*. Away. On vacation. Leave a message after the beep and I'll call you back.

There's never been a shortage of women ready to drop to their knees, open their mouths, and spread their legs with just a snap of my fingers. Whether it's because of my genetics, my money, my family, the criminal thing...or at times, the fact that I'm every scary nightmare fantasy every one of them has ever had.

You don't have to have slept with me to guess that I play darkly. Roughly. Bordering on...feral. Primal.

But sex has always simply been a tool for me to achieve a necessary release that's emotional as much as physical. I dull myself with drugs and alcohol and *fuck* to purge that thing inside of me that was put there too young.

I fuck for the same reason I consume food to sustain myself, or sleep so I don't fall apart. It's a part of living I need to engage in to survive.

But with Dahlia, I...crave it.

Desire it.

Truly and actively want it, in a way I've never wanted it before.

I've been dreaming of the ways I'll fucking *ruin* her, too. While trying not to think about...well, what I saw that night. What that motherfucker burned into my brain before I burned his house.

I rip myself from my thoughts and glance at my watch.

Where the *fuck* is she?

I check my text thread with her, ordering her to bring me documents I don't actually need.

I'm just being an asshole: I want her to show up on my doorstep when I'm sure it's the last thing she's hoping to be doing. I even timed it to have the maximum effect, when she's already changed out of her work clothes and is relaxing for the evening.

My phone dings with a new message. It's my brother.

ARES:

Thanks for letting me use the office.

ME:

That was awfully urgent

ARES:

The video call couldn't wait, and I couldn't take it in the car.

ME:

You were only like fifteen minutes with traffic from your penthouse.

ARES:

Like I said, it couldn't wait. Will you let me say thank you?

ME:

You're welcome.

Weirdo.

I stand, jam my phone into my pocket as I march over to the door to my loft, and yank on my jacket.

Then I'm gone.

DEIMOS

“OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR.”

I’ve been banging on Dahlia’s apartment door for five straight minutes, with no answer. Neither has she answered any of my texts or picked up my call.

The need and desire to turn her ass pink with welts, or to watch her eyes water as she swallows my cock down to the balls, consume me like fire as I pound again.

“You are playing a game I promise you you’re *not* ready to go pro with, Dahlia,” I hiss. “Now open the goddamn door.”

It doesn’t, but the one behind me does.

“Can I help you?”

I throw a brief glance over my shoulder at the weird artsy girl with pink hair.

“Yes. You can mind your own fucking business.”

I turn back and raise my fist to the door again. Her voice stops me.

“Who the fuck are you?”

I exhale slowly, gritting my teeth as I look back at Pink.

“Her boss.”

I turn back to Dahlia's door and raise my fist—

“And?”

A low growl rumbles in my chest.

“There is no *and*, sunshine. That's it. Now kindly fuck off.”

The meddling neighbor's door shuts as I start to pound on Dahlia's apartment again, loudly. So loudly, actually, that I don't hear Pink's door open again.

But I do feel the cold metal of what might be a gun barrel pressing into the back of my neck.

“You need to stop banging on her door and leave.”

My lips twist. “And *you* need to seriously rethink your actions.”

The lock clicks open, the door in front of me swings wide, and suddenly I'm face-to-face with a seething Dahlia. She's wearing a baggy oversized Yankees t-shirt and white cotton sleep shorts, and she's got her arms crossed petulantly over her chest with a look of spite on her face.

“What do we think, girl?” her neighbor asks.

“I think you should shoot him,” Dahlia hisses with a cold, malicious smile and something else I can't quite place smoldering in her eyes.

I tilt my head to the side. “I would consider your next words *very* carefully.”

“Or what, dickhead?” Pink mutters behind me. “Gonna huff and puff and—”

Now, there's surprising someone standing in the hallway of a nice, clean, building with a doorman on the Upper West Side with a gun... And then there's actually being able to *use* it.

Or keep it.

Pink doesn't stand a chance when I whip to the side, whirl, slam the barrel away from my neck and snatch the rifle out of her hand.

...Which isn't actually a rifle at all. It's a fucking camera tripod.

Pink swallows, her face paling a little as I loom over her. But the sneer doesn't quite leave her face.

"Whatcha gonna do, tough guy?" she spits. "Hit me?"

"Next time," I growl quietly, chucking the tripod past her through the open door to her apartment, "*mind your own fucking business.*"

I go to shove Dahlia into her apartment and then slam the door behind us. But Pink isn't done running her damned mouth yet.

"You enter her apartment without asking first, and I *will* be calling the police, fuck-face."

I exhale with a low, growling sigh, rolling my eyes as I glare at her and then swivel my gaze back to Dahlia.

"Well?"

Her lips purse, her arms still crossed over her chest with a sour look in her eyes. But finally, she sighs.

"Fine."

"Dahlia?" Pink presses.

"It's fine, Lena. He's harmless, aside from the gaping asshole he calls a mouth."

"*Real cute,*" I mutter, shooting *Lena* a venomous look before storming past Dahlia into her place. She says something else—

I'm sure biting and snippy about me—to Lena before turning to me and shutting the door behind us.

“What the fuck do you want, Deimos?”

“It can't actually be that much of a mystery to a smart woman like yourself, can it?” I say sarcastically as she stomps past me into her living room area.

It's no palatial penthouse, or a loft like mine. But Dahlia's not exactly slumming it, either. Her place is a good size, tastefully decorated and cozy, with decent views out the windows. I mean, the entire place is roughly the size of my bedroom, but still.

It's very *her*.

“Well?”

She's standing by the windows in the living room when she turns to scowl at me. “Well *what?*”

“Where the fuck are my files, and why the fuck have you been ignoring my texts and calls?”

“Because my time is *my time*, Emperor Nero,” she snaps. “And your dumb files are exactly where *you* left them at the office.”

Again, I don't even need the fucking files. But that isn't remotely what this is about. It's about her defiance. It's about her throwing the basic premise of our new arrangement—that I *own* her—back in my face. Petulantly.

“Then *get them*,” I hiss.

“You could have gotten them yourself if you weren't so busy fucking the flavor of the day over your desk!”

Her voice booms across the living room. Then it goes completely pin drop silent. I lift a curious brow, given that I have *no fucking idea* what she's talking about. My eyes take in the anger and some other emotion etched deeply on her face. I move toward her, and she flinches.

“Don't you fucking touch—”

She gasps when I grab her wrists and pin them behind her against the window.

“I will *touch you* however and whenever I fucking want—”

I blink at the sting of heat on my face, momentarily confused what just happened before it clicks.

Holy shit.

Dahlia just slapped me. Hard.

She goes pale, her breath catching audibly as I grab her loose wrist and slam it back against the glass. My teeth are bared as I loom over her, leaning down to snarl right into her face.

She shivers. “Don't even think about—”

“Already have.”

In one swift motion, I've grabbed her, whirled her around, and tossed her down on the couch. I pounce on her, straddling her chest with my shins and pinning her arms above her head.

She fights and bucks, twisting and writhing as she tries to hit, kick, or bite me. But when one of my hands leaves her wrists and wraps around her throat, she goes quite still. I can feel her pulse thudding in her neck, and the green of her eyes turns to fire as she stares up at me.

Her cheeks flush. Her nipples harden to two distracting little points against her t-shirt as it stretches across the swell of her

tits.

“I would *refrain* from doing that again,” I murmur quietly, an edge to my voice.

“Or *what?*” Dahlia sneers, glaring at me. “Or you’ll hit me back? Is that it?” She snaps.

“I might.”

She can try to hide it all she likes, but pure desire roars like a raging forest fire in those big green eyes.

“The only question is...” I murmur, almost to myself.
“*Where.*”

Her throat bobs under my hand. “Where what?”

She shivers as I bend down over her, bringing my mouth right to her ear.

“*Where to leave my mark on you.*”

She shudders underneath me, and I can feel her throat working as she swallows heavily. In one motion, I thrust a hand behind me, grip the waist of her shorts and her panties, and yank them down to her knees. Dahlia struggles and bucks against me. But I grab the drawstrings of her shorts and pull hard as I quickly release her neck and twist and knot them, binding her legs together at the knees. Then I press a hand to her throat again to keep her where I want her.

My fingertips tease down her bare thighs, and her eyes widen. When I draw closer to her drippy little pussy, though, she suddenly bucks hard against me again.

“Don’t you *dare* touch me with those hands after...”

“After *what,*” I snap.

“After that whore in your office tonight!” she hurls at me, naked rage all over her face.

My brows knit in genuine confusion. “Not that I owe you shit, but I wasn’t even in my fucking office tonight. Hence me telling you to go there and get those goddamn reports, before you fucking ignored me.”

“*Fuck you—*”

Dahlia gasps sharply as I reach back and smack her thigh smartly. Then I do it to the other one for good measure, and she bites her lip. But there’s no biting back the whimper that spills from her throat. I grin savagely as I latch onto that chink in her armor, homing in on it as I smack her thigh again—high up, near where it’s pressed to the other one, just inches from her needy cunt.

This time, she *definitely* whimpers. I grin darkly.

“I’m going to say this once more, and once more only. I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about concerning me fucking anyone in my office. Because I wasn’t *at* my office tonight. Whoever the fuck you saw, it wasn’t me. Is that clear enough for you?”

Her lips twist. I smack her thigh again.

“Answer me. *Is it?*”

“*Yes,*” she chokes out.

My hand slides down closer to her cunt, and her body betrays her as she squirms so desperately.

“Oh, you *do* enjoy being a needy little slut, don’t you now?”

“You disgusting pig—”

I slap her thigh again, but this time, while it's probably still stinging from my touch, I drop my hand between her legs and cup her pussy.

Which is, as I expected, *soaking* wet.

Dahlia's face goes bright red as I chuckle quietly.

"My my my..."

I curl my hand, dragging a finger up through her slick folds as she bites her lip to stop a moan. She tries to turn her face away from me, but I shake my head and slide my hand from her throat to cup her jaw. I twist her face back toward me, willing her to look me in the eye.

"Don't leave, darling," I murmur, my lips curving up. "We're just getting started."

Her eyes go wide as two of my fingers sink into her greedy pussy to the knuckles. The wet sounds of her eager cunt sucking them deeper fill the room, turning her face a deep crimson red.

"I think you enjoy when I leave my mark on you."

"I *don't*—"

My fingers slip from her pussy just long enough for me to slap her thigh, hard. Dahlia mewls so eagerly that my cock bulges against my fly, leaking precum into my boxers.

"Don't lie to me, darling," I growl, ramming my fingers back into her. "Because your mouth is pretty abysmal at it, and your pussy downright *sucks* at it."

My thumb rubs her clit as I start to finger her harder. Her eyes roll all the way back as her mouth opens and closes in a silent moan.

“The thing is, Dahlia,” I murmur thoughtfully, “I know them all...every dark fantasy. Every hidden, dirty, fucked up little need you’ve never satiated but always wanted to.”

“The fuck you...*oh God...*” she whimpers. “The fuck you do.”

“Care to test that theory?”

I sit up just enough to give me space to yank her t-shirt up over her bare tits. Her face turns red as I shove the shirt up higher over her head, twisting and knotting it around the wrists above her before sitting back down astride her sternum.

I reach down, eyeing her with a devious smile as I flick one of her rosy-red nipples. She jolts, squirming under me. But I don’t give her an inch of leeway. I flick the other one, hard, and then pinch the first between my thumb and forefinger, twisting enough to bring a choked gasp to her lips as her eyes roll back again.

“Such a *greedy* little whore...” I murmur, pinching the pebbled nipples atop her delectable tits.

“You’re a sadist,” she chokes.

“Guilty.”

“And a monster.”

“Hmm. Probably.”

“And an asshole—”

“Now you’re just trying to hurt my feelings, darling.”

Her eyes go wide as I yank open my belt and casually tug at my zipper. I reach into my boxers and wrap a hand around my cock before I pull it out right in front of her face.

Dahlia’s mouth drops open, her eyebrows shooting up to the ceiling.

“*Holy...*”

I allow myself a smug moment to bask in her shock.

What can I say. I’m...blessed.

Considerably.

My thick, swollen cock bobs right in front of her face. My hand cups her jaw, keeping her right where she is as I nudge my hips forward.

“Rather than insulting me with it, let’s find a different use for that mouth, shall we?”

Somehow, her eyes widen even more, pulling reluctantly away from my dick to stab up at me.

Her lips purse dramatically. I chuckle.

“Open up, Dahlia.”

Her lips press together even tighter.

My hand smacks her thigh sharply, making her whimper and squirm. I do it again, then again, before finally, I drop my hand from her jaw to pinch a nipple roughly.

She gasps, her body flinching...and her mouth opening wide.

In an instant, I’ve pushed the head of my swollen cock over her lips and sunk myself in her warm, wet mouth.

Sweet. Fucking. *God*.

I groan as Dahlia mumbles and chokes a little around my cock. Erring on the side of caution for the sake of my favorite appendage, I slip my cock out from between her lips.

“And just what the *fuck* do you think you’re—”

“I’m fucking your sassy, defiant mouth is what I’m doing,” I murmur darkly. “*And* I’m going to make you come like the

greedy whore you are all over my fingers while I do so. But in case it needs mentioning, if you even think about using your teeth, there *will* be consequences. Are we clear?”

She just glares back at me, so I slap her thigh again and pinch her nipples, making her moan softly as her eyes roll back and her body arches under me.

“Are. We. *Clear*, Dahlia?”

She swallows and returns her gaze to me. “Yes.”

“Yes, what.”

Her brow furrows. I smile and silently mouth the word “sir”.

“I am *not* saying that.”

“Then I’ll fuck this mouth and *not* let your needy little pussy come while I do so. Is that what you want?”

Her face heats, her dark lashes fluttering as her eyes flicker with green fire. And the sight of her trapped under me, legs bound, arms bound, thighs bearing my marks and her nipples pink and swollen...

It’s perfection.

“Well?”

She swallows, defiance flickering in her face before she whimpers when I twist one of her nipples.

“*Okay, okay*,” she gasps, writhing under me. “Yes...*Sir*.”

My lips pull to an evil grin. “Open your mouth and stick out your tongue.”

When she does, my eyes burn with hunger.

“I’d suggest a bit wider, if I were you.”

She flushes, stretching her mouth even more open, her tongue sticking out. I fist my swollen cock, push forward, and drag the head over her lips. I trace it around and around her wide-open mouth, and suck in my breath when it slides over her wet little tongue.

Then I'm pushing inside.

I groan, and my eyes roll back in pleasure as the warm, wet heat of her pretty little mouth envelops my dick. Her lips stretch obscenely around my girth, and she gags a little when I push deeper. But her eyes are locked on mine, and the fire and the lust I see in them drives me fucking mad.

My fingers plunge into her pussy, finding her even wetter and drippier than she was before. My thumb rolls her clit as I finger her cunt, curling my fingers against her g-spot as my hips pump, fucking her mouth.

Dahlia tries to hold back at first, but fails as her body begins to betray her. Her moans mix with the slick wet sounds of her own pussy, and the sloppy sounds of my cock fucking her mouth. Spit escapes and dribbles out the sides of her mouth and her swollen, stretched lips, my hand tangling in her hair as I fuck my cock in and out.

I add a third finger to her pussy, stretching her to the absolute limit as she squeals and moans around my dick. My fingers tangle in a fistful of her hair, my own groans and snarls adding to the noise as I start to fuck her mouth faster and a little deeper.

I can feel her cunt squeezing and milking my fingers, and when she starts to tremble and clench up, I know I'm about to see one of my new favorite sights: Dahlia's face when she comes.

She doesn't disappoint, either. Her brow caves and furrows, her eyes squeezing tightly shut as she moans like a slut around my spit-slicked cock. Her body spasms and jerks under me, squirming and writhing as the orgasm tears through her.

Yeah, that's all I can take.

With a groan, I bury my cock deep in her throat and allow myself to let go. I grunt as the cum explodes up from my balls and spurts out of my cock, spraying the back of her throat and her tongue. She swallows quickly, but I just keep coming and coming, until her mouth is full to the brim. Cum leaks out of the corners of her mouth as I slowly pull myself free of her lips with a popping sound.

I grin savagely: the greedy little thing *didn't want to let go*. And the deep blush that spreads over her face tells me she's just realized that, too.

My glistening, swollen cock hangs above her still-open mouth. Cum is leaking from the head, dripping onto her tongue, her lips, her chin, and cheek. I wrap a fist around myself, pumping and groaning as another spurt of sticky white cum splatters her between her tits.

Slowly, I climb off her, tucking my cock back into my boxers before zipping up my slacks. Dahlia's still lying on the couch, dazed by her orgasm, her chest rising and falling with her breath.

There's something so perfect about the sight of her lying there, arms and legs bound with her own clothing, her lips puffy and pink from my cock and my white cum dotting her tanned skin.

She blinks, coming out of her fog. Quickly, her face on fire, she unknits her clothes, pulling them back into place and turning away from me. I grin when I watch her use her finger

to scoop the cum from between her breasts, her chin, and from the corners of her mouth.

“Uh-uh.” I growl it curtly when she starts to reach for the tissue box on the side table. Her eyes dart to mine.

“Clean it off with your tongue, not a tissue.”

Her face simmers. Her eyes slide back to the box.

“Do it with a tissue and I’ll fuck you in the ass right now, here on your living room floor.”

Her jaw drops, her eyes wide and flickering with something as they lock with mine. Her lips purse defiantly, and for a moment, I’m quite excited at the prospect of making good on my threat. But then she opens her mouth, sucks her finger inside, and keeps her big green eyes firmly on mine as she licks it clean.

“There. *Happy?*” she mutters.

“When you do as you’re told instead of mouthing off at me? Yes, extremely.”

She shivers, then gasps as I move toward her. My hand cups her jaw, and she trembles, her eyes holding mine as I lean down as if to kiss her. But I don’t, instead dropping my mouth to her ear.

“If I’d known what a good little cocksucker you were,” I murmur quietly, feeling her shiver against me, “I’d have done that much, much sooner.”

I swear, I hear her breath catch deliciously.

Then I pull back and straighten my shirt and tie.

“I’m aware that you have classes tomorrow. So I won’t see you, but be at the office at eight AM on Wednesday. Don’t be

a minute late.”

I turn away, and hear her make one of those signature snorting sounds she makes right before she’s about to mouth off or say something snarky.

“I assume you can get your own reports, seeing as how the office is on the way back to your place?”

I smile as I turn back. “Reports?”

“The ones you so desperately needed enough to screw up my night for?”

“Oh, I didn’t need them. What you still haven’t grasped is that the nature of our arrangement means your nights belong to me, as well as your days. To screw up, should I choose. To... *occupy*, if I choose.”

Her throat bobs up and down.

“Is that clear, Dahlia?”

She finally swallows.

“*Yes.*”

“Yes...?”

“*Sir,*” she mumbles, blushing. “Yes, Sir.”

“Excellent. Oh, and Dahlia...” She shivers, her nipples puckering under her shirt again as I move closer to her. “Don’t ever talk back to me like that again. Next time, I might just *chase* you first, before repeating what I did just now.”

I resist the urge to grin hungrily when I see the dark desire surge into her eyes.

The needy heat.

The forbidden fantasy.

Then I leave, before I lose whatever self-control I have left around this girl.

Outside, I'm throbbing all over, my skin on fire even with the chill of the fall air. I yank out my phone and glare at it as I stab at the contact. Ares picks up on the second ring.

"Video call my *ass*, jack-off," I snap coldly. "The next time you fuck your wife in my goddamn office, I'm torching the place and sending you the goddamn bill."

My oldest brother chuckles darkly. "Sorry, buddy. I did tell you it couldn't wait."

I hang up and storm into the night, back toward my place.

I've never really considered myself to be someone with "lines". But it seems I do have them after all, and that I keep *crossing them* when it comes to Dahlia.

And I'm not completely sure that I see that changing any time soon.

DAHLIA

Six years ago:

I need to confess something. I feel like I've been holding back in a sense when it comes to our conversations.

I FEEL myself grin as I sit on the stone bench, reading this latest diary entry. Which, at this point, aren't really so much diary entries anymore as they are pen pal letters collected in one book.

We talk about ourselves a lot—dreams, thoughts, random ideas, jokes, etc. But it feels kind of...PG rated.

I'd like to take the brakes off and show you the R-rated version of myself. The real me, the one most people don't see. I don't want to wreck what we have right now, but I also don't want to build whatever this is on lies or a censored version of myself. Is that okay?

I leave a reply saying that that sounds perfect, that I never want him to censor himself with me and that I want to know the real, full version of him.

A day later, I'm back on the bench, learning more about my mystery pen pal that I've ever learned about anyone, ever. And my face is instantly blushing.

Reading his reply is the most sexual thing I've ever done.

Tell me what turns you on.

For a day or two, I don't respond. I can't. Not because I've got a chaste, pure mind devoid of sexual fantasies, but because I'm *scared* of those fantasies.

I'm a little scared of men in general, to be honest, after what happened in my bedroom in Paris that awful night when I was twelve.

But more than that, the kind of fantasies I have alarm me. *Especially* because of that night of terror and violence. After what happened to me, the fantasies I have are beyond fucked up. They're twisted, and wrong, and I shouldn't have them, and I try *so hard* to ignore them and turn them into something more normal, something safer.

But I always come back to them when the normal, safe fantasies fail to do a single thing for me.

This is why I struggle for two full days trying to figure out how to explain to my diary author/pen pal that I *can't* tell him what turns me on.

Because I know he'll judge me. Or ghost me entirely and never reply again. And then I'll have lost the one real friend I've ever had.

But my friend is clearly a mind reader. Because on the third day, when I go to the diary again to write some lame ass excuse why I can't tell him the truth, he's beaten me to it:

I don't judge people for the things that make them tick. And nothing you say will scare or shock me.

I promise you that I've imagined worse.

Darker.

More past any boundaries of normalcy and safety.

And then I read the words that change the entire nature of our relationship:

Let me tell you about what turns me on.

He does, and what he fills the following pages with turns me into jelly. It scares me a little, too—not because of *what* he writes, but because it's totally wild to realize there's another person out there who thinks the way I do. Who feels desire in the same supremely fucked up ways that I do.

He doesn't ask me not to judge him, and I like that. He merely tells me what he's into without apology. Not to shock me, but to comfort. To show me I'm not alone in having these desires.

How he wants to chase. How he wants to tie up, to bind. To hear the word no and keep going anyway. To use a person like his own personal toy—ruthlessly, brutally, and without mercy.

I read it all twice. And when I get back to my dorm room, knowing Amanda has class for a few more hours, I'm barely through the door before I'm face-down on my bed with my hands between my legs, bringing myself to the most explosive orgasm I've ever had.

But not before I respond in the diary.

You've just described everything I've ever fantasized about but never dared tell a soul. Please, tell me more.

Present:

I STRAP RIGHT BACK into Mr. Drakos' wild ride. After the night he barges into my apartment and pushes me into the fucking stratosphere, we lapse right back into the unpredictably volatile Deimos I know.

Yep, the good ol' whiplash is back.

One night he's pinning me to my couch, his hands making me explode while he fucks my mouth, which is something I fully realize should make me feel demeaned and like a sex toy instead of a person and turn me off. But it doesn't.

It makes me feel alive, in an exhilarating, dirty secret kind of way.

But then after that, he goes right back to being Lord Dickhead.

When I get back to the office on Wednesday morning...and you'd better believe I'm on time...he's got me straining my wrists and soaking myself in sweat again, putting together endless desks and chairs. The next day is the same, as is Monday the next week when I go back in.

The whole time I'm doing this, he's either in his office ignoring me or shooting me glares, or else he's stepping out

with the sole intention of interrupting me and delegating me *other* tedious, menial bullshit tasks.

It's like he's punishing me.

For what, I still don't know.

I've *never* known.

It's a week and a half after the first night in my apartment when I gasp as something heavy lands right next to where I'm kneeling on the floor, struggling to assemble a cubicle wall. I gasp, jumping out of my skin and dropping my screwdriver as my head whips around and up to where he's standing over me impassively.

"What's this?"

"It's work. Unless you're hell bent on completing the cubicle walls instead. But they need to be finished this century."

Asshole.

I frown as I pick up the stack of papers and stand. I page through them, my brows knitting as I glance up at him.

"These are resumes."

"Clever girl. Very astute."

I glare at him. "What are they *for*?"

"These are promising potential new hires for Laconia Logistics."

My eyes roll.

"Something amusing, Dahlia?"

"When is this going to end?"

He arches a brow. "I believe my stipulation was a year."

“No, not...” I shake my head. “Not our *deal*. I mean this charade with this company.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Just... Deimos, this is all a gag, right?” I mutter. “I mean you started Laconia simply to fuck with me, yes?”

“Your narcissism is quite the turn-off, Dahlia.”

I shoot him a venomous look. “It’s not narcissism. But if it turns you off, *good*.”

He smirks. “After the other night, I’m afraid I have to doubt the sincerity of that comment.”

Asshole. “Go ahead. Try.”

He shrugs. “Choose to believe this is a real company or not, I don’t care. But these *are* potential hires for senior management, and I’m making it your job today to whittle it down to, let’s say, seven potential candidates.”

I frown. “This isn’t really—”

“Your area of expertise? Well, I can promise you, putting chairs together as if you’re a five-year-old isn’t your area of expertise either. So sorry to have to break that to you.”

I flip him off. He just smiles.

“You’re in one of the best businesses school programs in the world, Dahlia. If finding management potential in a stack of highly qualified candidates isn’t ‘your area of expertise’, I’d start asking Columbia for a fucking refund if I were you.”

I sigh as I glare at him once more and then turn to sit resignedly at one of the dozen or so desks I’ve put together. Yes, it wobbles.

Sue me.

I start to page through the resumes, suddenly pausing when I land on an oddly familiar name. When I glance at the educational background of the applicant, my eyes widen. I'm right.

"Spotted it, did you."

I jump, realizing Deimos is still standing right behind me. I turn in my somewhat shaky, equally wobbly swivel chair.

"Mateo Setaro. He was at Knightsblood with us. His father is high up with the Camorra in Sicily, I think."

Deimos nods curtly. "Correct."

I frown. "Exactly what kind of company are you building here, anyway?"

He sighs. "Just vet the applicants."

I turn back to the resumes, glancing over Mateo's. I'll admit, it's seriously impressive. Harvard School of Business, then three years at one of the most profitable and aggressive hedge funds in the world. A stint as CFO for a tech company he took public. And now he wants to work for Deimos at his bullshit fake company?

"Were you and Mateo friends at school?"

Deimos smiles wryly. "You think I'm doing him a favor."

"Honestly?"

"Why not."

"It feels more like *he's* doing *you* a favor. This resume is beyond ridiculous."

He sniffs. "Then put him in the 'good' pile and keep going."

He starts to turn away, which is when, if I was smart, I should just shut my mouth and get on with it.

“Do you keep in touch with many people from Knightsblood?”

So much for being smart.

He stops, his shoulders visibly tensing. “No,” he mutters without turning around. He starts to continue toward his office. But again, my stupid mouth just won’t stay shut.

“Me neither.”

Deimos stops again. This time, he chuckles a dark, low, cruel laugh before he turns to level a piercing gaze at me.

“No? You don’t keep in touch with *anyone*?”

My lips purse. “No. Everyone hated me there.”

Except one person.

“Not *everyone* hated you, surely.”

Something cold slides beneath my skin, chilling my blood. I swallow nervously, my pulse quickening as Deimos’ lethal gaze flays me open.

“If I’ve heard the rumors correctly, you weren’t *totally* isolated, now, were you?”

My lips purse and my jaw tightens as I swallow back the sudden lump in my throat.

“*Shut up,*” I hiss quietly.

No. I wasn’t totally isolated. I *did* have one friend. One man who wanted to talk to me. Who saw all of me and understood me.

And the night I left Knightsblood is the night Deimos killed him.

Only I know what he did.

Run from this place, now. And if you ever speak of any of this, I'll destroy everything you love.

“A real shame there isn't a reunion in the cards for you, isn't it?”

I blink back hot tears, turning away. I'll be damned if I let him see me cry.

“Guess I rather squashed the possibility of a repeat fucking performance with the two of them and you, didn't I?” he snarls lethally, his voice pure, honed steel, glinting with a malicious edge.

“So sorry about that,” he hisses.

I whirl, heedless of the tears streaking down my face as my eyes flash dangerously at him.

“What the hell are you talking ab—”

“I'm talking about you being *exactly* like your mother, Dahlia,” he growls.

I bristle, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up as my pulse thuds directly beneath the surface of my skin.

“*Excuse me?*” I spit.

“You heard me.”

“And I think I need you to explain yourself,” I hiss.

Deimos' lips curl dangerously. “Do you? Do you *really?*”

I realize I'm shaking with rage as he steps toward me.

“The apple doesn't fall far, does it, Dahlia? Another Roy slut willing to pimp herself out like a cheap whore for a taste of the good life—”

My hand darts out and strikes him hard across his face, slapping the fuck out of him.

“FUCK. YOU.”

I’m shaking and trembling, my breath coming in quick, shallow pants as my eyes narrow to slits. Deimos’ head is still turned away from me, his cheek turning bright red where my palm struck him. But slowly, like a monster in a nightmare, his lips begin to curl into a grin as he turns back to level those dark, sharklike eyes at me.

“Oh I see, we’re playing rough again, are we?”

“Deim—”

“*Good.*”

I gasp as he grabs me, whips me around, and roughly bends me over the desk, yanking up my skirt and starting to pull my panties down.

And then reason grips me. Reality punches me in the throat. And before he can do anything else, I’m whirling around and shoving him away as hard as I can.

“*NO!*” I scream at him. “*No, Deimos!*”

His eyes pull to lethal slits.

“You don’t get to say that word in our arrangement—or, actually, I take that back.” I shudder as he leans close to my ear. “Please *do* say it. And continue saying it as I utterly ignore you until I feel your hot little cunt exploding around my cock.”

His hand grips my thigh, sliding higher before I shove him in the chest again, and then straight-up punch him in the sternum. He grimaces, backing away and glaring at me malevolently.

“Careful, darling...” he growls quietly.

“Or *what?!?*” I snap. “Or you’ll do something against my *will?* Or you’ll fucking *assault* me?”

“As if we both don’t know how many pairs of panties you’ve destroyed wishing, begging, and hoping that I’d tie you up and fuck every hole you have while you—”

“I fucking mean it, Deimos!” I shriek at him. “Don’t you fucking *touch me!!*”

He bristles, his nostrils flaring.

“If this your idea of a game, darling, I’m fucking *tired* of it.”

I laugh coldly. “But it’s all a game for you, isn’t it, asshole? Because you’ve never lost. Because you’ve never once had to hold the ashes of your life in your hands and figure out how to move forward.”

His jaw grinds. His eyes are unblinking.

“You told me to disappear from your life!” I hurl at him. “And believe me, Deimos,” I hiss. “That was *never* going to be a fucking problem until you yourself barged back into it and chained me to you!”

He rolls his eyes. “Oh, yes, kicking and screaming, judging from the other night, not to mention all the other times I’ve made you come—”

“I hate you!”

The words taste like poison and pain as they spit from my lips. I’m literally shaking as I back away from him, my face livid.

“You have no *idea* what I went through, and what it took for me to finally feel seen at that fucking place!!”

Fresh tears start to bead at the corners of my eyes, and I angrily wipe them away as I stare right at his toxically

beautiful face.

“And then you killed the *only person* who was ever nice to me there,” I blurt. “You killed him and then sent me away!”

The office space falls silent. Deimos’ jaw clenches. His eyes stab into mine unblinkingly as his head cocks slightly to the side. Finally, he exhales.

“We’re done. Get the fuck out.”

I blink, staring at him. “Are... Are you firing me?”

“I’m telling you this whole fucking thing is *done*. Get out, now.”

My voice drops to a whisper. “What about our deal?”

“Get out.”

“What about the companies—”

“*Get. Out.*”

“What about what you promised me—”

“GET THE FUCK OUT!!”

I’m bolting for the elevator before I even realize it, my heart pounding loud in my chest as adrenaline and fear roar through me.

And as tears I don’t even fully understand stream down my cheeks.

DAHLIA

Six years ago:

IT'S ALMOST HALFWAY through the first semester, and I'm still here.

Fuck knows how.

Despite all the bullying, the mean-girl bullshit, and the fact that just about everyone here who isn't *actively* being an asshole to me flat out ignores me, I'm still at Knightsblood.

I've started to hit my groove with my classes, and there are some professors here I've come to have a good rapport with, and who seem impressed with me. But honestly, the main reason I haven't run screaming from this place is him.

Whoever *he* is.

I've spent weeks trying to nail down who on campus I've secretly been communicating with and pouring out my most intimate, darkest secrets to, but I haven't settled on one prospect yet.

I think I have, however, narrowed it down to *two*. Except neither of them being my mystery man makes any goddamn sense at all.

Call it a hunch. Or a “vibe”. But over the last few weeks, there’s been times when I could swear I’ve felt eyes on me—a sensation that I’m being secretly watched from a distance. And for whatever reason, that sensation elicits the same feelings deep within of me that I get when I’m reading the latest correspondence with my mystery pen pal.

It’s like whatever wavelength I get from him through words is the same one I get from his eyes following me.

Except, like I said, it’s not just one set of eyes.

It’s *two*.

Sometimes, when I feel it and look up, it’s Chase Cavendish who’s smiling at me from across the green or down the hall. Actually, that’s who it is most of the time. Although that doesn’t necessarily mean he’s my pen pal, because somehow we’ve weirdly gotten close over the last few weeks. I still don’t understand why, when the man is almost literally the king of this school, with a line of girls—pardon the awful pun—*chasing* after him for the smallest crumb of his attention.

But for whatever reason, his attention has remained fixated on me. He’s frequently there when I leave a lecture, offering to walk me to my next class, or carry my stuff. Or just to talk to me and listen in return.

Part of me is beyond suspicious, because, come on, in what world does a guy like Chase Cavendish talk to a girl like me? But he’s been very persistent, and over the last few weeks he’s slowly been breaking down my walls.

Honestly, it’s nice to have someone to talk to. And I’ve started looking forward to when he bumps into me or walks with me. Especially because, like I say, when I’m with him or when I look up and catch him smiling at me, I get that same “vibe” I

get when I read the correspondence with my pen pal. It would be really nice if it was him, I think.

But there's a second prospect. Another potential candidate to be my mysterious friend. One who, like Chase, gives me the same familiar vibes from reading the book as when I look up and find that it's *him* watching me from afar.

Only when I do, he's never smiling at me.

He's glaring at me.

Eviscerating me.

Turning me to dust and ash with his very eyes.

The second one is Deimos Drakos.

Chase might be king of this school. But he's not the only king, just the golden one. The dark lord of Knightsblood, the complete opposite of Chase in almost every way, the Darth Vader to Chase's Luke Skywalker, is Deimos.

So—yeah. Sometimes when I get that tingling sensation that I'm being watched, I look up and it's Chase, smiling from across the dining room. But other times, it's the dark, swirling malicious gaze of Deimos that I see.

If I was normal, and if I didn't have the dark, blood-soaked baggage of my past chained to my ankles, I'd have enough sense to keep as far away from Deimos as possible. To avoid him. To *not* look up when I feel those malevolent eyes burning into me.

Except I don't seem to be capable of doing that. Something about him draws me in, even if I know it's dangerous.

There are good and bad men in this world. My mother has taught me my whole life to have the good sense to stay clear of the latter.

So why the hell can't I?

It's mid-afternoon, and I'm rushing from my sociology lecture to my French lit class when I feel it: that tingling feeling of being watched. My skin prickles, and I quickly stop and whirl to see which of the two opposites are lurking behind me.

The fact that my heart sinks a little when I see that it's Chase is probably grounds to go seek professional help immediately.

But I can't help it. I *know* Deimos is bad. I know he's a lurking force of darkness, and when he's looking at me, he's probably trying to figure out how to devour my mortal soul or sell me into slavery or something. He always looks at me as if I've *wronged* him somehow, though I have no idea what I've done that could possibly make him think that, aside from the fact that through Chase, I've hung out at the Para Bellum mansion a couple of times. And I know that club is huge rivals with Deimos' club, The Reckless. But that can't be the sole reason he looks at me like that, surely. I mean, talk about petty.

There's something else about Deimos I can't extricate myself from, too. It's as if the darkness swirling around him like a storm cloud has a way of hooking itself into my very psyche and drawing me closer.

Deimos is the car crash you shouldn't look at, but somehow can't avoid craning your neck to stare at. He's the swirling scent of cigarette smoke in the crisp fall air that you *know* is bad for you, but it just smells so damn *nice* with the crunchy fall leaves and the scent of apples and coffee that it makes you want to have one right the fuck now.

He's the music you play too damn loud, even if you know it'll leave your ears ringing. And God help me, I can't for the life of me stop my thoughts from gravitating to him, even when he stares at me like that.

Especially when he stares at me like that.

But I digress. It's not Deimos who's caught my attention just now.

Chase grins. After I smile back, my eyes drop, and I blush.

He's holding a bouquet of...wait for it...dahlias in his hands.

"Hey, Dahlia." He grins that charming, magazine cover model grin at me. "So, look, I don't want to be too forward, but..." He shrugs, winking at me. "Eh, forget it, I'm gonna be forward. I'd love it if you came to the Halloween Ball with me."

My heart flip-flops.

Hang on. What? We've covered that real life is *not* a John Hughes movie. This really isn't Jake Ryan asking Samantha Baker out in *Sixteen Candles*.

Or is it?

"What?" I blurt, immediately cringing at my less-than-smooth response. I swallow, blushing fiercely as Chase continues to smile at me. "I mean... You mean me?"

He chuckles and steps toward me. "Of course I mean you! It doesn't have to mean anything crazy, but I'd love to go with you, Dahlia. I'd love to..." He shakes his head and looks away. Then he turns back to grin at me again. "I'd just love to take you. I think we'd have a great time."

I chew on my lip, blushing fiercely. People are walking past us, and every single one of them is staring at Chase like he's gone crazy, and at me like I'm the one who's whacked him over the head and made him forget he can have literally any girl on campus that he wants.

"I don't know, Chase..."

I cringe inside. Here comes my self-sabotage. It's something I've perfected, a product of years of making sure no guy could ever get close to me.

"I'm not sure I'm even going, that's all."

He smiles. "C'mon, Dahlia." He hands me the bouquet of flowers that bear my name. "Just give me a chance?"

My lips twist up in a smile. "Let me...think about it?"

He beams. "Totally! Yeah, take your time."

"Thanks, Chase," I say shyly, turning to walk away.

"Sometimes I feel as if I'm the only real person wandering a whole planet of replicas."

Time stops. I freeze mid-step, my mouth falling open as the line forever seared into my heart falls from Chase's lips.

Swallowing, I turn to stare at him in disbelief.

"*What did you just say?*" I breathe.

"A single fish in a tank, with the glass painted to look like the ocean around me."

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

It's him. The diary author is Chase.

Not Deimos.

There's a small flicker of disappointment deep in my core that I'm not quite ready to dissect yet. So I shove it aside, and promptly latch onto the other feeling: the one of utter disbelief and shock that this is happening.

"I gotta run to class." He grins as he pushes the flowers firmly into my hands. "Hope we can talk soon, Dahlia."

I, too, have class. But hours later, as late afternoon is fading into evening, I rush across campus to my favorite spot. I pull out the rock and flip open the orange leather book to the last page.

My heart soars at the words written there.

Have you figured out who I am yet, Dahlia?

We've never once used names. Obviously *I* haven't, because I don't know who he is. But I've likewise never told him who I am. It's kind of been our "thing".

Until now.

My heart races as the pieces all drop into place.

It's Chase. The man I've been pouring out my soul to, who gets me so fucking much it hurts, who understands me, and doesn't judge me, and has me hanging on his every word, is *Chase*.

A smile lights up my whole face as I snatch a pen out of my bag and bring it to the page.

Yes. And I cannot tell you how glad I am that it's you. I think I wanted it to be you all along. I can't wait to dance with you at the Halloween Ball.

A WEEK LATER, I make my way across a dark campus filled with eager, excited students. I've gotten ready for the Halloween Ball in my dorm room, despite Amanda's snobbish,

shitty comments, and her asking me “why I’m even going to the dance since no one wants to fuck a rape-baby.”

I won’t lie, seeing her smile drop like a stone when I casually mentioned that my date was Chase Cavendish was *supremely* satisfying.

The club members and assorted hangers-on that greet me at the Para Bellum mansion when I walk in are all equally as snobby and elitist as my roommate. Being in a club at all at Knightsblood puts you in the “elite” category of students here. But Para Bellum in particular seems to attract the especially blonde-hair-blue-eyes, WASP-y, snobby types.

Whatever.

I ignore the looks as I make my way upstairs and down the hall to the east wing of the mansion where the “top brass” of the club hang out.

I’m halfway down the hallway when I pause. My brow furrows as I sniff the air, alarm bells going off in my head.

Smoke.

Something’s burning.

My pace quickens as I bolt down the last stretch of hallway to the big double doored entrance to the billiards room that also serves as the inner sanctum for the Para Bellum president—aka Chase—and the other club leaders. The smell of smoke only grows more powerful, and the air around me gets hotter.

What the hell.

My hand has just touched the doorknob when the door itself suddenly yanks inward. I gasp, stumbling forward into the room and barely catching myself on the doorframe.

Then a figure blocks my way.

A figure with a hauntingly beautiful, terrifying face painted like a skull, smeared away and scuffed in places.

Deimos.

He's standing there in front of me looking haggard, disheveled, and brimming with black energy, like a mad king. The face paint only makes it even worse; even scarier. He's cradling his hand, bloody and mangled, and when his eyes meet mine, I see a savagery in them that shakes me to my core.

"*You...*" His eyes are dangerous as they focus on me. His lips curl into a sneering snarl so full of pure hatred and vitriol that it sucks the air from my lungs.

It's only then that I notice there's smoke billowing all through the room behind him, and flames flickering across the ceiling. I go to push past him, but his good hand juts out and grabs me roughly by the throat, sending my pulse jangling. He slams me back against the doorframe, blocking me from entering or even seeing properly into the room.

"Do not go in there."

His voice always has a raspy edge to it. But tonight, it's like he's Death itself. The voice coming from this man's body is one that's been through hell and back. Or maybe it's something inhuman speaking *through* the man standing in front of me.

Something snaps and crackles in the room behind him, and a fresh wave of smoke and sparks billows behind him.

"*Fire!*" I choke through his grip around my throat. "Deimos, there's a—"

"*Run away,*" he hisses venomously. "Turn around, and fucking *run away*. And don't ever fucking look back."

The crackling sound snaps again, pushing more smoke through the room. My jaw sets. My courage rises up deep within me and I plant my hands on his firm chest.

“Let me go.”

I shove him, and before he can grab me, I’ve gotten past him and into the room.

Oh God...

The whole far wall is on fire, the heavy brocade curtains on the window roaring with flames that lick at and char the ceiling. The couch is on fire, and a chair, and the Persian rug in front of the fireplace.

I’m about to scream, when my eyes land on something else. And the needle on my whole world scratches.

It’s two bodies: one is the VP of Para Bellum, Brad Hathaway, and the other...

My hand flies to my mouth, clamping over it as I scream into my own throat.

The other is Chase, face-up, eyes open and staring lifelessly at the ceiling, with blood pooled around his head.

So much blood.

Before I can say or do a thing, powerful arms go around me, yank me back, and shove me roughly from the room. Deimos’ good hand wraps around my throat as he slams me into the wall opposite the door to the club room. His eyes spark black fire as he looms over me, snarling down into my face with all the vengeful wrath of the very god of terror he’s named for.

“I warned you not to go in there,” he snarls viciously. “*I fucking warned you!*” His eyes squeeze shut tightly. So does his hand around my throat.

“Your life just got very complicated, Dahlia,” he hisses quietly. His eyes open again, and when they do, the look he gives me is like a knife being slammed into my chest. “You’re *gone*. You are leaving Knightsblood tonight. You will never, and I do mean fucking *never*, speak of what you saw here to anyone, ever, in your entire life.”

I blink, my heart racing and the blood draining from my face as the shock begins to settle into me.

“Dahlia.”

I gasp for breath as the world spins and smoke chokes the air. Someone’s screaming somewhere. A fire alarm begins to wail.

“*DAHLIA.*”

I jerk from my stupor, horrified as I stare up into the viciously cold and brutally beautiful face of the man who I’m pretty sure just killed the only person to ever see me for me.

“*Run from this place, now,*” he snarls. “And if you ever speak of any of this, I’ll destroy everything you love.”

His hand drops from my throat. We stare at each other, as if he’s trying to gauge if I’m going to do as he says or die at his hands when I don’t.

My mouth opens, then clamps shut. Something unspoken flickers between us as my eyes narrow at him in both pure fear and utter hatred.

Hatred that I see mirrored right back in his own eyes lancing into me, swirling with something else I can’t quite place.

But I don’t wait to figure out what it is. I whirl, and I fucking *run*, out into the night, tears streaming down my face, my heart shattering as screaming sirens fill the air.

DEIMOS

I'VE NEVER REALLY CONSIDERED myself a sadist. I mean, obviously, I have, at times, sadistic *tendencies*. I blame the abnormally high levels of malice flowing through my veins for that. But for all of my more...primal inclinations, sexually speaking, I don't actively seek out causing pain for my own satisfaction.

That all said, I could get very used to watching Dahlia mutter and swear to herself while she kneels on the floor of the Laconia offices in Louboutins and Dior skirt-suits putting furniture together.

It's like the sexiest IKEA ad ever.

I smile darkly, my eyes narrowed and glinting as I watch her grit her teeth and shove her hair back from her face, giving me a glimpse of the wrath in her eyes. But she stays where she is, kneeling amongst the piles of half-broken-down cardboard boxes as she assembles a chair.

But even as I watch her, I'm not sure I could truthfully say that the pleasure I derive from watching this comes from her discomfort.

No, what's got my cock rock-hard and swollen in my slacks is the fact that every time Dahlia bends too far over, her skirt

rides up high enough to give me a flash of her black panties. Or that the harder she works, and the sweatier she gets while doing so, the more her blouse clings to her breasts, giving me glimpses of her nipples puckering.

It's a distraction, to say the least. But then, if I'm going to be distracted from the very real work I have to do—with getting Laconia Logistics up and running, not to mention still being in charge of all of my family's assets in Europe—I choose to be distracted in more, well, shall we say, less of a cock-tease way.

She startles when I exit my glass office and march over to her.

“Yes?” She mutters, shooting me a look.

“First, lose the fucking attitude. Second, we need to talk about your office attire.”

Her brows furrow. “What the hell is wrong with my office—”

“It's distracting.”

She stares at me incredulously before her eyes narrow. “You're something else, you know that?”

When I say nothing, her lips purse.

“Well?” Dahlia mutters. “Exactly how can my extremely appropriate, non-revealing office attire be less distracting for you, my liege?”

That fucking mouth. Part of me wants to unzip and fill it right here and now, until the sass in that mouth is replaced with my sticky cum.

“For starters, you can stop flashing me your fucking panties.”

Dahlia's face explodes with heat. “Well perhaps I could stop spending my days on my hands and knees putting furniture—”

“There’s a much simpler solution.” I smile at her quizzical look as I extend my hand, palm up. “Give them to me.”

Dahlia stares at me, her throat bobbing.

“I—*what?*”

“Your panties. It’s distracting seeing them as you fumble your way through these chairs. I’m telling you to take them off so that isn’t an issue going forward.”

Her cheeks turn pink. I don’t even blink, keeping my gaze locked with hers. I crook my fingers.

“I’m confident I was clear. Now, Dahlia.”

I can see the venom swirling behind her eyes and bubbling right behind her lips. But she clamps them shut, glaring at me.

“I’m counting to three, at which point...” Her eyes bulge in shock as I flick a switchblade out from my jacket pocket. “At which point, I’ll be cutting them off.”

“Okay, okay! Jeez...” her face burns with something I’d love for her to claim is anything but excitement as she turns away. I’m confident I hear her mutter something to the effect of “psychopath” under her breath as her hand slips under her skirt.

“Here,” she blurts, turning and shoving a pair of lacy black panties into my hand.

They’re warm.

...And not entirely dry.

I’m about to bring them to my nose when I hear a slow clapping sound across the large office space. Dahlia gasps, whirling in shock. But I groan to myself, eyes narrowing when my gaze lands on the culprit.

Goddamn it.

“I heard you were back in the city...” Raquel’s manicured brows arch, painted nails daintily pushing back locks of platinum blonde. Her eyes land on the garment in my fist, and I see something vicious flicker behind them as they raise to mine. “I guess old habits don’t go away, do they, Deimos?”

As if I needed another reminder of why I fucking hate this city: because it’s filled with women like Raquel.

Four years ago, before my siblings moved back here, I was back and forth between London and New York helping out with the family business here. Our Uncle Vasilis, before he was killed, ran the New York side of the Drakos empire for a while, and it fell on me somehow to be the back-and-forth guy.

Being that I fucking loathe New York, I occupied as much of my free time as I could with empty vices to block it all out.

One of those empty vices ended up being Raquel.

We met at a place called Club Venom—a place built for the dark, dangerous, and deviant of New York’s underworld. Part kink club, part clandestine meeting place for those with money, power, connections, and illicit tastes.

Scary asshole that I may be, I don’t lie to people. At least, I don’t lie to women the way a lot of men do. My intentions are naked and brutally honest: I want to fuck—hard and rough, and in ways that will most likely terrify them and go way past their comfort zones. And that is *all* I want.

Not their phone number. Not their name. Not their interest in a repeat.

I am very clear in all of this. And yet, people mostly only hear what they want to. In Raquel’s case, it was *not* hearing what she *didn’t* want to.

She wasn't the first woman to think she'd "fix me" or "change me". But if there was ever a list of potential "fixers" of me, she'd be at the goddamn bottom. Raquel didn't just ignore my rules. She was, and presumably still is, a cruel person.

I'm an asshole, and a narcissist with a God complex. But Raquel is a cold-hearted bitch who enjoys being cruel to people she considers less than her, because she thinks it builds her up. And odd though it may sound, I find outright cruelty to be a turnoff—doubly so when it's paired with desperation.

We hooked up all of once, four fucking years ago. Or rather, we *almost* did. Raquel falls squarely in the camp of "thinks she wants to fuck the scary guy with issues and then freaks the hell out when she realizes exactly how dark and deep those issues are" camp.

I never fucked Raquel. Yet she acts as if she's "the one who got away" or something, and hounds me whenever she can for some fucking reason.

"Can I help you, Raquel?" I growl thinly.

She bristles as her eyes dart between Dahlia and me.

"Who's this?"

I say "none of your business" at the same time Dahlia says "his employee".

The overlap and the ensuing silence is...telling.

Dahlia clears her throat first, her cheeks red as she awkwardly approached Raquel and holds her hand out.

"Hi, I'm Dahlia Roy."

Raquel smiles at her thinly, ignoring her outstretched hand.

"You work for Deimos?"

Dahlia nods. “I do, yes.”

“And is it part of your job description to give her your panties?” Raquel snaps coldly. “Or are you just his little toy?”

Dahlia’s face goes crimson, her throat bobbing quickly.

“Oh, I, no—”

Raquel laughs a brittle, icy laugh. “Well you just collect playthings wherever you are, don’t you, Deimos?”

My jaw ticks.

“Laconia Logistics isn’t quite open for business, Raquel. There’s the door.”

She snorts, glaring at me before ripping her gaze back to Dahlia.

“Just to point out the obvious, hon,” she sneers. “He *will* get tired of you.”

Dahlia stammers, her face. “Oh, no, we’re not—”

“That might hold a bit more water if he wasn’t holding your fucking panties, you dumb bitch.”

Something flickers in my veins like fire.

“Your exit options, Raquel, are the elevator, the stairs, or the windows.”

She bristles, shooting me a snotty look. “Those windows don’t open.”

“They will if I throw you hard enough.”

Raquel glares at me, then at Dahlia.

“Well, I can see you’re...busy,” she sneers. “Maybe I’ll call first next time.”

“Better idea,” I growl. “We call this goodbye and there *is* no next time.”

Raquel ignores my comment, turning towards Dahlia again with a thin smile on her lips.

“You poor, poor thing,” she hisses malevolently. “He’s going to chew you up and spit you out, you know.”

Dahlia says nothing, and neither do I, as Raquel smirks, whirls, and storms over to the elevator. The office is silent as the doors close.

I scowl when Dahlia yanks her underwear out of my hand. When I turn, she’s tight-lipped as she turns away and pulls them up under her skirt. Then she grabs her bag.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“Class,” she says in a clipped, cold tone.

“Like fuck. You’re not done for the day.”

She whirls, her lips thin and her eyes lethal. “Yeah, Deimos,” she hisses quietly. “I am.”

I let her storm off, but only because she *does* actually have class now. Then I send a quick note to Christian, my head of security, to make sure Raquel doesn’t get within three blocks of this fucking place again.

Which just leaves me with one last problem: why it is I give a shit that Dahlia looked so fucking pissed when she stormed off after Raquel.

Why I care at all if her meeting a woman I was once briefly involved with makes her angry, or jealous, or fuck knows what else.

But mostly, why I look at Dahlia as anything but anger, or why I want anything at all to do with her aside from revenge.

DEIMOS

SHE MOANS, arching her back as he pounds into her from behind. His hands grip her hips, his bare dick glistening and slick as he fucks into her. Another set of hands tangles in her black hair, gripping it tight and chuckling as she gags on his cock.

Flinching, I rip myself from the flashback, stopping myself just before my fist goes through the wall.

Breathe, goddamnit.

There is no room in my head for nostalgia or dwelling on the past. Partly because I find it burdensome and illogical to linger on things that have already happened, because it's not like you can change them. And partly because the past, for the most part, is filled with nothing but ghosts and pain for me.

I mean, I'm not a monster. Not entirely. I can look back fondly on a few choice happy moments with my siblings when we were younger. But even those are somewhat tainted by the shadow of our father. Aeneas Drakos was a terror to all of us, even Atlas, my oldest brother ahead of Ares, who's now as dead as our father. But we all experienced his wrath in different ways.

He poured all his malice and hatred for the world into Atlas, trying to mold him into the future leader of our family he was born to be. Except my oldest brother was a bully, a sadist, and, most importantly, an idiot. After he killed our father to seize the throne early, he lasted all of about five seconds before he picked a fight with a man he shouldn't have, and got himself killed as well.

Honestly? Good riddance.

To Ares and Hades, Aeneas was a bully and a bastard. Kratos had it a little worse than them, since he refused to leverage his massive size and be the soulless monster our father wanted to mold him into. Ares and Hades took a lot of shit and a lot of beatings from our father. But Kratos did too, with a heaping dollop of disappointment on top of it.

Callie was nothing more than a bargaining chip. A girl, when he thought himself only capable of fathering sons. He largely ignored her. She may have gotten the best of it because of that.

And then there's me.

His weapon. His attack dog.

And also his sacrificial lamb.

He left me there to die.

Although I don't dwell on the past, there are two events that haunt me, no matter how I try and cauterize them from my mind. One is all the time I spent locked in that basement as child. Where I was shown true pain and torture. Where I was wronged. Where part of my soul was cut from me in the darkness, even as I screamed in vain for salvation.

The other event is killing those two fuckers the night they showed me that fucking video that tore out whatever was left

of my soul and my faith in humanity, and any emotions other than hate and revenge.

I breathe again. And instead of punching clear through the wall of the room that was once my bedroom here in Ya-ya's mansion, I rest my forehead tiredly against it.

Coming back to this city was a bad enough mistake. Staying was a worse one.

Bringing Dahlia back into my world was like ingesting poison, and I have no fucking idea what I was thinking. She's a toxin to me. She always has been.

And now I'm feeling the effects of her slowly poisoning every drop of blood in my body.

"Ekeí einai o engonós mou."

There's my grandson.

I smile, turning at the sound of Ya-ya's fond voice from the doorway.

"Kratos told me you were here."

I chuckle quietly. "I think it's time for your guard dog to get his own place, Ya-ya."

She scoffs at me. "What, and leave me here all alone? Since all of my other grandkids insist on leaving me one by one?"

"And here I thought you were all about us all finding love and 'making lots of babies'," I quip.

It's one of her favorite lines.

Ya-ya rolls her eyes. "Well, so far, lots of love. But no babies."

"Don't worry, I hear Ares is working diligently to change that."

In my goddamn office after hours, over MY fucking desk.

That, of course, is exactly what Dahlia walked in on the other night when she went to get those reports I didn't actually need. It was Ares and Neve that she saw screwing like teenagers in my dark office. I'm guessing she even spotted the dragon tattoo on his back that all us brothers have.

Ya-ya makes a face, slapping my chest.

"Theé mou, Deimos! Don't talk like that."

"I'm not a child, Ya-ya," I grin. "None of us are. I think we all know that the stork is as much a lie as Santa Claus at this point."

She sighs, rolling her eyes before her lips pull into a smile. "Well, babies will come eventually. In the meantime, don't you dare chase off my Kratos. Ares is off with Neve, Hades—God only know how—is settled with Elsa. Callie has her Castle—"

"She has her fake marriage to him. I'm not sure I'd go so far as to call him *hers*."

Dimitra says nothing, merely arching her brows eloquently before beckoning with her hand. "Come, I'm making tea and I'd like some company."

I've actually stopped by the house to talk to Kratos about some business I need his help with. But who am I to deny Ya-ya a cup of tea, especially when I've been gone for so long and have always adamantly refused even to visit this cesspool of a city.

I owe her much more than a cup of tea, honestly. For a start, she's the one that held our family together as best as she could after our mother died and my father went from merely self-righteous bastard to full on unhinged lunatic.

But even more than that, my grandmother is the one who sat by my side all those years ago, when I came back from that evil place in a dark, damp basement. When I still wasn't talking again yet, and still trying to find a way to hold a hand over the invisible hole in my chest through which whatever remained of my soul was dripping out.

I don't truly know if Ya-ya knows all the details of my time in that place. I doubt it. If she does, she's never said a word or let on. But she knows *something* broke inside me back then. And she stayed right next to my bed, watching me, sometimes praying, or reading a book, or other times just sitting quietly, for weeks.

In the kitchen, Ya-ya picks up a silver platter with a teapot, two cups and saucers, a bowl of sugar cubes, and a little carafe of milk. We move outside to her favorite spot—the dining table under the arbor where we held Callie's birthday.

It's getting cold out, especially when you're forty stories up in the air. But it doesn't bother me, and Ya-ya, God love her, would sit out here until the skies drop three feet of snow. And even then she'd probably still be out here, bundled up in a parka, doling out a history lesson about the trials and hardships the Spartans dealt with in defending Thermopylae.

Oh, yeah—she's convinced we're all direct descendants of the dudes with the CGI abs in the movie *300*.

“How are you liking being back in New York?”

I smile noncommittally as I stir a splash of milk and two sugars into my tea. Normally I take it black, but my grandmother brews this shit like she's making roofing tar.

“It's...quite a city,” I mutter.

Ya-ya laughs quietly to herself. “*Engonáki me káneis na geláo.*”

Grandson, you make me laugh.

“I’m glad I can provide you with entertainment for the afternoon.”

She sighs, settling back in her chair and drinking her rocket-fuel tea. Straight.

“You hate this place.”

“I...” I drum my fingers on the tabletop and then slowly raise my gaze to hers. “Yes, I hate this place. Present company excluded, of course.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “Of course, I’m always happiest when all of you are near me and not across the Atlantic...”

“I sense a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

She smirks. “You want me to inquire as to why it is you’re here? To try and peek past those walls of yours?” She snorts. “Please, Deimos. I’m an old woman. I don’t have the time, patience, or strength to tear those down. I doubt even Hercules does.”

I say nothing, slowly sipping my tea.

“And besides,” she says, lifting a bird-like shoulder beneath her shawl. “I don’t need to inquire why you’re here. I know.”

That gets my attention. I glance at her, making a point to keep my face neutral. “Is that so?”

She smirks. “How’s your new company doing, *engonós?*”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“And your hiring process?”

“Marching slowly onward. I’m going to begin bringing on an executive team next month.”

Her lips curl. “I was more curious about your *current* staff.”

“I have no current—”

Goddammit.

It takes a miracle to catch me unawares, or get me to walk into shit over the course of a conversation.

A miracle, or Ya-ya.

“You mean Callie’s friend.”

“I do mean Callie’s friend,” she says, with the slightest hint of smile.

I shrug. “I’m doing her a favor, is all. She’s at Columbia School of Business with Eilish and needed to land an internship as part of her semester coursework.”

“Is that so.”

I spread my arms wide. “I’m not sure what you’re looking for here, Ya-ya. But yes, that’s so.” I take a sip of tea as the hawkish woman across from me flays me open under her gaze while managing somehow never to once be aggressive about it.

“And the only company this girl could find at which to intern in a city like this was yours, currently consisting of zero staff but yourself?”

“I do much better with direct questioning if it’s before noon, Ya-ya. And I would assume there were no other companies interested in her because, well...” I clear my throat and lean forward conspiratorially, lowering my voice. “She’s...not very qualified, if we’re being honest.”

“Ahh, I see,” Ya-ya smiles to herself. “So it’s charity, then.”

“Exactly.”

She keeps that calm, warm, grandmotherly smile on me for precisely three more seconds before she snorts in a most unladylike way and rolls her eyes. She laughs quietly as she shakes her head and looks away.

“I see everything, *engonós*. You do know that, yes?”

I arch a sharp brow upward.

“Would you please care to fill me in, then? Because I seem not to have the same gift.”

“That’s the second time you’ve lied to your own grandmother in the last five minutes.”

When I stiffen, she grins and makes a tsk-tsking sound with her teeth. “Fine, I’ll stop now. But I *see* it, Deimos. I saw it on Callie’s birthday, just watching you at the dinner table.”

“I’m dying to be clued into whatever this is.”

She sighs. “Calmness.”

“Context?”

“In *you*, *engonós*. This girl brings a calm to *you*.”

Well, that’s utter and complete horseshit. But even I’m not monstrous enough to say that to my own grandmother’s face.

“Well, I’ll factor that into my report for Columbia once she’s done.”

For a moment, Ya-ya says nothing.

“You know, your grandfather had it, too.”

I frown. “Had what?”

“The darkness that lives in you.”

I blink in surprise. “There’s no way in the world that’s true.”

There’s not. My Papou was one of the nicest, kindest, most genuinely warm-hearted humans I’ve ever known.

“Yes, because I lived with the man for fifty years. What could I possibly know about him?”

I smile wryly.

“He *did*, Deimos. When he wanted to.”

“We’re seriously talking about the same Papou? Perpetually happy-go-lucky, always-smiling Papou?”

She lifts the corners of her mouth, nodding to me. “Sometimes we smile through the pain. He had it, though. Same as I see in you. Your father had far too much of it. And Atlas...” She shakes her head sadly. “Also too much.”

We say nothing for a minute. We just sip our tea in the chilly fall breeze, looking out over the changing leaves on the trees of Central Park.

“She’s seen darkness too, you know.”

I stiffen a little before I glance at her curiously. “Who—”

“Oh, let’s stop playing this clueless Deimos game, shall we? I don’t enjoy it.” She winks at me. “We both know I mean Dahlia.”

I arch a brow. Ya-ya smirks.

“Please, *engonós*. As if I don’t know all about *anybody* who spends time with my family. I know about Ms. Roy’s connections to the Cross family, and of her sad parentage.” She frowns, nodding slowly as she looks into her mug. “But there’s something else, too. Another darkness that still hangs over her, though I don’t know what it is.”

I do.

It's *me*.

The shadow hanging over Dahlia is *me*, and what she saw that night at Knightsblood that she wasn't ever meant to, darkening her past like a stain and now haunting her present like a recurring bad dream.

And maybe she'd finally found a way to forget, and to move on from that darkness. But I've gone and ripped her right back into it, claws outstretched, and teeth bared. Ya-ya smiles as she reaches across the table and rests her hand on mine.

“Something that might help, *engonós*. Something your grandfather used to say.” She clears her throat and turns to look into the wind. “*If we hide who we are, we remain in the darkness.*”

Well, that explains that, then. Because I've hidden who and what I am my entire life.

It sure explains the shadows.

DAHLIA

SOMETIMES, your breaking point is dramatic and explosive. Cue the *Jerry Maguire* “who’s coming with me” scene.

But other times, your breaking point just happens in between words or breaths of air. There’s no big Hollywood movie finale that pushes you over the line. It’s just a single look, or one comment.

Or, in my case today, a blister.

This morning, I woke up with my hands and wrists aching, my knees raw, and my back killing me from the long, punishing hours I’ve spent as Deimos’ handyman putting furniture together. I even didn’t wear office attire one day, coming in instead in basically workout gear so I wouldn’t sweat through another nice blouse.

Deimos told me it looked unprofessional and that I was in violation of some sort of previously unknown-to-me office dress code. Then he bent me over the nearest half-assembled desk, yanked my yoga pants and panties down, and spanked the *fuck* out my bare ass before fingering me to an explosive orgasm while emptying his cum down my throat.

Yeah.

You'd think if *that* wasn't your breaking point, nothing would be. Except...nothing about that made me break. Just shatter, beautifully, and come apart at the seams in the most sinfully delightful way.

I really, *truly* need to find a therapist.

In the back of my mind, I know what's going on between us is extremely fucked up. The power imbalance alone of him being my boss and what he's holding over me should be the biggest, reddest red flag in the world. Throw in the *nature* of our... physicality, and it gets downright scandalous. My white male boss is, essentially, forcing me to perform sexual acts with him while using threats of me losing my future as leverage.

I mean this could be the poster for the Me Too movement.

And I know that should bother me, like, a *lot*. Especially with what my mom and I have been through. I feel like I vaguely remember a therapist I saw years ago saying something jargon-y like "negative pattern conformity repetition", or some such.

Loosely translated from ShrinkSpeak, that's: "you're kinda fucked up with a bunch of baggage, and you're probably pretty likely to repeat bad things or terrible decisions on impulse."

Except I really don't think that's what this is. Because I don't fear Deimos. I don't resent what we do at all. I don't feel as if I'm being coerced into anything, even when he's literally manhandling me physically into a position and leaving his handprints on my ass for the next three days.

I'm almost waiting for someone, probably dressed like a suffragette, to knock on my door and demand I relinquish my feminist card.

Wanting what I want, especially from a man like Deimos, is... *problematic*. I get that. But no matter how hard I try, I can't stop the dark, swirling, viciously alluring fantasies and desires that rampage through the most private parts of my head. I can't *help* craving the way he touches me so roughly, and forces me to my knees.

The way he spanks my ass or slaps my inner thighs. The way he twists my nipples until he's *just* crossed over the line from pleasure to pain, blurring the two together as I drown in the rush of it all. The way he sinks his ridiculously large cock so deep down my throat that I'm sure I'm going to stop breathing and suffocate.

The way he's told me on more than one occasion that he'll tie me up and "fuck me raw whether I say no or not", or that he'll break into my apartment and wake me by fucking me.

I mean...these can't be *normal* kinks. And it can't be normal for me to get so absurdly wet and needy when he growls these fantasies...or possibly threats...into my ear.

So maybe that's what brought me to my breaking point this morning. It's not the blister on my thumb from the fucking screwdriver. It's the fact that I'm worried I might be a little too eager to jump off a cliff and sail into pure darkness.

In any case, I decided this morning I was playing hooky today. I sent a text to Deimos that I was taking a personal day, temporarily blocked his number, left my apartment, and asked my across the hallway neighbor, Lena, to call me if he showed up.

She helpfully offered to call the police or *shoot him*, but I told her that wouldn't be necessary.

Now, mid-afternoon, after bouncing around a few of my favorite haunts in the city all morning, I grin as I walk into The Mermaid Inn, in Chelsea. Raph looks up from his martini and the dozen oysters he's been a saint to preorder for us, smiling as he stands.

"Well hello, my dear."

He laughs, but then frowns as the hug I give him lingers and lasts a little too long.

"Hey, hey..." He pulls back, peering anxiously into my eyes. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I smile, lying through my teeth. "I'm fine. Just happy to see you."

"Well, I'm glad you could fit me into your busy schedule," he grins as we both take our seats. He motions for the waiter, tapping his martini glass and then holding up a finger.

"Oh, no, I'm—"

"Joining me in a drink, yes, I know."

I roll my eyes. "Raph, it's like two in the afternoon."

"Yes, which means noon was two whole hours ago. Catch up, Dahlia."

I laugh as I shake my head and help myself to an oyster, slurping it down. "Well, I had a day off, so...here I am."

"How's Adele?"

I make a face and roll my eyes. "The same."

"So, stabbing pillows while outwardly putting on a brave face?"

"Yeah." I shrug. "It's okay. She's tough: she'll survive your dad."

Raph grunts and takes a large sip of his martini just as mine arrives.

My brow furrows. “Have you...you know...”

“Seen him?” Raph’s mouth twists as he shakes his head. “No. As far as I know, he’s holed up in his vineyard outside Lyon. But I don’t know for sure. We’re not really talking right now. Not since he basically did a one-eighty on your mom.”

And me.

I never really saw myself letting an older man through my defenses, especially another one that was going to play father-figure. But Gerard was *so* amazing to me and Mom, and so kind, and so loving.

And he still ended up being, well...this.

Raph sighs. “He’s such a bastard.”

I snort, lifting my drink. “No disagreement here.”

“Well, being that we’re on the same team when it comes my dick of a father, I should let you know I’ve been doing some sleuthing, legally speaking.”

“Oh?”

Raph nods, his brow furrowing. “Well, as much as I can.” His mouth twists. “You know I’d love to help more, it’s just...”

“No, I know, and I totally get it. You don’t have to apologize for anything, Raph.”

My stepbrother is a lawyer at a well-known firm here in New York, and a good one, too. But while I’d love his legal help with all of this, his hands are tied. For one, because Gerard does some business with the legal firm that Raph works for, which is a conflict of interest. But for two, him being Gerard’s

son makes it ethically gray for him to officially help my mom and I

Raph sighs. “Well, in any case, I’ve been alarmed by the sale of some of these contested companies of your mother’s. At first, I figured it was you or your mom working with shell companies—”

“Except we don’t have the sort of cash it would take to do that. Also, that would be fraud, right?”

Raph snorts. “Only if you get caught. If he’s going to play this dirty, I see no reason why you and Adele shouldn’t too. But, you’re right. I figured—no offense—that you didn’t have the cash to start buying up companies just to stop my father from taking them in the divorce, not with everything tied up with his legal motions.”

“You’re right. And no offense taken.”

“So, I did some digging.” He frowns. “Dahlia, I’m not going to lie: I’m concerned about some of these sales. A few of the CEOs had...issues, let’s call them. Issues that I was aware of because I’m a snoop like that. But I’m worried that maybe others knew of them as well and used that knowledge to get them to sell for rock bottom prices.”

I nod, looking down into my drink.

“And the more I’ve dug,” he goes on, “the more I’m beginning to suspect that six of the bought companies were ultimately purchased by one individual, using different shell companies to cover their tracks.”

My face twists as my eyes lift miserably to Raph’s.

“Way ahead of you,” I sigh. “They were.”

His brow lifts. “Oh?”

I exhale slowly. “Do you remember Deimos Drakos, from school?”

Raph grins slyly. “Tall, dark hair, ultra mysterious, and scary-sexy in that ‘please choke me and fuck me raw’ sort of way?”

My face explodes into flames as I crumple and bury it in my hands. “*Raph*,” I hiss, side-eying the adjacent tables.

He snickers. “Oh please. As if we all haven’t thought it. He’s the boy who fucks you over the dinner table in front of everyone when you take him home to meet the family.”

I groan, shaking my head. “You need help.”

“No, I need a crazy pale boy with tattoos and a big dick to—”

“Yeah, no more martinis for you, my friend,” I blurt, yanking his glass out of his hand as I shoot an apologetic look to the older man sitting at the table next to us.

“Well, what about him?”

When I clear my throat and throw him a significant glance, Raph’s eyes go wide.

“Hang on, *him*?”

I nod quietly.

“I thought he lived in Paris or London or something.”

“He did. Now he’s back in New York.”

Raph blinks and shakes his head. “But how do you know that he’s the one who bought all—”

“Because she works for me.”

My head jerks up, a ripple of something cold and sharp sliding down my spine as the voice wraps around me and squeezes.

Slowly, my pulse thudding loudly in my ears, I turn. Immediately, I shiver as his dark eyes slice into mine.

“And, given that she *does* work for me, I believe she’s just committed corporate espionage.”

Raph flashes a nervous smile. “Deimos, long time no see. We were just talking about y—”

“Yes, well, you know what they say. Speak of the devil,” Deimos growls quietly, his eyes never leaving mine, “and he shall appear.”

His eyes narrow dangerously as they flit to Raph. Then back to me.

“You’re supposed to be at work.”

“I texted you. I took a personal day.”

“Those need to be approved.”

I frown. “No, they—”

“They do at my company.”

Raph clears his throat. “Actually, Deimos, labor laws—”

“I’m confident I wasn’t talking to you.” Deimos’ eyes slide from me to Raph. “And exactly *why* are you on a fucking date with my goddamn employee during work hours?”

I glare at him, plainly seeing...well, possessiveness on his face. Anger. Maybe even a little jealousy.

Of *Raph*?

“*Date?*” I blurt at Deimos. “This is my stepbrother, you psycho.”

“So, the piece of shit offspring of the man trying to steal your mother’s money.”

Raph awkwardly clears his throat. “That would be me, yes. And, I don’t know if you remember me, but we went to Knightsblood together—”

“I went to school with hundreds of pampered douchebags,” Deimos growls. “I never bothered to keep track of who was who.”

Raph frowns. “Well, for what it’s worth, despite who my father is, I’m on Dahlia and Adele’s side here.”

“How nice for you.”

Raph’s smile falters, and he shrinks back a little as Deimos looms over him, gutting him with a somewhat unhinged, psychotic glare before turning to me.

“You’re coming with me. You have work to do.”

“We’re not done our lunch.”

“Oh, believe me, you are.”

He grabs my wrist, but I yank it back and shoot him a venomous look. I’m pretty sure my dangerous bravado is coming from the fact that I haven’t eaten all day and just slugged back half a martini at two in the afternoon.

“I’m *not*. And I’m not going anywhere with you.”

I shiver as the corners of Deimos’ lips curl dangerously. He clears his throat and leans down, looking over my shoulder with his lips right by my ear so that only I can hear him.

“Come with me right now, or I’ll put you on your knees right here in the restaurant and fill that fucking mouth of yours with my cum.”

The speed with which my core tightens and my panties become soaking wet is...disturbing.

I clear my throat, trying to stop the roaring heat from spreading across my face.

“Raph...”

“Hey, work is work, I get it,” he says with an uneasy laugh, glancing nervously at Deimos. “Call me later?”

“WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?”

The car that Deimos had waiting for us outside of The Mermaid Inn hasn't taken us to the Laconia Logistics office.

We've just pulled up outside his apartment building.

Deimos says nothing, ignoring my question as he gets out and waits for me to follow suit. When I stay put, he shoots me a look that both scares and electrifies me. It also gets me the fuck out of the car.

I swallow as the elevator opens onto the huge, sprawling, gorgeous loft space that I remember from last time. Since I was last here, it seems Deimos has made zero progress in buying any more furniture.

“What are we doing here?”

I flinch when I hear him lock the door behind us. He says nothing as he moves past me, shrugging off his jacket. He hangs it neatly over the back of the single chair by the window before he clicks on the floor lamp and pushes a button on the wall. My pulse skips and my skin tingles into pebbled goosebumps as blackout shades begin to slide down, covering the walls of windows and utterly blocking out the afternoon light. The entire loft goes dark except for the pool of light cast by the single floor lamp in which he's standing.

“Deimos—”

“Since you like to play games,” he growls quietly, “we’re going to play one of *mine*. One of my favorites.”

He leisurely starts to unbutton his cuffs, deftly rolling his sleeves up his tattooed, muscled forearms. I shiver, something in between fear and arousal gathering in my core.

“What...” I swallow thickly. “What’s the game?”

Black fire ripples in his eyes.

“You’re going to *run*, Dahlia.”

A tingling sensation, like the tip of a cold blade, drags murderously slowly down my spine.

“I’m not sure I—”

“In here, Dahlia,” he murmurs quietly. “You’re going to run. And I’m going to *catch you*.”

Holy fuck.

Holy fucking FUCK.

My eyes widen in shock, and fear, and anticipation, and my pulse jangles as adrenaline floods my system.

“I...and... What happens when you catch me?”

He doesn’t say anything. He just slowly advances toward me, staring right into my soul with those dark eyes as my blood roars in my ears.

“Deimos...?”

I tremble as he slowly circles me.

“What happens when you catch—”

“I’ll *fuck you*, darling,” he growls right into my ear, making me flinch as a gasp rips from my mouth. “I’ll pin you down

and fuck you hard and rough, like the good little fuck toy you are.”

Holy fucking SHIT.

I know he’s dead serious, and that only adds to the swirling, heady mix of fear and desire careening through my system. The threat...or is it a promise...is so hot and so scary at the same time that my system can’t decide what to do with all the chemicals being dumped into my brain and bloodstream.

I could tell him. I *should* tell him. That this is new, that I’ve never done this before.

That it’ll be my first time.

But I don’t.

“Well?” he growls quietly, stepping back in front of me.

My throat bobs as I rake my teeth over my bottom lip, my eyes caught in the twin dark pools in his lethally beautiful, demonic face.

And slowly, explosions firing in my brain, I nod.

“*Okay.*”

His lips twist hungrily.

“*But,*” I blurt. “If we do this, there needs to be an expiration date.”

“To?”

“To...this. This entire arrangement of ours.”

He scowls. “We have one already. It’s a year.”

“Well, that doesn’t work for me.”

He arches an amused brow. “And I give a fuck...why?”

“It just doesn’t. I’m not doing a year.”

He smirks coldly at me. “Well, there’s room for a counter-offer, I suppose.”

“A week.”

He laughs. “Try again.”

“A month?”

He turns away and walks back toward the single floor lamp casting the only light in the whole loft.

“Six months?”

He chuckles darkly. “Not happening.”

“I thought we were negotiating!” I blurt.

“I said there was room to, not that I’d agree to anything. It’s still a year. And I’d highly recommend brushing up on your negotiating skills. That came off more like begging.”

I swallow tersely, chewing madly on my lip as my pulse begins to thud.

“Nobody else.”

At the light by now, he turns and lifts a brow. “Meaning?”

“The other night, at your office...”

“That was my brother.”

“Yes, I finally figured that out, but just the same, I don’t have any interest in catching something from one of your whores.” My jaw tightens. “Like the ones that may or may not be dropping by the office.”

Deimos looks mildly amused, rolling this eyes. “Not that I owe you an explanation—”

“You’re right, you don’t,” I say coldly.

His brow arches. “I’m aware of that. Just the same, that’s not what you think it is. There’s no history with Raquel and I.”

“*Great,*” I say flatly, disturbed how secretly pleased I feel to hear that, after seeing the predatory way that woman looked at him in the office. “But still, no one else. No other *playthings.*”

“Fine.”

It almost comes out *too* quickly. My brow furrows. “I mean that.”

“And I just agreed. Take the win, Dahlia.”

I shiver.

“One year,” he growls. “And no other people. I hope you’re aware that goes for you as well. If you so much as touch another man, I’ll find him, cut his cock off, and choke him with it. Clear?”

I gulp. “Graphically, yes.”

He tips his head, his eyes piercing into me across the dimly lit room. Fresh adrenaline begins to pump through my bloodstream as he fingers the switch on the floor lamp.

“Now, are we done with the fucking negotiations?”

I nod, my throat closing up as I wet my lips.

“Good.”

“So what do we do now—”

My heart lurches into my throat as he clicks off the light, plunging the whole loft into utter blackness.

“Now, darling,” his voice rasps from somewhere in the ether. Behind me? To the side?

What the fuck have you signed up for, woman?

“Now,” his disembodied, venomous voice growls. “You’re going to *run*.”

DAHLIA

THERE'S no time to think. No time to weigh the choices that brought me here, or to process how insane this is.

No time to make a T with my hands and say "time out".

I'm not sure I'd want to, anyway. Because as I turn and bolt into the blackness of the loft, unable to see a goddamn thing, it's not just pure fear and adrenaline that explode through my veins like napalm.

It's the darkest, most incinerating, soul-damning rush of pure desire I've ever felt. It's the pupil-dilating, heart-pounding thrill as my worst, most depraved fantasies swirl and blur with reality.

This is real. This is happening. Deimos is going to *chase me* through the dark.

...And I know he'll catch me, eventually. And when he does, I know he'll do exactly what he said he would.

He'll pin me down.

And then, he'll *fuck me*.

This isn't a fantasy. Not a fever dream punctuated by a gasped moan alone in my bed. This is for real.

For keeps.

My pulse thunders as I bolt across the darkness. I grunt, biting my lip to stop from crying out when I crash into what must be one of the support pillars that dot the loft. I zig to the left and zag to the right, a chill running down my spine as I hear the slap of footsteps somewhere behind me.

“Come out come out, my little plaything...”

Deimos’ voice sounds both supernatural and ethereal as it floats on the blackness, seemingly coming from every direction at once.

“Tell me where you are, darling,” he growls from somewhere next to me. “So that I can enjoy your moans when I’ve spread those legs and I’m fucking you raw.”

It’s the sensation of walking up the dark basement stairs as a kid and *knowing* there’s a monster coming after you. It’s the feeling of being alone in the woods and sensing eyes on you.

Or swimming at night, waiting for the shark to rise from the deep and tear into your flesh.

And yet it’s not just all of that. It’s not merely terror and fear. It’s pure, unadulterated *lust* being mainlined right into my veins. Not even just a turn on, it’s like a concentrated lethal dose of being turned on, hitting me all at once. Like going from zero to a thousand miles an hour in milliseconds, tied to the nose of a rocket as it blasts off.

“*Where are you...*”

I stifle a gasp, my pulse thrumming, skin tingling and pure need pooling between my thighs as I jerk to the right and careen into the abyss. My nipples are almost painfully hard against my bra, my thighs slick with arousal, my very skin on fire with adrenaline and the rush of endorphins as I run.

“*Where are you...*”

I bite down hard on my lip and double back when I hear his ethereal, spooky voice somewhere in front of me. But instantly, my shin slams into something hard, and there's no stopping the cry that is torn from my mouth.

Tears dot my eyes and pain throbs in my shin as I bolt to the right—

“Found you.”

And I *scream* as powerful hands grab me tightly. His voice snarls into my ear, sending chills down my spine as he yanks me off my feet and brings me down hard to the ground. I scabble, kicking back, catching him with my heel, I think. He just grunts and twists my leg painfully to the side, making me gasp sharply.

My eyes start from their sockets as I slam back down to the ground, face-down. A hand tangles tightly in my hair, snapping my head back and making me cry out as a heavy weight slams down on top of me, keeping me pinned hard to the wooden floor.

“Too. Fucking. Easy,” he rasps into my ear before biting it sharply. His hand slides underneath me, and I choke back a moan when he roughly manhandles my breasts through my shirt. He rips it open, sending buttons scattering everywhere and my pulse skyrocketing. My bra is roughly yanked down, freeing my breasts, which he immediately grabs hard.

Pleasure and pain explode through my core as Deimos squeezes my breasts mercilessly, pinching and twisting my sensitive nipples until the ache ripples all the way between my thighs. His teeth rake down my bare shoulder as he yanks the shirt away, breaking the skin and sinking into my flesh as I cry out and writhe beneath him.

“*That’s it, darling,*” he growls thickly into my ear as his thigh shoves mine apart. “Fight me. Try and escape. It’s only going to make your pussy that much *sweeter* for me.”

I know this is beyond fucked up and wrong. I know it on every single level of reality, and in every fucking molecule in my body.

But, so help me God, I *still* want it.

It’s not even a want anymore, it’s a need. Something visceral and primal that’s such a part of my DNA that I’m entirely helpless to fight or deny it any longer.

Maybe it does mean I’m fucked in the head. Maybe it means my trauma runs so deep it’s screwed up the wiring in my brain, and left me broken, deranged, and irrevocably messed up.

Just like him.

But when his fingers pinch my nipples, and his teeth rake hard down my shoulder, and he shoves his leg between mine, I don’t give a shit about labels or psychoanalyzing my twisted brain.

All I know is, the most depraved fantasy I’ve ever had, the one that runs in my mind on a loop if I let it, is being played out in reality.

And it’s *so* real, I’m not even sure if we’re “playing” at all anymore.

And that makes it even better.

I choke out a scream as Deimos roughly twists my nipple before freeing it. He shoves me down hard against the wooden floor, my tender skin dragging against it electrically as he keeps one hand in my hair and brings the other to the back of my knee-length skirt.

My moans fill the air as he shoves the skirt up over my ass and immediately spans me hard. He hits me again and again, viciously slapping my ass over and over until it feels like it's on fire and I'm choking out another scream.

"*More,*" Deimos growls into my ear, backhanding my bruised ass again and making me yelp. "I want you to cry out *more* for me, like a good little fuck toy. Like the sweet little *bait* that you are."

Holy. FUCK.

His hand jams between my thighs, cupping my pussy through my ruined panties. A low, cruel laugh emanates through the darkness.

"And so fucking *wet* for it. Such an *eager* little cock slut," he growls. "Already making a mess of your little cunt while you wait for me to take it. I do hope you're sopping wet, darling, or else my cock will never fit in this tight little hole."

His fingers rub my clit hard through my panties, filling the darkness with the mortifying wet squelching sounds of my arousal. He grabs the gusset of my panties, yanking it to the side before suddenly shoving two fingers deep inside of me. I cry out, my legs kicking and writhing at the feel of him suddenly filling me.

It's rough, but it's *so fucking good*. It's scary how I have absolutely zero control right now.

But that's the thrill. That's the forbidden desire I've never once allowed myself to explore fully.

Deimos chuckles quietly as he fingers my pussy until I'm dripping all over his hand. He pulls his fingers out, making me whimper as he yanks my head up from the floor, his fist in my hair. I shudder, gasping when I feel his wet fingers at my lips.

Wet, from me.

“*Open*,” he snarls. “Open wide and *taste* just how eager your slutty pussy is for me. Taste how badly it wants me while the rest of you squirms and writhes on the ground, helpless.”

My lips part, and when his fingers slide inside, I moan as I wrap my lips around them. My tongue swirls, tasting myself on his fingers as he groans. His hand leaves my hair, and I tense when I hear the jangle of his belt.

He shifts on top of me, and I gasp loudly as I feel hot flesh against the heated skin of my ass. Then, I feel it.

His cock: heavy, hot, swollen, and fucking *huge* as it grinds against my ass. Real, naked fear ripples through me.

He still doesn't know that I've never done this before.

I could say something, right now. Maybe I would, if I had any rational thought left in my brain. But when he roughly shoves my thighs apart and drags his hand from my mouth down to pinch my nipples again, that last molecule of rational thought pops like a bubble and disappears into nothingness.

He grabs my hips, spanking my ass hard, then spanking my thighs as he shoves them wider apart. My face is still pressed against the floor, my nipples dragging against the hardwood as his hand grabs a hank of my hair.

My panties are still pulled to the side as his swollen head pushes between my slick lips. My legs tremble.

Oh fuck...

I think I'm ready. I hope I am. But nothing can prepare me for that first brutal sensation of penetration, of being completely fucking filled, when Deimos rams into me. Hard.

Sweet. Fucking. Jesus.

It hurts. That first thrust, when he buries every inch of that massive dick deep inside me, fucking hurts, and it sends fire rippling through me as I cry out into the floor. But then he drags that thick cock out, and then fucks right back into me. And again, and again, and again.

And something happens.

The searing pain of that first claim melts away. The tense, clenching sensation and the way my teeth are grinding so hard that my jaw throbs fades. I can feel my body relax. I feel my pussy stretching wider to take him, and my jaw and mouth go slack as I choke out a moan against the floor.

Oh my fucking God...

Deimos groans deeply as he pounds into me mercilessly, his hips rocking hard against my ass as he fucks me into the floor. One hand spans my ass, my thighs, my breasts; his other one tangles my dark hair in a fist as his teeth drag over my neck and sink into my flesh.

It's like being fucked by something inhuman, a monster. By the devil himself. By a malevolent force of nature.

And I am *fucking loving it*.

I love how messed up it is to lose my virginity like this. I love that it hurts, alongside the pleasure. I love that it feels like I have less than zero control over this, that I'm entirely at his mercy.

I love how *wrong* it all is.

"*There's my good little cock-slut,*" he snarls into my ear, ramming hard into me as I squeal in pleasure. "Moan for me. Beg me for it. Be my eager little cum whore."

"*Please...*" I choke, moaning as reality glitches.

“*Louder, darling,*” he growls, grinding his fat cock deep in my virgin pussy and slamming my hips savagely against the floor. “I want the fucking neighbors two blocks away to know you’re mine.”

“*PLEASE!*” I scream.

“Please *what*, my little toy.”

“*Please fuck me harder!*”

It already hurts as much as is pleasurable. But I’m a junkie for all of it already. An addict, craving more, more, *more*.

And Deimos is like a shot straight to the vein.

He starts to fuck into me even more brutally, with no shred of mercy. His hips ram against my bruised ass, slamming my hips into the floor as he pulls my hair and spanks my ass. He leans over me, biting my shoulder and making me scream as my body begins to coil and clench. His mouth finds my ear in the darkness, and when he calls me his slut and whore and fuck-toy and every imaginable degrading, demeaning name, it only dumps more fuel on the fire roaring inside of me.

I might be fucked up beyond saving. But if I’m going to hell, he can drag me right down there himself.

The room and even reality itself become nothing but a blur. It’s like my entire universe shrinks down to one single point, erasing all the trauma in the past, wiping away all the troubles of the now, deleting *everything* except for the sensation of him taking me, and pushing me to a place I’ve only imagined.

My core clenches tighter and tighter. My breath is shoved from my burning lungs as he rams into me over and over, nailing me to goddamn floor as his huge cock fucks into me, filling the loft with the lewd sounds of my drenched pussy squelching around him.

“Now be a good little fuck-toy and take my cum, darling.”

Take my cum. Not “come for me” or “I want to feel you come.”

I’ll analyze why later, but the second he says it, it’s like pulling the trigger on a gun.

And I. Fucking. *Explode.*

I scream into the floor, my back arching and my body racked with shudders and tremors as the single biggest orgasm of my life, by a fucking *mile*, erupts through my core. I cry out over and over, shaking and writhing and spasming under him like I’m having a seizure, while he just keeps pounding into me.

He grabs my hair tight, yanking my head up from the ground as his teeth find my neck. He bites down so hard I’m almost deliriously imagining he’s an animal ripping out my jugular. I feel his powerful muscles coil and tighten as he grinds his huge cock deep in my tender, throbbing pussy and starts to come.

I do, too; again.

The feel of his hot cum spilling into me, and his thick cock pulsing and throbbing so hard and so deep, sends me over the edge a second time. Deimos groans, snarling into my neck and growling into my ear as he pushes in a little deeper, as if to make sure not one drop of his cum is ever coming back out.

After that, it’s like a switch flips inside me. My vision—what little I can even see in the almost pitch dark—blurs. My head droops. I’m honestly not sure if I’ll ever be able to get up off this floor ever again.

Everything hurts. Everything throbs and tingles. I wince when I feel Deimos slowly pull out of me, my legs trembling as his

swollen cock head slips free of my lips. I'm wondering how I'll convey to him that I can't speak, or move.

I don't have to.

Powerful arms scoop me up. I cling to him, still trying to steady my breathing as he glides effortlessly through the pitch blackness.

A light flicks on, half blinding me before he dims it a little. He sets me down on something soft, but my battered ass is on *fire*, and I wince and roll onto my side. I hear water running, and it's so soothing a sound that I almost fall asleep.

"Not yet," Deimos growls quietly. He picks me up, and I gasp when I feel myself being lowered into warm, bubbly water that smells like jasmine blossoms.

He just chased me down in the dark and fucked me to within an inch of my life on the ground, like an animal.

And now he's run me a bubble bath.

I blink silently in shock as Deimos wordlessly soaps my body, pours water over my hair, and then starts to shampoo it.

The man is *washing my fucking hair*.

What is happening.

Slowly, I begin to relax. I begin to allow the warmth of the water to sooth my sore muscles and the throbbing ache between my legs from our brutal, savage fuck session.

The duality of the two sides of him feels like a reality blur: there's the chase-me-down-and-fuck-me-like-he-hates-me Deimos. And the run-me-a-bubble-bath-and-wash-my-hair-like-a-lover Deimos.

It's confusing, and more than a little strange. But also oddly... comfortable. Comforting. The ferociousness blurring at the edges into tenderness.

I shiver when his hand slides between my legs, gently washing my very, very sore pussy.

And then suddenly, reality crashes back and my eyes fly wide open as my head whips around to stare at him.

"I'm..." I swallow, flushing. "I'm not on any birth control."

"Good."

My jaw drops like a stone as my eyes widen.

Holy sweet fuck why is that so hot?

Something heated flickers in his eyes. Then he looks away as he starts to rinse the conditioner out of my hair.

"You'll go on birth control tomorrow. Because, Dahlia..."

I shiver, taking a shaky breath as he cups my jaw and twists my face around, leveling those dark, piercing eyes right into mine.

"Because we'll be doing what we just did *far* more often."

DAHLIA

THIS IS what addiction looks like. This is what ignoring logical reason and personal boundaries in the name of chasing the next hit looks like.

I've never once done drugs. And I hardly ever have more than a few drinks. I don't like giving up or losing control. I get antsy and on edge if I'm not in charge of my faculties.

I don't even drink coffee every day, for God's sake. So I've never felt what a real chemical addiction is.

Until now.

Until Deimos and I started these dark, fucked up, depraved games. And now, there's no stopping. Not because he's forcing me. But because I want *more*.

Constantly.

In the two weeks since that time in his loft where he unwittingly took my virginity in the most vicious, brutal way imaginable, we've played that game again almost every day. The days when he's not turning the lights out and chasing me like an 80's horror movie psychopath, he's simply bending me over his desk, or having me kneel between his legs, or throwing mine over his shoulders.

It's relentless. And consuming.

But I. Can't. Stop.

And I don't want to.

I wince as I lower myself gingerly to the bench outside one of the academic buildings on campus. Sweet *fuck* am I sore. Ridiculously so, to the point where my vagina is begging me to knock it the fuck off for a whole twenty-four hours at the least.

But again... This is what addiction looks like.

Even when I settle onto the bench and groan, immediately that painful sensation makes my brain flash hungrily back to how I got it. How Deimos chased me through the still pretty empty office earlier today and wrestled me to the floor. How he pinned my arms down as I tried to smack him, and bent my knees up to my chest before cutting—literally *cutting*, with a switchblade—my panties off, stuffing them into my mouth, and fucking me until I swear I saw a higher power before he pulled out and came all over my face and my breasts.

Yeah, so...yeah.

I feel my cheeks burning as I replay one filthy, fucked up flashback from the last two weeks after another. I know deep down that this is seriously messed up—that it's...*weird* for me to crave the brutality and the loss of control, especially after what happened to me.

But there's no reasoning with it. No rationalizing these desires.

“Hey!”

I gasp, whipping my head around as the peppy voice rips me from my daydreams. Victoria makes a face as I stare at her with what is probably a harried expression on my face.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you!”

My throat bobs as I force a smile. “No, not at all!” I push the x-rated memories from my head. “No, I was just...” I smile awkwardly. “Just a lot going on in my head.”

It’s weird, talking to a “normal” person after doing the things Deimos and I do. It’s like you’re hiding this terrible secret beneath the surface, smiling sweetly so they don’t realize what a twisted, deviant, kinky little bitch you are.

She frowns. “Is everything okay?”

God, every time this poor girl sees me or even interacts with me, I’m falling apart at the seams, and not in the good way.

“Yeah, no, I’m good,” I shrug before making a face. “And, again, I’m so sorry for bailing the other night.”

“Oh, no worries at all. I’ve actually connected with a tutor to catch up a little more on what I missed at the beginning of the year.”

I nod. “Awesome. Well, the notes are really yours if you still want them.”

“Yeah?” She looks at me hopefully. “I mean, I wouldn’t say no...” She grins at me. “What are you doing now?”

Going home to soak my bruised ass and pussy in a warm tub with some kind of bath bomb thing Eilish recommended when I lied and said I’d fallen down some stairs onto my butt and bruised my vulva.

“Nothing?”

She shrugs. “Can I buy you that drink? I just found this awesome little vintage-y bar near the Museum of Natural History. And it’s like nobody even knows about it.”

My brows perk up. Victoria makes a face. “I mean, unless you want someplace livelier. I just hate busy—”

“No, no, secret vintage place with no one else in it sounds *perfect*,” I grin. “I hate crowded bars.”

“Oh my God, *same*,” she groans. “No thanks. So, what do you think?”

I grin. “Lead the way!”

AS IT TURNS OUT, Victoria is *awesome*. She’s also almost exactly like me: only daughter of a single mom. Shit-head dad who took off basically the second she was conceived. Unconventional upbringing, moving around a lot. Stepdad that ended up screwing her mom over. And even though neither of us says it in so many words or out loud...well, you know it when you see it in someone else’s eyes. She’s got trauma somewhere in her past too, just like me.

And yet here we are: surviving. Thriving. Building futures. Kicking ass and taking names.

She’s got the same taste in music as me, we order the same cocktail, and honestly, it just feels great to let go and relax with a new friend.

“By the way, how’s your internship going?”

I feel the burning rising to my face before I turn to hide it by sipping on my cocktail straw. But the couple we’ve had so far have either heightened Victoria’s sense of perception or lowered her inhibitions enough to call it when she sees it.

“Oh, no. There’s no way you’re leaving it like that,” she giggles, smirking at me. “What was *that* look for?”

“Nothing!” I blurt, blushing fiercely.

“Eek! Co-worker?”

“Victoria, it’s seriously nothing—”

“Oh my *God*,” she blurts. “Your boss?!”

My face gives me away despite my silence. Victoria howls with glee, biting her lip as her eyes dance.

“Uhhh, details?”

“Uhhh, *no*?”

“Come on, spill! Is he way older? Super-hot? Daddy vibes?”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, I think that’s your last Aperol Spritz.”

She laughs, immediately turning to the bartender and ordering another.

“No, he’s basically my age,” I blurt out. “And....”

“And?”

“And we have...history.”

“*Ooooo*,” she grins. “And? Is he hot?”

“*Incredibly*,” I groan. “Like, ridiculously so.”

“Okay, seriously, this is the way they need to pitch business school. Fuck the whole ‘build the best future for yourself you can through hard work and networking’ spiel,” she snickers. “Just hit us with ‘steamy office affairs with your hot internship boss’. Enrollment will go through the flipping roof.”

I laugh as she drains her drink, just as the bartender is bringing over another.

“You want one more too?”

I shake my head. “Nah, I gotta get going. I’ve got some cramming to do for a midterm and then an early morning.”

She nods, and I smile at her.

“But hey, this was fun. We should do this again.”

“We totally should,” she beams back at me.

After saying goodnight and promising to connect again soon with my old class notes, I head out of the bar. There’s a bunch of taxis just down the street outside the Museum of Natural History. But I’m right at West 74th and Central Park West, which is just across the street from Strawberry Fields, the John Lennon memorial and one of my favorite spots in Central Park. Plus, it’s also home to the unofficial memorial to the late Iggy Watts of Velvet Guillotine, who overdosed almost fifteen years ago in the same Dakota Building that Lennon was shot outside of.

So instead of heading for the taxis, I cross the street to the park and enter through one of the footpaths. It’s late, and dark, and cold. But there’s plenty of lights, and this area of Central Park is never exactly solitary with all the people who meander this way.

I take a few quiet minutes at Strawberry Fields, then I head over to the Iggy Watts memorial nearby. This one always gets me, because I grew up with my mom and aunt Celeste *loving* Velvet Guillotine.

Thinking of them, I pop in my wireless headphones and start playing “Wreck Me Gently” on my phone.

I only get about thirty seconds into the song before the hairs on the back of my neck prick up. A cold sensation tingles down my back.

I yank out my headphones, gasping as I whirl. But there's nothing there except a little old lady walking a tiny fluffy lap dog. I smile weakly at her, and she smiles back before she and her dog continue on. The lampposts around me are lit, but the shadows stretch long in the chilly fall air.

And that sensation won't go away.

The feeling like I'm not alone.

Like I'm being watched.

I shiver, turning again as I slip my headphones into my bag, lace my apartment keys through my fingers, and make my hand into a fist before pulling it out of my bag again.

"Hello?"

The park around me isn't exactly quiet. I mean, I can hear the traffic on Central Park West not forty feet away. But I'm surrounded by the trees and landscaping of the park. And this section of it dips down and curves around a bend, making it feel secluded.

Yeah, I need to get back to the street.

I start walking briskly. But no matter how fast I walk, I can't shake the tingling feeling that I'm being watched or followed.

I even whirl around at one point, my pulse thudding in my ears. "Deimos?" I venture quietly. "This isn't fucking funny anymore. I don't want to play this game right now."

But, when I think about it, this isn't his style. He's not the sneak up on you type. He's the type to look you in the eye and straight up tell you he's about to turn the lights off and tackle you to the ground before fucking the daylight out of you.

I turn, and I start to run.

Instantly, I hear the not-quite-echoing sound of another pair of feet pounding on the path behind me.

Chasing me.

Adrenaline explodes through my system, and the scream lodges in my throat as I bolt down the pathway, racing past Lennon's memorial and crashing out of the park onto the sidewalk. I lurch into the crosswalk without even looking, my vision narrowing to a tunnel and my brain fixating on the single thought to get as far away from the footsteps behind me as I can.

...Which is how it is I go running right out into traffic.

Tires squeal. Horns blare. I scream, spinning as blinding headlights bear down on me. Suddenly, hands are grabbing me and yanking me back toward the sidewalk next to the park. I scream again, whirling to jam my keys into their eyes—

“Stop it!”

I freeze at the sound of Deimos' voice. And when I blink and focus, it's his face swimming in front of me.

“What the *fuck*, Dahlia!” he hisses. “If you're trying to fucking kill yourself, there are much easier and less messy ways than getting your head caved in by a taxi.”

“Someone—” I blink, sucking in air, my pulse still screaming in my ears. “Someone...someone...”

My words aren't coming out. My breath is hitching as fear closes my throat.

“Dahlia.”

I flinch when he grabs my jaw—not hard, but firmly enough to center me and allow me to take a deep breath.

I exhale slowly.

“Someone was chasing me.”

Deimos’ dark eyes look at me skeptically.

“I swear to fucking God,” I spit. “Someone...” I shiver, looking past him into the shadows of the trees in Central Park. He turns too, glaring into the darkness with a fierce snarl on his lips. Then he drags his attention back to me.

“Are you okay?”

I look away.

“Dahlia.”

“Yeah,” I mumble. “Yeah, I’m...fine. I just need to go home.”

“Like fuck.” He turns and nods to the man who I recognize as his driver, parked on the side of the street. “You’re coming with me.”

My brow furrows deeply. “Uh, no. I’m not.”

“That wasn’t an invitation to a debate, nor is the subject up for discussion.”

He takes my hand and starts to pull me toward the car, but I don’t let him.

“Deimos, I have my own place.”

“And we have an agreement that you fucking belong to me.”

My teeth grit as I plant my feet firmly on the sidewalk. Deimos feels the resistance and turns to arch a stern brow at me.

“Fight me,” he growls. “Let’s see how well that works out for you.”

“Oh yeah, tackle a woman to the ground on the side of Central Park West with about a thousand eye witnesses. Let’s see how well *that* works out for *you*.”

His gaze never leaves me. His hand tightens on mine in a way that sends shivers of ice and bolts of heat through my core.

Goddammit.

I chew on my lip, glaring at him. “*Fine.*”

A small smile pulls at his lips. His hand wraps around the back of my neck as he steps close, dropping his lips to my ear.

“Good girl.”

It’s like a stabbing sensation in my stomach, ripping and tearing my guts out, shoving me right back to that couch in our apartment in Paris when I was twelve.

With *him*.

“Good girl”. His hand wraps around the back of my neck as terror drips down my spine. He squeezes, massaging my neck as he crawls on top of me. “Be my good girl for me.”

The memory fades as my vision darkens at the edges. My knees start to wobble. I’m dimly aware of Deimos barking my name and then catching me as my legs give out.

Then it all goes black.

DEIMOS

I FEEL something tight unclench and release deep in my chest when her eyes flutter open. I scowl, get up from the chair I've been sitting in staring at her, and move to where she's lying on my couch.

Maybe I should get more than four pieces of furniture to fill my five-thousand-square-foot loft space. But then again, that would deprive me of my new favorite pastime of chasing Dahlia around in the dark, catching her, pinning her down, and fucking her like a possessed demon.

So yeah. Fuck furniture. It only gets in the way.

I crouch down next to the leather couch, watching her stir and then settle back to sleep. Without realizing it, I raise my hand and push a stray lock of dark hair out of her face.

What the fuck are you doing to me?

Dahlia isn't the first woman I've let see my inner monster. But she's certainly the first to witness a repeat performance of that savagery being let loose.

She's one of a very select few who even allowed the *first* instance of it coming out to continue, once they fully realized what they were in for.

He's complicated, my monster.

It's *not* misogyny that drives me. I don't hate or want to hurt women, and it's not some kind of fucked up gender-norm-based subjugation of the "fairer sex". That's vile.

It's a pressure release valve. A stopgap to make sure I don't spontaneously combust or fully devolve into the beast the lives inside me. He was there when I was a child, partly formed. And then it was that horrendous time I spent in hell itself, chained up in the festering, fetid dark, waiting for the monsters to come back, that I truly allowed that blackness inside of me to grow into what it is today.

Call it a coping mechanism. A psychiatric break from a past reality that I never really dealt with. Or, most likely, it's that I've always had this psychosis—this *neurodivergence*—inside of me, and the extreme limits of my sanity that I was pushed to when I was twelve destroyed my ability to keep that psychosis under wraps.

Then, in my late teens and young adult years, I discovered *this* certain part of the darkness in me—the part with peculiar tastes.

Dangerous tastes.

Tastes past the edge of normalcy.

Again, this appetite doesn't come from a desire to hurt women. I've never once remotely felt the urge to tackle some random person in a park and assault them or anything disgusting like that.

Because It's not a violence or causing pain kink. It's a *power* kink. A primal kink. And honestly, the idea of acting upon those desires with an unsuspecting or unwilling partner takes all the fun out of it.

Which brings me to Dahlia.

I grit my teeth as I stroke her hair again.

Of *course*, the one person in whom I could find an equal to my monster would be her. Fate would do that to me, just to fuck with me and laugh at me up its sleeve from the shadows. But I knew back then, and I know it now.

In spite of all my hatred for what she did, I can't pull away from her. I can't resist her. And neither can the beast inside of me.

In fact, I think he'd tear me in two if I even tried to keep him away from her.

Dahlia stirs again, her eyelids fluttering open. She blinks rapidly, gasping quietly as she realizes where she is.

"You can relax," I growl, my eyes searching hers and my mind replaying the sickening way she just went limp like a rag doll on the side of the street.

Her throat bobs, and slowly she sits upright. I hand her the glass of water from the floor beside the sofa, and she drinks almost all of it before looking at me awkwardly and then looking away.

No. She doesn't get to hide from this.

"What the fuck was all that?" I grunt.

"Nothing," she says quickly. Too quickly. Then she shrugs. "I was scared, and someone was chasing me. After that... I don't know, the adrenaline wore off or something. Or, I'd had a couple of drinks with a friend and not much to eat, so it was probably—"

"Bullshit."

Her brows knit, her eyes peering at me. “Pardon me?”

“Skip the lame excuses and tell me what the fuck that was back there.”

Her jaw sets. “I told you. It was *nothing*—”

“*No*,” I growl, cupping her face. “No more fucking secrets.”

She tenses up. “That’s not part of our deal.”

“I’m changing our deal.”

She scoffs dramatically, but I can still see the pain and the fear in her eyes—the part of her she’s trying to stuff deep down and keep hidden. Not just from me, but from herself.

“You don’t get to change the terms of our deal just because you—”

“Our deal changed the split second someone tried to hurt you!”

My words are like a slap in the face to both of us.

Shit.

I frown, and Dahlia’s brows lift curiously. I take a slow, measured breath, holding myself back.

“Tell me.”

“It’s really nothing,” she says tersely. “Drop it.”

“Bullshit. Not happening. *Tell me.*”

“It’s *nothing*, Deimos!” she hisses, anger flushing her cheeks.

“It’s *not* nothing, and you *are* going to tell me.”

She bristles, her jaw clenching. But then she trembles in that kittenish way she has when I lean close and level my gaze with hers.

“Or do I have to fuck it out of you.”

Her face flushes. Her teeth clamp down on her lower lip as it retreats back. I can see the truth *right there*. It’s begging to be let out. But then it’s gone.

“Do whatever the hell you want,” she says flippantly. “I’m just your fuck toy, right?”

I’m about to push harder. But at that moment, something flickers deep in her irises, like a smoke signal rising from the depths of her soul. She glances away, but even in profile, I can still see it, flickering like a warning light as her throat works again, like she’s pushing something deep down back into its secret hiding place.

Oh. Fuck.

Suddenly, I understand. Suddenly, the truth reaches out and kicks me in the teeth with a vicious sneer and an even more vicious laugh.

Suddenly, I know what it is she’s hiding: she’s *me*.

Not me in the neurodivergent sense.

Me in the shattered past sense. Me in the broken sense.

Someone hurt her.

She doesn’t say a word, but she doesn’t have to. Because once I get a hint of it, and once I tug at that thread with my mind, it all unravels and becomes clear as day to me.

She’s just like me. Even more, she *deals* with it just like me, too. Pushing her limits. Embracing the dark and depraved within her as catharsis and release.

Well, I’m going to drag that release out of her, right now.

Dahlia flinches, gasping quietly when my hand wraps around her throat. She twists her head, her cheeks darkening and her eyes flashing green fire as she stares into mine.

“Is that what you want?” I growl quietly, loosening the chains on the beast inside. “To be my fuck toy?”

She shivers, and a small whining whimper tumbles from her lips. I lean closer, stopping her breath as the darkness surges into my eyes.

“Is it what you want?” I hiss. “Or is it what you *need* right now.” She jolts upright as I bite down on her earlobe. “*Tell me the truth.*”

Dahlia shudders. “*It’s what I need...*”

I’d give her a second, but my monster is already smashing down the cage I keep around him and there’s no tapping the brakes at this point. Dahlia gasps, shuddering when suddenly I shove her legs back, pushing her knees up to her tits.

I don’t even bother pulling her yoga pants down. I just grab them in my fists near the top of her thighs, my biceps clenching to steel before the material rips in two under my strength. Dahlia moans as I shred the fabric, tearing a hole for me to get to her sweet cunt. Her soaked panties get yanked to the side, and suddenly, my mouth is between her legs, devouring her.

“*Deimos...*”

She cries out as my tongue drags up and down her pussy lips, tasting every sticky sweet drop of her before I plunge it in deep. My hands smack the backs of her thighs smartly, making her shudder and whimper.

I keep her legs shoved back, growling as I run my tongue from her clit down to her puckered little asshole. Dahlia squeals

when I ram my tongue into her tight back hole, writhing in ecstasy under my mouth as I devour her.

I move back to her clit, mercilessly sucking on the throbbing nub as I roll my tongue around it. I curl two fingers deep in her cunt, stroking in and out hard and fast, turning her into a goddamn puddle.

She moans when I add a third finger, sinking it into her ass as I suck harder on her clit. Her cries of pleasure fill the loft, her whole body shuddering and spasming and shaking for me as I push her to the very brink.

When she comes, it's an explosion. I can feel both her holes clamping down on my fingers as she floods my mouth with her orgasm. I keep licking her clit and fingering her, pulling back and pausing just enough to groan at the sight of her flushed, swollen pink pussy.

Fuck, I could spend a month between her thighs like this, licking her cunt into submission. But today, I know the brutal release she needs.

She whimpers when I rip off her panties and slide up over her shaking body. My black jeans and boxers are already down, and I keep her legs pinned exactly where they are, knees against her tits, as I grab my cock and center the fat crown at her opening.

“Scream for me, darling.”

I ram into her hard, filling her sweet, tight, perfect little pussy with one savage thrust. Dahlia cries out, her eyes rolling back in her head and her mouth falling open in pleasure. I pull almost all the way out and then pound back in, sawing in and out of her clenching, drippy little cunt as she moans for more.

Her eyes bulge when I shove her panties between her lips, gagging her with the ripped lace. She whimpers, moaning even louder into them as I grab her wrists and force them back over her head. Our eyes lock, our bodies grinding and undulating as one as my cock pounds in and out of her pussy mercilessly.

“Such a pretty little whore,” I grunt, fucking her even harder, my balls slapping heavily against her ass. “What a good little cum slut, moaning into her own soaking panties while she takes every inch of my thick cock bare in her greedy cunt.”

Dahlia’s eyes roll back, her face dark with lust and heat. I keep her wrists pinned with one hand and use the other to rip the neck of her top down, tearing it in two and exposing her breasts. Then I yank down her bra, making her shriek as I lean down to suck one of her nipples into my mouth. I bite down, raking my teeth over her soft flesh as she screams and writhes, her pussy clenching and milking my cock.

I know *exactly* what she craves.

It’s exactly what she gets, and then some.

My hand wraps around her throat as I suck hard on her nipples and fuck my thick cock into her. One of her hands slips free from my grasp, and quickly drops to hang on to my hand around her throat.

For a minute, I think I’ve pushed past her limit—that she’s telling me to ease off. But when my grip immediately loosens, she moans, shaking her head and gripping my hand tighter.

More blood rushes into my already rock-hard cock, swelling it almost painfully.

Greedy little fuck toy.

She wants my grip tighter.

She wants to be pushed further over the edge.

I'm happy to oblige.

"*Dirty little slut,*" I hiss into the bruised, pink flesh of her tits, now marred with marks from my teeth. My hand tightens around her throat, squeezing.

Her pussy does the same thing to my cock.

I squeeze harder, and so does she, her face suffusing dark pink as she moans and drools into the lacy gag in her mouth.

That's when I lose control entirely. I ram into her ruthlessly, fucking her like a goddamn piston as her screams and moans of pleasure choke from her clenched throat. Her hips rise to meet mine, her body writhing as we both crash toward release.

When it happens, it's like a neutron bomb going off.

Dahlia positively *explodes* for me, her body jerking and jolting in a way I've never seen, so wild it almost worries me. When I feel her start to come around my cock, arching her back off the couch, I bury my face in her neck and bite down as I bury my cock in her to the hilt and explode into her.

It feels like I haven't come in a fucking month. A year. A decade. Even though I literally just did, with her, this morning. But when I erupt, it's like an endless stream. It's like I just keep orgasming over and over along with her, emptying my balls as what feels like gallons of my cum spills into her needy pussy.

I can't see straight. My eyes are ringing. My body is shaking everywhere as I slowly come back to reality. Dahlia looks like she just had electro-shock therapy—her eyes wide but unseeing, her face flushed, her whole body trembling with aftershocks.

Gently, I pull the panties from her mouth. Our eyes lock.

Something changes.

And then, we do something we haven't done before. Something that we skipped over when we went straight to the deviant, depraved games we play.

It happens without thought, without warning; without planning or agenda. But there's no stopping it. I lean down, and when my mouth crushes down on hers, everything goes white.

For the first time in my entire life, that background noise snarling in the recesses of my head goes abso-fucking-lutely *silent*.

And I fucking *love* it.

So I keep on kissing her.

And I don't stop.

DAHLIA

YOU DON'T HAVE to spend more than five minutes with Deimos to realize that when he “decrees” something, when he “makes a proclamation”, it just *is*. It happens, almost with the snap of his fingers. On the one hand, this borderline toxic arrogance is almost eye-rolling.

Or at least, it should be. But therein lies another problematic reaction I have to this man: it *doesn't* make me roll my eyes when he decrees things—things like what I'll be eating for dinner. What I'll be wearing to the office that's still literally just him and me.

I mean, it should. It really, really should. But it's not even that I tolerate his bossiness and his ultra-possessiveness and his various demands.

Hand on heart, I kind of *like* them.

It's as confusing to me and as much of a paradox as the dark kinks of mine that I explore with him. At times, yes, it makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong, or “giving in”, or playing into some sort of patriarchal system meant to cage and bind. But mostly, it just makes me feel safe and warm and secure.

Perhaps it's because it's been me and my mom against the world for my whole life. And it feels *good* to be taken care of, almost like an infant, as silly as that sounds.

One of the changes Deimos has decreed since the night I *swear* I was chased through Central Park is my living situation.

I live here now, at his loft. There was no discussion, it was just proclaimed by the dark lord himself that very night. I initially put up a stink about it, but honestly, I only did that to appease the part of myself that insists on rebelling against someone taking charge. Secretly, I was more than okay with effectively moving into his place.

Prince of Darkness he may be, I feel safe here with Deimos.

He's never questioned me further about what happened that night. At least not since that initial moment when I woke up on his couch. I never did say what it was that sent me into that dark spiral when he touched my neck and said "good girl". I didn't have to.

It's almost like he knew without the words being spoken out loud. Which is...curious.

Mercifully, although it seems to have sparked a protectiveness in him I'd have never guessed was there, especially toward me, what that night *hasn't* done is tamed his aggressiveness sexually.

He still chases me. He still fucks the living shit out of me in brutal, punishing ways, pushing me to my absolute limit. Which I crave, and need. I really like that. I like that the events of that night haven't dampened that wild, animalistic side of him.

We don't share a bed—at least, not by the end of the night. I'm staying in his guest room, which was literally empty until the morning after I was chased, when he had a queen-sized bed delivered.

That's the only thing in the room. And I'm still not sure if Deimos' aversion to furniture is because he doesn't want to bump into things when he chases me around or due to some weird phobia when it comes to tables and chairs.

Either way, a week after the night in the park, this is where we're at. My new daily schedule involves waking up at my boss' apartment, either being ordered to bend over the arm of the couch so that Deimos can eat me or fuck me, or else being forced to my knees with his cock rammed down my throat. Then I go to work—mostly in a separate car from him, which I'm reasonably sure is both of our bizarre ways of hanging onto a modicum of distance between us so we're not spending *all* of our time together. At the office, I either put together more furniture or keep screening resumes, taking at least two breaks during the day for Deimos to make me orgasm in vicious and heart-stopping ways.

Then we go home, where he chases me through the dark, fucks me until my sanity breaks, and then feeds me whatever dinner he's had delivered before giving me a bath and putting me to bed.

I mean, there are worse ways to spend your time.

And yet, for all our physical intimacy, that's where it stops. We don't "chit-chat" or talk about our days. We're not cuddling on the couch watching a movie or anything like that.

It's purely sex—raw, rough, heart-stopping, animal *fucking*. We haven't even kissed again since that first and only time.

...It's interesting how often I find myself wanting more of that, though.

But for now, the purely sexual nature of our...whatever you want to call this...might be exactly what I need. It's cathartic. It's freeing. When he pushes me screaming past my limits as I shatter for him, it's like mental, emotional medicine.

It's also still a secret, and an unspoken one, at that. We've never had "the conversation", but it's beyond clear that neither of us is telling anyone in our families what's going on. And I'm *more* than okay with that.

It's Callie I worry the most about finding out. The idea that one of my best friends might figure out that I'm sleeping with her brother—let alone the dark and depraved *flavor* of what we do together—is enough to give me a mild panic attack.

So: a secret it remains. A dark, twisted, forbidden little secret.

I'M WORKING on some homework on my laptop, sitting on my bed in Deimos' guest room, when my phone pings with a FaceTime call. I grin when I see Uncle Adrian's name on the screen and answer immediately.

"Well hey there, stranger," I grin. "Long time no see!"

Adrian Cross isn't *really* my uncle by blood. But he might as well be. With the way things were when I was a baby, all of us pretending that Celeste was my mother while my real mom was just the nanny, Mom and Celeste grew to be closer than sisters. I've always just called her "Auntie Celeste", so it makes sense that Adrian is "Uncle Adrian".

He's ridiculously handsome—dark hair that's now tinged with silver at the temples, piercing blue eyes, and a lean, muscled build that you'd never imagine belongs to a man of fifty. With the stylish suits he wears and the clean-cut scruff on his square jaw, I've always thought he had a suave David Beckham thing going on.

I know a lot of people are scared of Adrian. And I don't blame them. I mean, the man is the head of the entire Cross family—one of Britain's most powerful mafia empires. But I'm not. I've never been. To me, he's just Uncle Adrian, who saved my life as a toddler and helped pull my mom and I out of a life of imprisonment.

I grin at the screen. When he doesn't smile back, mine falters.

"Uncle Adrian?"

"Dahlia," he growls quietly. "Look, I don't want to scare you, and your mother is *fine*—"

"*Oh my God*—" I gasp, my hand flying to my mouth as my eyes go wide.

Adrian shakes his head, forcing a calming smile to his lips.

"No-no, listen. She's okay. She's unhurt."

"What happened?!"

He clears his throat. "Someone broke into her townhouse in Paris while she was home. Luckily, as you know, I have my own people always watching your mother from the periphery, and they were able to jump in and stop the two fuckers who got in before anything happened to her."

His brow worries as his lips thin.

"I wish I could tell you this was just an attempted break and enter, a robbery by a couple of morons who didn't realize

anyone was home. But... They were both carrying guns fitted with silencers.”

My face goes pale as I clamp my hand over my mouth.

Oh my fucking God.

“Again, I want to assure you that Adele is just *fine*. My guys took the two fucks out and cleaned up the whole thing. And she’s here with us in London now.”

“Can I talk to her?!”

He nods. “Of course. She’s resting for the moment, but I’ll ask her to call you the second she’s up.”

I exhale a shaky breath that does absolutely nothing to calm my nerves.

“W-who do you think it was?” My voice cracks as my eyes widen with fear. “You don’t think—”

“No,” he says quietly, shaking his head. “They’re all gone, Dahlia, and not a single one of them is coming back.”

There’s a lethal edge in his voice. And we both know who he’s talking about. After Nasser El-Sayed—the bastard who fathered me—was killed, there were a number of his people still out there who wanted my mother and I, and Aunt Celeste, dead.

I don’t know all the details. But I do know that Adrian hunted every single one of them down like rats and killed them all. Literally *all* of them. Yes, he did it to protect my mother and me. But I know it’s Celeste that drove him to that extreme.

The man would burn down the world to save his one and only.

“Look,” he growls. “We still don’t know if this was anything more than a robbery, even with the silencers on the guns. I’m

probably just being overly cautious, but—”

“But you’re worried about me.”

His lips twist, half in concern and half in pride. “You’re getting too clever for your own good, luv.”

I grin a small smile. “Well, I blame you, Uncle Adrian.”

He chuckles darkly, but then his brow furrows again. “I don’t necessarily want to involve the Drakos or Kildare families—I know you’re close with them—but I do want to make sure you’re protected. Just out of an abundance of caution. I’m thinking about sending a few of my men—”

“I’m safe.”

I let my eyes lift from the screen to survey the guest room of Deimos’ loft around me. The whole place is also a *fortress*. Pin-code security doors, a state-of-the-art alarm system, and now that I’m staying here—though I’m not sure if Deimos has realized I’ve figured out this part—there are five armed Drakos men in the lobby, outside the building, and occasionally patrolling other floors. I can only assume Deimos has sworn them to secrecy concerning the fact that I’m living here.

“You’re sure?”

I nod at Adrian. “Very.”

He doesn’t ask for the details, but he also believes my answer, because he trusts me. Still, I can see there’s an unasked question in his eyes.

“I’m...staying with a friend right now,” I explain.

The corners of his lips lift with curiosity and amusement.

“Oh?”

My face warms. “And... I’d rather that *not* be shared with my mom just yet?”

He chuckles. “Heard loud and clear.” He sighs, shaking his head. “Remind me again, when the hell did you grow up?”

“Is that her?”

My face lights up at the sound of my mom’s voice in the background on Adrian’s end. He glances past his camera and nods.

“Yeah. She’s all yours.” He shifts his gaze back to me. “Here’s your mum, luv. Call me if you need *anything*, yeah?”

“Of course. And thanks, Uncle Adrian.”

He flashes a roguish grin at me before the phone twists to face my mom. I smile widely as she beams at me.

“*Voilà ma chérie!*”

I grin wider. “*Salut, Maman.*” My brow furrows as her green eyes meet mine. “Are you okay?”

She sighs, waving her hand nonchalantly. “Ahh, it was nothing,” she shrugs. “Just some assholes trying to take what wasn’t theirs.”

She doesn’t mention the bit about the silencers. I’m guessing she doesn’t know Adrian told me that part.

“Mom,” I murmur quietly. “No sugar-coating.”

She grins. “You’re getting too damn smart.”

“Well?”

“*Ce n’est pas un problème, Dahlia!*” she says with another casual wave of her hand.

It’s not a problem.

“I’m just here with Celeste and Adrian so they’ll stop fretting about me.”

Gee, I wonder where my habit of burying my problems under so many layers comes from.

She peers at the screen, frowning. “Where are you?”

“Oh, just at a friend’s. I’m doing some studying.”

The door to the guest room opens without a knock, which isn’t exactly unusual. Deimos has made it abundantly clear that me having my own room is only about us not sleeping the entire night together, not anything to do with my privacy.

But this time, when the door swings open, my pulse spikes as a gasp chokes off my breath.

Holy fuck.

Deimos casually leans against the doorframe, rolling the sleeves of his white dress-shirt up to the elbows, the collar already open.

...And *skull paint* covering his face.

Fear and excitement explode through my system when I see the white makeup with heavy black circles and slashes where his eyes, lips, and cheekbones are—somewhere between a skeleton’s face and Brandon Lee in *The Crow*.

It’s terrifying, feeling his lethal gaze land on me when he’s looking like that.

...It’s also making me very, very wet.

The main loft area behind him is already blackened. The way his forearms ripple under the rolled-up sleeves is intoxicating.

So is the huge bulge in his dress pants.

“Dahlia?”

I blink, dragging my gaze back to the screen. “Um, yeah, sorry.”

Mom smiles. “You’re okay?”

I glance back up at Deimos, then to my mom again.

“I’m safe, *Maman*.”

She peers at me inquisitively. “That’s not what I was—”

“I know,” I say quietly, smiling. “But I am.”

She nods, biting her lip. “Good.”

I jump, my gaze whipping to the foot of the bed. Deimos has crossed the room and is now grabbing one of my ankles. He pulls it away from my other leg, making me blush as I try vainly to close them.

That just gets me a slap on the inner thigh.

“Dahlia?”

“Umm, yeah?” I blurt, smiling at my mom and trying to ignore the metal cuff I can feel being clicked around my ankle. I clear my throat. “Look, Mom, maybe I should come visit—”

“Oh, please,” she laughs. “Dahlia, *mon chérie*, I’m really fine. It was just a break-in.”

Deimos scowls, looking up abruptly from where he’s yanking my other leg wide and cuffing it as well.

“Still...”

She shakes her head. “Not that I wouldn’t *love* to see you, sweetheart. Of course I would. But you’ve got so many important things going on with school and that internship.”

I shiver as Deimos casually takes my free hand and pulls it to the side of the bed, where he cuffs it in place.

“Mom, I—” My eyes bulge, and I have to bite down hard on my lip to stop from moaning as Deimos’ fingers twist one of my nipples through my tank top, just out of sight of my phone’s camera.

“You’ve got studying to do, yes, I know,” she smiles at me. “We’ll catch up later.”

I’ve barely ended the call before Deimos is pouncing on top of me, shoving my other hand to the side, and cuffing it. I whimper as he drags a finger down my cleavage, pulling the tank top with it until it slips down over my nipples.

“What’s going on with your mother?”

I swallow. “Noth—”

I gasp, shivering when he roughly pinches a nipple again.

“Care to try that again?”

I clamp my teeth between my lips, defiantly shaking my head with the tiniest flicker of a tease in my eyes. Deimos growls quietly, and I writhe when his hand reaches behind him to cup my eager pussy through my shorts and panties. I flinch, gasping as he slaps my inner thigh.

“I can do this all night, and I *know* you know that.”

“I do know that.”

His eyes flash, his lips curling devilishly as he reaches over and turns out the light.

“I see you’re ready to play, darling...”

LATER, after he’s made me scream about a half dozen times, first handcuffed to the bed and later on the floor of the living

area with my bruised legs wrapped around his torso and his hand at my throat, I'm back in bed, alone.

Well fucked, but also kiss-less.

I frown as I pull the blankets up over me.

But is that really what I want? Do I want kissing and sharing a bed all night with him? Or is what we're currently doing exactly what I need?

I effectively live here. We have *a lot* of sex, exclusively with each other. And yet it's obviously not a relationship.

We'd have to kiss for it to be that.

We've still never discussed the blackness of our twisted past: the fact that he clearly still has a chip on his shoulder when it comes to me, like he's still harboring this lingering hatred for me. And I still haven't forgotten that night.

When I walked in to the room to see the man who finally understood me dead on the floor, with Deimos standing over him, telling me to run and never come back.

At times, what I'm doing with Deimos truly hits me, and I have a flash of black self-loathing. Because as good as he makes me feel, and as deeply as he pries into me, pulling out the most secret parts of me and feeding them the darkness they crave...he's still *him*.

He's still the man who killed a man I might have grown to love.

It was years ago, and I recognize now it was mostly just teenage infatuation. But still...every time Deimos makes me scream or explode in orgasm, as good as it is, there's a hint of a shadow in the background.

A slight bitter taste of betrayal, that comes from the knowledge that I'm sleeping with Chase's killer.

I guess we can add that to the lengthy and growing lengthier list of "reasons I'm fucked in the head."

DEIMOS

I'VE "BEEN WITH" women before. But I've never been *with* one.

Subtle distinction, I know.

Since I was twelve and had the innocence ripped from me, I've used sex as a tool. As a prescription drug. The women have always been faceless and mean nothing, and as callous as it may sound, I know the feeling's mutual.

I may have used them to escape my own demons and vent my fury, but they used me, too. As "an experience". To explore the fetishization of broken and damaged. To have the thrill of going home with the monster with the terrifying reputation, to give them a story to tell their breathless girlfriends over a bottomless mimosa brunch someday.

Women slept with me, and even occasionally indulged the darker angels of my nature, assuming it was all an act: a persona I projected, like some sort of fashion statement. They all realized quickly that there's no mask to take off.

This is just my face.

This black hole in which they lose themselves in is just who I am. And they all, without exception, have gone running once

they figure that out—if I haven't already thrown them away anyway, that is.

All of them except Dahlia.

That's...confusing, and possibly a problem.

Because at times I am beginning to question certain moves I've made, in hindsight. Moves like moving Dahlia into my apartment. Moves like *caring* about her and the ghosts I can tell are haunting her past—ghosts worse than mine, even.

But the moves have already been made.

The thing is, I *like* her living here. And it's not just the fact that I now have the most willing plaything I've ever known living not twenty feet away from my bedroom door, ready and willing at any hour to engage in my supremely fucked up games.

—I mean, *a lot* of it is that, don't get me wrong. But it's moved past that, to the point where I realize that I'm wrapped up in her now—wrapped up in her life, I mean. In her emotions, and her well-being.

And I can't seem to extricate myself from that.

...I'm not sure if I *want* to extricate myself from that.

She still very much hides certain parts of herself from me—the trauma I sometimes clearly see in her eyes being the biggest one. And it irks me. Not because I'm a psychopath with a God complex—okay, not *entirely* because of that. But because I want to know who and what her demons are.

So I can slay them. Very slowly, and very, very painfully.

That, too, is a curious new mindset for me: the desire to seek retribution on behalf of someone who isn't part of my immediate family. It's not that I haven't typically *given* a shit

about people who aren't my siblings or my grandmother. It's just that...

Well, no, it really is that I don't tend to give much of a shit about anyone other than them.

In any case, I've got some of my most loyal people looking into her past, under orders of strict secrecy. I've got other men looking into the two idiots who were stupid enough to try and break into her mother's Parisian townhouse, given Adele's close personal connection to Adrian Cross.

I one hundred percent do not believe in coincidences. Both Dahlia and her mother having brushes with danger in the span of the same week? It rubs me the wrong way.

"The fuck are you doing here?"

I blink as my thoughts scatter and my attention returns to the here and now. I turn and lift my gaze from the table in front of me to where Hades is standing in the doorway of one of the larger conference rooms at Crown and Black.

I lift a brow. "I could ask you the same question."

He smirks, leaning against the doorframe and shoving his fingers through his longish dark hair.

"I was, uh, meeting Elsa for lunch."

Hades' fiancée, Elsa Guin, is an attorney and partner here at Crown and Black. How my lunatic wild-man of a brother managed to settle down at all, let alone with a *lawyer*, more specifically a lawyer who has a teenaged kid sister who she basically raised and who Hades will now effectively be a stepfather to, is one of the universe's great mysteries.

But stranger things, and all that.

My gaze drops from the smug, cat-who-caught-the-canary grin on my brother's face to the front of his pants.

"Your fly is undone, and your shirt isn't buttoned right."

He glances down at himself, then looks up at me, the grin widening on his face.

"Well look at that. So it is."

I roll my eyes. "I don't think Elsa needs you coming into her office and distracting her, Hades. Her job is intense, you know."

Hades sighs, shaking his head. "Yes, Deimos, I *do* know that about the woman I'm spending the rest of my life with. I know a deep personal relationship with anyone, let alone a romantic partner, is a foreign concept to you—"

"Yes, hello, Mr. Pot, my name is Mr. Kettle."

He snickers at me. "I'm a changed man, brother."

I allow my lips to curl into a smile. "I know."

"And I'm not stopping by to *bother her*. We actually enjoy spending time with each other, shocking as that may be. Again, it's called being in a loving relationship. I highly suggest you try it someday."

"I'll have to take that under advisement."

"Oh-kay, ah-firm-ah-tive, Dei-mos-bot five-thousand," Hades barks in a mechanical robot voice.

"That's incredibly funny, you should really take that material on the road."

He grins. "Elsa thinks I'm hilarious."

"Hate to tell you this, but Elsa is humoring you because she loves you."

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, that’s not the dunk on me you might think it is, Mister Roboto.”

He’s not being an asshole. Hades has always had this joke with me where he leans into my...let’s call it *clinical* way of thinking and talking at times. Hence, the robot voice.

Considering my past, you could argue that Hades mocking my stiffness and uniquely wired social skills is both insulting and cruel. But you can’t blame him. You can’t blame any of them.

Because none of them know what happened. Dad made sure of that, and I sure as hell never felt compelled to cozy up to any of them and give them the Cliff Notes version of my trip to hell.

Only my father and a few of his close top brass knew about that. And all of them, himself included, are dead now.

Hades saunters into the room and perches next to me on the conference table. “I wanted to ask you about something.”

“The suspense is killing me.”

He smirks. “Present shitty attitude aside, you’ve been...dare I say it...positive lately. Since you got back to New York, I mean.”

My brow arches. “I think you’re imagining things.”

“Yeah, I thought so too at first, because, I mean, it’s *you*.”

“Flatterer,” I mutter dryly.

“But Kratos has noticed the same thing. Ares, too.”

I frown. “Noticed what?”

“A decidedly un-Deimos-like pep in your step.”

“There’s not, nor has there even been, *pep* involved in any aspect of me.”

“Exactly. Which is why I’m curious if you’ve turned the corner on your weird hatred for this city, or if perhaps, by some miracle, you’ve started seeing someone. Just, you know, for an abrupt change in tradition.”

I give him a look. “I don’t have trouble seeing women, Hades, but thank you for your concern.”

“I’m not talking about randos or visiting Club Venom. I mean seeing someone like *seeing* someone.”

“I don’t ‘see’ women, Hades.”

“Maybe a dude? I don’t know, man. You’re a lockbox with your personal life.”

“Yes, *personal* being the operative word there. And I’m not gay.”

He shrugs, folding his arms over his chest. “You know if you were, that’d be cool, right?”

Jesus Christ.

“Have we entered a fucking Lifetime movie now?” I grunt.

“And for fuck’s sake, don’t you have work to do?”

“Okay,” he snickers. “I take it back. No one regularly getting laid could be as tightly wound as you.”

“Well, I’m glad I could clear all this up for you.”

He sighs, chuckling to himself before he pauses and glances at me. “What *are* you doing here, though?”

“Alistair.”

As in Alistair Black, one of the name partners of the law firm along with his adoptive brother Gabriel and the formidable Ms. Taylor Crown.

Hades frowns. “You two went to Knightsblood together, didn’t you?”

We could all have gone to Knightsblood, but I’m the only one of my siblings who elected to do so. Ares came back to New York to attend NYU, Hades went to Harvard, Kratos chose Lords College in London, and Callie followed in Ares’ footsteps to study at NYU, too.

I shake my head. “Not at the same time, but we know some of the same people. Why?”

Alistair and Gabriel were both long out of Knightsblood by the time I was a freshman, being about eight years older. But Alistair, like me, was once president of The Reckless when he was there.

“What are you and Alistair meeting about?”

“Among other things, how to stop meddling and prying older brothers from crawling up my ass about my personal matters.”

Hades chuckles, shaking his head. “I’ve missed you, D. I know you fucking hate this city, but I’m glad you’re sticking around at least for now.”

Somehow, when I’m not balls-deep in Dahlia’s illegally perfect pussy or drowning blissfully in her moans and screams, I’ve found the time to be working two jobs. Despite being here in New York, I *am* still running our family’s operations in Europe. I’m aided in this by my very capable number two, Kostas, who’s still in London. The other job is getting Laconia Logistics off the ground, even though I’m sure Dahlia still thinks it’s a completely sham company created for the sole purpose of fucking with her life.

I mean, it’s not the *sole* purpose. But she’s not wildly off the mark there.

It does have another, legitimate purpose, though.

The door to the conference room opens, and in walks Alistair.

And by “walks” I mean “strides like a conquering king entering the city he’s just sacked”. Which is, as I gather, pretty much how Alistair enters any and every room.

Tall, with broad, muscled shoulders and a lean build, Alistair’s blond hair and bright blue eyes *could* have the potential to make him come across as charming and friendly.

That is, if he hadn’t tailored the rest of his face and general demeanor to strangle that charm and friendliness while they were still in diapers.

Instead, the man has ended up with a sharp, somewhat deviant, sinister vibe to him, which lurks in the shadows of his sharp cheekbones and the flicker of malice in his eyes.

In case it’s not obvious, there’s a reason we know each other and get along. Not to mention a reason this man was head of The Reckless at Knightsblood long before me.

Amusingly, his adoptive brother Gabriel, who looks so much more the part of the villain with his dark hair and hazel eyes, was president of Para Bellum at the same time that Alistair ran The Reckless. But of course, that was before what *was* a friendly college rivalry escalated into the Cold War it apparently still is today.

...Yeah, I’ll take *some* responsibility for that.

“And here I thought I was meeting with only *one* Drakos brother today.”

Hades shrugs, pulling out a chair and going to sit. But I slide it back under to the table with my foot, smiling at Alistair as he takes a seat across from me.

“Hades was just leaving.”

“Well, I mean,” my brother shrugs. “If I’m *here*, might as well sit in?”

Alistair lifts a questioning brow at me. When I give him a look and silently shake my head, he turns back to smile at my brother.

“Hades, as much as I enjoy seeing you around the office when you stop by to destroy the productivity of my best lawyer with your mid-afternoon fuck-fests—”

“*Easy, Black,*” Hades hisses quietly. “That’s my fiancée we’re talking about.”

“Yes, I think the offices across the street are quite aware of that when you two lock her office door but don’t bother closing the blinds.”

Hades grins. I roll my eyes, turning to him. “I can catch up with you later, Hades. But I do need a few minutes with Alistair. *Alone.*”

Hades sighs. “Fine.” He grins at me, clapping me on the shoulder before sauntering for the door. He turns as he steps into the hallway. “I can take a hint that I’m not wanted.”

“So long as that hint is playing through a loudspeaker and surrounded by *neon signs*, apparently.”

He laughs, closing the door and then holding up his middle finger through the glass. Alistair reaches over to a button on the conference table. When he pushes it, the door and the wall of windows looking from the conference room into the rest of the Crown and Black offices instantly turn opaque.

“Siblings,” he sighs, shooting me a sympathetic look of understanding.

I like Alistair. Probably because we're cut from similar cloth. This is one of the reasons I've been working with him since coming back to this city and making my aggressive acquisitions of Adele Roy's companies.

"I'm guessing you're curious why things have stalled," Alistair growls, eyeing me across the table.

"It's been more than slightly on my mind, yes."

He sighs. "It appears we're hitting roadblocks."

"So, blow them up."

Alistair eyes me keenly, rubbing his jaw. "May I point something out?"

I shrug. "Sure."

"The way you've been pursuing these companies..." he frowns. "I'm concerned that you may be letting personal issues cloud things with this."

My jaw grits. "It's just business, Alistair. I have nothing personally against Adele Roy. But a fire sale is a fire sale, and that is precisely why I've hired you to pull the trigger on these deals. Legally speaking."

"Oh, I wasn't suggesting you have personal business with *Adele* Roy," he muses, clearly pleased with himself when my eyes turn dark, even for me. "I'm talking about her daughter."

"Careful, Alistair."

"*Carefulness* didn't build me a law firm empire by the time I was thirty-five, Deimos. Boldness, ballsy-ness, and the willingness to get my hands *very* dirty did. And we both know *that* is the reason you and I work together so well." He drums his fingers on the conference table. "Dahlia *is* under your employ, yes?"

“And this matters why?”

He chuckles. “Deimos, come on. I’m not stupid. You have a new company with exactly one employee, and that employee happens to be the daughter of the very woman you’re buying up companies from in the most aggressive grab I’ve ever seen.”

“Just get me the rest of them, Alistair.”

He sighs. “Well, that may prove tricky.”

“Explain.”

“There now seem to be other interested parties in the remaining companies currently held in limbo while Gerard Dumouchel and Adele Roy sort out their legal troubles and finalize their divorce.”

Shit.

“Other parties like who?”

“I mean, it’s an enormous empire on the rocks, Deimos. When there’s blood in the water, the sharks come out to play—”

“*Who.*”

He exhales slowly. “Drazen Krylov.”

Fuck.

I don’t know him personally, but Drazen is a former mercenary warlord who’s recently come into a *fuckload* of money which has allowed him to go from a sort of boogeyman in the Bratva world to...well, a king.

“Okay,” I growl. “I’ll talk to Gavan and see—”

“I’m not sure that’ll do much. Drazen might be new to the Brava scene in New York, but he and Gavan have a bit of history.”

“I said I’ll *handle* it. In the meantime, be extremely aggressive. I *want* those companies, Alistair.”

He nods slowly, fixing me with a cold, piercing stare.

“Something on your mind, Alistair?” I growl.

“There is, actually. Did you have anything to do with the break-in at Adele Roy’s townhouse?”

What?

There’s an edge to his voice, and a warning in his tone. I glare at him.

“No.”

“Deimos—”

“The answer is no, Alistair.” I eye him. “You’re asking because that would be crossing a line for you, I suppose.”

He dips his head. “That’s exactly why I’m asking. I’ll get down in the mud when I have to, you know that. But suggesting to CEOs that their wives will find out about their affairs if they don’t sign deals is another ballgame entirely compared to showing up at people’s homes with loaded guns. If it’s the latter you need from me, I’m out. I might be fine working with men in your particular line of work, Deimos. But I’m a lawyer, not a mafioso.”

I shake my head. “Again, that wasn’t me.” My face darkens. “I’m actually looking into it myself.”

He clears his throat, tapping the table with his pen. “In that case, I might be able to point you in the right direction.” His brow knits. “Are you and Dante Sartorre on speaking terms?”

Interesting.

You'd be hard pressed to be in my world and *not* know the mafia-connected majority owner of Club Venom, New York's notorious underground kink club that caters to the rich, dangerous, and deviant.

Hades was a member, before Elsa came into the picture. So was I, briefly, years ago.

But how it is that Alistair knows about Dante and I's...well, *history*, is curious.

"I wasn't aware you were a member of Club Venom."

Alistair says nothing aside from a lifted shoulder.

"And I have no idea if we're on speaking terms. We're not exactly friends."

"Well, chances are, he'll know something about what's going on with Adele and Dahlia Roy."

I bristle. "And what exactly *is* going on with Dahlia?" I hiss quietly.

Alistair arches a brow. "Well, for a start, I know your only employee is beautiful, went to Knightsblood at the same time as you, and is currently your one and only *roommate*."

I leap to my feet, the monster inside me snarling viciously.

"Take a breath, Deimos," Alistair murmurs quietly. "I only know that because she's been conversing with Elsa Guin on some legal matters, and when she filed some standard paperwork, she listed your place as her mailing address."

"So we're just forgetting all about attorney-client privilege now?" I hiss through clenched teeth.

Alistair tilts his head. "She's not *my* client, Deimos. And I'm not your enemy. Just—talk to Dante."

My monster snarls and bangs on the cage inside. Yeah, I'll talk to Dante. But it's not going to be about Dahlia. It's going to be why the actual fuck that snake even knows her goddamn name.

I step out of the conference room with my ears ringing and my blood running hot.

"So, I have a question."

I scowl, turning to see Hades leaning insolently against the still-opaque windows to the conference room, his arms folded over his chest.

"Do you, now."

He nods slowly, smiling thinly. "Yeah. You're totally fucking our sister's friend."

"No part of that sentence is a question. And eavesdropping on a private conversation between an attorney and a client is highly illegal."

"You're aware of how our family keeps the lights on, yes?"

I glare at him. "First of all, my personal life is no one's concern but my own. And secondly, there's nothing going on between—"

"You and Dahlia? The same Dahlia that you went to Knightsblood with, who looked at you as if she'd seen a ghost at Callie's birthday, who is now your only employee at this company you still haven't told any of us sweet fuck-all about, and the same Dahlia who, I've just heard, is living at *your fucking apartment?*"

"Are you done?"

He levels his eyes at me. "Does Callie know?"

“There’s nothing for Callie *to* know,” I say. “And this conversation is over.”

“Do you *ever* get tired of shutting out the people who love you, man?”

I tense up as his words hit my back.

“I mean Jesus fuck, Deimos. Look, I’m not asking for the world, I just want you to let me in.”

“I don’t let you in, Hades,” I say quietly, “because I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy, let alone my brother.” I shrug as I put a hand on his shoulder. “That doesn’t mean I don’t love you, though.”

I’ve just started to turn away when he stops me.

“I’ll take you to see Dante tomorrow night.”

My brow arches. “What makes you think I need a chaperone?”

“Because people like me, Deimos. You, however, scare people.”

I tilt my head. “And?”

“*And*, if memory serves, one of us voluntarily ended their membership at Club Venom.” He clears his throat as he leans close to my ear, patting me on the shoulder. “The other one was asked in no uncertain terms to *leave*.”

DEIMOS

YEAH. All things considered, it's probably a good thing Hades is coming with me tonight. Which is precisely why I goaded him into insisting on coming in the first place, since my ego wouldn't allow me to straight up ask him.

What? I can't help it if I understand all too well the secret buttons to push on those around me as well as the inner workings of my own fucked up brain.

Something I've come to realize about my own *neurodivergence*—fuck me, that word—is that it isn't a disease, or a mutation. It's simply a door my psyche has decided to push open that most other people leave shut.

Look closely at those around you—friends, family, lovers. If you look for it, you'll know it when you see it: the way to push them and manipulate them. The way to pull the strings *just* enough to guide them wherever you want.

Most people don't ever see these strings. And of the small percentage that do, almost none of them will have the certain makeup to pull or even to *want* to pull those strings.

And then there's people like me.

The string pullers. The neurodivergent.

The psychopaths.

Hades being with me is indeed probably the only way I'll get through the front door at Venom. He's not wrong that while he gave up his membership here when he found Elsa, I was *asked*—and not so indirectly, either—to turn mine in.

Which still irks me, even though I barely had an interest in this place in the brief time I was a member here before, and I certainly don't now. It's not my fault that a “kink club that caters to all deviant tastes” doesn't *actually* want people of *all* deviant tastes.

Also, how the fuck was I supposed to know that the young woman I was...*engaged with*...in what I thought was a mutually agreed-upon chase around one of the private rooms was the niece of one of the club's investors?

Both of us in black suits—Hades sans tie, me with—we check in with the concierge of Club Venom. From the outside, this place looks like nothing—just a warehouse in an unassuming neighborhood.

Inside, it's a place dripping with broody opulence, where the devils and demons of New York City come to play. The dark and deviant. The rich and connected.

It's not *just* criminal types that frequent the place. But like Knightsblood, it mostly is. And because of both the clientele and the activities that go on here, the masks are a mandatory part of the dress code.

The beautiful woman with long chestnut hair at the concierge desk, wearing a slinky black cocktail dress and a black, maroon, and gold carnival-style mask in the likeness of a cat smiles at us.

“Hades, so good to see you again.”

Given my brother's former antics and proclivities, it's a wonder this woman recognizes him without his dick out.

"I believe we've actually still got your old mask back here. If you'll give me a second?"

"Of course, Kara."

She slips into the back room. I raise a brow and suck my teeth without looking at Hades.

"It would seem you left a lasting impression on *Kara*."

Hades rolls his eyes. "Because she's the head concierge, dickwad. Not because I ever fucked her."

"Touched a nerve, did I?"

He exhales loudly. "Look, I'd have been fine never setting foot in this place again, thank you very much. I'm here to do *you* a favor. At the expense of every single one of my brownie points with Elsa, I might add."

"I'll tell her you were on your best behavior," I reassure him smoothly.

"I *am* on my best behavior," his hisses.

Kara returns with Hades' old mask from his membership days, and a gold and black wolf mask for me.

"And is this your first time with us, sir—"

"Only since Dante revoked his membership," Hades says with a bland smile on his face.

"If you fuck this up," I murmur, "then there will have been no noble family-related purpose for you being here. Which means you just stopped by for no other reason than to...well, stop by." I smile. "That won't play too well with Elsa, will it?"

"You're such an asshole," he grunts.

Kara clears her throat and smiles politely as a man in a black suit and all-black mask steps forward and opens a little wooden case. Inside are wristbands in various colors with markings that designate the various roles and “interests” of the members who enter: black lines for a Dom. Gold lines for a submissive. Red indicating an interest in sadomasochism. Green for...

Well, you get the idea.

Hades plucks out a white and gold one, signifying a casual observer only, and slips it on his wrist. Gotta be the first time he’s chosen one of *those*.

“Sir?” The man smiles at me when I stand there peering thoughtfully into the case. “Do you need a guide as to which band you’d like to—”

“Yes. Which one signifies a psychopath with a God complex and a primal chase kink?”

“*For fuck’s sake,*” Hades mutters, grabbing another white and gold band and shoving it on my wrist. “You want to get thrown out of here again before you even get in? Tone it down, fucker.”

Another slender woman in a slinky black dress and an elegant mask leads us through the doors and down into the bowels of sin. We step into dim, sultry lighting radiating from brass candelabras, casting shadows on the matte black walls accented with blood red and gold.

Our guide leads us deeper into the club, through another set of doors flanked by guards in all-black suits with simple matte black masks, something like a cross between *Eyes Wide Shut* and *Squid Game*. Past these doors, the fun really starts.

It's the moans that hit you first. The music too, of course. And the general erotic vibe of the whole place. But it's the gasped, grunted, whined and whimpered cries of sheer pleasure that really grab you by the throat and yank you from the normal to the hedonistic.

Club Venom is essentially a members-only private club that caters to like-minded individuals, or *several* individuals, in their search of carnal pleasure. The ground floor is a series of cocktail and wine bars, lounges, and side rooms where almost nothing is off limits, as long as you don't mind an audience. Upstairs are the private suites and playrooms.

But it's the exhibitionism on the ground floor that you always walk through first.

In the first room we come to, a blonde woman in a gold cocktail dress with the top undone kneels between the spread knees of a man in a black suit. Her pouty crimson lips bob sensually up and down his cock as another woman—brunette, for anyone keeping score—sits between his back and the sofa he's sitting on, running her hands over the Bratva tattoos visible beneath his open shirt.

Beside them, another man with Bratva ink has the ankles of a brunette over his shoulders as he fucks her into the couch. And on the couch across from all of that, an Asian woman with bleach blonde hair writhes and moans as the two muscular men with Camorra ink relentlessly fuck her mouth and pussy.

Yeah. Welcome to Club Venom. And this is just the foyer.

Our guide leads us into the main lounge—a huge room with two bars and ample seating scattered around it. In the center are a number of beds and couches which are almost *always* occupied by couples, throuples, and more-uples engaged in some sort of orgy for whoever wants to watch.

Tonight is no exception.

Personally, it's not my thing: neither the exhibitionism nor the group sex. But to each their own, I suppose. The woman who's been wordlessly guiding us through the club turns to smile from beneath her matte black and gold mask.

"Mr. Sartorre will be out shortly and invites you to relax and enjoy yourselves while you wait."

Hades nods. "Great, thanks."

The woman's smile becomes more coquettish as she slinks closer to him. "If there's anything *I* can do to help with that relaxation—"

"Yeah, I'm good. *Bye*," Hades grunts, glaring at the woman. Her smile falters a little, then she turns to me next.

"Awful fucking idea. Keep walking," I growl.

She's unfazed. "Well then, please enjoy a drink and the show, and Mr. Sartorre will be with you presently."

When she disappears back the way we came, I grin as I glance at my brother.

"Oh, *what*," he mutters grumpily.

"Nothing, nothing at all," I shrug. "I'll just be happy to report to Elsa later what a good boy you were."

He rolls his eyes, turning away from the orgy on the couches and beds in front of us to shake his head at me.

"I'm going to explain something to you, Deimos."

"Well this should be interesting."

He sighs. "When you're with the one person on earth who you know without a shadow of doubt is the one you're *supposed* to be with, because they complete you in the most sincere way

possible, it's not a matter of resisting temptation." He shakes his head. "There simply *is* no other temptation. End of story."

"Very touching. Thank you, Hades."

He rolls his eyes. "I genuinely hope you understand that someday, Deimos."

And *I* genuinely don't want to drill too deep into the thought that immediately surfaces in my brain: that I already *do* understand that. See also: my utter lack of interest in any other woman since Dahlia fucking Roy waltzed back into my life.

We both turn to check out the scene before us. A voluptuous woman with auburn hair moans into the tits of another woman as the muscled man behind the redhead fucks her like a machine. Two blondes writhe and gasp, kissing each other feverishly as they ride the Yakuza-inked man beneath them—one grinding her pussy on his mouth, the other bouncing on his dick.

Behind all of *that*, on one of the beds, a dark-haired woman shakes with orgasm as four men take her at the same time. And I do mean *all* at the same time.

I pluck two flutes of champagne from a passing masked waiter clad all in black and hand one to Hades.

"You miss this place, don't you."

"Incorrect."

"Not even a little bit."

"Nope."

He slugs back half of his champagne before he glances at me curiously.

“You know, I’ve never actually heard why it is Dante kicked you out.”

“He didn’t *kick me out*, we merely had a strong disagreement.”

“What—you wanted to stay a member and he felt roughly the exact opposite?”

I lift a shoulder. “Something like that. And it was fine. This place isn’t for me, at all.”

He smirks at me. “I just want to know what the fuck you could have done at *this* place to warrant expulsion.”

I smile as I turn and lay a hand on his shoulder heavily. “Hades, I love you like the brother you are to me. But I don’t think we *ever* need to start swapping what our personal sexual tastes involve, do we?”

He makes a face. “Fair enough. Ugh.”

“My my my...”

Shit.

I grit my teeth when I turn and my eyes land on Raquel. Even with the gold and blood red carnival mask she’s wearing, adorned with roses and a dove, I know it’s her. I’d recognize that grating tone of voice anywhere.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I guess I’m like a bad penny,” I say grimly. “Always turning up uninvited.”

Hades clears his throat, smirking with more than a little bit of amusement as his eyes dart between Raquel and me.

“I’d offer to help extricate you,” he mutters into my ear, turning away from Raquel. “But this looks *way* too amusing to stop. I’ll be the guy over there enjoying some popcorn.”

“*Asshole.*”

He snickers, patting my shoulder. “Good luck, baby bro.”

Hades removes himself, sliding over to the bar nearby to grab another drink and watch this shitshow from a safe distance.

“Where’s the new plaything, Deimos?” Raquel says pointedly, her blood-red lips curling with venom.

“What do you *want*, Raquel.”

She bristles briefly at my stony coldness, then shrugs it off, stepping closer to me. “I’m here alone tonight, if you’re curious,” she purrs quietly.

“I can assure you, I am not remotely curious.”

Her lips twist as she makes to slap my chest. I take a step back, avoiding her touch easily and leaving her swiping at the air between us. Her brows knit.

“*Please,*” Raquel snorts. “Don’t tell me that little mouse is your fucking girlfriend. We both know you don’t *do* girlfriends.”

“I don’t do people who ignore the fact that I’ve said no as plainly as I can, either.”

She grins. “Maybe I’m bad at hints.”

“It wasn’t a hint. Get the fuck away from me, Raquel. I’m *not* interested.”

She giggles. “Now *why* does that sound like you’re arguing more with yourself than with me...”

“Probably because you’re an idiot with defective hearing, and a narcissist as well. And not the interesting kind of narcissist, either. The vapid, boring, utterly unoriginal cookie-cutter kind.”

Her smile falters a little. But she still reaches out as if to put her hand on my chest. She flinches when I smack her hand aside roughly, surge into her, and grab her hard by the chin.

“Touch me again when I’ve already told you not to, and I’ll break your fucking hand,” I hiss. “Are. We. Clear.”

Without waiting on an answer, I turn, all set to go find Hades and kick him in the nuts for leaving me alone with this woman, when her voice stops me.

“What the fuck does she have that I don’t?!” Raquel blurts. “I mean what is it, Deimos?! Does she scream louder? Does she let you hurt her more? Does she play your games whenever you want? *Tell me!* Tell me what it is—”

She gasps as I whirl, looming over her, snarling, fear exploding in her eyes.

“There *are* no games with her, Raquel. That’s it.”

Then I turn and walk away, leaving her standing there.

And that’s the truth, even if I’m fairly certain I just made that connection myself the very second it popped out of my mouth.

There are no games with Dahlia. And the ones we do “play” aren’t games at all.

They’re just who we are.

DEIMOS

“DRINK?”

Dante finally came out to greet us, and Hades opted to stay in the club proper, posting up at the bar with a bartender who remembers him—a guy, for what it’s worth.

After following Dante down dark, matte black hallways with gold and blood red accents and through a door with the gold emblem of a viper—the club’s logo—on it, I find myself standing in his private office.

“Why not.”

He shoots me a curious look from where he’s standing at the bar cart before pouring us two generous whiskies. He hands me one and then sinks down into a couch in front of a crackling fireplace, gesturing at the one opposite him.

“Care to sit?”

“Depends. Has anyone jizzed on this tonight yet?”

Dante chuckles quietly. “The evening’s festivities happen out there, Deimos. Not here.”

“Well, in that case...”

I sit, crossing an ankle over my knee as I casually sip my drink.

“Can’t say I ever expected to see you here again, Deimos.”

“Bad penny.”

“Aren’t we all, though.” He draws in a deep breath, sitting back in his couch and eying me curiously.

Dante’s an imposing man: tall, broad-shouldered and muscular, with deeply bronzed Italian skin, dark hair, piercing blue eyes, and a sharp, swarthy jaw. And for all of the disagreements we’ve had in the past, I have to admit, the man wears a *very* nicely cut suit.

He’s not direct mafia, but he’s cousins with the Carvelis, one of the five Italian families that form The Commission here in America—a sort of high council of important, powerful mafia families.

To say Dante is “connected” is the understatement of the century.

“Well,” he sighs. “Here you are. And you even managed to bring the other stray Drakos brother back here, too.”

“Stop it, I’m getting all emotional,” I drawl.

Dante smirks, but then his smile drops quickly. “What are you doing here, Deimos. I’m confident you’re not interested in joining again, and I would never let that happen anyway. And leave your usual biting sarcasm and snark at the door, if you could. I’ve got a busy night.”

“Indeed. Those cum stains on the rugs won’t clean themselves, will they.”

He levels a cold glare at me. I smile back just as icily.

“I don’t have any interest in rejoining your little circle-jerk club, Dante. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Well then? Don’t keep me waiting,” he mutters dryly.

“I need information.”

His brow lifts. So do the corners of his lips. “Well, this is interesting. The spymaster himself, king of The Reckless and psychopath extraordinaire, needs *my* help in deducing something.”

“Been waiting for years to use that one, haven’t you.”

“What do you *want*, Deimos.”

I reach into my coat pocket and drop a stack of wrapped bills on the small table between us. Dante smirks, arching a brow at the ten thousand.

“You wildly undervalue the sort of information I can deliver.”

“Which is why that,” I nod at the money, “isn’t for your information. It’s for your silence.”

A shadow crosses his face. “Don’t insult me, Deimos. My information comes with my silence as a matter of course.”

“Well, let’s call that an insurance policy, then. Or you can put it into the bodily fluids cleanup fund. I’m sure that’s no small budget for this place.”

He rolls his eyes, leaning forward to shove the money back toward me. “I said no.”

I shrug. “All right.”

“So... What or who are we interested in?”

I clear my throat. “It’s a who. Two, actually. Adele and Dahlia Roy, a mother and daughter—”

“I’m well aware of who they are.”

“Specifically, I want to know who might wish them harm.”

Dante's brows lift. Then he grins quietly as he leans back against the sofa and drums his fingers on the back of it.

"Which part of that, exactly," I growl, "is amusing to you?"

"Bit of trouble at home, Deimos?"

It doesn't shock me that Dante knows Dahlia is staying with me. The man isn't just the majority owner and operator of Club Venom. He's also *the* go-to guy for behind-the-scenes intel on all of New York City. I would be shocked if he *didn't* have dossiers on my entire family and their acquaintances.

So I don't give him the satisfaction of appearing angry or surprised when he drops that, since I know that's exactly *why* he said it.

"Is that a yes or no to you knowing, Dante?"

He eyes me. "It *might* be a yes."

I exhale with a loud huff. God, I hate the fucking cloak and dagger games these self-declared "mysterious types" enjoy playing.

"Am I keeping you from something urgent, Deimos?"

"Yes—you're keeping me from being literally anywhere else but your stupid fucking club. Do you have an answer or not, and could we *please* drop the secret handshakes and decoder ring bullshit? I thought you said you had a busy night."

He frowns at me, then shrugs. "Fine. You're aware of their connection with the late Nasser El-Sayed?"

"I am. And yes, I've considered the possibility of people still loyal to him seeking revenge—"

"Wrong." Dante shakes his head. "It's not anyone from El-Sayed."

“You seem very sure about that.”

“Yes. Because I know Adrian Cross spent ten years hunting down anyone who’d ever even shaken hands with Nasser and exterminating them to make sure no one would ever come for his wife, Celeste, not to mention Adele and Dahlia.”

I lift a brow. Well, that’s interesting. I’ve only met Adrian Cross in passing here and there in London. Now I suddenly think we may have more in common than I thought.

“One of Cross’ enemies, then?”

Dante shakes his head. “Unlikely. And besides, these days, the Cross family has made peace with anyone who could actually pose a real threat to them. Any enemies Adrian’s got now are small time, and could never pull off something that bold. I mean I assume Adele Roy has plenty of security, given her wealth. And Dahlia...” He smiles lasciviously. “Well, she’s got *you* now, doesn’t she?”

I don’t humor him by taking the bait.

“There’s a rumor that Drazen Krylov—”

“—is actively trying to pressure some of the companies currently in limbo between Adele and her estranged husband into selling. Yes, I know. Drazen might be a lunatic...” He smirks at me. “I can only assume you two are close?”

“Everyone’s a comedian these days.”

Dante grins sourly. “Drazen is a force to be reckoned with. And crazy. But one thing he’s not is stupid, and he’d know that going after Adele or her daughter would bring down the wrath of Adrian Cross. The Krylov Bratva is just getting a toehold here in New York. Drazen doesn’t need that kind of heat.”

“So?”

He shrugs. “So nothing. That’s all I have.”

I scowl. “You’re asking me to believe that the famous spymaster of New York doesn’t have an answer?”

Dante casually sips his drink. “Hey—you win some, you lose some.”

My lips curl. “Is it that you honestly don’t know, Dante, or is it that you simply don’t like me.”

He chuckles. “This isn’t my world, Deimos. I’ve got information on Adrian Cross, and you, and most if not all of the other major players. But Adele Roy runs a fucking charitable foundation, not a mafia family. I don’t bother to keep track of civilians like that.”

He smiles coldly at me.

“But for what it’s worth, I also don’t like you very much. And I *definitely* don’t like you sitting in my club like a fucking time-bomb.”

I make a “tick tick” sound with my teeth as I wag a finger back and forth like a metronome. Then I finish my drink and stand.

“Well, this has been an enchanting evening, Dante. Let’s never do it again, shall we?”

“Stay the fuck away from Venom, Deimos. Next time, not even your brother will get you through the front door.”

I’m halfway to the door to his office when he stops me.

“Apologize.”

I chuckle incredulously, turning to him. “Excuse me?”

“*Apologize*, for being a psycho little fucker who scared my investor’s niece half to death, and I’ll give you one thing.”

“What sort of thing?”

He smiles. “Oh, trust me, it’s a good one. The kind of string I believe you’re especially good at pulling on.”

My teeth grind. Dante smiles widely.

“Come on now, Deimos. One little apology, and you get one step closer to protecting that co-worker turned roommate of yours.”

He’s enjoying this, the little shit. I make a mental note to royally fuck with his life at some point down the road. Then I clear my throat. “Sorry,” I grunt.

“Good night, Deimos.”

Oh my *God*, this fucking guy. I take a deep breath.

“Dante, I apologize for thinking *all* sexual tastes were indeed welcome at your establishment, and for misreading the verbal cues from that young woman. For what it’s worth, I never touched her.”

“No, you just literally scared her badly enough for her to piss herself,” Dante mutters.

I can’t help it. I chuckle quietly.

“But fine,” he grunts. “Apology accepted.”

“Do I get my cookie now?”

He drums his fingers on the couch, eyeing me coolly.

“Gerard Dumouchel.”

I frown. “Adele’s husband who’s divorcing her?”

He nods. “Except he’s not just divorcing Adele and trying to take all her money.”

My brows knit. “Then what else, pray tell, is he doing?”

“That’s just it,” Dante shrugs. “No one knows.”

“Jesus, Dante,, if this is a riddle, you should know that I fucking *loathe* rid—”

“No one knows because no one has so much as *seen* Gerard Dumouchel in almost two months.” Dante eyes me. “He’s missing.”

DAHLIA

ELSA CHECKS her phone yet again, her brow furrowed deeply.

“Everything okay?”

She looks up at me and blushes. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“No, not at all! If you need to take off or deal with a work thing or—”

“No, it’s...” She rolls her eyes. “Nora’s on a date.”

I wince. “*Oof.*”

“*Right?*” Elsa groans.

Nora is Elsa’s sixteen-year-old sister, who Elsa basically raised as if Nora was her daughter, given the age difference between them.

I frown. “Are you worried about the person she’s with?”

Elsa chuckles. “Not at all. One, because he’s a puppy dog and a really sweet guy. And two, because Hades scared the ever-loving fuck out of him when he came to pick her up.”

“Let me guess, he’s going to be waiting by the front door to further scare the shit out of this poor kid when he brings Nora home?”

Elsa grins. “Nah, that’s my shift. Hades is off on some mission with Deimos.”

I stiffen. Deimos had indeed mentioned he had work tonight and would be home late—home, as in *his* home, that we apparently share now, albeit in separate bedrooms.

But he never mentioned going on a “mission” with Hades.

“Oh?” I shrug as casually as I can manage. “What sort of mission is it?”

Elsa grimaces. “Eh, it’s...no, forget it.” She shakes her head and then plucks up her glass of wine and takes a dainty sip. Then she drops her eyes to the substantial pile of legal documents in front of her. “Okay, let’s wade into these, because there’s a *lot* to go over.”

My mouth twists. “Thank you again for doing this. Seriously, I don’t know how to repay you for taking the time to—”

“Dahlia,” she smiles, reaching across the hightop table at Bar Great Harry in Brooklyn, where we’ve met up, to squeeze my hand comfortingly. “I’m honestly more than happy to help. Okay?”

Again, my mom puts on a very brave face when she wants to. Her “stiff upper lip, turn the other cheek” game is solid.

But she’s crumbling. I can see it whenever we FaceTime, and hear it in her voice whenever we talk. She’s been through so fucking much, and even though I know she’s trying to rise above what’s happening with Gerard, it’s slowly taking its toll on her.

I mean, she really loved him. So did I, honestly. Which just makes the betrayal so much worse.

Unfortunately, as part of breaking down under the surface, she's letting things slip through the cracks—missing meetings with her legal counsel. Forgetting to return important documents that need to be sent back. That sort of thing.

So, I swallowed my pride and reached out to Elsa to pick up the slack. And she's been amazing; helpful, empowering, comforting, and she didn't say a *thing* when I listed Deimos' address instead of mine when I was filling out the paperwork for her firm to engage her for this. And she's not one to miss a detail like that at *all*.

“So, things have gotten...weirder.”

Weird. That's a word Elsa keeps using more and more the further she digs into what's going on with Gerard and my mom. She doesn't even know them personally, but according to her, just about every aspect of Gerard's cases and his legal motions are bizarre.

For a start, we're not able to pin down who his actual lead counsel is. When he files paperwork or more motions, it's always through a different paralegal at various law firms scattered all over the place—some in the UK, others in France, still others in the US.

It's like he's hiding something, but we can't tell what it is.

I frown as I sip my wine. “What do you mean?”

“Well...” She digs out a computer printout of an email that came a few days ago—a formal letter from Gerard himself, chastising my mother for dragging this out.

Asshole.

Elsa clears her throat, pointing to a line in the second paragraph. “This right here. It makes no sense.” She twists the page so that I can read where she's pointing, where Gerard

makes mention of various papers, legal forms, and contracts my mother either hasn't signed yet or responded to.

I raise my eyes to Elsa. "I don't get it. What's weird about that?"

"What's weird is that so far, your stepfather has shown a surprising adeptness in the legal process, considering he's not a lawyer. He's dotted every I and crossed every T properly, legally speaking. Except this is a mess. Look."

She points to where he lists all the forms by number.

"He writes that your mother hasn't responded to form 98-R, PREP-2, JD-982-B..." She shakes her head. "And so on and so on."

I frown. "I'm still not sure I get it."

"He's talked about these forms before, in other emails. But he always mentions them in the order in which they were filed. Not here, though. These are all *out* of order, and he's also listed more legal documents that aren't pertinent to any of this, documents that he never sent. Some of them are literally made-up forms. They don't exist."

My brow furrows. "What?"

She shrugs. "Yeah, it's got me stumped." She raises her gaze to mine. "Gerard doesn't have dementia or early signs of Alzheimer's or anything, does he?"

I shake my head in bewilderment. "Not that I know of."

"Then I'm at a loss. Because this makes zero sense."

I chew on my lip as I glance over the lengthy list of forms. But suddenly I gasp and my spine straightens sharply as something cold splashes all the way down my back.

Literally.

I whirl and then instantly freeze when I recognize the elegant blonde woman standing behind me, smiling venomously.

“Oh *no*,” she drawls, her lip curling. She raises her empty wine glass. “Somebody bumped me.”

I glare at...fuck, what’s her name?

“Raquel,” she says with a snippy tone, still smiling that fake, sneering smile at me.

I roll my shoulders, twisting to look over my shoulder to where she’s spilled white wine—I mean, at least it’s not red—down the back of my hoodie. Meanwhile, the bitch is in a smart black cocktail dress that looks *amazing* on her, her makeup and hair impeccable, and her white teeth flashing with malice.

“So clumsy of me,” Raquel sighs.

Elsa scowls as she rises to her feet. “What the fuck? You deliberately just poured that down her back. I was sitting right here.”

“Where’s your *boyfriend*, hon?” Raquel sneers at me, ignoring Elsa.

“Clearly not with you,” I smile back, relishing the way she bristles.

I love it when people think they can bully me or hit me with that mean girl bullshit.

Yeah, *just try it*. I was raised by the most badass woman I know with the second most badass woman I know as an aunt and a literal crime boss as an uncle. *And* I went to private school.

But something's wrong. Raquel doesn't seem the least bit fazed by my comment. Instead, she starts to smile wider.

"I mean, not at this very moment, no. But only because he's probably still trying to catch his breath."

Something vicious and green stabs into me, making me wince, but it's also painfully obvious she's merely trying to get a rise out of me. So I just exhale and shake my head.

"Look, I don't even know you," I mutter. "And I don't have any issue with you—"

"Well, I have an issue with *you*," she snaps back.

"Great," I shrug. "Take a number and get in line. I don't know what to tell you. But we're in the middle of something important, so, like, bye?"

I turn away from her, rolling my eyes at Elsa. Suddenly Raquel is grabbing my arm and yanking me back around.

"Are you serious?" I blurt. "Don't touch—"

"First, I let him chase me," she hisses, leaning in so that her lips are close to my ear. She laughs quietly. "You know how he likes to play, don't you?"

I bristle.

"Then I let him fuck me as hard as he wanted, and oh my *God* was it good."

"Please, you're embarrassing yourself," I growl.

"And after *that*? Well..."

I tense up as she brings her mouth super close to my ear.

"Let's just say, if you and I kissed right now, you'd taste something *very* familiar."

Cold bile rises in my throat. I can feel myself clenching up as green jealousy swirls in my chest.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Elsa snaps, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from Raquel. “Look, I don’t know who you are—I don’t fucking care. But you need to get the fuck away from us before you really do find the trouble you seem to be so hell bent on stirring up. Are we clear?”

Raquel laughs. “Down, girl. I was just telling little Dahlia here about running into her boyfriend at Club Venom. Without her. Awkward much?”

I frown. “What the hell is Club Venom?”

When Elsa is silent behind me, I turn. My brows pinch together when I see the look on her face.

“Oh, *she* knows what Venom is,” Raquel laughs coldly. “Why don’t you ask your friend, Dahlia. She’ll tell you *exactly* what goes on there.” I flinch as she leans in close to me again. “*Think of me the next time he fucks you,*” she hisses. “I can *promise* you that he’ll be thinking of me.”

I don’t realize I’m shaking with my hand balled into a tight fist until she’s walking out the door.

“Dahlia.”

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat.

“*Dahlia.*”

With an exhale, I turn back to see Elsa peering at me, bewildered. “Who the hell was that?”

“Just a cunt,” I mutter. My lips twist as I glance up at her. I’m almost afraid to ask. But I do. “What’s Club Venom?”

Elsa quickly looks away. “We should get back to these documents—”

“Elsa?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“*Elsa.*”

She sucks on her lip for a second before raising her eyes to mine with difficulty. “It’s a kink club here in the city that caters to...certain types of people. Rich, powerful, usually criminally connected.”

I snort. “A sex club?”

She nods.

I burst out laughing. “Who would actually go to—”

I freeze when I see the look on her face.

“The guy who runs it is who Deimos and Hades went to see tonight,” she says quietly. “Dante Sartorre.”

It *hurts*, dammit. It hurts like a knife to the stomach, twisting deep within me. I somehow fall back into my chair, unable to hide the raw emotion on my face. Her hand quickly slides across the table, landing on mine and squeezing.

“Hey,” she says gently. “Can I ask you something?”

I nod.

“I mean, as a friend, but I’m posing the question as your lawyer. As in, this is bound to confidentiality, and I won’t tell a soul. Not even Hades.”

I raise my eyes slowly to hers, already knowing what she’s going to ask.

“Dahlia... What’s going on with you and Deimos?”

My throat bobs. “Nothing.”

“Look, whatever it is, he and Hades just went there for work tonight. That woman is clearly insane. What is she, some ex or something?”

“Elsa, I have to go—”

“She was obviously just trying to bait you, Dahlia. Whatever is going on between you and Deimos—”

Before she can say another word, I stand and drop some money on the table for the drinks.

“Thanks for your help, Elsa,” I mumble quickly before I grab my coat, rush out the door, and jump into the first taxi I see.

There is *nothing* going on between Deimos and I. I’d have to be insane to let anything happen between me and the man who almost ruined my life.

The man who killed the only person who ever really saw all of me.

Except, I *am* insane. Because I let him in. I invited the devil himself into my heart.

And now I’m paying the price.

DEIMOS

GERARD DUMOUCHEL IS *MISSING*?

Now that is indeed an interesting string to pull on, as Dante put it. Because for all the little birds I have who whisper secrets to me—and believe me, I have a whole fucking *aviary* of them—I haven't heard a single thing about this.

Apparently, neither has anyone else.

After leaving Club Venom, I make a bunch of calls from the car, checking with various sources to look into this. Not a single person is aware of Gerard being missing. But while I'd love to chalk that up to Dante being an asshole and sending me on a wild goose chase, there's one similarity with everyone I reach out to:

They might not be aware of him missing...and several of the people I speak to laugh at the idea...but *not a single one of them has seen his face in about two months.*

So, yes, Dante was right: this *is* a string to pull on.

I'm almost home when my phone lights up with a call from Christian, who I've had shadowing Dahlia whenever she goes out. I'm sure she's smart enough to have at least guessed that I've got security on her whenever she leaves my place these

days. But Christian is a pro, and I'm reasonably sure she's never caught him doing it.

"We've got a small problem."

My stomach drops.

"What sort of problem."

"Ms. Roy was out with Elsa Guin in Brooklyn this evening. But when she came back over into Manhattan via taxi, she went to her own apartment, not to your loft."

I frown. "And?"

"I made myself known to her and let her know that it is your preference that she stay at the loft."

"And how well did that go?" I mutter dryly.

"About as well as you can imagine. Ms. Roy became physically and verbally...agitated."

"Agitated"? *Ten points to Gryffindor for diplomatic language, Christian.*

"Mr. Drakos, I'm very sorry, but she wouldn't come with us willingly, and had to be restrained and physically escorted into the car."

I'm not quite prepared for the level of rage that suddenly explodes through my system at the thought of another man—even one of my own guys like Christian—laying hands on Dahlia.

"Penelope was with me, sir. She alone did the restraining of Ms. Roy. I felt that was the only appropriate way."

Okay, the surge of murderous rage dials back a little bit. Penelope is Christian's niece, roughly Dahlia's age, who wants to go into security just like her Uncle Christian. So she's been

shadowing him. And if memory serves, she was all-state women's wrestling at Michigan and did a short stint with the UFC.

"Where is Dahlia now," I growl as the car pulls up outside my building.

"Your place, sir. Not restrained or anything, but I've got a guard posted outside the door just in case."

"Thanks, Christian. I'm headed up there right now."

At the door to my place, I tell the guard he can leave. When I walk inside, Dahlia looks up from where she's sitting on the sofa. Her eyes narrow on me, her lip curling.

"So, kidnapping is on the table now as well?"

I shut the door behind me and lean against it. "I believe you were encouraged to come on your own accord first."

Her eyes spark with fury as she leaps to her feet. "And I would *encourage* you to remember that I'm not your fucking property."

I resist the strangely powerful urge to snarl "yes, you are" in response.

"Dahlia, your mother's house was recently burglarized by men with guns, and you yourself said that someone chased you through the park," I snap. "The safest place for you is right here."

She laughs coldly. "Oh, with *you*?"

"*Yes*."

She snorts, looking away and shaking her head.

"Your apartment isn't safe, Dahlia," I say a little more gently.

“In what world?! It’s got lobby security, three locks on the front door, and it’s ten stories up, with no fire escape staircase off my windows. *No one* could get...”

She tenses, staring at me as I smile devilishly at her. Then she gulps.

“How often,” she says tersely.

“How often what?”

“How often, when I felt the tingle at the back of my neck or felt like I was being watched...” Her face burns hotly. “How often was that you?” she hisses.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t anyone else.”

Dahlia shivers. “You spied on me.”

“Yes.”

“You had no right to do that!”

I shrug, walking across the floor to pour myself a drink at the windows. “Historically, the victorious haven’t been too concerned with what’s right or wrong.”

“Spoken like a true fucking dictator,” she snaps.

“Tell me, darling,” I growl, whirling to smile wolfishly at her. “Which bothers you more: that I watched you lying in bed and touching your needy little pussy while fantasizing about being used...”

Her eyes go wide as her face explodes with heat.

“Or that I didn’t come in and *join you*,” I snarl.

Dahlia gapes at me. And I can tell she still so *very badly* wants to show me how livid and incensed she is that my people plucked her off the sidewalk and brought her here under duress.

But it's hard for her to look angry when she's got lust writ large all over her face. When her lips part slightly, quivering. When her nipples harden against her thin shirt.

My eyes never leave hers as I finish my drink, set the glass down, and slowly prowl toward her. My cock turns to iron in my pants, tenting the front as I picture the way I'll chase her, catch her, and pin her down on her knees on my hardwood floor before making her squeal with my cock deep inside of her.

"Don't you dare," she spits, stopping me when I get right in front of her.

I smile deviantly. "Do you know how ridiculously hard I get when you fight me, darling?"

She shivers, pure need throbbing in her cheeks and blazing in her eyes. Her tongue slips out to wet her lips, and I'm astonished at how highly attuned I am to the way her pulse thuds in the hollow of her soft neck. The way her nipples ache against her shirt. The way her thighs clench as she squirms under my gaze.

My hand reaches out to cup her face, but she slaps it aside and glares venomously at me.

"Don't you fucking touch me," she snaps.

My brows arch. My monster snarls inside.

Fuck. Me. I don't know what is about the way she says "no", the way she dares me to fight her for it, that makes me crave her even more.

"If you're trying to get me to fuck your ass raw right here on the floor with your panties stuffed in your mouth, you're doing a commendable job."

Dahlia's face explodes in a riot of maroon and pink, dancing somewhere between incensed and aroused.

I reach for her once more, but again she slaps my hand away. Her chin juts out as she angles her livid face up toward mine.

"How was your night?" she spits.

Ahhh. Now I see.

"Delightful," I say mildly. "How was yours?"

Before she can stop me, I've grabbed the front of her shirt in a fist and yanked her close to me. She gasps, collapsing against my chest but still glaring up at me.

"Where were you tonight?"

I smile. "I think you already know."

"I want to hear you say it," she hisses.

"I was at Club Venom. And let's save the song and dance dramatics where you ask me what that is, because I'm sure you know already—"

"What happened to our arrangement, Deimos?!" she spits.

"Exactly which part of our—"

"The part where you don't go sticking your dick into other women!"

"My dick hasn't been 'stuck into' any other woman since *you*, this morning," I growl, yanking her harder against me and grinding my thick erection into her stomach.

Dahlia barks a laugh. "No? Not even Raquel?!"

I roll my eyes. Of *course* that miserable cunt is salty enough to hear the word "no" once in her entire life and immediately go running to find Dahlia in order to rub lies in her face.

“I have no interest in fucking Raquel.”

“Well!” she sneers. “It’s good thing you were at a whole fucking sex club full of eager skanks ready to screw the infamous Deimos Drakos!”

“Nor do I have any interest in the *skanks* of Club Venom—”

“I’m sure you think that if you just keep lying and lying and lying to me that I’ll eventually forget what a monster you really—”

“My monster is the part of me that gets your pussy dripping right through your fucking panties,” I snarl. “And I don’t have any interest in any woman but *you!*”

Dahlia blinks rapidly. The loft goes dead silent. Her delicate throat works, her tongue wetting her lips furtively as she stares at me.

“*What did you just say?*”

“You heard me.”

She gasps as I twist and yank, ripping the buttons from her shirt.

“Okay, that was one of my favorite—”

“*Fuck the shirt,*” I growl thickly. My fingers trace down her cleavage, feeling her heart thudding right behind her chest. My hand slides up to wrap around her throat, making her shiver as her eyes lock with mine.

“And *fuck* Club Venom, and fuck Raquel, and fuck any other woman there or anywhere else.”

Dahlia shivers as I push her slowly backward, one hand still around her throat and the other teasing my fingertips across the soft skin of her stomach at the waistband of her skirt.

“Fuck the games, and fuck the bullshit,” I hiss. “Fuck the past and the whole rest of the goddamn world.”

She gasps as the backs of her legs hit the couch, her face tilted up, her big, wide green eyes locked with mine.

“And *fuck you*,” I snarl. “For destroying me again and again and again...”

“*Deim—*”

My mouth slams to hers with a finality that shakes me to my core and knocks her off balance. She falls against my chest, moaning as her lips open for me. My tongue seeks hers, tangling with it as I shove off the shirt and roughly cup one of her breasts. Dahlia shivers against me and moans into my mouth.

“Are you done hurling accusations?” I hiss.

She whimpers, nodding and then gasping when I tug her bra down and pinch one of her nipples. My other hand wraps around the back of her neck as my mouth drops to her ear, and she moans again.

“*Good girl.*”

The mood shatters. Dahlia goes cold as ice. She freezes, every muscle in her body tensing as her legs begin to shake.

“Dahlia?”

She starts to tremble. Her shoulders cave, and her eyes bug out.

“*Dahlia!*”

She’s fading and blacking out the same way she did that night on the sidewalk of Central Park West. But this time, I’ve seen it coming.

This time, I'm not letting whatever this is shove her back into that deep, dark hole like it did before.

"No," I hiss, grabbing her jaw and keeping her eyes trained on me. "Don't you disappear on me again. Don't you dare block me out."

Her pupils dilate and go in and out of focus over and over, her breath coming short and quick as she starts to fade again.

I need to keep her right here with me. I need to force her back into this moment. I reach down and pinch her nipple, hard. Immediately, she yelps, ripping back into the present. So I do it again, even harder. And this time, instinctively, she winds up and does exactly what I need her to do.

She hits me.

It's just a slap to the cheek, and it doesn't really hurt me very much. But it has the desired effect: it focuses her. She blinks, sucking in a much needed lungful of air. Her eyes bulge as she sees where she's just hit me.

"*Oh my God—*"

"Again," I snap.

Dahlia blinks, staring at me in shock.

"Hit me again."

She shivers, shaking her head. "No, I—"

I wind my fist back, as if to hit *her*. I'm not going to in a million years, but her reaction is immediate. In half a second, she's slapped me again, on instinct.

"Again!!" I yell in her face. "Hit me again!"

"Deimos—"

“Hit me, *good girl*,” I growl, carefully watching the way her cheeks go pale at the words. “*Hit me, you fucking coward*,” I snarl right in her face.

Something snaps.

Suddenly, she’s screaming and lashing out, striking me in the face again and again. I know it’s not me that she’s hitting. I can tell it’s another monster from her past. I can tell by the way she loses all control, tears rolling down her face as she slaps at me over and over, until I’m seeing stars and tasting copper.

She starts to spiral, and that’s when I grab her wrists. I yank her against me, pinning her hands against my chest as I cup her face hard, willing her to look into my eyes.

“*It’s me, Deimos*,” I hiss. “It’s me, and I’m here, and I’m not fucking going anywhere. Ever.”

All the panic and rage floods out of her stunned, wide-eyed face. And suddenly, she’s collapsing into my chest, clinging to me, sucking in air as she shakes and breathes against me while I hold her tight.

Finally, she takes one heavy breath and raises her tear-blurred eyes to my narrowed ones.

“Who hurt you,” I growl quietly.

Her face caves, and she looks away.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what.”

“Like I’m dirty,” she chokes, sucking in another shaky breath.

“Like I’m tainted somehow.”

“I don’t see dirty. I don’t see tainted,” I hiss, twisting her chin and yanking her gaze back to mine. “I see a slayer of demons. I see courage in the face of—”

She barks a laugh. “If you see that, then you’re even fucking crazier than I thought you were.”

She flinches.

“Sorry,” she mumbles quietly, dropping her gaze. “I’m sorry, I...I know you want to help, but you can’t possible know—”

“I was twelve.”

She stiffens. So do I, and I can hear my voice floating somewhere outside my body as I tell her what I’ve never told a single person in my life. None of my siblings. Not even Ya-ya.

My father knew most of it, though not all. The only ones who truly knew were the monsters themselves.

And I killed every single one of them.

“Our father was embroiled in a Cold War of sorts with the Turkish mafia. Greeks and Turks...let’s just say that past isn’t exactly roses and sunshine. And the disagreement over turf and who could move what product where got real ugly real fast. Especially since my father was content to throw gasoline at the fire instead of actually putting it out in the best interests of everyone involved. But he wasn’t smart enough to do that.”

I look away, a thudding sensation roaring in my ears.

“I was being driven home from school when they ambushed the SUV I was in. Killed the driver, killed the two guards riding with us. Me, they took.”

I keep staring out the windows at the glittering city I fucking hate so much I can taste it, but I can feel her eyes are still right on me. She’s out of her hole, and she’s focused on me.

So I keep going.

“They took me to a house out in Bay Ridge in Brooklyn and threw me in this basement room.” My jaw clenches. “No lights, no windows, one door, and one bucket. It smelled like rat shit and mildew.”

Her breath chokes. Her hand clenches almost involuntarily on my chest.

“I was there for a while: almost two weeks. It felt like...” I grit my molars, glaring at the city lights. “It felt like forever. At first, they were just assholes to me. You know, not feeding me very often, yelling at me, kicking me when I was trying to sleep. But then it got worse. They went longer between feedings. Kicking me turned into beating me, and then beating me turned into beating the *fuck* out of me—with bike chains, a stick...”

I can feel her body shaking and hitching against me as she starts to cry softly.

“There was this one guy...this one fucking...”

My eyes squeeze shut.

“He enjoyed it. I mean he really, *really* enjoyed it. Hitting me, torturing me. He waterboarded me a couple of times down there and laughed through the whole thing. And then one night—or maybe day, time had lost all meaning—he woke me up by kicking me. He was piss drunk, and he reeked of beer.”

I sort of fade outside my body, watching myself tell her about the darkest time in my life.

“That was the first night he put his hands on me. He had these fucking fingernails...” I swallow thickly, my blood turning to ice as Dahlia cries against me. “These dirty, sharp fucking fingernails...”

“Deimos...”

I inhale and exhale slowly.

“It just kept happening, over and over, until I could feel something in my soul just...giving up,” I hiss. “Something in me wanted to die and never wake up again. But another part of me refused to die and let the monsters win. So one time, when I was near exhaustion and falling asleep, I curled my hand around that fucking shit bucket and used the raw edge of it to cut myself. The pain kept me awake and conscious, until I could hear and smell him come in. He’d gotten lazy the last few times he came for me, and it was the same this time. He left the door unlocked, no guard, and I waited until he shuffled over and I could hear his breath wheezing.”

Slowly, I turn to let my eyes stab right into hers.

“That’s when I swung the bucket as hard as I could at his head. Then I did it again. And again, and again. When the handle finally broke off, I used my bare feet until all I could feel was wet pulp squelching between my toes.”

She looks horrified and heartbroken, but she needs to hear this. Not because she needs to know the full extent of the hell I was in.

She needs to know you can get out the other side.

“I used the broken pieces of the bucket to kill two more guards upstairs. Then I stole a car and drove right to our place on Central Park South. One of my dad’s top guys happened to be the one downstairs when I staggered out of the car, and he swept me up directly to my dad’s office.” I laugh coldly. “No medical attention. No seeing my siblings, who were probably scared shitless that I was dead. None of that. Right to the mad king’s throne room.”

My lips twist bitterly.

“As it turned out, my siblings weren’t scared I was dead because *he hadn’t told them* anything bad was going on with me. He’d told them I was at space camp.” I laugh a dark, barking laugh, pure poison in my veins. “*Space camp*. No one except him and a select chosen few even knew I’d been kidnapped, because my dad had spent the last two weeks trying to *haggle down the fucking terms* of my release.”

Her face falls, tears flowing freely down her cheeks now as she stares at me in abject horror.

“That’s why I was down there so long with that piece of shit in that hellish basement. My father was trying to figure out exactly how few crack-dealing street corners he could trade for his own son.”

She throws her arms around me, hugging my stiff frame as her tears soak my shirt.

“I *enjoyed* killing that motherfucker and the two others in the house,” I murmur. “And it awoke something in me.”

Jesus, this is so much more than she ever needs to hear or know about me. But I’ve never talked about this to anyone, and now that it’s started tumbling out of me, I can’t shut the fuck up.

“A few months later, I started keeping tabs on all of them—the entire Turkish gang who’d been fighting with us. I kept notes on them, watched them....” My lips curl. “And then I started to hunt the fuckers down, one by one, until there weren’t any left. It took a while, because eventually the organization broke up and went into hiding. But I did it. I got every single one of them. The last was during spring break my sophomore year at Knightsblood. My friends all partied on a tropical beach or

went skiing in Europe..." I shrug. "I went to Slovenia. I found the last of them, working as a janitor in Ljubljana, living under a fake name in a shithole apartment, and I cut his throat."

I lift her chin, her green eyes and tear-stained cheeks lifting to meet my gaze. And it's like something clicks. Maybe it's sharing my trauma, or knowing she's got it, too. But slowly, like a breath held far too long finally releasing, I forgive her.

For the pain. For the betrayal. For what she took from me.

I just—let it go.

"I am *twice* the monster you think I am, Dahlia," I growl quietly.

She sobs, shaking her head firmly before suddenly cupping my cheeks.

"You're not a monster, Deimos," she chokes as tears trickle down her face. "You're what kills the monsters."

And then her lips sear to mine, kissing away all the poison and the pain; the damage, and the darkness.

She tells me about her own monsters—the man who lived upstairs from her mother and her in their first luxury apartment in Paris. The well-off, well-dressed man with a family of his own, who was always *so* kind to Adele and Dahlia. The man who'd give her candy when they saw each other in the lobby or the elevator.

The man who came to help with Dahlia when Adele wasn't feeling good one night. Who made Adele some tea, and laced it with Rohypnol, and smiled while she drank it.

The man who then slipped into Dahlia's room while she slept and pinned her to the bed. Who crawled on top of her and told

her to be his good girl and not say a word as he put his hands on her.

Hearing her tearfully choke out the awful tale puts me in a place so volatile I'm worried I'm going to explode like a bomb. It makes me want to scream and roar and commit acts of pure evil and unspeakable violence until the smell of blood obliterates everything else.

Then she tells me how Adele *didn't* in fact pass out, because she recognized the effects of the Rohypnol at the first sip from when Dahlia's father used to give it to her, and she dumped out the rest of the tea. How she staggered, only half-awake, through the kitchen, grabbed a chef's knife, and lurched down the hall to her daughter's bedroom.

...How she stabbed that man from upstairs *forty-nine times* and let him bleed out on the floor. And finally, how Adrian Cross took them home to his place and took care of the whole thing, sweeping it all under the rug so nothing would ever come back to Adele which would cause her to lose Dahlia.

When the whole story is lying like bodies at our feet, I hold her tightly in my arms as she sobs and wails into my chest. As she screams out her demons and then slams her mouth to mine. As she tells me that she needs me, and needs it to be hard, to block the rest of it out.

Honestly, so do I.

Fucking Dahlia is always a release for me. But tonight, it's catharsis for both of us. It's like water dumped on the roaring forest fires of both our pasts, dousing them forever. It's brutal and raw, and when we fuck, it's like gods fighting.

Over and over, we keep going until we're both raw and sore. Until there's nothing left to give.

And then we do it again.

When we're finally both utterly and completely spent, I scoop her up in my arms and carry her into a hot shower. Then to my bed, where I wrap her in my arms as the darkness sucks us both under.

This is different than anything I've ever known. It's not anything I ever wanted, expected, or looked for.

I came for revenge.

I got *her* instead.

And I wouldn't change that for the world.

DEIMOS

THEY SAY it's best to leave the demons where they lie, and to let the ghosts of the past remain there.

I say fuck that.

Hunt down the demons. Rip them from their hell and cut them to fucking pieces. To suggest anything else is to suggest that demons and ghosts can be trusted to stay in the past and not come for your fucking future.

Not that I literally believe in shit like demons or angels or whatever. But you get the idea.

If something hurts you, destroy that thing. Don't let it sit anywhere collecting dust just waiting to come for you and hurt you again.

That theory is what has me digging into the piece of human excrement that preyed on Dahlia and her mother. The man who touched her, that Adele then stabbed to death and Adrian Cross buried.

I need to remember to thank Adrian for that if we ever cross paths again.

The piece of human excrement's name was Bernard Aubert. He was in shipping logistics and finance, and he and his

family were quite well off. His death was ruled a missing persons case. But a few months later, remains were found on a hiking trail in Khao Sok National Park in Thailand that DNA testing positively IDed as Bernard. A secret email account also came to light, detailing Bernard's ongoing affair with a woman who was never identified or found.

Though I only know him by reputation, I'm guessing *all* of that was Adrian's doing.

Bernard was survived by a wife and a daughter. And that's where things get interesting. The wife, Claudette, had already been succumbing to stage four breast cancer when everything went down, and she died a mere three weeks after her husband's remains and affair were discovered.

It's a shame she died. It's a worse shame she died without knowing just how truly evil the man she was married to was.

Meanwhile, the daughter—Juliette—fell off the map. She was seventeen and in university when her father did what he did to twelve-year-old Dahlia. She went to that school for one more year, and then utterly disappeared.

Gone. Not a trace, or a breadcrumb.

At least, not to the average person looking for her. But I'm not the average person. And when I finally find the breadcrumbs I'm looking for, and follow them through the woods, too many things begin to add up, and too many alarm bells start ringing.

Because again, I do *not* believe in coincidence.

Juliette Aubert is now Julie Humbolt. She lives in the US—in fact, she lives just two hours outside of New York City, up in New Paltz.

That's the first alarm bell.

The second? She's a registered gun owner.

The third is that her work frequently brings her to the city.

The fourth is, she's an avid runner.

...Which is how it comes to pass that two days after Dahlia bares her soul to me, and I rip open mine to her, I find myself standing outside a dark house on a quiet, unassuming cul-de-sac in New Paltz, New York.

I can put the pieces together. Maybe young Juliette was smart enough to put the pieces together too. Maybe she was home when her father was stabbed forty-nine times downstairs. Maybe, even though he was a monster who deserved far worse than he got, she was angry about her father being killed. About the life that was taken from her.

Although he was high up in his company, and on paper he was making bank, the reality was that Bernie-boy was as bad at managing his finances as he was at being a human being. After his death, it came out that he really didn't have anything but a mountain of debt. So it's not even as if his daughter got a big trust fund out of it.

Actually? She got nothing.

There've been plenty of documented cases where the children or spouses of abusers blame *the abused*—for “tempting” the abuser. Or they accuse them of lying. I wonder if everything that happened to Juliette is enough to drive her to seek revenge on an innocent she might somehow blame for her life's direction, and her father's death.

Juliette—*Julia*, now—works late most nights, I've learned, from home. I'm aware too that she's not home alone: her husband and two children are asleep upstairs. They'll be fine. *She'll* be fine, for that matter...so long as she convinces me

she's not the one who chased Dahlia through the park, and/or possibly sent killers to Adele's house.

The backdoor is unlocked because this is a nice, safe neighborhood.

Or at least it was before I showed up.

I wait in the shadows of the dark kitchen. Through the living room, a light is on in a small study, where I spy a now thirty-year-old Julia typing on her laptop.

She stretches, yawns, rubs her eyes tiredly, and closes the laptop. Then she shuts off the light and stands before padding through the living room into the kitchen. She moves toward the fridge.

That's where I stop her.

She doesn't scream. I doubt she can, with her heart and the terror choking her. I say nothing at first. I just press the edge of the blade to her throat.

"*Please,*" she finally whispers. "Please, just take whatever you want. There's money in the coffee can above the pantry, and some jewelry in a safe in the study. The combination is ten-eight-six-two—"

"I don't want money," I rasp quietly.

She stiffens, her breath catching. I feel her swallow against the blade, and her head slowly nods.

"I...I think I always knew you'd come."

"Did you, now," I growl.

"*Yes,*" she chokes. She half turns toward me, but I'm cloaked in shadow. "I have children, and a husband."

"That won't work on me, sorry."

She shakes her head. “No, I just mean...” She hitches with a silent sob. “Don’t do it in here. I don’t want them to find me, okay? If you have to do it, can you do it out in the woods behind the house? Please?”

My brows furrow. Something’s not adding up here.

“Why do you think I’m here?” I growl quietly.

Julia starts to cry. “I know why you’re here. Because of him,” she chokes. “Because of that...that monster.”

“What monster.”

“*My father,*” she blurts. “I know what he was, okay? He tried it with *me*, once. It’s why I begged my mother to send me away to private boarding school, and then to university early. I can put two and two together. The woman and her daughter downstairs in Paris...they were friends with the mobster, Cross. My father goes missing, and the very next day, they move out completely?”

She hitches as another quiet sob wrenches her chest.

“Do you work for Adrian Cross? Or the woman and her poor daughter?” She shakes her head, tears falling quietly. “*Please.* I’m not anything like him, okay? I’ve spent my life running from where I came from. I even changed my name. *Please!*” she whispers fiercely. “Please, my family doesn’t have a clue who I used to be. They’re not involved and never have been. So if you have to do this—”

She flinches when I draw the blade away from her throat. I step back further into the shadows.

“Turn around.”

She’s trembling when she does so, her big blue eyes staring hauntingly into the darkness, glinting from the moon outside.

“Am I right? About the poor girl downstairs?” she breathes.

I nod, and she buries her face in her hands. “*I’m so sorry.*”

“She’s okay now. She has a new life. They both do.”

She looks up, smiling through her terrified tears. “I’m glad he didn’t break her.” Her lips twist. “But it’s because of her that you’re here, isn’t it? The girl.”

“It is,” I growl.

“Because you love her?”

My mouth twists. “Because I care for her.”

“Good,” she swallows thickly. “Good, I’m happy to hear that. And I’m so sorry for what she and I have in common.”

I nod. “I’m going to go now. And you’ll never see me again. You have my word on that.”

She hugs herself, smiling a crooked, sad smile at me. “*Thank you.*”

And I’m out.

I DON’T CONDONE LYING to those we care about. But I just couldn’t tell Dahlia the truth about what I was doing tonight. I didn’t want to alarm her. All she knows is that I was working late.

She’s fast asleep when I get back to the loft—in *my* bed.

A grin tugs the corners of my lips.

We’ve still *mostly* been sleeping in separate rooms. And the nights where I do end up staying by her side—at least until

daybreak, when I take my leave—it's always been in her room.

I really, really *like* finding her curled up under the covers of my bed when I get home.

The lights of the city through the half-closed blinds illuminate the tanned skin of her shoulder where the sheets have slid off. They've also slipped up her thigh, giving me the tiniest glimpse of her black thong panties.

Maybe the violence that almost but never quite happened tonight has my blood running hotter. I'm not sure what it says about me that the idea of killing and then *not* killing gives me a version of blue balls, or at least, gets my libido roaring.

Neuro-fucking-divergence.

Whatever the cause, when I see her sleeping in my bed, and glimpse her soft skin and her panties, my cock is instantly swollen, fat, and hungry.

A dark smile teases across my jaw.

No need to wake her first...

I strip naked, my cock rock-hard and thick as it juts out from my lower abs. Gently, I peel the covers away. She stirs, but she keeps sleeping. Even better, she rolls a little more onto her side, one knee rising up, pulling the thin panties tighter across her cunt.

I groan to myself, precum beading at the swollen crown of my dick.

I slide onto the bed, kneeling behind her and allowing myself to drag a finger over the delicious curve of her hip and her ass. She shivers and stirs just a little, but still she sleeps.

Good.

My finger drags lower as I wrap my other hand around my cock and begin to stroke. My finger traces down to her slit, running up and down the lacy fabric that's barely covering her pussy. Dahlia moans softly in her sleep, her hips moving gently on autopilot.

I can feel her getting warmer, and wetter, until she's soaked all the way through her thong where I'm rubbing her. My finger slips underneath, relishing the feel of her silky pussy as I pull the gusset of her panties to the side. I run a finger up and down her cunt, gathering the sticky wet moisture there and rubbing it over her clit.

Dahlia moans again drowsily, her breath coming faster and deeper as she rolls her hips softly. I pump my cock, gritting my teeth as I sink a finger into her and curl it. She whimpers and writhes, still out, as I stroke her g-spot.

I can't hold back anymore.

I use my fingers to smear her arousal all over the thick head of my cock. I keep her panties pulled to the side as I spoon behind her, line my dick up, and press the head between her lips.

In one motion, I cup my hand over her mouth and drive in hard.

Dahlia jolts, thrashing and screaming into my hand as the sensation of my rock-hard cock ramming into her yanks her awake. She's confused and probably scared. But I don't stop, or slow down. I just start to fuck her using deep, hard thrusts. She screams again, her arms and legs flailing, trying to hit me. But I'm much stronger than her, and I roll her onto her front and pin her down with my legs atop hers.

“*Don’t squirm, darling,*” I rasp into her ear. “Just let me fuck this messy, greedy little cunt.”

When she realizes it’s me, she stops screaming and thrashing, but I can tell her adrenaline is still roaring through her veins, heightening every sensation. I fuck into her as I pin her flat to the bed, savaging her sweet little pussy and keeping my hand clamped firmly over her mouth.

I slip my fingers between her lips, letting her taste herself on me as I thrust into her. My other hand spans her ass, over and over, until she’s squeezing in pleasure and dripping all over my cock. My hand shoves up under her t-shirt, roughly manhandling her tits and pinching her nipples hard as my teeth rake over her earlobe.

“You were already so fucking wet before I even touched you. Before I even *took* this needy pussy,” I growl. “Were you thinking of me, my little whore? Were you having dirty, slutty dreams, hoping I’d come in late and fuck you hard without even feeling the slightest need to ask permission first?”

She moans desperately, her pussy clamping down around me and spasming as a mini orgasm rips through her.

I wet my thumb by rubbing her clit before dragging it back to her asshole.

I haven’t taken her here.

Yet.

But I will.

Dahlia cries out as I sink my slick thumb into her tight ass.

“*Soon, darling,*” I growl into her ear. “Soon you’ll take my fucking cock here, too. You’ll whine and beg me not to, and maybe even fight me. But we both know it’s already mine. I’ll

pin you down in the dark and have you gag and slobber all over my cock to get it nice and fucking wet before I push every thick inch up your ass.”

She screams into my hand, her body shaking and tensing as her pussy squeezes my cock tightly.

“I want to feel this greedy little pussy come, darling,” I snarl. “I want to feel you come undone for me, imagining me fucking every hole you have, willing or otherwise, until my cum is dripping out from *everywhere*. Until I’ve claimed every fucking inch of you and left my fucking marks all over your skin.”

My visions starts to blur at the edges as Dahlia begins to explode.

“*Fucking come for me,*” I rasp. “Come on my fat cock like the good little cum slut you are.”

She detonates like a bomb, thrashing and writhing and shaking as her toes curl and her feet kick at the bedsheets. I groan, burying my cock deep in her sweet little pussy as my balls contract and twitch. My cum pours into her, spilling deep in her cunt as my teeth bite down hard on her shoulder.

I was prepared to kill for her tonight.

Again.

And when I find whoever chased her that night in the park, there *will* be blood spilled. But until then?

She whimpers and whines as I start right back up again.

Until then, I have a new favorite way to satiate the monster inside of me.

DAHLIA

TIME FLIES when you're having fun. And as unconventional as this arrangement is, and as bizarre a situation it is that I find myself in with Deimos, it *is* fun.

...In a supremely fucked up, mega-twisted sort of way.

It's a strange rhythm we've found ourselves in over the last four weeks, since the night I had my last attack triggered by the phrase "good girl"—the night we told each other everything about the trauma in our pasts.

I wake up every morning in Deimos' bed. Usually, I don't leave it without orgasming. Then I either go to class or share a car with him to the office—which is now fully furnished, thank you very much.

I still have *zero* idea what Laconia Logistics does, or why Deimos has rented all this space and had me build all these cubicles for a company that doesn't seem to sell or make or do anything. But whenever I press him about that, he changes the subject.

That, or fills my mouth with his cock, or puts me over his knee.

In the evenings we make dinner or get takeout, and then typically debate the pros and cons of Deimos actually buying

more furniture for his loft. On the plus side, well, more furniture. In the minus column is the far higher chance of me breaking my neck or smashing my shin on something when he turns off the lights and chases me like a psychopath.

Not that I'm complaining about the chasing.

A lot of other stuff has happened in the last four weeks, too. My mom has decided to stay in London for the time being with Celeste and Adrian, which I'm very happy about. She seems better, too—in a real way, I mean, not a hiding and pretending way. She's still obviously in a lot of pain about Gerard, but Celeste says she's sleeping more regularly, and even eating here and there, so that's good.

The biggest thing that's happened though, of course, is everything that went down with Castle and Callie. Who are now, very officially and very publicly, an actual couple.

I mean, *duh*. Like anyone with half a brain didn't see *that* one coming a fucking mile away.

It—whatever “it” is with Deimos and I—isn't conventional. It's not perfect, either, and for all the walls we broke down between us that night, there are obviously still more of them that are still firmly up.

There's still something unspoken about what happened before, back when we were at Knightsblood. It comes and goes. At times, it's like this weird fever dream I try to forget—the smell of smoke, the bodies, the blood on his hands.

The threat on his lips.

Sometimes, it's like it almost didn't happen at all. But others, it hits me so hard that it steals the very air from my lungs. There are times I've woken up in a manic state in the middle of the night, freaking the absolute hell out that I'm sharing a

bed, my body, and at least a part of my heart with the man who killed the one person I think who ever truly saw the absolute center of me.

Deimos killed Chase that night. There's a decent chance I was in love with Chase.

Now I'm with Deimos?

What the *fuck* does that say about me?

“*OH MY FUCKING GOD...*”

Stars swim at the edges of my vision. My breathing is irregular, and my pulse roars in my ears as I collapse face-first into the bed. Behind me, Deimos groans as he slowly slides his thick cock from between my legs. I can feel his cum dripping out of me—which is a sensation I honestly can't get enough of.

It's actually—weirdly—one of my favorite feelings of all the boundary-pushing, knife's-edge sensations he gives me.

I roll over, wincing. Then I twist, making a face as I glance down at my ass, which is still bright red and purpled with bruises.

“I will eventually need to be able to sit down, you know,” I groan.

“I disagree.”

I gasp when he reaches up and drags a finger through my pussy. When he pulls his hand back, I blush at the glistening white cum he's scooped up. He crawls over me, and I shiver with anticipation when he teases his finger over my lips.

“Open wide.”

My lips close around the finger, my tongue licking his cum off it as our eyes meet.

“Good girl.”

I don't flinch when I hear that anymore. I don't shut down or freak out.

He's changed those words for me. He's slowly acclimated me to them over the last month.

I mean, if I were on edge, and he said them while grabbing the back of my neck, I'd probably freeze up. But he knows that, and he wouldn't.

I grin as I lean over and kiss him before I slide out of bed. I grab the dress shirt he was wearing last night and slip it on like a robe before leaning over and kissing him again.

“I'm going to go make some coffee.”

It's Saturday. I've got a study thing later with Eilish, and then I'm meeting up with Victoria, with whom I've gotten closer. Until then, I'm going to climb right back into bed with him.

But first, coffee.

I'm leaning against the counter mindlessly scrolling my phone when I hear Deimos come back into the loft and the front door around the corner from where I am in the kitchen close behind him. I frown without looking up.

“I didn't even hear you leave—”

“WHAT THE FUCK!”

I scream, my eyes ripping from my phone and up to where Callie, not Deimos, is standing stunned in the middle of the apartment, staring at me with wide eyes.

“*Ohmygod!!*” I scream, scrambling to pull the shirt closed around me as I spring behind the kitchen island.

“What is actually happening right now?!?” she yells.

“I can explain!!” I blurt back.

“Morning, Callie.”

I whip my head around, my face throbbing and my brain still spinning. Deimos strolls across the floor casually in sweatpants and a t-shirt, arching a brow at his stunned sister.

“How the fuck did you get in?”

“You...Kratos gave me his set of keys...I...surprise?” she finishes with an embarrassed laugh, her eyes darting between him and me.

“I see.” He rakes his fingers down his jaw as he walks over and stands beside me.

“What...” Callie blinks quickly, darting her eyes between us again. “What is...”

“We’re fucking.”

Oh my sweet fucking God.

I cringe, burying my face in my hands as Deimos casually leans against the counter behind us.

“Uh, *clearly!*” Callie says, clearing her throat. “So, uh...*huh.*”

“Any questions or concerns you’d like to raise at the moment?”

“Well...uh...no? Maybe? I’m...not sure?”

I’m still half covering my face and wishing for a convenient sinkhole to appear in the floor beneath me when Deimos shrugs.

“Well, that settles that, then. I have to run out. Got stuff to do.”
He turns to me as if nothing at all is up. “You’re staying here?”

“I...yeah?”

“Good.” He turns to smile at Callie before striding back into the bedroom.

Callie and I eventually look at each other, both of us speechless as our mouths try and fail to form words.

“I can explain...” I finally manage to mumble, swallowing thickly.

“*Okay...*” she breathes, her brow furrowing.

Deimos steps out of the bedroom, now dressed, and walks back over to me. He leans down to kiss the top of my head affectionately, his hand grabbing my bare ass under the dress shirt.

“See you later.”

He walks over to Callie, who just blinks in a stunned sort of way when he ruffles her hair. “Thanks for dropping by, Cals.” He leans a little closer to her. “Maybe we keep this just between the three of us for the moment, though?”

“Uh, yeah, sure...”

“Great.”

He glances at me, then he’s out the door.

The silence that remains is deafening. The seconds tick by into almost a full minute, which might as well be an hour.

“Callie—”

“We need drinks, right?”

I don't even care that it's well before noon. "We absolutely need drinks."

"YOU STILL THINK I'm mad, don't you."

I feel my face burn hotly as I peek at Callie over the rim of my margarita. "No..."

She snorts. "Yes, you do. I can tell. Well..." She lifts a shoulder, her face as flushed as mine from the breakfast alcohol. "I'm not."

"Callie..."

"I mean, don't get me wrong," she giggles, sloshing her drink a little. "Seeing your bare ass wearing my brother's shirt and with sex-hair wasn't *exactly* the ideal way to find out."

I groan, hiding my face again as she cracks up.

"But cheer up, it could have been worse."

"I doubt that."

"No?" She grins. "Think of it this way: I coulda walked in ten minutes earlier."

My face turns even redder, and she groans, shaking her head.

"*Ack, ugh*, actually, gimme a sec, just gotta scrub that visual from my head."

I make a face, draining the last of my glass. Hers is pretty empty, too. We went out earlier, with Christian in tow, and picked up limes, Cointreau and tequila, because literally the only way either of us was going to be able to have a conversation about the fact that I'm obviously sleeping with

Deimos was through the magic of margaritas on an empty stomach at ten in the morning.

I mean, *obviously*.

“You want another?” I slur a little.

Callie snickers. “I mean, I’m only on my third cocktail while we talk about you banging my brother. Is that even a question?”

I roll my eyes, groaning as I stand a little unsteadily from where I’ve been sprawled in a deck chair on Deimos’ outdoor patio. Callie follows me inside, finishes her drink, and leans against the counter as I refill the blender.

“I’m starving. Wanna order something?”

“Carbs.”

She moans happily. “Oh, *fuck* yeah. Okay, I’m ordering pizza.” She taps away on her phone and then puts it down, eyeing me curiously.

“What?”

“How long has it been going on?” she prods, grinning at me.

I blow air through my lips, pushing the blender button to buy me some more time. When it’s finished doing its thing, I sigh.

“I wanted to tell you.”

“Bullshit.”

I snicker. “Seriously, I felt *terrible* not telling you. But you had everything going on with Castle, and the wedding, and then all the shit after...”

She nods as I refill our glasses. “Wait—was this a thing between you two from Knightsblood?”

I shake my head. “No...” My face scrunches up. “I mean, yes? But...no.”

“You’re going to say it’s complicated, right?”

“Took the words out of my mouth.”

She laughs as we walk back outside and sit in the lounge chairs, looking out over Soho.

“In my limited romantic experience?”

“Being that you just married your crush, you mean?”

“Yeah, that,” she grins. “It’s...*always* complicated.”

“True, that.” I clink my glass to hers and we each take a sip before her eyes light up.

“Oo! Think of this! If you’re crazy enough to marry my psycho brother one day, we’ll literally be sisters.”

Something twists painfully in my chest.

Marriage comes after falling in love.

Not contracts. Not deals. Not dangerous, dark games and a relationship built almost entirely on the foundation of both of you being royally fucked up and into seriously deviant sex stuff.

We’ve broken walls down, yes. And this has obviously become a lot more than it was at the start, when I was fairly certain Deimos hated me as much as I was afraid of him.

But is what we have now a *relationship*?

CALLIE ENDS up staying well into late afternoon. And then Victoria calls to see if I still want to hang out, so of course I

get her over here too, and the margaritas just keep flowing with all three of us.

That turns into Callie drunk-dialing Castle to come over, which he does, because they're in love. But then *that* brings up questions of why I'm essentially wearing pajamas at Deimos' house, and why my toothbrush is in the guest bathroom.

Long story short, by the time Deimos comes home, I'm drunk, Victoria, whom he's never even met, is drunk, Callie is *very* drunk, and Castle is nursing a beer and several questions.

So much for keeping it between just the three of us.

"So, this..." Castle smirks over the Thai take-out we've had delivered for dinner. He points first to me and then to Deimos with the neck of his beer bottle, and then back to me. "This is..."

"A consenting adult relationship," Deimos mutters. "Next question?"

"Buddy, believe me, I got *several*."

"Well, granted, I know none of the backstories here," Victoria grins. "But I think you two look cute together."

"Hear hear!" Callie bangs her fist on the table.

"*Thank you*, Victoria," I smile.

"It's less 'cute' when I chase her around the apartment, tie her up, and have my wicked way with her."

My margarita almost comes out through my nose. Callie laughs, like it's a huge joke. Castle laughs with a little less ease, like he's not *sure* if it's a joke. Victoria giggles the loudest.

"Oh my God!" She cracks up, grinning at me. "This guy!"

Deimos lifts a brow at her. “It wasn’t a joke.”

Which, of course, makes everyone else think it’s even *more* of a joke.

Deimos ignores them, turning slightly toward me and catching me red-faced as I take a bite of Pad Thai. I grin at him.

“What?” I giggle quietly.

He smiles an alarmingly *normal* smile right back. It’s... unsettling, like he’s wearing a mask.

“Nothing, babe,” he chuckles.

Wait. What the fuck? He never calls me *babe*.

I eye him suspiciously before turning back to my food. And that’s exactly when he pounces. Victoria, Castle and Callie are all on the other side of the kitchen island laughing about something with each other when I almost choke. Deimos’ hand has just slid right up my bare thigh to cup my pussy through my cotton shorts and panties as he leans in, as if pushing a stray hair away from my face for me.

“When our guests leave,” he growls quietly in a low tone that turns my core to molten fire, “I’m going to chase you. And when I catch you, I’m going to rip your fucking clothes off, and tie your hands behind your back using your messy little panties. And then I’m going to fuck your mouth until I come all over your pretty face. Then I’m going to fuck you into the floor like a dirty little slut until my cum is dripping from your body.”

Holy. Fucking. *Shit*.

It’s a struggle to swallow the bite of food in my mouth, fire spreading across my face.

“Dahlia, you okay?” Castle frowns, turning suddenly and seeing the way I’m almost choking on my Pad Thai.

I muscle it down and flash him a weak smile, gasping a little as Deimos' hand on my pussy tightens just a little.

“Yeah, I'm *great*.”

Callie and Castle agree to keep Deimos' and my relationship to themselves for now. Victoria does too. We all hug at the door, my arm around Deimos' waist and his around mine, just like a totally normal, regular couple saying goodnight to their friends after a totally normal, regular dinner.

But then they're gone, and he locks the door and turns to me with a look that promises me the rest of the night is about to be anything *but* normal.

“I'm going to count to five after these lights go off,” he growls quietly, his dark eyes burning into mine, his hand on the master light switch.

My core tightens, my nipples hardening instantly as my body preemptively begins to dump adrenaline into my system. I'm conditioned for this now.

“And when I catch you—”

“*If*,” I blurt, purposefully antagonizing him by both interrupting and by suggesting he might *not* catch me. “*If* you catch me.”

I know by now that antagonizing him makes him pounce on me just a little harder. Makes him maul me with his hands and mouth just a little more aggressively.

Makes him fuck me a little more animalistically.

Which is *exactly* why I do it.

“What happens if you catch me?” I say innocently, biting my lip.

I gasp as he suddenly reaches out and grabs my jaw, his thumb rubbing sensually across my bottom lip, pulling it from my teeth with a pop.

“If I catch you, darling,” he murmurs, leaning down to graze my earlobe with his teeth, “*I’ll fucking ruin you.*”

My pulse skips.

The lights slam off.

“Now *run*, darling.”

I turn, and I bolt, pounding across the open space of the loft. For a minute, I almost double back to try and sneak around him into the kitchen area. But then I zag left instead, and an idea hits me.

We’ve never laid out any hard and fast ground rules for these games. But it’s also sort of been accepted that I stay in the main area. I don’t go into the bedrooms or the bathrooms.

Tonight, I do.

I slip into his room, quietly shutting the door just as I hear Deimos growl “...five, here I come...” from way across the loft. I stifle an excited giggle as I retreat into his room, and then slip into the enormous walk-in closet. I move to the very back, pushing clothes on their hangers out of the way and slipping behind them against the wall. I sink down to the floor, adrenaline sizzling in my veins as I lean my head back.

The wall behind my head *moves*, and I gasp as part of it swings fully back. A light suddenly clicks on, and my heart climbs into my throat.

Shit shit shit.

I spin around, staring in shock at the small compartment with the automatic light inside that I’ve just accidentally pushed

open with the back of my head. I scramble and fumble for a light switch, or a way to close the door again...

When suddenly, my world goes still.

And nothing is real.

Sitting right inside the little compartment, on a shelf next to a stack of cash and a gun, is a little notebook.

A journal.

A diary.

...With a frayed orange leather cover.

The rest of the world slips away as my head starts to throb, a ringing sound filling my ears as I reach for the diary in slow motion. I flinch when I even touch the cover, flashbacks of being curled up on that stone bench in the rose garden reading the book flooding my brain.

My hand shakes as I pull the diary out of the compartment, my throat tightening as I stare at it in disbelief and horror.

Suddenly, it all makes sense.

This is how Deimos knows me so well. This is how he's able to play into every single hidden kink and secret fantasy I've ever had. How he's able to dissect me, and play me: because six years ago, I wrote it all down and poured my heart out on the page for someone else.

Now Deimos has it. And in having it, he has *me*.

“What the fuck are you doing in—”

I whirl on him in a fury, tears brimming in my eyes and my emotions raw on my face.

“*Why do you have this?!*”

He goes still, his chiseled jaw violently clenched and his dark eyes flashing black fire.

“Dahlia—”

“Why do you have this?!” I scream louder, staring pure malice at him as I brandish the diary over my head.

“Dahlia, stop—”

I get to my feet and lurch at him, hitting and smacking him over and over as tears flood my face.

“WHY DO YOU FUCKING HAVE—!”

I jerk as he grabs me by the throat and the wrist holding the diary, snarling as he leers maniacally down into my face.

“I’ll tell you.”

DEIMOS

Six years ago:

I'VE ALWAYS ENJOYED HALLOWEEN. And not just when I was a child, when it meant dressing up, stuffing your face full of sugar, and watching mildly spooky movies, either. As I've gotten older, I think I might actually enjoy the day even more.

There's something beautifully sinister about it that hits the shadowed places in the dark corners of my mind just right. It's the nip in the breeze warning that winter is coming sooner rather than later.

The crunch of leaves underfoot. The crackle of excitement hanging in the air that has everyone a bit more on edge, as if everyone around you is anxiously waiting for some malevolent force to jump out at them from behind the next tree.

But tonight—*this* Halloween?

I think this may be my favorite one yet.

I was never looking for her, because I sure as shit was never participating in the fucking gross, pathetic “fuck a virgin, win a prize” bullshit that people like Chase Cavendish revel in.

I also wasn't looking for her because I've never been looking for *anything* in the way of a real, human connection with

someone. That part of me was ripped out years ago. I'm not entirely sure I *ever* had much in the way of relatability with other people, what with the darkness that's always lurked inside me. But since my days in that basement, and the horrors that were inflicted on me there, and the vengeance I wreaked afterward?

There's "damaged". There's "having baggage".

And then there's *me*. I am way, *way* over the line when it comes to both of those things, and no rational woman would ever have the stomach to deal with it.

For years, blind, uncaring, unfeeling, casual sex with women that are never repeated has been enough. It's a therapy of sorts, a way to shore up the walls around my monster. And I've always been fine with that.

Until one day, recently, someone broke through those walls. A sneak. A thief of privacy. A fool, who came back for more.

None of my siblings know what was done to me. They don't know what I was put through, or what I did afterward to satiate the blood lust and need for revenge boiling in my veins. But, they're still my siblings. They're still closer to me than anyone else in the world. And it was Ares a year or so ago who suggested I might benefit from "seeing someone".

Aka: therapy. Barf.

But as loath as I was to try it at first, and as much as I hate to admit it, it *was* beneficial. Not the therapist himself, of course. He'd become so terrified of me within the first ten minutes of our very first session that every appointment thereafter was a semi-amusing chess game of me pushing him, and the poor bastard trying not to be obvious about counting down the minutes until I left.

But he *did* introduce the concept of a diary to me.

The therapist, I dropped.

The diary, I've kept.

I don't keep it at The Reckless mansion on campus, where I live. Not out of any sort of fear or worry that someone would find it. No one on this planet is stupid enough to invade my private space or snoop through my shit. No, I keep it in a hidden hole in the wall in that rose garden no one ever goes to because I need the black thoughts that I write in there to be kept a safe distance from where I sleep. I need it physically removed from me, separating me from my demons.

Yet, hidden as it was, someone *did* find it. Read it. And one day, I noticed the stone on top of it was out of place, and they revealed themselves.

Who are you?

I wrote it assuming they'd freak out and never come back. There was nothing in the diary to out me as the author, so I wasn't worried about them using what they'd read against me.

But they did come back. They...spoke to me.

She spoke to me.

The handwriting was definitely feminine. The thoughts and opinions, though obviously not as dark as my own, were certainly along the same lines as mine. The same fractured wavelength. The same hint of a sadness and a darkness in a soul not quite whole, and different from all those around us.

I should have ended it right away. I should have moved or destroyed the diary, and shut the whole thing down.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

And then one day, I found her.

It had to happen eventually. We were getting to the point of conversing via the diary on almost a daily basis. Sooner or later, we'd both arrive at the garden at the same time. And that day, she was already there, sitting on the bench with her legs curled up underneath her, her long dark hair hanging over half her face, with her sharp green eyes reading the words I'd written to her the day before.

A smile on her full lips. A pen in her hand.

I never expected it to be Dahlia Roy. And I never blinked after I found her that day. Never looked away.

Obsession takes root fast at the best of times. With me, it's almost instant. She'd already been a fixation of mine in a way I couldn't quite understand. Seeing her with my diary in her hand and that smile on her face as she read it cemented her fate.

But I wanted her to connect the dots herself.

I started dropping hints in my notes: alluding obliquely to what my family did, hinting at being in a position of authority in one of the student clubs. We got to talking about our darkest desires, and when she confessed the damaged, dark, and deviant things she craved in the pages of that book, I was done for.

Finally, I just flat out asked her.

Have you figured out who I am yet, Dahlia?

Her reply was there later that day:

Yes. And I cannot tell you how glad I am that it's you. I think I wanted it to be you all along. I can't wait to dance with you at the Halloween Ball.

Which is tonight. We haven't conversed for a week, since she wrote that. She's been back to the book—I know because I've lain in wait and watched her. But I've purposefully silenced myself.

I want the moment we come face-to-face at the dance for the first time to be filled with anticipation.

But first, there's mayhem to cause.

Chase and his Para Bellum goons have once again escalated the “pranks” to something dangerous and past the line. Corbin Shaw, a junior who's in *The Reckless*—the guy who's tapped to replace Chase as star quarterback on the Knightsblood football team next year after Chase graduates—was badly hurt at practice the other day.

It wasn't an accident.

The team was divided up, playing a scrimmage game when two Para Bellum defensemen slammed into Corbin from two directions—one clipping him at the knees, the other tackling him from behind. He didn't even have possession of the ball, for fuck's sake.

The result was a torn Achilles tendon, a broken tibia, and a fractured L4 vertebra. Not being the star quarterback next season after all is the least of Corbin's problems. He'll be in physical therapy just to be able to walk properly again for the next couple of years.

The darker part of me has grand plans for revenge. Mostly, they involve knives, blunt instruments, snapping bones, and

possibly a woodchipper, a la *Fargo*.

But I've dialed my monster back a little for tonight. After all, I have a date, and murder might get in the way of that.

I grin to myself as I make my way across the dark campus toward the Para Bellum mansion. I'm wearing an all-black suit and have painted my face in a dark, skeletal grin, somewhere between Jack Skellington from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and Brandon Lee's character in *The Crow*.

I won't be feeding Chase and his fucking goons into a woodchipper tonight. But I *will* be dosing the whiskey in their inner-sanctum club room in the mansion with ipecac—a fast-acting medicinal emetic.

As in, Chase and his buddies are going to be spending the evening puking their fucking guts out after they propose a pre-dance toast to themselves.

...And yeah, if I can swing it, I'll also do my best to break a Para Bellum nose or three on my way out the door.

I slip in a back door to the mansion and creep my way through the kitchens to a little-used back staircase. Upstairs, I disappear into the shadows, watching with a grim face as two Para Bellum underclassmen jostle each other down the hall on their way to the Halloween Ball.

I've planned ahead by enlisting the unwitting help of a few of the more...*sexually liberal* girls on campus. I told Jen Morebach, Arianna Amato, and Katya Skovony—all currently Juniors, all known campus-wide for their habit of star-fucking their way to popularity with the top brass of the student clubs—that Chase and his buddies had been talking about them and wanted to “hang out”...*wink wink*...with them before the dance tonight.

Currently, they're all down in the billiards room of the mansion, in the basement. Which leaves their clubroom unoccupied for my meddling.

Inside, I grin as I move to the bar cart next to the crackling fireplace. I lift the glass stopper of the decanter full of Chase's favorite high-end whiskey and dump it in the ipecac.

"I assume you're here to concede defeat?"

Shit. On the downside, I've just been caught. On the upside, maybe I'll still be able to break some noses on the way out of here.

I turn to smile thinly at Chase, with Brad Hathaway filing into the room behind him and closing the door.

"Where's your third musketeer?"

Chase is rarely without both Spencer Campbell *and* Brad.

"Probably still getting his dick sucked by Jen Morebach downstairs." Chase nods his chin past me to the bar cart. "I'm assuming we can thank you for the free blowjobs? Assuming that was your doing so that you could fuck with my booze, that is."

Well, you know what they say about even the best laid plans, and this one was as off-the-cuff as I get.

His eyes narrow. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Are you here to admit defeat?"

My brow cocks as I start to circle around them, heading for the door. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I just wanted to stop by and see if this little clubroom of yours was as pathetic and lame as I imagined it was. It's not. It's worse. Tell

me... When you, Brad, and Spencer jerk each other off in here, who gets the middle seat on the couch? I feel like that would mean double the work, you know?"

I pantomime putting both hands out to either side of me and moving them up and down.

Chase just chuckles quietly. "I'll take that hundred grand off you in cash. I don't need the looks I'd get from my bank if they saw me trying to cash a check with a Drakos signature."

Something whines in the back of my head.

"Excuse me?"

Chase glances at Brad, and they both chuckle.

"You're all dolled up, Deimos," Chase smiles. "Going to the dance tonight?"

My teeth grit.

"Got a date?"

Brad starts to snicker, and it's not lost on me that he's fanning out to the side of me, like he's flanking me.

Chase's lips curl in mock puzzlement. "Or—wait—is it *me* that has that date?" Something malicious sparks in his eyes as he steps toward me. "You lost, Deimos."

My hand closes to a fist. "What the fuck are you—"

"I mean, A for effort. The whole emo Donnie Darko sad-boy act in that lame fucking diary was a nice place to start. I even used some of your words on her in person. Thanks for letting me copy your notes, by the way."

Oh fuck.

Chase sighs, spreading his arms in faux apology as he walks closer to me. "But you just couldn't seal the deal in time with

the crown jewel.”

He pulls out his phone, smirking at Brad.

“What do we think, bro?”

“I’m cool with it. Might as well show him what he missed out on.”

Chase lifts his phone, the screen facing me.

...And everything inside of me dies.

Everything goes black and cold.

The video is shot from Chase’s point of view, looking down to where he’s fucking a girl from behind.

A girl with tanned skin that looks vaguely middle eastern. With long locks of dark hair. With an achingly familiar build.

Poison spreads through my veins as I watch Chase’s extremely average dick plow in and out of her pink pussy, one of his hands gripping her ass tightly.

“Yeah, you fuckin’ like that dick, don’t you, baby?”

The girl moans, though it’s an awkward sound, given that her mouth is full. The camera pans up over her back to where Brad, still wearing his shirt, is in front of her. He grins and throws up devil-horns with one hand as he grips her hair tighter in his other fist and thrusts into her mouth.

“You were dying to get fucked like this, weren’t you, Dahlia.”

And she *moans*. She nods her head, whimpering around the cock stuffed in her throat as she pushes her ass back harder against Chase.

The camera jerks wildly as it pans back up to Chase’s smirking face.

“*You lose, buddy,*” he chuckles into the lens. “*Dahlia’s my fucking slut, now.*” He laughs as he turns the camera back around to show her getting fucked by the two of them. “*Isn’t that right, Dahlia?*”

It’s the eager, wanton way she moans and nods her head as the two fuckheads pound her from both ends that pushes me over the edge.

Chases chuckles and takes the phone away.

“Oh man, your face,” he snickers, shaking his head. “Now, is it just that you wanted to win and didn’t? That you wanted to beat me, Deimos? No... I think you had a little *crush*. That’s it, isn’t it? It’s that you truly wanted her.” He grins wider. “I mean, that’s sure how it looks from reading your little diary.”

Chase and Brad both chuckle before the former leans closer to me.

“Ask me nicely, and maybe next time, I’ll let you smell my fingers after I fuck her. Because shit, Deimos. That’s some *nice* pussy you missed out on.”

I pride myself on keeping my emotions in check. I *like* that I’m coldly calculating, not a ticking time bomb like Hades. But in that moment, having just seen the one girl I’ve ever taken down my walls for getting fucked by these two shits right in front of me, *while they laugh at me*, I lose that control.

Hard.

It happens fast. I wind up my fist, and Chase is still snickering when it slams into his nose.

“*You fucker!*” he roars, clutching at his bloody, broken nose. He takes a wild swing at me, which I dodge easily. But a second later, I grunt when I’m hit from behind and knocked to the ground.

It's all sort of a blur. It's one against two, but for all their macho swagger, neither of them can throw a punch very well. But I can, especially after all the underground fights behind the stables at the weekends.

I've got them both pretty banged up, and now would be a good time to walk the fuck away. But just as I'm deciding this, Chase circles me, and something brutal smashes into my back.

I roar in pain, dropping to my knees and rolling to the side before Brad can bash me over the head this time with the fire-poker in his hand. He swings again, and again, I roll. This time, Chase stamps down hard on my right wrist, pinning it in place with me flat on my stomach on the floor. He jumps on top of me, crushing me under his weight as he yanks my arm out to the side and holds it against the ground.

"I think this little fucking psycho needs to be taught a lesson. What do you think, Brad?"

Brad grins. "Class is in session, fucker."

He swings the fire poker down with all his strength. Pain explodes in my hand, and I watch, horrified, as he raises the poker and does it again, and then a third time. I can actually *hear* the bones in my hand breaking and feel the tendons getting severed.

I'm shaking from shock when they get off me and back away.

"Get the fuck out of here, Drakos," Chase spits as I hold my mangled hand to my chest.

I stand, blinking back the nausea of pain as I glance at the door. Just as I turn to go, fresh pain explodes in my side.

"Brad!" Chase barks as I back away from the Para Bellum VP who still has the fire poker in his hands. "Drop it, we're done here."

“Nah, bro,” Brad leers at me, advancing with the poker. “I don’t think I’m done teaching this greasy mafia-boy some fucking manners.”

That’s where he fucks up and things go south, fast.

He swings, but I dodge the hit this time, grabbing his wrist in my good hand and wrenching the fire poker away. I slam into him, shoving him back and away from me. Brad stumbles, hits the edge of the couch with the back of his knee, and loses his balance.

He falls back, his eyes wide, and then the back of his neck cracks against the corner edge of the coffee table with a sickening, snapping sound.

He doesn’t get back up. His eyes stay wide open.

Oh shit.

He’s not breathing.

“You fucker!” Chase roars, staring at me. “You little *fucker!*”

He storms toward me as I shake my head and lance my eyes into him.

“Stay the fuck back, Chase,” I hiss. “I’m warning you.”

“You’re a dead man, Drakos.”

No, you are if you touch me.

He hits me like a freight train, toppling me over the back of the couch and sending us both crashing into the bar cart. The thing tips over, and I flinch when the over-proof bottles of booze go crashing into the fireplace and suddenly ignite.

Liquid flame belches out across the room, setting the curtains and the rug on fire. Chase bellows, slamming into me again and sending me crashing into the wall.

I blink, stars exploding in my head and behind my eyes. I'm aware of Chase pulling away from me, but my vision is still blurred.

"I should call the cops."

I go still as my eyes begin to focus.

Shit.

Chase is standing a few feet away, a gun in his hand leveled right at me. His lips pull back in a thin smile.

"You've got the reputation, psycho," he growls. "And I'm sure at least one camera or person saw you slinking in here tonight."

My gaze locks onto the gun.

"This little baby might not be technically allowed on campus. But I've got a clean title for it, and a concealed carry permit for the state. And you breaking in here and killing my friend is *definitely* self-defense."

"*Coward,*" I hiss.

He just grins wider. "Oh, and just so you know, I'll be sure to tell Dahlia that the diary was you while my cock is buried balls-deep in her ass."

My lips curl into a snarl as Chase draws the hammer back on the gun.

Then he pulls the trigger.

I flinch, but the fact that no sound leaves the gun and the fact that I'm not bleeding out of a fresh new hole in my chest tells me it's misfired.

I don't even give Chase a millisecond to think about that before I'm charging him. I slam into him, ignoring the pain

that radiates through my hand and up my arm as we crash to the floor. I grab for the gun, but he doesn't let go, the both of us twisting and kneeing and snarling at each other as we grapple with the gun in a frenzied tangle.

And then suddenly, the trigger gets squeezed again.

...This time, there's no misfire.

I don't honestly know whose finger sets it off. But suddenly, sitting astride Chase's chest, I realize he's not fighting me anymore.

The gun barrel is jammed against a gaping hole in his throat, half covered by his hoodie. Blood pools under his head from the exit wound. And it's a *lot* of blood...

It's then that I realize, his eyes wide and his face pale and devoid of any flush as the blood drains out of him, that Chase is dead.

I also realize that half the room is on fire.

I stand, my breath coming fast and hard. My blood thuds as I deftly wipe the gun down, erasing any fingerprints before I toss it into the fire. I cradle my hand against my chest and whirl for the door.

I don't know which of us is more surprised when I yank it open and come face-to-face with Dahlia.

I want to drink in how beautiful she looks. How perfect she is in the dress she's chosen for the ball. But it's all wrong. It's all tainted now.

It's not *just* that Chase used the words in my diary to make her think he was the author. That it was him she'd been talking to on those pages all along.

It's that she believed it. It's that she *wanted* it to be Chase. She even said so, in her response in the book. That's why she's all dressed up tonight. That's why she's *here*, to meet *him* for the dance.

That's why she's already fucked him and his fucking friend, and let him video it.

Because she doesn't want the beast. She wants prince fucking charming.

It's a bizarre feeling, looking at someone you thought you loved and suddenly hating them so much, even if you know you're not truly capable of that. I want to, so badly. I *want* to hate her. But I know that there could be a thousand men before me, and I still wouldn't hate her. I'd just kill them all.

But at this moment, she has to be gone. She can't be around me anymore. Not ever.

"Run from this place, now. And if you ever speak of any of this, I'll destroy everything you love."

The wailing of sirens fills the night as I stagger outside, watching as Dahlia runs away from me in terror, out into the darkness of Halloween Night. Fire roars behind me on the upper floor of the Para Bellum mansion, and students are rushing out, some screaming and running away, others filming it.

But I just watch her as she fades from my vision.

Present:

SHE'S SHAKING and crying when I finish telling her the events of that night. She pushes me aside, staggering out of the closet

and into my bedroom. Her shoulders shake and her breath hitches as she paces the room frantically with a dazed, wild look on her face.

“You...you really...” She turns to stare at me with pure venom in her eyes. “You honestly thought that was me in that video!?”

My stomach drops. I blink at her.

“What?”

“That wasn’t me, Deimos,” she hurls at me, her face haggard and her voice strained. “That *couldn’t have* been me!”

My lips curl into a snarl. “The fuck do you mean—”

“Surprise, buddy!” she screams. “I was a virgin before!!”

My pulse is still thudding as I stalk toward her. “Before *what*,” I snarl.

“Before *YOU!*”

The room goes silent. My body freezes, and all the hatred and rage drops away and shatters at my feet.

“*What?*”

“There was never...” She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and looks away miserably. Her shoulders shake as she glances back at me with teary eyes and a tragic expression. “*I always wanted it to be you, you know,*” she whispers. “When I found the book, and read it, and we started conversing...” Her throat bobs. Her eyes glisten in the darkness. “Deep down, I always wanted it to be you.”

I’m moving to her before I can stop myself. Before I can analyze it or let the mistakes of the past cut me in half.

“*It always was,*” I growl.

She moans as I slam into her, my lips bruising hers as I seize her in my arms. We stagger backward, tearing each other's clothes off and grappling like we're each other's lifeline keeping us tethered to the world.

We fall onto the bed with her astride my hips, her nipples dragging against my chest as my swollen cock head pulses right against the soft slickness of her opening.

"It always was me," I growl. "And I've loved you since the moment you stole my attention."

I grab her hips and yank her down onto me. She cries out, throwing her head back and rolling her hips as she takes every last, thick inch of my cock like a good girl.

And then we start to move.

Typically, what Dahlia and I do in bed together is *fuck*. It's violent and dark, vicious and unmerciful. It's both a release of our demons, and a bandage for the scars they left behind.

But this time is different. This time, when we move together, I feel something I've never felt before.

Love.

Yes, we're still clawing at each other like two wildcats, and my teeth still find the tender parts of her flesh to bite into. But when we lock eyes, we stay like that, staring into each other's soul as she slowly rides and grinds on my cock until reality blurs at the edges.

"*I love you*," she chokes out just as her face caves and her entire body shudders and wrenches around me. When she comes, I let go as well, groaning as I capture her mouth with mine and swallow her moans. My cock pulses and throbs, my hot cum spilling into her as her nails scrape down my back and her legs wrap around my waist.

Then, we do it all over again.

DEIMOS

“OFF TO CLASS?”

She turns, blushing when she sees the way I’m wolfishly eying her as she gets dressed. I’m still in bed, and I groan when I feel my cock thicken under the sheets as my eyes feast on her ass in those lacy panties.

“Unfortunately, yeah,” she sighs. “I have an advisor meeting in like half an hour, or I’d...” She bites her lip as her gaze lands on the tent in the sheets. “I mean, I could be late...”

“No, you couldn’t. Get to your meeting, it’s important.”

She smirks. “Are you actually saying no to me crawling between your legs and sucking your dick?”

I grit my teeth. “Odd and completely uncharacteristic of me as it may sound, yes. Because school is important, and I won’t have me *or* my cock fucking that up for you.”

She sighs, nodding. “Fine, fine.” She pulls the rest of her clothes on. “What about *after* my school stuff?”

“Oh, don’t worry. After you’re done, I’ll be wrapping that cute ponytail in a fist and fucking you over the side of the couch until my cum drips down your thighs.”

Her face explodes pink. I smile as I slide, naked and very hard, out of bed.

“Enjoy school.”

She groans. “When did you become such a tease.”

I chuckle as I pull on clothes.

“Oh, shit,” she blurts. “I actually told Victoria I’d do some study prep with her at her place after class today.”

I’ve only met this new friend of hers once, when she was very drunk, so it was hard to get a real sense of her. But Dahlia seems to like her, and she also seems to have become a bit of a mentor to the undergrad.

“Then your fucking will have to wait until after *that*, Miss Busy Schedule.”

She giggles. “Promise?”

“What do you think.”

She grins as she grabs her bag and then stretches up on her tiptoes to kiss me.

“Have a good day. Love y—” she tenses, biting her lip. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to just—”

“I love you, too.”

Fuck me, I love the way she blushes.

I LOOK FOR PATTERNS. Patterns help me narrow thoughts down. Finding them helps me focus and see the truth in things.

There were three of them—three kings of the Para Bellum club that year. I killed Brad and Chase the night of the

Halloween Ball—the night Dahlia left school and never came back, under my dire threats.

But one of those kings remains: Chase's third-in-command, Spencer.

He was always the least shitty of the three of them. And these days, he's gone out of his way to show just what a good man he is. I'm aware that acting good doesn't make him *actually* good, because bad men often cloak their badness in everything he has—a beautiful wife, children, the charity he runs, blah blah fucking blah.

But when the bad ones cover it with goodness, it's usually painfully obvious. It's too perfect and symmetrical, like tiles covering the marks and imperfections of the bare wood floor beneath.

There's no pattern with him, though. His life is simply that: a life, not a cover.

Just the same, it's time I had a little chat with Spencer Campbell.

Luckily, he's not far. He lives in New York City now.

...Where he's about to announce his candidacy for mayor.

“UH, SIR? *SIR!*” The flustered secretary flaps after me down the hallway of Campbell and Dunn. The law firm bears Spencer's name because his uncle is one of the founding partners; he himself is now a senior partner.

Partner at a top law firm, running for mayor, has a nice little charity foundation, and enjoys a happy, beautiful family. Yep, Spencer's done well for himself.

It also means he's got *so much* to lose.

"Sir!" The secretary continues to squawk. "Sir, do you have an appointment?"

"Nope."

I barge into his office. Spencer starts, looking up from his desk in confusion before suddenly he freezes.

"Mr. Campbell, sir, I'm sorry, he wouldn't stop—"

"It's fine, Christine," Spencer says quietly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Hold my calls, please."

"Of course, sir."

When the door closes, I smile icily at him.

"Hello, Spencer."

His throat works as he sits back in his chair. "Yes...ahh... I heard you were back in the city, Deimos."

"I'll bet you did."

He's scared. But it's not pathetic or abject. It's a natural fear, quite to be expected, and he's not cowering, either.

"I've never spoken a word about any of it to anyone, Deimos," he growls quietly.

I arch a brow. "I'm very curious why it is you jumped right to that."

He snorts, shaking his head. "I doubt you're here to tell me you're going to make a campaign contribution."

Spencer and I bumped into each other a week after the night of the Halloween Ball, at the school-sponsored memorial to poor Brad Hathaway and Chase Cavendish, who'd died in a tragic fire where alcohol was presumed to have played a factor.

I knew he knew—or at least had an idea—the second he looked at me.

I don't normally trust people. But I'm also surgically insightful in my ability to read them. And with Spencer, I didn't read evil or backstabbing. Truth be told, I saw him as a decent guy who just happened to be unfortunate enough to have gotten mixed up with some shitty friends at school.

So I chose to believe him when he swore up and down to me on that day that he'd never tell a soul. I chose to think that ultimately, Spencer wanted to be good, and live a good life. I chose to trust that he was smart enough to realize that if he ever even mentioned a *hint* of his suspicion that I was involved in the events of that night, that good life would swiftly come to an end.

Apparently, I read him right.

But I'm still here for a reason. And that reason is pulling at whatever strings I can to finally get to the bottom of who came after Dahlia and her mother.

Nasser El-Sayed and all his people are gone, thanks to Adrian. Adele doesn't have any other obvious enemies, and neither does Dahlia.

Which is why I'm looking into that night at Knightsblood.

Spencer Campbell was smart enough to put two and two together. He also knew that Chase and I were enemies, and probably knew about that fucking sex video of a girl who I now know definitively wasn't Dahlia, but whom Chase wanted me to *think* was her. Which means he could probably deduce that Chase showing me that video might have led to the “accidental fire” that killed Chase and Brad.

I really don't think Spencer himself is dumb enough to put his family and career in jeopardy by blabbing anything about his theory. But I am curious who else *besides him* may have connected the dots on that night.

"I want to talk about that Halloween at Knightsblood, Spencer."

He pales a little, but he sets his jaw. He exhales slowly as he stands, pacing to some shelves on the other side of his office.

"Drink?"

"No thanks."

"Yeah, me neither," he mumbles, turning to lean against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. He looks at me cautiously.

"Well?"

"Who was the girl?"

He winces, glancing down and away from me. "That fucking video, and that fucking bet..." He shakes his head. "We were *kids*, Deimos. Idiot fucking kids. And I'm not that guy anymore. I'm really not. I met my wife Sam, and I found my truth."

It honestly isn't that he's covering anything. I can tell. He just really is a good man.

"I hope you get elected, Spencer."

He scoffs. "Why, so you can plant something on me and use it to blackmail me to help your family?"

I chuckle. "No. Because sometimes, it's a good thing when the good guys win."

He smiles wryly. “Sometimes the good guys don’t have to win. It’s just that the bad ones have to lose.” He frowns. “In hindsight, Chase and Brad were never my friends. I want you to know that. And they were definitely *not* good guys.”

“No disagreement from me on that. But back to my question —”

“You’re with her now, aren’t you?” He eyes me. “Dahlia Roy, I mean.”

I bristle, my nostrils flaring.

“Whoa, take it easy, Deimos,” he murmurs. “But from your reaction, I can guess I’m right?” He shrugs. “Take it from me, I can see it in your eyes. It’s the same look I’d have if I was chasing down Sam’s monsters.”

He exhales. “The girl in the video is Allison Whitley.”

My brows knit. “Who?”

“She didn’t go to Knightsblood, before you ask.” His face sours a little. “She was Chase’s stepsister for a while, when her mother and his father were briefly married.”

What.

My mind replays the video of Chase fucking this girl with the tanned skin and the dark black hair from behind, while Brad took her mouth.

...And now Spencer is telling me she was his *stepsister*?

Jesus *fuck*.

Spencer grimaces. “I know. Needless to say, they had a weird relationship. I think it was just casual for him. But that girl was in love with him, like, full-on puppy-dog eyes in love. She’d have done anything for him.”

She'd have done anything for him.

Like fuck him and his buddy on camera just to screw with me.

...Maybe also like looking to avenge his death by going after the girl whom she impersonated in that video? The girl that the boy she loved was in a group bet to see who could sleep with her first?

“She was also pretty nuts,” Spencer mutters. “Pretty sure she was in and out of psych hospitals when we were at school, and I don’t think she’s done too well since. Her mom and Chase’s dad split, and I heard her mom got nothing in the divorce. She —”

“Where is she living now?” I hiss quietly.

He frowns. “Actually, right here in New York.”

Shit.

I yank my phone out and start to hammer her name into Google.

“She’s not on social media or anything. I think her mom made her delete all her accounts after her last manic episode. Hang on, I’ve probably got an old picture of her.”

Spencer scrolls through his phone for a minute before he nods. “Yeah, here we go.”

He hands the phone to me. I frown as I take it from his hand.

Oh fuck.

Oh holy fucking shit.

My eyes widen as I look into the face of the girl on the screen —Chase Cavandish’s stepsister Allison, who was madly in love with him.

Who’s dangerously mentally unwell.

And who now goes by a different name.

“Deimos!?”

Spencer barely catches his phone as I whirl and bolt out the door. When I try to call Dahlia it only rings once before going straight to voicemail. I call again, but the same thing happens.

Then I start to *run*.

DAHLIA

“YOU ARE A *GODSEND*.”

I laugh as I take a sip of the fresh coffee Victoria’s just made. Her apartment is pretty small but super cozy, especially where we’re currently camped out in her living room. Small as it may be, the place gets a ton of natural light, and it turns out Victoria has a mega green thumb. Plants fill the living room—some potted, some hanging in baskets—and it gives the room a great calming vibe.

“Well, it took me forever to even get these to you,” I groan, nodding at the class notes in front of her. “The least I could do was help you decipher my horrible handwriting and weird brain patterns.”

“Nah, you’re totally normal,” she grins, tapping her own temple. “Trust me, I’m the crazy one.”

I roll my eyes as she glances back to the notes.

“So how’s your undergrad program going?”

She makes a face. “It’s challenging. I mean it’s good, and I really like it. But...I don’t know. It’s fine, I’m just not sure if international relations is really my thing.”

I frown. “You mean poli-sci?”

“Well, that too.” She looks up and smiles. “Did I not tell you? I switched to a double major.”

“*Damn*, girl,” I whistle, shaking my head. “That’s seriously intense.”

“Tell me about it.” She grins at me. “But in other, far more interesting news...uh, your steamy office affair internship boss is a total *babe*.”

I blush deeply. It’s not the first time she’s mentioned Deimos since she met him when she was over for dinner with Callie and Castle the other night.

“It’s not weird, is it?”

“That you’re clearly living with him already?” She snickers. “I mean...maybe. But who cares? Weird is fun. And from the perpetual way you’re smiling these days, I’m guessing you’re having a *lot* of fun.”

I grin, my face blushing.

“Not to mention the constant bow legs.”

I groan as she collapses in a fit of giggles. “*Jesus*, Victoria!”

While she continues to laugh, I reach for my phone to text something dorky and cute to Deimos. Because apparently, I do that now. Yup, I’m that girl.

Shoot me.

But just as I’m typing out “thinking about you”, my phone dies.

Dammit.

“Hey, do you have a charger I could borrow?”

“Yeah, for sure. In the kitchen.”

Victoria starts to get up, but I jump to my feet. “Nah, I’ll grab —”

My thigh hits the table, and my coffee spills all over my top.

“*Shit!*”

I hiss at the sting of the scalding hot liquid. Victoria scrambles to her feet, dashing into the kitchen and coming back a second later with a wad of paper towels.

“Fuck, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I wince. “Just scared me more than anything.” I glance down at my shirt. “Crap.”

Victoria shrugs. “You can go grab anything you want from my room, if you want to change. We’re so close in size, it’ll fit perfectly.”

“Oh my God, really?”

“Yeah, of course! Second-top drawer of my dresser.”

“You’re the best.”

In her room, I strip off my coffee-stained, damp shirt and hang it on the doorknob. Then I open her drawer and paw through the stack of t-shirts. I smile curiously when something catches my eye. I push the stack of shirts to the side, and grin when I pull out the one I saw peeking out from the back.

It’s a Knightsblood University t-shirt—white with the logo in black emblazoned on the chest. I tug on the super oversized shirt and smile as I strut into the kitchen, where Victoria is standing by the sink.

“Ta-da! Holy *shit*,” I laugh. “Did you *go* here?! How have we not discussed—”

She’s looking at me with a horrified expression on her face.

“Victoria?”

“Take that off.”

Her voice is a rigid and lethal whisper, her face white and her jaw clenched.

I frown, sucking on my teeth. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

“*I SAID TAKE IT OFF!*”

Yeah, something’s not right here.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” I say quietly, trying to calm her.

“NOW!”

“Okay!”

I shiver, a nervy feeling creeping up my spine as I reach down and peel off the shirt. When I toss it to her, all the sudden venom in her immediately disappears. Her shoulders relax, and her jaw visibly unclenches.

“I...I’m sorry,” she mumbles.

I nod, crossing my arms awkwardly over my bra. “That’s... okay, Victoria. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She nods quietly, looking at the shirt in her hands. Her thumbs run over it almost lovingly.

“Did you go—”

“My stepbrother did.” She just keeps staring at the shirt. “This was his.”

Was.

Now I feel like an asshole, parading in here in a shirt that belonged to a family member who’s clearly deceased.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Victoria,” I say gently. “What year was he?”

Slowly, her eyes lift to mine. Something flickers behind them.

“The same year as your boyfriend.”

I freeze.

Knightsblood never *once* came up at dinner the other night. And I can't imagine I've ever mentioned to her that Deimos went to school there, considering she and I have never even talked about *me* going there.

“Excuse me?”

Her mouth twists. “He was there at the same time as Deimos. The same time as *you*, too...”

Her voice has changed. It's noticeably colder. More distant. Edged.

The feeling of sharp steel dragging over my skin tingles down my spine.

“Who...” I swallow. “Victoria, who was your stepbrother?”

“Oh, you knew him.” Her face darkens as her lips thin. “Chase Cavendish.”

My pulse skips. Then her eyes dart to the rack of knives on the counter, and my heart starts hammering in my chest.

“And you and your fucking boyfriend got him *killed*.”

The second she lunges for the knives, I'm bolting out the kitchen door. I scream as I hear her charging after me and crash into the living room with her right on my heels. I cry out when I feel the nick of a blade against my arm, sending me tumbling into the hallway by the front door—

Which immediately slams open as a dark shape comes exploding through it. The shape slams into Victoria, wrenching the blade from her hand, twisting it, and then

pinning her hard to the floor, pressing the tip of her own knife against her throat.

“Stay the fuck down,” Deimos growls.

DEIMOS

“VICTORIA”—OR *Allison*—pales when the edge of the blade presses against her throat. She doesn’t fight me at all. In fact, whatever fight was in her before floods out as fast as the tears that flow down her face.

“*I’m so sorry!*” she sobs.

Part of who and what I am is my ability to see through the masks people wear, as if they weren’t there at all. It’s how I could tell six years ago that Spencer wasn’t going to say a thing, and how I know he’s a genuinely good man now.

It’s also how I can tell this isn’t some act from Allison now that she doesn’t have the upper hand.

She’s just *done*.

I’m not, though.

“You’re *sorry?*” I snarl. “For trying to fucking *kill* her?!”

“Please!” she begs, bawling big ugly tears as she looks past me to Dahlia. “I’m so fucking sorry! I...I don’t know what the knife was all about. I wasn’t planning to hurt you!”

“But you *did*,” I hiss, cold malice in my tone, as I turn to glance at the small cut on Dahlia’s arm.

It's barely a scratch. But fuck that. This crazy cunt could have snipped a single hair from Dahlia's head, and I'd be acting the same way.

"I didn't mean to! I just..." She flinches, sucking in air through her hitched breaths. "I get these impulses sometimes, and they're almost impossible to control..." She squeezes her eyes shut. "I'm bipolar! And that's the truth. You can look in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom if you don't believe me!"

I glance at Dahlia. "Go look."

She nods, still hugging herself and shaking as she disappears out of the room. A minute later, she walks back in holding a prescription bottle. "Depakote," she says quietly.

As well as being used to treat Epilepsy, it's a mood stabilizer commonly prescribed for bipolar disorder.

My gaze swivels back to lance into Allison. She shrinks under my fierce gaze, still crying.

"Please don't kill me..."

I should. Another version of me, from not so long ago, would have. Not now.

"I'm not going to kill you," I hiss quietly. "Because I understand privileged and yet broken lives better than you will ever know, believe me. But you're leaving New York, forever."

"But I have school—"

"Lying would be a *very* ill-advised idea right now, Allison."

She goes silent.

She doesn't go to Columbia. Or any college, for that matter. I had a cop I know who owes me a favor look her up on my way

over here. She's just a former trust fund brat with a backpack stuffed full of psychiatric issues, and an unhealthy obsession with a dead guy who never felt the same way about her that she did about him.

"And I know you've got that spark of vengeance still burning in your heart," I say coldly.

She shakes her head. "No, I—"

"Stop. Lying."

She flinches. Then I see her eyes burn with hate as they stab past me toward Dahlia.

"She killed him," she blurts. "She killed—"

"No, she didn't." I toss the knife away and grab her by the collar of her shirt, hauling her up to look me dead in the eye. *"I did."*

Horror, pain, and anguish explode simultaneously across her face, like a haunted kaleidoscope.

"Hate me," I growl. "You're welcome to, and you're entitled to it." I leer close, snarling in her face. *"Hit me."*

Allison flinches. "W-what?"

"Hit me. Expel your hatred for me, who took someone you loved away from you. I'm giving you permission, and I won't hurt you back." My eyes draw to slits. "But you only get one."

She tenses. Her lips pull into a savage sneer. And then suddenly, she's lashing out and delivering a closed-fist punch right in my face. She screams and lashes out again, but I grab her wrists fast, stopping her cold.

"That was it, Allison," I growl. "That's the only one you get. And now, you and I are *done*. Your stepbrother was an utter

piece of shit. He used you and how much you loved him to convince you to make that video, didn't he?"

Her face reddens with shame as she looks away.

"He...he never meant it," she says quietly. "Whenever he did bad things..."

And suddenly, I see it.

Fuck.

There were always rumors about Chase on campus. Yes, as the star quarterback and king of Para Bellum, it's not like he was ever hard up for female company. But monsters who abuse and hurt don't do it for sex. It's not about getting laid.

It's about power.

And if you looked in between the cracks of the golden veneer on Chase Cavendish, that's what you saw: a black-hearted piece of shit who wanted power over others. Which is why no matter how hard he and his sycophants tried to squash them down, the rumors about one girl or another who woke up in Chase's bed without clothes or any memory of how she got there kept popping up.

And now, I'm looking at Allison, and I'm seeing something I didn't see in her before.

I see a survivor.

Like Dahlia. Like me.

I see it in her eyes: the warring emotions of a survivor who doesn't know how to hate a victimizer they were supposed to admire and love.

"He did it to you sometimes, didn't he?" I say quietly.

Allison's face caves as her eyes dart to mine. Then she looks quickly away again.

Yeah, that's a yes.

"When you know you should hate the person who hurt you, but that person is someone you're supposed to love, it's... confusing," I growl quietly.

Allison blinks back tears. I reach a hand behind me and take Dahlia's in my palm, squeezing it briefly before I reach into my jacket for my checkbook. Deftly, I fill one out, tear it off, and press it into Allison's hand.

"I believe this is yours."

She looks down and almost chokes when her eyes land on the million-dollar figure.

It's the amount the "pot" ended up at for that fucked up contest of Chase's back at school. All things considered, it's not money I need to eat next week. And this girl, no matter how much anger I still have for the way she lied to Dahlia and then tried to hurt her, has been through a lot at the hands of those who manipulated her.

"I—I don't..."

"Take it. Cash it. It'll go through, I promise."

My eyes pierce into hers.

"You have money as well as opportunity now. Your life can be whatever you want it to be. If you choose to make it nothing more than revenge for a guy who was a piece of shit rapist, by all means, come for me again. But you will not walk away. And if you come for *her*?" My chin nods at Dahlia, my eyes darkening. "If I even have a *dream* that you're after her, I'll wear your fucking skin."

Allison goes white, but she nods her head quickly. “I understand,” she says quietly.

“Good. Make what you will of your life. But this part of it is *over*. Do we understand each other?”

She nods again, turning to Dahlia with genuine sadness on her face. “I—”

“Do not look at her.”

She starts to cry as she drops her gaze. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to deceive you or to rope you into a trap or anything. I just... He wanted me to be *you* when he filmed me...” she chokes. “And so I just wanted to know who you were. And...and be you, maybe. Just a little—”

Dahlia pushes past me and hugs Allison close. I frown and go to pull her back, but she shakes her head and shoves my hand away.

So I allow it for another minute before Dahlia finally lets me pull her from the embrace. I turn to look down at Allison.

“You will leave New York tonight.”

She nods quickly. “I understand.”

I wrap my jacket around Dahlia as I lead her to the door.

“Wait!”

Allison stands, chewing on her lip as her fingers pick at her cuticles. She looks scared.

“I...”

She looks terrified, actually.

“I’m not supposed to say anything,” she says quietly. “He made me swear on Chase’s memory...”

My jaw tightens as Dahlia and I turn and walk slowly back into the living room.

“Say anything about what, Allison?” I murmur darkly. “And who made you swear?”

She swallows, her face white as her eyes drag to Dahlia. “Your stepdad. He’s—”

I see the shadow in the window behind her, and I react on instinct.

“DOWN!”

I slam Dahlia to the floor, just as the glass shatters and the bullets start flying.

It’s over as quickly as it started. I yank Dahlia’s face to mine.

“Are you—!”

“I’m fine!” she blurts as I lurch to my feet, my gun out as I storm over to the window.

Whoever was out there on the fire escape has already gone, though.

“*Deimos!*”

I whirl, and my face tightens.

Shit.

Dahlia and I weren’t hit.

But Allison Whitley is now lying on the ground, motionless, with blood rapidly pooling beneath her.

Fuck.

DEIMOS

SOMETIMES, her lips move in her sleep.

When I first noticed it, I worried that it was nightmares, or her reliving some of her past trauma. But as time's gone on, I've realized that she's almost always smiling when she does it.

I don't think that means nightmares.

I grin when she does it now, the early morning light filtering across her face through the curtains. Sitting on the edge of our bed, I tuck a lock of her dark hair behind her ear as my heart swells in my chest.

I could have lost her.

I almost *did* lose her.

And it's that dancing on the horrible edge of what-if that has me looking at her now in an even deeper way than I have before.

I've loved Dahlia Roy since the moment she first caught my attention. I've known that for a while, even if I kept it buried deep. I loved her when she didn't know who I—the writer of the book she was conversing with—was.

I loved her when I hated her.

Now I think I'm realizing there's more than just love. There's a higher level, past infatuation, past even that feeling your heart gets when it finds its second half.

Obsession.

I'm *obsessed* with Dahlia. I always have been, and I'm quite sure I always will be. Not obsessed in the sense of stalking her or looking into her dorm room from a tree.

I'm obsessed with every *detail* of her. Every secret smile. Every look. Every way her brain ticks and thinks.

Every fleeting moment I have with her.

Her eyes open and her lips pull into a sleepy smile as she looks up at me.

"Hey..." she whispers quietly in a way that utterly disarms me.

There aren't any other walls to come down. Not anymore.

She's destroyed all of mine.

All my defenses. All my armor.

I'm all hers now, to do with what she will.

"You're dressed already," she murmurs, her brow furrowing.

"Yeah, I have some work I need to do. Be here when I get back."

She grins wider. "That doesn't sound like a question."

"It's not."

She beams up at me and lifts her head just as I lower mine. Our lips sear together in a kiss, and the roaring in my head goes silent once again.

I could honestly get used to this.

“Don’t disappear on me or anything.”

She chews on her lip, grinning impishly at me. “I’ll try not to.”

Outside on the street, I take in a slow lungful of crisp morning air. I’m about to get into the waiting car when my phone rings. It’s Christian, who’s been at the hospital where they took Allison after the bullets that came through her window almost killed her.

“Mr. Drakos.”

“Talk to me.”

“She’s out of surgery, sir. Doctors seem to think she’s going to pull through. And she might be awake within the next few hours.”

“Good.”

It’s not “good” because I give the least shit whether the woman who lied to Dahlia in order to get close to her, and then almost tried to kill her, lives or dies.

Actually, let me rephrase: she *can* die, and I’ll be perfectly fine with that.

But she doesn’t get to do that until I’ve talked with her and pried out what exactly she was about to say before someone tried to kill her. I don’t think Allison Whitley is the only threat here. And I’m *very* curious what she was about to tell Dahlia about her stepfather.

“Keep me posted about everything.”

“Will do, sir.”

I slip into the back of my car.

It’s time to chase down the last of Dahlia’s demons.

And destroy them once and for all.

DAHLIA

I USED to love puzzles as a kid. Crosswords, jigsaws, word jumbles—I couldn't get enough of them. My Aunt Celeste in particular used to love watching me do them and then howl with laughter when I'd figure them out in no time at all.

My favorite was always the mysteries that came in those little paperback books they sold in the checkout lines of grocery stores. Most of them involved incredibly tame “crimes”, things like the mystery of who stole Mrs. Twiddledee's apple pie from the window where it was cooling, or where Sally Squirrel—who was, *obviously*, a talking squirrel wearing odd Victorian-era petticoats and dresses—misplaced her sewing kit.

You'd read over the short, illustrated stories and look for clues in both the text and the drawings. And I *loved* them.

For some reason, I keep thinking about those books as I stare at the jumble of legal paperwork and documents on the kitchen island in front of me. It's all the motions and filings that Gerard's been hitting my mom with. And I know it should be cut and dried: she was wooed into marrying a jackal of a man who then used her trust to come after her *significant* financial assets. But it's not adding up to me. Something seems off.

It helps that all the cards are on the table now. Last night, in his arms, Deimos and I told each other *everything*.

I told him how I'd always wished the author of the diary was him, even after Chase found it too and used lines from it to make me think *he* was the author. I hate so much that it worked: that I was so eager and desperate to meet my mysterious pen pal that when Chase used Deimos' words in order to elude that it was *his* diary, I jumped on it.

But now I know the truth that I wanted all along.

Deimos even told me about Chase and Brad, and what happened in that room before I walked in.

I told him how at times over the last six years, when considering if I was doomed never to find a relationship, I'd think about him, a lot. And wonder what things would have been like if I'd realized it really was him I'd been pouring my fantasies out to within the pages of that book.

He told me, quite frankly and unapologetically, that he'd quietly sabotaged any possible relationship I might have found after leaving Knightsblood.

I should probably be furious about that. I know I should. I should have exploded at him when he told me.

What can I say. I kissed him instead.

Maybe we both really are the right kind of fucked up for each other.

Deimos *also* told me that Gerard seems to have gone missing—as in, no one's seen him at all in quite some time. And that's sitting quite oddly with me.

Since I've known him, Gerard has always been a social butterfly. I think it's one of the reasons my mother fell for him:

he could pull her out of her shell, and knew just how to gently bring her into social situations.

And now he's off the grid?

It's weird. Weird like the letter Elsa was telling me about the other day—the one where Gerard listed all sorts of legal motions and forms, but listed them curiously out of order, and interspersed between them numbered forms that don't actually exist.

I frown as I reread the printout of that particular email. Again, I can't shake the feeling that I'm looking for clues in a Sally Squirrel mystery book.

And then suddenly, I freeze.

Hold on.

I grab a piece of scrap paper and a pen as my eyes read over the list of out-of-order motions in Gerard's email. I start to copy the forms down on the paper in the same order they're mentioned in the email. I frown and then scratch out the letter parts of the form names. Like for the one labeled "form 2A-F9", I take out everything except the 2 and the 9.

I blink, staring at the list. Then I re-write the numbers in a line, and my pulse spikes.

Holy. Shit.

Just then, the intercom by the front door buzzes. I jump up, staring at what I've just written out in a daze before I go to the button.

"Ms. Roy," one of Deimos' men downstairs says gruffly. "We need you to confirm that you know a man down here who claims you do."

"Okay?"

“Raphael Dumouchel?”

I smile. “Yes, he’s my stepbrother. You can send him up, thank you.”

A minute later, I glance up from my pile of papers as Raph steps into the apartment. He whistles quietly, taking it all in. “Well, even if it’s not the man himself that has your attention, I can see why you’ve stayed.”

I roll my eyes.

“Seriously, Dahlia, this place is...wow. Divine.” He crosses to where I’m sitting at the kitchen island. His brows furrow at the papers. “Is this—”

“Yeah, it’s all the shit from your dad.” I chew on my lip, my pulse racing. “But, Raph, I think I just found something big. Like, really big.”

“Oh?”

“I think your dad might be in trouble.”

Raph’s brow furrows. “Well, no shit. He’s tearing down his legacy and ruining the image he’s spent his entire life building. So yeah, I’d say he’s royally screwed—”

“No, no. I mean *really* in actual trouble.”

He eyes me curiously. “Because?”

“You know how I told you about the rumor of your dad being missing?”

He rolls his eyes. “And *I* told you he’s done that before. He’s not missing, Dahlia. The asshole is off at a beach house somewhere scheming how to fuck with your mom some more and throwing piles of money at escorts. I can promise you, it’s nothing sinister.”

“Well, except for this.”

I stab my fingers at the numbers I’ve written on the page.

“What am I looking at?”

I swallow. “The first sequence are the numbers eleven and ninety-nine, repeated three times. See? 119911991199.”

“And?”

“And your dad *loves* those gritty cop crime novels, right?”

“Yes...”

I swallow. “Well, eleven-ninety-nine is the police radio code for ‘officer needs help’.” I drag my finger to the next numbers. “And look. These are map coordinates.”

Raph stares at the page. Then he lifts his gaze to me with a smirk on his lips. “Hon, did we maybe hit our head, or have one too many martinis—”

“Raph, please. I think this is legit.”

“Where did you even get these?”

I push the email in front of him. “This email he sent. The forms he references in this are all out of order, and some of them aren’t even real legal forms.”

Raph’s mouth purses, and he says nothing.

“Raph, I think there’s at least a chance that *none* of this—not the divorce, or all the legal motions—is what we think it is. That maybe someone has your dad, and he managed to get a code out hidden in this rambling email—a code that asks for help and gives *coordinates where to find him*.”

Raph blinks in disbelief, shoving his hair back from his face.

“Okay, but, where even are these coordinates—”

“Not far from here. Two and half hours away, in Litchfield County, Connecticut.”

He stares at the numbers again in disbelief.

“Raph, did you drive over here?”

He nods quietly. “Yeah, I—” His eyes snap to mine. “*No*, Dahlia—”

“Then I’ll go without you.”

“No! We’ll involve the authorities, like rational people!”

I shake my head. “And if whoever has your dad hears sirens and sees cop cars coming over the horizon?”

“*Dahlia...*”

“I’m going, Raph. You can come, or you can say ‘I told you so’ later. But I’m going.”

He takes a deep breath, eyeing me dubiously. Then he slowly nods. “Okay, okay. Fuck it. Let’s do this. But I *am* going to say I told you so later.”

THREE HOURS LATER, as evening settles around us, we enter the quaint town of Woodfield, in the bucolic north-west corner of Connecticut. I glance at Raph behind the wheel.

“Your phone is definitely dead?”

He makes a face. “Yeah, sorry hon.”

In my rush to get going, I was an idiot and left my phone back at Deimos’ place. And then Raph’s died on the way up here. Luckily, we’ve been using his car’s GPS to get to the map coordinates. But I really need to find a phone before Deimos

freaks the fuck out and starts razing Manhattan to the ground looking for me.

Raph pulls the car around a bend onto the main street running through town, and my brows arch.

“What the...”

I stare out the window at the crowds of people filling the streets and sidewalks, almost every single one of them wearing some sort of skull mask or face paint.

“What the hell is this?”

Raph snorts, turning to raise a brow at me. “Dahlia, hon, did you honestly forget what tonight is?”

I wince. Holy shit, I think I did, what with all the madness of yesterday.

It’s Halloween. I cannot believe I didn’t remember.

“There’s the lightbulb going on,” Raph chuckles. “Woodfield is famous for their Halloween Night festival. See?” He slows down and points out the window to a huge poster plastered in the window of a café. “Everyone’s probably heading to the town green for the festivities.” He grins. “*Very* quaint. Rides, music, candy apples and popcorn balls. That sort of thing.”

“And the skulls?” I murmur, glancing uneasily at the crowds outside the car.

“Yeah, that’s part of it, I guess,” he shrugs. “It’s like a day of the dead thing, even though that’s not until the day after tomorrow.”

I glance at the GPS on the car’s dash. “We’re close. It’s right up here.”

The map app takes us past the crowded town green, which is full of people enjoying the Halloween festival: there's a carousel, a fun house, snacks for sale, and a mariachi band dressed to the nines in Día de los Muertos sugar skull outfits and masks. We drive further away from the lights and the people into a dark little side street before rolling to a stop outside an old historic home with scaffolding and plastic sheets all over it.

“Well, this is it.”

Raph stops the car and then glances at me. “Dahlia, I've humored you thus far. But, c'mon.”

“Raph, we've come all this way. I'm going in there.”

“And I'm urging you *not* to. Hon, I know you're playing bad girl these days with Mr. Scarypants. But this is *real*, okay?”

I open the car door. Raph groans and shuts the engine off, following me out.

“I've made it clear that I think this is a terrible idea, yes?”

“Loud and clear, Raph. And when this turns out to be nothing, you can one hundred percent hit me with the I told you so, okay?”

The front door of the historic house under reconstruction has a padlock on it. So does the back door, but that one's locked with a chain that has considerable slack. Raph shakes his head, but he still follows me when I wriggle inside into the darkness.

“This is such a bad idea...” he moans.

I nod. Yeah, no arguments there.

The first floor is pretty wide open: there's nothing here. The topmost two floors are the same. I'm about to admit this was

nuts, when I spot the locked door in the far corner of the old kitchen on the first floor.

“Raph...”

He shakes his head rapidly. “Nope. No fucking chance. Creepy locked door that probably leads down to a *basement* in an old, abandoned house? Have you ever watched even literally *one* horror movie?”

“Don’t be such a baby.”

He glares at me as I brush past him and grab a brick from the pile of construction material near a fireplace that’s clearly being worked on.

“Dahlia—*DAHLIA!*”

Raph gasps when I slam the brick onto the lock on the door. The padlock holds, but the eye hook bolted to the old doorframe splinters off. Gingerly, I pull open the door. Down at the bottom of the creepy old staircase, there’s another closed door, but there’s no lock on it.

And dim light is coming from the cracks around it.

“Dahlia, hon...” Raph’s voice is utterly serious now. “We’re *done*, okay? This is over. I’m finding a phone and calling the police.”

“Fine, go do that.”

I start to walk down the stairs, feeling my way along the rickety banister as I go. Raph follows. At the bottom, I take a breath. I swallow. Then I push on the door, and it swings open with a creak.

Instantly, my heart leaps into my throat.

Oh, my God...

A single lightbulb hangs from the dingy, cobwebbed ceiling. And there, sitting tied to a chair on the dirt floor beneath it, his face gaunt, eyes sunken, and skin pallid...

...is Gerard.

I choke back a scream as I rush to him, tears brimming in my eyes. His focus, blinking slowly as he begins to recognize me. He moans through the gag in his mouth, and I sob as I yank it free.

“Gerard!” I cry out, cupping the face of a man I’ve spent the past two months hating, but who was once the closest thing to a father I ever knew. “Oh my *God*,” I sob, hugging him before pulling back. “Who—”

“*Beh...*” His voice is raspy and dusty.

“What?”

“*Behind...*”

I hear the creak on the staircase just as he gets the words out.

“*Behind you.*”

I whirl, but my scream chokes in my throat as something heavy slams into the side of my head. I go sprawling onto the dirt floor, blinking stars and whining in pain before I roll over and raise my eyes...

...To where Raph is smiling coldly at me, a brick in his hand.

“Well, Dahlia my dear,” he says quietly. “Do I get to say I told you so yet?”

DAHLIA

No.

My head swims and my vision cuts in and out as I kick at the dirt under my heels, trying to push myself away from Raph. He smiles wider, shaking his head.

“I tried my best to keep you out of this. But you just wouldn’t listen.” He sighs. “Why are you *so* stubborn, Dahlia?”

“Raph...”

“It didn’t have to be like this, Dahlia,” he mutters. “If you’d just have let this play out, I’d have made sure you and your mother had plenty of money to be just fine.”

“*Why?*” I choke. “Why are you doing any of this?!”

His lips curl into a snarl, and I flinch when he jabs a finger back at his father, tied to the chair, looking near death. “Do you know what happened to my mother after he abandoned her?”

“*Raph,*” Gerard croaks, his face pained. “I never abandoned —”

“Lies!” Raph snarls. “All lies! And I am *so fucking tired* of hearing them!”

“*Your mother...she was sick,*” Gerard groans. “I tried to help her, but we were terrible for each other. I gave her everything —”

“You gave her nothing!” Raph spins back to me, seething. “He gave her nothing, and then she took her own life.”

My heart wrenches. “*Raph,* I’m sorry—”

“Oh, everyone’s always *sorry,*” he growls. “But no one’s willing to make it *right.* That’s what all of this was about, Dahlia,” he mutters. “Making it right. But you couldn’t keep your fucking nose out of it. And then you brought that...that fucking *psychopath* into the mix, too.” He shakes his head, hefting the brick in his hand. “I like you, Dahlia. I didn’t think I would, when my father and your mother got together, and I met you. But I do. And I like Adele, too. Which is why I genuinely hate that I have to do this.”

Oh God.

Gerard makes a strangled, choking sound. My eyes slip past Raph to him, and I realize he’s looking right at me, like he was deliberately trying to get my attention. His eyes are haggard and bleary, but I can still follow his gaze as it slides past me, then raises to the lightbulb above him. He looks past me again, then up to the lightbulb once more.

I tense, my eyes quickly darting behind me, where they spot the fist-sized rock lying in the dirt.

Raph hefts the brick in his hand again. “I truly am sorry, Dahlia. So I’ll let you decide how it is you want me to make this look for your mother. Do you want to have simply been kidnapped and killed cleanly? Or maybe you’d prefer it if I make it look like that psycho Deimos took you somewhere and let your little fucked up sex games go too far?”

I pale, shaking my head and shuffling away from him on the dirt floor. “Raph, you don’t... You don’t have to do this.”

My hand slides back, my fingers curling around the stone.

“Well, no, unfortunately, Dahlia, I *do*. I mean I like you and everything, but I like not going to prison even more. Nothing personal.”

“Well, this is.”

My mom used to take me to the *Pétanque* courts at the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. It’s like the French version of bocce ball. And I got pretty good at the underhand toss you’d use to get the ball exactly where you wanted it.

Luckily, I’ve still got the magic touch.

I lurch to my feet, and in one motion I whip the rock underhand right at the lightbulb hanging down over Gerard.

It hits.

With a smashing sound, the room is plunged into pitch black. I don’t hesitate. I lunge past where Raph was when the light went out and bolt for the stairs. I’ve gotten very good at running in the dark.

“*Run, Dahlia!*” Gerard bellows in his hoarse voice. “RUN!”

I scramble up the stairs, my heart climbing into my throat as I hear Raph screaming at me and following me up the steps. I go crashing through the kitchen and slip through the chain on the back door. For a second, I try the doors to Raph’s car, but they’re locked. And when I hear him kick open the back door and roar my name, I forget the car and bolt down the road toward the crowds of people.

The mariachi band has been replaced by a rock n roll one, all of them dressed like leering, dancing skeletons, and their

music blares over the crowd.

“HELP!” I scream, throwing myself into the throng of people. But the music is so loud, and the band has a definite rock/metal vibe. And suddenly, the crowd I’m in morphs into a sort of mosh pit, with people shoving each other and dancing and going nuts.

Everyone’s in skull masks or face paint. They dance in and out of my peripheral vision as the music blasts and I shove my way through them.

“*DAHLIA!*”

The voice is right next to me. My gaze rips around, and I choke when I see Raph’s leering face in the crowd, coming toward me. I pale, edging away and shoving my way back through the mosh pit, keeping my eyes locked on him. He turns away, and when he spins back, he’s slipping a skull mask down over his face.

Suddenly, he’s completely lost in the crowd.

I’m shaking as I shove my way through, getting banged back and forth by the dancing, surging crowd. I tumble out from the melee, gasping, my heart roaring in my ears as I run. I look around wildly, and my eyes bug out when I see a masked man wearing the same clothes Raph was in coming for me, leering at me from behind his skull mask.

The fair area is almost deserted now that everyone’s over at the stage area for the band. I bolt toward the nearest building, and when I get to the back door, I yank it open and dive inside.

It’s pitch dark.

I stumble away from the door, spinning before I suddenly wince as I slam into something.

Fuck.

I gingerly touch my face, tasting blood on my lip before I fumble around the barrier in front of me. I make it past that, but then I hit another wall. Whirling, I touch another smooth, slick obstacle.

What the fuck is this?

I flinch when I hear a door yank open and then slam shut from somewhere behind me.

“Daaahhliaaa...” Raph growls. “Come out come out wherever you—*fuck!*”

The thudding sound and subsequent curse tell me Raph’s just walked into the same obstacle I did. I hear him fumbling with something. And then I gasp as red lights flicker on all around us. A shape lunges at me, and I scream as I turn around...

Only to come face-to-face with myself.

What the fuck...

It hits me just as the creepy carnival organ music begins to filter from tinny speakers.

I’m in the mirror maze in the fun house from the fair.

“Daaaahliaaa...”

Raph’s voice echoes around the walls of mirrors, ebbing closer and then farther away the next second. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to panic, refusing to let the fear drag me under. I touch the wall next to me, skimming my hands over the mirror as I make my way down a hallway. Then there’s a turn. But I hit a dead end filled only with my many reflections.

I have to get out of here.

I go back the way I came, but when my eyes land on five men in identical skull masks, I scream and bolt in another direction. All five chase me at the same time, running the same speed, and I realize it's Raph and the mirrors around him.

Then I round another corner, and he's gone.

"Going to make me work for it, are you?" he growls. I flinch when I hear the unmistakable clicking sound of a gun being cocked. "You know what I think I'll do?" He sighs meditatively. "I'm going to make it messy. I'm going to make it look like he had *fun* with you first. So when the evidence inevitably leads back to that fucking psychopath, they'll lock him up forever and throw away the key."

I bolt around a corner, gasping and throwing a hand over my mouth to stop the scream when I catch a glimpse of a white skull. I dart back around the corner and run the other way. At the end of that hallway, I spot four more mirror reflections of Raph in his skull mask.

"Got you!"

I scream, turning and slamming into glass so hard that it shatters against my arm. I wince, feeling broken glass cutting through my sleeve and blood leaking down my arm. I shove the pain away, running down another hall of manic mirrors illuminated by blood-red lighting.

Another man in a skull mask pops out in front of me. My throat closes on my scream, but then I realize it's just a reflection as he disappears. My feet zig and zag, taking me down yet one more path before *again* I catch another glimpse of another mask.

It's like he's everywhere and all around me at once. Like he's closing in. Like he's cloned himself and there's all the Raphs

in the world chasing me down.

I tumble around a corner, and then scream and instinctively duck away as a shot rings out. The mirror behind me shatters, showering me in glass shards as I fall to the ground. Glass slices into my palms and my knees. I whirl, but the mask is closing in, gun raised.

And now there's just one of him.

No reflections. No tricks of the eye. Just the man who's about to kill me, stalking toward me with blood-red light bathing us both.

"Trick or treat, Dahlia," Raph sighs, levelling his gun at me. "And unfortunately, I'm fresh out of treats."

He draws the hammer back. I shrink in on myself, thinking of my mom. Of Celeste and Adrian. Of my friends.

But mostly, I think of Deimos, and how much I love him.

"Any last words?"

"Yeah. *Boo.*"

I jolt when the reflection of a skull next to Raph suddenly lunges at him, slamming the gun away from him as it goes off, shattering yet another wall of glass. The second man smashes Raph to the ground with a fury that sucks my breath away.

A fury that's very familiar.

He roars as he grabs Raph by the throat and slams the back of his head onto the ground, over and over. Raph's mask falls off, and Raph looks up at his assailant with a terrified look on his face, his hands trying to push the other man's mask away. But the more he claws at the mask, the more I realize it's not a mask at all. It's face paint.

And I've seen the design before.

Deimos snarls, his biceps and forearms bulging and rippling as he tightens his grip around Raph's throat. He slams him down over and over and over into the shards of glass on the floor until Raph goes limp.

Deimos finally stops and his hands unclench, dropping Raph's lifeless body to the ground. He turns, and when those fearsome, pitch-black eyes from beneath the smudged white and black skull paint lock onto me, I shiver.

But I don't feel any fear at all.

Not with him.

I cling to him when he scoops me up into his arms. My mouth crushes to his, my arms wrapping around the back of his neck as he carries me out of all the broken glass and blood, away from the horrors and the demons.

Outside, police lights fill the night, and we're surrounded by New York State Troopers loyal to the Drakos family as well as some federal agents, including Shane Dorsey himself, the NYC regional director of the FBI who's close friends with the Kildare family.

I gasp when Callie, Castle, Eilish and Gavan come bursting out from behind the police cars, rushing over to us. Ares, Neve, Hades and Elsa follow, and I don't even realize I'm sobbing until I pull away from all the hugs.

Deimos runs a thumb over my cheek, brushing away the tears before he cups my jaw, pulls me close, and kisses me with all his possessive, reckless fury.

Paramedics come to take a look at my arm, but I shove them aside to rush over to the stretcher carrying Gerard. He smiles

weakly, clutching my hand and squeezing as I sob into his chest.

He's going to be okay.

We're all going to be okay.

Actually, I take that back. When Deimos pulls me into his arms again, and tilts my chin up, and leans down to kiss me in front of all of them, I know things aren't just going to be okay.

They're going to be great.

EPILOGUE

DEIMOS

“YOU HAVE MY ETERNAL GRATITUDE, Mr. Drakos.”

Gerard Dumouchel still looks a little haggard, and he’s still far too thin. But he’s looking much healthier after three weeks in the hospital recovering from his ordeal.

Even by my fucked up, depraved standards, that *was* quite an ordeal.

Raphael ran his mouth, talking a big game about “justice” and “making it right”—but in the end, it was all about money. He was angry with his father for divorcing his mother when Raph was ten. He viewed it as Gerard callously tossing his mom away when it came to light that she had a suitcase full of mental health issues.

But I’ve looked into that chapter of the past, and that’s not how it was at all. Gerard went to Hell and back trying to get help for his wife. It wasn’t just mental health issues, either: there was drug abuse, infidelity, and at least four instances of her trying to physically harm Gerard seriously.

It was when she got high one afternoon and had a manic episode where she tried to tattoo her own son with a sewing needle and fountain pen ink that Gerard finally said enough was enough.

He divorced her and paid for her to be put into a center that could help her. Unfortunately, it was there that she killed herself.

It's a shitty, sad story, but Gerard obviously did everything he could to help her.

That wasn't even how Raphael saw it, though.

So when his father got remarried to Adele Roy, he started plotting. Or, at least he started thinking about it. It appears that it was when he got a good look at the prenup Gerard and Adele had signed that he put his plan into action.

Because Raph didn't really have his own money. He was just living off his father's generosity. And under the terms of the prenup, Adele's money was never going to become Gerard's money. Which meant it was definitely never going to become *Raph's* money.

Once he knew that, he acted. He kidnapped his father, locked him in that fucking basement, and kept him there barely alive for months while forcing him to sign various legal documents asking for a divorce and coming after Adele's assets. Until finally, when Raph made him write that email, Gerard cleverly slipped in a bunch of forms to spell out coordinates and an SOS.

It was Dahlia who was smart enough to put all that together. But it was Allison Whitley who led me to Woodfield.

In the hospital after the gunman Raph hired tried to kill her, Allison told me about all the times she met with Raph after he "recruited" her. She remembered going to his apartment on multiples occasions, and seeing all sorts of blueprints, building permits, and other financial statements strewn across his dining room table.

And apparently, Raph was so pleased with himself on the historic home in Woodfield, Connecticut that he was having fixed up that he bragged to Allison about it.

It wasn't a smoking gun for me, but it was something. And through that clue, I arrived in town just in time to watch a man in a skull mask chasing Dahlia into that damn fun house.

Allison, barely awake after her lifesaving surgery, confessed to me through tears and apologies that Raph had reached out to her and put it into her head that Dahlia was the reason Chase was dead. He got her to come up with the fake Victoria identity, and to stalk Dahlia on campus, pretending she was also a student in order to befriend her.

I imagine his "plan" was just to let Allison's *clearly* under-medicated issues foment until she did something crazy and harmed or killed Dahlia.

That aspect of all of this confused me. Until I realized that as much of a piece of shit Raph was, he was a *smart* piece of shit.

Smart enough to guess what I was doing with Laconia Logistics, and smart enough to know what I wanted Dahlia for.

I'll get to that in a minute.

But for now, the short answer is Raph is dead, and his schemes have been laid bare to everyone. Allison's got some legal challenges ahead of her, but Dahlia isn't pressing charges.

I've reluctantly agreed not to slit her throat while she's lying in that hospital bed for what she almost did to the woman I love.

Part of that is because Dahlia asked me not to. But the other part is that Allison confessing all this to me is the only reason I was able to get to Dahlia in time.

She played a huge part in saving Dahlia's life. For that, she also gets to live.

Gerard shakes my hand firmly, smiling. "Really, anything you ever need, Mr. Drakos. You have it."

I smile at him, glancing at Dahlia. "I already do."

He chuckles as I turn to Adele. Before I can say a word to the woman I've come to know and truly *like* over the last three weeks while she's been in New York helping Gerard recover, she throws her arms around me and hugs me tightly.

"*Merci bien,*" she whispers fiercely. "For everything. For Gerard, and for my daughter." She smiles. "She's lucky to have you."

"I would say it's the other way around."

She shrugs. "*Oui,* well, I would think that goes without saying."

I chuckle as Dahlia rolls her eyes, hugging her mom tightly.

"We'll see you later this evening?"

"Of course, *ma chérie.*"

Now that he's recovered enough to be discharged from the hospital, Gerard and Adele are checking into a hotel while they stay in New York for another week. Adrian and Celeste Cross are flying in from London tomorrow as well.

But tonight, we're all having one big dinner—*all* of us. My entire insane family, the Kildares, and the Roy-Dumouchels, at Ya-ya's place. It's basically winter now but knowing my grandmother, she'll have set up a billion heat lamps and still have dinner laid out under that outdoor arbor just the same.

We say goodbye to Adele and Gerard at the front door to my loft—sorry, *our* loft. Dahlia officially lives here now.

And I'm staying in New York.

I've had some light bulb moments over the last few months. Like maybe I don't hate this city as much as I always told myself I did. Like maybe I've been running our family's European business operations in London all alone, despite my number two, Kostas, being extremely capable of doing that himself, because I have a compulsion to isolate myself.

Maybe I don't need or want to do that anymore.

After we say goodbye to Adele and Gerard at the front door to the loft, Dahlia turns to me. "Well...." She bites her lip. "We've got a few hours before dinner..."

I groan, my cock thickening instantly as I pull her to me and lean down to whisper in her ear.

"Such an eager little slut, aren't you?"

She shivers, grabbing my wrist tightly.

"We'll get to that," I growl quietly. "But first, I need to give you something."

Her brows knit curiously as I lead her to the couch and sit her down. There's still almost zero furniture in here.

And I plan on keeping it that way, for one *very* specific reason.

I hand Dahlia the plain white envelope. She looks at me curiously as she opens it.

"What's this?"

She opens it, and her eyes drop to the page in her hands. Her irises flit over the words as she reads. I grin when her jaw eventually drops and her face goes white.

Her gaze snaps up to mine.

“*What is this?*” she breathes.

“I think it’s fairly well laid out right there in the—”

“Deimos, is this a joke?” she murmurs quietly.

I shake my head. “No joke.”

I don’t do off-the-cuff. And nothing I do is accidental.

Not even Laconia Logistics, and every move I’ve made with it since forming the company.

To the untrained eye, it would seem that I created that company for the sole purpose of blackmailing, overpaying, and lying my way into possession of as many of Adele and Dahlia’s assets as I could, once I discovered that they were under duress from “Gerard’s” legal threats.

And while, yes, that’s *exactly* what I did, the end goal wasn’t quite what you’d think. It certainly wasn’t what I know Dahlia thought, which was simply plundering her inheritance to fuck with her or to otherwise be an asshole.

I’ll admit it: at first, when I heard that Dahlia’s mother’s companies were under attack, I smelled blood in the water. I can’t help that, I’m a shark.

But that was before I bumped into her after all that time. Before I walked into Callie’s birthday party and laid eyes on the woman who’d twisted herself under my skin and into my heart and my soul six years before with the words she wrote.

With the way she understood me. And saw me, even when she didn’t ever lay eyes on me.

After that, my plans changed.

Radically.

“I...” she blinks, shaking her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, if you’d just read—”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I can *read*, Deimos. Except it says here you’re making me the CEO and sole owner of Laconia Logistics.”

“*Pending your graduation*—with honors, if you’d refer to the fine print—from business school.” I shrug. “I’m not handing over control to some dropout.”

She grins quietly, shaking her head. “*Why?*”

“Because it’s yours.”

She trembles as I yank her close.

“Because it’s *always* been yours. Hell,” I say with a shrug, “you literally put the desks and chairs together.”

She grins and laughs, slapping my chest. “Such an asshole.”

I’ve said it before: nothing I do is accidental. Which is why I bought, cajoled, and stole as many of those companies as I could and lumped them under one umbrella corporation. It wasn’t just because I was trying to take them from Gerard—or Raph, as it turned out. It was because I’d looked into the financial statements of these companies, and seen the blatant grift going on.

Adele Roy is a wonderful woman. She’s a force to be reckoned with, she’s brave beyond comprehension, and she’s a fantastic mother who raised an incredible daughter...

But she’s a terrible businesswoman.

She’s too trusting. She’s always relied on handshakes and smiles instead of ironclad contracts. Her focus has always almost entirely on her charity work, not the actual business

side of things. And because of that, her empire was on fire at the edges, and she didn't even know it.

Theft, complacency, incompetency...her companies and trusts were collapsing from the inside out without proper leadership and guidance.

So I gave them that leadership and guidance. I took as many of them as I could, shoved them under one company, and I've now staffed that company, with Dahlia ultimately making all the final calls.

Now it's hers.

When I finish telling her all this, she drops the letter in her hand, throws her arms around me, and kisses me so hard that we both fall to the ground.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," she murmurs over and over as I growl the same thing into her lips.

I don't break away. I just keep kissing her hard and deep until there's no more air to breathe between the two of us.

When she giggles and finally pulls away, gasping as she gets to her feet, I stay right where I am. I get onto my knee, pulling the little box out of my pocket. Dahlia's still laughing as she turns back to me.

Her body goes stiff. Her eyes go wide, and her mouth falls open.

"Deimos...?"

"Marry me," I growl, opening the box and revealing the giant diamond ring glittering within.

Of *course* I'm going to marry her. I think we've established that I'm not a fucking idiot, haven't we?

Dahlia just stares at the ring, her eyes blinking rapidly.

“You have to say yes, you know,” I growl. “Before you’re allowed to put it on, I mean.”

Her cheeks burn as she lifts her eyes to me. I frown curiously as she steps back slowly from me, reaching for the wall behind her.

My eyes narrow. “What the fuck are you—”

“And *you* can’t put it on my finger...”

She flicks the lights off.

“...Until you catch me.”

My blood turns to fire in my veins. I grin savagely as I get to my feet, relishing the sound of her giggles and footsteps as she runs away from me.

I give her a bit of a head start. But then I chase her. Honestly, it doesn’t matter how much of a head start I give her.

I always catch her.

She always lets me.

And this time, I won’t be letting go.

This is your exclusive invitation to Club Venom.

Toxic Love, book one in the upcoming Venomous Gods series, will be arriving January 11th, 2024.

Haven’t gotten enough of Deimos and Dahlia?

[Get their extra scene here](https://BookHip.com/PJTTLPS), or type this link into your browser:

<https://BookHip.com/PJTTLPS>

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Reckless Hearts*. But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the steam going.

DEVIANT HEARTS

Thank you so much for reading *Reckless Hearts*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, though this book is the finale of the this series, the world of the Dark Hearts continues with [Toxic Love](#), a dark enemies to lovers mafia romance as well as book one in the upcoming Venomous Gods series, arriving January 11th, 2024.

There are also other characters mentioned in *Reckless Hearts* who already have their own books. Adrian and Celeste's story (as well as the back history of Adele and Dahlia), for instance, can be read in [Dark Kingdom](#), book 1 in the Kings & Villains series. You can read a sneak peek of *Dark Kingdom* as well as one for *Deviant Hearts* on the following pages.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.

www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Deviant Hearts*.

Neve

Fuck. Me.

He's doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they'll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master's program if I don't focus.

I tell myself it's high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this...*distraction*...since it's clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The "deep down" part always wins. *Always.*

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control...or lack thereof.

No. It's definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let's go with that.

I mean, *he's* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, "There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable." But, smart as he was, it's clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I'm pretty sure he'd have taken a whole lot of the whimsical "charm" out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let's be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes

in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He's a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don't even know what they're called but they seem to be evolution's way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well...*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole “dream apartment” thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors *above* my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing.
The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it

makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he's finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don't have time for these distractions. Not when I've got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in...

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish's brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

“Neve, what the fuck. We’re going to be late, and you’re not even dressed?”

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

“You need to get *dressed*, Neve,” my younger sister sighs.

“I’m dressed!”

“Those look like pajamas.”

“So? They’re comfy.” I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. “Cas, back me up here.”

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

“Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid.”

I roll my eyes at the word *kid*, but I let it go. Castle’s been Eilish’s and my—I suppose the word is “bodyguard”—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an “eww” degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he’s always been the older brother we never had. And we’re the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me “kid” or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I’m twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

“But *Caaaastle*—”

“Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve,” he grunts. “Your uncle isn’t exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up.”

“But *why*? What’s this meeting even about?”

Eilish shrugs. “Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though.”

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there’s no way he’s budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there’s no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there’s a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

“*That’s* dressed up?”

“I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer.”

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She’s right. I’m still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

“Okay, *okay*, fine. C’mon. We shouldn’t be late.”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code.”

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he’s looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

“What’s up with you?”

He shrugs, turning away.

“Just don’t want to be late. C’mon.”

I frown. “Cas, seriously, what’s up?”

There’s a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

“Let’s get where we need to go, kid,” he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an “I have no idea” face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it’s clear she’s also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O’Bannon’s. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle’s temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O'Bannon's, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian's been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there's the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN!*" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

"Cas?" I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she's still cowering behind me, shaking.

"It's okay, kid," Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I'm the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who's arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

“But that’s—!”

“*Boo*,” Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

“Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?”

The creases in Castle’s brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

“It’s Castle.”

“I really don’t give a shit. Are we doing this or not?”

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

“Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—”

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn’t just eye candy.

He’s *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I'm vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares' piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he's here fades into the background.

And the question of why he's looking at me like he's trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

"Inside, all of you," he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O'Bannon's. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I'm stuck. It's as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We're on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it's as if we're suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

"They haven't told you yet, have they?"

I swallow.

"Told me *what*?"

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I’m still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woody, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

“Oh, and Neve...” he growls quietly. “Peach isn’t your color.”

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

“I’m not wearing—”

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans...

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

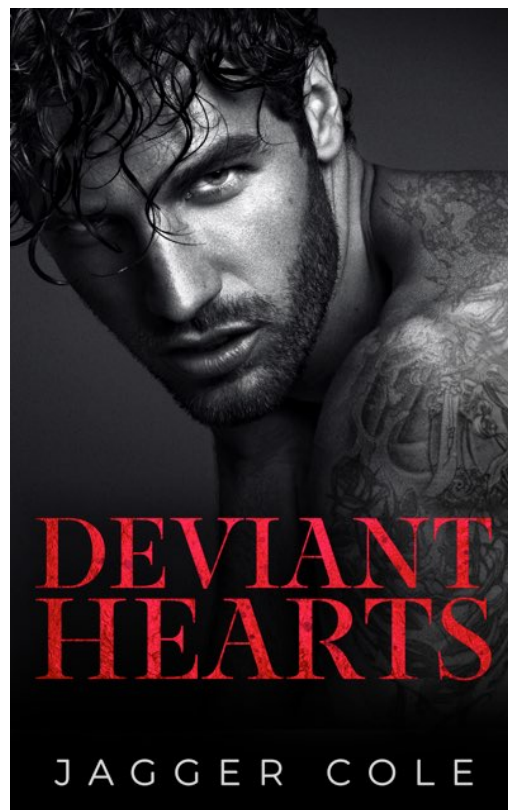
I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

“See you in there, princess.”

[Keep reading!](#)



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DARK KINGDOM

Chapter 1

Adrian

I grunt as the alarm drags me from sleep. My brow furrows, and the tinge of a hangover starts to bite into me as my body wakes.

Christ, I can still taste the scotch on my lips.

With a groan, I reach over and slam the alarm off. My fingers find and stab at the button for the automatic shades on my bedroom windows. Slowly, with a soft mechanical hum, the blackout shades roll up, letting the sunlight in.

My eyes squeeze shut, wincing. But I have things to do today. And there's no rest, as they say, for the wicked.

Or the hungover.

I fling the covers back and then roll out of bed directly onto my toes and fingertips on the hardwood floor. My muscles coil and flex as I push up and down, pumping out a set of pushups that gets my blood coursing through my veins, chasing away the lingering remnants of alcohol.

Heart racing, I instantly roll onto my back, gritting my teeth as I alternate elbows to knees, feeling my core clench with each crunch. When that fresh hell is done, I roll back over for

another round of pushups, then flipping again for more brutal crunches. Lastly, it's rapid high-intensity dumb bells until my arms and shoulders scream.

But at least the hangover is fading.

I pad naked across the elegantly-wainscoted bedroom on the top floor of my three-story townhouse. I can faintly hear the new Velvet Guillotine record blasting from my kitchen, reminding me that Noel crashed here last night after our night of apparently bottomless scotch.

But for Christ's sake, the man needs to *stop* with that fucking album.

The shower is cold, which has me gritting my teeth and hissing. But it's what I need, and the hangover retreats further as I rinse off. I step out to shave quickly—with hot water, thank you very much. The silver straight razor gives me pause, and I allow myself ten seconds of melancholy, remembering the man who this once belonged to.

It's been six months since Jonathan passed—cruelly and ironically to the same pancreatic cancer that took his brother, my father. But in the two and a half years he had me under his wing, I grew in ways I never imagined I could.

Now it's me who sits at the head of the Cross table. It's a delicate balancing act, considering I'm both the leader of a billion-dollar criminal enterprise as well as a student in my final year at Lords College graduate school of business.

There's a chance this tightly-wound balance is a contributing factor to my Thursday night scotch shenanigans.

I dress for the day quickly: dark charcoal gray suit, crisp white shirt, midnight blue tie and pocket square, dark brown shoes.

By the time I'm heading down the stairs to the first-floor kitchen, my hangover is just about gone.

Velvet Guillotine's *Wreck Me Gently* seems to be on its fifth rotation of the morning as I step into the kitchen. Worse, Noel is bloody *singing along* to it in his goddamn boxers and t-shirt as he flips something on the stovetop, his back to me.

"This song? Again?"

He chuckles without turning.

"Bloody love this fucking record."

"Oh, do you?" I mutter dryly. "I'm not sure fucking Scotland is aware of that just yet, if you could maybe turn it up for them?"

Which he does. Wanker.

I groan and step past him and dialing the volume on the speaker it's blasting from.

"Is there coffee?"

"Oh, *yes*, but of *course*, m'lord!"

I roll my eyes as he turns to flip me off and nod at the pot.

"Hot and strong."

"Lovely."

The smell of sausages suddenly makes my stomach gurgle as I start to pour a mug of back coffee.

"Oi, speaking of Scotland..." Noel turns to give me a look that says he's been wrestling with the same hangover his morning that I am. "How was your head this morning?"

"Vindictive," I grunt. "Yours?"

“A bastard.” He sighs, shoving his fingers through his dark hair. “Thanks for letting me crash.”

“Any time.”

It made sense. We’d been drinking with friends at the Deluxe Lounge, which is a stone’s throw from my townhouse near campus but much further to Noel’s flat. Plus, I’m starting to recall the end of the evening over more scotch at my kitchen counter once we got here.

“Were we the last ones standing at Deluxe?”

My brows furrow, thinking. “Thomas and Cassandra left early, I remember that.”

“Well, there’s a shock.”

I grin. Our two good friends are newly engaged and newly pregnant, and still as perpetually entangled in each other’s arms as ever. Lately, it seems when they come out, it’s only to humor us, and only for as long as they can stand not being alone together.

“Lars was chatting up that redhead...” Noel frowns. “They may have left together?”

I give him a look. He grins.

“Right, as if that didn’t happen.”

I smirk at him. “Surprised you noticed.”

“Hmm?”

“Seems there was something, or should I say someone, occupying your attention last night.”

He glances at me. “Look, I was just—”

“Noel, I don’t care if you’re friends or, you know, whatever, with Matilde.”

Maybe I should care. Maybe it should bother me more that somehow, Matilde Laurent, née *Margaux*—as in, the older sister of the girl who put a bullet through my heart out of fucking nowhere—has somehow become part of our little group here in London.

Maybe it *would* bother me more, if it wasn't for the fact that Celeste and her goddamn husband, *Amir*, have basically dropped off the face of the planet somewhere in Dubai.

With their fucking *daughter*.

I swallow the hatred that boils like molten lead in my chest, waiting for it to cool to the edged steel it always turns into.

Matilde knows enough to not mention her sister around me. But, from my own digging—and I *have* dug—Matilde has also barely been in contact with her own sister for the last four years.

She's also smart enough not to mention her father around me. But there too it's the same thing. She and Jean haven't spoken in a year, since Paul, her husband at the time, ran off with our friend Oliver Prince's wife Vanessa. Apparently, Jean took that personally, and decided it was Matilde's fault that her shit-head husband wanted to stick his prick in another man's wife.

Jean Margaux: still the same son of a bitch four years on.

"Seems to be a good thing; she's coming out more often now."

"Good thing for you, you mean."

Noel glares at me. I shrug.

"She's a package deal, you know."

"Yes, Adrian, I'm aware that her children aren't an optional add-on."

“I’m just saying, ‘step-father’ has a nice ring—”

“Adrian?”

He turns to glare at me. “If you want this breakfast on a plate instead of shoved up your ass, shut the fuck up.”

I grin into my coffee as he finishes with the bacon, sausages, beans, and fried eggs on the stove. Not quite a full English, but I’ll take a half any day.

I’m not just giving him shit for the sake of giving him shit. Matilde Laurent *does* come with two small additions: three-year-old Naomi, and eight-month-old Cora—two more casualties of Paul and Vanessa’s fling, along with Oliver’s three-year-old son, Jacob.

Noel plates our food and then pauses, a scowl on his face.

“When did Prince fucking leave last night, anyway?”

I sigh. Noel and Oliver are seemingly perpetually in competition with each other over *something*. And most recently, that something seems to be Matilde, given how they were both vying for her attention last night before she slipped out early to relieve her nanny.

“Late.”

I eye him.

“*Much* later than her, relax.”

“I’m perfectly relaxed.”

I roll my eyes.

“And he went home. *His* home. He has a young son, remember?”

“I’m not sure I could forget, given how many times he mentioned it to Matilde last night.”

I shake my head as I shovel food into my mouth.

“They both got burned, Noel.”

“No, *she* got burned. Oliver Prince is a dumb, greedy prick who lost his wife because he only gives a shit about himself.”

I glare at him. “Do I need to lean on Thomas to make sure you two get into the ring soon?”

“Please do,” Noel chuckles, gulping down breakfast before his brow furrows. He glances back up at me.

“I *did* appropriately bust your balls last night about completely ignoring the blue-eyed blonde in the black dress who was all over you, right?”

“You did.”

“And again I say, why the fuck was I the one sleeping over at your house last night instead of her?”

Because I don't want blonde hair and blue eyes. I want raven hair and emerald green ones.

“Because I know how good a breakfast you can make, Ransom.”

He snorts, shaking his head.

“Look, I know you're wound pretty tight what with school, and the business. But, Christ, Adrian. How long has it been?”

I stiffen.

Noel chuckles. “I'm being fucking serious, you know. When's the last time you allowed yourself some female comp—”

“I allow myself exactly as much female company as I want, Noel. But thank you for your interest in my bedroom activities, you fucking creep.”

He grunts, turning to sip his coffee and letting the subject drop.

Technically, it wasn't a lie. I *do* in fact allow myself as much female company as I want. It's just that the amount of female company that I want these days is none.

I simply don't have that urge anymore.

The only girl I ever wanted cut my heart out, burned it, and stamped on the ashes in front of me four years ago. My celibacy since isn't any sort of bloody torch I'm carrying for her.

It just...is what it is.

I glance at my watch—the same one Jonathan gifted me the night before my father's funeral—and frown.

“Fuck. I need to run.”

“Mind if I use your shower to clean up here?”

I nod. “Sure. But if you wank off in my bloody shower, it's going to be war.”

Noel sighs. “Adrian, please.” He grins. “That's what your pillow-cases are for.”

“Fuck you.”

He smirks. “What's your morning like?”

“Advisor meeting with Professor Higgins.”

The funny thing about being at business school here at Lords College is that it's only about twenty-five percent actual learning things. The rest is making connections and building relationships. And even in my world, that'll be handy. Handy, if not necessary.

The professors know that, too. I mean, Higgins isn't just some tweed-wearing schoolteacher. When he's not advising at Lords College, he's the Vice President of Rutger Capital, one of the largest, most aggressive hedge funds in the UK. He also knows *exactly* who and what I am. And he doesn't turn a blind eye and "not give a shit", but actually gives a shit precisely *because of* who and what I am.

Because the place where the gilded world of the elite and the dark world of crime meet is *money*. The marriage of sin. Higgins is my advisor because, one, he sees the business acumen in me, not just the hustler. And two, because he *also* sees the hustler. Rutger Capital knows full well there's more than a pretty pound to be made doing off-the-books business with people like the Cross family.

"Don't forget tonight."

"I'll be there."

"You know it's fight night?"

"Precisely why I'll be there," I grunt. "Let yourself out when you're done. Cheers for breakfast."

Then I'm out the door and heading across the street to the campus.

The "tonight" Noel is talking about is a meeting of the eight of us: myself, Noel, Thomas, Oliver, Braddock, Lars, Kristoff, and Maddox.

In the beginning, we were all mostly strangers—all first-year students here at Lords, with all manner of backgrounds. From wealth and privilege. From royal names and titles. But also from the streets and houses of crime—mafia, Bratva.

The common thread running through all of us was, and remains, Thomas. It was he who ended up being the lynchpin

in this whole bizarre group that has somehow come to mostly call itself friends despite the different roads that led us here, and the different titles we bear.

It's why he decided to name the group what he did. It was Thomas who said that in all of us, all eight of us, there are both kings and villains.

Yale University has the Skull and Crossbones. The University of Oxford has the absurdly pretentious-sounding Bullingdon Club. Lords College has us: the Kings and Villains.

The biggest difference between us and those other prats? You've heard of them.

You'll never hear of the Kings and Villains.

Secret society sounds...stupid. Fellowship, as Thomas likes to call it, sounds ridiculous, like we're playing some stupid fantasy game involving hobbits and elves or some shit.

To me, the group just...*is*. Eight men with their eyes on conquering the world, who found each other through various connections to one of their own.

We meet on Friday nights. And every third or fourth meeting, such as tonight, we have a fight night amongst ourselves. There's no deeper message or meaning to it. It's not because we've seen *Fight Club* too many times. It's not some fucking blood oath or bullshit like that. Like the group, it just...*is*. We box, one round at a time, winner fights winner, until there's only one left standing.

Normally, that last one standing is either Noel or Thomas. Noel, because his father was the relatively famous boxer Colin Ransom. Thomas, because despite his bookish accountant's appearance, he can fight like the bloody devil. *I can fight. We all can.* Braddock hits like a goddamn truck to the face, and

Maddox is a fucking monster. Kristoff has almost certainly killed people with those hands of his. But Thomas, for all that he grew up privileged and gilded...he has one leg up.

He was trained to fight for *years* by Noel's famous father, when he was the Ashford family's personal trainer. That's how the two boys became friends, actually. It's also how—no disrespect intended—a guy like Noel, with the lack of money, influence, or power his family has, got into Lords College.

Because *Sir* Geoffrey Ashford, Thomas's father, took a shine to Noel right from the start. He always looked at him like a second son. Probably because his *actual* second son, James, Thomas's older brother, is a pretentious trust-fund douchebag. James will do nothing with his life, and his father knows it. Thomas and Noel, however, like the rest of us, will conquer it.

I duck into the faculty offices just as it starts to drizzle outside. My mind ticks, trying to recall the fight schedule this evening.

I grimace.

Fuck, I'm fighting Kristoff tonight. I want to smirk, wondering if Thomas did that on purpose—pitting the two criminally-connected ones of the group against each other. Me, the lowlands gangster, and Kristoff, whose way to Lords College has been paved with blood money, courtesy of his employer, the Bratva-connected oligarch Boris Tsavakov.

I'm still trying to calculate the best plan of attack for dodging that Russian motherfucker's south paw, when Higgins opens his office door.

“Ah, Mr. Cross.”

“Mr. Higgins.”

He grins. Behind him, I can already see the paperwork he wanted to go over with me last week. It wasn't school related.

It was *business* related.

“Shall we?”

“Absolutely.”

Two hours and a very meaningful handshake later, I’m headed to my afternoon lecture. After that, I’m stepping outside again. It’s raining again as the sun is going down. I mentally tick off the schedule for the evening:

Home, to change. Then dinner with Thomas at Chesterford’s, our usual Friday night steak spot. And then to the Red Dragon pub, where we’ll first have a pint and then head through to the private back room to which only we hold the keys.

Through there, it’s down the stairs to the old sub-basement beneath the pub. And that’s where kings and villains will collide for the evening.

The rain is coming down harder as I jog across campus back to my townhouse. My head is down, my eyes stabbing at the dreary darkness ahead of me to find the next streetlight around the corner. When suddenly something small, drenched, and gasping comes slamming into me.

I snarl, gripping the person by the arms, ready to shove them away—or fight them, if they insist upon it. When suddenly, we both stumble under a streetlight, and the glint of it on her dripping wet, stricken face takes the very ground out from under me.

It’s *her*.

For the first time in four fucking years, I’m face-to-face with Celeste Margaux.

And time stands perfectly still.

I've thought of this moment. I've envisioned it in my head a thousand different ways. In some of those scenarios, I hurl her away, or snarl in her face for stabbing me through the heart from behind. In other versions, I grab her, never let her go, and crush my lips to hers until all she knows is my mouth.

My pain.

My vengeance, in carnal form.

But now that we're actually here, standing right in front of each other? Now that I've got her in my hands, literally, for the first time in *four fucking years*?

I don't know if I should choke her or kiss her.

Time stops around us. My steel-blue eyes stab into her swirling emeralds. My lips curl, still unsure if I'm going to sneer, or slam them against hers.

"You..."

"*Adrian.*" Her voice breaks, croaking as her eyes widen in fear. Her fingers grip my soaking wet dress shirt tightly, clinging to me desperately like I'm a life raft in a stormy sea.

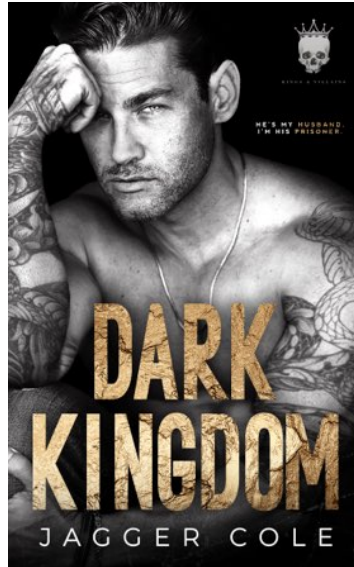
"What the *fuck* are you doing—"

"*I need your help.*"

She swallows, her face pale and her eyes impossibly wide as she holds onto me.

"Someone's trying to kill me, and I need your help."

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Grumpaholic

Stalker of Mine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jagger Cole

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

www.jaggercolewrites.com

