



Once upon a time
she became mine.
Mine to marry.

REMI'S WAR

V.F. MASON

REMI'S

WAR

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To the power of love.

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PROLOGUE

“We should be careful what we wish for.

*Life has a tendency to give it to us when we no longer want
it.”*

Penelope

*P*enelope

A raspy breath escapes me when the organ music fills the space, vibrating the walls around me. I jerk a little, goose bumps breaking on my skin, awakening every hair on my body.

Loud thunder echoes in the night; the lightning brightening the sky is visible through the window as the clouds gather, ready to pour rain and soak the people hastily running inside.

Even nature itself weeps with me it seems, sharing my grief on the day that should be the happiest of my life, where love and hope should fill my heart.

Instead, it is a nightmare that no amount of pinching myself can tear me away from or change this horrendous reality eating at my soul, bite by agonizing bite, leaving painful, festering wounds behind.

Again, thunder shakes the sky, mixing with the music, adding to the fear slowly spreading through my veins, creating gory pictures in my head—one more terrifying than the next—about the outcomes my decision may bring to the future.

My trembling fingers wrap around the short veil laying on the vanity, and I roll my lips to trap the scream ready to emerge from my throat at the sight. According to some traditions, it symbolizes the bride's happiness and purity.

Two things I no longer possess, because *he* staked his claim on me and dragged me to his hell.

Made out of the thinnest material and designed especially for me, one could rip the expensive tulle if they aren't careful enough.

Nothing but the best for the monsters roaming the streets of Chicago and deeming themselves the kings of this world while getting off on their absolute power that makes so many people around them miserable.

Men who are destined to bring apocalypses to this earth if they so wish.

My hands tighten their hold around the veil, my fingers pressing into the material, and for a second, I contemplate throwing it away and stomping on it till it turns black, showing its true colors that might as well be cuffs imprisoning me in a rusty cell with all the routes of escape closed to me.

Just imagining the act brings satisfaction to my bruised soul. I'm ready to drop it and crush it under my blue shoes so the groom can choke at the sight.

However, at the last minute, I stop because every action has consequences in my world, and this time around, there is

too much at stake to succumb to the madness creeping into me.

I lift it up, place it on my head, and attach the clips into my hair. I try to ignore the bite-like nips on my head from the metal pins pulling at my dark locks so harshly, and I wonder if I'll have any hair left at the end of this nightmare.

Although it doesn't matter, does it, on the grand scale of things?

Finishing, I focus on my reflection in the mirror and blink at the hollowness in my sapphire eyes, which on most days shine like the brightest of stones but today signal the upcoming doom that will forever end my life as I know it and dump me in the fire of *his* creation.

The king of manipulation and obsession bordering on insanity.

A man who permanently resides in darkness and gathers all the lost souls around, feeding on their screams of pain.

A demon sent from hell to feast on my flesh until nothing is left.

Three knocks sound on the wooden door before someone opens it gently, and a woman's soft voice mutes the thoughts grating on my nerves. A single tear streams down my cheek and falls on my white skirt. "We have to go now. Everyone's waiting." A pause and then she adds, "I'm really sorry it has come to this."

Glancing in her direction, I notice guilt etching her features, her eyes filled with sorrow and compassion, making them enormous in her face.

Although her words hardly matter.

After all, she belongs to *their* family and as such forever stays on their side, no matter the horrible deeds they participate in.

An enemy is not an evil person or a villain seeking to feast on the vulnerable flesh; an enemy is someone who doesn't mind sacrificing you or anyone else as long as it serves their selfish desires.

Swallowing past the bile in my throat and grabbing the nearby orchid bouquet, I rise from the vanity chair, which scrapes against the wooden floor. The woman winces a little as she notices that my makeup got ruined by my tears.

She takes out a handkerchief from her purse and steps toward me. "I can fix it up for you before—"

My splayed palm stops whatever she wants to say, and without answering her, I shake my head and adjust the veil on my face, partially hiding me from the prying gazes of the monsters who are ready to find all my exposed spots in order to strike me where it would hurt the most.

Although at this point, they should give up. They've already delivered so many blows to my fragile heart it bleeds with invisible blood, drop by drop, letting my life slowly fade away.

Giving myself one last glance, I hold my chin high and walk out of the room, my heels clicking on the marble as the woman trails after me.

She tries to shuffle my long train and help me carry some of the weight since the lacy, silky material is heavy, but I snap over my shoulder, "Don't touch me." She leads me toward slaughter because a man she considers a brother set his eyes on

me and declared war on my family. Nothing but marriage to the monster can stop it.

Because he wouldn't rest until he got his hands on me, and God knows how many people will fall when everyone chooses the path of revenge.

How could she even for a second think I would welcome her help or allow her to speed up the process just so she can breathe easily and not worry about the consequences that will inevitably follow?

She freezes, her hands fisting, and annoyance flashes on her face, hinting at the character she failed to show me so far by agreeing to anything the monsters have dished out.

Straightening up, she says, "Very well," as she passes me by and walks toward the wide-open double doors leading to the church's altar. The music becomes louder and louder with each step we take.

She motions with her hand inside before entering, and I reach the opening in two short strides, pausing at the entrance.

Gulping for breath, I press the bouquet to my chest, and will all my self-control and bravery to push to the surface. I pray to everything that's holy to send some kind of intervention and stop this madness—even though, deep in my soul, I know no one will come to save me.

Fate proved to me a long time ago it has no mercy or compassion, and all the begging only angers it more, making it send more deadly arrows my way.

No matter what happens, I'll always be there. You just have to say the word, and I'll slay all the dragons.

Father's voice rings in my ears, urging me to run toward him and ask him to do what he promised, finding solace under

his protection.

Even my father, though, cannot save me this time around, because doing as my heart wishes would mean subjecting him and all the people I love to so much suffering and death that I'd never be able to accept.

They gave me everything, so giving my life and future in exchange for their peace shouldn't be such a hardship.

Or that's the lie I tell myself while bitterness fills my mouth, and with a swift intake of air into my shrinking lungs, my legs move forward of their own accord.

The music stops for a second as the organist blinks at my presence, and then he resumes playing, his hands flawlessly hovering above the keys while my eyes roam around the space and widen at the picture before me.

The church they chose for the ceremony has expensive stained glass in the windows, and the ceiling is curved in an oval shape, which almost gives a fairy-tale-like experience, creating a magical atmosphere. I'm surprised angels haven't descended from heaven to sing in tune with the music.

The golden marble glistens under the candlelight, pointing at the various expensive artwork displayed on the walls, matching the exquisite design.

Despite its beauty that can mesmerize a person into a constant state of awe, the place reeks of doom and hopelessness that nothing can hide.

Especially not the masks of deceit its occupants wear.

Slowly, I start to walk down the aisle while the men sitting on the benches stand, their hawklike stares trained on me, and I can physically feel their gazes sliding down my form, expecting rebellion from me at any moment.

Or maybe hoping?

Because despite supporting the evil monster who decided to claim me, even his family would have preferred not to unite us in the union that brings more trouble than good.

Raising my chin high, I speed up, passing by them all quickly, but tense as the familiar sound of guns' safeties clicking rocks off the walls, and the men on either side of me aim their weapons at each other. The only thing keeping them from killing each other is me standing in the middle.

And if I just tip the scale to anyone's side, they won't hesitate to shoot.

All while the man waiting at the end of the aisle watches me intently. His brown eyes scan me up and down; such deep satisfaction fills them as his mouth curves into a sinister smile, showing his true nature that even his dark three-piece suit can't hide.

A barbarian who wrecked my world.

Breathing heavily, I walk faster, noticing the swirling energy around us all that indicates everyone's patience is wearing thin.

The tension in the air rises to epic proportions.

I focus my attention back on the groom.

Three more steps and I stand in front of a priest who flips the Holy Bible open, smiling at me, although his hands tremble slightly as he sweeps his gaze over the room.

Bitter laughter sticks in my throat. A priest should protect all those in need behind the church's walls. Instead, he only adds to the misery by participating in their horrendous crimes.

“Dearly beloved—” he says, but the deep, husky voice laced with something wicked and forbidden cuts him off, sending shivers down my spine.

“No need for all that, Father Paul.”

A gasp slips past my lips when his arm wraps around my waist, my chest bumping against his as he lifts the veil from my face, my nails itching to claw the smug smile from his handsome face.

“Move to the most important part. After all”—he leans closer, his masculine scent mixed with tobacco washing over me—“we have an audience watching us. It’s impolite to keep them waiting.”

“I hate you,” I say under my breath, loud enough for his ears only while Father Paul nods, clearing his throat but not before glancing toward me as if trying to reassure me.

The groom chuckles and puts his hand on my cheek; shivers of disgust flash through me as his thumb brushes over my skin, wiping away the tear. “Hate is such a strong word, *ma chérie*.” Warning coats his next words while his thumb presses into my chin, sending prickles of pain through my skull. “Use it wisely in my company.” He leans even closer, his breath fanning my cheek as my heart beats so wildly in my chest I’m afraid it might jump out and the monster will take it hostage, not letting me breathe without his permission. “Besides, you wouldn’t want your family’s blood to smear the walls of this church, would you?”

Gazing at him right now, I wonder if he chose me as his willing victim only because my beauty spoke to him, and he refused to doom himself to eternal loneliness in his underworld.

Only to believe that would be a mistake on my part.

For he belongs to a dark brotherhood that brings catastrophes to whoever they see fit as long as it serves their amusement and wishes, ignoring anyone and anything else.

Men for whom compassion, mercy, and sanity do not exist, because they thrive in the chaos they create.

“Do you, Penelope Psyche Walsh, take Remi Odysseus Reyes as your husband and promise to love him till death do you part?”

With love sneaking into every cracked part of my heart toward my family and vicious hate tasting akin to venom on my tongue toward the groom, I reply, “I do.”

With two simple words, I forever seal my fate.

And the most ironic part of it all?

I'm not the one he truly wants.

CHAPTER ONE

*“Obsessions are dangerous addictions.
Maybe that’s why I love to indulge in them.”*

Remi

*C*hicago, Illinois
A week earlier

*R*emi

A whimper echoes in the darkness, piercing through the loud classical music blasting from the speakers.

My mouth curves in a sadistic grin as I enter my dungeon.

The unfortunate creatures who end up trapped inside it associate it with hell on earth, where evilness rules and all pleadings fall on deaf ears, because their fear and flesh are too tempting to resist to the monster reigning in it.

I find such comparisons hilarious and misleading even though none of them live long enough to speak about their tortures.

After all, the devil will express way more mercy and compassion than I ever will.

Clapping my hands two times, I open my arms wide when the projector lights hanging on the ceiling turn on one by one with loud snaps, brightening the entire space in all its majestic and hideous glory.

Ah, does a greater beauty exist in this world?

The rectangular-shaped dungeon is enormous, spreading horizontally and showcasing the mazelike perimeter where one might easily get lost and find no way of escape, their exhausted bodies leaving bloody imprints on the perfectly polished parquet. Some prey love to think I'll let them go, when in fact their running around this place while whimpering in despair serves as amusement to the willing onlookers in the viewing area located right in the middle.

The area is separated by four glass-like walls where two leather couches stand, brought here straight from France, and a small bar with countless bottles of expensive whiskey reside.

Various tables made out of the finest oak glisten in the light, bringing attention to the beauties occupying them—from rare poisons that have the ability to kill someone with one drop, to steel blades drawing blood with just a slight nip.

People might think I'm a cruel bastard who thrives among the gore he creates around him and has no compassion toward those he hurts... and they're right.

Empathy, mercy, remorse.

They do not exist inside this place where my mind, which screams at me every single day while flashing unwanted memories I wish to forget, temporarily finds peace.

A man whimpers again and tries to speak through the tape stuck over his mouth, and I shift my focus to the left to a tall metal pole stand where the man is attached, several ropes

wrapped around his body so tight, they've rubbed the skin and drawn blood.

He breathes heavily, gulping air into his lungs while the blood slides down his forehead from the beating he received prior to arriving here.

Several deep bruises mar his skin, only intensifying my amusement. I slowly walk toward him, making sure my heavy boots alert him to my every step. I don't speak, knowing my silence is one thing they all hate.

Because the unknown scares people and prey alike far more than the evilness lurking in the shadows, ready to claim any soul and never let go.

For if you are smeared in darkness, nothing and no one will be able to clean you of it.

He scrunches his eyes under the harsh light, blinking two times before focusing his gaze on me, and his face brightens. An emotion I'm all too familiar with crosses it, as it always sparks nothing but rage within my soul.

Hope.

Sadly for him, hope has the tendency to crush like the finest of crystals under the harsh reality that's life.

Because sometimes no one gives a fuck about you or the nightmares fate have dumped you in, even divine intervention itself.

Putting my gloved hand to his chin, I grin at him; adrenaline rushes through my veins in anticipation of my next move.

Tears form in his eyes, and his body almost sags in relief, clearly expecting me to save him from this, only for his loud

cry to echo in the space when I roughly tear the tape away, dangling it in the air in front of his nose, showing the torn skin on the edges of it.

His chapped lips create a pathetic view, blood coming from the open wounds, and tears start to fall down his cheeks. "Please," he whispers, spitting blood on the floor by my feet, and I clack my tongue.

"Now, James. Why are you behaving like a coward?" He freezes at the sound of his name on my lips, his eyes widening while realization slowly creeps into his stare, and his breathing becomes even more ragged.

"Please," he repeats, probably too scared to utter anything else, because compared to most other victims, he used to be one smart fucker who got off on the power he possessed and learned to recognize the likes of him.

Vicious monsters surviving only on the blood and suffering of those around him.

A chuckle emerges from my throat.

Memories are such a complex thing in one's life; they always amaze me, because their contradicting qualities make them a golden token with two sides.

Their existence ensures we remember all the happy moments with our loved ones, filming a movie in our mind that we can turn off or on again, serving as witness to our existence and emotions.

Ironically though, sometimes memories became a curse, shattering someone beyond repair because there is no reprieve from them.

And as such, one resides in darkness where evil desires rule and nothing human remains.

I go to the nearby table, running my fingers over my favorite collection of canes in different shapes and materials, gathered from all over the world. I find beauty in each piece, predicting with touch alone how much pain it could bring.

Settling on the metal one, I grab it and spin around to face James again. “Act like a man.” Before he can say anything else, I pull my arm back and then hit him with the implement across his face. Cracking sounds fill the air, and I chuckle. “Don’t cry like a little bitch.” His scream envelops me from head to toe, the sound inspiring such profound pleasure I wonder if I should hit him again, but sadly his nose is already broken, pouring blood all over him, and he chokes a little, spitting again.

Throwing the cane up, I catch it in the middle and then slam it into his collarbone with its razor-sharp end. Whimpers and groans followed by hollow shouts shower me. The red smears his skin so much he starts to remind me of a fascinating painting on display in a gallery for everyone to admire.

In a very dark and twisted way, all monsters are painters and sculptors, mastering their craft with each victim and creating more and more despicable pieces that society would never accept, so they stay hidden underground.

And in a way, that’s a blessing in disguise, as most of these people are so rotten they should never have been born in the first place.

“Remi,” he utters my name for the first time, wincing as I rest my arm on the cane stuck to him and rub my chin while he blinks several times before continuing. “Please. I’m so sorry.”

“You are?” He nods vigorously, and my brows furrow. “What exactly are you sorry for, James? Do tell.” My elbow

pushes harder on the stick, which results in the sharp end piercing deeper, and he cries out. “Don’t leave me hanging, James. Patience was never one of my virtues.”

Instead of answering my question, he decides to give me a useless explanation that means absolutely nothing to the monster controlling my every movement. “We were so young. And broke. We needed cash, and he offered it in abundance.” He exhales heavily, wincing as his tongue grazes his lips. “We just wanted a better life. Please, Remi.”

I cock my head to the side. “Sorry you got caught?”

“It was a mistake. A onetime thing. We were high constantly and barely understood our actions.”

Swirling rage glides over my skin, sinking into my bones while enveloping me in a red haze, ready to snap his neck with one flick of my wrist and end his good-for-nothing life.

So he’d finally shut up and stop faking the remorse he never felt.

James, though, has no sense of self-preservation. He speaks up again, his teeth chattering as fear must pollute his every cell, thinking only about survival. “You should be angry with them! They offered us the money. They shouldn’t have done it. Go after them, Remi!”

Sadly, preys are so similar in their nature, boring me to death with the constant pleadings or attempts at reverse psychology, trying to play it cool when most of them piss themselves the minute I raise my voice.

If the monster trapped you in his hell... he has no intention of letting you go.

Unless playing with your psyche is part of the game, but rotten fuckers like James hardly inspire an interest in me,

although the idea of seeing him choking on his blood while chains attached to his limbs pull him in different directions and tear away his flesh does sound appealing.

Too bad there is no time to waste.

“You think that’s what I should do?” I ask him casually, gripping the cane and twirling it again, earning myself a hurt-filled groan as more blood pours from his wound. “And I suppose you are finally ready to tell me who the so-called *they* are?” My tone stays even, although madness slowly consumes me, blocking away the common sense ordering me to play this game and get my satisfaction from the process while I still can.

Because once the victim is dead, I no longer have an outlet on the rage filling my heart every single day, letting me live long enough to fulfill a vow I made to myself at the age of eighteen.

James’s head lolls to the side. Breathing through his nose, he replies, “Yes. The folder in my office has all the information you might need. Spare my life, and you can punish everyone involved. The true villains in this story.” Excitement sparks in his eyes, happiness blanketing his face, and even his fucking voice grows stronger in anticipation of his freedom.

Pulling out the stick, my mouth curves at the sight of blood sliding down his form, although the wound never touched an important artery; it just sent unpleasant sensations to his nervous system, allowing fear to be a primary emotion, which only fuels the pain in his body.

You don’t become a skilled monster without studying human anatomy well.

“Thank you,” he whispers, wiggling in the ropes and leaning on the metal pole, sweat soaking his hair. “You won’t regret it.”

Dropping the cane on the floor, I say, “There is only one tiny problem with this plan.”

He blinks in surprise. “What?”

“They’re already dead. All of them.”

When a hunter wants to destroy a den or a pride... he has to kill all the weak links first in order to get to the alpha of the pack. Because the alpha’s true power lies in his subjects, who guard his back from the coming danger. Although he might be stronger than the rest, his strength depends on the unity within his circle.

And when that circle is destroyed?

He becomes too vulnerable to survive in the wild and ends up someone’s meal.

“Remi, listen—” He whimpers in despair when I place my hand on his neck, pressing my fingers into his glands, welcoming his panic, transforming him back into the coward he has always been.

No matter how much perfume you spray over trash, it doesn’t stop reeking.

My hand squeezes him so hard no air enters his lungs, making him thrash his head from side to side. His face becomes red, and his eyes almost bulge out of their sockets. He tries to evade my grip, but the ringing in my ears has started, and I tighten my hold on him one last time before stepping back.

James gulps for breath, peeing himself in the process and then erupting in tears, his sobs bouncing off the walls and overpowering the music.

He croaks, "Please, Remi. I'm begging for mercy." His rigid breathing fills the space as I stroll to the weapon table, wondering which one to use next, but James plays on my nerves, almost pleading for me to do the opposite and kill him right now. "You aren't like us."

"True. I'm not." Adjusting the gloves on my hands, I grab the salt and a steel blade reflecting the ceiling lamp before turning back to focus my stare on him. He presents a pathetic view, glued to the pole, his feet sliding under him while the blood from open wounds mixes with the urine soaking his pants. "I'm way worse."

With this, I spill salt on his chest, grinning at the loud screams and groans as the salt adds more pain than he already has. The agony will send him into a spiral of madness from where no man comes out alive.

"One day, I should record you all. A little souvenir to remember you by." He opens his mouth, ready to spit more bullshit in order to save his ass, but it changes into a desperate, pain-filled, hoarse shout when I slice the blade across his dick, cutting it off and causing more blood to pour and create a pool at his feet; but the man still has the ability to shout. "Weakness doesn't suit you, James." Tears stream down his cheeks, his mouth opened wide, while the barely visible pulse indicates to me he's still alive. His wounds should bring him extreme discomfort but not kill him.

Oh, no.

None of them deserves a kind death.

Taking out the blade, I slide the tip over his chest to the collarbone and shift toward the neck. The light cuts leave imprints on the skin as I debate the perfect place for my next target, careful to avoid all the important arteries.

After all, where would be the fun in that?

“Stop.”

“Your voice is starting to annoy me, James. So either shut up or I’m gonna cut off your tongue.”

“Remi, please.”

Sighing heavily, I bring the blade to his mouth and announce, “Cutting it is.”

He shakes his head when I raise my hand to catch his tongue, mumbling quickly, “The boss. Do you know about the boss?” I pause, and he licks his lips, elaborating, clearly thinking he has found a gold mine. “He issued the order. We just executed it. He’s to blame.” He whimpers when I put the knife on his belly button, the tip digging hard into the skin, almost piercing it. “Please, Remi.”

“I might consider it.” He freezes at my words. Leaning his head forward a bit, the blood from his nose drips on the blade. “You have to answer my question first though.” My voice becomes low and dangerous, barely contained anger lacing every word, because the idea of this man even for a second hoping he might escape my clutches creates a pool of rage within me. “How many times have you shown mercy toward those who begged you to spare them?”

Panic flashes on his face, and tears form once again in his eyes, his lips wobbling, and he whispers, “Please, Remi.” I pull my arm back and deliver a blow to his mouth, knocking out some of his teeth.

Fisting his hair, I tilt his head back, and his eyes blink several times to focus on me, but then they close as his body catches up with his condition. The adrenaline rushing through his veins now must still block most of it, though, because he's still standing and awake. My gaze lands on my wristwatch. "I wish I had more time to play with you, James, but life has other plans."

Revenge is a powerful force urging me to torture in order to deliver payback in the most vicious way, ensuring their great suffering before the gates of hell welcome the rotten souls in.

However, no revenge could be more important than my goals.

Since James has no strength to reply, I march to my weapon table and wipe off the blade, putting it back in its rightful place. Then I take off my gloves, throwing them in the nearest trash can, and go straight to the bar, grabbing a whiskey bottle and pouring some into a glass.

"Thank you," James whispers, judging by how his lips move.

Dropping a few ice cubes into my glass, I shake it a little and address him. "Why are you thanking me, James?" He mumbles something, but I no longer give a fuck what he has to say. "The best part is about to come. Send my warmest regards to the devil, James. May your soul fucking never know peace."

I snap my fingers, and instantly darkness settles over the dungeon; small lights illuminate the floor around us from different corners, creating an illusion of fireflies floating in the air.

My dungeon is considered simple compared to those my friends have. Impressing my victims has never interested me much, and besides, as long as it suits my needs, it works just fine.

The most fascinating fact about the place where evilness rules is that I designed it myself, spending months paying attention to the smallest details and dumping a lot of money into it.

However, the end result has been worth it.

“Glance down, James,” I order the fucker, and he shifts his head obediently. His eyes widen in shock, and his body trembles; perhaps he already suspects his future.

The floor slowly changes color, the transparent glass showcasing the view of the small tropical heaven below—thick trees with the longest green leaves, stones in different shapes, and an endless amount of space covered with grass.

For a second, everything else is invisible, whispering to one to lower his guard and admire the natural beauty. But that’s a short-lived security blanket as a green creature slides through the trees, wrapping herself around branches, her eyes flashing a little, and her tongue peeking out. She halts her movements, probably recognizing the vibrations, as the section above the pole opens and lowers the platform toward the little tropical land.

James thrashes in his bindings, whimpering and crying, his mouth mumbling something, and he shakes again, fear coming from him in spades, but I just salute him before winking.

He wiggles in the ropes and then croaks something through his dry throat as the ring finally closes, leaving him alone with my python nicknamed Anguis, which means snake in Latin.

She's already settled her gaze on her newest toy, sliding toward him, and James once again whimpers, since his face twists so much that more blood comes.

She never eats them, even my python finds their smell despicable, but she loves to rile them up, and the likes of James deserve nothing less for all the horrible shit they've done.

Sipping my whiskey and enjoying the burning sensations in my throat, I watch Anguis reach James's feet and then glide over his legs, wrapping tightly but not using all her strength since James is still breathing. James's gaze becomes glassy, his heart probably going into cardiac arrest, unable to operate due to his fear and all the wounds.

After a few more seconds, James stills with his mouth wide open, and Anguis slides away, hissing a little before disappearing between the trees until the next time.

Snatching out my phone, I press on the display, and the ring opens again and raises the body I'll soon have to bury.

Spinning around, I gulp a greedy sip from my glass and zero my gaze on the board several feet away from me, which holds pictures of eleven men.

Ten in the circle around the main one in the middle, their latest pictures remind me of the monsters who could never hide their nature, even if they got a new name.

Putting the glass back on the table, I pick up my pocketknife and throw it straight at James's picture located just above the boss, marking the picture. Every single person in the circle has a knife in them to announce their death.

Only the one, the alpha—or as they affectionally called him, the boss—in the middle still roams this earth, deeming

himself invincible and believing in his absolute power.

Familiar rage pushes back, but I squash it, concentrating only on the goal. Because kidnapping and killing the boss won't be enough—oh no.

I want his despair, humiliation, and suffering to be so strong... and so vocal every person in this fucking city will know about his alter ego and the deeds he does.

A man who stole my identity from me, my heritage, and my real family name.

Because I was born an heir to the throne and instead became no one but the help's son.

He has to pay for everything.

Only then will the boy within me find peace.

When one wants to destroy a monster, he must find his vulnerable spots and deliver a blow that even evilness cannot survive.

To accomplish that, I have to take away what he loves and values the most.

Power and his reputation.

And for that, I have to have a wife.

As she wears the name of the dynasty that holds the key to my victory.

I'm done waiting to claim what rightfully belongs to me.

And if an innocent creature ends up being collateral damage in it all?

Well, then so be it.

After all, *la vie est injuste*.

Life is unfair.

And so am I.

CHAPTER TWO

“Every family has their dark secrets.

Some are surprising.

Others hideous.

And some so hurtful you wish you never knew them in the first place.”

Penelope

*F*rom Penelope’s Diaries....

My hands are trembling as I write this diary entry, my heart crushed inside my chest. The pain is so strong it envelops my senses and makes it hard to breathe.

Because the truth I just discovered in my father’s study shatters my soul into tiny little pieces, letting them scatter by my bare feet as the harsh wind whooshes through the open balcony door of my room.

I allow the tears to fall on the white paper and smudge the black ink. Devastation slams into me over and over again, the sobs stuck in my throat, while my father continues to bang on the door, rattling the wood.

He says something, but his words are muffled by soundproof walls, and I’m not interested in his explanations

either. Nothing can ever justify the illusion he has created about my existence.

The lies I've been living all my life.

The man I considered my father... my best friend... the person who always supported my dreams no matter how reckless they were... a man who told me a girl could do anything if she put her mind to it... hid the truth about my birth.

For the birth certificate and letter I have found in the envelope lying inside his desk showed me he was never my father to begin with.

Instead, he's my uncle who got custody of me when my parents died in a car accident.

It's like he tried his best to pretend life before the accident didn't even exist and guarded me fiercely.

All this could have been forgiven though. I could even understand why he decided to shelter me from this painful truth until I was mature enough to handle it properly.

His soul must ache too to lose his only brother Theodore, with whom—based on his earlier stories—he shared a strong bond, and his death devastated him to the point he couldn't even paint or read his favorite poets.

Although I don't know that man beyond the stories my dad told me, sadness slips into every crack in my heart, pouring salt over the already bleeding wounds, making me yearn for a man I never got the chance to meet.

The despair slamming into me because of his death feels like a new experience, as I've mourned my mother's death my whole life, since Dad convinced me she died during childbirth.

She has always been just a mirage in my mind, having no face or story, but now... now, clenching their photo in my hand while more tears drop on the paper, the hurt in my chest is almost unbearable, and sobs escape my mouth, my whimpers echoing in the otherwise silent room.

However, it doesn't even come close to the pain raging in my heart, burning me from inside out, creating an inferno in my soul no water will be able to extinguish at the true betrayal I've discovered today.

My parents didn't give birth to only one girl; they had twin daughters.

Twin daughters were separated by the relatives on both sides. They divided the girls, me and my twin, so my sister went to live with our mom's sister.

I'm not even sure how it's possible under any law. Judging by the papers and my father's wealth, shouldn't only one have gotten custody of us? How could my parents have failed so much to protect their daughters?

Although now, all Dad's intentions have become quite clear and why he settled in France, refusing to ever go back to his hometown.

Chicago.

He's probably afraid I might accidentally stumble upon Amalia—that's my twin's name—and my heart squeezes in my chest so hard I gasp.

A twin.

The other half of my soul exists somewhere there, and I know nothing about her but a name.

My family, my father, destiny ripped her away from me, leaving a deep hole in my heart, hollowness that nothing could fix, and maybe that explains how sometimes such strong pain envelops me that I don't know how to face another day.

They say twins have the ability to feel each other even miles away.

If such sentiment is true, then my twin is hurting so badly somewhere, thinking she is all alone to face the demons crushing her spirit.

And I can't do anything but cry, being miles away from her, unable to reach her.

But I won't let her be alone anymore, because from today on I will do everything in my power to find her.

I will reunite with my twin, and when I do?

I'll hug her so tight she won't ever feel alone in this world again.

*P*enelope

Grabbing my suitcase by the handle, I huff in exasperation when my eyeglasses slide down my nose and drop on the floor right before a passenger running to the exit steps on them.

They crunch loudly under his heavy boots.

He looks over his shoulder, his eyes widening as he notices the mess he caused, and yells, "Sorry!" He turns back to resume his action without even bothering to check on me or properly apologize.

Several more people pass by while everything in the distance becomes a blur brightened by smeared lights.

Exhaling a breath, I mutter, “Welcome to the United States, I guess.” Although my expectations about the welcome I’d receive in my home country weren’t high or mattered this much, I somehow didn’t expect to lose my glasses and jeopardize my vision in the first few minutes of stepping on America’s soil.

Picking up what’s left of my glasses, I throw them away in the nearest trash can and scrunch my eyes, searching for the right way to go as I snatch out the vibrating phone from my purse.

Several messages pop up one after another, all similar in nature, and I shake my head, slowly walking toward my destination while pulling my suitcase behind me, its wheels moving flawlessly on the polished floor.

<Dad> Have you arrived?

<Dad> According to the time, you should be in Chicago already.

<Dad> Thomas will be there to meet you. He’s been instructed to take you to a hotel and other places. Don’t even dare leave without him.

I roll my eyes at his last command, finding the notion of anyone wanting to harm me highly amusing, but I prefer to keep my mouth shut so I won’t end up in another argument with my father that never leads anywhere.

He believes that someone here has a bounty set on my head, so coming here was possible only under one condition.

Playing by my father’s rules.

And I wouldn't have played by them at the age of twenty-three if he didn't hold keys to uncovering my sister's whereabouts and hadn't had a second heart attack several months ago, which put him on bed rest again.

Uneasiness rushes through me as the picture of him lying on the ground still plagues my mind, the fear so powerful I can taste it on my tongue, and coldness sinks into my bones, reminding me a life can end in the blink of an eye.

Which makes my mission even more important, since we get only today, and tomorrow is never promised.

<Dad> Penelope Psyche Walsh, answer me!

Quickly typing a reply while maneuvering between people, I wonder if scheduling an appointment today with a private investigator was a wise idea, because the jet lag is messing up my concentration and possibly my judgment of her character. This investigator might think I'm an easy target, because she dangled a carrot in front of me—that being information about my sister—and I immediately flew to her, but she will soon discover that's not the case.

I might be naïve in a lot of ways, but being stupid and letting people use me to their advantage isn't one of them.

However, a longing and desire to find your own twin is a powerful force, especially when for years you've been running into a brick wall and bruising your heart time and time again.

Because Amalia Walsh doesn't exist in any database, and searching for her by my photo brings no results either. A person cannot just vanish into thin air and leave no trace anywhere.

Not to mention my sister was born three minutes before me, which means she's an heiress to Theodore's throne and all

his assets, along with the bank accounts, which belong to her. The empire is forever lost, but he still had shares in different corporations that are worth millions right now.

Wouldn't she be interested at least to get her birthrights and live carefree for the rest of her life?

Only the oldest child gets the inheritance; that's the stipulation he personally put in the will, according to old family lawyer.

I'm sorry, Penelope. Your father came to my office five days before the accident and demanded these changes. Originally, the will said to divide the inheritance between you two, with his brother acting as a benefactor with your trust funds. Contrary to most parents, he didn't want you to live at the mercy of the person responsible for watching over you. You would have gotten your hands on the trust funds at eighteen and full rights to the company and properties scattered all over the world at twenty-one. He also added the clause about Amalia going to Beatrice while you would go to Asher, even though your aunt's reputation was less than stellar. I tried to reason with him, because quiet frankly, you were left high and dry, but he wouldn't listen. He just crossed out your existence from the will entirely.

On the grand scale of things, the will meant nothing to me, and I couldn't care less about the inheritance Theodore denied me. But the pain still found its way to sink into my bones, polluting my mind with conflicting thoughts of why my father decided to essentially cut me off when I wasn't even born yet.

When I asked Asher, Dad, why his brother did something like that, his expression became guarded, and he advised me to not judge a past I haven't lived.

Thousands of unexplainable things and lies surround my past, which only fuels my desire to uncover them all, to finally get all the answers and reunite with Amalia.

Even if she doesn't want to be found.

The voice announcing the next flight snaps me out of my thoughts, pulling me back to the conversation at hand as my message still sits unsent.

<Me> Full name? Pulling out the big guns, I see.

My phone vibrates instantly.

<Dad> That's the only way to get your attention

<Me> Touché.

<Dad> Love you, darling. Please be careful.

Theodore might have never loved me and held some unexplainable resentment toward me. At least his brother, the man I will always consider my dad, surrounded me with so much love and affection that I found a way in my heart to forgive his lie and rebuild our relationship from the crumbling pile of sorrow it became after the truth came to light.

I just wish he had taken Amalia in too on that fateful day. But then, was he really to blame, considering he had to honor our parents' wishes?

<Me> Right back at you, Dad, and don't worry. I will be.

After I manage to find the nearest optical center and buy myself suitable glasses, that is. Otherwise, various hazards unseen through my blurry vision would sneak up on me and bring unwanted injuries. God knows the few scars already marring my skin can attest to this statement.

Since my focus is on the flashing display, I don't watch where I'm going and bump into a hard chest. I sway back, but a strong arm wraps around my waist, pressing me to hard muscles and saving me from falling on my ass, but my phone drops on the floor as my hands are trapped between our bodies.

Instantly, a masculine scent mixed with cologne and tobacco envelops me in a weird haze, making the hair on my nape stand while goose bumps spread over me, sending unfamiliar sensations through my body.

My soft curves almost melt into his powerful frame, and my palm itches to run over his chest to check if all these carved muscles are real or just a fragment of my imagination.

I definitely shouldn't have drunk that wine on the plane, because nothing but insanity explains such thoughts toward a stranger, when men have never inspired anything but confusion in me.

Snapping out of my shock when another announcement blares, I finally find my voice and mutter before stepping back, "Oh my God. I'm so sorry." Gluing my gaze to the floor, I pick up my phone and whisper once again, "I'm really sorry." Since the man stays silent, I use this opportunity to quickly walk farther away from him in fear he will either shout at me or try to initiate a conversation that always ends up awkward for me, because most men find me weird or annoying.

I can't even blame them, because I turn into a fool in their company who can't form a coherent sentence and blushes so much that people make fun of me.

Being an introvert in the modern, extrovert world sucks.

It takes me several more maneuvers through the airport until I'm headed out and scrunch my eyes, searching for Thomas, when a male voice calls my name. "Penelope Walsh?" Spinning to the right, I spot a short, middle-aged blond man wearing a worn-out black suit and smiling brightly at me. He extends his hand to me. "Thomas Smith at your service." He snatches my suitcase from me after shaking my hand and motions me forward. "The car is waiting outside. Did you have a pleasant flight?"

We talk on the way to the entrance, and I stay close to Thomas not to create another accident or get lost, and nod. "Yes, thank you. Although all this walking is amazing after almost nine hours on the plane."

We reach the double doors, and as they slide open, a harsh wind slaps me in the face before blowing my hair back. The fresh air fills my lungs as several horns sound, signaling heavy traffic gathering around the airport drop-off area.

Rubbing my arms from the cold swirling around me—I failed to check the weather before booking a flight here—I smile at the driver waiting by the black car, and he raises his hat.

Thomas heads straight to the trunk, already putting my suitcase inside, while my attention stays on the older man. "Welcome to Chicago, Miss Penelope." Warmth coats his voice as he beams at me and opens the vehicle's door.

Blinking in surprise and ignoring the additional honking, I place my palm on the roof. A shiver runs down my spine as if something powerful glides over my skin, leaving an invisible imprint on me, forever marking me for everyone to see.

Glancing back at the terminal, I wonder for a second about the strange man who has no name or face, yet his scent alone

created a powerful response from everything female in me.

A smile shapes my mouth despite all the mess my life has become. Even though I won't ever see him again and nothing really happened, the small encounter proves one thing to me.

I'm not a cold creature, unable to feel anything physical toward men as several failed dates have claimed, which means someday, I might find that true love all the poems, myths, and fairy tales speak so highly of.

Maybe then, the loneliness that claws at my soul and continues to spread inside me ever since I read the letter that changed my world, destroying it, will go away and be replaced with something more powerful.

Something that will allow me to be myself and not present a beautiful mask to all the people who surround me and think they know me.

Because even your family can become a powerful weapon against you if they set their minds to do so, and your true nature has to stay hidden from prying eyes, ready to manipulate you into something you'll never be, just so you fit the criteria they need.

Loving my dad didn't make me blind to his flaws, and unfortunately those flaws hurt me more than he will ever realize.

Shaking my head from the grim thoughts and internal musing that should have no place in my mind while I'm on my mission, I tell the driver, "Thank you. Let's stop by an optician first." Then I hop inside, resting my head against the car's seat while closing my eyes, my body buzzing at the memory of hard muscles pressed against me, leaving me breathless.

Welcome to Chicago indeed.

*R*emi

If the devil wanted to send a creature to earth who was able to lure men to their doom because they were so mesmerized by the beautiful mirage she represented when she called their name, it would have *her* face.

I keep my gaze trained on the woman, who freezes by the car, pondering something while the wind plays with her dark locks falling down her spine in heavy waves, reminding me of the ocean during a storm. I allow myself to drink in her features, momentarily blocking away the outside world, which almost never happens.

A hunter never sleeps; instead, he is always ready to attack anyone standing in his or her path, destroying the opponent in the most vicious ways.

Her skin seems almost porcelain in the bright sunlight, showcasing the smooth perfection, but it doesn't reveal her veins or the beating of her pulse that would announce her true emotions at this moment.

A flawless canvas with endless possibilities to discover, a yet-to-be-carved statue destined to grace the most famous museums, because such beauty shouldn't be hidden from the world.

Something unfamiliar sparks inside me, something I haven't felt before while watching a woman, which only intensifies the need rushing through my veins, urging me to get closer to the woman and snatch her away from whoever came to pick her up.

Mine.

Interest and curiosity—two feelings a monster like me forgets about, because nothing surprises me anymore.

After all, when one lives in darkness and deceit for so long, having seen the most despicable things done by humankind to each other, he no longer shocks easily or finds the people around him amusing or worth his time.

This fascinating creature just might become my one exception, and wouldn't it just put a dent in my carefully laid plans?

Her oversized dress hints at some curves but only allows me to see her long, slender legs, which are a surprise, because the top of her head barely reached my collarbone.

Her lilac scent still lingers in my nostrils, sending an odd thrill into my blood, demanding I wrap my hands around her waist and attach her to me in any way possible, so she won't smile at any other fuckers.

Mine.

I haven't had the chance to study her eyes, and the need is all-consuming. The possessive beast living inside me roars its displeasure at being denied the sight and almost lunges toward her to grab her chin and make her look at me.

Because although I know they are sky-blue and icy-cold by nature, the monster craves to stare at their beauty in real life and not through a photo.

After all, I have been studying the instrument of my revenge for so long that I've learned everything about her down to her favorite drink and how she loves to put extra sugar in everything.

Yet not once in all these years have I felt this pull toward her or any kind of reaction from my body wanting to stake a

claim where it shouldn't.

Because what a hunter uses as bait and a weapon to trap his prey cannot ever be vitally important to him.

What the hunter cannot control has the tendency and power to disrupt his environment and then destroy him.

However, the idea of ever letting her go no longer satisfies me, even though at the beginning of the plan I had no intentions of harming her.

Everyone in my world believes I fell in love with her years ago, and that's how my obsession was born, although the idea itself is so laughable a chuckle slips past my lips.

Love is a mistake in anyone's life, bringing consequences to innocent people around them, and anyone believing otherwise is a naïve fool.

They have no idea this is a deceitful lie in order to achieve what I want and finally put an end to *his* reign in the most horrendous way.

My delectable creature smiles again, her plump lips widening, and happiness mixed with sadness radiates from her, almost calling my name and tempting me to touch it, becoming part of it, and this way claim her as mine.

My body is rock-hard just at the idea of putting my hands on her perfection, needing to possess her like I need air to breathe, and for a second, I still at the onslaught of emotions I've never known before.

She glances toward the gate one last time and then sits inside the car, hiding from me but not for long.

Because there isn't a place in this town where she can ever hide from me.

Snatching the phone from my back pocket, I dial a number, and the man on the other end of the line picks it up on the second ring. “Remi! I wondered where you are. We’re ready for takeoff,” my pilot says cheerfully, probably already anticipating our upcoming trip to New York that lately has become more frequent.

Any lie has to be executed to perfection to be believable, and what man obsesses over a woman without wanting to check on her?

Although I never knew a real obsession until my eyes truly landed on her; otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to survive one day without being with her.

“Change of plans.”

Why would I go to New York now?

After all, Amalia is here.

CHAPTER THREE

“Maybe madness wouldn’t have gotten such a reputation... if it weren’t for the evilness always lurking on the edges of it.”

Remi

*F*rom Amalia’s Diary...

The wind slips inside from the open window, billowing the yellow curtains that graze my skin. The cold air doesn’t deter me from putting my thoughts on paper.

A paper that lately has become my only escape, where no judgment or pretense exists, and only deep pain remains, digging deeper and deeper into my heart.

I wonder how much hurt it can withstand before it gives up and stops beating inside my chest, leaving only a hollow shell behind?

Tears streaming down my cheeks drop on the paper, mingling with the blood dripping from my fingertips from where I scratched them so hard today I have no nails left.

He who became my greatest nightmare, he who comes at night and shows me how truly evil this world is... because no matter how much I pray or beg for divine intervention, my suffering doesn’t end.

Instead, it sucks the life out of me, a walking and breathing skeleton that goes through the motions, dreading to see another day.

They say parents are the people who are supposed to love you the most.

My existence proves otherwise, because the woman who calls herself my mother has brought me nothing but hurt.

Calling her by her given name, Beatrice, somehow soothes the raging inferno inside me, demanding justice for the wrongs done to me because of her greedy nature that allows anything to go on under her roof as long as it ensures her luxury.

Like marrying a man who is more interested in his stepdaughter than a wife.

She married Jonathan two years ago, met him on a cruise, and came back home with her eyes shining brightly, which made me exhale in relief.

Because her bad moods meant bruises and pain for me and sometimes starvation.

She announced her upcoming marriage and our move back to the States where he would give us all the riches possible, as he was so enamored with Beatrice.

Two years.

Twenty-four months.

Seven hundred thirty days.

He comes to me every single night, tapping on the door as if announcing his entry before he forcibly takes me despite my cries and struggles.

And every single time, my mother ignores it, sleeping soundly and allowing the monster to feast on my flesh as long as it gives her what she wants.

I tried speaking to someone at school, asking them to save me from this nightmare. But the minute I opened my mouth again, Beatrice warned me that she would place me in an asylum, and I needed to stop making up stories to separate her from her husband.

She knows. My mother knows. It's impossible not to hear my screams and begging for him to leave me alone, but she lets it happen.

What ensures her peace matters the most.

I still ignored her warning and told my teacher about the abuse, hoping that maybe she could alert someone, and they would take me away.

But it turned out Jonathan is a big sponsor of my private school, and they told him everything, advising him to find professional help for a difficult teenager.

My back still has several dark bruises from the expensive leather belt, Beatrice's favorite, since she delivered blow after blow to my back, hissing that I needed to know my place and to do what I was told.

Sometimes, my eyes linger on the kitchen knife, imagining it slicing through his throat, or mine, to finally end this torture from where there is no reprieve.

However, despite everything happening to me, I want to live so badly.

So, so badly.

Because every new day gives me another chance to find her.

My twin.

Although I know very little about her, my Penelope, my whole soul yearns to wrap my arms around her and never let go.

Beatrice loves to say Uncle Asher wanted nothing to do with me and chose Penelope because she was prettier, and she ended up stuck with me. But I don't believe her lies.

Maybe Uncle Asher and Penelope actively search for me. Based on all the stories Beatrice loves to spit when she's drunk, he is a good man.

A painter with a romantic soul and love for everything pretty, according to her, who ignored her when she tried to make a move on him.

They are my only hope in this world, the only people keeping me alive during the torture. Because when I close my eyes, I imagine them bursting into this horrible house and snatching me away from the evil clutches.

Sometimes though, lying on the bed after Jonathan visits, with my body hurting and blood oozing from my wounds, I hope she never comes to see me.

What if Asher is weak and the monster who destroys my life turns his attention on Penelope, who must be the spitting image of me?

Beatrice once bragged that if she so wanted, she could get Penelope back, because removing my uncle from the equation shouldn't be too hard.

In these betraying moments, fear unlike anything fills me, poisoning my blood while my heart creates various images of my poor twin crying.

If they put me in the asylum, would she bring Penelope as my replacement?

Jonathan loves to repeat that he is a man who no one can go against, and all my attempts are useless, because no sane man will challenge him.

Least of all, some painter living in the clouds.

Maybe instead of praying for all the suffering to stop, I should pray for someone extraordinary to come and squash the monster, someone who is so powerful and evil he will torture Jonathan in the most horrible ways.

So no one else will ever be at the receiving end of his cruelty.

And then I will finally find my Penelope.

Nothing and no one will ever separate us again then.

Penelope

Owen stops the car abruptly, and I fly forward, my splayed palm protecting me at the last minute from hitting my forehead against the front seat. “My apologies, Ms. Walsh,” he says, worry lacing his tone as he clears his throat. “There’s a ditch on the road I hadn’t noticed.”

Straightening up on my seat and hooking a strand of hair behind my ear, I pat his shoulder, saying reassuringly, “It’s all right.” Despite my words though, he doesn’t relax; instead, the tension increases in him tenfold, judging by how the energy

inside the car changes around us, and I follow his eyes trained on something in the distance.

Adjusting my new glasses on my nose better, I blink in shock at the neighborhood he brought us to, staying absolutely speechless.

The picture greeting us through the windshield can't be called anything else but... hideous with a touch of scary.

The neighborhood recorded in the private detective's notes presents a gloomy atmosphere consisting of gray and black concrete buildings with cracks visible under the streaming sunlight, indicating that they might collapse at any moment.

Owen starts to move the vehicle again, driving toward the destination shown on the GPS while I continue to study the street.

Nothing but emptiness surrounds the place, the grass that had once been green is now yellowed with a little orange thrown in. Several overturned trash cans are scattered across the premises, with half-open black bags filled with rotten food spilling on the ground. Flies swarm above them while a couple of cats dig into the food, meowing loudly.

People wearing different clothes from formal dresses to bikini tops roam the streets, are chatting or cruising with each other, and most of them hold some kind of drink in their hand.

We pass by a larger area with a kids' playground containing broken swings, slides, and a sandbox filled with more trash than sand. In the middle of all this, kids are running around, giggling loudly, and still finding joy.

Owen presses on the gas pedal, rapidly heading to the massive gray five-story building that has even more cracks

than the previous ones. It has a large entrance where a group of people hang around, playing cards and drinking.

From the corner of my eye, I spot a woman leaning on a car door, wearing rather provocative clothes, and I wonder if she is a prostitute making a living.

“What in the hell?” Thomas, who occupies the front seat, mutters under his breath, although I still hear it, and Owen finds a parking space—but calling it that really gives it too much credit. There are so many rocks, and some are big enough to break off a car’s door.

Thomas types something furiously into his phone, no doubt leaving a report for my father, and I grit my teeth in annoyance, trying to stay calm.

Glancing at my phone one more time, I check the address to make sure we are at the right place, but there is no mistake.

Not to sound like a judgmental bitch or anything, but somehow I imagined a private investigator, who promised to find my twin in record time, would live in some other area than this.

Everything inside this place speaks of hopelessness and doom, dead dreams, and the desire to break through the glass ceiling but being unable to do so.

Huffing in exasperation and deciding to be open-minded even though this environment leaves a lot to be desired, I quickly type a message to the woman.

<Me> Hey! I’m here.

The reply comes instantly.

<Private Investigator> Be there in five.

“Ms. Walsh, maybe you should reconsider,” Thomas says carefully, twisting in his seat so our gazes meet. “I have a list of highly recommended private investigators.”

I barely restrain the sarcastic laugh ready to erupt from my throat, because the so-called “highly recommended” ones have come up empty-handed every single time they got the case from us. Trusting in them would be foolish on my part right now.

Thomas opens his mouth to add something else, clearly taking my silence as encouragement, but the words die on his lips when I open the car door, the disgusting smell enveloping me, and I almost cough.

Stepping out, I close the door but not before addressing Thomas. “Stay in the car.” The last thing I need right now is him running his mouth and potentially offending or scaring the person who personally reached out to me.

Questionable neighborhood or not, this person might provide me with the information I desperately crave, so my feet aren’t going to move an inch until we talk.

Based on the limited research I’ve managed to do on her, she has recently moved to Chicago from New York, where she used to work as a police officer. For some reason, she transferred here but preferred to continue her work as a private investigator, although her police record showed no conflicts leading to such a career shift.

She worked with my previous investigator for several weeks before leaving his practice and doing God knows what, and that’s how she found out about my case.

Her emails came unexpectedly to say the least, but the promise and passion behind it somehow spoke to me and made

me believe her, because she possessed what all previous investigators lacked.

She is convinced she can find Amalia, because important evidence has landed in her lap; however, she needed resources to continue the search.

How could I possibly pass up a chance like this?

My heart flips inside my chest, sending warmth through my system just imagining holding my twin in my arms, finally inhaling her scent, and reuniting with my other half.

And I'm ready for anything and anyone for just the small possibility of that.

Strolling close to the entrance, I see two guys spot me. They smile and stop drinking all together, pointing at me with their chins, which causes three others to shift their attention in my direction as well. "Hey, pretty girl. Are you new here?" one of them, the younger one judging by their appearances, asks, his gaze roaming over me, interest flashing in his eyes. "Haven't seen you before."

"God's honest truth," another one pitches in, taking a greedily pull from his bottle and then wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Wouldn't miss someone so pretty."

I'm slightly taken aback by the compliments; my appearance hardly inspires comments. "Thank you." And I instantly regret it, thinking they might consider it encouragement, which will only turn even more awkward for me.

Considering that we're in the middle of nowhere in a country foreign to me, despite being born here, I don't want to engage in any conflict or fight if they become insistent.

Drunk people are unpredictable.

“You don’t thank for the truth, girl.” The third one winks at me and lifts his beer as if toasting me before drinking it.

To my surprise, they focus their attention back on the game, ignoring me all together.

How interesting.

People don’t really act how you assume they will, and maybe that’s why human psychology always has captivated me, making me study various cases in order to understand the human mind better. Being a psychologist never interested me; however, being savvy on the subject did.

Maybe because growing up, surrounded by art, I couldn’t help but study emotions and people through the prism of others’ creations, which taught me to look at evilness, goodness, deeds, and actions in a different light, finding layers and layers to people that might be horrendous on the surface but beautiful deep down inside.

And vice versa.

Sometimes, the deadliest monsters wear the most gorgeous masks, hiding their true nature behind the facade of perfection.

Heavy boots thumping against the concrete echoes around us, making everyone look at the entrance as a young woman appears, wearing jeans and a black sweater. She’s so petite one might mistake her for someone soft and gentle, but all such thoughts vanish once someone settles their gaze on her face, as her stubborn expression has the power to move mountains.

And based on her record history she did as much, always catching her suspects, even if it might have cost her a job.

Her smooth, tan skin and high cheekbones emphasize her symmetrical features, sharpening attention on her vivid gray

eyes that remind me of the molten steel Dad uses on his statues.

Despite not being considered classically beautiful, she has a sensual aura around her that probably draws attention from the men, although the ones occupying the stairs just wave at her before continuing playing cards.

With a tight smile, she nods at me, jumping the last two steps and reaching me in record time. “Penelope, hi. Nice to meet you.” She extends her hand to me, and I shake it. “I wish we’d met for the first time in a different place, but it wasn’t meant to be.” She motions toward the empty bench several feet away, giving some privacy from everyone else.

My brows furrow at her words; she was the one to suggest meeting as soon as possible and refused to see me at my penthouse or a public place, leaving me no choice but to come here. “People are very friendly here.”

Amusement flickers in her gray orbs. “You could say that. But it’s a ditch otherwise.” She shrugs. “Serves its purpose though.”

“Sometimes horrible people live in castles making it unbearable to live there, so I think you’re lucky, all things considered.”

“Lucky is a strong word,” she mutters and then starts walking toward the bench, so I follow, finding this conversation beyond bizarre. Usually private investigators cut to the chase right away, but to be fair, all of them were in their forties or fifties, and they preferred to deal with my father instead, because they couldn’t handle my emotional outbursts during the investigative process.

Isla, though, is only four years older than me, one of the reasons why I decided to believe her and come here. I'm sick and tired of being treated like a spoiled child who should stop searching for my twin just because everyone keeps telling me to do so.

She drops on the bench, putting her phone between us, and I sit next to her, shivering slightly from the thunder echoing in the sky and the wind indicating the change of weather.

Hopefully we can finish this meeting before pouring rain soaks us both.

“As you probably know, I worked for Mr. Jameson and found your file on his desk. He told me to handle it, but it seemed like he hardly believed in the case.” I roll my lips to stop myself from saying something about the old man who almost laughed in my face when Dad explained to him our situation. He gave me zero hope, and by the lack of enthusiasm he showed toward the case, I knew he wouldn't find Amalia. “However, something nagged at me, so I took the file with me when he fired me.”

I blink in shock, clasping my hands on my lap, contemplating this statement and wondering if Isla has some issues. She left her previous job and got herself fired almost immediately from this one. Plus, shouldn't it be alarming how she just grabbed my case? The last thing I need is to deal with some psycho on my quest. “And the rest, you know.” She laughs. “You should see your face right now. Don't worry; I'm quite sane.”

“However, you agree your behavior is strange, right?” I ask her, oddly relaxing a bit in her company, which rarely happens with strangers, and a sense of calmness settles over me. Despite her don't-fuck-with-me attitude, an unexplainable

warmth oozes from her, making me trust her right away. “I traveled all the way here, because you convinced me you have a lead for me.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t have a lead, Penelope.”

My heart sinks, coldness claws into my bones, and familiar hopelessness wraps around my heart, squeezing it so hard I think it might shatter.

God, how could I have been such a fool?

A woman doesn’t just appear out of thin air and claim to have found a lead where so many before her failed, unless she wants something from you.

Like a hunter luring his prey out of the comfort zone to catch it for his wicked desires by dangling irresistible bait in front of its nose.

My earlier relaxation vanishes, and anger replaces it, temporarily soothing the pain crushing me like heavy waves destroying everything in their wake.

My tone, though, stays cold and even, hiding my turmoil from Isla as I get up. “Well, then we’re done here. Congratulations, Isla. You just wasted my time.” With this, I’m ready to dash toward my car, but she grips my wrist, halting my movements.

Tugging on my hand, I grit out through my teeth, “Let go.” I rarely show my Walsh temperament unless provoked.

And people in my family are not known for patience and understanding when it comes to someone who dares to cross us.

She sighs, and a frizzy curl escapes from her bun and lands on her nose. She puffs at it, then says, “I don’t have a lead,

because I don't need it. I found Amalia.”

Everything inside me freezes once again; the outside world ceases to exist, and all sounds are blocked away by the loud ringing in my ears.

Goose bumps travel all over me as happiness mixed with disbelief shake my entire body, and without thinking, I grab her shoulders, my voice trembling when I ask, “Really? You really found my twin?”

After all these years... has someone finally found her among more than seven billion people?

“Yes.”

“Oh my God,” I exclaim, leaning forward and hugging her close to me, tears streaming down my cheeks as laughter slips past my lips. The knowledge of her existence fills the darkness and hollowness created by the lonely years without her. “Oh my God,” I repeat, squeezing Isla tighter. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

She pats my back awkwardly, and a strange tension seems to fill her body. Maybe she isn't used to her clients hugging her.

I let go of her, taking several steps back, which allows her to get up. “Where is she? Please tell me.” She opens her mouth to say something, but I slap my forehead, huffing at my own stupidity. “I'm sorry. I know your services aren't free. How much do you want for this information? I will pay you any amount. Just name your price.” I'll use all my trust fund if needed in order to know Amalia's whereabouts.

Because all the riches in the world don't matter if my twin is not by my side.

Just a little longer and I will be able to wrap my arms around her and never let go again, and this burning in my chest that hurts me every single day will disappear forever.

Thank you, God, for putting this woman in my path!

“I don’t want your money.”

My brows furrow at her words along with her cold tone as if I insulted her.

And then her statement registers in my ears.

What?

What does she mean she doesn’t want my money?

Thankfully, she elaborates. “You’ll get her file, which includes her address and picture, once you do something for me. If you refuse... I won’t help you.” Her voice wavers on the last part, raising doubt in me about her threat, but the stubborn lift of her chin indicates she has a lot of resolve.

I should have known it wouldn’t be easy, because apparently when you are a Walsh, you have to jump through hoops to get to your relatives.

“And you won’t find her on your own. Trust me—all your connections and wealth will not be enough to uncover it.”

The hell?

Dropping back on the bench, I gape at her in confusion, because what she says makes no sense to me at all. What private investigator demands something in exchange for his services instead of money? A blank check at that!

Maybe she is crazy after all.

She huffs in exasperation, hooking the curl behind her ear. “I’m not crazy.” Shit, I must have said it out loud. “Let’s just

say we all have a past, and the key to mine lies somewhere I don't have access to.”

“Okay.”

She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees while I rub my forehead, hoping that whatever she requests will be within my means.

As entitled as it might sound, money is easy in my world, but everything else... now that is a big challenge.

“There is an elite club in Chicago that allows only the richest of the rich inside.” A beat passes. “You can get in by invitation only. I've tried everything and even used my best friend's connections, but they have still denied me access.” She turns her head and looks at me, her eyes drilling a hole in me. “I need you to get me in there tomorrow night. That's the only time of the year he interacts with women.”

Blinking several times because this is the last thing I expected for her to ask of me, I shake my head, and my stomach flips in panic at the prospect of losing my chance to find Amalia. “How am I supposed to do that? You just said they allow people inside by invitation only.” Another thing pops in my mind. “And who is he?”

She ignores my last question and says, “You're different.”

“How?” I exhale a heavy breath at this bizarre request and the comment about her wanting to meet the mysterious man. “Look, I can pay you any amount you want, but please just—”

She gets up, pacing back and forth in front of me and running her fingers through her hair while I watch her, wondering how people get access to this club. Do they hand over their bank statements or what?

I grew up with private schools and all that hoopla attached to it, but we never had secret access to things unavailable to my other friends.

Finally, Isla hooks her thumbs on her jeans pockets and faces me. “You’re Theodore Walsh’s daughter. You were raised by a Walsh too. Your family comes from old money, and you guys are worth millions.” Since I’m not sure how to react to this obvious information, I stay silent. “If you want, you can get the invitation.” She snaps her fingers. “Just call your uncle.”

“My uncle? You mean my dad?” Okay, how in the hell did he get into all this?

She nods, determination written all over her features. “He used to work on a project with Rebecca Esmeralda Cortez.”

The name vaguely rings a bell. My father once prepared a show in France for her around fifteen years ago; she is considered one of the best artists of her generation.

“And Rebecca Cortez owns this club?”

Isla laughs, finding my assumption hilarious it seems, and then shakes her head. “No. But she will get us an invite.”

Still reeling from the information about me having to call my father regarding this, who wasn’t the biggest fan of Isla to begin with, something snags my attention among her words. “Us?”

“We’ll go together. After that, I will give you Amalia’s file.” She grabs my hand, squeezing it hard to the point my knuckles turn white, but all I can do is stare at her as hope and desperation lace her voice. “One phone call. That’s all that separates you from reuniting with Amalia. And me finally finding the truth about my past.”

My heart pangs painfully in my chest, sending hurt through my system, and compassion swirls inside me, because I understand her.

And the anguish reflecting back at me in her gray eyes, begging me to accept her agreement and give her the key to unlock the Pandora's box residing in her mind.

It's clear that whatever she needs from that man in the club burns her alive every single day, the same way my sister's absence does. A kindred spirit who recognizes the agony of another because they've experienced it themselves.

At the thought of Amalia, deep longing sinks hard in my bones and the familiar ache in my chest blazes anew.

The ache that sometimes won't let me go to sleep while tears form in my eyes with no reason, yet everything inside me begs to run far, far away.

Emotions that don't belong to me, but I can feel, taste, and experience them all the same.

Snatching my hands from her grip, I place them on my collarbone, my fingers wrapping around my platinum medallion, and I step back. "My twin... is she in danger right now?"

"No." Although an odd note dances on the edges of her tone at this reply. "I promise you. I wouldn't withhold any information if she was." Her fists clench. "Your sister can actually kick my ass if she wanted."

Pride fills me at this, while happiness spreads through my veins, easing the earlier tension as a small smile curves my mouth.

Amalia has character, and that's the first real thing I know about my twin, which intensifies my desire to meet her.

I can't kick anyone's ass though, but still... I'm far from an idiot. "How can I be sure you'll keep your word?" My eyes move up and down her form while she frowns. "You know how they say appetite grows with eating?" Since she still has a clueless expression, I explain, "Your demands might grow with time."

She shakes her head. "No. That's it. Please, Penelope, do this for me, and you won't ever have to see or talk to me again."

Searching her face for any deceit and not finding any, I take several more steps back while pondering her words.

I think she has no right to withhold information, and if I wanted to involve the authorities, I could.

Especially considering she stole my file from her previous employer.

And yet I don't have the heart to do it.

Because compared to all the men who took my case and failed to deliver on their promises, this woman believed in me and gave me more than any of them ever did.

So shouldn't I show my gratitude to her now by fulfilling her request?

If one invitation can change both of our lives, so be it.

Exhaling a heavy breath, I snatch my phone from my dress pocket and ask, "What's the name of the club?"

Her eyes light up, and she takes a deep breath before giving me the name.

One night.

I can pretend to be a sophisticated woman interested in this club's business for one night and then reunite with my sister, putting an end to our past once and for all.

Our dead father's wish to make us live separate lives will be no more.

Besides, it should be fun to see how the Chicago elite spend their time, and my natural curiosity always gets the better of me, getting me in questionable situations.

Not that this is one of them.

After all...

What harm could a little invitation and a visit do?

*R*emi

Classical music plays loudly as I slide my fingers over the various weapons spread on the table. I enjoy the light reflecting off the silver while anguished whimpers echo in the space, forcing my mouth to curve in a smile.

Ah, the two most enjoyable sounds in the world for me.

Whoever said that in cruelty you can never find pleasure because it is designed to strip you of everything human... certainly never had anyone fuck up his life.

For only those who grew up in love and affection have the luxury to preach about the greater good and stellar character qualities.

The rest of us though?

We indulge in our vices because we are doomed to live in hell anyway.

Besides, being a sinner is a lot of fun, so who would willingly sign up for a boring existence all the saints follow?

Certainly not me.

“Help,” the man whispers as I pick up a butcher knife and dip it in poison, letting it coat the steel as I look over my shoulder at the man currently standing in the middle of the dungeon.

A heavy chain wrapped around his throat lets him sway from side to the side slightly when he tries to escape fate’s clutches. Blood slips from his forehead to his mouth, making him cough. “Help,” he repeats, goose bumps dotting his naked skin. He groans when his feet step on the broken glass spread all over the floor.

Just a little something to warm him up a bit for what’s about to come.

One of the rules of good torture?

Play with the victim for hours and begin with basic things to build their terror. After each torture session, they expect rescue, and when it doesn’t come and they face more agony, then they truly learn regret about their past deeds.

Not that it matters.

Because I never forgive or forget.

Especially someone who stole me thirty-one years ago.

Even if I wanted to, my photographic memory would never let me.

“We’re underground on land that belongs to me. You can beg for help,” I say, reaching for the knife. Liquid slowly slides to the handle and smears my gloved fingers. “But don’t expect anyone to show up and free you.”

Spinning around, I stroll to him as his eyes widen, and he sways back, wanting to avoid my presence.

I chuckle.

All these years and all these cowards still manage to surprise me with how much they want to live despite their life circumstances.

Robert here has been in exile for the last twenty-seven years, barely making ends meet, hiding in the woods in a small cabin built by his great-grandfather, and all his children refuse to have anything to do with him. Not to mention the men *the boss* sends his way yearly to beat him up and remind him to keep his mouth shut or else the consequences might be severe.

Yet he begs for forgiveness all the same, wishing to prolong his stay on this earth and in his misery.

I guess even the pieces of shit have strange attachments to this world.

“I was following orders. He said it was for the good of the family,” the man speaks up, breathing heavily as my boots thud loudly on the floor. Each thud creates a nervous friction in him, judging by how he winces and his shoulders hunch. Only for him to stand up straight again as the collar pulls too tightly around his throat and he coughs again. He continues to spit his excuses as if anyone gives a shit about them. “You presented danger to the clan and union.” A beat passes. “You were a mistake that needed to be fixed, according to him. A child who could ruin his daughter.”

Fury slides through my veins, awakening the beast inside me, hungry for blood and pain, wanting to cut his throat and watch him choke as he struggles for breath. The life would slowly leave his body, and I’d enjoy every fucking second of

it, doing my best to forget his words that still affect me after all these years.

A mistake.

It could be my middle name for all the times I've heard it thrown my way while growing up.

Reining in the anger polluting my mind and pushing back the little boy still existing within me who craves revenge right now for all the injustice done, I widen my mouth in a bigger smile.

Displaying true emotions was a privilege I could never afford among those who ruled the world with their iron fists.

When you grow up among poverty and claw your way to the top, you learn a lot of stuff.

Mainly how to listen to the information without anyone knowing what you truly think. And how to bite your tongue when you are treated worse than others in order to achieve what you want.

Sometimes, to win a war, one must lose several battles.

“Ah, Robert. Let's not play the victim here, shall we?” I put the tip of the knife to his cheek, pressing it hard until it pierces through the skin, and his scream fills the air. “We both know you'd do anything for a bottle. Even sell your own child to the devil.”

Except he didn't follow the plan when it comes to me.

Instead, he kept me with junkies for the first four years and then made a deal with two desperate people who had begged God for a child.

Only to screw him up beyond measure, as the child had a specific purpose for them.

One that did not include being loved or cherished.

“Remi, you don’t know him. He is... cruel. Ruthless. He would have killed me!” He licks away the blood from his lips and steps back, whimpering when the glass cuts deeper into his feet and the knife pierces farther in his cheek, probably burning him from the inside out.

This poison has a very specific purpose. I acquired it on the black market several years ago while traveling the world, dedicating my time to finding the rarest liquids designed to make one lose his mind, tremble in endless agony, and bring so much pain the victim never finds rest before his death.

Knives and weapons are of little interest to me, although blood is nice to look at, especially when the victim soaks in it, but poison appeals to my soul, sneaking up on the person unexpectedly. He never sees it coming and still has this all-consuming hope flashing in his eyes.

That’s why I love snakes and got one for myself.

These magnificent reptiles have their own appeal, speaking to the darkness that resides in me and crushed my soul a long time ago.

They create fear and repulsion in whoever comes in contact with them. Similar to my experience, where my existence alone threatened to destroy two families once upon a time.

Two families who didn’t mind sacrificing me at the altar of their selfishness to keep the status quo of the prestige and luxury they thrived in.

“He wanted you killed.” His brows furrow, and his voice rises to a higher pitch while he stills, breathing heavily after each yell. “‘Shoot him,’ he said. ‘Shoot him so my daughter

and our families will be free from this shame.” Robert’s annoying voice grates on my nerves when he continues his excuses. The idiot really thinks some lousy explanation is going to save him.

Too bad fear means nothing to me.

If you are a coward who hurts the innocent, don’t bother excusing your behavior, as I will kill you anyway.

However, the way one is killed depends on my mood and the information they can give me.

Everything in this world has a price.

I hiss a breath through my teeth. “Ah, you failed to listen to the order.”

“I couldn’t do it. You were so little. Just a day old. I swear, Remi, I did everything I could.”

“Did you?” I sigh, my hold on the handle tightening for a fraction of a second. “Then I should thank your compassionate nature for me ending up with junkies?”

He nods, relief flashing on his face, and then his agonized screams echo around the dungeon when I twist the knife deeper into his cheek before sliding it lower and stabbing him hard in the collarbone—although not touching any important arteries.

Robert does not deserve a quick death.

I remove the knife, grinning at the blood coating the steel, then throw it on the floor where it lands with a loud clatter.

Robert places his shaking hands over his wounds before gliding them up and trying to rip away the collar around his neck as tears stream down his face, mixing with blood. He licks them off and cries some more. All while pain fills his

eyes, so deep and profound it allows the pleasure to travel through my bones for a moment.

A moment, because I remember myself and all his deeds, and this pain reflects back at me.

It's nothing compared to the inferno I had to live through that was akin to hell on earth, paying the dues for the sins my parents committed.

"Please," he begs hoarsely, his voice barely audible now. His knees bend more every second, and he chokes on his own blood before standing up and then repeating the action all over again.

He's a pitiful sight, but it's still not enough to satisfy the monster raging in my soul, seeking total destruction of his enemies, and even that might not be enough to satisfy the all-consuming anger present in every breath I take.

Because you have to live in absolute misery to relate to it.

Wrapping my palm around the chain, I lift Robert up a little bit until his toes barely touch the ground and he becomes blue in the face, struggling in my hold as much as he can while staying awake and fighting for his life to the best of his abilities. "Today is your lucky day, Robert," I say, lifting him up a little more before flicking the lock open with the twist of my wrist, and he falls hard on the floor, his hurtful groan loud in the silence. "I feel generous. A little bit at least."

He breathes heavily, gulping for breath while coughing every other second. He sits up only to fall on his back again. I grab the nearby chair and hit him hard with it, closing my eyes to soak up his scream that trumps any music in the world for me.

There are no more beautiful melodies than the ones my victims make in the throes of their despair.

Placing the chair over his chest, I straddle it and glance down at Robert, who just chants, “Please, please, please.” Rolling my eyes, I grab the gun from my back pocket and flick the safety off, which makes him freeze instantly.

His pain-filled gaze focuses on me as he shakes his head, scrunching his eyes so hard in anticipation of a shot following.

“I’m going to give you a choice, Robert, of how you die.” He looks at me again, panic etched on his features, and finally hope slowly slips away.

Ah, the most glorious sight indeed.

He burst out in tears again, sobbing, and I clack my tongue. “Robert, learn to accept the gift I’m giving you. Either you will die of the poison already killing you inside...” He shakes his head and I cock my head to the side. “No? You don’t like that option. Well, since there is no antidote, your death will be long and painful in ways you cannot even imagine.” I tap his cheek with my leather shoe, pressing on the wound there, which earns me more cries. “Unless you spill a little secret, and then I’ll shoot you in the forehead.” Even allowing him to choose demands great restraint.

To accomplish my plan though, I need the information Robert has.

He was always a drunk, ready to do everything for his next fix, but this secret he almost took to the grave.

“Remi, ple—” Whatever he wants to say disappears in an agonizing yell when I step hard on his hand, hearing the bones crack under the pressure.

“Poison or a gun, Robert. Choose.” I glance at my wristwatch, the arrow coming close to five o’clock and reminding me about my plans later on. “You have exactly one minute to decide. Tick tock.”

He opens his mouth and closes it, winces, then opens his mouth again, uttering something, and I lean forward a bit. “What was that, Robert? Louder!”

More tears flow from his eyes as he finally whispers, “Gun.”

“Excellent choice.” Rubbing my chin with the gun, I question him. “Why did *the boss* kill Theodore Walsh?”

Although he organized quite a show with the car accident where Walsh died tragically with his wife, it wasn’t hard for me to figure out someone killed him once I dug into the subject deeper.

According to various staff members, Theodore was a proud, good man who valued integrity and loyalty, and he treated his employees with respect. He adored his wife and loved his brother who, compared to him, preferred art and ignored family business. Yet Theodore never held it against him.

Completely opposite to the boss, so why he decided to strike a deal with him is beyond me.

The man signed himself a death warrant on that day.

By the surprise flashing on Robert’s face, this wasn’t the question he expected, and he swallows hard, pondering it a little too long for my liking, and I kick him again. “The boss loved him and considered him a perfect groom for his daughter. So he gave him fifteen percent of the shares in his

empire. They silently agreed for Theodore to marry his daughter, and then the shares would go back to their children.”

Ah, yes.

Way better than anyone beneath his status—after all, the boss values one thing only.

Wealth.

And if you do not have it, you present no interest to him.

Unless you decide to stand in his way.

Then he just eliminates you from his path.

Twirling the gun on my fingers, not missing how his eyes trail after my every move, the fucker must be afraid I’ll accidentally shoot him.

A lot can be said about the people who died by my hand, but dying because of an accident is not one of them.

“Why would Theodore need these shares?”

Robert’s breathing speeds up, and he gulps for air several times before answering. “He lost several million back then on the stock market, and his corporation faced some trouble. The boss’s deal seemed like the answer to all his prayers.” He shifts a little, wanting to sit up, and then groans in pain when more blood pours from his wounds. “But after a few months, he managed to get all his assets back and tripled his income. He still wanted to keep his word though.”

“But then he met his future wife.”

Robert nods. “He married her, and the boss was livid. Theodore refused to give him his shares back, because by that point, he’d already discovered his side businesses.”

Right.

Illegal brothels with rich clients who would pay anything as long as their kinks stayed hidden in the darkness and didn't taint their reputations.

“Did he blackmail him?”

“Theodore believed that women worked there against their will.” My brows lift. “They didn't. Your... the boss.” He quickly corrects himself before he calls the boss by his real name. Or rather what I would have called him had he not stripped me of my family name. What was rightfully mine. “He hired only willing women and men who didn't mind earning some cash. He was... nice that way.”

A nice pimp who orders an infant shot and arranges a car accident for his enemies.

My laughter reverberates through the space, and he stills, blinking in surprise, but after a prolonged pause, he elaborates further. “The boss warned him several times, but Theodore didn't listen. So the boss killed him along with his wife. Asher was stupid when it came to business, so he assumed he would get his shares back easily.”

Getting up, I push the chair back and enjoy his scared huff before strolling through the dungeon, thinking over his confession about the events from twenty-three years ago, finding them incredibly stupid.

All he had to do was blackmail Theodore to get him to sign the papers.

The fucker just wanted to kill the entire family as revenge for daring to go against his orders.

“But Theodore outsmarted him.”

“Yes. He made a will leaving all his wealth to their daughter Amalia. She survived and was left for her aunt to

raise at the last minute. And then she just disappeared with the kid without a trace. She must have changed her family name. Asher flew out of the country even earlier to France and adopted a little girl there.” The information I’ve already read on the file is nagging my mind. It needs to be sorted and aligned to create a full picture; right now, it leaves me with too many questions.

Mainly why a nineteen-year-old guy would adopt a child and guard her fiercely—the press has never gotten so much as a picture of her. He worked three jobs just to support them until his art found the needed fame. His brother left him with nothing for all the love he claimed to feel toward Asher.

Grief stricken after the loss of his brother?

Or was there something else?

Robert’s voice pulls me back to the present. “The shares presented danger to the boss, because they threatened his reign. His nephews are against him, so whoever has the shares can vote him out of his position, and if the secret of his side business comes to light... he will be destroyed.”

There is no *if* about it.

By the time I’m done with him, his name alone will be synonymous with shame and humiliation among the people.

Bless Theodore for making it so easy for me.

He focuses his stare on me again, while he starts pleading once more. “Please, Remi. Forgive me. Please.”

Too bored with this exchange, I point the gun at him and fire at his forehead since he’s served his purpose.

It takes me an hour to get rid of the body and wash my hands from all the blood on them, while counting down the

hours to the meeting tonight before I can move to execute my plan.

Amalia will wear my ring by the end of this week and sign over her shares to me.

All these years, I've waited patiently for her to be more cooperative in this plan of mine, but the woman hasn't given me the time of day, which has created the rumors of me pining away for her.

Not that I give a fuck.

The cold, sophisticated creature hasn't inspired any kind of physical reaction in me, and I sure as fuck have not been a saint all this time.

However, back in the airport, she stirred something inside me, something that wanted to strip her naked and see if under the right touch, *my touch*, she would come alive and show me the real woman hiding behind the perfect facade.

A woman the beast inside me craved to possess.

And why not indulge myself in her beauty while destroying my worst enemy?

Because anything else is out of the question.

I would never love a woman.

Such obsessions and feelings bring nothing but disaster in my bloodline.

My destiny can attest to it.

CHAPTER FOUR

*“Sometimes past, present, and future collide in such a way
that they might bring the most unexpected results.*

As the chaos they inspire has the power to destroy one’s life.”

Penelope

*F*rom Penelope’s Diary...

*Loving someone shouldn’t be so hard, should
it?*

*That’s the question I ask myself every day when my heart
aches for my twin while I’m stuck in a different country,
playing by the rules the grownups inflicted on me.*

*Even though Dad promised to use all his resources to
locate Amalia, it doesn’t stop the pain squeezing my heart
tighter and tighter each day.*

*Maybe because I sense something is wrong, terribly
wrong.*

*In my dreams, although they should be called nightmares,
I’m always running inside a building, trying to escape the
heavy metal walls, but something else or someone else always*

manages to catch me, trapping me inside while my screams become muffled.

I always wake up with a shriek, sitting on my bed, the sweat running down my back, and my senses on high alert.

During these moments, I know... I just know, no matter how often people might deny it, Amalia is in danger.

But Dad has forbidden me to leave the country until I'm twenty, claiming that I would be in less danger once the will comes into effect, whatever that means, and no amount of pleading helps my cause.

I sometimes wonder if my father thinks I'm insane too, and that's why he stalls my travels. He doesn't understand why I need to go against my birth parents' wishes and break the status quo.

However, without any money or his support, for now, my hands are tied, and I hate it with all my being.

I have a plan though, which will allow me to travel to Chicago in a year.

Since he sent me to school a year early, I'll be graduating soon, which means I can enroll in a university and then use a special program to spend a semester in the States.

My best friend, Monique, who graduated last year, already has a job for me. She said I could help her father out in his office with translations and tutor her younger brother in English. Since I already speak three languages and plan to study linguistics to add two more, it will be good practice for me too.

This way, I will have money to use, and Dad won't be able to dangle anything over my head.

I hope with all my heart that I'm panicking for nothing, and Amalia is blissfully enjoying life, unaware about our past.

But if she truly suffers... I beg her to hold on just a little longer.

Because I won't rest until I have her in my arms safe and sound.

*P*enelope

"I think this was a horrible mistake," I say as my driver pulls up in front of the club with a mile-long line leading to the flashy red entrance where three bouncers guard the place.

Their arms are crossed as they broodingly watch their surroundings, their muscles bulging under their shirts, and I shrink inwardly.

Countless women and men dressed in fine clothes showcase several of the latest designers' collections for the season, while expensive-looking diamonds glisten under the shimmering lights all around them.

A lady scans everyone's invitations and even sends some people home. Some women burst out in tears, begging to be let in.

One man tries to argue but shuts up when a bouncer shoves him away.

Isla huffs next to me, tightening her jacket. "Let's not be dramatic." She pats my hand and motions to the door. "We should find out what all the fuss is about, right?" She sends a reassuring smile my way before pressing the handle and getting out of the car while I groan inwardly.

No matter what this girl claims, she's insane and lives in her own head, because what else explains her acting as if we've been the best of friends who have dreamed about going to the club?

To my surprise, my father was very happy to fulfill my request and got us invitations within an hour, and he even recommended that I have fun while I was in Chicago.

It's a city you'll fall in love with once... and it never lets you go. Enjoy it, and then come back home.

I didn't miss his wistful sigh or the sad notes in his tone, which confused me to no end too. Why haven't we come here sooner?

For this reason alone, I decided not to tell him about Isla's information; maybe meeting my twin and reading her file will give me insight on what the hell happened all those years ago that resulted in this mess.

After it was taken care of, I went to the hotel room but couldn't sleep, thinking about Amalia and Isla, but mostly the latter, because the girl is fascinating despite her weirdness.

She showed up an hour ago at my place, ready to go, but not before warning me to stay close and not make any sudden moves.

After blinking several times at this order, I kept my mouth shut the entire way while she continued to give me pointers.

If someone makes a move on you, you can say no.

If you see something weird there or shocking, just ignore it. It's a normal occurrence and not against the rules.

If at any time you become uncomfortable, let me know. Never wander away alone.

The more she spoke, the less calm I became about this whole thing, and my anxiety rose to epic proportions. The only reason I've kept my ass in the car and not screaming at Owen to drive me back to the hotel is Amalia.

What the hell is going on inside that freaking place anyway? Hopefully we aren't going to some sex club because I don't mind people having fun where they wish, but I really don't want to see some random men and women having sex.

"You don't have to go if you don't want, miss." Owen's voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I muster up a smile for my concerned driver as he glares at Isla waiting for me on the sidewalk.

"It's okay. You can go home. We'll catch a cab back."

"As you wish, miss." A beat passes. "Should I come tomorrow morning?"

Butterflies erupt in my stomach while happiness travels through my system, serving as a healing balm over my nerves, because "tomorrow" has such a nice ring to it.

Tomorrow, when I will finally find my sister or maybe even manage to talk to and see her.

Grinning at him and exhaling a little bit easier about the upcoming evening, I reply, "I'll call you." He nods, and I get out, my heels clicking on the asphalt.

Let's hope I don't break my neck in them!

Isla grabs my elbow, hooks her arm through it, and then drags us to the bouncers who lift their brows, scanning our appearances from head to toe.

On most days, I don't care what I wear, but even I know about such luxurious places having some kind of dress code.

So I chose a simple black, oversized dress, ending just above my knees, and four-inch heels, because everyone always towers over me. “You lost, ladies?” one of them asks.

I shift uncomfortably, a gust of wind whooshing over me and billowing my locks backward. Tightening the hold around my velvet jacket, I extend my invitation to them, and they share a look before stepping to the side and letting the lady greet us with a plastered-on fake smile stretching her thin lips. “Good evening, ladies.” She takes the envelope from me, her eyes widening for a fraction of a second before she even opens it, and then she motions with her head toward one of the bouncers. “I hope you’ll have an excellent time.” The bouncer removes the golden rope, allowing us to go inside.

“Thank you,” I barely manage to reply, while Isla moves forward rapidly as if we’re on a tight timeline or something. My mind still swirls with their reaction though.

Shouldn’t she have at least checked the names or something?

Or was the color alone enough to determine our importance in this world?

Once in, we walk down the narrow, dark corridor leading to the reception desk lit only by the lights on the floor, giving the place a mysterious vibe and sending shivers of fear through me.

Another woman meets us here behind the desk, same fake smile, and I read a name tag on her chest.

Samantha.

She must be the hostess.

“Welcome to the club, ladies. Could you please give me your invitations?” I extend my hand to her, and she grips them,

opening them up and typing something furiously on her keyboard.

She blinks at the desktop screen several times, and then more warmth slips into her gaze, and she picks up two menus. “Ms. Walsh, it’s a pleasure to have you here. Your table is in the VIP lounge. Please follow me.” Her green pencil dress showcases her lean figure, and her golden locks emphasize her subtle beauty, fitting organically into the luxury and prestige surrounding us.

She saunters to the heavy double doors while Isla and I trail behind, and I whisper from the corner of my mouth, “VIP lounge?” And then everyone’s reaction as if the king himself granted me permission to enter his kingdom clicks.

Isla must read my mind, as she says, “Rebecca Cortez’s son is one of the owners.”

Well, that explains her confidence about us getting in.

I open my mouth to ask more questions, when Samantha pushes open the doors vibrating from the music, and instantly the smell of alcohol, cigarettes, and sex envelops me.

The loud music echoes through the space accompanied by the click of shoes on the parquet as people lose themselves on the dance floor, rubbing against each other. Some even engage in heavy make-out sessions. In the corner, two men have a woman pressed against the wall as they take turns kissing her as she moans under their touch and wraps her legs around one of them. Any minute now and she’ll jump them.

My jaw drops, almost hitting the floor, when realization hits me.

A threesome.

In the club for everyone to see!

“Oh my God,” I mutter, scanning the gorgeous club more and doing my best to ignore the various sex acts happening all around me. A threesome might be the most innocent thing my eyes land on here.

Although, after watching my father build his art empire, I understand the more mysterious the place, the more demand it has among society. And that brings in great profits and the desire to get inside, especially when they say only special people get in.

The richest of the rich would rush to be considered *special* while only adding to the prestige of the club.

Perfect play on human psychology for their own financial gain indeed.

The club is decorated in silver, red, and black, and the first thought coming to my mind are the four riders of the apocalypse as they rode horses with these colors.

The myth scared me as a child; I much prefer Greek and Roman mythology. I still found it fascinating—the idea of four majestic beings who would come someday to earth to end it, but not before sending misery to all those around them.

The bar is in the back, right corner with four bartenders busily preparing drinks for everyone while the rest of the staff easily navigate through the club to booths and tables in the left corner. They deliver orders of steaming food on porcelain dishes, the delicious smell wafting through the air and making my stomach grumble.

Each one of them wears black pants and white button-up shirts.

When it comes to furniture design, they’ve settled on round, leather couches looking comfortable enough to sit on,

and there are chairs at round tables with lamps should anyone need to speak privately. Most of the people sitting at them are either making out or drunk.

I step toward the booths, when Samantha's voice stops me and gently nudges me to the left to the small stairs. "The VIP zone is on the second floor, which has several soundproof rooms. You'll be more comfortable there."

Nothing but the best for the Cortezes' guests apparently.

Isla stays quiet through the entire thing as we push through the sweaty bodies before going up the stairs, her eyes studying every little detail it seems for how focused she is, while Samantha continues to chat. "Twice a month, we have special dance shows. You should really come next time. I'm afraid tonight is a bit boring."

A chuckle slips past my lips. "Trust me, I won't survive it getting any more interesting."

She grins at me as we step into a narrow hallway with about a dozen private rooms, and she swipes the card for number seven.

The interior is almost identical to downstairs with the only difference being the couches are black and a private bar filled with an expensive selection of liquor is on the side.

However, the most striking thing about the VIP lounge is the glass wall that showcases the view of the entire club, presenting it in quite a different light.

Almost sinister and forbidden yet tempting nevertheless.

"Here are the menus." Samantha puts them on the round table and then points at the small button on it. "Just press here when you want to order, and the server will come." Her gaze

shoots between us. “Should I inform Mr. Cortez about you once he comes?”

“No,” Isla speaks up for the first time, and Sam’s brows shoot up. “Thank you.”

“All right. Have fun, ladies.” She spins around and dances off to the hallway, shutting the door behind her.

I sigh in relief as silence settles around us and sit down on the couch, wiggling my toes in my shoes while gluing my stare to the glass.

Four cages hang from the ceiling with dancers wearing provocative clothes inside, showcasing their skills and flexibility to the awe of everyone watching. The crystals on the chandeliers shift in the breeze from the AC, brightening up the entire space with colorful lights.

“If this thing drops, someone will get injured,” Isla mutters, taking a nut from the dish on the table and popping it in her mouth. “It must cost a fortune.” She drops on the chair opposite me, then rests her chin on her hand.

She wants to talk about a chandelier? Is she kidding me?

“Why are we here?” I snap, focusing my stare on her while she blinks in surprise. “I did what you asked. Don’t you think I deserve to know what the hell is going on?”

“There is a man I need to meet.” My brows furrow. “Since he’s rich, reaching him is almost impossible. Not to mention he kicked me out of his company. He doesn’t want to talk to me. So here we are.”

Oh, God.

She’s a stalker and crazy after all.

In my defense though, she left me no choice.

“Okay.” I pour myself some water and press the cold glass to my cheek. “Amalia’s file?”

“You’ll get the email in the morning. I promise.” She scoots closer to the window and stares at the dance floor, the light flickering in her eyes and ignoring me all together for the next fifteen minutes as I flip through the menu.

I never thought I’d find a weirder person than me, but Isla wins.

Since the silence only stretches around us, I decide to order some food, when she exclaims, making me jerk, “They’re here!” She jumps up, practically plastering her face against the glass, and I come closer, following her gaze to the parting crowd on the dance floor.

It’s as if the whole club has frozen in time to give space to the newly arrived people.

A murmur washes over the crowd, judging by their body language, as four men march inside in unison, one after the other, different yet magnificent in their own nature.

After all, their images frequently cover the most popular magazines as they inspire curiosity and interest among men and women alike.

You don’t have to live in Chicago to know about them and their deeds.

First, in walks one of the most handsome men I’ve ever seen, his blond hair glistening under the light, and his bright green eyes make me think of the clearest of emeralds. Compared to most of them, he’s on the leaner side; the three-piece suit and lustful atmosphere fit him like a glove, while the wicked smile on his mouth could charm any willing woman out of her panties in record time.

His manwhore ways are legendary, and he broke a lot of hearts back in the day, although he never promised anyone commitment or fidelity. Rumor has it he avoids the word like the plague.

Not that women even tried much.

The men in his family are known for a good time and disastrous relationships.

Belonging to the exclusive jewelry makers dynasty whose pieces are displayed all over the world and cost a fortune, he is considered one of the rare ones who got his great-grandfather's talents. Although to his family's dismay, he refuses to take the reins and inherit the business from his father.

Florian Price.

A server already runs to him, holding a tray with a drink that he snags easily, then winks at the passing women who giggle happily at his attention, and my gaze shifts to the man following right behind him.

Half his head is shaved with the rest falling over the side of his face, covering an angry-looking, long, red scar on his cheek that the press loves to speculate about but everyone shies away from looking at. His cold stare has the power to awaken the dead to do as he says. Nicknamed a barbarian trapped in a suit whose ripped body is ready to erupt from it at any moment, and that's why he mostly never wears them unless he absolutely has to.

An heir to the oil empire who sends fear in whoever comes in contact with him, and women avoid him at all costs despite the wealth and status he possesses.

Octavius Reed.

He strolls to the bar, snapping his fingers at the bartender who instantly takes out an envelope and gives it to him.

The air hitches in Isla's throat.

I glance at her as she curls her fingers on the glass, her whole focus belonging to Octavius, and realization falls on me like a ton of bricks.

This is the man she is stalking. Is she out of her mind?

I shake my head and groan inwardly at the upcoming disaster, because Octavius Reed is not known to be nice or even fair. In fact, in most cases, he is straight-up cruel and has little regard for people's emotions. The only person everyone ever saw him being nice to is Estella, his younger sister, who married her professor a few years back.

Talk about being brave. Not sure I'd have been messing around with my professor if I had Octavius for a brother.

My eyes move on to study the third man.

His dark hair accentuates his tan skin and emphasizes the high cheekbones that bring attention to the perfect symmetry of his face.

If a sculptor wanted to ever carve his image, he'd have a perfectly mesmerizing statue. A true work of art in a human body.

His full lips tip into a smile, yet compared to Florian's, it almost serves as a warning to whoever wants to come close, and his piercing ocean-blue eyes stay absolutely cold, hinting at his cruel character and ruthless nature.

The white shirt covering his chest has several buttons open, and a leather jacket is thrown over his shoulder, showing off his muscled physique.

Sophisticated and stunning, two words describing any member of this dynasty spanning centuries, whose wealth could buy a small country, and still generations and generations of people to come would live in luxury.

A man who according to the latest gossip forced his own wife to marry him, and she's been helplessly trapped in this union ever since.

Santiago Cortez.

I should have put all the dots together sooner, regarding his mother; otherwise, I wouldn't have been surprised this much.

And finally my eyes land on the fourth one, walking slightly farther from everyone else as he scans the club like a hunter prowling through the forest and searching for his prey, ready to sink his claws in whoever he sees fit.

My heart stills inside my chest and then beats so wildly it's a wonder it doesn't jump out of me. A gasp escapes me as his full masculine beauty comes into view, less polished and refined than that of his friends, yet it slams so hard into me I sway back a little under the pressure.

His brown hair falls below his ears, bringing attention to his tan skin and nose, broken in a few places, which speaks of the rough edge to his temper and adds to his raw handsomeness and natural charisma. It tempts all the women around him to discover what hides behind the perfect image he presents to the world.

A light scar mars his full lips stretched in a thin line. The man rarely graces anyone with his smiles, and his silence alone communicates to anyone who stands in his way to never mess with him or there will be deadly consequences.

After all, he never plays fair, and if the opportunity presents itself, he will use it against you. He never lets people forget he came from rags, and whatever he has, he got it with blood and sweat.

Not born in wealth and privilege, but who got it nevertheless due to his sheer will alone. He's faced so much shit from different institutions that a lesser man would have given up a long time ago.

He might have money, but he will never attain status among the elite, making them feel better than him, because he has no family name to back him up.

All doors open to him though, because his friends would destroy anyone who dared to not invite him to functions, but he doesn't have their respect.

Yet he has their fear, fear he doesn't hesitate to use whenever he wants to acquire another company or crush his opponent in the most vicious way.

Kindness, compassion, empathy.

They don't exist in this man's vocabulary.

His dark brown eyes stay hollow and indifferent on most days, never letting anyone see what's inside his soul, and they flare into blazing fire when someone angers him, showing how truly ruthless he can be. An intoxicating combination making one wish to discover what secrets he harbors in his heart and what kind of past he had to face in order to build such strong armor around himself.

In contrast to his friends, he wears a black shirt, jeans, and leather boots that accentuate his muscled form. His six-pack is visible from the hard lines on his torso, and his powerful frame would tempt even a saint. A woman might just believe nothing

could hurt her as long as he stayed close, protecting her like a brick wall.

Everything about him screams to run far, far away and never look back, for this man has downfall and misery written all over himself, yet all the women flock to him, unable to resist the magnetic pull he has on them.

Primitive sexuality oozes from him, sending warmth all over me and filling my mind with wicked thoughts that should be forbidden for how insane they are. Because this man must know how to touch a woman so she'll burst into flames and will stop thinking just for a second.

Lust with such a man would be all-consuming and addicting.

A man I could never, ever indulge in, because it would burn me alive, and my ashes would scatter all over the world, never to be seen again.

Besides, a man like him would never look at a woman like me once... let alone twice or enough times to want me.

Dashing knights fight for princesses' hands in fairy tales and not their less-than-stellar cousins.

Remi Reyes.

Three heirs to different thrones and one self-made king.

Each powerful on their own, however their true strength lies in their unity, as their combined worth allows them to be invincible to anyone and anything.

Men for whom rules and order don't exist, because they crush them under their thumbs.

Life is endless play while women are nothing but interchangeable bodies.

They say there is no woman alive who can resist them nor a man who doesn't bow to them.

In chaos do we thrive.

The Four Dark Horsemen.

Remi

Grabbing a whiskey from a nearby server, I take a large sip and welcome the burning sensation in my throat while still scanning the club, doing my usual surveillance of the place.

People can do pretty much anything their heart desires in our club as long as it's consensual and they pay the large amount of money to be allowed to enter.

The more unique the place, the higher the demand, and with demand comes affluent clients who, with the right information, can be blackmailed into doing whatever the fuck you want them to.

Everything in this world is about power, and anyone telling you otherwise never had it.

Our club is considered one of the most luxurious establishments in the country, with guests begging to get onto our waiting list that's a mile long.

Not one person has ever slipped in here by chance; the list of guests is always reviewed carefully so we know who we are dealing with and what they can offer us should we come to collect.

Although we do pick beautiful women from time to time to have fresh blood for all those willing to pay, but usually

Samantha finds those.

We have strict rules everyone has to abide by, and if you ignore them... you're dead.

The Four Dark Horsemen don't give second chances.

Despite making us a profit every single year, the money we earn from it is pocket change and hardly makes a difference to our bank accounts. But the club is the perfect cover to use should the police come knocking on our doors and asking for alibis. In addition, it's a great place to unwind from time to time, but that's about it.

True monsters don't need secluded clubs in order to show their vices or indulge in their dark desires, scaring even the bravest of people.

However, I have to say, it's amusing as fuck to watch people speculate what goes on behind the walls of our club and dream about getting in just to get a glimpse at our lives everyone so covets.

"Remi, glad to see you here." Samantha rushes to me and taps on her tablet while also nodding at the rest of the guys standing by the bar now, waiting for me to finish and go to the elevators that'll take us downstairs, where we can discuss my latest action that has brought us to the brink of a war with certain people.

And considering I made all the decisions on my own and didn't even bother informing them about it, they will be furious and have a lot to say.

The floor below holds our meeting room and individual fuck pads always available if the mood strikes us.

Well, except Santiago's.

He renovated his and never touches his wife there, something about her being special and all.

As for the rest of us?

We don't bring women home—what the fuck for? Next thing you know, they'll start planning a future with you, and the idea is truly hilarious.

There is no future with the likes of us.

Although Santiago intends to prove us wrong. Considering he kidnapped and then blackmailed his wife to marry him, I'm not sure his actions should be what we all blindly follow.

Sam's voice drags me back to the conversation at hand as I finish my drink and place the glass on the tray. "I sent you the latest report this morning, but I can print it out if you guys want."

"No need," I say, wondering when we should give her a raise with all the shit she does here. "Anything else?"

She shakes her head but then speaks up. "Oh yes. We have a VIP guest in number seven. Usually, we have those reserved for you guys, but since the invitation came from the Cortez family, I figured it would be fine." She blinks nervously at my frown, her hands curling on the tablet, and she adds, "All the other rooms were taken for tonight."

Invitation from a Cortez?

We've owned this club for years, but we never personally invited anyone despite the right to do so.

A guest?

Or an impostor who came here with some specific agenda?

My eyes shoot up to the room, and my gaze collides with the deep blue ones covered by huge, thick glasses that should never mar such delicate features.

Despite their appearance though, they don't diminish her beauty shining brightly like an expensive diamond among the cheap, fake jewelry, a siren who lures helpless men toward her with her sheer presence alone and promises nights full of passion if they just succumb to the temptation.

And all sane men know temptations have horrible consequences in most cases because they speak to the darkest parts in them.

Sinners seek and crave saints like nothing else. What bad boy resists a good girl if he has the chance to taint her?

She gasps, her sapphire eyes widening in surprise at my attention, and she steps back as if reading my mind while I can imagine her pulse beating wildly, anticipation filling her every bone.

She tears her gaze away from me while sliding her hand up and down her throat, breathing heavily, and then she shakes a woman standing next to her, whispering something to her.

My blood boils with fury at the beauty's retreat, the monster snapping awake to destroy anyone standing in my way or even thinking about stealing her attention from me.

Her focus should be on me, always.

She shouldn't have come to our club.

Every man will look at her once and want to fuck her, tightly gripping her dark locks that almost reach her tailbone, and strip her of the innocence pouring from her with every breath she takes. They'll watch her inhibitions disappear as her body finds pleasure.

Unfamiliar jealousy and possessiveness washes over me, making the beast inside me roar at the thought of another man ever touching her, much less thinking about possessing her, because she belongs to me.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Thousands of marks of ownership should cover her porcelain skin, showing everyone that this delectable body has a man who worships it daily and will kill anyone who thinks about laying a hand on her.

And a huge ring.

Maybe then the beast inside me will find peace, instead of barely holding on to his sanity, when he hides her somewhere far, far away so no one will hurt her or take her away from me.

Unacceptable thoughts when she is a pawn in my big plan, twenty-seven years in the making.

Amalia is here.

My future wife shouldn't have come to my club tonight.

With this, she's sped up her unfortunate fate.

For what can be worse than to be married to one of us?

Our women are doomed from the very beginning.

But when did anything stop us?

Whatever we want, we get.

That's our most absolute law.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Not all monsters are hideous creatures hiding in the night. Some monsters are so mesmerizingly beautiful you cannot help but flock to them.

Ironically, falling for one of them became my greatest downfall.”

Penelope

*F*rom Amalia's Diaries...

My shaking limbs can barely hold the pencil in my hand as I write these words, scratching the tip harshly against the dirty paper filled with stupid drawings the psychiatrist showed me.

However the words are the only escape I have in this place that should be called hell on earth, ruled by the heartless devil who has no mercy for anyone as long as his pockets are full.

Or maybe he just enjoys inflicting eternal doom on those weaker than he is while getting off on their cries of pain?

The sink in the right corner of this small, square room slowly drips water, the sound grating on my nerves and driving me insane. I fist my hand, hating how I long to rock back and forth in this filthy bed and cover my ears to get a temporary reprieve.

However, silence is not an option in the room with metal walls in this asylum where Beatrice and Jonathan placed me when I could no longer resist the desire to deliver a blow hoping he wouldn't survive. I stabbed him with a knife, screaming for him to stop hurting me.

Everything inside me came alive when the blade pierced his skin, pouring blood on my hands. His horrified scream was like the most beautiful symphony blocking away the outside world and keeping me in the nirvana of my creation.

The pleasure was so strong it washed over me in wave after wave, whispering to me to stab him again, but before I could, Beatrice interfered and called security.

She locked me in my room, smeared in his blood, while waiting on an update for Jonathan, who to my dismay lived. However, he wasn't happy about my rebellion.

His patience ran thin, so he sent me here, laughing in my face as I thrashed in the guards' hands, and he promised to find Penelope as his new toy.

Which brought such devastation to my heart I thought I wouldn't be able to breathe, but how wrong I was.

I'm still surviving every single day, resisting their constant torture and medicines they forcibly put in my mouth. Although, after discovering they don't bother to treat the minds of people who are already insane, I learned to act in a certain way that led them to believe I no longer differentiated reality from my imagination.

The cries of the other inmates—no one is here of their own accord; Elijah, the owner, said so himself—constantly fills the night, while during the day, the evil people who work here use their power to torture us.

Sometimes they withhold food.

Sometimes they don't let people go to the washroom.

And sometimes they like to beat you up when you don't follow their orders.

Crying overnight into the pillow probably spreads sadistic joy through their blood, and I hate myself for such weakness, but the pain cannot be held inside. At some point, it's going to erupt.

I think it's been two years now in this fresh hell, and still no one has shown up to rescue me. Praying for a powerful man to come break this awful circle of abuse drawn around my life has proved to be worthless too.

What if all this talk about goodness prevailing against evil is lies?

And in truth, only evil can extinguish evil, because neither plays fair and both are ruthless in their nature?

Slowly, my hopes transform into resentment that tastes bitter on my tongue, and darkness sinks deeper and deeper into my soul, somehow serving as a blanket over the pain and injustice of it all.

My attempts at escape have all ended up being fruitless; each time, someone caught me and delivered more punishment.

I think at some point I even stopped caring if I lived or not. I was too afraid to try again after the last time when they left wounds on my back from their knives and then let them go untreated to fester for days before giving me any help.

Still, I write this entry as if I still have my usual journal, because only the words keep me sane. They won't read it

either. I tear it into tiny little pieces, and they don't ask questions about it.

I'm not sure how much longer I can survive in this hell and not succumb to the madness calling my name so sweetly, extending her arm to me and promising peace if I just cross the line.

Penelope.

My sister's name represents tight ropes wrapped around my wrists, attaching me to something solid, pulling me in a different direction while I just want to jump from the cliff.

However, ropes have a tendency to grow thin at some point.

And when mine do?

I will be just a memory in time.

A girl who suffered so much she no longer could hold on.

Even for her twin.

*P*enelope

I tear my gaze away from the magnificent stranger downstairs. His gaze alone breaks goose bumps on my skin, and fire slides through my veins, shooting straight to my nerve endings that demand his attention. I go to the table and grab a glass of water, gulping it greedily and welcoming the cooling sensations in my throat.

My God, what's going on with me?

I've been here for twenty-four hours and already have managed to react to two men who awaken dormant desires in

me that I thought, considering my dating life, I'd never know.

Maybe if you suppress your natural cravings for a long time, then the result is you want to jump on any handsome man.

But then if that was true, I would have appreciated the other three Dark Four, yet they inspire no such cravings in me, and I shiver in disgust at the idea of doing anything with them.

Now, Remi on the other hand....

I groan inwardly again from the stupidity of it all. Who in the hell gets turned on by looks alone? I grab the water bottle, ready to pour myself another glass, when Isla turns on her heels.

My brows shoot up when she gulps for breath, opening and closing her mouth as if some battle is going on inside her, and then says, "I have to go." That's all the warning I get before she races to the door, opens it wide, and takes off to God knows where.

"The hell?" I mutter, quickly placing the bottle back on the table, and follow her, my heels clicking on the parquet. I rush through the hallway and then downstairs, barely catching up with her on the dance floor. She's pushing the bodies away, moving forward as if on a mission.

I grab her elbow to stop her and pull her toward me so she's facing me. Music blasts from the speakers, and the floor vibrates under us from people dancing.

"Where are you going, Isla?"

To my astonishment, her cheeks heat up, and she exhales heavily. She steps closer to me when someone bumps into her from behind, then says, "I'm sorry, Penelope. But I need to talk to one of them about my past." She hooks a brown lock

over her ear. “I’ve been waiting for this for months, *believe it or not.*” She mutters the last part, narrowing her eyes as she rises on her tiptoes, trying to look over the people’s heads to the bar. “I think you should go home.”

I blink in surprise at this, my hold easing on her, and I ask, “What?”

She nods, freeing herself completely from my grasp. “Thank you for giving me this chance. I’ll send you the report tomorrow. You have no idea how you’ve helped me.” She turns away, glancing at the bar again. “But I have to go. I probably shouldn’t have dragged you into this, and for that, I apologize.”

Is she kidding me right now?

She at least could have warned me she wouldn’t need me for longer than fifteen minutes; I wouldn’t have sent my driver home. And now she wants me to what? Trust her word and have another sleepless night in the hotel room while expecting her report?

She’s beyond bizarre and clearly has some unresolved issue with Octavius Reed, but I really don’t give a shit.

I’m about done playing her game and jumping through various hoops in order to get what she promised me in the first place. “Send me the report now, and we’ll be done.”

She shakes her head. “No. I can’t. Not before—”

“You can’t?” I repeat and huff in exasperation, glaring at the man who waves his hands around in the air and spills a little of his drink on my shoes. “Isla, keep your word, or I swear to God you’ll be kicked out of this club before you get the opportunity to speak to one of the owners.”

Anger crosses her face. “I’m about tired of all you rich people threatening me.” She crosses her arms, although amusement dances on the edges of her voice. “It’s hilarious, all things considered.”

I ignore her comment. My words hardly count as a threat, because I have no idea how one gets kicked out of this place, but still.

Who knows what Isla will demand next if this meeting of hers goes south? “Yeah? Well, I’m tired too of all the shit you private investigators put me through. Send the report, and we’ll be done.”

She studies me for several seconds as tension rises between us, and then a grin stretches her mouth, brightening up her whole face, which makes me frown.

“I think I’m starting to like you, Penelope. You are a character under all that good-girl persona. You have that in common with Amalia.” I freeze at this, my ears perking up whenever the name slips past her lips, greedily soaking up any information I can get on my twin. “She doesn’t hesitate to put people in their place if they try her patience either.”

The music changes from a soft tempo to a hard thump. My blood pumps from the adrenaline rush, and I watch people move around the dance floor, pushing us closer together. The scent of sweat and sex fills the air, and I don’t protest when she grips my wrist, tugging me toward the bar. Standing in the middle of these people is disgusting; I don’t need anyone’s fluids on me.

One of the reasons I found sex so lacking and boring was because my mind could never stop thinking about my surroundings or the awkwardness of it all.

According to Monique, I just had lousy lays, and judging by all the women getting off here, I think she was right because I can't imagine having sex in a club. How good a lover does a man have to be to make you forget everything and everyone but him?

We make it a few steps before a young guy with a boyish smile stands in front of Isla, winking at us both. His suit showcases his lean body, and by how charm oozes from him, I have no doubt he is popular with women. "Hey, ladies. I haven't seen you here before." His gaze darts between us before he gives his full attention to Isla.

He scans her from head to toe, interest sparking in his eyes. Her leather boots, black jeans, and green blouse stand out among the fancy dresses here. "Would you allow me to buy you a drink?" He extends his hand toward another lock of hair that escaped from her band, when a muscled hand drops on his, squeezing it hard and making the guy wince.

"Don't touch her, Steven." My eyes widen at Octavius's deep, dangerous voice. A furious expression settles on his features as he shoves the guy away.

Steven shakes his injured hand, blinks several times at Octavius, and with a nod hightails his ass in the other direction, but not before I hear him mutter, "Why do I always offer drinks to their women?"

Octavius looks at me and asks, although it sounds more like an annoyed growl, "What are you doing here?" Confusion washes over me as his full-of-hatred gaze settles on me. "You've brought enough trouble to us as it is."

If I didn't know better, I'd think he knows me, but that's impossible. I've never met him, let alone done something to deserve these emotions.

I open my mouth to give him a piece of my mind. I don't care for his tone and implications.

But the entitled asshole has already shifted his focus to Isla, who just stares at him in awe. Something akin to curiosity, and fear, flashes in her gray eyes when he steps closer to her. "I told you to stay away from me or there will be consequences."

"And I told you, I don't scare easily."

A sinister smile like a grimace—due to his scar—shapes his mouth, warning everyone to stay away, and Isla's breath hitches when he wraps his hand around her throat, pulling her to his chest. "You should, darling." A beat passes, and he leans toward her, their faces inches apart. "Every brave act has a price. And yours might cost more than you expect."

She fists his shirt, holding him, as she replies, "I'm willing to pay."

The sexual tension envelops them, swirling in the air, making it uncomfortable to be in their presence, because I feel almost like an intruder despite the crowd around us.

"Then you're more stupid than I thought. And I haven't given you much credit to begin with." Isla pales, and Octavius lets go of her. "Get the fuck out of my club." He looks at me again. "Both of you." Then he walks off, people parting to give him space, and I shift awkwardly since Isla just got rejected for the whole club to see.

For the hundredth time, I think about how I ended up in all this mess. "Listen—"

"That infuriating man!" she exclaims and darts after him, while I'm left standing alone on the freaking dance floor.

Serves me right for trusting new people.

Sighing in frustration, I pull at my dark locks and take a step in their direction. At this point, I have nothing else to lose.

A deep, husky voice speaks up, though, stopping me in my tracks, so sinister it feels akin to silk slowly gliding over my skin, pulling me to him and luring me to my doom. No good person should have such a tempting timbre. “I wouldn’t follow them if I were you.” I turn around swiftly, almost tripping, but a muscled arm wraps around my waist, easily catching me and dragging me toward him. “Their encounters tend to get wild.”

I gasp as I come face-to-face with the dark-eyed stranger who awakened such a strong reaction from me earlier.

Remi.

My splayed palms settle on his chest while I just gape at him, his masculine scent of tobacco, somehow familiar, making my nostrils twitch. It sends a scorching rush through my entire system and adds gasoline to the already burning fire inside me from his presence.

Gazing into his secret-filled orbs that hypnotize me, creating a fog around my mind, I grip his shirt reflexively, straightening up. The muscles under me flex, hard as granite that probably speaks about years of dedicated work.

And once again, his presence seems familiar. Trying to resist the temptation to curl my fingers on his chest, I stare at him like an idiot, doing my best to remember when I met this man and managed to learn how he feels underneath my hands.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, still holding on to him for dear life. My cheeks heat up just thinking about my clumsiness around such a powerful man who probably never mingles with walking disasters because he could pick whoever he wishes.

Even now, a lot of women are sending daggers my way for being in his company, and I grin, a small laugh slipping past my lips.

They shouldn't worry; the man might be kind enough to help me not fall in his own club, but he won't display a real interest in me.

You don't pick an ordinary stone found everywhere if you can choose from diamonds.

Tension ripples through him, his fingers digging into my skin, and he presses me to him even harder, my curves melting against him while something flashes on his face, which makes me hot and confused at the same time.

“Pleasure is all mine, darling,” he says with that damned voice again, wrapping the invisible silk tighter around me and imprisoning me in a burning bubble that can pop at any moment. “I quite enjoyed catching you. Twice,” he adds, swaying lightly to the slow music, leading my body farther onto the dance floor while I keep up with his steps, my arms circling his neck, because I'm too stunned to do anything else but listen to him.

If there was ever a male version of a nymph, it would be him. No man has any business being this magnetic.

My brows furrow. “Twice?” This club must be some magical place where the owners know everyone, because apparently I've crossed paths with them all but have no memory of it.

Maybe their majestic presence awed me so much it wiped their image from my brain.

But how can a woman forget someone like Remi?

“First time in the airport and the second just now.” The notes turn softer, more sensual, and the energy around us changes, creating a different atmosphere as realization hits me hard.

The stranger from the airport.

The mystery man and Remi are the same person, which means I’ve only reacted to *one* man in Chicago.

And what’s even more unbelievable is finding myself at his club of all places!

I gasp when he pushes me away and then grips my hand, making me twirl, and presses me hard against him once again. The air hitches in my throat, our mouths inches apart. “It was you.”

A menacing smile appears on his face, and he nods, murmuring into my ear, “It was me.” His hot palm glides up and down my back, leaving an inferno in its wake, blocking the outside world away. His lips graze my neck. “Welcome to my club, darling.” He grabs my thigh, hiking it up on his hip, and our breaths mingle, a sensual haze enveloping me whole. “At last, you’re here.” Anger and possessiveness lace the words that make no sense to me, and yet everything female in me reacts to them. Electricity flashes through me, and I shift even closer to him, despising the clothes that separate us.

Madness, utter unexplainable madness that rules over logic and common sense, demanding the pleasure of the flesh and the desire to feel his naked body against mine.

He raises me up and spins me around, my nails digging into his shoulders while thousands of sensations travel over my system, one more powerful than the other, heady from the need for this man to do something.

He freezes and leans forward, ready to kiss me, when I see Isla on the second floor, trying to say something to Octavius, who grabs her and pins her to the wall before the glass goes dark, hiding them from the view.

Their image serves as ice-cold water over my hazed mind and snaps me out of the stupor this stranger has placed me in, reminding me of why I came here tonight.

Amalia.

And I almost forgot about her because of Remi.

Nothing and no one has the power to make me forget about my twin, and yet this man managed to do so in the first five minutes of our meeting.

My God, is the air different in Chicago, or what? I'm acting like a lunatic who's seen a handsome man for the first time.

Shaking my head, I push him away, and he frowns, not expecting that. "Isla," I say and then dart to the stairs, ready to drag the annoying woman out of there and use any means necessary to get me the information.

Then she can fuck Octavius Reed all she wants or whatever weird stuff they're doing.

"Not so fast." Remi grabs my elbow, spinning me around to face him once again. Several people pass, bumping into us and then running away scared when Remi looks at them.

His brown eyes become deadly dark while a murderous expression settles on his features, sending chills down my spine. I even shrink inside, never wanting to be on the other end of such a gaze.

The Four Dark Horsemen might be fair and respectful, but they are also rule breakers who love power, never too afraid to cast fear in those who don't fall in line with them.

Deciding not to anger a man who basically owns this town I plaster on a polite smile and ask tentatively, glaring at the still dark glass, "Please let me go." I twist my arm, but his hold stays relentless. "Isla has something I need. Then I can leave." And forget about this all together.

Especially the stranger who probably chose to distract me so I wouldn't bother his friend and... who the hell knows who Isla is to him.

It's not the first time a guy used me for his agenda. However, somehow this time around, it sucks, and a shot of pain stabs in my heart, making me feel like an idiot.

Just because you reacted to a man doesn't mean he is really interested in you; just look at him.

He's a Greek god in human flesh. They fall for goddesses and not for us mere humans who gape at them in awe.

With my mood and pride in shambles, I rub my arms as coldness sinks into me and pushes me to the abyss of despair. Once again, nothing's worked out as I thought it would. "Okay," I tell him while he studies me intently, and I shift uncomfortably. "I need to order a cab."

I hope Isla's word actually means something. Otherwise, tomorrow, I will really use all my connections to retrieve Amalia's file.

"They should be done soon. Come with me." He pulls me to the side, into the darker part of the club where several VIP couches spread horizontally with small round tables full of drinks and food, and... are those condoms?

He doesn't let me focus on it, though, still prowling through the space as the music becomes more muted with each step. Finally, we reach the steps that lead us upstairs, and then he locks us into a room similar to the one I was in with Isla earlier.

Only somehow this one seems more sensual, wicked, and darker than the previous one. The energy buzzing around me makes me restless, and I blink when he removes his jacket, throwing it on the couch before rolling up his sleeves.

I groan inwardly at how this only adds to his hotness. My skin prickles, my fingers itching to run over the partially visible tattoo and the sharp veins on his muscled arm.

Focus, Penelope, focus.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“Because this is my VIP room.” He must read the confusion on my face, as he elaborates. “You got an invitation to Santiago's room. How did that happen?” By how he words the question, I think he doesn't like me using his friend's name to get in.

“My father got it for me. He knows Rebecca.”

Amusement dances in his orbs at this, and he even barks a laugh, which makes me frown.

What's so funny?

“Your father? How interesting,” he says and then goes to the small bar I didn't notice earlier. “Would you like something to drink?”

I open my mouth to refuse but then think how this evening has failed spectacularly and this stranger brought me here for God knows what.

Or maybe he wants to gently let me know that what happened earlier was just a ploy to keep me occupied? Let me down easy?

A little alcohol won't hurt to face the harsh reality. "Red wine please."

He picks up a glass and pours the drink into it, walks to me, and then gives it to me. "Thank you." I take a sip, welcoming the bittersweet taste on my tongue, while he pours himself whiskey and drops a few ice cubes in his glass. "You still haven't really answered my earlier question." I sit down on the couch and adjust my dress, glancing at the club. I realize the view is different here. I see the earlier place we passed, and I have a bird's eye view of the show happening downstairs.

My jaw hits the floor when the man laces his hands in the woman's hair, pulling her closer to his dick. I shake my head, hoping to wipe that image from my brain.

Remi drops on the opposite couch. "Well, since you have to wait for your friend, I figured you could do it here." He takes a large sip, his Adam's apple bobbing. "How do you know Isla?"

"She's a private investigator and has some information I need." This is as far as I go with sharing. Remi might be nice to let me stay here, but I don't want to go into detail about my twin.

For the last eight years, I would talk about her to anyone who would listen, and I just want one conversation to be about me and my feelings and not her.

Even if guilt sparks inside me at the thought.

“Since when do you all need a private investigator?”
Another laugh, which once again clouds my mind as I muse on his odd statements.

Maybe he has me confused with someone?

“Since we lost things and people we need to find,” I reply, then clear my throat. “My name is Penelope.”

His glass pauses midway to his mouth, surprise flashing on his face, and his brow lifts. “Penelope.”

I nod. “Yes.”

He stares at me for several seconds, and I wish I knew what he’s thinking about in there since his brown eyes glint with a dangerous light, and it creates a fire in the pit of my stomach. I hear him murmur, “Is this how you want to play it tonight?” However, it’s barely audible, so maybe this is all in my head as he speaks up again, his voice carrying through the space. “Very well then. For tonight, I’m Odysseus.”

Disappointment fills my every cell, and I drink some more of my wine, hating how this stranger used the teasing tactic from my classmates. “Please, think of something original,” I mutter, pressing the glass to my cheek. “That joke has been used on me time and time again, and for your information, it’s not funny or nice.”

I should have known he wouldn’t be able to resist.

My name is a curse sometimes, especially among artists who love to depict Greek myths and poems in their art and, as such, find deeper meaning in everything.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Of course not.” I hook a strand of hair over my ear. “It’s not exactly a popular name. And how convenient for you that

it goes with mine, huh?”

He snatches out his phone, clicks on it a few times, and then puts it on the table, sending it flying to me, and I catch it easily.

It’s a photo of his ID with his full name, and I blink a few times, not believing it.

Remi Odysseus Reyes.

“I’ve never met anyone with such a name.” And really, what are the odds to stumble on this man in Chicago of all places?

A smile shapes his mouth, and he winks at me, taking a sip and then twisting his glass in his hand, the shimmering light from above reflecting in it and casting colorful designs on the table. “Some would say we were destined to meet each other.”

Homer, a famous Greek poet, wrote two masterpieces during his lifetime, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

When the Trojan prince Paris fell in love with King Menelaus’s wife, Helen, and stole her, it led to the Greeks declaring war on Troy. It lasted ten years, with the Greeks winning and setting Troy on fire. Since Troy had an unbreakable wall, they used trickery. They built the Trojan Horse and presented it as a gift from the gods. Soldiers hid in it, and then once the horse was brought inside the city, they all emerged and burned and conquered it.

The war saw many losses, victories, and loves stories with brave and power-hungry, vicious men on both sides who would do anything to win.

Three characters stood out the most for me.

Hector, the Trojan prince who protected his land with everything in him and whose skills and morality inspired respect even in the Greeks. One of the bravest men who just wanted to live peacefully with his family but was denied that right.

Achilles, the best warrior of the Greeks, participated in war for endless glory and found it. It cost him his life, but he had no value for it anyway. According to him, it was better to die in good company than live in a bad one.

Among them all, though, there was one who survived the war and made it home.

Odysseus was a king of Ithaca who was known for his calm demeanor and cunning intelligence, which greatly served the Greeks during the Trojan War. He was a big advocate for it and managed to handle a lot of internal conflicts in order for the army to continue fighting, showcasing his diplomatic skills. If Achilles was known for his temper and anger that flared like hot flashes, then Odysseus was the opposite of him, always thinking first and acting later.

However, compared to the mighty warrior, he had a reason to come home—his beloved wife Penelope and his son.

After the Greeks won the war, he started his journey to Ithaca and faced so many challenges a lesser man would have given up.

But after ten years—or twenty in total, if you count the war—he made it home just in time to save his wife from an unwanted marriage as many suitors wished to marry her and snatch Ithaca for themselves.

Penelope, though, stayed faithful to her husband and declined them all, patiently waiting for him to come home.

Through the years, she used many tricks in order to avoid unwanted matches and the need to choose a new suitor.

My father always found Homer's work fascinating. A lot of his paintings are inspired by it, and that's why he decided to name me Penelope. According to him, she showed so much character and will, being brave and keeping the love for her husband burning brightly in her heart even though there was no hope. He wished for me to find a love story like theirs.

For me it made zero sense, though, even as a child, but I never told my dad.

Their love story, in my opinion, is tragic. To lose each other and be separated right after you had a son... while you are young and carefree... to reunite after facing so many hardships?

Who would wish for such a love story?

"Destiny is a fickle thing," I finally reply to him. "Besides, I can't say I dreamed about meeting Odysseus."

He leans back on the couch, placing his arm on the top of it, and drums his fingers, his diamond watch glistening. "Not really into romance?" He clacks his tongue. "Where is your adventurous nature?"

"Please," I mutter, finishing my wine and putting the glass on the table. "She stayed faithful to him while he had other women. He even spent a year with the goddess Circe on his way back, drinking and having fun." I don't really hold him sleeping with others against him, considering it had been twenty years for the guy, but what's romantic in all this?

The dude literally lived his best life while his wife suffered.

“Didn’t she hold his men hostage at first, turning them into swine? Arguably, Odysseus had no choice.” He throws a challenge my way and swirls his drink, the ice rubbing against each other, and the sound echoes in the space.

“If my husband’s only choice to survive is to fuck someone else for a whole year, he can stay with her. I’ll mourn him for life.” This excuse is such bullshit anyway. According to the poem, she never forced him to sleep with her. Obviously, I shouldn’t judge their actions through the modern prism, but alas.

Remi throws his head back and laughs, my cheeks heating up at this, while I sigh in resignation, ready to hear more teasing about it. No one understands my point of view, so I’m used to it. Especially my father, who just looks at me weirdly whenever I bring up this point.

Maybe men see it differently? I don’t know.

All I’m saying is Penelope could have gotten some in those twenty years.

“There is a bit of cruelty and possessiveness in you. I like it.” A hot flush travels through me at the heated gaze aimed at me. “Penelope.” He tastes my name on his tongue. “Strangely, it suits you.” He rubs his chin, drilling his stare at me for several seconds. “Love is unpredictable and has many layers. For those who believe in it anyway.”

Rolling my eyes at this too-familiar statement, I fire back, “My father says love is a poison we all willingly subject ourselves to. Maybe that’s why we find so many love stories romantic and wish to experience something as powerful. Love, though, can’t justify or withstand everything.”

If a man is cruel and capable of hurting you or others, you can't love him. You can call it an obsession, passion, or even a syndrome... but actually love?

No way.

Once he shows his sadistic nature, you need to run far, far away and pray the monster chasing you will either die or give up; for otherwise, they will never let you breathe freely.

He ponders my words for a while. I didn't miss how annoyance crossed his face when I mentioned my father, as if I personally insulted him, but I have no clue what could have warranted such a reaction.

Finally, he breaks the stretched silence. "I agree." He agrees on what? That love can't justify everything? "Although the odds of meeting Penelope tonight surprised even me."

"Yeah, the odds of two strangers named after the epic poem are very slim."

He grins. "Two strangers, darling?"

I nod. "That's what we are, right? Two strangers who just met."

"If you say so, darling. We are playing by your rules tonight." A shiver rushes down my spine at the sensual notes coating his words as heat envelops me whole, making me struggle to breathe while the air itself electrifies with something wicked.

Everything about this man is mysterious, and instead of being afraid, I feel a weird pull toward him that demands I discover what hides behind the person he presents to the world.

They say the Four Dark Horsemen are passionate creatures, and yet no one knows it for sure, since they were never seen with any women.

However, he so easily took me inside his VIP room that they probably just do it discreetly.

This realization, albeit stupid, somehow sours my mood, and I fire another question, preferring to remind myself that the encounter is about stalling me from interrupting his friend and nothing more. “Why did you decide to open up a club?” They make so much money with their empires; doesn’t this little venture seem like a waste of time?

“We lost a bet to Florian.” I blink at this, so he elaborates. “And his wish was to open up a club where human vices ruled and would be so elite that people fought to get in. The rest is history.” He finishes his drink and then places it on the table. “With our power, it was a given it would be successful.” He speaks about it so nonchalantly, but why wouldn’t he?

Everything they touch turns to gold.

“Do you find them fascinating?” Our eyes meet again, and even though I will myself to stop, I can’t help but crave to know what goes inside this man’s head. “Human vices.”

“I wouldn’t say that. People’s reactions toward them are fascinating though.”

My brows furrow at this. “What do you mean?”

“Vices are considered evil, and yet everyone has them.”

“That’s not true. Good people—”

“Just hide them better. Denying the dark side creates an internal conflict, and people spend so much time fighting themselves they become exhausted.”

“So you believe that darkness lives inside everyone?”

He smirks, his hand clenching the couch, and a scorching heat travels through me at the bulging muscle he displays. “Of course. Goodness and evil lie in the eye of a beholder. How would we know what’s a vice or not if we weren’t able to distinguish them?”

“That’s not true.” For some reason, nervousness washes over me as if we are treading in dangerous waters here, and I’m trying to make sense of his point of view. “Some things can never be justified.”

“Like what?”

“Like murder.”

Amusement, to my shock once again, flashes on his features. “Murder. That’s true. No matter the reason, we have no right to take anyone’s life.” I exhale in relief. For a second there, I thought he considered it no big deal. “That being said... depending on who you’re talking to, some might not see it as a crime.”

“That’s impossible!” I hiss.

“That’s the truth. Moral compass, vices, what’s right or wrong... they are not set in stone. Our beliefs are shaped by our environment and experiences. And in this, they cannot be the same.”

I’m too stunned to speak right now.

“By this logic, we shouldn’t have laws or rules, since everyone decides for themselves what to do.”

“Well, when it comes to murderers, I don’t think they give a fuck about laws, darling,” he concludes, and I huff in frustration even though he’s right. “Anyhow, no one on this

earth is a saint. Do you want to know why?” He rests his elbows on his knees and twists his watch. “Because our minds are warped, and sometimes the most perfect people on the outside are actually so rotten you’d run away from them if you truly knew them.”

“That’s a very depressing way of thinking.”

“It’s the truth. Truth is often not pretty.” An emotion flickers on his face. “You must be curious about vices, since you’ve come here.”

My cheeks heat up at this while embarrassment washes over me, thinking how this must look to him. “No, I had no idea you guys allow that.” I motion with my head toward the window.

His laughter booms through the space, and I don’t think he believes me. “It’s all right, darling. All of us wish to indulge in sin.”

The endearment rubs me the wrong way, because it sounds so impersonal on his lips, and I hate it. “Don’t call me darling. We don’t know each other well enough to be this informal.”

“Ah, you’re a lover of rules, *darling*?” He prolongs the last word, and I narrow my eyes on him. “I think, considering what almost happened on the dance floor, we can drop the formalities.”

I open my mouth to protest but then shut it, because I remember reading about them in a social media post, and they quoted Remi.

Those who give up and lose don’t value victory. Otherwise, they’d always win.

It was very arrogant, and people discussed it for days. However, the quote presents everything right now in a

different light.

Did I strike a chord with my refusal to be enchanted by his charms, so now on his agenda tonight, there is seduction?

“I need to go.” I get up swiftly, the electricity rippling all over me in burning flames playing tricks on my mind. It urges me to run far, far away from this man, because his actions cannot be predicted.

And worse.

Like a moth to a flame, I cannot resist discovering all his secrets, and in this, I’ll face my downfall.

Tearing my gaze away from him, I walk to the window, suddenly too breathless to speak. Placing my hand on the glass, I take greedy gulps and focus once again on the couple, who now have changed their position.

She is sitting on the table, biting on a strawberry, while he watches the juice run down her chin and licks his lips as she slowly lifts up her skirt, clearly inviting him to taste something else,.

A hot flush washes over me, and although I believe such moments are intimate, some part of me wants to watch to see if she gets pleasure from it.

Is this the secret to the big O everyone speaks of but I’ve never experienced?

I hear Remi’s footsteps, and then our gazes meet in the glass’s reflection as he comes closer and closer to me, my heartbeat speeding up with his every step, and instant heat surrounds me when his powerful form traps me between the glass and his hard-as-granite chest.

He settles his splayed palms on either side of my head and leans forward, inhaling my scent while his breath fans my neck and breaks goose bumps on my skin. “Like what you see, darling?” he asks right as the guy grips the woman’s hips and pushes her to lie flat on her back.

She laughs and then arches her back when he flaps her dress away, opening her up for his hungry mouth and placing it on her center for everyone to see, and my core contracts, creating a pool of desire with me.

Because for a second, I imagine what it would be like to lie on a table while the man behind me made a meal out of me.

A raspy breath escapes me when Remi’s lips fall on my shoulder, his teeth grazing my flesh and awakening every dormant instinct inside me. “Do you like to watch, Penelope?” he asks against my skin right before he bites on my flesh, my moan echoing through the space, followed by a sigh when he licks it with his tongue. It soothes the sting and only adds to the swirling desire building within me, promising me temporary reprieve from this world.

Inviting me to indulge in vices he so highly speaks of as the aura around me creates countless webs wishing to trap me as long as I succumb to the passion enveloping me whole.

“*Oh mon Dieu,*” I whisper at the complete ecstasy on the woman’s face, and heat zips through me when Remi presses his hips harder into me. The thick bulge hidden by his pants sends an onslaught of heady sensations through me at the idea of this man wanting me with all the women around available to him, bringing me so much joy. A shiver runs down my spine when he puts one of his hands on my waist, squeezing it so hard it earns him a gasp. “Remi.”

His other splayed palm lands on my stomach as he fists the cloth, making the dress plaster against my pointed nipples, and on a reflex, I arch my back and rest my head on his shoulder, which opens me up more for his hungry lips skimming upward, where he bites on my earlobe before murmuring, “Answer me.” And then he sucks hard on my neck, for sure leaving hickeys marring my skin for everyone to see.

Too lost in the pleasure spreading like a wildfire within me, I try to understand what he wants from me, and then I remember his question, glancing back at the couple who are so lost in each other they don’t care who watches them. This only intensifies the need rocking within me.

“No,” I reply and bite on my lower lip when his palm glides lower and lower until he grips the edge of my dress, pulling it upward and exposing my sodden lace panties covering my core.

He places his hand on me, rubbing me up and down as a moan erupts from me, and he chuckles, tickling my ear. “You’re soaked, *chérie*.” He slips his fingers inside my panties, and they connect with the bare and wet flesh, making me jerk as if shocked by a thousand volts of electricity. “Does the idea of being watched turn you on?”

The air hitches in my throat when his middle finger slides down my core as his thumb gently brushes over my clit before pressing on it hard, my moan rocking between us, and of their own accord, my legs close around him, trapping his hand, and he pulls me closer to him, leaving no space between us.

My common sense screams at me to push him away and escape from this madness that has heartbreak written all over it, and yet the passionate creature this man has awakened mutes it, urging me to jump over the cliff and stop resisting

this temptation. “I... I don’t know,” I answer honestly instead, flicking my orbs back to the couple, and my slit dampens when the man rolls his tongue out and licks her from bottom to top as she laces her hands in his hair.

I wish to experience what she does, but I don’t want the whole world as witness to my pleasure.

But what would it be like to be so lost in all the sensations, everyone else be damned?

His grip on my waist becomes almost unbearable when he flexes his hand on me, and he goes rock-hard against me, biting my shoulder, his teeth sinking into my skin and breaking it. I welcome the sting washing over me while his finger roams over my opening, and then he delves deeper, entering me. I moan, hissing a breath through my teeth. “Remi, please,” I beg him, silently asking him to soothe the inferno burning brightly, demanding an outlet, and I rock backward, loving how he flicks my clit from side to side with his thumb. Then he’s pressing the heel of his palm into me and entering me with two fingers. “Please.”

I slap my palm on the glass, a raspy breath slipping past my lips and fogging the window in front of me, reminding me that all the people downstairs can see us should they just raise their eyes.

But in this moment, I don’t care about anything but the bliss waving at me from the horizon, and I put my hand above his wrist, pushing it harder against me, and whisper again, “Please.”

“Please, Remi, what, *chérie*?” his wicked and sinister voice whispers, seducing me with each softly spoken word that sends a thrill through me, promising me carnal pleasures that would know no bounds. “Fuck me? Finger me?” He sinks

his fingers deeper, my pussy clenching around them at the picture he paints in my head while his erection grows bigger, letting me know his fingers are just a substitute for the real thing awaiting me.

“Yes.”

Slipping out of me, he spreads my lower lips, opening me up, and in the reflection I can see how my center glistens from desire. He glides the pads of his fingers upward, leaving tingling sensations in his wake, driving me insane with each passing second.

“No, *chérie*.” I whimper in distress at this, only to still when he adds, “What you need is my mouth between your legs. This pussy is begging to be licked, and I’m just the man for the job.” I gasp when he spins me around and pushes me into the glass, his palm landing on my collarbone only to slide it up, up, up until he wraps it around my throat and squeezes a little, his thumb brushing over my pulse. Instead of being scared, I sway toward him, gripping his shirt and getting lost in the intensity of his brown eyes that seem absolutely livid. “The only man.” Possessiveness and harshness lace his tone, hinting to me that this man does not like to share. “I hope you enjoyed the show, *chérie*, because you’ll never get such an opportunity again.”

He puts a little more pressure, and for a second, it becomes hard to breathe while he adds, “You’re mine. And I don’t share.” His thumb moves to my chin, tilting it up and exposing my neck to his hungry mouth as he kisses my pulse, my heartbeat thudding in my chest at the gentle gesture contrasting with his earlier actions. “You belong to me. Property of Remi Reyes.”

Sensations one after another travel through me, sending blazing fire into my blood and awakening every hair on my body, dumping me into the sensual ocean swallowing me whole. His words fuel the already burning desire in me, and I fist his shirt harder, holding on to him; otherwise, the blaze might erupt at any moment in a blast that would destroy us all.

Breathing heavily, I close my eyes when he nips my neck before skimming to my chin, and his teeth scrape over my skin, his tongue peeking out as he licks over the abused flesh, heat washing over me. “Remi, don’t,” I beg, fighting the inevitable, because I know without a shadow of a doubt that once he kisses me, there will be no coming back.

Even though in reality there was no turning back the minute our bodies collided on the dance floor.

“Look at me,” he orders, and I do as he says, everything in me reacting to the command in his tone that almost brings relief to my constantly working mind that knows no reprieve from my thoughts. Yet, with this man, I think I can give him all the control, and he’d know how to handle the passionate fog hazing my mind while my body hums with anticipation. My skin is so tight I feel like it could rip open at any moment. “There will be no one else from today on, because you’re mine. I own this body.”

His hand grabs my ass cheek, and he lifts me up, pushing his hard-on against my soaked core, and we share a gasp at the contact, his lips inches away from mine. “You’re in deep need of being ridden hard, *chérie*.”

The sensual energy floating in the air enveloping us becomes so thick with tension and anticipation I can almost see it, and scorching heat sinks into me, creating a frenzy in me at just the idea of belonging to this man.

Madness, utter madness, and yet I'm powerless to resist its tempting pull. "Remi, please."

Lust rocks into me in waves, demanding things from me I've only heard about and never experienced. My nipples peek through the dress, the sensations almost too painful, because this magnetic man can get me off with his dirty words alone. "Give me your mouth, Penelope, before I lick this pussy clean."

He swipes his tongue over my lips and then traps my lower one between his teeth, pulling at it, and my hands move to circle his neck, bringing him even closer to me, loving every sting mixed with pleasure. It places us in an invisible cocoon of lust and need, where only we exist in this universe. Carnal desires rule here, threatening to send you flying down the abyss from where there is no escape.

And worse.

Where the devil reigns and allows you to indulge in every sin known to man.

"You'll love my tongue," he whispers, pressing his lips to mine as we share a breath. "You'll need it every day. It will be your personal toy. Right after my dick."

Insane. His words are insane, for we just met, and our encounter will have no future.

My life is in France, and his in Chicago, and even if I wanted to believe in fairy tales or that dreams come true, I can't.

So instead of dwelling on the future, I palm his head and rise on my tiptoes, connecting our mouths, craving to know what it's like to be owned by such man.

He swallows my moan, opening me wider for him as he slips his tongue inside, roaming and exploring, claiming the territory as if it's his given right, so no one else will dare to kiss me again.

Each lick and flick entices my tongue to play with his, drawing me closer to him and getting myself lost in his embrace while heat envelops me, the bliss calling my name and telling me that nothing will ever be the same.

My life will forever be divided—before and after Remi Reyes—and somehow the after part holds hidden pleasure in it that I need with maddening intensity, as it has the power to set me free to experience things I've only heard about but never felt.

In his arms, with his mouth owning mine, I'm not the frigid ice queen but the hot-blooded woman desperate for his touch that welcomes his possessive tendencies and the kiss that's akin to cuffs he wants me to attach to him.

Almost communicating to me that he will never let me go and I've doomed myself by deciding to indulge in carnal sins.

Our tongues duel, fighting for dominance with him winning, and I arch my back, letting him deepen the kiss as I grip his shirt hard before slipping my hands to his chest, groaning at the hot muscles that flex and his heartbeat beneath.

Sliding them up, I tear my mouth away when I reach puckered skin, reminding me of scars, and gasp only to moan again when he pulls me back for one more kiss while I thread my fingers in his hair, bringing him closer to me.

This time around, there is nothing gentle about the kiss. We are hungrily devouring one another while a thousand

sensations hit me from every corner, swaying me in different directions, demanding the burning need inside me to be sated.

We both groan when he hikes me up, my legs wrapping around him, and my core comes in direct contact with his hard-on. He spins us around, taking us somewhere. Since my lungs scream for oxygen, I throw my head back and gulp much-needed air as he sucks on my neck hard, pulling at the skin, which will bear his mark all over it.

And in this moment, the idea thrills me as everything female in me screams in pleasure for everyone to see it.

Because for this man, I'm the center of his attention right now, and he mutes all the voices in my head that tell me how to act, what to feel, what to wish, or who to find.

In this moment, I'm just Penelope, who is wanted for who she is, and this magnificent man desires me so much he doesn't mind the whole world seeing it.

He uncovers a hidden part of me, the daring and sensual one that has been asleep all this time, and pure joy fills me at the prospect of finally unleashing her into the world. And by the lust whispering into my ear to taste the forbidden fruit, I know Remi holds the key to all my pleasure.

My skin connects with a glass surface, and it takes me a moment to realize he's placed me on the table, sending our drinks flying and shattering them while he drops onto his knees, his face darkening. And right in this moment, I don't see him as a famous billionaire.

No, the feral look and the intensity in his eyes reminds me of an ancient warrior who has come home and expects rewards for all his sacrifices.

He sucks a breath through his teeth. “You’re gorgeous.” His dark orbs flash, and heated arrows shoot straight to my clit at this. “And all mine.” He shoulders my legs apart and then lifts my dress up, exposing me to his view again.

While I should feel embarrassed having him this close to my most sensitive flesh, I don’t. Instead, a tremor rushes through me when my sodden panties once again come into view and he hooks his fingers in them, slowly removing them, the glide of the silk over my skin highlighting my need, and then he lifts them to his nose, inhaling my scent, and my cheeks heat up while my core becomes even wetter.

“Lie back, *chérie*,” he instructs me and pushes until my back lands on the table. I stare at the black ceiling showing me a reflection of us, and a moan escapes me, my hands fisting my dress while my nipples ache so much I want to remove the offending cloth.

“Remi,” I gasp when he slides his middle finger from my bottom to my clit and flicks it lightly, playing with my nerve endings like a maestro.

“Look at you. This pussy is in bad need of my tongue.” He shoulders my legs wider and makes room for his powerful form, bending them so my heels rest on the edge of the table and opening me up to him as I pulse with need.

I feel his hot breath on my core, popping more goose bumps on my skin, and a groan escapes me at the sensual reflection, the image serving as an aphrodisiac in itself. “Enjoying the view, *chérie*?” My center dampens at the wickedly spoken words. “Do you love knowing you have me at your mercy?” His question rushes tremors through me, and I nod even though he can’t see it.

The idea of this man craving me as much as I do him makes me dizzy, and I want to mark his skin too so all the women out there know for a moment in time he belonged to someone.

Me.

His fingers graze my thighs before he sucks the inside of one, and I hiss at the contact, grabbing his hair and pushing him closer to my pussy as his chuckle vibrates through me, only adding to the lustful bubble about to burst inside me. “Remi, please.”

His palms slide underneath my ass, lifting me up to his hungry mouth, and my toes curl when he orders, “Watch.”

That’s all the warning he gives me before he places his mouth on me, stabbing his tongue deep, and my muscles instantly clench around him while I cry out, arching my back.

He licks between my folds, flicking from side to side, swiping his tongue over my lips one by one, before sucking them into his mouth while his thumb brushes over my clit and then presses on it.

Scorching heat spreads through me, burning so bright that my own skin feels foreign on my body, and pleasure fills my every cell while the earlier need becomes hungrier.

And the image above me, showing me how he rolls his tongue out, making it flat, licking me from bottom to top, his fingers spreading me wider for him, is torture in itself. “Remi,” I say on a moan when his teeth scrape over my clit before trapping it between his lips.

My hands leave his hair, and I grip the table, my heels digging harder in the glass while sweat glides down my skin as fire envelops me whole with no reprieve in sight.

“Remi, please.” I have no idea what I’m begging for, but he seems to know, because he enters me with his tongue again, swirling it inside me, pushing deeper and deeper, and each glide brings me closer to the brink—after which nothing will ever be the same.

He slides out and then goes right back in, his fingers gripping my ass cheeks hard as he drinks his fill while he continues to ravish me with his tongue.

A man who can do such wonders should be forbidden, for how can a woman think straight when he displays such skills?

My body is desperate for friction though, and I start to raise my hips in tandem with his thrusts, grinding on his tongue, and I thread my fingers in the silky strands once again, keeping a tight hold on him so he’ll let me find the release whispering my name, closer and closer with each swipe of his tongue.

He forcefully places my hips back on the table though and growls before licking me up and down again, the obscene sounds echoing in the room. I thrash my head on the table, too turned on to watch us and yet living in constant anticipation of his next move.

All while the pressure builds inside me, promising me relief from all this sweet tension that inspires such heat in me and will grant me access to the abyss that has pleasure and satisfaction written all over it.

“Remi, please.” My nails sink into his neck when he focuses on my clit again, sucking it, and then two fingers slip inside me, stretching me wide, and the double sensations almost become my undoing.

Hot flashes wash over me in waves, breaking goose bumps on my flesh while thousands of tickling sensations envelope me.

Just a little friction, and I would....

My frustrated groan mixes with his chuckle when he changes his movements again, placing his whole mouth on me and continuing to fuck me with his tongue as his thumb goes to my clit.

“Remi, please!” I beg angrily, because how dare he deny me pleasure that he promised me in the first place?

This man turned me on. He has to deliver!

“What do you want, *chérie*?” He licks me. “Tell me.” Another long lick, this one turning into a soft thrust, earning a moan from me. However, once again, this action brings me closer to the edge but doesn’t push me over, leaving me floating in the air. “Voice your wish.” He dives right back in, torturing me while I find the courage to speak the words he craves to hear.

Fisting his hair, I finally manage to make him look at me and groan inwardly at how his lips glisten from me, and whisper, “Fuck me hard, Remi.” I’ve never in my life uttered such words, but nothing else fits.

We stare at one another, and for a second, I think I said something wrong. But then he growls, giving me one last long lick, and rubs his face on my navel, smearing it with my juices.

He slides up, leaving butterfly-like kisses on my stomach, and lifts the dress up until he exposes my bra-covered breasts and says, “Hold it.”

I grip the dress while he lowers my bra and moan when he brushes his thumbs over the pointed peak before flicking his tongue over the tip, then sucks it hard into his mouth, coating my nipple in his saliva.

“Remi.” At this point, his name becomes a prayer as he feasts on my flesh. I arch my back again, watching the dance floor, so incredibly turned on at our reflections and how his powerful form looms above me. He shifts to the other breast, giving it the same treatment, and the sensual hot flush washing over me makes me flex my legs around him, and I drop the dress, once again lacing my fingers in his hair and pulling at it hard until he raises his mouth. “Remi, please!”

If he doesn't make me come in the nearest seconds, I'm going to combust and turn right into ashes, never to know any other pleasure in this world.

I whimper just at the possibility.

“Ah, you're so innocent. I will enjoy corrupting this body, mind, and soul, *chérie*.” His mouth continues its journey to my collarbone and neck, where he scrapes his teeth, and finally reaches my lips and bestows a deep and passionate kiss.

I groan at my taste, our tongues licking at each other while urgency fills our kiss along with lust. Angling my head, I let him own me completely, so lost in the heat consuming us I do not care about anything else. This man will be mine, even if someone walks through that damn door and tries to interrupt us!

“Every inch of you will crave one thing. Me. You'll be so addicted to me you won't know how to go a day without me.” The possessiveness in his tone acts like gasoline to the already burning fire in my veins, and I press myself closer to him, my

arms circling around his neck, begging for one more kiss, but he has other plans.

Instead, he grips my thighs and raises us up, pushing his hard-on against me and blindly walking us toward a window. My back once again connects with it, and I let out a loud huff.

“Who do you belong to?” he asks again, the rough timbre of his voice a seduction in itself.

“You.” Right in this moment, I’ll tell him what he wants to hear.

Satisfaction crosses his face. “Yes, only ever mine and not his.” He grips me so tight, as if to wipe away my protests, but I just shake my head, not understanding his comment.

But he doesn’t let me dwell on it much, because he drives into me deep, stretching me to the brink, burning sensations splintering through my walls at such an intrusion.

He catches my whimper with his mouth, kissing me with all his might while letting me adjust to his cock. Reality crashes into me, because after this, I will never be the same.

The invisible line separating the goodness and darkness almost shows itself, and I crossed it, succumbing to the cravings coming from within me that only this man can fulfill.

He slowly sways back, leaving me completely, and then thrusts into me again, my head pressing into the glass while he takes his fill, the kiss turning rougher as I claw at his back, tightening my legs around him while his fingers dig so deep they’re bruising my skin.

However, so lost in the bliss slowly swirling around me and yet still not reaching me, I barely pay attention to it. Instead, I love the sting mixing with the pleasure igniting my

blood with every slide of his cock, pushing farther and farther into me, marking me for the future.

A man like this can ruin a woman beyond repair and never look back, but I don't care.

Right now, this man is mine, and this is all that matters.

His even strokes evoke electrifying, lustful sensations throughout my body, flaring the scorching heat swirling inside me while creating a world where only we exist, a protective bubble where no one but us has permission to enter.

Gulping for breath, I throw my head back, giving him access to my neck, all while the pace of his drives increases, and he slams into me so hard I don't know where he ends and I begin.

My thighs burn, accommodating his muscled body as a feminine thrill rushes through me, and I grip his hair harder while he continues to stake his claim on me. He's trying to fuck me into oblivion, it seems, so that I won't remember anyone but him.

As if it's possible I could.

This man has the power to make me addicted to pleasure, seeking it like a junkie needing a fix, and yet I reach for it, needing it like my last breath, so I tighten my legs around him, pulling at his hair until our gazes clash. "Remi, please."

His only reply to my pleading is a deep thrust that inspires a hot flash, sending tingles straight to my clit. I hug him closer, running my lips over his shoulder, shifting his shirt to the side so I can latch onto his bare skin, enjoying the taste of sweat and him.

He enters me over and over again, all while taking me higher and higher, building something within me that grows

bigger and bigger with each erratic drive.

My core spasm around his length as he pushes into me so deep I can no longer fight, and the bubble inside me bursts, soaking me in pleasure and bliss I've never known before.

I cry out and then sink my teeth into his shoulder, all while he thrusts into me, and my core clenches with each glide as I hold on to him.

Leaning back, I palm his head and fuse us in a kiss, our tongues fucking each other's mouth, mimicking his thrusts, and the tension grows in him as he growls into me.

Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.

He releases inside me, and only then do I realize he had time to put on a condom at some point, and I wrap my hands around him, wishing to stay in his arms forever while we are attached in the most primal way.

"Remi," I say in wonder, still not believing what I just did with this man who seemed almost feral in his need for me.

In fact, just the idea of it turns me on all over again, blazing heat filling my blood.

However, coldness akin to frigid water dumps on me when he whispers right back, "Amalia."

And in this, he ruins everything and makes a mockery out of the best experience of my life.

My twin's name always brought joy to my heart, enveloping it with so much love and longing I didn't know how to handle the emotions on most days.

She gave me solace in my sadness.

Hope about my future in which we could meet again.

Happiness at the prospect of not being alone in the world and gaining more family.

After all, our bond is eternal. Even science cannot explain it.

However, for the first time in my life, my sister's name uttered in my ear doesn't inspire any of those things, and instead, devastation sinks into my skin. Invisible claws tear my flesh apart while pain squeezes my heart so much I can almost feel the red drops dripping on the floor, creating a bloody pool by my feet.

Is this what Cinderella felt when the clock struck midnight and the magic her fairy godmother sprinkled on her started to disappear, making her leave the prince in a rush?

Although my fairy tale ended before it truly began, and there won't be a glass slipper to leave behind so he can find me.

The man who inspired passion and desire in my body, creating a deep need for him alone and awakening dormant cravings inside me, never wanted me in the first place.

He wanted my twin.

Although this shouldn't have surprised me.

As I discover more truth about my life, the more I come to the conclusion that my twin always came first to everyone, in everything.

And I'm just a consolation prize, an unwanted child and the mistaken woman who Remi touched.

Well, thankfully, I was raised by a good man who loved me and taught me a valuable lesson.

Never settle for second best.

So blocking away any other emotion and pain ripping through me, I push at Remi and free myself from his hold.

Quickly adjusting my dress, I dash toward the exit, my heels clicking loudly on the parquet. I cover my ears when he calls my twin's name.

Maybe my father has been right all along.

Some pasts should never be disturbed, as they have the power to destroy you.

CHAPTER SIX

“Lust is considered a sin by some.

For rarely anyone can withstand its forbidden call.

And sadly...

“I’m not an exception to this rule.”

Penelope

*F*rom Penelope’s Diaries...

All my carefully placed plans about my trip to Chicago crashed.

Saving all the money earned at my side job proved to be a good strategy, and getting a scholarship was a nice surprise. I waited every day for the international program to roll out so I could apply, only to discover that those on scholarship cannot study abroad and need to finish their degree here.

And maybe that wouldn’t have stopped me, and I’d have tried to transfer to Chicago, but Dad’s sudden heart attack changed all my plans for good.

The doctors advised him bedrest and warned me that any kind of stress in his condition might turn critical.

And if I just broached the subject about leaving, he would have gone ballistic, and I couldn’t take any risks with my

father.

However, I still nagged the investigators, demanding they find answers, but all of them came up blank, not finding Amalia and subtly hinting at me to finally give up.

“Sometimes, people don’t want to be found” are the exact words one of them used.

And lately, since the nightmares stopped a year ago and the familiar restlessness doesn’t fill my soul, I’ve wondered if maybe there is some truth to this statement.

What if Amalia built a new life where there is no place for her lost twin?

In college, during our psychology class, we raised the topic about how sometimes people remind us of our past we wish to forget, and we cannot stand to be in their presence.

Does my stubborn nature work against me right now, and I should let go?

No matter how horrendous the past is though... the light has to shine on it and uncover its secrets so people can finally move on.

If my sister reached out to me, I would have listened.

If my sister rejects me once my eyes settle on her, I will accept it.

But until then, with the echo of the pain rocking my soul inside me?

I won’t give up my search.

emi

R “Amalia.” I call her name, pushing through the bodies toward the exit, my gaze alone warning everyone in close proximity to make way.

If my woman thinks she can let me touch her and then run back to New York to her fiancé, then she has another think coming!

I’ll kill Lionel right in front of her eyes before I let that happen.

A hand snatches my elbow, halting my movements, and I spin around to rip it away and punch the fucker who dares to stop me from pursuing my woman, when I see Octavius standing in front of me. “Remi.” Warning laces his tone as his eyes speak volumes. “Meeting room now.”

“Let me go.” I try to pull away, yet his hold is relentless, and several degrees drop between us, the tension growing rapidly as we face each other. “Five seconds, Octavius. You have exactly five seconds to let me go, or I’ll forget you’re my friend.” I look at the entrance again, seeing Amalia disappear through it, and the hunter in me chants only one thing.

Catch her. Catch her. Catch her.

“You’re acting insane.” His fingers dig into my elbow, but I twist it back, finally freeing myself from him. “You’ll bring war on our heads, and I won’t let you do it.”

“You are not the leader, Octavius. Remember your place.”

He smirks, his eyes growing colder. “Take your own advice, Remi.”

People gather around, whispering to each other while Samantha stands several feet away, fear etched on her features, as she doesn’t know how to react to this situation.

We never fight, at least not against each other.

“I have no time for this.” I spin around, darting after Amalia, needing to get my hands on her before she flies, when Octavius stops me once fucking again.

And this time in a way I could not ignore.

“We have rules. You swore to follow them.”

We operate with unity, creating a powerful front nothing can break, and in this, everyone stays away from us.

Which means any small thing can shake the unity and bring the downfall to all four involved, one of the reasons we’ve agreed to vote on decisions.

If you hurt one of us, you might as well have hurt all of us.

If a vote is not in someone’s favor, it means one of the four is on his own and deals with his situation separately, never endangering anyone else.

The ring on my finger burns my skin, flashing a memory in my mind so bright it’s as if it just happened yesterday.

“What the fuck is this?” I ask, picking up one of the rings with a black stone, examining it closely.

“These are our rings.” Florian gives us the rest, each one of them having a different colored gemstone in the middle, matching our eyes, while the overall shape and the platinum surrounding it is identical. “With this, we are part of the Four Dark Horsemen, our unity.”

“Isn’t it like a chick thing?” Octavius wonders, slipping a ring on his hand. “I vote for matching tattoos.”

*“We’ll do that too.” I show them the design on my pad along with the quote. **In chaos do we thrive.** “That’s what*

makes us feel alive,” I reply, and we all laugh while the darkness slowly settles into our hearts when the full meaning of this hits us.

Those rings forever represent one simple truth.

We’re murderers who are bonded by a horrible secret from the past.

And by the oath we all took just seconds ago, signing the parchment with our ten rules together.

“Gentlemen, I think you forgot about our meeting.” Santiago’s voice pulls me from my memories, and I look at him, grinning at everyone as he throws his arms over our shoulders, tension vibrating from him while he grits out through his teeth, “Are you both out of your fucking minds?” He stands straight for the passing women who snag a picture of us. “Making a scene in the middle of a club?” He maneuvers us to the elevators. I shrug him off and walk ahead as everything inside me rips in two.

I crave to go after my woman and trap her quickly in this marriage so no fucker will go around thinking he has some claim on her.

The other part of me, the rational, sane part that still thinks several steps ahead, knows I can’t ignore our rules and act out, because my action, especially my marriage, would affect the little peace we have with a certain brotherhood.

Ten minutes.

They can vote in ten minutes, and I will either have their support or go rogue on this mission.

Either way, by the end of tomorrow, Amalia will wear my ring.

The ride downstairs is quiet, although the silent judgment in Octavius's stare drills a hole in me, and Santiago snatches a cigarette from his back pocket, lighting it up. We get out and enter the spacious meeting room, which has a huge, round table with four chairs, a TV hanging on the wall, laptops, and four tablets.

And a gold bowl right in the middle of the table is where we throw our rings when making important decisions.

I shut the door and ask, "Where is Florian?"

Despite how Octavius loves to act, we don't have leaders in our dark brotherhood; each of us holds equal power. That's the only reason that with our difficult characters, we've managed to stay a unit for such a long time.

Which means despite my complicated relationship with Florian, considering our past history, we cannot decide shit without him.

"He's on his way. Something kept him downstairs." Octavius flicks the whiskey bottle and pours it into a glass before dropping a few ice cubes in too. "You know him."

Santiago chuckles, exhaling smoke all around us. "Women."

Right.

What else interests Florian in this world besides jewelry and women?

Except Santiago would be surprised who occupied our friend's mind for the last three years and how not everything is as it seems.

God help us all then, because Santiago would kill him.

“You’ve been obsessed with Amalia all these years yet never claimed her,” Octavius says, and tension rises in the air, so thick and heavy you can almost touch it. “What do you really want from her, Remi?”

“I want her.”

“Lachlan considers her a little sister. He stayed civil until you salivated after her from a distance, but he warned us all. She has gotten engaged to someone else. And now you’ve fucking touched her and plan to what? Kidnap her?” He takes a large sip from his drink. “The woman made her choice. Respect it.” By the distaste lacing his tone when he speaks about her though, it’s clear he doesn’t respect her.

Then again, Octavius has a high sense of morality, and any infidelity in his eyes is a crime that could never be forgiven.

I snap my teeth just at the reminder of her engagement.

The news broke a few months ago. Apparently, she fell in love with a famous violinist during one of his tours, and they’ve been inseparable ever since. Truth be told, I couldn’t give less of a fuck if I tried. Amalia presented no interest to me back then, except for her family name.

So all I wanted to do was borrow her just for a while, not harm or touch a hair on her body, and then return her safely to Lachlan.

However, after tonight, when I felt what it was like when such a woman belongs to me, fucked her so hard and deep all she could do was chant my name... I will not let her go or give her back to a fucking violinist.

Although her “brother” does present a little complication for me.

Lachlan Scott is the underground king of New York, one of the most skilled serial killers we've ever known, and we know so many we could build a fucking stadium filled with them. He rules his protégés with an iron fist, and his reputation precedes him. Everyone knows not to fuck with him or his city, because consequences for it are severe.

Our net worth is about the same though, so we don't give a fuck on most days about his desires or stupid rules. However, we do have to play nice, because we don't want him to show up in Chicago and try to claim our territory. Not to mention he is several years older than us, and his experience in torture could either be admired, or well... yeah.

So we respect him on most days, although his orders have annoyed me to no end in recent years, even though I understood.

None of his protégés had an easy life, so him being protective of Amalia impressed me, but we all knew one thing.

To get her, we would have to declare war on him, a bloody and cruel war where no one would show mercy or compassion to one another. Alliances and friendships would be tested, and there could be only one winner, ever.

While my friends tried to avoid it at all costs, they were on board with it before her engagement; they changed their minds after though.

Because she clearly made her choice.

And we don't force women.

Ever.

Or at least we didn't... until Santiago kidnapped his wife.

"She's mine."

“She belongs to someone else.” Santiago presses the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray while keeping his gaze on me, his open eyes concerned and annoyed at the same time.

My best friend mastered his drilling stares through the years, and while they have an effect on most people, I am indifferent to them.

“The minute you go after her now, you will start a war. Lachlan is ruthless. He’s already stolen several of our staff and offered them jobs at his club. Fucked up Octavius’s deal. Florian’s jewelry just disappeared from the latest collection. He has been warning us all along because you spent so much time in New York.”

Right.

It was hilarious to ruffle his feathers and keep my eyes on Amalia, wanting to find an opportunity to offer her a deal.

Her willing participation in my plan would have sped up a lot of stuff, but destiny had other plans in sight for us both.

Santiago continues, propping himself on the table. “Amalia ran away from you tonight. Some battles are meant to be lost, *amigo*, in order to survive.”

“I haven’t come this far in my life, *amigo*, by losing.” They treat me like one of their own, and for that, I will always be grateful to them.

They never once showed me disrespect or made me feel less than them.

But in moments like this, they should remember my origins and what it actually took for me to be on top of the world right now.

You don’t get power by being nice and understanding.

“I’m not going to declare war over a whore,” Octavius says, snapping my attention to him as razor-sharp rage rushes through my veins, awakening the wild beast inside me roaring at the insult thrown toward the woman I consider mine.

For now at least.

Having permanent attachments in our world is dangerous; life has taught me that good things happen to those who fucking never expect it.

All my prayers and wishes have fallen on deaf ears, followed by despicable laughter of the people who don’t deserve to breathe.

“Watch your mouth, Octavius.” My voice stays even and low, albeit no one misses the danger lacing it. I can be understanding of his past and why he has such strong emotions on the topic, but he will not call my woman names.

He just smirks, coldness sinking into his gaze as he steps closer. “Or what?”

Without thinking, I pull my elbow back and deliver a punch to his nose, making his head tilt, his powerful form shifting back as a small huff slips past his lips. The whiskey glass drops on the floor where it rattles loudly and doesn’t break, to my surprise. “Or you won’t like the consequences.”

Santiago exclaims loudly, “*Mierda*,” before darting toward us.

Octavius quickly finds his footing, though, and sends a blow my way, harder and meaner than the one I gave him, hitting me so hard in the stomach air sticks in my throat.

The mean fucker even digs his knuckles into my recent gunshot wound, and a small spot of blood appears on my shirt, indicating he might have ruptured the stitches.

Stumbling, I hit the wall with my back, and sharp pain travels through my system. Rolling my lips together, I trap the groan ready to emerge from my throat, because he won't get the satisfaction of knowing how much his blow hurt me.

Octavius might be a civilized man most of the time, having to abide by society's rules, but deep down inside, he's a barbarian thriving on the pain and suffering of others.

Even if I'm his best friend since childhood... the minute the hunter inside him sniffs weakness and blood, he attacks the opponent until there is nothing else left.

He wipes away the blood from his mouth. "What's going on, Remi? Don't like to hear the truth?"

"My woman is not a whore," I reply, pushing away Santiago who stands in my way probably aiming to stop the fight, but the anger pumping my blood doesn't give him the opportunity to do so.

Besides, despite being my best friend—a brother really in all things that matter—he doesn't understand.

He just doesn't.

A man who has been given everything he's ever wanted on a silver platter since his birth will never understand the need to possess, to crave something of his own like I do right now.

And the reminder that Amalia doesn't belong to me and considers herself attached to Lionel, who she willingly chose as her future husband and always has a loving look on her face whenever her gaze lands on him, only intensifies the madness driving me to the point of insanity.

Because yesterday, Amalia was just a means to an end. I never planned to touch her, just to use her in order to exact my revenge.

Her only tempting quality was her true family name, which essentially gave me a key to unlock the darkest secrets of certain segments of society.

Now though? After seeing her here, touching her, sinking into her, and feeling her tight pussy wrap around my dick while her moans echoed in my ear, consuming me so much I no longer gave a fuck about anything else but claiming her?

The unfamiliar possessiveness and raging fury hate any male on this planet who thinks he has some right over a woman that is mine.

Mine and no one else's.

I'll be damned if I allow anything to take her away from me now.

Octavius shrugs as he taps on his chin with his finger. "She's engaged to another man, yet she fucks you in our club. Sounds like a whore to me."

My roar reverberates through the walls as I dart at him, hitting him in the collarbone, but he manages to block my aim and dips a little, which sends us both flying to the floor where we start punching each other blindly, not giving a shit where as long as it ensures another's pain.

Our blows are mean, rough, and charged with the desire to destroy the opponent in order to claim victory and win this argument that shouldn't even be one in the first place.

No one gets to question, insult, or judge my woman, least of all one of us.

"Apologize!" I shout, kicking him in the legs, but the fucker only laughs, finding it highly amusing.

“I won’t apologize for saying the truth!” he growls back, punching me in the stomach and hissing in pain as I do the same, which loosens his grip on me and allows me to roll to the side, placing my splayed palms on the floor and lifting myself up.

Octavius follows suit, and in a second, we’re both standing once again, facing each other, our chests rising and falling as we gulp for breath.

Although the swirling energy still floats in the air, consuming us both, it gradually becomes calmer and deadlier, slowly gliding over my skin as he announces to me, “I will not risk the brotherhood because you have decided to claim a taken woman.” He raises his hand, cutting off my protest before words leave my mouth as newfound anger finds its way into my darkness, demanding I punish Octavius more so he can choke on his words. “She marries him in two weeks and fucks you? A disloyal woman will never be the bride. Amalia will be the downfall of this brotherhood.”

Ah, right.

Octavius and his rules.

Although this particular rule, number ten, I insisted on back when I was an eighteen-year-old fool who believed in being capable of falling in love with a woman someday and wanted to protect her at all costs.

They even called me the most romantic among the group, which is hilarious, since I had only one girlfriend in high school and never made any romantic gestures for her. The girl ended up fucking Florian in the bathroom at the party, because “who could resist him”— her exact words.

Despite not giving a shit about the girl, I still harbor resentment toward Florian, because his betrayal cut deep.

The asshole can't even explain why he did what he did, just that it was for my own good. Needless to say, I still haven't forgiven him. Which didn't stop us from being best friends who would die for each other, as fucked up as it sounds.

The rest of the women were just fucked and never claimed. Never promised commitment to anyone.

With a loud scratch, Octavius finishes writing on the parchment we ordered, dipping his feather in the ink one last time before putting a dot on it. "So nine rules in total, and we have to seal it with our blood."

Florian picks up the knife, ready to slice his palm, when my question stops him. "What about women?"

"What about them? You can fuck whoever you want. Just keep it covered, because we don't need little horsemen in our lives," Santiago says, shuddering a little at the idea of bringing a child into this world. He has been the most vocal about never wanting to get married.

"Ha ha. Fuck you, Santiago," I bark before elaborating. "If anyone of us claims a woman as his own, what happens?"

"Ehh, it's up to you?" Florian supplies, as confused with this conversation as the rest of them.

Right.

He probably never even thinks about commitment.

"Except when a man takes a woman, he shares with her. She becomes part of you. It contradicts rule number five, in which we do not reveal the true deeds of the brotherhood."

Florian runs his hand over his face, muttering something about my romantic nature, while Santiago huffs, his body language showing in all its glory how much distaste he has for my statement.

*Octavius, always the peacemaker, finds his voice first.
“Look, Remi—”*

“No. I won’t leave this to chance. We’ll agree on it right fucking now, or this brotherhood will run without me.”

Santiago gets up, facing off with me, anger shining in his orbs while his fists clench.

Well, it looks like a fist fight will be inevitable at this point.

“Who are you, Remi, to give me ultimatums?”

“Who are you to tell me I cannot protect my woman?”

“She doesn’t even exist. It’s a mythical concept you think you might want to have someday.” He hits me on the chest, and I sway a little before finding my balance quickly and delivering my own blow, sending me flying to the wall, my back hitting the stone hard.

“Fucking apologize!” I shout, moving toward him, and he punches me right in the face instead.

The rest of the guys jump up. “Lo siento, Remi. Is this enough of an apology for you?” he asks, a wide grin spreading across his mouth.

I launch toward him, delivering my own blows to his face as we fall back. He hits me in the stomach, and I bend in two.

Santiago can be a real mean fucker if he wants.

“Enough, both of you.” Neither of us listens to Octavius, and we continue to hit each other, the cracking sounds

reverberating through the space.

“What is it, Remi? Want a woman of your own so she can compensate for your childhood?”

Of course.

Of fucking course he uses my childhood against me, but then what’s new? After the hell he has endured, Santiago always lashes out in the most vicious way.

“Shut up!”

He pushes me harder, and I fall on one of the desks, where we continue to deliver blows, only for me to kick him hard, and as a result, we both tumble on the floor.

One second, Santiago is under me, and the next, someone lifts me up.

“Enough, Santiago, enough!” Florian screams, wrapping his arm around him and keeping him away from me while Octavius does the same to me, both of us standing opposite each other and breathing heavily. Blood drips from his lips, bruises already forming under his nose, and I feel my forehead dripping.

“Let me go,” he orders, but Florian doesn’t listen to him.

When it comes to conflicts, that’s when his resolve shines through, because Florian never does anything unless he is absolutely sure everyone has calmed down.

“Not until both of you are done.”

“Please, let me go. I’m fine. I’m not going to do anything.” Octavius waits for a second as if contemplating my words and nods, stepping back, and I adjust his shirt, wiping away the blood, and point a finger at Santiago. “You’ve got issues.”

Florian finally lets him go, and he steps closer to me, smirking. "Yeah, so do you." We watch one another for a second before we hug, slapping each other on the back, and I whisper, "It's important to me."

Especially after what happened to my family and how my drunk of a father couldn't handle these changes, so he almost destroyed us both with his choices.

"Yeah, I know."

While I crave to find the love of my life someday to share all the hardships with her, if such terms as soul mates truly exists in this world, then mine is Santiago. Although we're a tight group of four, he's my best friend, the second half of my soul. He's the raging storm sending thunder through the sky, while I'm the peaceful shore. He's the cynical asshole who thinks love is just a word, while I'm a hopeless romantic. He's a sophisticated, charming man, compared to my barbaric tendencies... and at first glance, we have nothing in common.

Yet I don't trust anyone more in this world than him and can't imagine a life in which he wouldn't be standing by my side.

"Write the law," he says as we lean back, and I hang my arm over his shoulders, instructing Octavius who is back on his chair, the feather in his hand dripping ink onto the parchment.

"If one of the Four Dark Horsemen claims a woman as his bride, she becomes one of us." The feather scratches against the paper while I continue. "She has our loyalty and protection."

"Hold it. What if she ends up being a two-timing bitch undeserving of the trust?"

Ah, Florian, always the pessimist who never trusts women despite intending to fuck all of Chicago.

“Considering who stands on the other side...” Octavius trails off and stops writing. “We end her.”

“Not without a vote,” I warn, knowing about their tempers.

With our nods, we wait till Octavius finishes and slice our palms one by one, sealing our oaths with blood.

Santiago claps his hands together, tearing me away from the past to the situation at hand. *“Cállate par favor.”*

“Shut up indeed.” Florian chooses this moment to enter, lazily sweeping his gaze over the scene around him, and then puts a cigarette into his mouth, flicking the lighter between his thumb and index finger. “I think you need to turn on the TV.” We all give him the death stare, and he exhales dramatically. “I have to do all the work in this brotherhood alone.”

“TV is the last thing on our minds right now. Fucking vote, Florian,” I hiss, and he just raises an eyebrow at me.

He picks up the remote and clicks it while asking me a question. “Or what? You’re going to punch me too? Save your strength, our romantic barbarian.” He winks at me, and my sheer will stops me from hitting him in the face.

Florian chose a bad day to test my hotheaded nature.

The surveillance footage comes into view from the front entrance. “I thought you’d be interested in seeing this.”

Amalia comes into view, running away in distress along the sidewalk, as she extends her hand and tries to catch a cab while wiping away a tear sliding down her cheek.

My fists clench just seeing her misery, uncomfortable sensations traveling through me at seeing her sadness, which speaks to the hidden part of me I thought I lost a long time ago.

But the feeling is quickly replaced with anger when a man wearing all black sneaks up behind her and wraps his hand around her throat.

She struggles in his hold for a few seconds, and then slowly, her knees wobble. The man catches her in his arms and drags her to a nearby car.

They drive off while complete silence falls on us all. Fury boils my blood, poisoning my veins as my ears block almost all sounds out, leaving only the powerful roar of the beast inside me as he appears at the prospect of my woman being in danger.

Because I couldn't protect her in time.

Florian breaks the silence first. "Have I mentioned that Lachlan came to Chicago? He has a mansion on the outskirts of the city. I guess he wanted to see his so-called sister now." He looks at me, his green eyes unreadable. "If you go after her, you'll indeed start a war. So think carefully for once in your life, Remi, and choose."

"There is no choice to make." I remove my ring and throw it in the golden bowl where it rattles soundly, announcing my choice to them, because there is no time to waste.

Lachlan will never harm Amalia, but as long as she is not with me, I can never be sure of her safety.

My whole life, I chose what was right for me to advance in this society, carefully evaluating my options, because they carried so much weight. I couldn't make any mistakes, as all

my fuckups had greater consequences than those of my friends.

Never once did I pick what my nonexistent heart desired; personal preferences played no factor in how I moved toward my goal.

For once though, I'm going to think about myself and indulge in this newfound craving to own a woman who drives me insane with each breath I take.

If that's madness, then so be it, for I wasn't sane to begin with.

"I'm going after her," I announce to them and spin around, dashing to the door, already wondering which of the mansions belongs to Lachlan.

Santiago's voice stops me with my hand on the handle as he says, "We are a unit."

Without turning my back and still facing them, I reply, "I stood by you all when you made your choices. Hideous choices that altered our lives." I look over my shoulder, noticing the muscles in their cheeks twitch. Although otherwise they have no outward reaction to my statement.

Except Octavius.

His dark orbs flash with something akin to regret, but it's quickly gone with indifference, hiding his true emotions from me. "Never have I shown my judgment or opinion on the matter. Your decisions were enough for me. But maybe that's the difference between us and our friendship." I open the door. "After all, I've always been a son of a gardener among princes. I don't have a kingdom to risk." Before anyone can say anything else, I shut the door behind me and prowl to the

elevators, intending to find my woman, everything else be damned.

And if I have to go to war all alone and face Lachlan in his territory while fighting off his protégés?

So be it.

I've never lost a battle in my life, and I certainly won't lose this one.

*P*enelope

Pain.

That's the first thing flashing through my mind as I twist my head to the side and groan when the soft cushion dips under me, pain zipping from my neck to my shoulder.

My eyes snap open only to close again when thousands of tickling sensations akin to agony sweep over me, hitting me from every corner as my head spins.

God, did I fall asleep while reading a book again?

I thought I'd outgrown the tendency as a teenager.

Placing my hand on my cheek, I rub it a little before rising on my elbow and groaning in frustration when the pain becomes almost unbearable, my blood running to my numb muscles and awakening them ruthlessly. "What in the hell?" I mutter, opening my eyes again and glancing around, hoping to spot a bottle of water only to blink in shock.

Because the environment greeting me is not one I recognize.

Instead of my purple and white room back in France with the birds chirping from my usually open balcony door, a bare white room comes into view with just a wide leather couch inside and a small desk several feet away.

A huge window covers one of the walls, letting the moonlight slip inside and mix with the crystal chandelier shining brightly above me and emphasizing the emptiness of the room.

Everything about it reeks of coldness, danger, and hopelessness as if no matter how much one tries, his life will always stay blank like this room.

Where am I?

“You’re finally awake.” A deep, husky voice startles me, and I sit up on my seat, my gaze shooting to the right, where a tall blond man wearing a three-piece suit that fits him like a glove stands, twirling a glass in his hand. “I started to wonder if maybe my men used a bit too much sedative in order to bring you here.”

Sedative?

With one word alone, all the events from tonight come crashing down on me—from my disastrous visit to the club where I ended up having sex with a guy enamored with my twin, to the stranger who covered my mouth with a sweet-smelling cloth.

Oh my God.

Someone kidnapped me!

Fear unlike anything I’ve felt before swallows me whole. It’s like a tight rope wrapping around my neck and cutting off all my oxygen supply, urging me to run far, far away from here.

Because even the air itself is saturated with danger and darkness so wicked one must always stay away from it in order to survive.

My eyes dart around the room, searching for a way out and not finding any except the door that is for sure guarded by someone, since he mentioned his men. He would catch me before I took two steps toward it anyway.

“Who are you?” I ask, my voice trembling slightly while my fingers fist the hem of my dress, trying to cover as much of myself as possible.

Only then do my bare feet register in my mind, with no shoes in sight, so they must have removed them, thinking a few steps ahead.

Oh God, oh God.

What do people do in situations like this?

Vaguely, I remember my dad giving me the talk a few years back that, due to my family name, people might kidnap me for ransom, so I should always be careful and not blast our surname anywhere.

Back then, his words seemed paranoid, but the more time I spend in Chicago, the more I come to the conclusion that my father was right all along.

Chicago must hate all the Walshes, because so far I’ve been treated like shit by almost everyone.

“If you need money, my father will pay any amount,” I say, doing my best to hold his stare while reining in the panic creeping in slowly and threatening to wipe away any sane thoughts.

His piercing blue eyes scan me from head to toe, a bored look settling on his features as if he finds nothing interesting there. “If I indeed kidnapped you, Penelope, you’d be suffering now in my dungeon, begging for me to spare your life.” He glances at his platinum watch glistening under the light. “Give or take five minutes.”

Everything inside me freezes at his admission, cold sweat breaking on my skin while goose bumps pop on my flesh and bile fills my throat at the picture he’s painted in my mind.

I scoot back on the couch, pressing hard, as if it can protect me from him while hectically wondering what else this man might want from me. I’ve never seen him in my life, but a sense of dominance and power seeps from him, almost suffocating me.

Probably people who cross this man don’t live long enough to tell their tale.

“Who are you?” I repeat my question as I search my memory for all the lectures in my psychology classes about psychos who do dark deeds for different reasons and how to deal with them.

Although my father found it strange, my favorite shows always included some kind of crime, and I could spend hours watching documentaries about serial killers, fascinated and horrified by their minds.

In almost all these shows though, most of them looked creepy and lived less-than-stellar lives, and this man doesn’t seem like one based on his appearances alone.

Appearances can be deceiving though, so until he tells me what he wants from me, I won’t exclude the strong possibility he might be a psychopath.

He ignores my question, instead continuing his earlier thought. “Thankfully, you’ve led a boring and innocent life. No need to be afraid.” He grabs a nearby chair from the desk and drags it closer to the couch, the legs scraping against the wooden floor and grating on my already tight nerves. “However, a certain situation requires our mutual cooperation so it can be beneficial for both parties.” He unbuttons his suit jacket, sweeping it back as he settles on the chair, placing his ankle on his knee while his elbows rest on the chair’s arms.

His words filled with riddles make zero sense to me. “I don’t understand.” The headache intensifies, and the throbbing in my temples starts. “I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

Amusement flashes in his eyes, and his chuckle echoes through the room, hollow in nature, warning everyone about the true character of this man. “I don’t make mistakes.” He twirls the glass in his hand and then speaks up. “Remi Reyes. A man who considers you his.”

I blink in surprise at the sound of his name, and my betraying body allows the warmth to wash over me, remembering how it felt to have his strong, powerful arms hug me so close the outside world disappeared.

And with it, all the worries, while nothing but pleasure existed for me for the first time in my life.

All of this was just an illusion, a fragment of my imagination, because his passion and all the dirty words belonged to my twin.

A twin he must know and want, since he stalked me in the club and claimed me almost instantly.

And the idiot that I am believed he actually felt these emotions for me.

Naïve fool.

This should be my nickname.

Shaking my head from the thoughts about the mysterious man who set my body aflame and storing them in the box locked in my heart, I say, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” My fingers fist the dress harsher. “Remi doesn’t want me.” At least this much is true.

His brow rises. “Is this why he claimed you in front of the whole club?”

I frown at his question. What does he mean by that anyway?

All he did was dance with me before taking me to the secluded place where he had sex with me.

I’m sure he’s had plenty of sex in his life.

Pure rage fills me as the green-eyed monster awakens inside me, wanting to claw his face at the prospect of him touching anyone else like he touched me or even daring to look at another woman.

He’s mine.

Yeah, okay.

I’m insane.

Jealousy has no place in one-night stands or with a man who never desired you to begin with. Yet the foreign possessiveness is hard to control, and a bitter taste fills my mouth.

I love my twin to pieces despite never meeting her, but in this moment, anger swirls in the pit of my stomach at the knowledge that Remi prefers her over me. And doesn't that just show how shallow I am?

The man clears his throat, pulling my attention back to him. "Trust me. Remi wants someone else. Not me." A beat passes, and I say, "So please let me go and hash out whatever issue you have with him." Then I can go back to the hotel, get information from Isla, who decided to ditch me at the freaking club, and forget everything that has happened in Chicago like a bad dream.

"Ah. You mean Amalia?" A gasp slips past my lips at my twin's name. "He did chase her around for the last few years despite my disapproval. I never liked the fucker, but his resolve impressed me."

His disapproval?

I swing my legs to the side, my bare feet touching the cold floor, while my torso sways forward. "Amalia? You know Amalia?"

A smile shapes his mouth. "She's one of my protégés."

What in the hell? Protégé? Who are these people anyway? Some secret brotherhood or something?

"Isla is lucky her best friend is married to one of our own." His hold on the glass tightens. "We don't appreciate strangers creating reports on us."

Momentarily forgetting about this man kidnapping me and threatening Isla—who apparently left out an important piece of information, like spying on high-class people—I get up and clasp my hands together. "Amalia? Where is Amalia?"

He takes a sip and counts. "Three. Two. One."

Heels clicking on the floor echo before the double doors burst open, and a stunning woman enters, blazing with fury so strong I feel it charging the air all around us.

The hard wind from behind billows her straight hair forward while the red dress with a turtleneck and long sleeves ends midhigh. It showcases her body in the most flattering way and brings attention to the generous swell of her breasts and her long legs.

Sophisticated, elegant, gorgeous.

Just a few words to describe her, yet they don't even begin to do her justice.

Flawless makeup accentuates her high cheekbones and vivid ocean eyes that are framed by long, black lashes.

My heart swells with happiness and joy. I'm so proud all I can do is stare at my twin after all these years, in awe of her beauty.

All this time, while wondering about our meeting and playing thousands of scenarios in my head, I thought that seeing her for the first time would be almost like watching my reflection in the mirror.

Oh, how wrong I've been.

Because she is the stunning version I could never measure up to, a mesmerizing mirage you cannot take your eyes away from.

Could I blame Remi for wanting her?

My twin, the other half of my soul, my sister, is finally here in front of me, and my hands are itching to trace over her face to confirm she is real.

Tears form in my eyes while my stomach flips, my heart beating so wildly I feel the pulse in my neck, and even my earlier headache is gone.

Because the kidnapping was worth it if it means I'm actually seeing my Amalia.

"Amalia," I whisper her name, addressing her for the first time, and take a step toward her, ready to hug her close and never let go.

A sob escapes me, and I cover my mouth with my palm, emotions threatening to overwhelm me in this moment.

Countless nights filled with nightmares. Private investigators who considered me crazy.

After all these years, I've finally found her!

Only to stop abruptly when her harsh voice serves as cold water extinguishing my happy emotions about this reunion and announces that some dreams are never meant to come true.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Seven words.

Yet they crush and burn the hope that flourished in my chest all these years.

I found my twin.

But it seems my twin never wanted to be found in the first place.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Sometimes, destiny gives you no other choice but to put your soul on the devil’s altar and plead for mercy. Even if everything inside you burns with hatred toward the darkness the vicious creatures reside in.”

Penelope

*F*rom *Amalia’s Diaries...*

I think my theory was right after all.

You have to pray for another monster to come and kill the one destroying your life if you want to live on.

Because only someone who is permanently smeared in evilness can extinguish his own kind. Besides, those who live in the darkness never willingly let go of those they trapped in their hell, and as such, there is no running away from them.

Blinding sunlight streams through the huge hospital window, brightening the spacious place and showcasing the magnificent glory. Birds chirp in the distance, announcing the arrival of a new day and basking in the spring weather. One of them pecks the glass, its gaze zeroed on me as it continues to knock several times and chirps again.

The rose and orchid smell tickles my nose, drawing my attention to the various flowers spread around the room. I also notice the couch several feet away and a round table, opposite the flat-screen TV hanging on the wall.

The voices from outside are muffled, with doctors and nurses periodically entering, checking my vitals, and giving me updates on my various injuries that are healing nicely, and I should be good to go in a few weeks.

After I have enough therapy to walk on my own and hold food inside without vomiting all over the floor.

Thankfully, they didn't have to do anything with my arms, so I can write these entries, because the feelings battling inside me need an outlet; otherwise, they might overwhelm me. I don't trust anyone here to handle my hysterics.

Not yet anyway.

Elijah had the brilliant idea to put me in the cell with another victim, who he called Emerald, so she would have some company. I think he was obsessed with her and forcibly kept her there, as she also had a lifeless expression shining in her eyes that I saw reflected back at me from the mirror.

However, I still acted my part and made her believe I was slightly off, because risking Elijah's wrath wasn't an option.

One night, the door was left open, and Emerald used this opportunity to grab my hand and run. The alarm rang so loudly I thought my ear drums would burst. We found the stairs, ready to escape together, when we stumbled into three men.

Although, I barely had time to focus on them, because I fell down the stairs and hit my head hard, already weeping inside

my soul before oblivion claimed me that my new attempt proved to be useless and more torture awaited me.

Only, my predictions weren't true.

The men who showed up didn't work with or for Elijah. No, instead, they belonged to some kind of dark brotherhood, and they blew up the entire place, freeing all the hidden souls trapped inside it.

A king of the underworld and his faithful dark knights.

I woke up in a hospital room where doctors assured me they could fix all my wounds and advised me to stay on bed rest. I accepted their help, not wanting to bite the hand that saved me.

Besides, if life taught me one thing... never act on your emotions, and study your environment first before making any rash decisions.

I didn't ask a lot of questions, just obeyed all the orders and watched TV, learning a lot of new stuff about the modern world, and I read the books brought to me.

Among those books, I found an empty journal, which for the first time brought me so much happiness I burst into tears, crying so hard and for so long a nurse had to give me a sedative.

According to her, it was normal to experience it all under harsh stress, but still, I just nodded and refused to see a shrink.

These people could still hurt me, and I wasn't about to give them any weapons to use against me.

After two weeks, a man showed up whose aura of dominance and power filled the space around, making me sit

straight and watch his every move warily, knowing that if this man unleashed his wrath on me, I wouldn't survive it.

My first instinct was to bolt; none of the men in my life had been kind to me, but I froze when, instead of saying anything, he dropped a folder on my hospital bed.

Picking it up with trembling hands, I gasped, seeing reports about Jonathan being found dead and how that monster married again after casting my aunt away and raped another stepdaughter. He was found in the forest, his limbs chopped and his face barely recognizable.

And the dark part inside me, the one that enjoyed hurting him, almost wept in pleasure finding this justice fitting, even if it was horrendous.

Nothing would have stopped him except death anyway.

There was also a report on Beatrice, who struggled to find another fool who would marry her and desperately needed money to keep up with her life.

The man finally spoke when I raised my head, his gaze focused on me but so blank I couldn't predict what he felt. "You don't have a past anymore that hunts you. You are free to do as you choose." I swallowed hard, slightly lost at his words, my throat so dry I couldn't utter anything, but thankfully he continued. "Everyone else found their home. You have none. If you want, you can come with me."

My eyes widened in shock, fear enveloping me when certain images played in my mind, creating rather gory pictures, but he quickly soothed them.

"We don't hurt the innocent, and we never strip away the freedom from those who crave it. I can give you a new life. One where no one will ever dare hurt you again." His voice

held so much conviction, and by the ruthless steel ringing in his tone, I knew it was the truth.

Clearing my throat, I finally found the courage to reply. "Thank you for saving my life, but... I'd like to be with my twin. Could you find her instead?" I twisted my hands, my heart beating so hard in my chest I felt the pulse in my neck, and something flashed on his face before he nodded.

"Of course." With this, he turned around, ready to leave, but my next question halted his movements.

"What's your name?" For some reason, I needed to know my savior's name, because even if he participated in horrible things, I would be forever grateful to him and his friends.

Or whoever all these men were.

"Lachlan Scott."

That's how I learned the name and later how much importance it holds in the world.

And even though there is still fear that he might transform into a monster who craves to tear my flesh away, the familiar hope burns brighter and brighter each day in my soul as my days here come to an end.

Because Lachlan, as he promised, found my sister, and his private plane will take me to France right away.

He even made my passport and all the paperwork, claiming me as his distant cousin and temporarily giving me his family name. I knew I wouldn't need it once I met Penelope.

My heart squeezes hard, and now smiles always grace my mouth. My happiness manages to block away the screams in my head waking me up at night and the voices whispering in

my ear to attack the men around me, as sometimes their faces merge with Jonathan or Elijah's, making me lose my mind.

But I hold strong, withstanding the lure, because I have a reason to live.

Penelope.

Once I'm in her arms, everything will be all right.

The nightmare will finally be over, and I'll live happily ever after like in all the fairy tales.

With Penelope by my side.

*P*enelope

Amalia scans me from head to toe. Her arms are crossed, her red nails digging into her elbows, as she hisses, "Do you have any idea the mess you've created?" She looks at the man and addresses him for the first time.

"Lachlan. Why didn't you send her to France?"

"Watch your tone when you speak to me, Amalia."

Clearly, no one orders him around or so much as raises their voice in his presence.

Wait.

Send me to France? Mess?

The buzzing in my ears starts as a horrible realization dances around the edges of my mind, but I refuse to see it, because the amount of pain might be catastrophic to me.

"You know about me." The words slip from my mouth before I can stop them, and Amalia's attention shifts back to me. "All these years... you knew about me?"

In the times of despair from not being able to locate my twin, I wondered if maybe she searched for me too. Although this idea rarely crossed my mind, because Dad and I were so easy to find.

One online search would have provided results, so I just assumed our aunt kept the secret and took it to the grave. She died a couple of years ago in a boating accident.

Unfortunately, the truth was much simpler than I could have predicted.

She knew and had no desire to contact me.

“Beatrice told me when I was five. Compared to you, I didn’t live in a castle with a father who adored me.” I blink several times at the hurt and distaste lacing her tone. The strings of my soul and the familiar ache in my chest start to throb. “I repeat—what the hell are you doing here?”

I freeze on the spot as identical blue eyes gaze at me with so much hatred it burns me from the inside out and fills me with confusion and hopelessness. I take a step back, her anger somehow physically hurting me in this moment. “I wanted to see you.” I hook some errant strands of my hair behind my ear and shiver a little at the sudden coldness settling on my skin. “Since I turned fifteen and found out about you, that’s all I’ve ever wanted,” I whisper as silence falls on the room, almost defeated and heavy in nature, as our gazes clash.

A single tear slides down my cheek, and I wipe it away, refusing to cry right now when my twin has made it abundantly clear she despises me.

A reunion I’ve dreamed of for so long, which was supposed to heal an old, festering wound, instead sprinkled salt on it and intensified the pain.

Have you ever thought that maybe Amalia lives a peaceful life and doesn't need you to disturb it with the truth or old memories?

Maybe I should have trusted my father more when it came to judging people's character.

Because he predicted our reunion to a T, and compared to me, he never lived in an illusion of Amalia welcoming me with open arms.

For a second, an emotion I cannot name flashes on her face, letting me see under the harsh exterior she presents, but it's so quickly gone I think my filled-with-hope heart imagined it.

She waves her hand up and down her form. "Well, you've seen me. Now you can go back to France and stop sending private investigators after me." My eyes widen at this; she must have known about them all and hid from me. My God, how naïve have I been? "You've already brought enough attention to me by going to the Four Dark Horsemen's club."

"I'm afraid it's impossible for her to leave now," Lachlan says, rubbing his hand over his chin. "Remi claimed her in the club, and he covets her. Even if she goes to the ends of the earth, he will follow her." He winks at Amalia. "It puts your wedding at risk as well."

Wedding.

I barely restrain the hysterical laughter ready to erupt from me at this and squeeze my fists hard, allowing the nails to dig into my palms and nearly draw blood. The pain glues me to the present.

My twin is about to get married, and she didn't want me with her. And worse... I slept with a man totally obsessed with

her who now thinks he has a chance with her.

I'm like a bad-luck charm who fucked up all their lives and plans with my presence alone, and they want me to disappear.

While I can deal with all that, my twin's rejection cuts so deep I'm not sure there is a way to heal the bruise forming on my soul.

Amalia's mouth drops open, and then she huffs in exasperation, running her fingers through her hair as her eyes send daggers my way. I think if she had a real knife right now, she'd stab me to death. "Claimed her at the club?" she hisses. "As in fucked you?"

I jerk at the crude words, stepping back even farther until the back of my knees bump into the couch. I avoid her gaze as humiliation fills me by discussing such things with this Lachlan man in the room. "Yes."

Amalia, though, has no mercy for me and throws another question my way, this time with cynicism and mockery coating it as if she almost gets pleasure from it. "Did he fuck you, though, or did he think it was me?"

"You."

Silence follows my reply; only the wooden clock ticks loudly on the wall. I focus on my breath, not letting the panic overtake me, and wonder how fast all this can end so I can go back home.

Dad was right all along. Chicago is not for me, and I never should have stepped foot in this damned city that has brought me nothing but heartache.

Lachlan's assumption doesn't scare me. Once Remi learns he didn't touch the real Amalia, he will ignore me. I bite my lower lip at the painful pang in my heart.

However, Amalia is set on a path to destroy me, it seems. Her next angrily spat statement makes me drop onto the couch, struggling to breathe. “He has been stalking me for years. A completely obsessed psycho who has barely accepted no as an answer.”

Psycho? What does she mean by that?

She chuckles, although it lacks any humor. “I’ve refused all his advances and gifts. And now, when I’m about to marry the man I love, you screw it all up for me?” The last part she yells as her chest rises and falls.

Remorse sinks into every bone in my body, demanding I soothe her distress, because just the idea of hurting her brings misery to me. “I’m sorry.” I don’t know what else to say, and by how fury glides over her features, she doesn’t give a damn about my remorse.

In fact, it only fuels her anger more. I’m surprised smoke is not coming out of her ears at this point. “Well, your sorry won’t fix things, will it, Penelope?” She pinches the bridge of her nose and turns to Lachlan, who is still sipping his whiskey with an indifferent expression on his face, making it impossible to gauge his true feelings on the matter. “Let’s send her to Paris on a private plane, and I’ll handle Remi.”

Irrational jealousy washes over me at the idea of her—in all her gorgeousness—being in the same space with him. My insides demand I stop her from doing so, because he is...

What?

The air here must be poisoning my blood; my stupidity can’t even be measured in the current situation.

And what does she mean by handling him, anyway?

According to the firm lawyer, she never met with him or accepted her inheritance, so how does she have money and power to go against the mighty Four Dark Horsemen?

Lachlan must be very wealthy if he managed to keep Remi at bay all this time, and judging by how Amalia shows him respect, he's important to her.

I blink and then pay closer attention to them, my gaze darting between the two, and a question slips past my lips. "Are you her fiancé?" It would explain his protectiveness and displeasure with all this shit.

Amalia gapes at me as if I'm insane, while Lachlan lifts his splayed palm, flipping it as the ring on his finger—a simple platinum band—glistens under the light. "I'm already married and have a daughter." By how possessiveness echoes in his answer, he leaves no doubt his obsession with his wife rivals that of Remi's toward Amalia.

I wonder if beauty is the requirement to have a man want you so much, or is there some other magic quality?

Or just a lack of rational thinking.

Who would willingly marry a psycho? Not that Lachlan gives the impression of one, but any man who kidnaps people for whatever reason cannot be called sane.

Groaning inwardly at my weird mind that likes to think about the most random things during inappropriate times, I say, "Let me talk to him. After I explain, I'm sure he won't bother you again." I force out the words that taste like poison on my tongue. "Then I'll buy a ticket on the first flight, and you won't ever have to see me again."

Clenching my dress in my hands, I pray she'll reject my offer and change her mind about our reunion, letting me know

all of this was just a bad dream and we can start over.

Even though it's selfish, because she probably didn't have an easy life. Otherwise, she wouldn't hate me this much.

Amalia's laughter echoes through the space, and I swallow hard, as the sound alone breaks my heart in tiny pieces, scattering them around the spotless floor for everyone to see. "I always knew you were naïve. But I didn't expect you to be this stupid."

My head snaps up at this. Annoyance zips through my body, blanketing the hurt swirling in my being and reminding me I love my twin with everything in me.

But no one gets to mock me or, worse, treat me as a doormat or a punching bag for their anger. "If loving someone and wanting to fix my mistakes means being stupid, then by all means I am. Too bad you have no idea about such things. Maybe then you wouldn't act like such a bitch toward me." I cover my mouth in shock at what I just said, and by how Amalia blinks several times, I know I've managed to surprise even her.

Before anyone can react to my statement though, a piercing alarm blasts around us, so loud and disturbing I wince and cover my ears, while the siren intensifies with each second.

"Well, it looks like Remi found us," Lachlan says and gets up, placing the glass on the nearby table. "Stay put," he orders Amalia and then disappears behind the door, while the alarm makes it almost impossible to focus.

Finally, the alarm stops, and I exhale in relief, but then his words register in my ears, freezing me on the spot. My heart almost stops and then gallops in my chest, and I jump up.

“Remi is here.” I dart to the door, wanting to get to him and explain this big misunderstanding.

Amalia catches me by the elbow and pulls back so hard I stumble a little. “You’ve done enough.” We come face-to-face, and I’m horrified to see the cruel glint in her eyes. “Now you’ve left us no choice but to declare war.”

“War,” I repeat in confusion.

“Yes. We’ve had a decade-long, pent-up hatred toward each other, and you just gave them a reason to finally release it.”

None of this makes sense to me.

Do they belong to some kind of mafia, and they crossed one another in the past, or what? Granted, kidnapping me doesn’t paint them in the best of lights, but wealthy people do some weird-ass shit like that all the time to establish power.

There have been rumors about the Four Dark Horsemen and their various deeds, although no one has had any proof to charge them, so I just considered it all an urban legend.

Was there some merit to it, after all?

This adds to the swirling panic in my stomach, making me nauseous as the gory picture painted in my mind creates horrific prospects for me in the future.

“I don’t understand.”

“My God, how did I miss you coming here?” Amalia mutters under her breath, adding more gasoline to the fire destroying me from the inside, while my mind desperately tries to find a solution to this mess.

I just want to go home now and find solace in my father’s arms. He will find a way to fix it all. “If you’d reached out to

me and told me you didn't want to see me, I wouldn't have come." A beat passes, and I ask, "Why didn't you?"

She stills at this and releases me, going to the bar and snatching a whiskey bottle. She pours a generous amount in a glass, takes a large sip, and in this moment I truly see how miles apart from each other we are.

And it's not just because we have grown up in different circumstances. Amalia put a barrier like a brick wall between us, one that can't be broken.

"What was the point? You'd never understand the hell I lived through. After all, you were our uncle's ray of sunshine, while our aunt made it her mission to tear me apart. I lived in a never-ending nightmare while you thrived."

Her bitterness and pain—hidden behind the harsh exterior—stab my heart deep. I clench my fist, wanting to run to her and hug her close, give her comfort from the nightmares I have no idea about.

Yet I know she lived through them, because I felt her hurt from a distance, waking up from horrific pictures with hollowness in my chest, and nothing could calm me down.

They say the connection between twins is legendary, and I don't know if it's true for most people, but for me... it is.

This is one of the reasons I've never given up on finding her and showering her with the love my family has in abundance.

But I misjudged it.

Sometimes love is akin to torture to those who have never had it. It reminds them of what destiny stole from them, and they cannot look past it.

And to Amalia, I'm a living and breathing representation of what she could have had.

"We're twins," I say, and it earns me another chuckle, this time more vicious and colder than the previous one.

"Only by blood. Turns out, though, blood is not thicker than water." I jerk under her harsh tone and almost whimper in hopelessness as she leaves no doubt about her emotions. "Get a hint, Penelope. We grew up separated from each other, and our lives couldn't be more different if we'd tried. What did you expect anyway? A reunion with unicorns and rainbows?"

I open my mouth to answer her, but then gunshots reverberate through the walls, awakening fear within me as terror slowly sinks its claws into me.

"Oh my God," I whisper, running to the window, but in the darkness of night, I can't see anything, just small flashes of light accompanied by the gunshot sounds. "We need to do something." If Remi arrived all alone to claim Amalia, then it means he is outnumbered, and just the idea of him hurting makes me want to save him and protect him from any harm.

He might not want me, but for me, he'll always be special, even though it's stupid.

Amalia takes another sip and then drums her fingers on the glass while my pulse speeds. My palms become wet, sweat breaking on my back as more shots are fired. "They are going to kill each other."

If she doesn't care about Remi, she should think about Lachlan, who has a wife and child.

Shouldn't she do something about it? I'm sure a man like him doesn't operate alone.

The energy changes in the room, becoming more electrified, and I zero my focus on Amalia again as she takes another sip before dropping the glass on the desk.

A smile curves her mouth, ruthless in its nature, that almost tells a story alone of what she is capable. She comes closer to me, an unreadable expression settling on her features while her blue eyes glint in anticipation.

“Do you really want to fix it?” She swirls her finger in the air. “Atone for all the trouble you’ve brought on my family’s head?”

Ignoring the piercing hurt sliding through my veins at her considering other people family while having little regard for me, I nod, wishing to bring peace to this place. I don’t want anyone’s death on my conscience.

“Well, then I have the perfect solution.”

“What is it? I’ll do anything.”

And when she does tell me... I wish I’d never made such a promise.

Because her request is so hideous and outrageous I should run away.

Instead, I agree.

For life has punished my sister enough, and she deserves a little bit of happiness.

Maybe the time has come for me to sacrifice myself in the name of family.

The saying is correct after all.

Be careful what you wish for.

Because it has a tendency to come true.

*R*emi

Raising my hand high, I press the trigger several more times, firing bullets up in the air. I want to alert them to my presence, because my leather shoes are soundless on the perfectly cut grass surrounding Lachlan's vast property.

He acquired this three-level mansion two years ago. Apparently, it stands on an enormous, empty tract of land, according to the report I downloaded on the way here. The fucker never comes into the city, and the only reason he bothered to buy this place was to show us his power.

He might be the king of New York, but Chicago belongs to us.

We hate each other and despise each other's ways; in addition, we find each other outrageous and difficult to deal with. Lachlan and his fucking rules bore us to death as we thrive in chaos and bask in the freedom it creates.

He, on the other hand, rules his kingdom with an iron fist, and while the men loyal to him could rival him in strength and power, we all know who the leader is among them.

After all, they all are indebted to him, and this creates the kind of loyalty that lasts a lifetime.

Then again, he deals with young psychos on the brink of insanity, gathering them from all over the country and teaching them ways to channel their anger into something more useful than losing their heads.

Like killing fuckers who deserve it and, in this, facing their past. Those who fail to do so, he ends quickly.

Every monster knows the one absolute golden rule.

If the head is gone... the person will be destroyed for their desire for blood, and the pain would hurt those around them.

What cannot be controlled, cannot be cured.

Lachlan has my respect for doing the devil's work, and that's about it. I've played nice long enough with the whole Amalia thing.

Changing the clip in my gun, I aim at the marble statue representing Zeus and smirk when it shatters into thousands of little pieces, destroying the artist's work in mere seconds.

The god of thunder always has inspired hatred in me, because his values and actions remind me those are *his*.

The man who denied me life and my birthright the minute I took my first breath.

A powerful creature who plays with people's destinies as he sees fit with no regard to their feelings as long as he stays on top.

He didn't even spare his own daughter.

"Ah, what disrespect toward my art." A deep voice pulls me from the memories threatening to crush my sanity, and I look ahead to see Lachlan emerge from the mansion, his metal cane glistening in the light. "I expected better from you, Remi."

"Where is Amalia?" I have no time for whatever mind games he plans to play and decide to cut to the chase. The sooner he gives her to me, the sooner all this shit will be over.

He strolls to me slowly; the fucker measures each step as he swings the cane from side to side. "Where she belongs. With her family and fiancé."

Jealousy and possessiveness sweep over me, bloody and vicious in nature, ready to kill any man who thinks he has rights to my woman, especially the one who put a fucking ring on her finger and announced to the whole world she is his.

Amalia is mine. Mine and no one else's.

My obsession might have taken longer to show itself to me, but once awakened, it will never go away.

She shouldn't have come to Chicago if she wanted a peaceful life with a violinist.

Although our union was inevitable, right? I'd use her for my revenge sooner or later.

"Give her to me," I grit out through my teeth. We stop several feet away from each other, the energy radiating from us, my body buzzing with anticipation and danger, urging me to force Lachlan out of my way. "She's mine."

His brows rise. "Is she?" He rubs his chin with the tip of his cane. "She ran away from you." He clacks his tongue. "She must have found your charms lacking."

Counting to ten and willing all my patience in my fist, I still keep my voice calm when I say, "We had a deal a long time ago."

"We did," he agrees. "I told you that if she willingly chooses you as her man, I will not object." A beat passes. "Her answer is Lionel. You'll respect that."

I almost bark a laugh at this one. This coming from a man who held his own wife captive.

"She came to me. I claimed her. She's mine."

"I'm afraid we'll have to agree to disagree on this one, horseman." I don't miss how mockery coats his voice on the

last word. “Amalia made her choice. You’ll leave her alone. Or —”

“Or?” If the situation wasn’t so serious, I’d find it amusing that someone dares to threaten me at all and thinks he can get away with it.

In my city!

Anger and danger flash on his face, alerting me to the real monster residing in his soul, the one who is ready to sink his claws in whoever stands in his way. “You won’t like the consequences.” He sweeps his gaze over me. “I will forgive this emotional outburst and you barging onto my property. Don’t make the same mistake again, Remi. Because next time, I will kill you.” He half turns, fully expecting me to obey, but he freezes when I fire several bullets into the air.

“I won’t leave without her, Lachlan.”

No one will keep me away from Amalia anymore. I’ve played nice all these years.

Fuck that shit.

He straightens up, our gazes clashing as we face off against one another, equal determination on our features, and he nods, accepting my terms. “Very well. If it’s a war you want, it’s a war you’ll get.” With this, he snatches a gun from the back of his pants and points it at me while I do the same, removing the safety from mine.

And instantly, the energy around us changes, becoming more electrified and dangerous, intensified by the thunder echoing in the night and the lightning streaking across the sky, then followed by the darkness settling around us.

Nature prepares for the upcoming storm, rivaling the one happening between us.

I'm aware of movement from behind Lachlan. Four men walk from the bushes and join him, two on each side, one deadlier than the other, and they each have their own guns.

Of course the king doesn't travel without his faithful knights.

Arson, Callum, Madman, and Micaden.

"Five against one." I sigh dramatically, placing my hand on my chest, and shake my head in fake disappointment. "Where is your famous moral code?"

A muscle twitches in Lachlan's cheek. "When you want to kidnap one of our own, you don't get our moral code." His gaze shifts for a second behind me, and he adds, "Besides, it's five against four."

That's when I feel my best friends joining me, Santiago on my right and Octavius with Florian on my left, their guns glistening under the moonlight, and I grin.

I never doubted their choice.

We might be mad at one another, and not support our decisions, as they might seem too insane for us.

But we stand with each other no matter what, and we face every trouble together, never shying away from the consequences.

Together, we shoulder every responsibility and will protect one another forever. If you hurt or cross one of us, you might as well have done it to all of us.

"*Hola, Lachlan. Como estas?*" Santiago winks at the man who just lifts his brow at him and then zeroes his focus on everyone else. "Gentlemen, welcome to Chicago." Despite his indifferent tone, I detect notes of fury, especially when his

eyes land on Arson and Callum. “After everything I’ve done for both of you, you turn your back on me?” He exhales heavily, hissing through his teeth. “Like Brutus who betrayed Caesar.”

Callum rolls his eyes, although a ghost of a smile appears on his face. He probably finds this situation amusing.

“Cut the crap, Santiago,” Arson snaps, the wind billowing his blue hair. “Take Remi and get the fuck out of here.”

“Careful, *amigo*. You’re treading in dangerous water,” my best friend warns, brushing his finger over the trigger. “You don’t come to our city and threaten one of us without repercussions.”

“You don’t claim one of my own against their will without repercussions,” Lachlan fires right back at my friend, while the tension escalates even more, accompanied by powerful booms in the sky as more thunder shakes it.

Octavius speaks up, brushing his shoulder against mine, and I know it’s a silent apology from him for his earlier outburst. “Amalia came to Remi willingly. She is his. You, on the other hand”—he motions at Lachlan with his chin—“broke the treaty set in stone.”

Ah, right.

We don’t buy property in each other’s cities nor show our faces there without permission, and they do the same.

A cold accord that allowed us a peaceful existence that my obsession will bring to an end.

Florian steps forward, swinging the gun back and forth as he addresses Lachlan. “Let’s all calm down and think rationally, shall we?” Always the charmer in the group, he manages to keep his emotions in check and never allows rage

to dictate his actions. “If you give us Amalia, we will forget about the treaty. After all, we’ll be family.” His raised hand stops whatever Arson wants to say. “If you don’t, the war will be bloody. Even if we all kill each other today, we all have alliances. Do you want them to fight too?”

Right.

Our deaths will initiate a chain of events that will affect not only us but all the mafia houses connected to us.

Like the MacAlisters and Boston’s Deadly Trinity.

Those two don’t really need any more encouragement to fight than they already have.

Silence falls all around us, disrupted only by the owls hooting in the distance as Lachlan and I have another stare off.

I’m not going to back off, no matter what. For the first time in my life, I’m selfish and greedy for my woman to be by my side as I end the reign of the person responsible for our miseries.

Even a villain’s patience wears thin with time.

“No,” Lachlan finally replies, the statement announcing the beginning of a war. “You will not get her.”

Tension ripples through everyone. The first raindrops start to fall on us, the lightning flashing, charging us with the much-needed energy of doom and chaos. “May the stronger one win, then.”

Before anyone can say anything else though, a loud voice pierces the fog of rage enveloping us. “Stop!”

I shift my attention to Amalia running toward us, and the beast inside me sighs in relief at seeing her again. The constant

need to have her near me is new and unusual, because I've made it my mission to never need anyone in this world.

But my dark-haired beauty is the exception to this rule.

She reaches us quickly, her bare feet peeking through the grass, and my brows furrow when I notice a new dress on her that's so different in style than her previous one.

She had time to change?

"Lachlan, stop," she says, gulping for breath, and grabs his elbow. "I don't want war." He frowns at her, and she settles her gaze on me. "I will marry him." She flips her hair back. "And you will give us your word that no matter what happens, there will never be another war." A beat passes. "Our arranged marriage, so to speak, will form an alliance of sorts."

"Amalia," he utters her name, but I hear an unrecognized note, as if he is almost disappointed in her.

However, that's not what snags my attention and makes me study the woman in front of me harder than ever.

It's the lack of reaction toward her at all.

In fact, she reminds me nothing of the woman who a few hours ago came apart in my arms, screaming my name.

Her cold, sapphire eyes have so much hollowness and cruelty in them they reek of darkness and deceit, making me want to move away from her, as she has no softness or pull on me.

For a second in the club, my darkness—soaked in blood and torture—found a peaceful shore where everything inside me calmed, and the rough edges present in me were soothed.

A woman who showed me a different part of herself that I thought I'd missed before, gentle and feminine to my hard and

barbaric.

Where is that woman?

And why does everything in me rebel just at the idea of touching her now or slamming my mouth on hers, claiming her for everyone to see? So no one doubts who she belongs to, and sure as fuck, no one has a right to keep her away from me.

Certain memories start to pluck at my mind, putting different pieces together in alignment to build a puzzle in my head so my mind can finally see clearly what is really going on, answering all the questions in my head.

My father says love is a poison we all willingly subject ourselves to.

That's what we are, right? Two strangers who just met.

Asher left even earlier for France.

And then how the woman in my arms stilled before running away from me the minute I called her Amalia.

Because she wasn't Amalia, was she?

Asher Walsh never adopted an unknown baby girl in France; he adopted his niece and guarded her as the best-kept secret.

Twins.

Two heiresses to Theodore Walsh's empire and, as such, more weapons to destroy him with.

Destiny couldn't have granted me a greater gift if she tried.

"Remi." Santiago bumps me with his shoulder, pulling me back from my thoughts, and I focus on the current situation.

Or rather my future sister-in-law who expects my reply, ready to sacrifice her sister in order to end this war and save

her family.

Because Amalia Scott would never say yes to me otherwise.

Anger zips through me, my hold on the gun tightening, as I despise anyone using my woman in their twisted games and putting her in danger.

However, to win a game, you have to be smart, and showing emotions signals only stupidity.

“I accept the terms.” Satisfaction crosses her face, and she gives me a smug smile. I almost feel pleasure from crushing her when I add, “Under one condition.”

“What’s the condition?” she asks warily, exchanging a look with Lachlan.

“We get married tonight.”

Like I said, patience is a virtue that I sadly no longer possess.

Tonight, her twin will become my wife.

Her name is Penelope then indeed, but it doesn’t matter anyway.

Because the world will know her as mine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“As a little girl, I was fascinated by my full name.

Penelope after Odysseus’s wife and Psyche after Cupid’s.

In both cases, the women loved their husbands so much they didn’t mind waiting or searching for them, because they couldn’t imagine living without them or with someone else.

A love so strong it endured through all challenges, separations, and even other evil people’s interference.

Their stories amazed me.

I thought by default fate had something as beautiful and legendary in store for me as my namesakes.

Instead, fate has given me to the villain enamored with my twin.”

Penelope

Penelope

Pulling at the dress, I bite my lower lip as the vehicle drives through the narrow pathway.

Pouring rain cascades from above us, the droplets slapping on the car’s roof the only sound in the deafening silence grating on my ears in the spacious car as Amalia drives straight ahead.

How she sees anything in this darkness is beyond me.

I adjust the glasses on my nose and pull at the dress again, still hoping the damn thing will cover my thighs instead of flashing them to everyone around me.

“Stop it,” my twin hisses, making me jump, and I glance at her as she takes a harsh turn to the right that forces me to lean on the door. “He’ll never believe it’s me if you keep looking so uncomfortable in my dress!”

I wince, my soul crushing, thinking about the plan to face my future husband, Remi, who thinks he finally got the woman of his dreams.

When Amalia proposed her solution to the problem, I didn’t think. I just reacted and wanted to save these men from dying because of my stupid mistake.

Marrying one of them seemed a lesser evil, and besides, Amalia convinced me it would last only for about a month before they disclose the truth to the dark four.

“Once I marry Lionel, Remi will lose interest. He loves to win, so right now, getting me means victory to him. He won’t want me after I have a ring on my finger. They never go for the married ones.”

This information hardly made me feel better, because if a man loves to win... what will he do once he discovers he lost?

Amalia ignored my question though and just demanded for me to agree, and—the sucker for punishment I am—I did.

Maybe on some subconscious level, I feel like I owe her one for living with our aunt while our uncle loved me, so her lashing out is justified in her eyes.

And yet the closer and closer we come to the place Remi ordered to bring me to discuss something before the marriage, the more afraid I become as realization hits me from every corner.

I agreed to marry a stranger who covets my twin.

What have I done?

Not to mention I'm still not sure what they do that they have such an issue with Lachlan.

“Amalia.” I lick my lips and clasp my hands together, resisting the urge to adjust the dress once again. She told me to wear it so Remi wouldn't be suspicious, although I think I should have kept my clothes instead. At least I'd have had something familiar to calm me down in this new and uncertain world designed to drive me insane and hurt me in the most unexpected ways.

The dress is too tight and short for me, making me look like a bigger idiot than I am already, and my discomfort must be seen from miles away.

“What?” she snaps, clicking on the button and adding more heat to blast on us—not that it helps my chilled skin. Coldness sank so deep in me I don't think I'll ever get warm again.

Can you be any more dramatic, Penelope?

Disgusted with myself, I clear my throat and try to fight for reason in this madness. “My marriage to him is a mistake.” Her hands tighten on the steering wheel as anger flashes on her face, yet she stays silent, and it gives me enough hope to continue. “He will expect me to be... his wife.” Nausea hits me just imagining Remi touching me while whispering Amalia's name. I won't survive such humiliation. It might be

crazy, but I felt something toward him. Being her substitute for him will hurt me beyond belief. “How can I pretend for so long?” The initial shock from the situation has worn off, and that’s why I see reason right now, ready to bolt at any moment from this sinking ship that’s my life.

Amalia stops the car abruptly, making my lurch forward, and the seatbelt pulls me back again as the air hitches in my throat.

“You fucked him in the club. I’m sure you’ll have no problem sharing his bed.”

My shoulders sag at the reminder, hating how dirty our encounter sounds on her lips, but I have no words to dispute her statement.

Searching for the right explanation, I say, “It’s different now. And lying is wrong.” Remi’s behavior toward my twin is a giant red flag, since he doesn’t accept her no as an answer. However, coming up with this scheme in order to gain something for herself doesn’t make Amalia any better.

In fact, her complete detachment and willingness to push me in his arms stuns me.

Does she even know what compassion is, or did my aunt manage to tear away her soul, and now she is just this cruel woman who sees no problem with using the twin she dislikes as her weapon?

“Penelope,” she addresses me, and our gazes meet when she places her hand above mine. Hope blooms in my chest at the thought of her reaching out to me, only to cry out in pain when she squeezes so hard her nails dig into my skin. “I owe Lachlan and the dark protégés everything. They are my family and matter to me the most.”

I twist in her hold, trying to free myself, but she tightens her grip on me, sending prickles of hurt through me. The car's interior shrinks in size, making me wish to get the hell out of it.

“You see, my dearest twin.” Mockery coats her tone as she smirks. “You screwed up, and in our world, every screw-up has a consequence. So now you have to pay the price for it.” She tugs on my hand, and I hiss, my skin turning red while her nails leave imprints on my flesh. “If you wanted peace, then you should have stayed in Paris.” With that, she lets me go, and I rub my hand over the marks, surprised she didn't draw any blood, while my heart cries in despair at such treatment.

I guess by finding Amalia, I committed a crime the universe cannot help but punish me for.

Countless years of searching, heartache, and loneliness just for her to be a total bitch to me.

“Don't worry, Amalia. Trust me, if I knew, I would've never come to Chicago.”

Really. The family we create is the only one that matters. My birth one did nothing but hurt me.

Arguably, Asher is still my blood uncle, but he built a little world for us in Paris, hiding me from the ugliness so many people carry in their hearts.

At least now I know and can move on.

Or that's the lie I wish to believe in, to withstand this situation.

An emotion crosses her face, but she quickly masks it. “Get out. Enter the building, and Remi will greet you there. I can't come any closer, or they'll find out the truth.” She leans

over and opens the glove compartment, taking out a black umbrella and dropping it on my knees.

Wrapping my palm around it, I nod and then open the door, the humming outside calming me down a bit, and I put my heeled feet on the concrete, splashing water all around me as the rain continues to pour, instantly soaking my legs. “Will you pick me up?” She told me the groom insisted on the wedding tonight, but I’m not aware of future plans after this little meeting.

Which still confuses me. He got what he wanted, so why does he feel the need to talk to me before this marriage?

“No. From now on, you’re on your own. Congrats on the marriage.” I barely restrain the hollow laughter from spilling from my lips at her warning, as if anyone has been with me so far. I’m a lamb trying to survive around hungry wolves.

“Okay” is all I say before getting out and opening up my umbrella, shivering when the blast of wind hits me and buffets me to the side.

“And keep your mouth shut. If anyone gets hurt because of you, I promise you, Penelope, I will take my revenge on you in ways you cannot imagine.” With this, she closes the door herself and drives off, the tires screeching and echoing in the space while I look around me.

Complete darkness greets me, interrupted by the lightning flashing in the sky and brightening up my path through the alley toward a one-level building, my heels clicking loudly. I grip the umbrella tight when the wind whooshes over me so hard it almost slips through my fingers.

An owl hoots in the distance, and I jump again, hating the fear sliding through my veins at the unknown, but I plaster

indifference on my face. Amalia would not lose her shit in the current situation.

She'd probably stroll right now with all the confidence in the world.

Finally, I reach the massive metallic door and raise my fist to knock on it, when it opens automatically.

Blinking in surprise, I enter, scrunching my eyes from the light streaming above, and shake my umbrella before folding it.

“Hello!” I call, but no one greets me. However, classical music rocks off the walls, and following the sound, I descend the stairs, weird sensations pulsing all over me, as if trying to warn me about the upcoming danger, and yet they can't explain what it is. “Hello!” I call again when I reach the bottom, and darkness covers most of the space, with small lamps turned on through the room, I assume, showcasing various tables, with something glistening under them.

How strange.

Everything in me screams to run far away from here and not look back, because something bad will happen soon, and no one will be able to save me.

But what choice do I have though?

If Remi doesn't hurt me, then Amalia will.

Damned if I do and damned if I don't.

“Hello!” I yell, this time louder, and walk to one of the tables, hoping to find water. My dry throat aches as if with a thousand cat scratches.

My eyes widen when they land on a collection of knives in different forms and variation followed by another display of

small bottles, each having a description written underneath it.

Poison.

Every single one of them.

A gasp slips past my lips when my gaze shifts to the next table. This time, a gun collection opens to my view with so many bullets ready to be used against people.

“Dear God, what is this place?”

This convinces me the dark four do skirt the criminal world and deep down participate in some hurtful stuff. Why else would someone need all these weapons?

No wonder Lachlan doesn't want Amalia to be with Remi.

Is this why they ordered me to come here? So I know who I'm dealing with?

Another thought hits me.

What if they know the truth, and this is just destined to test me?

I freeze when I see a wall, what seems like hundreds of pictures scattered all over it, displaying one of the most horrible sights I've ever seen.

As each one of them shows the men on them either being chopped, shot, or tortured, with blood pooling around them, speaking about the hell they got to experience before their killer finally finished them.

Victims.

I've seen enough documentaries to know who commits such crimes, men who lose their heads and deem themselves gods on earth designed to hurt those who speak to the permanent evil polluting their mind.

Even as much as one single carelessly uttered word can trigger them into committing a hideous crime to sustain the monster eating at them from the inside.

I cover my mouth in shock, the scream stuck in my throat at the prospect of what it might mean, and my brain fights with my heart over the conclusion it's about to make as I refuse to believe it.

No, no, no.

Slowly, I step back from the table, breathing hard while internally ordering myself to not let panic overwhelm me and make me act crazy.

When life sends you into the darkness to play with demons, you stay alert at all costs; otherwise, they will claim your soul.

Another step back, and another, all while fear pulses in waves over me, nipping on my skin and whispering in my ear to race with all my strength away from here, yet I'm almost frozen in time, still gaping at the horrifying images displaying how cruel humans can be in all their glory.

Am I next?

Was that why they ordered to bring me here? We lied, so my punishment is to be chopped like a piece of meat?

The grim future awaiting me painted in my scared mind finally snaps me out of my stupor.

I spin around, ready to bolt, only to bump into a hard, muscled chest, the umbrella dropping to my feet, and my yelp reverberates through the space when a strong arm wraps around my waist, trapping me in the embrace as sadistic laughter tickles my ear.

And right in this moment, the space around me brightens as the lamps above turn on one by one, their intensity blinding me and prickling my eyes, and my vision becomes blurry, partially hiding the monster holding me right now.

“*Ma chérie*,” the husky and deep voice whispers, sending shivers down my spine, and I press the heels of my palms to my eye sockets, praying to wake up from the nightmare currently playing in my mind and refusing to recognize this man. “You’re here at last.” A beat passes. “Open your eyes.”

I shake my head in denial, too afraid to accept my reality, for it would mean I haven’t just made a mistake tonight.

I brought myself to a murderer on a silver platter!

“Please, God help me,” I whisper, chanting the only prayer my mind remembers. Dad was never big on being religious, and right now, I really hate that.

An extra prayer might have helped me with this demon!

The man clacks his tongue, his other hand lacing in my hair and fisting it hard, the hurt radiating through my scalp. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that.” He pulls at my locks, earning himself a gasp, and tilts me backward. “After all, you just willingly came to my lair, *chérie*.” My hands fall on his chest, gripping his shirt hard even though everything in me screams to push him away. “Open. Your. Eyes.”

With dread filling every facet of my soul, I do as he says, studying the environment around me, and I try not to cry out in despair at the sight chilling my blood. It makes my heart race so hard inside me I’m afraid it will end up on the floor where the monster will stomp on it.

All while laughing at me.

The place reeks of hopelessness, doom, gore, and danger, but also pain and horror as various devices in it leave nothing to the imagination.

Every piece speaks of torture awaiting anyone being unlucky enough to cross paths with this man.

Remi.

I bite my lips, not letting a sound escape me to show any weakness, as monsters always use it to their advantage.

“Good girl,” he praises me and glides his fingers over my scalp, rubbing the abused flesh while the bile in my throat rises, and I snap my head to the side, avoiding his touch.

I don’t want him to ever touch me again with these hands!

“Don’t,” I grit out through my teeth, which once again earns me laughter, and another voice several feet away speaks up, deeper and more amused, making me instantly hate the person it belongs to.

“Ella es una luchadora. Me gusta.”

My father once sent me for a whole summer to Madrid, so I speak Spanish fluently. I bristle at him liking that I’m a fighter. What a dick. No wonder he forced his own wife into a marriage.

Santiago and the rest of the dark four occupy the couches right in the middle of this... dungeon, for lack of a better word, with a small table filled with half-empty bottles and a bowl of ice.

“Well, resistance is interesting to a point,” Florian speaks up, inhaling his cigarette and then exhaling the smoke in a ring. “Then it becomes boring as fuck.” He winks at me. “Hello, darling. We haven’t had the pleasure of meeting.”

“Don’t call me darling!” I hiss at him, anger temporary replacing the panic swirling inside me with paralyzing fear.

Madness, such madness all around me, and not even an ounce of remorse shows on their faces.

Florian just laughs at my outburst, blowing me a kiss, while Santiago lifts his glass in my direction before finishing his drink in one shot.

“Ah, she talks back too. That’s way more interesting than hysterics. No tears or pleadings does spice things up around here.” He pours himself one more shot from a bottle of tequila.

Everything in me screams to say something to them, or dart to the weapon table and pick up a gun, to threaten to shoot until they let me go.

The fog of terror almost consumes me, urging me into foolishness, not caring about the consequences.

My anger helps me clear the mist in my brain though, grounding me in the present and willing me to stand brave, to face these men with my dignity intact and not let my emotions rule.

Psychopaths and their friends aren’t known for being kind or patient, so my words need to be chosen carefully in order to not dig myself a deeper hole. If my suspicions are true, then all of them support what Remi does to these poor people.

Monsters who wear beautiful masks to lure their victims, only to show their rotten natures in the dark, stripping innocent people from the gift God gave them.

Our psychology professor who was obsessed with serial killers once told us that we should never assign them any labels or expect a certain image associated with them.

For one of the cruelest facts of all is they are the people we would never think capable of such deeds.

However, he did point out that playing along with their games lets the victim stay alive longer, since they are then indulging them in their fantasies. People tend to slip up or make mistakes though, and when they do... they ruin the pleasure for the killer, which then destroys his control. And then he snaps, too lost in his head to stop himself.

“*Ma chérie.*” Remi’s hand slides to my cheek, cupping it gently, and when I twist away from the touch, he grips my chin hard, his thumb digging into me and sending pain throughout me. “Is this the way to greet your future husband and his family?”

His words remind me of my situation, although my mind thinks only about escape, because my twin can’t possibly know about all this and still want me to marry him—right?

“I’m not going to marry you,” I say, and a grin shapes his mouth, his brown eyes glinting with darkness and danger as he pushes me forward and grips my shoulders, forcing me to face his friends. They just stare at me with boredom written all over their features.

Especially Octavius, the man who just swings a chain on his finger while sipping whiskey, barely paying me any attention.

Remi sucks a breath through his teeth. “*Chérie*, you’ve already given me your word.” I fist my hands, holding myself back from punching them all for treating people like their personal toys and then playing off this scene as if the truth doesn’t matter. “After all, we have an arranged marriage.” He leans closer, his breath tickling my skin as goose bumps break

on my flesh, and he whispers, “Our union assures the safety of our families, right... Amalia?”

Despite everything, I wince at the harshly spoken name on his tongue and jerk in his hold, wishing to separate myself from him so he won't call me by her name.

I should just write **Doormat** on my forehead, so everyone knows what an idiot Penelope Walsh is.

“But before we can do that, you need to know what kind of family you're actually marrying into.”

This man is delusional if he thinks I will marry him after all this crap. He is a murderer, along with his friends. He belongs behind bars!

Rolling my lips, I keep all my thoughts to myself and desperately search for appropriate words in this situation.

Time.

I need to win time, and then someone will come to the rescue.

“I... I don't want to get married anymore. Please let me go.” My voice is barely audible while my eyes roam around the place, studying my environment and weeping inside after not seeing any emergency doors. Darkness covers anything in the distance, and the three men with hawklike stares focus their attention on me, as if silently warning me to obey their commands and wishes.

Otherwise, my life has no value to them; after all, they always get what they want.

And whoever stands in their way is destroyed.

“I won't tell anyone about... about...” I take a deep breath as Remi's hands fall to my waist, and he pulls me more firmly

against him, his hips bumping into me while I'm rigid in his arms. "I won't tell about all these men." Lying was never one of my strongest suits, but I hope they believe me. "Just let me go and—"

"Ah, *ma chérie*." He bites my neck. "I thought you'd appreciate us comparing notes before the wedding." My brows furrow at this while the other men nod. "I'm showing you my crimes. Every despicable detail. So you can share some of yours." What is he talking about? A horrible thought dances on the edge of my mind, but I push it away, refusing to acknowledge it even for a second. "Although I've heard you're even crueler than me." His hold on me tightens, sending prickles of pain through my system. "Your victims always die a slow and agonizing death, screaming until they tear their own throats."

No.

No. No. No.

Amalia... my twin... is just like them?

My heart might resist the information; however, my mind flashes proof one after another of his statement, from this whole marriage to how she threatened to punish me should anything ever happen to her family.

And with clarity, I understand why she never wanted to meet me and was so angry I slept with Remi.

They are murderers, dark souls who hide their deeds well, since those who know about their actions probably don't live long enough to tell their tale.

"We do indulge in tortures of course. It's our passion, for nothing is better in this world than the cries and suffering of

your victims begging to spare their lives while blood pours from their wounds.”

I cover my mouth, the deep desire to vomit all over the floor hitting me at the pleasure coating his statement, as if he’s just commenting about his hobbies. “See? We fit each other perfectly.” He fists my dress, resting his chin on my shoulder, while Santiago and Florian tap their tequila shots before gulping them swiftly. “Maybe that should be my wedding gift to you. A victim strapped to the pole here so you could play with him. Or them. Depending on your mood.”

Devastation and hate mix together inside my soul, blanketed by fear and horror, and I finally find the strength to rip his hand away from me as I step to the side, palming my head and trembling all over. His words playing in my mind over and over again sound more sinister and hopeless with each repetition.

“This cannot be my reality,” I whisper, closing my eyes and wishing for all this just to be a nightmare.

What are the odds of meeting a murderer and falling for him and then your twin ending up being a monster too?

I freeze when I realize I’ve spoken out loud in French, because I tend to do that when I’m nervous, and look at the men.

Their expressions don’t change as Remi walks to the table and grabs a thick rope, wrapping it around his hand.

At least they don’t speak French; otherwise, these monsters would go ballistic if they learned they have the wrong girl.

“I don’t wish to marry you,” I try again, straightening up, and despite my sister being a sadist, I still don’t want to hurt

her.

Although, at this point, I should just think about saving my own ass, because clearly Amalia is hardly a safer or better choice; she'd kill me too. "Please. I'm sure you would prefer a willing bride."

Sometimes, monsters crave consent too, because the darkness in them loves to believe someone willingly chose them.

Delusional, delusional people.

Who would willingly subject themselves to living with them?

Dark creatures might fall in love—I don't doubt that.

Their love though is so rotten and hurtful that it will inevitably slowly destroy the object of their fascination, for their nature cannot help but crave to sustain the hunger ruling their psyche.

"I prefer a bride I want, and who I want is you," he replies as I groan inwardly but then still when he adds, "However, I won't take a woman by force." I step back as he advances on me until my ass collides with the table, rattling it, and he cages me in, placing his hands on either side of me, our lips inches apart and his scent tickling my nostrils. "If you do not wish to marry me, you don't have to, *ma chérie*."

Relief instantly washes over me, heavy breath escaping me, although confusion swirls inside my mind. Why did he organize all this then, if he's still giving me an out? And why confess to his crimes?

Then again, Amalia would hardly run to the cops, considering her own likes. What a mess!

I need to jump on a plane at the nearest opportunity and never step foot in Chicago again. This thought unsettles me though, because what about all these people?

Maybe I should focus on my own survival rather than trying to bring justice to this corrupted world ruled by deceiving and powerful creatures.

“Great. I’ll go then.” He doesn’t budge a muscle. “I do not wish to marry you.”

He leans closer, his breath fanning my cheek as thousands of tickling sensations wash over me while his powerful form presses harder into me, contrasting with my soft curves. “Is that your final choice?” His lips graze my shoulder as he trails them upward to my neck, where he nips gently, and I push at him, wanting to free myself, but it’s useless. “Keep in mind your refusal would mean war. I will kill every single one of them for deceiving me. And all of them are married—some have kids.”

I freeze, closing my eyes and refusing to listen to him or let it get into my head.

These men are psychotic. Why should I care about their families?

However, being a child who lost her parents young, I do not wish such pain on anyone, let alone innocent kids who probably have no idea what their parents do.

“Then there are our families. Everyone will become collateral damage.” He sucks on my flesh, and I gasp, fisting his shirt again, hating his every touch and word. They speak to my compassionate nature, and it should be dead and in hell.

Otherwise, how can you survive it?

He whispers right into my ear, “So, so many deaths. Are you ready for them all?” I bite on my lip, stilling the cry of despair threatening to erupt from my throat. He slaps the table with his hands, and I jerk, still keeping my eyes shut. “Answer me. What is it going to be, *ma chérie*? Marriage... or a massacre?”

The question hangs in the air between us. He gives me the out I so wish for, and yet his conditions are horrendous.

This man and his friends would—for a fact—start a massacre and make me indirectly responsible for all the mess they create.

My father once told me that compassion is one of our greatest virtues and we should display it whenever we have a chance, because life is not kind to everyone. According to him, being selfish is not a sin, but we should be mindful of how our actions impact those around us and then do our best to minimize damage.

I never much agreed with whatever he said, because it sounded as if we should mold our lives to others’ wishes, which in turn would inspire resentment.

Right now, two personalities fight within me—the selfish part that tells me to pick myself and let all these psychos deal with one another, since this was never about me anyway.

Sooner or later, Remi would have declared a war over my twin.

But the other part... the one that was raised by a father who spent his days helping those less fortunate, the father who took me in when he didn’t have to, the father who always preached about doing the right thing, as it’s the only thing making us stand out among the cruelty in this world...

That part begs me to do as he says and subject myself to a marriage, even a temporary one, with a monster.

Massacre would mean so many people becoming collateral damage in their twisted game, and in this marriage... I'd be the only one who suffers.

But wouldn't I suffer either way?

Massacre would subject me to eternal agony.

My heart breaks into thousands of pieces that nothing will ever be able to glue together while I snap my eyes open, and they collide with the dark, calculative ones that await my reply.

I squeeze my hands so hard I feel a stab of pain wash over me, although it's incomparable to the one shaking my soul right now.

I finally say the word tasting akin to venom on my tongue, as it seals my fate. "Marriage."

For a brief, betraying moment, I think disappointment flashes on his face as if he expected another answer from me all together, but then a smile curves his lips, and he tips my chin up, revulsion rushing over me at the touch. "Ah, *chérie*. Your compassion is admirable, although it's stupid. When you have a chance, always pick yourself, because people are ungrateful bastards who won't hesitate to use you in their agenda and in this feed you to the wolves." He steps back from me, and I take a deep breath, having a little room to gulp oxygen without him looming above me. "We're having a wedding, guys."

The assholes cheer, raising their glasses, and Remi winks at them before zeroing his stare on me. "Now, you just have to

meet someone very important to me, and then we can prepare for the event tonight.”

What?

The floor slowly changes color, the transparent glass showcasing a view of a small tropical oasis below—thick trees with the longest green leaves, stones in different shapes, and an endless amount of space covered with grass.

Oh my God! Despite my situation, this is utterly beautiful and so memorizing it’s like we stepped into a different dimension, and an entire new world exists underneath us.

For a second, everything else is invisible, whispering for one to loosen his guard and admire the natural beauty. But that’s a short-lived security blanket as a green creature slides through the trees, wrapping itself around branches, its eyes flashing a little, and its tongue peeking out. It halts its movements, and I freaking swear it must hear us, because it seems as if it’s looking up.

A snake.

No, not just a snake.

A freaking python that must be three meters long!

I press harder into the table, like this action can actually save me, because even with the glass protecting me from it, it has this menacing aura about it that warns me to stay away or it will have me for dinner.

“What is this?” I ask, horror filling my voice.

“Anguis.” At my confused stare, he elaborates, “That’s her name. Meet my pet, *ma chérie*. She is, after all, a member of the family.”

Momentarily forgetting about everything else, I swallow hard and repeat after him, “A pet.” Did he just say he has a pet *python*?

“Correct. Found her during one of our massacres. The original owner didn’t treat her well, so I took her.” He’s so nonchalant about the whole thing I want to scream. All things considered though, this should actually be the least of my worries.

“That is not a pet!” I yell, pointing at the thing and hating its attention on me. “It’s a dangerous creature who will eat you alive at the first opportunity.” I glance back at the snake to see it hiss and then slink away to the bushes, hiding from our view.

“Awww, I think you’ve hurt my python’s feelings.”

“You’re... you’re....” I don’t know what to call him anymore, because I used all my bad words already, so I settle on, “I regret the moment I ever met you.”

Instantly, the energy changes, and I see Santiago get up, already racing toward us while a mask settles on Remi’s face as rage crosses his features and he grabs my arms. His fingers sink so deep into me I wince, but he doesn’t let go. “That’s too bad, *chérie*. Because you’re stuck with me for life.” Harshness and steel lace his tone, making it so deadly fear blazes in the pit of my stomach.

I must have said something really bad, but for the life of me, I don’t know what it is.

“You’re hurting me,” I whisper, twisting my arm, but he doesn’t care.

I think he even wants to punish me for my regrets, acting like I’ve committed an unforgivable crime. While he’s the one

who kills people!

Remi pulls me toward him, and I shake my head, avoiding his kiss, and his lips land on my cheek. “You best remember that before you do anything stupid.” He pushes me away, throwing me on Santiago, who catches me easily and doesn’t let my face smack the floor. “The driver is here. Put her in the car.”

“*Amigo—*”

“I’m fine. Just take her the fuck away.” And then his gaze flickers to my injured arm that I keep on rubbing. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Too confused by his apology that’s so different to his earlier burst of rage, I open my mouth to tell him that he can shove these apologies down his throat, when Santiago orders me, “Let’s go, Amalia.”

The name once again reminds me how I ended up in this mess, and as I follow one of the dark four, I wonder about one thing.

Why do we make wish lists?

Because from my point of view...

My wishes and dreams screwed me over.

Or it’s what I believe I should think.

When in truth, the only thought bothering me right now is Remi’s reaction and something akin to hurt ringing in his statement. The stupid and desperate part of me craves to soothe it, because I hate bringing him pain.

Only, these are just my illusions.

Villains don’t need compassion.

I just have to focus on this game and play it to a T to survive among them, and maybe, just maybe, I'll get out of it.

Even if it means breaking my heart over and over again.

*R*emi

I regret the moment I ever met you.

Her angrily spat statement rings in my ear as anger fuels my blood, while the desire to break something becomes too strong, my fists itching for a fight, but there's no time for one.

The clock is ticking, and the longer I stall, the longer I'm away from my revenge, which is unacceptable.

No one and nothing will stand in my way to execute my vengeance, not even pain and tears in my future bride's eyes.

Regret.

That's the feeling I'm familiar with the most in this life, since everyone always regretted me.

Why would Penelope be an exception to this rule?

Her compassionate nature and self-sacrifice didn't surprise me, even though it disappointed me. But it also awed me, and not many things do, because she is ready to do anything to protect her sister.

I can admire loyalty, but I can never expect it from her in return.

It doesn't matter.

She will be my wife tonight.

And then her loyalty will be mine by default.

For going against me would mean death to those she loves.

After all, I'm a monster.

And we do not have hearts.

CHAPTER NINE

“I wish it was me he wants.

He is a monster.

*Yet I still cannot help but want to be on the receiving end of his
obsession.*

An ugly truth I won’t ever share with anyone.

*For how can a sane woman covet a man who can be so
cruel?”*

Penelope

***F**rom Amalia’s Dairies...*

*Blood drips from my fingers as I write my last
entry in this diary. Tears stream down my cheeks, washing
away any goodness left in my heart. Soon, the journal that has
witnessed my hopes and dreams during the past few months
will burn brightly, turning the paper holding my naïve
thoughts into ashes.*

*Because that Amalia died today, and this entry is her
eulogy, a funeral of sorts that allows me to say goodbye to the
fool I’ve been.*

*Three days ago, I finally traveled to France to meet
Penelope. The doctors gave me the “all clear” months ago,*

but Lachlan kept me in New York for a while until things settled down and to allow a few people to teach me the things I missed during my captivity.

He even hired a special etiquette lady who showed me how to behave at different gatherings and how to appropriately choose my clothes while advising me to think about my future profession. He created a fake diploma for school but still made me study all the subjects hard. My tutor was very optimistic about me going to a university in a year.

I tried to tell Lachlan he didn't have to do it, because the folder he brought me about Penelope proved that my sister has a good life, not to mention my inheritance. By the unfamiliar love and longing in my chest, I knew my twin wanted to see me too, so I planned to stay in France by her side.

My heart soared at the idea of her happiness and that our uncle was a good man who cherished the gift he got from his brother, compared to how Beatrice treated me.

Lachlan didn't listen, but as I discovered, he rarely listens to anyone, and his word around here is considered absolute. He created all these resources for me and told me I could come back whenever I wanted.

However, I was stubborn and insisted on the trip right away, and all the way to France, my mind painted various images of the reunion and how I'd finally know what love feels like. My fingers gently traced her face on the pictures, studying every little expression and finding so many similarities between her and me.

Her dark locks were long, almost reaching her waist, and she wore thick glasses, which made it difficult to gauge her reactions.

Arson, who traveled with me, took me to the mansion; we stopped by the iron gate, and to my surprise, the guard let us in, thinking we had arrived for the wedding.

We entered, and my eyes drank in the beauty around me as the warm spring air caressed our skin. A vast garden was filled with exotic flowers and exquisite marble statues.

A lot of people wearing long dresses and suits arrived, and Arson told me to be careful, but I ignored him. Frantically, I looked through the people to find my twin, and then I spotted her by a huge arch.

I froze in place, watching how she threw her head back and laughed at something Uncle Asher said.

The happiness and peacefulness radiating from her slammed into me, and I swayed to the side, thankfully bumping into Arson who caught me.

Everything around me spoke about luxury, society, and perfect images, which they displayed to the world.

A life where people knew no sorrow and lived in their special circle in which outsiders didn't belong.

Penelope in her yellow dress among her family and friends seemed almost ethereal, representing everything good with no touch of evil in sight.

Her warm aura almost encouraged you to step closer toward her and discover if the warmth continued to slip into you the longer you stayed in her company.

An angel descended from heaven who knows no grief and probably believed in fairy tales because everyone doted on her.

In all the scenarios playing in my head about our reunion, I never imagined I'd feel so inadequate next to her. Like

something dirty that shouldn't smear her goodness with darkness and all the horrendous deeds done to me in the past.

I cupped my cheek, tracing my fingers over the few scars still marring my skin. They would soon be fixed with surgery. Would she even accept me as her twin, or need one?

My whole life, I dreamed about the moment I'd be with her, because then it would mean an end to my nightmare. A twin who was supposed to be my person, someone who would stand by me through anything.

But even if she dreamed about me... did she expect me to be a burden who might never function normally?

Even right now, acid fills my mouth as various male voices grate on my nerves, and my hand itches to grab a sharp object and shut them up as they merge with the other whispers in my ears, reminding me of the past.

How long will it be till I do something so bad she won't be able to look at me? Or worse... would I crash her world, and the people she loves might turn their back on her, because her twin is a psycho unable to control her urges?

They say a human heart can hold only so much suffering before it cracks. I would never be able to survive her rejection or the pain of knowing I made her an outcast.

During my stay at the hospital and mansion, I thought I got better. I functioned normally around all the other dark protégés, although it wasn't that difficult, since they always gave me space and never spoke with me much anyway.

As one of them told me, they all had their own demons.

Demons have a tendency to appear, though, and hurt the innocent people who least deserve it.

I could never allow my past or demons to destroy the one thing I value most: my north star that kept me alive all these years.

My twin, the other half of my soul... the better half who probably doesn't even need me or know of my existence. Based on the reports, Asher legally adopted her and even added another name to hers. As if he wanted to erase me from her life completely.

Familiar burning anger replaced my sorrow, sliding through my veins and filling me with the fury that begged me to set this place aflame and demand vengeance for the injustice done to me.

That was why I backed away, and Arson didn't say a word as we got back inside the car and drove to the airport, while I fisted my hands and kept my urges at bay until we could get to New York.

Far, far away from my twin.

I barely remember the plane ride or how I sat numbly in my seat, ignoring the food and drinks while counting down the minutes to my arrival.

Because something dark inside me snapped, something holding me back from acting on the growing instincts inside me, and the monster living in my soul wanted blood.

Maybe that was my destiny all along.

Once we were in New York, I asked Arson to leave me at the park, and to my astonishment he didn't object.

When I realized no one tailed me, I sat on the bench and counted an indefinite amount of numbers, still resisting the call while clenching the knife I managed to slip into my pocket on the plane to my chest.

My heart cracked, filling with pain and agony that knew no mercy and wanted to hurt someone in return.

Mostly the monster who tarnished my flesh so much I could no longer function properly in society and build a relationship with my twin.

The longer I rocked on the bench to weird glances from people passing by, the angrier I became at all the people who failed me in this life.

Uncle Asher, who didn't fight for me and let Beatrice have me.

Beatrice, for selling me to the highest bidder so she could have her peace.

Jonathan, who raped me over and over again and then put me in an asylum.

Elijah.

All the people who worked there, abusing my flesh time and time again, treating me like dirt under their nails and not a human being.

Internal screams filled my head, bringing back all the flashbacks of Jonathan's looming image with his sadistic whispers.

"Smile, Amalia. Smile for me and enjoy what I'm doing."

The knife in my hand dug deep into my palm, drawing blood, but I barely comprehended the sting or my movements.

Only pain kept me grounded in the present and didn't allow me to fall down the rabbit hole called insanity.

And then it happened.

A male voice in the present spoke to me, sounding almost similar to Jonathan in tone while the strong smell of alcohol filled the air. "Hey, baby girl. Are you all right?" My eyes focused on his scuffed boots as he took a step closer, and I breathed heavily, his nearness serving as gasoline to the fire ready to blow at any second. "A girl like you should smile. Not cry in the park. Smile," he said and then patted me on the shoulder, and that was my breaking point.

Where my life would become divided by before and after.

Slowly lifting my gaze to him, I saw Jonathan close to me and felt like a helpless little girl who couldn't do anything.

Only it wasn't true, right?

Gripping my knife by the handle, I aimed it at him, screaming, "Shut up!" And he backed away, his eyes widening while another arm managed to block me, knocking the knife out of my hand before it could pierce the man's stomach.

The man shook his head and started running away, while I blinked in rage several times, making Jonathan's image disappear.

Then I shifted my attention to the one who came to the rescue and didn't let me kill an innocent man.

Lachlan.

He took out his handkerchief, wrapped it around my bleeding hand while Arson stood several feet away, studying me intently.

Fear and disappointment replaced my earlier rage, hating myself for succumbing to the darkness instead of building a new life.

And now the man who gave me a chance to live free witnessed my horrible nature.

However, his words snapped me out of my stupor and confused me, although relief filled every pore. “You will learn to control it, Amalia. Darkness has its beauty, but it should always have boundaries. For what has no boundaries always brings the most devastating consequences.”

Swallowing past the bile forming in my throat, I asked, “What if I can’t?”

His face stayed unreadable, but the energy swirling around us transformed to heavy and scary, sending coldness through me, as his voice held a note of warning when he replied, “If you lose your head and start killing the innocent, you won’t live long enough to indulge in your cravings.”

I understood then what he meant and strangely welcomed it.

I’d be considered a monster to society regardless, but at least no innocent people would suffer from my madness.

That’s why this is my last entry.

Because instead of growing stronger from my experiences and learning to live with my past and finding happiness... I can’t resist the darkness. My desire to inflict similar torture and agony on those who deserve it is too tempting to ever ignore.

People experience worse shit than I did and still manage to find peace and love, because love trumps all in their heart. That’s how it should be. The past shouldn’t dictate the present and future.

However, that’s not my story, and I will learn to accept it.

Once upon a time, I wished to find my twin.

Now?

I pray we won't ever cross paths.

*Because an angel doesn't belong in hell among the
monsters.*

*P*enelope

“Just a little bit more color here, and we’ll be done,” the makeup artist, Erica, says as she applies one more layer of red lipstick to my lips before stepping back and grinning at me. “You’re gorgeous.” She puts the lipstick back in her bag and searches for something else in it. “Here.” She slips an eye pencil into my small purse. “This will do wonders for your sapphire eyes.” She wiggles her nose in distaste at the glasses lying on the table. They forced me to wear contact lenses for the first time in my life, and I even got a whole-ass tutorial on it too. “And I’d lose these particular glasses, because that frame wouldn’t look flattering on anyone.”

“Kelly said you are not planning a honeymoon anytime soon. I can make a note for her to order a broad selection of new frames so you can try them on,” Aly says, making me look at her as she types something on her tablet. “They should arrive along with your clothes.”

“My clothes?”

She nods, smiling at me. “Remi requested a new wardrobe for you, so we’ve been preparing that. It should be ready in a couple of days, but we’ve already stocked the closet with a few of the latest designer pieces.” I hear a few more clicks

from the tablet. “They are a bit different from your usual style, but Remi assured us you’d like them.”

Internally screaming in frustration, and outwardly staying calm, I reply, “Oh. Thank you.”

What else is there to say?

Santiago’s assistant has been glued to my side ever since I arrived at this hotel room, ready to prepare for the charade, or what everyone else calls a wedding.

Apparently, the Four Dark Horsemen objected to me getting ready at Lachlan’s mansion, so they chose neutral territory in some fancy-ass hotel and sent their own assistants, who brought an entire army just so they could work their magic on me.

Countless people pampered me while I sipped coffee and tried to understand how the hell I ended up preparing to marry a monster, and my twin hates me so much it seeps from her every breath.

My heart contracts painfully in my chest. I quickly wipe away my tears before they ruin the makeup Erica worked so hard to apply. The girl ended up the chattiest of them all, telling me stories about various brides who requested the weirdest makeup, but she didn’t mind as long as the pay was good.

Is this why she accepted this job, too? Because it wasn’t hard to guess from the misery etched on my features and my complete lack of interest in everything related to the wedding how this wasn’t something I wanted.

Aly and Kelly, Remi’s assistants, have tried their best to lift my mood by bringing delicious desserts and asking me questions about France. They must know their bosses really

well though, because not once have they asked anything personal.

Or questioned a wedding they had to arrange in exactly three hours.

At least I got a short nap, which only added to my headache. All I wanted to do was run to France and find solace in my father's arms.

I never should have touched the past.

Now, I owe it to my sister to marry a man so obsessed with her he doesn't care she's engaged to someone else.

Even in my worst nightmare, I couldn't have imagined such a scenario.

Exhaling heavily, I focus on my reflection in the mirror. I'm thankful to Erica that, despite seeing a mesmerizing creature staring back at me, I still find traces of me in my reflection.

Although right now, I'm almost Amalia's carbon copy sans the hair.

My heavy locks are bound together in a loose braid thrown over my shoulder. Several small crystal pins are strategically placed to create a shimmering reflection, bringing attention to the thickness and glistening color of my hair.

Artistically applied mascara and black eyeliner point out the vividness of my ocean-blue eyes filled with despair and frozen tears. The soft blush on the pale skin of my cheeks gives me a healthier look than I deserve.

Red color adds fullness to my lips, bringing attention to the shape of my mouth. The combined effect makes me think of the Greek goddesses displayed in various galleries.

Tempting and alluring, yet soft and gentle.

Why then does it feel like all I have to do is tap my finger on the mirror, and the image will shatter, showing my true reflection?

This is all an illusion designed to fool a monster into thinking he got his coveted prey so he'd stop hunting. And only God knows what he will do once the deception comes to light.

But I guess my twin gives zero fucks about that, and why should she?

I'm just a nuisance she wants to get rid of.

"This is one long-ass train," Erica mutters before adjusting it so my legs won't tangle in the chiffon. "Kind of an old-fashioned touch to the dress."

"Erica," Aly hisses, shooting me a scared glance. "Remi picked this dress himself. He loves the design." She glares at her friend, who shrugs, not that I blame her.

When they brought the dress an hour ago, my jaw dropped so much it still freaking aches.

The white ballgown with a turtleneck and long, lace sleeves flows over my form, hugging it tightly and showing every curve and dip on my body. The countless buttons hold it all together. The silky, monarch train gives it a wider scope and pulls heavily on my waist. To finish the ensemble, my blue velvet stilettos peek from under the long skirt.

Remi decided they should be my something blue, so they found me designer shoes with a pretty crystal on the tip.

The dress indeed seems like it's from another century, but ironically, it's exactly what I would have chosen for myself

had all this been real.

I'd be the happiest bride on the planet if the man of my dreams who awakened my body to all its pleasures knew me so well that he picked this dress for me.

Except he picked it for my twin.

And the dashing knight from the club who grew up with princes ended up being a villain.

Deep down, though, part of me, the one I'm not proud of, could have tried to understand why he does what he does and how horrific this is.

However, I can never get over who he truly wants, and just the idea of him touching me again while thinking of Amalia crushes my soul in more ways than one.

Glancing at the wooden clock, which announces a new hour's arrival, I muster up a smile. "Well, if I'm ready, then I'm going to sit down." I need to stop staring at myself, or the waterfalls are going to start at the injustice of it all.

"What about the veil?" Erica asks, picking up a black box from the nearby chair. "It's very pretty and would look amazing with this dress."

A veil.

Doesn't it signify the purity and happiness of the bride?

To wear a veil would be spitting on this belief and tradition; besides, a veil won't save this marriage from a disastrous ending once the villain finds out he wedded the ugly duckling instead of the swan.

I shake my head.

“And *another one* objects to a veil. What’s wrong with all their brides?” Erica mutters under her breath, and my brows furrow.

Another one?

Before I can dwell on this, a knock followed by heels clicking on the floor cause my gaze to shift to a newcomer.

I blink in surprise; I’ve never seen a more stunning woman in my life, and considering I’ve been surrounded by beauty my whole life, it says a lot.

Even Amalia doesn’t hold a candle to her, as bad as that sounds.

She has long black hair falling down her back in heavy waves. The bright light reflects through the wavy, silky strands that reach her bottom.

Her blue eyes remind me of the clear sky on a summer day and stand out like two diamonds against her tan skin. The woolen dress wraps around her body, showing the generous curves of her breasts, butt, and the slight bump of her stomach, which is almost invisible to a passerby. My best friend gave birth to a healthy baby boy a year ago, so I know how a pregnancy bump in the early stages looks.

The dress ends slightly above her knees, revealing her long legs, and as she steps closer, her scent, roses mixed with orchids and lavender, washes over me.

Ah, the famous heiress to the throne and the Four Dark Horsemen’s princess they all love to dote on. Even Octavius’s sister, Estella, doesn’t get as much attention as this girl does.

Maybe because she’s eleven years younger than them, so they all feel protective of her, especially her older brother Santiago.

While she has the combined features of her father and mother, her overall appearance screams Rebecca Cortez. They all have the same warm gaze that invites you to tell them your secrets, because you will not face judgment from them.

Only acceptance and love.

Is this why they love the dark four? No way in hell they don't know about their deeds, and besides, they invited her to the wedding.

So she must know it's all one big ploy where a man forces a woman to marry him, or otherwise, people will die.

She stares at me for a second before widening her plump lips in a smile. "Jimena Cortez," she introduces herself, and then to my astonishment, she hugs me so tight she squeezes the air out of me. "Welcome to the family!"

Since this woman has nothing to do with the actions of my fiancé, I reply, "Thanks." And I pat her back awkwardly for several moments before leaning back. "I'm not a willing participant in this wedding, though."

Acting as my twin is one thing, but pretending like I'm on board with this spectacle is quite another.

Besides, Amalia has been refusing his advances for years now, so her resistance to marry Remi must be common knowledge at this point.

A gasp echoes in the room, and I groan inwardly at Erica and Aly's shocked expressions; I'd forgotten about their presence.

"I've heard that one before," another soft voice speaks up, and I see a woman enter. Softer and curvier than Jimena, and while she can't be called beautiful, she has a magnetic presence about her.

Her brown hair falls down her spine and contrasts with the beige pencil dress that emphasizes her unusual eyes.

One is green and the other is dark brown. They shine with curiosity as she studies me from head to toe before grinning. “Briseis.” The name doesn’t ring a bell, and she must read the confusion on my face, because she adds, “Santiago’s wife.”

Oh.

From Erica’s chat earlier, I know they got married a little over two months ago. Was this enough time for her to get used to the idea and accept this prison of a life? To the point of attending a wedding where another bride is forced to marry one of their own?

Sometimes, understanding women is beyond my comprehension.

“We need to be at the church in an hour,” Aly announces and grabs Erica by her elbow. “We’ll wait for you in the hallway. The car should be here in twenty minutes.” They both nod at us, and Jimena gives them a wave.

The minute the door shuts behind them, Briseis sighs and throws her coat on the chair. “The judgment on your face speaks volumes.”

“Just to clarify. She judges *you*,” Jimena says, flipping open the box and running her fingers over the veil. “You’re the one who married my *loco* brother.”

Briseis blinks and then narrows her eyes, placing her hands on her hips. “While you stood there as a witness.” A beat passes. “You also sang his praises.”

Jimena takes out the veil and looks at Briseis as if she has lost her mind. “Well, of course. My brother is perfect. Which doesn’t change the fact that he’s crazy.” She winks at me and

then comes close, raising the thing above my head, and I sway back, avoiding it.

“Don’t,” I warn, despising the idea of putting it on. Some traditions are sacred, and I won’t smear them with all these hideous lies. “I won’t wear it.”

She must read determination on my face and warning in my voice, because she sighs in resignation and places the veil back in the box. “You’ll have to wear it in church, though. Remi insisted. He’s very traditional.”

I bite my lower lip to not scream at her that I don’t really give a damn what Remi insists on; besides, what man has so many freaking rules for his wedding anyway?

Briseis speaks up, her tone inviting me to share things I shouldn’t. “You don’t have to control yourself. We aren’t on anyone’s side.”

A chuckle slips past my lips, although it lacks any humor, and I welcome the anger filling every bone in my body. “And yet I don’t hear you offering me any help.”

“Have you met the Four Dark Horsemen? If they set their sights on something, it’s impossible to escape it,” she replies, and I just blink at her. “Wherever you run... they will find you.” She brushes her thumb over the sapphire ring on her finger, glistening under the light. “But if you really want to run away, then we’ll help you.”

Jimena frowns, reaching out for a chocolate on the table, and asks, “We will?”

“Yes.”

“May I remind you that Remi is my brother’s best friend and practically family to us.”

“So?”

“So where is your loyalty, woman?” Jimena pops the chocolate in her mouth. “As a bride, you can’t go against the brotherhood.”

Briseis scratches her head while my gaze darts between them, listening to their dialogue, even though I don’t understand anything. “I can’t?”

“Nope. Your loyalty is always to the dark four.”

“Says who?”

Jimena picks up another chocolate, munching on it before replying, “The rules they wrote at eighteen.”

“They have rules?”

“*Si.*”

Briseis ponders this information for several moments and then exhales. “I can’t help her, then.”

“Nope.”

“This sucks, Jimena!”

“Hey! You’re the one who married one of them.” Jimena shifts her attention to the strawberries. “I’m just passing along the message.”

“He blackmailed me into marriage!”

Do these men have no idea what consent means? Why do they feel the need to force women into marrying them? To my knowledge, they’ve topped the most-wanted charts for bachelors.

I groan inwardly at the fury brewing in me at the idea of anyone snagging Remi and order myself to get it together.

My contradicting emotions will give me whiplash someday.

Exhaling a heavy breath, I internally order myself to calm down; my hysterics won't bring anything good. "I'll marry him. I appreciate the offer, though." I send a smile Briseis's way, even though she backpedaled really quick.

And what are these rules anyway?

If Remi thinks I'll be following their warped rules, he has another think coming.

The minute Amalia gets married, I'm calling the cops on all these psychos.

I still glare at Jimena. "A little compassion wouldn't kill you."

She shrugs. "I'm a Cortez. We aren't known for being compassionate."

My brows furrow at how proudly she utters this statement, and I open my mouth to comment, when the distinct sound of a phone ringing echoes in the space.

Briseis fishes out her phone from her coat pocket and says, "It's Santiago." With this, she walks from the room, closing the door behind her softly.

Silence falls over us, and I smooth the nonexistent lines on my dress when Jimena asks me, "What's your name?"

I still at this. "Amalia." Remi didn't even bother telling them the name of his fiancée.

She gets up, picking up a tissue and wiping her hands. "I've met Amalia a few times through the years. You can fool my sister-in-law, who is still new to our circle, but not me." I

gasp in surprise at this, and she steps closer to me, crossing her arms. “So I’m going to ask again. *Cuál es tu nombre?*”

Panic washes over me as my mind hectically searches for suitable words to cover up the lie and not get myself into more trouble. If Briseis is this loyal to them despite being forced to marry Santiago, his sister for sure will run to Remi to tell him the truth. “I have no idea what you mean.”

Jimena cocks her head to the side, studying me for several seconds. “Your eyes. They are different. Hers are cold, and quite frankly, your sister is one vicious bitch to those around her.” I blink at this, wanting to defend my twin, but at the same time, I agree with her. “Yours are warm and soft.”

Tearing my gaze away from her, I spin around to face the mirror and play with my hair, wanting to ignore her all together, when our gazes meet in the reflection.

“I know about the invitation my mother got you, *Penelope.*”

I almost cry in desperation, because she already knows the truth; she just wants my admission.

The internal battle goes on for just a second before my resolve breaks and my headache intensifies. “Please don’t tell them,” I whisper, not being able to lie anymore under her drilling stare. “He won’t leave her alone, and I need to fix this.”

A pin slips from my hair and falls to the side, dangling on a lock, and with trembling hands, I try to adjust it but fail.

Jimena gently pulls at my elbow until we are standing in front of each other. She puts her fingers on the pin, detaching it easily. “They’ve been best friends forever.” She tugs on the end before stepping closer to me and sliding it in my hair. “I

grew up with them all. In fact, Remi is as much my brother as Santiago.” Although love seeps from her words, I feel no jealousy toward the bond she clearly shares with Remi. She readjusts the pin and then taps me on the nose. “Men like them do not wait years to claim the women they want, and they don’t let them get engaged to someone else.” Butterflies erupt in my stomach at this admission, giving hope to the scared parts inside me, which, despite all the secrets, crave to know Remi wants me and not my twin.

Foolish, foolish girl.

And yet wearing this wedding dress, about to marry the vigilante, I long to believe it has to do with me.

Jimena is not done, though. “But most importantly, nothing and no one can stop them from staking their claim once they set their sights on their women.” Although she says these words to me, it almost feels as if she has repeated them enough in her life to fully believe them, and for some reason, pain flashes in her eyes before she covers it up with a smile.

Why would this hurt her?

She rubs her belly, leaving no doubt she’s pregnant, and clears her throat, grinning again, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

The baby daddy must be an asshole.

She doesn’t let me dwell on it, though. “According to rumors, Remi wanted Amalia for years. And yet it took him less than twenty-four hours to claim you and declare war.”

I hold her stare for a moment before I study my reflection in the mirror once again. The gorgeous dress and every thoughtful detail on it speak about the groom’s desire for it to be perfect.

Is there really a chance that he fell for me and not my twin? And there might be some secrets hidden behind his so-called obsession with my twin?

Does it change anything, though?

He is still a monster who kills people; his justifications for the crimes doesn't erase them or pardon him.

However, this knowledge gives me hope on moving forward, making this charade more bearable, and I can pretend all of this is for me while temporarily existing in his insane world.

Besides, a monster might spare me once he knows he never wanted my twin and set me free without declaring war on Amalia's family.

I gulp for breath, inhaling as much oxygen as possible, because this newfound hope fills me with happiness and determination to talk to him before the wedding.

What if we can stop this madness all together?

Briseis comes back inside. "We have to go. They're waiting for us at the church."

Yes.

I will give Remi one last chance to prove to me I'm not an idiot who looks at this world through rose-colored glasses.

And based on his answer, he will either heal my heart or crush it beyond repair.

God help me.

emi

R “What is the meaning of all this, boys?” Father Paul asks, glancing around the church in confusion when it fills with men—each deadlier than the next—who drop onto various pews.

Lachlan has refused to attend, since he never steps foot in churches, but his loyal knights sure showed up to make sure my bride goes through with the wedding.

“We’ll have a wedding here.” Santiago checks his wristwatch. “In twenty minutes to be exact.”

Father Paul gapes at him in shock, then blinks before his brows furrow and his gaze darts around us four. “Who is getting married?”

“Me,” I reply, and at this, he relaxes, a smile shaping his mouth and happiness flashing in his eyes.

He even sighs, poor guy.

“Ah, Remi. Is this the bride’s family?” Since silence greets his question, and instead Arson checks the magazine in his gun, the smile starts to slowly slip away, and concern along with dread replace it. “Another forced bride?”

“We just call them brides. The whole forced thing gives us a bad reputation,” Florian responds, earning a chuckle from Santiago, and Octavius flips open the tequila bottle, ready to take a greedy pull.

Needless to say, we don’t follow the holy rules in the church or have much respect for the institution.

And we get away with all this shit, because Father Paul happens to be the best friend of Uncle Lucian, Santiago’s father, and the Cortez family funds this church and all its charity organizations.

Father Paul glares at me and shakes his head. “Remi, how could you?”

Laughter threatens to escape me at this; the idea of anyone thinking I have a higher moral ground than those of my friends is truly hilarious.

Through the years, I’ve earned the reputation of a hotheaded asshole who acts first and thinks later, because I’m always single-handedly focused on whatever I want to achieve.

Consequences. Society’s opinions. Feelings.

They don’t matter to me unless they stand in the way of my goal. Then I either deal with them or destroy them, depending on my mood.

When people have nothing and rely only on the resources nature has granted them, they learn quickly to grab opportunities with both hands. This is one of the reasons most of us are grateful whenever someone shows kindness to us and treats us as equals to them without judging us by what we have.

My gratitude toward my friends’ parents is absolute. They never treated me as less than them or encouraged their kids to stay away from me, the gardener’s son.

Hence why I show more respect to those around me through the years than my friends do, and I control my temper, doing my best not to get into useless fights unless someone crossed a line I couldn’t look past.

I didn’t want Santiago’s or Florian’s parents to be disappointed in me and regret giving me a chance when most people from such dynasties wouldn’t.

Somehow, though, everyone also has come to the conclusion that I'm the gentleman in the group for having a romantic soul, because I believed in finding one's true love. Watching Santiago's parents' marriage inspired awe.

Although, that romantic boy died at the age of eighteen when the truth about my past came to light and turned the world on its axis. Everything I said after that was an act so no one would know. Even my best friends who supported me through it all.

Sometimes our past and our secrets are so hideous and painful we prefer to keep them locked away in our dark and tortured souls, for sharing them might bring disaster to those around us.

Father Paul clears his throat, and I come back to the conversation at hand. "Life is full of unexpected surprises, Father." I wink at him. "I decided to keep the tradition going."

His lips thin, and he crosses his arms, his mantle flapping backward at the action while he raises his chin stubbornly at me. "I will not consecrate this wedding." A beat passes, and he adds, "It's wrong."

Arson chuckles behind us and whistles. "Looks like even the priest himself won't bless this union. Still have a chance to change your mind, Remi."

Without turning to him, I give him the middle finger, which earns me more laughter. I grit my teeth with annoyance at Father Paul's refusal. "I didn't see you object much when Santiago dragged Briseis here two months ago."

His cheeks heat up, and he opens and closes his mouth several times as if searching for the right words to object. I raise my brow, urging him on. "Well? Or do you require a

generous donation to the church in order for you to do it?
Name the price, Father, and you shall receive it.”

This is a total dick move on my part, and Uncle Lucian will probably kick my ass once he learns about it, but I cannot be nice right now.

The beast inside me demands I stake my claim on Penelope so no one will ever think they have a right to take her away from me.

She’s mine, and in a way, our whole lives have brought us to this moment to join us in a holy union in order to get our mutual payback.

Even if she has no idea what really happened all those years ago.

“Remi, son, you know that—”

“Don’t call me son.”

The tension around us rises. The hunter in me snaps awake and is ready to sink his claws in the priest so he will learn his place and a lesson: to never go against my wishes.

Only one man on earth has called me son, and I despise him so much the word alone stirs anger in me as his despicable voice echoes in my ear.

“You’re my son, Remi. So fucking clean up my mess and stop crying unless you want me to crack your skull.”

“You will consecrate this wedding. Willing or not, Father Paul.”

The priest tugs on his collar, fear crossing his face, and he even steps back from me as if not sure what I might do to him next.

Santiago places his hand on my shoulder, and with steel coating his voice as he warns me to rein in my desires, says, “*Déjame a mí.*” And grins at the priest with his signature cruel and sadistic smile that makes Father Paul shift uncomfortably and then frown. “*Hablemos, Padre.*” With this, he grips the priest’s elbow gently and pulls him to the side, already whispering something in his ear, which only makes the priest frown more.

We are truly complete assholes who thrive in darkness, welcoming the pain and suffering of those around us as it numbs the voices in our head, lullabying us toward darkness and calling our names every single day.

The need for nicotine hits me hard as the voices inside me become louder and louder, not letting me rest. I spin around on my heel, strolling outside, and inhale a breath of fresh air before grabbing a cigarette and putting it in my mouth.

A lighter flicks next to me, the orange and blue of the flame mingling together, and I see Florian holding it for me with Octavius right behind him.

Lighting up, I take a greedy pull and then exhale smoke all around us as Florian flips the lighter through his fingers.

“A little harsh, Remi,” Octavius says, swinging the tequila bottle in his hand. “Father Paul is family,” says the man who despises the church and everything associated with it. He can’t even be in one without alcohol involved; otherwise, flashbacks come to him in various ways, one more horrific than the other.

He was the one who walked in on the church killer during one of his massacres. That’s why Isla wants him. That killer wiped away her entire family more than ten years ago.

I bet she wouldn't stalk Octavius if she knew the whole truth though.

"I will send him a basket sometime."

"I heard he loves cheese," Florian leans his back against the wall. "What's going on, Remi?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"For the past year, you've spent more time in New York than in Chicago. Displayed patience you are simply incapable of on most days." Octavius takes a large sip and then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "But tonight—"

"You went off the rails and almost got us all killed with your hot temper." Santiago's voice makes us swing our heads toward him as he emerges from the church and hooks his thumbs in his pants. "We could understand it after you claimed her. And yet..."

"The fact that you slept with her twin didn't stop you from pursuing this marriage," says Florian as he pushes from the wall, coming closer to me until all of them form a familiar circle around me. "Not an ounce of guilt either."

I straighten up, already knowing where this conversation is leading, because I put them in an impossible situation with all this fucked-up shit.

The Four Dark Horsemen never lie to one another, but lying is what I've done almost my whole life.

Dread fills me, spilling more poison in my system, in the anticipation of their reaction that might change the balance of our friendship.

My best friend, the only one who never judges my obsession and gives me lectures that fall on deaf ears anyway,

holds my stare and says, “*Nosotros necesitamos saber.*”

“What do you need to know?”

“Is she a bride we guard and protect as our own because she is an extension of the Four Dark Horsemen?” Florian asks, rolling up the sleeves on his shirt. “Or is she an interchangeable weapon you plan to use in order to destroy a man who stole your birthright?”

The cigarette pauses midway to my mouth as his question registers in my mind.

And then their behavior for the last few years becomes crystal-clear.

How Santiago always promised me his support during various business deals.

Octavius never argued with me about my obsession or constant trips to New York, despite trying his best to form peace with Lachlan and his allies.

Florian traveled with me frequently, always saving my ass from mistakes and keeping an eye on me, which I found hilarious, because Amalia never drove me so crazy I’d forget about common sense.

“You know,” I state the obvious, and laughter ripples between them. Amusement flashes on their faces as they look at me in bewilderment.

Santiago shrugs. “*Por supuesto.*”

“For how long?”

Florian steals the bottle from Octavius and replies before taking a drink, “Since we were eighteen.”

“I found out at eighteen.” And immediately formed a plan but not before wanting to see for myself the man responsible for all the lies surrounding my existence.

“Well, yeah. And we followed you when you went to...” Octavius trails off, the word hovering on everyone’s minds, but no one dares to utter it in my presence.

Because despite the blood relation to the demon who destroyed my life, I will never consider him worthy of the title he could have had.

He chose greed and the prestige of society over me.

“We thought you wanted to kill him.” Florian rubs his chin. “By that point, we all had enough skills thanks to this pretty face.” He grips Santiago’s chin, blowing him a kiss, and then laughs when our friend shoves him away, tequila spilling on the ground.

“Fuck you, Florian,” he mutters, albeit without any heat in it. “You just watched, though, and then walked away.”

“We figured you chose a different way to avenge yourself,” Octavius says, and I drop the cigarette butt, twisting my shoe on it, my mind still reeling from all this information. “Once this shit with Amalia started and we connected her name to Walsh’s, it was easy to guess your plan.”

I withheld the truth in order to protect them, because all their families ran various business ventures with him. My friends’ loyalties would have never allowed them to continue doing it, and I needed *him* to be successful and *his* empire to thrive.

So I could crush it and watch him suffer, because the society he so loves would shy away from him.

Sometimes, psychological torture is more agonizing than any physical wound.

And yet... I don't see judgment on their faces, or scorn, even though we made a vow.

The wind whooshes around us, and owls hoot loudly in the otherwise silent night as we stand outside Octavius's house.

He flips the knife between his fingers before he settles the tip on his splayed palm, slicing it and drawing blood as we all watch him in confusion. "Let's make a deal and seal it." He extends his knife to Florian, who picks it up and cuts his hand too without question.

"What deal?"

"There will never be lies within the dark four. No matter how horrific our actions are, we will never deceive one another. Honesty above anything else."

We all exchange looks, knowing full well how Octavius values these qualities, and sometimes I wonder what will happen with people who betray him.

Or if a woman does. I think among us all, he'll be the only one who won't show his woman mercy if she commits an unforgivable act in his eyes.

"Bueno," Santiago agrees, snatching the knife from Florian and slicing his hand before I do the same.

We all place our splayed palms above Octavius's, letting our blood mingle together as we forever seal a vow none of us intends to break.

Because if we ever do... our unity will shatter, and that's the one thing keeping us all alive.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

“Our pasts are sacred to us. We don’t decide how the monsters among us deal with their wounds,” Octavius says, letting me know he doesn’t consider this a breach of our vow.

“Besides, you knew we knew,” Santiago speaks up, our gazes clashing, as my best friend with his eyes alone allows me to see the truth in his words. “You just preferred to pretend we didn’t.”

Hiding from Santiago is like hiding from the mirror, because he knows me better than anyone.

And I would have never endangered the dark four in my twisted games, if I didn’t suspect on some subconscious level they were aware of my plan all along.

Our bond holds us together wherever we go, never truly leaving us alone to the despair and agony polluting our minds.

Florian claps his hands together, spilling even more tequila, so Octavius snatches the bottle away from him. “Our question remains. Who is Penelope to us? A bride? Or a weapon?”

Penelope speaks to the monster inside me, soothing his rage in ways I never thought possible as he craves to possess her every thought so she won’t even think about escaping me.

The world becomes almost bearable in her presence, despite the injustice it has shown me time and time again. She’s an addiction I can get used to so easily; I crave her to the point of insanity.

A true madness that serves as a hammer to the chains keeping my control in check, threatening to wipe all sane thoughts from my head and to act like a true barbarian by claiming her for everyone to see.

An obsession and desire destined to be my downfall. It makes me forget about my revenge. I despise using her in my plan, because I want to harm, or even kill, any male nearby who even thinks about hurting her.

An angel who grew up in love, doted on by her father, a princess who dreamed about a dashing prince, and instead she got a villain with no morals who resides in darkness that will envelop her in it too. Pleasure and possessiveness wash over me as I enjoy the idea of her losing some of her purity, so she will belong in hell with me, instead of trying to run back to heaven.

Because her sweet and compassionate soul can't stand the gore and pain I inflict on anyone I see fit.

Yet it won't stop me from chaining her to me, watching the hope slowly die within her, until she finally accepts her inevitable fate.

My siren who, with her face and voice alone, has the power to destroy me in ways my enemies haven't managed. Love and lust in my family always have the deadliest consequences.

The need to put my ring on her finger and the desire to cover her body in my marks of ownership consume me, so then everyone will know she is taken. This obsession fills me and shakes the foundation of everything I've tried to build and achieve all these years.

Through the years, I fucked many women. Never bothered to remember their names as I've never slept with anyone more than once. Anything permanent has represented danger to me, and having a woman when I built an empire was a distraction I didn't need. I enjoyed sex as much as the next guy, but the

minute the deed was done, the woman was of no interest to me.

My emotions didn't get involved at all.

With Penelope, everything is different.

I want to worship her naked body on my satin sheets for hours, making her addicted to the pleasure only I can provide, so I won't be alone in this maddening need.

I want to learn every inch of her body before fucking her so hard she won't remember anything but me.

I snarl at the idea of using her as a weapon now, giving my enemies an opportunity to take something so valuable from me and use it to their advantage.

In fact, the monster in me wants to hide her far away from my revenge so *he* never gets to see her, let alone talk to her.

“Remi.” Santiago's voice brings me back to present. “*Cual es tu respuesta?*”

My answer can only be, “Bride.” Thunder echoes in the sky, almost sealing the word and commitment it means for my horsemen, who nod at it.

The black car pulling up by the church with a loud screech interrupts us; its headlights shine along the entire sidewalk.

Quickly, Briseis gets out, adjusting her dress, and Santiago crooks his finger at her. “*Querida, ven aquí.*” She rolls her eyes at his command but rushes to him, laughing when he wraps his arm around her and hugs her close, already slamming his mouth on hers.

Jimena hops out next, her heels clicking on the concrete as she saunters toward me and exclaims, “You're getting married.” She reaches me quickly and circles my neck, raising

on her tiptoes and kissing me on the cheek. “*Felicidades, hermano!*”

I trap her nose between my fingers and squeeze it lightly. “*Gracias, princesa,*” I tell her before embracing her in a hug, because we might not be blood-related, but this girl was my little sister the minute her parents brought her home.

A pure, innocent, loving girl who brightened up our worlds with her smiles alone and soothed the pain from the nightmare her family encountered that shook us all.

The Four Dark Horsemen’s princess who we all love and protect fiercely. So if anyone dares to hurt her, he will have to answer not only to Santiago, but to all of us.

For a brief second, I catch Florian’s possessive gaze lingering on her, drinking in her beauty, and he squeezes his fist. However, the expression is quickly gone and replaced with his usual indifference bordering on coldness as he smiles. “Careful, Remi. Your bride might get jealous.”

Jimena freezes in my arms and then steps back, her cheeks heating up as she murmurs, “I’m sorry.” Then she lifts her chin and smirks at Florian, her blue orbs flashing dangerously while her stubborn Cortez nature pushes forward, clearly blanketing her pain. “Manwhores, such as you, are incapable of forming long-lasting friendships with the opposite sex, so they fail to understand such bonds. Thankfully, his future wife is not one of them.”

“I have enough friends, princess. I prefer to fuck the opposite sex.”

She huffs in disgust. “You’re such an asshole.”

He shrugs. “At least I’m honest.”

All thoughts fly from my mind, though, when I focus my attention on the vision in white emerging from the car in all her magnificent glory.

I've never seen a more beautiful woman than her, a seductive creature who will attract every male unfortunate enough to meet her.

Because the beast roaring inside me will sink his claws into them and won't rest until he tastes blood, killing the competition, so my beauty never even contemplates dreaming of another.

I'm a possessive bastard who has never had anything valuable of his own, just Penelope. I will guard her and fight anyone for her.

She watches me warily before taking a deep breath and walking toward me. I notice she doesn't have a veil on, and only then I see a box in her hands. "I won't wear a veil." She bites her lower lip and quickly adds, "Can I talk to you, please?"

My brows rise at such a request. Hope shines in her eyes along with deep need as her fingers dig into the box.

"I'll take that and wait for you in the bride's room." Briseis almost rips the box from Penelope, while Santiago says, "We'll be in the church. Don't take long, *amigo*."

In record time, we are left standing alone as my bride exhales and inhales heavily, gathering the courage to voice whatever bothers her, and I resist the urge to capture her plump lips in a heated kiss, wiping all her worries away.

My dick hardens just thinking how she came in my club, squeezing me so tight and holding on to me for dear life.

“Why do you want to marry me now?” She finally raises her sapphire orbs to me, drilling her stare at me. “You chased after me for years. What changed tonight?” Her voice hitches, and anticipation crosses her face while she awaits my reply.

Ah, my beautiful little liar.

She holds on to the hope that goodness resides somewhere deep within me, even though she was in my dungeon and knows what I’m capable of. And as such, she craves to hear that I want her and not her fucking twin who’s been nothing but a pain in the ass for me.

Two conflicting emotions fight for dominance inside me.

Protectiveness, as it pushes me to soothe all her worries and tell her that I know about the switch and crave only her.

And hatred, because in order to execute my plan and end this war, we have to marry right now in front of everyone with her still believing I don’t know her true identity.

Tonight, after all this is over, I will soothe her pain with my mouth and tongue, but right now, I have no choice but to be cruel.

I catch her chin between my fingers and tip her head back; we stare at one another for several seconds, before I say, “You came to me and gave me your body.” Her hope transforms into despair and hurt, darkening her eyes before she slaps away my hand and steps back. “You became mine, so I saw no point in waiting.”

“I see,” she whispers, swallowing hard and then shaking her head.

She straightens up and sends daggers my way. Pride fills my chest at her covering her weakness and facing all her troubles with her chin held high. “I hate you, Remi,” she

hisses at me as she gathers her skirt and rushes to the church,
not sparing me another glance.

A grin stretches my mouth as I follow her, welcoming the
joy gliding through me because my victory is close.

There is such a thin line between love, obsession, and
hate...

And Penelope will cross them all.

I'm doomed. This lustful fire she inspires in me is driving
me insane; I'll drag her right along with me so we can both
burn together.

Although once she discovers my true identity and whose
blood runs through my veins, she might truly hate me.

But it will be too late by then.

Because she will be chained to me forever.

CHAPTER TEN

“With this ring, I thee...”

Penelope

Penelope

A raspy breath escapes me as the organ music fills the church, vibrating the walls around me. I jerk a little, goose bumps breaking on my skin.

Thunder echoes in the night; lightning flashes are visible through the window. The clouds gather, ready to pour rain and soak the people hastily running inside.

Even nature itself weeps with me, it seems, sharing my grief on the day that should be the happiest of my life, where love and hope should fill my heart.

Instead, it is a nightmare that no amount of pinching myself can wake me from or change the horrendous reality eating at my soul, bite by agonizing bite, leaving painful, festering wounds behind.

Again, thunder shakes the sky, mixing with the music, adding to the fear slowly spreading through my veins, creating

gory pictures in my head—one more terrifying than the next—about the outcomes my decision may bring to the future.

My trembling fingers wrap around the short veil laying on the vanity, and I roll my lips to trap the scream ready to emerge from my throat at the sight.

The delicate thing is made of the thinnest material and designed especially for me. The expensive tulle can easily rip if I'm not careful.

Nothing but the best for the monsters roaming the streets of Chicago.

Men who are destined to bring apocalypses to this earth if they so choose. God knows they have all the necessary resources and weapons.

My hands tighten on the veil, my fingers pressing into the material, and for a second, I contemplate throwing it down and stomping on it till it turns black, showing my true colors. It might as well be cuffs imprisoning me in a rusty cell with all the routes of escape closed to me.

Just imagining the act brings satisfaction to my bruised soul. I'm ready to drop it and crush it under my blue shoes so the groom can choke at the sight.

However, at the last minute, I stop, because every action has consequences in my world from now on.

Which is why, even though I swore to everyone I wouldn't, I lift the veil, place it on my head, and attach the clips into my hair. I try to ignore the bite-like nips from the metal pins pulling so harshly at my dark locks, and I wonder if I'll have any hair left at the end of this nightmare.

Although it doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things, does it?

Because once Remi learns the truth about this decision, he might kill me. Or, if I'm lucky, just leave me.

Everything inside me rebels against this idea, because the dark four don't strike me as those who would kill an innocent.

But then I'm a naïve idiot, so my judgment can't be trusted anymore.

Three knocks sound on the wooden door before someone opens it gently. Briseis's soft voice mutes the sounds grating on my nerves.

Just because her marriage worked out, for whatever reason, doesn't mean she should support these assholes in their methods. Their rules be damned!

A single tear streams down my cheek and falls on my white skirt. "We have to go now. Everyone's waiting." A pause and then she adds, "I'm really sorry that it has come to this."

Glancing in her direction, I notice guilt etching her features, her eyes filled with sorrow and compassion, making them enormous in her face.

Her words hardly matter.

After all, she belongs to *their* family, and as such, forever stays on their side, no matter the horrible deeds they participate in.

An enemy is not an evil person or a villain seeking to feast on the vulnerable flesh. An enemy is someone who doesn't mind sacrificing you or anyone else as long as it serves their selfish desires.

Swallowing past the bile in my throat and grabbing the nearby orchid bouquet, I rise from the vanity chair, which

scrapes against the wooden floor. Briseis winces a little as she notices that my makeup got ruined by my tears.

She takes out a handkerchief from her purse and steps toward me. “I can fix it for you before—”

My splayed palm stops whatever she wants to say, and without answering her, I shake my head and adjust the veil over my face, partially hiding me from the prying gazes ready to find all my exposed spots in order to strike at me where it would hurt the most.

Although at this point, they should give up; they’ve already delivered so many blows to my fragile heart it bleeds with invisible blood, letting my life slowly fade away.

I regret ever stepping foot in this city that has brought me nothing but sorrows.

Giving myself one last glance, I hold my chin high and walk out of the room, my heels clicking on the marble as Briseis trails after me.

She tries to shuffle my long train and help me carry some of the weight, since the layers upon layers of chiffon is heavy, but I snap over my shoulder, “Don’t touch me.” She leads me toward the slaughter.

How could she even for a second think I would welcome her help or allow her to speed up the process just so she can breathe easier and not worry about the consequences that will inevitably follow?

She freezes, her hands fisting, and annoyance flashes on her face, hinting at the character she failed to show me so far.

Straightening up, she says, “Very well,” and passes me by, walking toward the wide-open double doors leading to the

church's altar. The music becomes louder and louder with each step we take.

She motions with her hand inside before entering, and I reach the opening in two short strides, pausing at the entrance.

Gulping for breath, I press the bouquet to my chest and will all my self-control and bravery to push to the surface, praying to everything that's holy to send some kind of intervention and stop this madness—even though, deep in my soul, I know no one will come to save me.

“No matter what happens, I’ll always be there. You just have to say the word, and I’ll slay all the dragons.”

Even my father, though, can't save me this time around. Doing as my heart wishes would mean subjecting him and all the people I love to so much suffering and death I'd never be able to forgive myself.

The Four Dark Horsemen won't hesitate to hurt who I love the most.

My loved ones gave me everything; sacrificing my life and future in exchange for their peace shouldn't be such a hardship.

Or that's the lie I tell myself while bitterness fills my mouth, because I will never forgive Amalia for this.

I will always love her, she is my twin, but she broke our bond the minute she pushed me to marry a killer and put Lachlan and his friends above me.

With a swift intake of air into my shrinking lungs, my legs move forward of their own accord.

The music stops for a second as the organist blinks at my presence, and then he resumes playing, his hands flawless on

the keys while my eyes roam around the space and widen at the scene before me.

The church they chose for the ceremony has expensive stained glass in the windows, and the ceiling is an oval shape, which almost gives a fairy-tale-like experience, creating a magical atmosphere. I'm surprised angels haven't descended from heaven to sing in tune with the music.

The golden marble glistens under the candlelight; the expensive artwork displayed on the walls matches the exquisite design.

Despite its beauty that can mesmerize a person into a constant state of awe, the place reeks of doom and hopelessness that nothing can hide.

Especially not the masks of deceit its occupants wear.

Slowly, I start to walk down the aisle while the men, who'd been sitting in the pews, stand, their hawklike stares trained on me, and I can physically feel their gazes sliding down my form, expecting rebellion from me at any moment.

Or maybe hoping?

Because despite supporting Remi, who decided to claim me, even his family would have preferred we not unite in this union that brings more trouble than good.

Raising my chin high, I speed up, passing them all by quickly, but tense at the familiar sound of guns' safeties clicking, and the men on either side of me aim their weapons at each other; the only thing keeping them from killing each other is me, standing in the middle.

And if I just tip the scale to anyone's side, they won't hesitate to shoot.

All while Remi, waiting at the end of the aisle, watches me intently. His brown eyes scan me up and down. Such deep satisfaction fills them as his mouth curves into a sinister smile, showing his true nature that even his dark three-piece suit can't hide.

A barbarian who wrecked my world.

Breathing heavily, I walk faster, noticing the swirling energy around us that indicates everyone's patience is wearing thin.

I focus my attention back on the groom.

Three more steps and I stand in front of the priest who flips the Holy Bible open, smiling at me, although his hands tremble slightly as he sweeps his gaze over the room.

Bitter laughter sticks in my throat. A priest should protect all those in need within the church's walls; instead, he adds to the misery by participating in their horrendous crimes.

"Dearly beloved—" But a deep, husky voice laced with something wicked and forbidden cuts him off, sending shivers down my spine.

"No need for all this, Father Paul." A gasp slips past my lips when Remi's arm wraps around my waist, my chest bumping against his as he lifts the veil, my nails itching to claw the smug smile from his handsome face. "Move to the most important part. Ask the bride the question, and it will be enough. After all"—he leans closer, and his masculine scent mixed with tobacco washes over me—"we have an audience watching us. It's impolite to keep them waiting."

"I hate you," I say under my breath, loud enough for his ears only, while Father Paul nods, clearing his throat but not before glancing toward me as if trying to reassure me.

At this rate, the priest is more a worker of the devil rather than God, considering he allows forced marriages to happen left and fucking right.

The groom chuckles and puts his hand on my cheek; shivers of disgust surge through me as his thumb brushes over my skin, wiping away a tear. “Hate is such a strong word, darling.” Warning coats his next words while his thumb presses into my chin, sending prickles of pain. “Use it wisely in my company.” He leans even closer, his breath fanning my cheek as my heart beats so wildly in my chest I’m afraid it might jump out and the monster will take it hostage, not letting me breathe without his permission. “Besides, you wouldn’t want your family’s blood to smear the walls of this church, would you?” An odd note laces his voice, almost amusement at the word “family,” and by how he drills his stare into me, I know he’s gauging my reaction.

Gazing at him right now, I wonder if Odysseus himself decided to grace earth with his presence and chose me as his willing victim only because he refused to doom himself to eternal loneliness.

Only, to believe that would be a mistake on my part.

For he belongs to a dark brotherhood that brings an apocalypse to whoever they see fit as long as it serves their amusement and wishes, ignoring anyone and anything else.

Men for whom compassion, mercy, and sanity do not exist, because they thrive in the chaos they create.

“Do you, Penelope Psyche Walsh, take Remi Odysseus Reyes as your husband and promise to love him till death do you part?”

With love sneaking into every cracked part of my heart toward my family and vicious hate tasting like poison on my tongue toward the groom, I reply, “I do.”

With these two simple words, I forever seal my fate.

Because the sinner who now owns me will never let me go.

And the most ironic part of it all?

I’m not the one he truly wanted.

But then the name the priest uttered registers in my mind, and I gasp in shock, realization hitting me like a ton of bricks.

Penelope.

He knows.

*R*emi

Penelope belongs to me now.

Just uttering the word in my head brings so much satisfaction, and pleasure fills my bones when my hold on her tightens, and she gasps into my mouth, her breasts pressing into my chest while her fingers curl on my shirt, her body already swaying toward me because it knows its master.

My beautiful wife can deny it all she wants, but we both know there will be no escape from this marriage, and I will use any weapon necessary to forever bind her to me. I grew up in poverty and rose to the top by sheer will and hard work, and I will never fucking ever give up what I claimed, because I’ve never owned anything in my life.

My wife, though?

Every hair on her body, every breath she takes, every emotion she experiences belong to me now.

And I'll be fucking damned if anyone dares to hurt her or take her away.

Not to mention, this marriage is truly a gift from destiny granted to me for all the hardships I've endured; it fixes not just one but two problems.

Our union will put an end to the ongoing war with Lachlan and his protégés, finally freeing us from this decade-long conflict that shouldn't have been on the table to begin with.

Just the idea I could really want Amalia is laughable. On the surface, she shares a face with my wife; however, they couldn't be more different.

Amalia is cold and sophisticated, always stretching her mouth in fake smiles even toward her fiancé, who must be clueless about her cruel tendencies.

If the monster inside me considered her mine, I would have never waited years to claim her.

My woman, though?

She's warm like sunshine blazing over the ocean. Her eyes wear her emotions for everyone to see, the warmth that tempts the beast and promises it eternal peace from the pain and suffering it endured for such a long time.

Physical attraction wouldn't have been enough to make me tie the knot.

This union will start another war though.

A war I intend to win, no matter the cost.

After all...

Everything in this world has a price.

And the man who shattered my life and soul has to pay for
all his sins, otherwise I'll never rest.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“If you fear or despise a monster... never ask him or her about their past.

For their past might make you feel compassionate toward their pain.

As goodness and evil lay in the eye of the beholder.”

Remi

*C*hicago, Illinois

Remi, 5 years old

My stomach growls loudly in the night, and I still my groan, rolling to the side and hoping the thick blanket will muffle the sounds and not alert my parents, who are arguing several feet away from me.

They won't like me being awake instead of following their order to fall asleep on the mattress they got just for me. Although it stinks so much I have to keep myself from barfing and the springs dig into my skin, at least it's more comfortable than the floor.

Dad found it in the trash the other day and proclaimed it his gift for my fifth birthday, crushing my dream of a full meal. I haven't had solid food in my mouth for days now. Father

wasted all his money on alcohol and Mom's favorite chocolate.

The sucking motion in my stomach continues, sending prickles of pain through me, and I roll my lips together, not letting myself weep.

"You're drunk again!" Mom's scream pierces over the TV blasting throughout the room as she shakes the empty whiskey bottle in her hand. "An entire bottle in one day!" She stands in front of the TV, blocking Father's view of the football game. He waves his hand, dismissing her while turning the volume up. "You have a job interview tomorrow! How could you, Roland?" she asks with despair lacing her tone.

She might not like him working, because she becomes jealous very quickly, which results in Dad always finding new jobs across the country, but she loves his gifts.

That's why she always pushes him to start a new job until he stops going due to her hysterics.

Compared to most parents that I see on the playground, they are very weird and never dote on me as they should.

Instead, they dote on each other while I'm an afterthought on most days.

"I'll be sober by morning. Now move. I'm not fucking missing the touchdown because of your nagging ass."

Mom doesn't listen, though, and drops the bottle on the carpeted floor where it lands softly. She points her finger at my father. "You reek of whiskey. This is not some shitty job. We're talking about one for Lucian Cortez!" She shouts the last part, and he only chuckles, finding her words funny while I frown in confusion.

The name sounds very familiar. My parents went out one night, and I stayed all alone, having nothing better to do than read. Wasn't he the one gracing the newspaper that spoke about his accomplishments and how he is considered one of the wealthiest men in the world? Plus, he has a very famous wife and a son my age.

Why would such a man consider hiring my father who mostly did low, odd jobs and got fired frequently, which speaks about his less than stellar ethic and character?

Although it explains why my mom is so agitated. I bet she is already counting the money she could spend on herself for a new dress.

We can starve for days, because they survive on alcohol alone during their party days, but God forbid if my mother has to stop shopping.

Once, my teacher said my parents love to live beyond their means. I didn't understand what it meant, but I guess it might mean when your needs are more important than those of a child.

Or at least that's the reality I'm living right now.

"So? Like I give a fuck about his social status. If he doesn't hire me, then fuck him," Father says, the volume increasing as Mom's mouth drops open in shock before anger crosses her face and she fists her hands.

Clenching my blanket tighter, I close my eyes and physically feel how an invisible knife sinks into my heart, wounding it in the process, because nothing will stop the upcoming storm now.

Still though, I address my prayers to God who, according to the priests in our church, watches above us and always

listens to our pleas.

Please, God. Make her shut up. Please. Let Mom go to sleep so Father can watch his game in peace.

However, all my hopes shatter when silence falls over the small motel room. “What did you do, bitch?” Dad hisses, and I glance there swiftly, seeing how Mom turned off the TV, and Dad stands up, ready to resume his game. “I’m warning you, Judith.”

“We need this job. Do you understand?” She motions around her. “We have no money left, and he offers us heaven on earth. Living arrangements, a good salary. Even Easter and Christmas bonuses. And you might blow it, because you couldn’t resist fucking drinking!”

Mom controls her addictions, indulging in alcohol when something amazing happens—or at least that’s what she says.

“It’s amazing; we need to drink and celebrate”—her favorite phrase.

My father, though, finds any excuse to drink, and he stays addicted to it for days.

Dad moves toward the small cabinet, grabbing another bottle of whiskey, and flicks it open, gulping greedily, all while keeping his gaze trained on Mom who almost shakes with fury. The AC buzzing through the room billows her blonde curls back, bringing attention to her wrinkled face, despite her young age, and several fading bruises marring her cheeks.

She lost her makeup kit during our last move, so she has nothing to hide it with. Not that people in this cheap area care one way or the other that she regularly gets beaten up.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and lifts his chin toward her. “Maybe the time has come for you to pull

some weight around here.”

“What?” she exclaims warily, and he nods, sipping from the bottle and groaning in pleasure before elaborating.

“All these years, I’ve struggled, working odd jobs to pay the bills because your fucking mistake made us outcasts. I’m damned tired of providing for you and the little fucker who loves to whine.” Pain slices through my soul, the sharp claws wrapping around my heart and leaving bleeding wounds, reminding me once again that my father has only one regret in this life.

Me.

Burrowing deeper into the blanket, pressing my nose into the dirty cloth that had seen better days, I listen to their conversation. Although, by this point, his regular speeches are imprinted in my brain. He repeats the same thing over and over again. Sentences that confuse me to no end. Because no matter how much I twist them in my head, they never make any sense to me.

A hollow laugh slips past Mom’s lips, and she places her hand on her hip, hissing at him. “You had no problem taking their money when they offered him to us, but now it’s my fault? You know damned well we had no choice!” She lowers her voice a little, as if remembering for the first time their little son is in the room with them, and I quickly close my eyes, feeling her stare on me before she continues. “We could have lived comfortably, but you gambled all our money away!”

“You willingly accepted their bastard so they could hide their shame. They should have paid more. We’re stuck with this bastard for life, while they enjoy theirs to the max. I heard she got engaged. She sure didn’t mourn him for long.”

“We signed the contract. You need to stop talking about it, unless you want someone overhearing and sending cops on us. Legally, he’s your son!”

What other way is there to be a son?

Father takes another large sip, the whiskey sloshing in his bottle, and then places it back in the cabinet with a loud thud. “Right. Little good it does me. He’s like a useless pet that cannot provide anything but needs to be fed daily. Useless piece of shit, a weight on my back.” He spits on the floor. “And that stupid photographic memory of his is nothing but trouble too.”

Tears form in my eyes at him once again sending jabs my way. According to some, my memory is a gift, but Father despises that I remember every small detail about everyone and learn everything quickly. I just have to read something, and it’s forever imprinted in my brain. I even memorized the dictionary, because interesting words and their meaning inspired curiosity in me.

I’ve read a lot, especially on the nights they leave me alone or they are really loud in their room. Sometimes, they order me to stay outside the motel room and not disturb them till morning, so I always have to search for a place to hide.

Once, a man almost took me, showing me chocolate and crooking his fingers at me to follow him to his room, and it scared me so much the shivers of disgust still travel through me as I try to wipe his hideous face from my brain.

I knocked on the door to get back to my parents quick, not wanting to give this man a chance to try something else, but Mom just laughed and told me “Learn to survive, boy. We won’t be saving your ass forever” before shutting the door in my face.

So on that particular rainy day, I hid in the big trash can with rats to accompany me, because anything was better than giving the man access to me.

I have a few scars on my body from their bites, which itched a lot since Mom didn't buy any medicine for them.

"Roland, we need this job. Stop drinking!" The money must really make my mother happy if she is willing to go to such lengths and still push the issue.

"Unless you want to spread those long legs, Judith, and head to the road to catch someone willing to fuck you for money, you need to stop yapping." He burps loudly, grabs the bottle again, and then pushes her to the side, heading toward the TV. He throws over his shoulder, "Now shut your mouth and let me enjoy this game." He sways to the side a little, grips the table, and breathes heavily. It means he already drank more than he should, and he will be asleep soon.

Only, my mother has different plans, and sweat runs down my spine as fear penetrates my bones at the prospect of what will happen soon. And it will, I have no doubt. Because whenever my parents fight, I always become the collateral damage.

"I won't let you destroy this opportunity for us. It's our ticket to a better life. I want stability for Remi." Affection laces her tone, warming me, and a smile tugs at my mouth, because my mother might have a lot of flaws, but she loves me in her own way. However, she still manages to shout at me or beat me with the belt till blood appears on my skin and bruises mar my body. Her embraces and words hold more emotion than my father's though. He just snarls in my direction or flat out ignores me.

So I consider it love when most people wouldn't, since I've never known anything else.

"And I want him off my back. Guess we'll see who gets their wish first."

As soon as he picks up the remote, Mom slaps his hand, and it drops several feet away.

Fury washes over my father, and his eyes narrow as my mother takes several steps back, not that it will help her now.

She's awakened the monster who won't rest until he punishes her for the crime.

Disturbing him is worse than her denying him sex, which happens a few times a month.

Sometimes, he even brings another woman to the motel room and takes her right in front of Mom. He tells me to sit in the bathroom with the water on so I won't hear a thing.

My mother usually joins me in a few minutes, crying her eyes out and gripping the toilet as she barfs in it several times.

"I've had enough of this, bitch," he hisses, fisting her hair, as her yelp echoes through the space. "Learn to stay fucking put." He drags her to the nearest wall and hits her hard against it, her muffled scream sinking fear into every bone in my body. "You haven't worked a day in your life and think you can dictate to me?" He slams her into the wall again. "Fucking bitch."

"Stop, Roland!" she begs him, her nails scraping against the wall as she whimpers in pain. "Stop." She struggles, trying to break free, but he only laughs, squeezing her neck hard, and by the familiar sounds of her gulps, I know she is fighting for every breath.

I jump off the bed and rush to them, yelling, "Let her go." I slap at his hips several times. He swings his head to me, his black eyes flashing. "Let her go, Dad!"

He loosens his hold on her as she sobs uncontrollably, blood smearing the washed-out wall. He turns his focus to me, gripping my shirt and lifting me upward. "The bastard is here." He shakes me so hard my teeth snap against each other. "I regret the day you were born." He spits this in my face before throwing me away. I groan when my back connects with the floor, pain ricocheting through my entire body.

Although my father never, ever hurts me physically, at least with his fists, he doesn't much care where I end up after he gets me out of his way.

And in such moments, weird flashes, like they are memories, pop in my brain one after another, in which a little boy is hurt by several men. And while I feel the hurt and even fear, I can't ever see his face properly.

They even press cigarette butts to his back, leaving small, round scars similar to those on my skin.

Laughter echoes in my ears too in such moments, almost freezing me in time and forcing me to watch the horrible pictures in my head over and over again, as if ordering me to remember.

These flashes are so intense I never tell anyone about them; everyone already thinks I'm either stupid or weird.

"Everything changed because of you." Father points a finger at me, his voice piercing through the fog, and then he kicks Mom in the stomach. She coughs hard and scoots to the side to avoid another blow. "You wanted a baby so much you were willing to put our lives at stake. I was an accountant with

a house, and now? I have to fucking play nice to even be considered a gardener!” He kicks her one last time before walking back to the couch and dropping on it, placing his feet up on the table. “Both of you, shut up and let me watch TV.” With this, he turns the game back on and ignores us all together as the announcer’s voice blasts through the speakers.

I crawl to Mom, who sits up in the corner, blood dripping from her forehead and mingling with the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Grabbing the tissues nearby, I reach her quickly and wipe her face while whispering, “Don’t cry, Mommy.” She looks in the distance, her gaze glazed as more tears form in her eyes. “Everything will be okay.”

That’s my motto in this family, because, according to books, darkness always comes before the sunrise, which means someday life should be good for us.

I dip the tissue in the blood. She winces a little, and I notice that this time the cuts aren’t as deep as they could be, which means she managed to put her hands on the wall, so they took the majority of the blow. “We need to clean it up, Mommy,” I tell her, standing up and turning on my heel to get the first aid kit in the bathroom. I want to bring her some relief from pain.

And while I do it, I hear her murmur, barely audible, and yet every single word stabs me like the knife Father uses to cut his favorite bread with. “He’s right. I wish you were never born. You ruined us.”

Scrunching my eyes and keeping at bay the tears ready to emerge at the hurt spreading through me and threatening to destroy me, I stretch my mouth in a smile and get all the

needed supplies for her, never showing her the effect their statements have on me.

Because they are the only parents I have, and we're supposed to love them, no matter what, since they provide for us. They didn't leave me behind or make me live on the streets like so many people do.

I should be grateful.

But sometimes... especially in these moments... I hate them so much I can almost taste the bitterness on my tongue and crave to run away from them, or worse... see them suffer and regret every insult they've thrown my way.

For they make me wish I was never born into this world too.

When people commit unthinkable crimes, they never want to be reminded of them.

In fact, they act as if they never happened and carry on with their lives.

My existence, though, served as a living and breathing reminder of how many people fucked up, because the boss wanted only one thing.

My death.

Instead, I survived.

And I intend to smear his dynasty in dirt and blood until nothing of his reign will be left. His surname alone will inspire shame and disgust in everyone around.

Only then will the little boy within me—who heard 2562 times how much everyone wished he died—find peace.

Penelope

“You know,” I whisper, still reeling in shock at the knowledge. His mouth lifts in a half smile, and his brown orbs flash with an unreadable glint.

“You may kiss the bride,” the priest says hastily in the stretched silence around us. My breathing speeds up as thousands of thoughts swirl in my head; however, one of the most prominent among them all, Remi knew all this time about the switch, even back in his dungeon when he revealed everything to me.

Goose bumps break on my skin as his raspy voice echoes in my ears while Remi grips the veil gently before pulling it back, allowing him to see my face.

The mesmerizingly handsome monster who threatened to declare war over the woman he craved to the point of insanity... he coveted her twin all along?

And he still went through with this wedding?

Our gazes clash, his possessive and mine confused. Warmth spreads through me, awakening every hair on my body when his thumbs brush away the earlier tears, tremors rushing over me at his touch.

“Welcome to my life, Penelope,” he murmurs, leaning forward and pressing his lips against my forehead, bestowing almost a butterfly-like kiss. His scent weaves me in a protective cocoon, keeping me away from all the hardships and pain my existence offers me, and instead it gives peace to the hurting part in me begging for love and attention.

Betraying hope blooms in my chest at the prospect of all this mess being done to win and claim me rather than my twin. It pours a soothing balm over the festering wound that could

have left a deep scar on my heart. Because despite common sense, I fell in lust with this stranger.

Deep, all-consuming lust that craves him constantly as the fire he evokes in me cannot be extinguished.

It can only erupt, since our collision is inevitable.

“Don’t cry anymore.” One more kiss and he adds before stepping back, “You will enjoy the darkness, *chérie*, as much as I do.”

However, along with hope comes the soul-crushing reality about his true nature and where he thrives. His dungeon. The countless weapons, as well as how he spoke so proudly of his deeds, flash in my head.

A man who kills people has no heart, and he will never show mercy to anyone, least of all to a woman he considers his personal toy. He plays with my destiny as he sees fit.

And people tend to outgrow their toys, so what will he do once it happens to him?

Along with this realization comes fear too, as all the variables have changed in our equation.

Because if he wants me, then he won’t let me go once Amalia gets married!

Oh God.

What did I get myself into?

Remi glides his hands from my cheeks to my neck, my skin blazing with the contact, and I sway to him, clutching his shirt tighter between my fingers. Just as I open my mouth to protest that the truth in the grand scheme of things changes absolutely nothing about us, a flash goes off in the church, blinding us both.

More snapping sounds bounce off the walls followed by a loud squeal. “Congratulations!” Jimena rushes toward us, wrapping her arms around me so tightly she cuts off my oxygen supply. This girl is clearly a hugger. “I figured you’d need at least one photo for the future little ones.” She leans back, grinning widely at me as her ocean eyes brighten with happiness and sadness at the same time.

A combination I thought was not possible for one to have, and yet she proves me wrong.

It seems even princesses living in castles who are doted on by everyone know sorrows and hardships too, and somehow this knowledge depresses me to no end.

Wait.

Little ones?

Is she insane?

Although, at this point, asking this question about all the people currently surrounding me seems quite stupid, as the answer to it is an unequivocal yes.

“Oh yeah. It would go great, right along with the story of how he blackmailed her to marry him,” Florian speaks up as he gets up from the pew and walks to us. “The little ones would love it.” I don’t miss how Jimena places her splayed palm on her stomach and shifts closer to Remi as if seeking his protection, and he gives Florian a hard stare unnoticed by Santiago who murmurs something to his wife, and she blushes hard.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he is the baby daddy, but that’s impossible.

Why would she fall in love with the biggest manwhore in town when she could choose anyone she wants?

Not to mention... isn't her father his godfather and vice versa? I imagine that would make all the family gatherings super awkward. And the age gap—he watched her growing up.

Their potential relationship has disaster written all over it.

Florian extends his open hand to me. “Congratulations.” Noticing the weird tension filling the air and Remi’s fingers digging into my waist harder at his friend’s action, I put my palm in his instinctively, and he raises it to his mouth, kissing it softly. “You’re the brotherhood’s bride. We tend to protect what’s ours.” A smile curves his mouth, seductive and warning in its nature, as his gaze lingers on me. “Welcome to our world, Penelope.”

Remi forcefully disconnects us and pushes Florian away. He laughs as my husband growls at him. “Don’t touch her.” I blink in surprise at how heated his words are. By how rigid his muscles become next to me, I don’t dare say a thing or acknowledge Florian’s earlier statement.

He winks at me one last time as he steps back and discretely and intentionally brushes his fingers over Jimena’s while he passes her by. She closes her eyes, the air hitching in her throat.

All this happens within a second. But that’s enough to feel the sizzling energy emitting from them coated in longing and desire, which leaves no doubt in my mind they have a thing going on.

My God.

What will their families do once they find out about it? But then again. The girl doesn’t have a ring on her finger, so Florian clearly didn’t stake his claim, which makes him an even bigger asshole than I thought.

Whoring around is one thing, but to get a girl pregnant and not take any responsibility?

Jerk.

Shaking my head at these thoughts, I take a deep breath and order myself to calm down and not get into hysterics that won't help anyone, least of all me.

These men are monsters itching to fulfill their dark cravings that women in their family for some reason approve of. They have absolute power in this city that's failed me so often I've lost count, and running away from them or getting help is almost impossible.

Who would go against such powerful dynasties? Those who have power and money reign over the world and dictate the rules mere mortals have to follow in order to survive in this cruel reality where goodness becomes a vice no one appreciates or wants. Instead, evilness consumes their souls, demanding more blood with each day, and they don't mind using their own flesh and blood in order to get what they want.

Like Amalia who sent me to the wolves as long as it meant that her true family was safe.

Selfish, selfish people who lead by example because probably only selfishness allows them to live with such hideous crimes on their conscience and not feel an ounce of guilt.

Letting my true emotions out is a luxury I can't afford right now; instead, I have to be logical, since only that will allow me to win whatever game Remi is playing.

Or rather get out of it alive before the man destroys my life or hurts those I love the most.

While he craves me, no one would dare to hurt me, but once all this ends, where will it leave me?

That's why, no matter what he says or does, my heart should stay cold toward him and never get involved.

I will not be Penelope who suffers for twenty years because she waits for her husband to show up and end the hunt for her by all the men in Ithaca.

Remi is a villain in this fairy tale of mine, and I'm not stupid enough to believe a little love will transform him into a prince.

"Congratulations, brother." Santiago's deep voice snaps me out of my thoughts as he hugs Remi, slapping him on his back. "And to you, little sister-in-law. Welcome to the family."

Even without having been in their company much, I can feel how deeply these two love each other.

Santiago supported his friend through everything, and his family considers Remi as their own; they even said as much during their last interview.

He nods at me yet makes no move to touch me; instead, he laces his fingers with Briseis's, pulling her closer as if he cannot physically stand to be away from her.

She smiles at me although worry still flashes in her colorful eyes as she whispers, "Congrats."

"Thanks," I reply, watching them both for a moment and wondering what he could have possibly offered her that she not only stays with him but even seeks his touch, shifting closer to him until his arm wraps around her shoulders and his embrace practically swallows her whole.

The Cortez family is legendary for their long-lasting-love marriages that can withstand any storm or hardship thrown their way. Their men love like madmen. But seriously.

Loving a murderer is a stretch!

Octavius gets up from the pew, taking another large sip and lifts the bottle my way but utters nothing. I almost laugh at his complete disregard toward Father Paul who glares at him, which is rich really.

Approving a wedding where a bride is unwilling is a far greater sin than drinking in church.

Remi circles my wrist and then drags me toward the exit, momentarily stopping by Arson and Callum who light up their cigarettes, sending smoke circling all around us. “This is a breach of our treaty. You all deliberately lied to me.” My stomach drops at his harsh tone. Does this mean all my sacrifices were useless, and the war will still happen? “If Lachlan doesn’t want a war, he’ll give me what I asked. The contract better be signed by tomorrow, or there will be war regardless of who married whom.”

Arson lifts his brow. “She is our family. Don’t threaten the brotherhood that her twin is loyal to.”

“Penelope is mine.” Possessiveness laces every word of his, breaking goose bumps on my skin as he faces the two men. The rest of the dark four come closer to us once again to form a united front. Santiago pushes his wife and sister behind him so no harm comes to them. “She belongs to me and the other horsemen. Your brotherhood has no claim on her, and our marriage has nothing to do with you all.”

“Amalia is her twin,” Arson says, exhaling more smoke, and I cough a little, which doesn’t go unnoticed by my

husband.

Remi snatches the cigarette from the blue-haired man and throws it on the floor, twisting his foot on the offending butt.

“A twin who pushed her to marry a monster. My wife will no longer be subjected to her sister’s cruelty.” My heart pangs painfully at the truth of his statement and, at the same time, warms at his protection, which inspires fury aimed at myself for appreciating anything this villain does for me.

Any minute now, I’ll consider this man a hero, when he’s who created the villainous situation I needed rescuing from to begin with.

With this threat thrown their way, Remi pulls me to the exit, and within seconds, we’re outside. The fresh air enters my lungs and brings relief to my heated skin. The black car that brought me here is parked to the side. The driver, smiling brightly at me, runs around it to open the door for me.

“Mrs. Reyes, it’ll be an honor to work for you from now on.”

Ignoring his statement for fear of screaming at him to wake the hell up and see what his employer does, I grip my silky skirt and climb inside the car, gathering the material around me, while the title he just bestowed on me swirls in my head.

From now on, the world will know me as Mrs. Reyes with all the hoopla attached to it. While I imagine a lot of women dream of marrying one of them, the title brings nothing but sadness to me.

I thought if I were to wear someone else’s surname, it would be because of love and not blackmail.

Remi gets in from the opposite side, his powerful presence shrinking the space around us. His masculine scent mixed with cologne disturbs my senses, reminding me of his hard body pressing against me, driving me insane.

“Home, Van,” he orders, unbuttoning his suit jacket and flipping it open while adjusting the AC on us.

“Where is home exactly?” I ask. Dread sinks into me as I imagine some weird-ass house with torture devices like the ones in his dungeon. Or worse... what if the dungeon is where he stays the most?

Murderers love to stay close to their trophies, right?

“You’ll see.”

Groaning in frustration and wishing to claw his face for being so non-freaking-chalant about all this, I bite my tongue and sigh in resignation when the screen lifts, blocking our conversation from the driver.

Even Van is not in the mood for my questions, it seems.

Looking through the window, I see him driving away from the church before getting on the highway with hundreds of cars, the lights shimmering all around us. He drives the vehicle at a steady speed, letting my thoughts drift away.

Mainly how I’m going to survive this wedding night with a man who intends to claim what is his given right, or at least he thinks so.

Somehow, when Amalia proposed this marriage to fix my mess, I didn’t think beyond the wedding. I never considered the consequences either, thinking he just needed a distraction until my twin safely marries who she wants.

However, Remi married me, really married *me*, so he has his expectations. Fear washes over me just thinking about it.

He proved to me he can be charming when he wishes to, and what if he shows me so much of that part of his personality I develop the captive syndrome even more?

Then another thought occurs to me.

My father.

Oh my God.

Once the media hears one of the horsemen married, the news will spread instantly, which means my father will know about this marriage that's nothing but a farce! He'll be furious and hurt.

I clench the skirt of my dress hard, closing my eyes in resignation while contemplating that particular conversation, and wince when my nails dig into my palm.

“You’re hurting yourself.” Remi’s husky voice snaps me out of the thoughts about my depressing future. He places his palm above mine, rubbing my bruised flesh. “Don’t do that again.” He holds my stare, his brown eyes filled with an expression I can’t name. “Don’t hurt what’s mine. I don’t react to it well.”

My stomach flutters, the electricity zapping through me at his touch, while anger mixes with it all, and a hollow chuckle escapes me. “No. I assume you prefer to be the one to punish and hurt your victims.” My voice hitches on the last part, his hideous crimes popping into my brain and coating with darkness any sweet words he might utter my way.

He fists my dress, pulling me hard toward him, and I gasp. His other hand wraps around my neck in a possessive hold while my splayed palms rest on his chest. Anger crosses his

face, and with fascination, I watch his jaw tic while his brooding stare sends an odd longing through me. I almost welcome the outburst of emotion from this man who seems unbothered by anything or anyone.

And yet with me, he seems almost human.

He leans forward, his hot breath fanning my ear as he whispers, "I've given you my family name." His lips slide to my neck, biting on the flesh and making me gasp. Then he soothes it with a long lick. His fingers dig into my waist while his other hand grips my veil. My back arches, exposing my neck to his hungry mouth. "Claimed you in front of the two brotherhoods."

My fingers clench his shirt, tremors rushing all over me as my mind screams for me to push him away. But I stay close to him, welcoming his every touch.

"Fucked you so hard you screamed till your voice turned hoarse and your pussy wrapped around my dick tight, milking the cum out of me." His softly spoken lustful words send scorching heat through my body, burning my insides while his lips travel to the underside of my chin where his tongue leaves imprints on me.

I groan when his hand shifts upward, cupping my breast through the dress. His thumb and finger squeeze my nipple, earning him a moan, while he nips on my chin, his teeth scraping over my skin, adding gasoline to the fire that's our mutual desire. My core clenches when he glides his tongue over my lips, sucking on the lower one and tugging on it.

"The only thing I haven't claimed yet is your pretty, full mouth. Would you like that, darling?" he asks, pressing his lips to mine, catching my gasp and pushing his tongue inside,

licking mine, but yet not fully kissing. “Wrapping those lips of yours around my cock until my cum fills your mouth?”

The air hitches in my throat at the image he presents in my head. My thighs rub against each other while need consumes me, demanding to be met, wanting to have this man at my mercy.

“Ah, you would.” He slides his hand upward, settling on my neck as if it’s a chain. And then I still in surprise when he cuts off my oxygen all together. “Don’t ever call yourself my victim again, Penelope. You’re my wife.” Fury coats his every word, making me dizzy when he loosens his hold on me. I gulp for breath and groan with instant pleasure when he sucks on my neck hard, marring my skin with another hickey, so no one will doubt his claim, least of all me.

A thrill along with relief rush through my system, because his affection is the only thing protecting me in this dark world where monsters exist and innocent people get sacrificed for the greater good.

When you’re a monster’s beloved woman, no one dares to hurt you, as he would kill anyone who so much as looks at you wrong.

And it shouldn’t make me happy or grateful, and yet with fear and the unknown hovering on the horizon, I want it even if shame is attached to the feeling.

“Open your mouth for me,” he orders and then traps it. He stabs his tongue deep, seeking mine until they collide in a duet, owning my mouth to his satisfaction. Each brush, lick, and suck silently tells me of his absolute obsession that will know no bounds or objections. His thumb presses against my pulse that beats strongly, showing him how much my body desires his.

The kiss deepens. I tilt my head, enjoying the soft glides of his tongue, lazily roaming inside my mouth while getting me addicted to it. The lust around us spreads, blanketing us away from the hideous reality in which I should stay away from him.

My fingers tug at his shirt, undoing the first few buttons as I crave to put my palm on his skin and feel his heartbeat against it, wanting to feel the rigid muscles dig into my soft ones while his wicked tongue continues to dominate me, delving deeper and deeper.

His hand drops from my hair to my back, seeking to tear away the offending buttons to open me to him, and I almost erupt in pleasure at the prospect.

My lungs burn for air, but I pay no attention to them, groaning when my skin finally connects with his and rough, abused flesh meets me, freezing me on the spot.

Scars.

Hideous scars that speak of his dangerous crimes and remind me that a prince didn't marry me.

The villain did.

Tearing my mouth away from him, I push him away while my heavy breathing fills the space, and I wish for the car floor to open up and swallow me whole so I won't have to face humiliation again.

He shifts on the seat, and fear penetrates me. If he reaches for me again, my betraying body will once more indulge in the passion he so willingly gives me.

But he doesn't. Instead, he opens the fridge and takes out a small bottle of water. "My wife, I do not take women by

force.” Our stares meet as he flicks the bottle open and extends his hand to me. “Drink.”

Grabbing the bottle from him and taking greedy sips, I hold back my hysterical laughter at his statement.

Little does he know he won't have to force anything, because my morals are so lacking. I'm even ready to sleep with a monster as long as he promises me pleasure.

Stupid, stupid girl.

No wonder I ended up in this situation.

“I wouldn't indulge in self-loathing much,” he says, sending me a crooked grin. “We'll fuck, darling, sooner or later. Better come to peace with it.”

And just like that, he awakens my hatred once again.

“In your dreams, Remi.” Which sounds idiotic, considering I was about to sleep with him just now. “I only married you so you would stop harassing my sister.” He winces at this for some reason. Is that guilt in his gaze?

Does he already feel remorse for his deeds?

“I never wanted Amalia. Never. Not like that.”

I blink at this abrupt change of subject. So much heat laces his tone while he drills his stare into me. I'm too shocked and confused to speak. Why the hell did he chase her all those years and even declared war for her then?

Thankfully, at this moment, the vehicle stops moving. I see we parked by a huge, long, modern building in the center of the city, by the looks of it, considering everyone walking around here are in fancy suits and cars honk in the distance.

The doorman stands by the revolving doors, waving at us it seems, since there isn't anyone else around to enter.

“Are we stopping by somewhere before we go to your house?” I ask, already despising that I'm acting the blushing bride part in front of him, when he shakes his head. “Then why are we here?”

“Because that's my home, *ma chérie*.”

What?

Before I can ask any more questions, he exits the car, and Van opens the door for me. Remi reaches me in seconds, opening his hand. I place mine in his, getting out as all the chiffon flops around me, and I huff in exasperation.

My eyes travel upward. The skyscraper's so tall my neck arches to look up, and then I move my gaze back down to the entrance. “You have an apartment here?”

Not that the building doesn't reek of luxury, but somehow I expect the Four Dark Horsemen to own land and mansions with huge amounts of stuff.

My family is well off, but we aren't *super* wealthy. Not even on the old Walsh's level, much less the Four Dark Horsemen.

And yet, even we have a grand, expensive apartment in France.

Remi shakes his head, and I'm confused even more. Is he renting an apartment?

He locks our hands once again and tells Van, “I'll call you tomorrow. You're free until then.”

The man tips his chauffeur's cap to me. “Thank you, sir, and goodnight, miss. Congratulations on the wedding, by the

way.”

“Thank you,” I manage to say before Remi drags me to the building, where the smiling doorman greets me.

Classical music echoes in the air while flowery scents from the orchids and roses surround me in the wide, luxurious hallway with its glistening white marble floor.

A crystal chandelier sways slightly under the AC and reflects colorful lights around us. Leather chairs and couches occupy the lobby with a couple of receptionists at the desk.

There is even a coffee and tea machine along with some delicious pastries nearby so everyone can blissfully enjoy their time.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he brought me to a hotel, because I’ve never in my life been to such a building before.

No wonder he likes to stay here.

“Mrs. Reyes. Just heard the news.” The doorman’s eyes flick to me. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I repeat like a parrot while Remi just nods at the man, pushing us toward the private elevator and pressing a button. “That seemed a bit rude. The man is glancing your way as if he wants to say something but is holding himself back.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow. Someone probably liked one of the apartments and wants to buy it. He needs to negotiate the price with me.”

The elevator dings loudly and then slides open, letting us enter. Remi presses the **P** button for the penthouse.

Well, I’m not surprised about that.

My brows furrow. “Why would he discuss that with you?”

His great business skills are common knowledge; usually whatever deals he makes or ventures he starts are very successful. But still. Isn't it weird that people prefer to discuss stuff with him before buying it?

And does he really have all this time to help out every buyer?

"I own the building." My jaw drops open at this, my eyes widening, and he laughs, gently tipping my face up with his finger. "You married a billionaire, darling. There isn't anything in this world I can't get. Just wish for it, and it's going to be yours." I'm too stunned to speak while calculating the worth of this building.

There is rich, and then there is *rich*. Clearly Remi and his friends reside in the latter part of the spectrum.

Somehow, this knowledge saddens me though, because now I truly understand that unless he wants to let me go, I won't ever be free from this marriage.

At this point, I wish he'd never brought me to his dungeon as bad as it sounds and shown me what a monster he can be. Because then I could almost convince myself to be happy with him for whatever time this marriage will last.

I grew up around art and artistic people who believed in love at first sight and romance, so rational thinking dictated my choices. This whole thing could have charmed me enough to believe in fairy tales.

Only Remi was honest, and his honesty complicated things for me so much that now I don't know what to do with myself.

Although I guess I should be grateful to him.

At least there are no secrets between us—well, regarding his personality that is.

I still need to understand why he married me in the first place.

“My freedom,” I say, and his brow rises. “Will you give me my freedom back?”

We arrive on our floor as he says, “Anything but that, *chérie*.” With this, he steps inside the spacious living room, and I follow him, studying everything around me.

Black and white dominate the color scheme. I trail my fingers along a leather couch and two chairs that stand adjacent to the fireplace with a small table sporting a stack of books nearby.

Various oil paintings showcasing biblical myths hang on the walls, creating a rather grim atmosphere. Their bloody pictures unsettle me, so I turn toward a shelf that displays a collection of books on myths from every country.

The spotless black marble floor reflects the light shining above us while the open balcony doors allow the breeze to billow the curtains backward. Through the fabric, I catch a glimpse of what’s sure to be a hell of a view.

There is also a glassed shelf holding a collection of silver knives in every size and shape with small notes underneath them, explaining their history and origin.

A small hallway leads to three separate rooms, and I assume one of them is the kitchen.

All in all, this penthouse is boring and bland. With his resources, I expected to see interesting designs and something more.

Instead, it looks like a place he sleeps in but probably doesn’t stay very long.

He doesn't even have a TV, just a desk a few feet away with a laptop and a bar nearby with so many bottles I wonder if a man can drink that much and not freaking die.

"It's so—" I try to search for the right words and settle on, "—minimalistic."

He gives me a smile and removes his jacket, throwing it on the couch, and then rolls his sleeves up, showcasing those damn muscled arms again that got me in this trouble in the first place. "You're so kind. Although I think you expected to see luxury here."

My cheeks heat up. "Well, to be honest, usually when people rise to the top, they tend to flaunt their wealth." This sounds so stupid to my own ears, and I really hate myself for coming off this judgmental and snobbish. "I didn't mean it like that."

"When I signed on my very first apartment around eight years ago, I bought all the expensive shit I could get my hands on." He goes to the bar, pours himself a whiskey, and then takes a sip. "I even acquired a car no one else had in this city. It was important to me to show everyone that I finally had the kind of money that could ruin them." He finishes his drink and places the glass back on the bar with a clunk. "Turns out though that it didn't really bring me the joy or satisfaction as I hoped. So I got rid of all the unnecessary shit and focused on growing my wealth." He looks at me, shrugging. "One thing people chasing success need to know is this—you don't become happier with it. Now, *money* is all together different."

"You love money?" I ask, and he nods.

"Of course. How can I not? It allows me all this." He waves his hand. "People who claim it doesn't bring happiness

never starved in their life. Because trust me, money is freedom.”

I can't help the next question slipping through my lips. “Did you starve? As a child, I mean?” There isn't much information about Remi or his family on the internet, just that his father was a gardener and that's about it. Whenever the press tried to dig deeper, they always got radio silence.

His hollow chuckle echoes through the space, bringing coldness with it, and I rub my arms hating how much self-loathing emits from him when he replies, “Constantly. Poor doesn't even begin to describe the poverty my parents lived in. But that's not the worst thing.”

“What was the worst thing?” I dread his answer, because it opens me up to the hideous truths this world has to offer, truths I never encountered firsthand, since my father created a protective bubble around me in France.

“The worst thing is knowing no one gives a fuck how much you suffer. That's why compassion has no value for me.” He clenches his fist and then starts to unbutton his shirt.

My heart aches imagining a little boy starving for food and facing either rejection or refusal. How many times do you have to experience it to grow cold and heartless?

His parents clearly weren't great, because anger coats his voice when he speaks about them.

Which shouldn't be that surprising to me, should it?

Rarely, if ever, did people who grew up in a loving environment turn into psychos hurting others around them.

The minute the thought flashes in my head, it serves as a wake-up call and a reminder of who I really married and that getting to know the monster will bring me no good.

Because his past cannot excuse his present. It just can't.

Fisting the folds of my dress, I ask, "Where should I sleep tonight?" His brows shoot up. "I'd like to go to bed, if you don't mind." The last thing I need right now is to get into an argument with a man I'm not sure how to act around.

I made the decision to not be hysterical, so there is that, but still, no way in hell will I be sleeping with him.

Earlier in the car showed me that my body doesn't mind his hands on me, but my mind resists, which means I have to hide somewhere at least until tomorrow to figure out what to do next.

"First door on the right." I exhale in relief, grateful he doesn't argue with me on this, and go to the room, my heels clicking on the floor. Wrapping my hands around the doorknob, I twist it and enter, only to gasp as thousands of lit candles, it seems, surround the place, brightening it in a romantic light with red rose petals spread on the silky black sheets.

"Romantic, isn't it?" Remi asks, following right after me, and I spin around to face him, my eyes widening at his bare chest. "Kelly outdid herself."

"What is all this?" I ask, my eyes on his face, refusing to focus on his tan skin and the perfect muscle tone that should be forbidden for any man to have.

I didn't get the chance to study his magnificent form back in the club, but right now, despite the truth, everything female in me reacts to him and craves to touch him to see if his pecs are as hard as they look.

Shaking my head from the lustful fog his presence alone brings, I await his reply, and then my jaw drops when he takes

off his belt with a whoosh, throwing it aside. “What are you doing?”

“It’s my wedding night. So I plan to get my wife off with my tongue before fucking her over and over again in my bed.”

A hot flush washes over me at his words, the carnal images filling my head while desire flares inside me, setting my blood aflame as his wicked energy floats around us, inviting me to succumb to the temptation.

However, I still resist its siren call and instead reach for my veil, unclipping it from my head and putting it gently on the bed before straightening up and raising my chin high. “Well, your wife is not interested, so please leave.” A chuckle meets my reply, and he lowers his zipper as I take a step back, when he comes closer to me. “I mean it, Remi. What happened in the car was a mistake.”

“Was it, *ma chérie*?” he asks and now takes off his pants, leaving him standing naked right in front of me with this thick and long cock out on display.

My God, how did it fit inside me before?

My core clenches at the memory, and it only intensifies the rage within me at my obvious desire, and I reply, “Yes.” He steps closer, and I take several steps back until my back connects with a wall, trapping me between the granite walls and an aroused male advancing on me. “Remi, please.” The power and desire pouring from him are almost my undoing, as they freeze me on the spot while goose bumps pop on my skin in anticipation of his next move.

“You.” He places his hand on the wall. “Are.” The second one as well, caging me in as he hovers above me. “Mine.” His

cheek twitches. “My wife. You have to accept me and your new reality.”

“You’re a monster!” I scream at him, pushing him away, only to groan inwardly at the electricity prickling through me at the contact. “You forced me into this marriage.” How doesn’t he understand? Dealing with this and accepting our passion would mean indirectly not seeing anything wrong with what he does.

What woman accepts such a fate?

“I kill those who do not deserve to live.” I shake my head, disagreeing with him. “Yes! Trust me—such people shouldn’t walk among us, and they brought much more darkness to the world than I ever could.”

Even if that might be so and I could believe in it... does it change any variables in this equation?

“You still take lives! It doesn’t make it right, no matter how much you twist it around.” I push at him again, but he stays an immovable wall. “Justifying it doesn’t make it right.”

“I don’t give a fuck about being right. Accept me as your husband and give us what we both so want.”

But he doesn’t want just my body, does he?

He wishes to claim my soul again so I will welcome him in my arms with all the darkness and horrible deeds, giving him the salvation and atonement he doesn’t deserve.

Yet he craves it nevertheless. What does he offer in return though?

I only realize I asked this out loud when he replies, “My complete obsession.”

“That’s insane! Why do you kill people? Why do you do what you do?” Maybe if he gives me more answers, insights into his past, I will see it in a different light.

“I reside in darkness that’s so hideous you should never be part of it. You are my only light in a world that has been nothing but cruel to me. So accept me as I am and stop fighting us. You will lose, so don’t subject us to misery over some high moral code you have in your head.”

“Your darkness scares me, Remi. Because one day, you might turn it against me, and then what?”

He jerks as if I slapped him and whispers, “I would never hurt you. I’m not capable of doing so. You’ll have to trust me.”

Trust him? After everything?

His hand circles my neck, his thumb pressing on my pulse, and for a second, he cuts off my oxygen supply before giving it back to me. “We are like the air we breathe. No longer can we exist without one another, and this body—” He roams down my form. “—belongs to me and knows its master.”

I close my eyes, hating the truth in his statement, as his action sends scorching heat through my system, announcing to me that sooner or later this passion holding us prisoner will win over my resolve.

And my addiction to the pleasure he has given me only once has already grown so much it wipes away common sense, logic, and everything else, as long as it means I can bask in it.

Would it be so bad to accept it?

We’re married. There is no escape from him or this union. He might get bored, but before then, Remi will make it his mission to seduce me; I just know it.

“Penelope.” I look at him as his brown orbs darken with desire and possessiveness that everything female in me reacts to. “I’m a monster with no redemption in sight. Despite my past and my present, you want me, and you need to accept that in order for you to be happy. Because I will never, ever let you go. You’re mine.”

A monster set his sights on me and believes his obsession will last forever, only I know the truth.

Such emotions don’t live for long, so shouldn’t I grab the opportunity now and soak in his attention before I find a way to escape him?

Remi, no matter where I go after this, will always stay a special man who broke my heart so carelessly while awakening me to carnal pleasures.

They say women never forget their firsts, and maybe that’s true.

However, he might not have been my first, yet I don’t think I will ever forget him. No, his memory will haunt me till the end of my days.

“You’re my greatest curse in this life, Remi. A man who brings me pleasure and hurts me at the same time, and while I know there is no goodness in you... I still covet you like no other. And right now, I hate you for it.”

He slams his mouth on mine, catching my whimper, and engages us in a thrilling kiss, and my whole body awakens at the touch, flooding my insides with warmth and lust that consumes me.

His hands glide up and down my waist, squeezing my flesh, and he pushes us away from the wall as we continue to kiss, our tongues playing with each other and seeking one

another while the world ceases to exist, leaving us in this moment surrounded by the candles that crackle every other second.

I palm his head, plastering myself to him, loving the feel of his skin and despising my wedding dress that prevents me from experiencing it in all its glory. My moan echoes between us when he steps back, my lips burning, and we gaze at one another.

“Remi,” I whisper brokenly, heat enveloping me while confusing emotions pollute my mind. However, the need to find relief with this man wins over them all.

“The minute I saw you get out of the car in this dress, I wanted to rip it open and fuck you right there, staking my claim on you all over again. So all the men who doubted this marriage knew who you belong to.” He pulls me to him, his fingers hovering over the buttons on my back. “Covered from head to toe, and no one could see my marks on you.” He skims his lips over my chin, biting on it gently before tilting my head back and exposing the little bare skin my turtleneck design allows.

“I planned to unbutton it slowly, kissing every inch of your body until you’d be so lost in the desire you wouldn’t know when I ended and you began.” The words alone make my core clench, and my mouth opens in the expectation of a kiss. “However, I’m too impatient for that, *ma chérie*. You’ll get slow next time.”

I gasp when he grips the dress hard on both sides and then rips it open, sending the countless buttons flying to the floor, cascading around us.

I shiver a little, standing in my white panties along with the stockings and heels, and a sinister grin curves his mouth.

“Gorgeous and only mine.” He sucks hard on my collarbone to the point of light pain that prickles through me as his hands cup my breasts, weighing them and then clenching so tight I gasp. “I didn’t get the chance to enjoy these earlier.” He leans toward them, and I thread my fingers in his hair when he licks around the areola, coating it in saliva before drawing it into his mouth, the scorching heat traveling through me as he licks around it over and over again. Electricity zaps straight to my clit, and I squeeze my legs, welcoming the light friction, yet it’s a poor substitute for what this man can do.

“Remi.”

He glides his mouth to the other breast, giving it a similar treatment as his hands grip my hips, his thumbs hooking on my panties, and I’m not even surprised when he rips them too.

At this point, the man will have to buy me everything new after our every encounter.

He drops to his knees, his lips skimming to my stomach and then pressing a kiss to my center, making me jolt at the contact. “Put your hand on my shoulder,” he instructs me, and I do it as he lifts one of my feet and removes the shoe and then repeats the action with the other. All while his tongue lazily licks over my flesh, driving me insane with each swipe, as the maddening need inside me grows. “My possessiveness turns you on, doesn’t it, *chérie*?” His fingers play with the edges of my stocking before sliding up and down the silk, breaking more goose bumps on my skin as sweet arrows of lust shoot through me. “My wife likes to know she is special.” He grips my ass cheeks, molding them as he takes another long lick, keeping me steady for the onslaught of sensations attacking from every corner.

My nails sink into his shoulders, and he groans, the vibration only adding to the fire blazing through me, and I moan, throwing my head back when he drives his tongue inside me. He's roaming between my folds, stabbing me deep before licking from the bottom up, circling my clit, trapping it between his lips, and then he bites it gently.

My hands shift to his hair to keep my balance. I rock my hips forward, silently begging him to continue as he slips one, two, then three fingers inside me while his tongue licks me up and down.

The double sensations serve as my undoing, the gasoline flaring my blood and awakening every hair on my body, pushing me toward the cliff holding the promise of bliss and hunger that would know no bounds.

"Remi, please." My center dampens with each slide, wishing to soak in his tongue and never let go as tremors cascade over me in tingling shocks.

His tongue replaces his fingers, thrusting in and it drives me insane as my entire being cries out to this man who holds back my pleasure yet doesn't mind torturing me to the point of sweat breaking on my skin, and I can't think straight.

And yet despite all that, I crave him and his touch more than my next breath, willingly succumbing myself to the darkness where his sinful desires and actions play with my mind and create their own webs of deceit around it.

"Remi, please." My back aches from standing in this position, but I make no move to step back, the pleasure tingling all over me too strong to ever refuse it.

Remi knows how to touch me, teaching my body to respond to him in ways I never anticipated. He rules it with his

presence alone, and just like one of the most skilled musicians in the world, he knows how to play it masterfully.

The fire consuming me becomes so strong my breathing labors while I splay my palm on my stomach and glide it down, wanting to press on my clit and find the friction my body so seeks, when he growls against me, “No.”

Groaning in frustration, I snap, “Fuck me already, Remi.” I squeeze my breasts, unafraid of falling with him holding me so tight. “I’m burning, darling. Burning for you.”

He freezes, his fingers digging into my ass cheeks so hard I groan and bite my lower lip at his possession, thrilling at the affect my words have on him and how much this magnificent and powerful man is, in fact, at my mercy.

And then his mouth is gone, and I have a second to blink before he picks me up and throws me face down and on my knees on the bed as he grips my hips, biting on my ass cheeks one by one before kissing the abused flesh.

“Remi,” I whisper, gripping the silky bedsheets as rose petals glue to my skin, enhancing the sensual atmosphere around us.

“Tonight, it’s going to be extra rough,” he warns, sending a thrill through me at the thought, and I yelp when he flips me on my back and trails his tongue from my collarbone to my belly button, circling around the opening and then diving in as he shoulders my legs apart, settling between my thighs. “First though, let me properly enjoy this pussy.”

I place my foot on his shoulder, opening wider for him, while arching my back and whimpering, “Please, Remi.” I don’t want this to drag on forever; our passion is combative

and urgent, so all this prolonged foreplay just taunts my nerve endings.

However, my husband has a different plan as he nips at the inside of my thigh and chuckles when I want to close my legs around him, urging him to give me his mouth, and instead, he shifts his attention to the other thigh, sucking on the flesh hard and then rubbing his cheek over me, bruising my skin, and yet all I can do is moan. “Remi, please just—”

My words turn into a prolonged groan when he puts his mouth on me and his forearm on my stomach, keeping me in place when I lift my hips, wanting to press closer to him. I’m experiencing insane sensations that slowly sweep away my rational senses, leaving a frustrated and aroused creature behind who covets this man to the point of madness.

He licks my lower lips up and down from side to side before biting on the flesh and then sliding his tongue, circling around my opening, then flicking against in. He dives in deep, roaming between my folds, all while his agonizing torture pushes me closer to the brink and yet not close enough to actually take the leap and claim my pleasure.

“Remi,” I groan, rubbing my foot down his back, and I latch onto his hair, holding him in place while he laps at me, sucking on my clit, lazily licking it and earning himself a hiss from me.

His mouth moves down again as he drags his tongue over my flesh in slow motions and then stabs in deep, his hands slipping under my ass and lifting me up a little as he takes his fill.

I grip his hair harsher, my heel digging into his back as he continues to fuck me with his tongue and rock my hips in sync with his movements, finding the much needed friction as heat

slowly surrounds me, a flush traveling through me in waves, and I arch my back, moaning loudly, “Remi, please.” The bliss hovers above me, crooking its finger at me, and urges me to let go while my husband gives me a long lick up and down.

A frustrated groan escapes me when he abandons my flesh, and his lips skim up to my stomach to my collarbone, and then he captures my mouth in a deep, all-consuming, sensual kiss that ignites me anew.

Wrapping my legs around him and sinking my nails into his nape, I sway my hips, seeking his hard length pressing into me, the tip brushing over my center before he grips my legs hard and snatches his mouth away from mine. “Get ready to be fucked hard, *chérie*.” He widens them farther apart, entering with just the tip, and my pussy clamps around him, which earns me a chuckle. “Good girl. My good girl who needs to come badly.”

Oh yes, finally!

Our combined groans echo in the space when he slams into me to the hilt, his bare length stretching me to the brink and bringing such profound relief to me because he’s inside me.

He pulls back and then drives in again, each stroke deep and moving us on the bed while fire blazes in the pit of my stomach, sending me into a lustful spiral that owns my body and soul as long as this man uses me like his personal favorite toy.

My core spasms with each slide into me, the pleasure building bigger and higher than at the club, and I pull him closer to me, wrapping myself tight around him, and lift my lips for a kiss.

He obliges me, locking us in a powerful duel akin to the one happening between us, and sways back only to thrust in again, moving us on the bed until the headboard slams against the wall.

The bliss flashes on the horizon, warmth gliding through me while I'm pulled toward the shimmering pleasure consuming me and owning me, because I'm powerless to resist it.

I should be afraid, but instead, I chase it, running toward it with all my might, all while Remi drives into me hard, bringing me to my peak.

Gasping for breath, I rest my head on the bed while watching my husband in awe, who owns me so well. He's not a prince.

Never a prince.

But a warrior who would stop at nothing to get what he wants, and what he wants is me.

And somehow in this moment, this knowledge makes me feel protected and cherished, because no one can hurt me as long as he stays by my side.

I clamp around him as he speeds up, hard strokes that send me flying higher and higher until everything goes blank and I'm dumped into the abyss as pleasure erupts all through my system.

I cry out, and in three more thrusts, he joins me, groaning above me, and spills inside me, making my core clench.

Breathing heavily, we stare at one another, and then he kisses me again as I hug him closer, wishing for this night to never end.

Because the minute it does, the reality will come crashing back on me, and I feel too good to think about anything else but my husband.

Or how a small, betraying part of me right now is glad he married me.

*R*emi

Odysseus found his Penelope that inspires such a possessive and obsessive beast inside, who wants to forever trap her by his side and never let her leave.

And now, with her in my arms, I crave more than ever to finish my revenge, to destroy my enemy forever.

So he will never think about hurting what belongs to me.

My darkness helped and saved me from madness.

But my darkness will never have Penelope. Otherwise, I will lose her.

And I haven't waited for her this long to do just that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*“Destiny cursed me before I came into this world.
As I was conceived in shame and born in agony and despair.
My existence threatened not one but two dynasties, and as
such, people wanted to destroy me.
I clawed my way to the top despite it and survived.
But I would have never done it without my friends.
Three princes to the thrones who accepted me with open
arms.”*

Remi

*R*emi, 5 years old

The massive iron gates slide open as one of the guards shouts, “Let them in.” My father starts the engine again, his dirty knuckles gripping the steering wheel and he drives our old, rusty car along the narrow asphalt road as my mom sighs in relief.

The smell of alcohol pollutes the air. My father barely managed to take a shower while still hungover, and Mother did her best to mask her bruises with some makeup borrowed from a whore in a nearby hotel room.

They even combed my hair and put a new shirt on me while cursing under their breath when my stomach growled from hunger.

Although they did nothing to soothe it, just told me to shut up and make sure to stay in the car while they spoke with the employers.

“Rich-ass people,” Father huffs, pressing on the accelerator as he frowns. “Even have fucking guards.”

“He’s one of the richest men in the country. What did you expect?” She claps her hands as excitement laces her tone. “Imagine what our house might look like? In the job description, it said housing is provided.” She flips her hair back. “No more cheap motels.”

Father huffs again, clearly not impressed with it, and I plaster myself to the window, watching in awe at the picture opening up in front of me.

Emerald-green grass surrounds the enormous property leading to the mesmerizing garden in the distance with so many flower bushes. I gasp in admiration as I’ve seen them only in botanical books.

One of our neighbors was a gardener, and he lent me the books so I wouldn’t be bored.

Roses and orchids are arranged in interesting designs and forms, their beauty so haunting you could walk into the garden and never want to leave. My nose twitches, just imagining their amazing scent. I wish to bathe in it, so maybe then it will wash away all the disgusting smells attached to me since birth and make me more appealing to the people who usually shy away from my dirty, smelly state.

The limbs on the big trees are heavy with leaves that brush the ground whenever the wind hits them, swaying them in different directions. The birds perched in the branches chirp loudly in the sunlight.

A glass house stands farther away, probably a greenhouse. At least that's what it was called in the book, and there are pots in it, visible even through the glass. Several alcoves dot the gardens with flowers growing from the walls, and I see a huge canvas with a small desk that has paint on it.

Is someone a painter in this family?

I've never seen anything so beautiful, and my soul soars just looking at it. It's such a contrast to the never-ending dump that's surrounded me my whole life.

However, with this realization, my stomach drops, and I whimper, already knowing Dad won't be hired. The garden is gorgeous, and my father's skills are not good enough to make it look better.

In fact, he will probably make it worse, and then God knows what the owner will do.

"Look at that house, Roland," Mom whispers in shock and shakes my father's arm.

Pulling my gaze away from the gardens, I shift my focus onto the huge brick house spreading horizontally over the property. Father worked in construction a few months back and made me memorize various supplies, and I did because I was bored.

My mind generally gets bored easily because I absorb information super fast, and then I search for new sources of knowledge. According to some studies, my brain will help me achieve great things in the future, but I don't know about that.

As long as my stomach is full, though, I will consider myself lucky. Hopefully my brain will be able to give me that.

Roses climb up the walls and enhance the fairy-tale vibe of the place where probably everyone loves each other and lives in peace without anyone being hurt.

The house has three levels, and I try to count all the rooms by windows. But I fail to catch them all. I can't even imagine having so much space for just one family!

A few steps lead to the brown double doors that open, and a man emerges wearing a perfectly tailored suit. I gasp once again, feeling such an onslaught of power from him.

I hate this kind of emotion, because my father loves to brag; he has all the power and sends fear through me whenever I do something wrong.

However, this man is different. For some reason, his vibe makes me want to run to him and ask for protection from all the pain this life dishes out on me, and he would give it to me, no questions asked.

If my father can be the villain in fairy tales, then this one is the king who can slay any dragon.

"Oh my," my mother exclaims, drinking in the stranger as she adjusts her skirts. "What a handsome man."

Father barks a laugh. "He'd never look at your sorry ass. Believe me, I'd like to whore you out to him." I wince at the crude words, hating them, and cover my ears, trying to block whatever nasty thing he wants to say next but fail to do so. "Have you seen his wife? She isn't only famous, but fifteen years younger than him."

That's when a woman follows the man out, making me blink as I glue my nose to the window to study her better.

She's so unusual.

She wears a long blue dress, her bare feet peeking from under it, while her hands are smeared in paint. Her purple hair falls down her back in waves, glistening in the sunlight. Her crystal-clear, blue eyes seem almost unreal on her face. She laughs at something her husband says before rising on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

She's so beautiful.

"What a weirdo," Mom says, jealousy coating her rude remark while Father licks his lips, and my shoulders sag.

Lucian Cortez doesn't strike me as a man who would take kindly to Father staring at his wife as if she's some cheap whore he finds on the side of the road.

And by how the man frowns and then a cold expression settles on his features, I know he has noticed the unwanted attention.

He squeezes his wife's waist, giving her a loving look before descending the stairs along with her.

Love practically pours from them, and I stare at this couple, wondering what one has to do in life to be like them. And not like my parents.

Or maybe you have to be born into a certain family.

Father gets out of the car, hissing at me, "Stay put and don't make a sound."

I nod while Mom follows him, smiling brightly at Lucian. He ignores her and addresses my father. "Lucian Cortez." He motions with his head to the woman. "And that's my wife, Rebecca." To my surprise, he extends his hand to my father. I somehow thought rich people didn't really like to touch the

likes of us, and my father shakes it. I see how he freezes, and pain flashes on his face. He tries to free his hand, but Lucian still holds it as a smirk shapes his mouth.

He must squeeze it really hard, since my father's hand turns red. He shifts uncomfortably as pain fills his gaze, and somehow this brings pleasure to me, and I hide my smile.

No one ever manages to hurt my father, and in this moment, this man is truly a hero to me.

I know it's a sin to wish someone harm, but somehow I don't care. Besides, everyone already calls me Satan's spawn after meeting my parents, so whatever.

"Roland," my father replies, his voice strained. "Nice to meet you." And I know my father understood the message, as Lucian finally lets him go. I bet he won't even look at his wife again.

What is it like to have so much power? And how does one get it?

Lucian's brown eyes flicker to the car, and he asks with surprise, "You brought your child?"

Mother nods and then calls, "Remi, come here, sweetie."

I do as she says, running my hand through my hair as I slowly approach the couple who watch me. Something weird crosses their gazes before they are blank again.

Rebecca smiles brightly at me, and somehow this smile alone warms me from the inside, when she says, "Hi, Remi."

"Hi." I push the word out, avoiding looking at Lucian, who still stares at me while his wife fires more questions my way.

"How old are you?"

“Five.”

“Five?” Rebecca’s brows furrow in confusion. “In the application, you said your son is four.”

My parents laugh nervously as Mom grabs me by the shoulders, digging her nails in so hard I still the cry of pain slipping past my lips. “He’s four. He just doesn’t know his numbers very well yet.”

I will pay for this slip; this much I know. Father will just order my mother to whoop my ass with the belt, and God knows when I will eat.

Tears form in my eyes, but I don’t let them out, too afraid of what kind of consequences it might have for me.

For some reason, my age is always a huge problem. They hide that I’m five as if this knowledge will hurt them.

The couple’s eyes linger on my shoulders, and Mom starts rubbing the injured flesh, playing the good mother, not that they’re buying the act.

Lucian turns to his wife, and they start to have a conversation in a language I don’t understand and my parents either since their heads just ping pong between them, awaiting the verdict.

The Cortez couple keep glancing at me while showing complete distaste to my parents and then back at me as if they are contemplating whether to take on my parents just for my sake.

But that’s a stupid thing to think.

Why would anyone do anything for me, especially such a couple as rich as them, when even my parents don’t?

Finally Lucian speaks in English again. “Let’s talk inside. You’re hired, but no one signs a contract here without me approving it first.”

How strange. Don’t they have special people for that?

Unless something happened in the past? That would explain the guards and how you have to have permission to drive a car inside.

Rebecca gently nudges me around, pointing to the other side of the garden. “Why don’t you go and meet the boys while you wait for your parents, honey? It’s too hot to sit in the car.”

Fear sinks into me at this. I want to protest but don’t dare in the current circumstances. So with a heavy heart, I walk the path to where she pointed while dreading meeting the boys.

All my experiences in the past proved to be disastrous. The kids like to pick on me, and whenever I tried to make a friend, they all laughed and always refused.

One of them even called me white trash and said his parents taught them to stay away from the likes of us, whatever that meant.

The loud voices snap me out of my memories, and I raise my head to look ahead, seeing three boys running around the garden and giggling loudly. Music plays from a radio several feet away on a spread-out blanket that also has a big basket.

I watch the three boys, so different from the other kids I’ve seen so far in my life.

A boy with a pirate patch on his head extends his hand with a wooden sword, tilting his head back, and yells, “Prepare for attack!” while racing to the blond-haired boy who is so pretty it’s hard not to stare at him.

I didn't know boys could be this pretty!

The boy giggles, a pencil dropping from his ear while he runs away and yells over his shoulder, "Help! Guards!"

My brows furrow.

What is this game?

Then the third one pushes the blond and faces the pirate one, holding his own sword up. "No one touches the prince."

"He betrayed his people," the boy says, lifting his chin. "In this kingdom, it means death."

The guard one replies, "Not while I'm alive." And their swords clack as they fight one another, taking several steps backward and then forward, while the blond guy cheers them on.

Then he rushes to the blanket, picks up his own sword, and stands by the one playing the guard, threatening the pirate. "You will be the one to die today, pirate." He motions at the house. "I shall win this war!" And with a war cry, I assume, he lunges after the pirate, each one of them moving their swords in different directions until the dark-haired boy falls on the ground and the two end up above him, everyone erupting in uncontrollable laughter.

In this moment, I wish I could have friends who played with me like this and enjoyed my company. I'd be less lonely in the nightmares and my head that consumes information but has no one to share it with.

My heart pangs painfully, and that's when my eyes clash with the single blue one, so intense I want the ground to open up under me.

His friends frown and then shift their attention to me, all of them just staring at me as they get up and dust off their knees.

Nervousness washes over me. I play with the end of my shirt, painfully aware of how my washed out, slightly small clothes and scuffed shoes must stand out to them.

They are all wearing dark blue jeans, colorful T-shirts, and their shoes glisten in the sunlight, and even without much experience, I know they must be very expensive.

Rich kids on the playground who always had toys and ice cream would have looked bad compared to them. I'm probably trash by all standards to them.

My hands fist when they slowly start to walk to me, studying me with interest, and I mentally prepare to hear another rejection, and hopefully then I can hide in the car.

These boys, with all they have, don't have to be kind.

And besides, people are never kind to me, even when they have to be.

"Hola," the pirate one greets me, removing the patch and putting it in his pocket. "Quién eres tú?" I have no idea what he says, but I'm too afraid to admit anything. "Cuál es tu nombre?" He frowns at my silence and crosses his arms, growing frustrated with me. "Respóndeme!"

He must be Lucian's son; he has his mother's eyes.

Panic envelops me, tremors shaking me, as I don't wish to anger their son. My parents would really kill me if my behavior cost them this job.

"Santiago, he doesn't understand you." The blond boy rolls his eyes and grins at me, which makes me tense even more. The last group of boys smiled while pouring orange

juice over my head because I asked for a sip. Sometimes smiles are more hurtful than frowns. “Hi! Who are you? What’s your name?” He fires the questions. “This is what my friend said before he ordered you to respond.” He waves at me. “My name is Florian and this”—he points with his thumb at the third boy, who just watches us silently, seeming miles away, yet his gaze flickers between us—“is Octavius.”

“Hi.” I relax a little bit, still guarded though. “My name is Remi. My father is the new gardener here. He just got the job.”

They all blink and then look at one another, musing on this information, and I sigh inwardly, anticipating their mean words.

They are basically princes, and I’m what?

A dirty, poor, starved little kid.

“So you will live here.” Santiago frowns even more. “You don’t speak Spanish?” I shake my head. “Everyone at our home speaks Spanish.”

Before anyone can comment, though, my stomach grumbles loudly, and my cheeks heat up in humiliation, terrified about them teasing me now.

“Oh no. You’re hungry,” Octavius says and then, to my surprise, grabs me by the elbow and pulls me after him as he marches to the blanket and orders, “Sit.” I do as he says, and then he opens the basket, takes out a hamburger, and my mouth waters at the sight. “Eat.” He practically shoves it at me, and I grab it. “We need strength.”

Not sure what to make of that, I bite the bread and whimper at the first food in such a long while, carefully chewing every bite as they continue to watch me.

Who knows?

This might be some trick to hurt me later, but I'm too hungry to care right now and take food when it's offered. Strangers never fed me before. I once begged someone on the playground to give me a carrot stick, and their mother told me I should be ashamed of myself.

Not sure how to be ashamed when hunger consumes you, but I learned never to beg for anything again.

"Would you like to play with us?" Florian asks, lying beside me and splaying his arms wide as he gazes at the sky. "We need a fourth boy." He sighs. "Santiago always loses otherwise."

"I do not!" he snaps and then drops on the grass right in front of me, crossing his feet and reaching for his own hamburger. "You just always like to be a prince."

Octavius offers me a can of soda, and I nod while still listening to the boys bicker.

"I'm prettier than you."

"No, you aren't."

"I am!"

"Whatever. Next time, I'm the prince, and Remi is the guard." He glances at me. "Then we will switch."

Too confused with this, I look at Octavius, who throws a nut in his mouth and shrugs.

I guess that's supposed to be an answer in itself.

"Let's play something else," Florian suggests and sits up, excitement shining in his eyes. "Now that there are the four of us."

Munching on the hamburger and drinking my soda, I'm really afraid to say a word, because they aren't cruel to me.

In fact, they even want to play with me!

How strange.

"Figures you change your mind once I have a chance to win," Santiago grumbles and swallows his bite before asking, "What do you want to play?"

"The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse!" Florian exclaims, and my brows shoot up. I heard about the myth; the pastor once mentioned it.

"We go to private school and have tutors," Octavius explains, as if that's supposed to mean something to me.

"Okay," I say and bite on my hamburger again.

"So each one of us picks a horseman, and we arrive on this earth to cause chaos!" Florian yells and jumps up, raising his arms while his friends just shake their heads.

Among the three, he seems to be the most cheerful one. And his finger pads are smeared in gray so he must paint a lot too.

"He's my best friend in the whole world," Santiago informs me, taking a napkin and wiping his hands. "But he is loco." With this, he stands up too and then grabs a camera next to them, snapping a few pictures of Florian who makes funny faces.

"That's great." Since I have no clue what that word means either, I find the courage to ask Octavius, "What does it mean?"

"Crazy."

“Oh.”

Well, I guess it’s fitting.

Santiago overhears it though. “You need to learn Spanish. All of us speak it. And French. And German.” I nod, although sadness fills me while I finish my hamburger.

They are very nice today. Maybe because they need a fourth member to play and are bored. But once it wears off, they will ignore me.

Princes are not friends with the commoner. Why would they want to be my friends anyway?

It’s not like I have any toys or could buy them sweets; plus, they will be too embarrassed to be seen with me in public.

“Who is your best friend?”

Octavius gives the boys the side-eye glance when they fight over the camera. Florian snatches it and runs away. Santiago is hot on his heels, though. “No one.” A beat passes, and he offers, “We can be best friends.”

“Great idea!” Florian yells, throwing his arm over Santiago’s shoulder as they sway to the rhythm of the music, the camera dangling around his neck. “This way it’s fair.”

“Fair?”

“Yeah. Should we ever fight within the group, there always will be a person who protects us.” He squeezes Santiago.

“Best friends, no matter what. Do you agree?”

“Si.”

“But what if we disagree with what they do?”

Florian waves Octavius’s worries away. “Doesn’t matter. The best friend always stays a best friend.”

In this moment, a maid comes to us, holding a tray of little cakes. “Boys, it’s time for some dessert.” She places it on the blanket as Florian comes to her.

He asks, “Could you please take a picture of us?”

“Of course, honey.”

“Sweet.”

She urges Octavius and me, “Come on, guys. Get up. Let’s take a photo.”

We do as she says, stepping a few feet away as we all hug each other, facing the camera, and my lips stretch in a smile when excitement for the first time lights up inside me.

This friendship will not last, I know. In fact, I won’t be surprised if they change their minds in an hour, finding me too stupid or poor for them.

They go to private school, which means we will always be miles apart. Besides, who would want to mingle with the help’s son anyway?

However, it’s the first time ever interacting with someone my age, and I soak it up, grinning at the camera as the flash goes off.

And then for the rest of the day, we pretend to be the Four Horsemen, each one of us picking a rider and acting accordingly until Florian and Octavius need to go home.

On that day, I go to bed happy and content, ready to cherish the moment for the rest of my life.

After that fateful day, I never knew starvation again.

Because three boys who should have never looked my way, against all odds, truly became my best friends, ready to

do anything for me.

What was theirs was mine, and what was mine was theirs.

However, Octavius and I weren't destined to be the closest friends who support each other no matter our screwups.

Because we both grew up in shitty households with awful parents who cared only about themselves and made us live in our own personal hell.

While Santiago and Florian had loving parents who adored them. They knew so much love in this life; they had it in abundance.

The need to share was simply too great, and that's how slowly Santiago became my true best friend, a brother to whom I owed everything and whose family gave me a chance at a better life.

They paid for my private schooling so I wouldn't be separated from the boys, blacklisted from their house whoever dared to say that their son shouldn't mingle with the help, and gave me their protection whenever I needed it.

They became my own family, saving me from the disastrous whirlpool my parents created.

My best friend even invested money from his own trust fund to help me start my empire.

Florian formed an unbreakable connection with Octavius, protecting him through so much shit that anyone else would have probably given up. However, our most cheerful and carefree horseman... is the most loyal man you could ever find.

That day was the beginning of a strong bond, which withstands anger, pain, separation, and still thrives no matter

what.

Even when Santiago was kidnapped and gone for so many years, we never stopped considering him one of ours.

However, his absence shattered our unity in ways I thought we'd never be able to come back from, and it tested the boundaries of our friendship, making us question a lot of things.

We bonded again but not because we all wanted to, though.

One of us committed a hideous crime.

And the rest helped him cover it up.

Every dark brotherhood starts with blood on their hands.

Once upon a time, we picked our favorite riders due to how deep they resonated with us at any age.

Santiago's is Conquest, because he loves to conquer whatever life throws his way or whoever shows him a challenge, one of the reasons he survived the hell his enemy subjected him to.

Mine is War, for my whole existence was a war. First with my destiny and then with *him*, craving to bring the downfall to the one responsible for the disaster attached to me since birth.

Octavius's is Famine, because hunger is all he knew in his existence. First for basic needs, as his awful stepfather beat him on a daily basis and starved him. Then for knowledge and power, so no one would hurt him again.

And Florian's is Death, as it chased him since he took his first breath, because a psycho destroyed his family, and then he started to search for it himself, soaking up the vices and sins this world has to offer to save him from the agony and guilt eating at him.

So different and yet so much alike.

We are the Four Dark Horsemen no matter where we go,
what we do, or who we become.

Only in unity we survive, because in chaos do we thrive.

*P*enelope

I'm floating on a cloud. Or at least it feels like it, as warmth and softness surround me, swallowing my body and sending a pleasurable ache through me. The kingdom of sleep still holds me in its tight clutches, urging me to drift far, far away as I refuse to open my eyes.

However, something splashes water on my skin. It sends sensations through me, dragging me away from contentment and forcing annoyance out of me.

Not ready to give up this heaven, I roll my head to the side, but the wetness follows me, and my brows furrow.

Why is something dripping on me in my sleep?

Clenching the blanket, I pull it over my face and mutter to whatever it is, "Go away." For some reason, my subconscious doesn't want me to wake up, convincing me that some disaster will happen once I do.

My whole body is sore in places it shouldn't be, which confuses me even more. I still try my best to fall back asleep.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, *chérie*."

The deep, husky voice makes my eyes snap open, and when I lower the blanket, they clash with deep, dark ones as the man looms above me, his splayed palms caging my head. Water drips from his wet hair onto me.

His masculine scent and the smell of fresh shaving cream tease my nose. His tan skin still has water droplets on it.

Remi.

My husband.

The events of last night play in my mind, one after another, starting as a romantic comedy turned erotic horror where I couldn't resist the temptation and allowed my captor to use my body as he saw fit.

And the worst part?

I enjoyed every second of it. Apparently, my body doesn't care about morality; it just craves pleasure and satisfaction only this man has been able to give me.

He clacks his tongue, bringing me back to the present, and winks at me. "Self-loathing isn't good for your health, *ma chérie*. I wouldn't overthink our relationship much if I were you." He removes a lock of hair from my face and grins at me while a hot flash rushes through my veins at his close proximity, making me painfully aware of my naked state under the blanket. "You're mine. The sooner you accept that, the easier our lives will be."

Fury overpowers me, and I push him away, hissing, "Get off me." I sit up, pressing the blanket hard against my chest, grateful at least the blinds are shut so he won't see much.

The only light comes from the hallway where the door is open and the bathroom too; otherwise, darkness surrounds us.

However, my relief is short-lived when Remi presses some button on the wall, and instantly the shades separate, letting the sun stream through the huge window and blind me for a second.

I cover my eyes with my arm and the blanket slips down, flashing him my breasts before I adjust it again. The impossible man chuckles in amusement.

“I had them in my mouth last night, Penelope. I’m more familiar with them than you are.”

“You’re disgusting,” I snap, looking around the room and noticing its design for the first time.

Overall, the master bedroom matches the bland mood of the whole apartment, but it has a spacious bed and a chair next to a small table sporting a pack of cigarettes and ashtray. He even has a TV hanging on the wall, so the monster must watch movies.

Although why he bothers, I don’t know. His life is way more messed up than any cinematic story.

One door leads to the walk-in closet; the bathroom seems huge, judging by the small glimpses I get from the bed.

Rose petals scatter all over the floor, and some are still stuck to my skin. My cheeks heat up as I remember how he glided them over my skin before fucking me for the second time so hard nothing else but him mattered.

Goose bumps pop on my flesh, and a shot of desire travels through me, but I shake my head, wincing in humiliation.

“Just speaking the truth, *chérie*.” He walks back to me, and I really hate how he shows off his perfectly carved six-pack, and his low-hanging jeans give too much justice to his overall physique.

God, Penelope please stop being such a whore for this man. He literary kills people and forced you into this marriage. People would call a shrink on you if they knew.

“We have an arranged marriage.” My gaze shoots up to him, and I frown at this statement. “I haven’t forced you into anything, *chérie*. To save their asses, your family—aka Amalia—used you to cover their backs. Consider it sort of a deal.” He grips my chin, his thumb brushing it, and my eyes widen when I realize I said the words out loud. “You became my wife of your own free will. Never forget it, Penelope, and don’t call yourself a whore again. Now get up.” He adds the last part harsher and heads to the hallway. I grab a nearby pillow and scream into it, horrified he knows about my internal conflict.

And his laughter echoing through the walls only adds to my misery.

“Okay,” I mutter, placing the pillow beside me but still digging my fingers into it. “Clear your head.”

Whatever people do in captivity doesn’t matter, because they do it to survive. My psyche probably protects me from going insane and makes my husband irresistible to me so I won’t experience any more pain. We can’t be too strict with ourselves and follow our everyday morals while dealing with murderers; we just need to survive by whatever means necessary.

All this overthinking will really exhaust me in the long run, and I can’t allow it if I want to find a way out of this situation.

And I will.

Because no matter how often he says it was my decision to marry him, it wasn’t. I agreed to marry a stranger who was obsessed with my twin to save her from a problem my presence created.

Not a man with his own dungeon and psycho friends whose hobbies include collecting weaponry and torturing-slash-killing people.

With my mind settled, I throw away the covers and quickly run to the bathroom, hissing when my feet connect with the cold black tile while looking around the space.

It has a bathtub able to fit up to three people, a shower several feet away, and two sinks with two mirrors that show my less-than-stellar reflection.

I gasp at my dark curls going in different directions. I pluck away a few more petals stuck in my hair before running my fingers over the countless hickeys marring my neck. They're on my collarbone and barely visible on my breasts. The beast staked his claim all over me so no one can doubt whose name I'm wearing.

Getting into the shower, I do my best to scrub myself raw, wishing to wipe away all his touches since they speak about my shame, and after soaking enough under the hot spray, I get out and dry myself off, letting the wet strands of my hair fall down my back.

“Oh my God.”

Clothes.

I don't have clean clothes to wear.

Dreading and cursing the impossible man once again, I go back to the room, ready to put on one of his shirts, which will probably thrill the possessive asshole to no end. I stop in my tracks when I see a pink bag on the bed.

I even recognize the name; she is a New York designer who recently opened a shop in Chicago.

I hope you like the color. The rest of the clothes will arrive today.

Frankie personally picked your gown for the event tonight, and I will get it to you first thing. Remi preapproved the design.

Kelly

*A*s in Remi's assistant got me clothes?
Event?

Anger boils up inside me that Remi now decides what I get to wear, and I grit my teeth to not scream in frustration.

But hey, their game, their city, and their rules, right?

I can't wait for my twin to get married, even if deep down inside I'm convinced her marriage won't change much of my relationship.

Opening the bag, I take out a purple apron dress along with panties. The dress is nothing I'd go for myself, since it shows too much skin and emphasizes my curvy physique, but alas.

I put them on, welcoming the soft cloth gliding over my skin. Without even bothering to check myself in the mirror, I march to the hallway from where an annoying sound rings in the air along with a vibration.

The phone shakes on the desk beside Remi as he types something on his laptop. A steaming coffee mug, judging by the fresh scent wafting in the air, is next to him. Complete concentration fills his face.

“Don’t you want to pick it up?”

He points at the small table beside the couch. “Your tea is ready.” I open my mouth to tell him I don’t want it, but that would be a lie.

Not drinking one in the morning usually gives me headaches and I can’t think straight.

Sacrificing my health and comfort just to prove a point to Remi doesn’t seem like a smart idea right now. Besides, when you are the prey, a hunter watches; you better always be prepared to run, and this means gathering all your strength.

If these men are delusional enough to live by some kind of code that excuses their behavior to them, maybe they believe in the myths they’re trying to live by.

Odysseus never hurt Penelope; he loved her very much. Hopefully, I’m safe from his rage, and he will never turn it on me.

Wrapping my hands around the mug, I take a tentative sip of the green tea, welcoming the warmth and taste. “No breakfast?” For some reason, I can’t help but poke the beast. “Is starvation part of this marriage too?”

Amusement dances in Remi’s eyes as he leans back on his chair. “You don’t eat breakfast. You prefer lunch and dinner.”

I freeze at this, the mug pausing midway to my mouth, and I stare, frowning. How does he know all this? Back at the club, we hardly spoke about my preferences, as my stupid self was too mesmerized with the devil to think.

He must read the question in my mind, as he answers. “Before acquiring anything, I tend to gather all the information about it. That’s just a good business skill.”

In other words, he requested a report on me and probably knows everything about me now, down to my favorite teacher in first grade.

Obsessive stalkers dive deep in order to hurt the object of their fascination.

“I’m not something you bought.” The audacity! “And call it what it is, please, a psycho who loves to learn his victim’s quirks to use them to his advantage.” I motion to the mug with my chin. “Green tea is great, but it’s not powerful enough to make me see a prince where there is a monster.”

Having sex with him in captivity is one thing, but being grateful for his gifts and gentleness is another. No way I’m gonna show him any acceptance when he deserves none.

He shrugs. “Never claimed to be a saint or sane.” He skims his brown eyes over my form, pleasure glinting in them, and I wish to go back to my room and hide as the betraying fire blasts deep inside me at this. “You are beautiful.”

Before I can snap something rude at his remark, the phone rings again, the annoying sound grating on my already disturbed nerves. “Just pick up the damn thing!”

“I don’t make a habit of answering someone else’s phone.” *What?* “It’s yours.”

I gasp when I see the blue case with a small, gold chain attached to it and realize it is indeed mine.

Placing the mug back on the table, I snatch it up and groan at the almost one hundred missed calls and messages from various people.

But most of them are from my best friend.

<Monique> **YOU GOT MARRIED!**

<Monique> In case it wasn't clear enough, I'm yelling at you right now.

<Monique> Sure... ignore my messages in married bliss. Why didn't you tell me you were in a relationship?

<Monique> This is not what I meant when I said to live in the moment.

<Monique> BTW, your dad called, and he is livid. He told me to confess and give him all the details on your "relationship." I had a poker face on, but seriously.

<Monique> Fine... just reply to me once you can, because, girl! That's so insane.

<Monique> Forgot to add: he is totally hot. Although I always fancied the blond one more. He's just so charming.

I barely focus on what she texted, though, since she also sent me a few online articles with me standing in a wedding dress next to Remi. It must be the photo Jimena took as she managed to capture me staring at my husband in awe as he gently caressed my cheek. From the outside, it might even seem he has feelings for me, and the black-and-white effect gives it a fairy-tale-like vibe.

The whole world knows we're married!

And the headlines are so ridiculous.

Another one ties the knot. Ladies and gentlemen, Remi Reyes is officially off the market.

Prepare your tissues, everyone, because one of Chicago's most eligible bachelors just found his forever.

Remi Reyes married Penelope Walsh last night. The bride is the daughter of famous painter and philanthropist, Asher Walsh, who happens to be good friends with Rebecca Cortez. Rumor has it, that's how the newlyweds met a few months back, during one of her father's art shows in France. The couple had a small, private ceremony with only friends present.

A hysterical laugh slips past my lips at the article. We now have a whole fake-ass history too to back up this “arranged marriage”?

I hadn't thought that far ahead about my involvement in all this. I assumed I could act my role and then hightail my ass to France, where all this would be forgotten like a bad dream. Remi was supposed to want Amalia and go ballistic once he discovered he was deceived.

Now, all the variables in our equations have changed, and the outcome is no longer known or predictable.

With the press finding out so quickly and spreading it around, this marriage will always be public knowledge, and I will never wipe it away from my existence.

Divorcing or sending your billionaire husband to prison would be bigger freaking news than the wedding!

“How could you?” I ask Remi, who watches me intently while sipping his coffee. “Everyone knows!” I shake my

phone with the screenshot. “Our picture is all over the internet.”

“Did you expect me to hide the fact that I’m married?” My jaw almost hits the floor at how he says it; he makes it sound as if I’m the idiot who was naïve enough to believe all this shit would be kept under wraps. “Especially with the event tonight. People will find out sooner or later; I just sped up the process.” He clicks on his laptop. “Your credit cards and access cards to my buildings will be ready for you soon. You don’t have a license either, so Kelly is interviewing drivers right now.”

“I don’t want your money. I have my own.” Although my savings would not be enough to cover all my expenses, I don’t want to owe Remi anything. “Besides, what would I do with those cards? It’s not like captives are allowed to wander around without their captor.”

He ignores the jab sent his way, although his orbs flash in warning, hinting at me to keep my mouth shut if I want to leave all this with my sanity intact. Urging the beast to snap wouldn’t be smart, because how would it protect me from him, then? “You have a low-paying job in France and live with your father, who financed your entire trip here. And you won’t get the trust fund Asher set up for you until the age of thirty.”

Dad believes in hard work, so he’s decided to give me the two million he has for me later in life, in this pushing me to achieve great things in my career. Walshes always find success; they just need to set their eyes on something.

Too bad my father never listened when I told him that I have no great career aspirations and in fact am quite content with my ordinary life. And it’s hard not to feel weird for it too when, from every corner, everyone insists you have to be super successful or otherwise you suck.

Is it really so bad to just enjoy your work and build a family without having the desire to conquer the world?

My phone dings again, tearing my attention from his far-from-cruel words that pour salt over my old wounds, and I groan before biting my lip when clicking on my dad's name. So many messages pop up I can't keep track of them all.

I focus on the ones that are sent after a screenshot, though, because that's where my dad's true fury lies.

<Dad> Penelope Psyche Walsh. Tell me this news is fake and you didn't just marry someone you barely know.

<Dad> I had to call Rebecca to find out about my daughter's marriage! She sings his praises as if he's her own son.

<Dad> Apparently my own child deceived me enough to hide a whole other life from me.

<Dad> You wore a wedding dress. Marriage in Vegas wouldn't have hurt me as much as this!

<Dad> You will call me as soon as possible.

Without thinking about it, I dial my father's number. He picks up on the second ring.

"Dad."

"You got married," he says, his voice hoarse, and I hear ice cubes clacking against each other. He must be drinking, since it's evening there now. My dad never drinks without a reason, but then again—his own child getting hitched on her first day in Chicago is probably a big enough reason. "To a man I don't even know."

"Dad—"

“Did you fall in love?” he asks, and I hate his question, because he wouldn’t accept anything else but a “yes” to this. How can I say it, though, if it’s a lie?

But a lie would soothe him. In my father’s world of art, love justifies almost everything. And since the majority of artists are very impulsive and ruled by their emotions, he would even accept the whole love-at first-sight thing. “Did you think I wouldn’t approve of him?”

“No,” I quickly say and see Remi get up from his chair, coming closer to me as he listens to our conversation. “It was just sudden. He proposed, and I said yes. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Dad stays silent for a few moments, and I hear him pop open the champagne and pour himself a glass if the sound is anything to go by. “You couldn’t wait just a little bit? Or come to France for this?” He takes a sip. “He’s a billionaire. He could have organized it.”

“Dad, I promise you I had no plans to get married. It just happened.” All my excuses are lame and so unfair to my dad, all things considered.

He never, ever forbade me from dating, just advised me to be careful and always tell him if someone hurt me. He took my side, no matter what, and never let anyone treat me poorly.

He didn’t have to love me just because his brother made him my guardian. But love me he did, so much I never felt unloved or unwanted.

“I didn’t deserve to walk my daughter down the aisle, Penelope?” I close my eyes, tears filling them at my dad’s disappointed and pain-filled tone. “Through all these years, I’ve made only one mistake. Because I promised to keep an

oath to Theodore.” A hollow chuckle escapes him while invisible knives stab into my aching heart for hurting my father this way. “Somehow, this made me unworthy of even knowing about this marriage, let alone attending it.”

I chose Amalia over him, and yet he is the only person who has loved me. He turned his whole life upside down at nineteen to take care of me and be the best father in the world, even if we’ve disagreed on a lot of things.

“Dad, you know I love you.” I really hope he hears the truth in my words and will forgive me with time. He always does, no matter my screwups. I just don’t want him to hurt anymore. “I’m so sorry. Please believe me.” A tear slides down my cheek, and that’s when Remi snatches the phone from my grip and presses the Speaker button. “What are you doing?” I whisper-shout at him, trying to get my phone back, but he ignores me, pushing my hand away, and lifts the phone high out of my reach.

Then he addresses my dad. “Mr. Walsh, this is Remi speaking.” A beat passes. “Your son-in-law.”

“Give it to me.” I reach for the phone again, jumping up, afraid he’ll make it worse.

My father might be an artist, but he *is* a Walsh.

We aren’t known for our patience.

“You’re nothing to me, boy, until you prove otherwise.” Dad’s statement is laced in fury and coldness, but Remi just grins, finding it amusing!

“I understand your frustration.” He rubs his chin. “What would make it better?”

I dig my nails into his bicep, really hoping it hurts him, because what in God’s name is he doing?

This whole mess will be hard enough to clean up when all this ends, once he gets bored with whatever game he has in mind. I don't need the added problem of facing my dad's wrath as well. Not to mention, this is not some business merger where he can discuss the terms and give my father a better proposition to change his mind about him.

"You having a beloved daughter who walks down the aisle without you." Dad's reply is met with Remi's chuckle.

"Nothing else will do."

My husband looks at me, possession filling his eyes as he says, "I'll try my best then to have a daughter with Penelope's eyes. A pretty little thing."

The part of me that fell in lust for a stranger back in the club melts over this. My insides flip just imagining having his baby, but the rational part is louder this time around, and it screams at me to snap out of it. "End the conversation," I whisper, and he shakes his head.

Dad, though, apparently loves this idea, as he laughs, and his voice becomes warmer. "What a born negotiator you are. No wonder you rose to the top so quickly." The truce lasts only a second, though, since he adds, "Still, I have no idea who you really are, and I'm not giving this marriage my blessing until you both show up here."

What? I don't want Remi anywhere near France!

"Dad, for now it's—"

"I will arrange a flight for us, and you will see for yourself I'm the best choice your daughter could have made."

"Don't get cocky, boy. You're still on my shit list and will stay there until I decide otherwise." Well, at least there's that. Dad hating him will work well once I divorce him and expose

his deeds. “Honey, I love you, and I’m not mad. But you have to come home, okay? Humor the old man.”

“You’re forty-two, Dad.” Since he stays silent, I know he expects the promise I detest to give because it’s one more lie thrown his way, but I have no choice. “Okay. As soon as we can, Dad.”

Which to me means never. No way will I bring a monster to my family home and sanctuary. He’ll pollute it in darkness before destroying it.

“All right. And Remi?”

“Yes?”

“If you get my daughter pregnant and I find out about it from the media, you are a dead man. I might be an artist, but I do have a gun.” With this, my father hangs up on us, leaving me stunned.

My father never threatened anyone in his life, and now look what Remi has turned him into.

Covering my face, I huff in frustration. “I hope you’re happy.” I glare at Remi. “Do you have some kind of mission?”

“Mission?”

“Are you set on destroying my life? My father is not a part of your game.”

“Game?” His voice drops a few octaves, sending chills down my spine and alerting me to the hunter this man is.

And I’m just a little naïve mouse who stumbled into a trap due to her illusions.

I wiggle a finger between us. “Whatever you’re trying to achieve, don’t drag my father into it. Once you get bored with

this marriage, I don't want to hurt him." I exhale a heavy breath. "And he will be. Because he'll think his daughter is brokenhearted. So please stay away from him. In fact, don't talk to him at all."

I spin on my heel, ready to lock myself in my room until further notice or rather the mysterious event he plans to take me to that requires some designer dress.

If he expected me to be some heiress who is a social butterfly, he'll be very disappointed. While I mingle in the art world and can't be called a recluse, I prefer quiet places, and I'm super awkward with new people.

A smile curves my lips, thinking about this. In my current situation, I have to find joy in the smallest thing.

I don't go far, though, as he grips my elbow, spins me around, and pins me to the nearest wall, his hand wrapped around my throat hard enough for me to feel the pressure but not cut off my air.

He rests an arm above my head, holding my stare while my chest rises and falls in anticipation of his move, ready to fight our attraction this time around. "My darling, it seems this mouth of yours can't help but beg for trouble." He squeezes my neck, making my breath hitch. "Taunting me to stake my claim on you again. Is that easier to bear, then?" He leans closer, our mouths inches apart. "When I take what's mine and make you forget about your reservations?"

He glides his open hand down my collarbone to my breast, then palms it gently before pinching my nipple. The scorching heat slides through my veins and awakens the lust burning deep inside me. A whimper escapes me as I try to push him away, but he is a brick wall.

“If you weren’t so stubborn, I’d have you for breakfast.” His hand shifts lower, fisting my dress over my stomach and causing goose bumps to pop on my skin. A little tremor travels from the top of my head to my toes. “Would you like that, Penelope? My tongue fucking you so sweetly you can’t see straight?”

The hot palm glides lower, lower until it settles right over my flesh, and his fingers slide farther, cupping me through the dress. I moan, tiny sensations enveloping me.

“I bet this pussy is dripping and longing for me to get down on my knees.” He puts his lips on mine, our breaths mingling as his middle finger moves up and down, probing my opening and then grazing over my clit, driving me more insane with each slide. He swallows my moan and then bites my lower lip, his teeth sinking in until they draw blood. The sting mixes with pleasure, shaking me as he licks over the abused flesh. “Too bad this pretty mouth needs a lesson,” he murmurs, and then his other hand fists my hair, my groan echoing between us, as he tilts my head back.

He bites my neck, sucking my skin, while my nails dig into his chest. My mind tries to force me to push him away and break out of the passionate haze he always manages to create, while my body and heart urge me to indulge in the temptation.

He presses his palm against my clit while his fingers continue to dive deeper and deeper, my panties becoming sodden while the maddening need consumes me, wiping all rational thoughts away.

“Should I make you come first, *chérie*?” he asks, dragging his mouth to my shoulder and nipping my skin. “Or do you want me to punish you?” An added thrill zips through me, shaking my entire system at the raspily whispered words that

paint sensual pictures in my head, calling my name. “Get on your knees, wife. You’re about to service your man.”

Everything feminine in me lights up at the command, desire filling my mind, but before I can react to it, the familiar ding of the elevator echoes through the space, serving as cold water to the ring of fire around us.

Remi lets me go, then pushes me behind him as a man steps inside, whistling loudly while covering his eyes. “Alert! A horseman in the house!” He peeks through his fingers and cocks his head to the side. “Is your wife decent, Remi? I’d like not to be dead shortly.” My husband growls, and his friend laughs, finally gazing straight ahead. “Well, I’m sorry to interrupt your marital bliss.” I quickly adjust my dress, smoothing my skirt, and step to the side as Florian waves a golden envelope in his hand. “The invitations wait for no one, though.”

“I’ve already gotten one,” Remi snaps, and his friend sighs dramatically while walking to the bar and grabbing a bottle of water, winking at me.

My face must be red from embarrassment. Once again, my body has betrayed me, but also Florian now knows, despite their past, I find one of them irresistible.

“You got married, my friend. Which means your invitation became invalid, and this one—” He extends the envelope to Remi, who practically rips it away from him while Florian flicks open the bottle, taking a few sips before continuing. “—includes your wife.” He flicks his emerald-green eyes at me. “My grandfather personally invited you to his eighty-fifth birthday. Be there at eight o’clock sharp, or he’s going to whoop your ass.” He grins at Remi. “His exact words.”

“We’ll be there.”

My mind swirls at this information, putting all the puzzle pieces together.

So that's the event we have to go to? I've heard of it, of course. They've planned the celebration for the last year. All the elite are planning to attend the patriarch's birthday. Despite having given the business reins to his son a long time ago, he still designs their jewelry pieces along with Florian. Even my father got an invitation, because he created one of the sculptures in their mansion, but he declined it. Which wasn't received well.

The Prices don't just want the best; they demand it. And if they send you an invitation, you have to go.

Otherwise, they blacklist you from everywhere. That's how much power this dynasty has.

"Amalia will be there to sign over the shares to you." He chuckles. "I think she almost gave the lawyer a heart attack when she barged into his office and demanded access to her inheritance."

What?

And could she even do that on such short notice?

Although that's once again a stupid question. These assholes can make anything happen when they want it.

A muscle twitches in Remi's jaw, and he nods at his friend. "Very well. The contract?"

"Santiago will be there." I guess he alludes to the fact that the Cortez man has a corporate law degree. "Once the contract has your signature, the deal will be done, and you will officially own the fifteen percent." Florian waves the bottle from side to side. "After all this time, you'll finally get them." He lifts the bottle high in the air. "Well done, brother."

“Whatever we want...”

“We get,” Florian says and drops the envelope on the table. “Since my job as the messenger is over, I’m going to go.”

My head buzzes with all this, while confusion clouds my mind. Remi stalked Amalia for her shares?

For money?

Doesn’t he have enough of it? And were those shares really worth the war he was ready to launch on Lachlan and his men?

“Don’t be late, Remi. I swear that Satan will make a whole show out of it.” I blink several times at how he refers to his grandfather. And then he taps on my nose as he passes me.

My husband shoves him to the side for this, and the maniac laughs. He dips his hand into his suit pocket and takes out a small velvet box with the Price family name on it. “Almost forgot to give you this.” He throws it to his friend, who catches it easily. “Designed it myself a few years back and just added the final touches today.”

Is this some kind of jewelry?

“*Adios, mi amor.*” He blows Remi a kiss, who flips him off. “Penelope, stay away from Satan tonight. Otherwise, the old man will try to feel you up before you can even blink.” With this, he gets on the elevator again and disappears as swiftly as he came.

“Feel me up?”

“Grandpa Carton loves to hug beautiful women.” Amusement laces his tone at this. “Don’t worry. He’s harmless. And he won’t lay a finger on you.” Something flashes in his gaze. “He knows better than that.”

My insides feel so raw after our earlier encounter I desperately need to talk to ease the energy still crashing against us. “So this event tonight—”

“Come here.”

Too afraid to get closer to him after what just happened before Florian showed up, I swallow hard and take a step toward the bedroom. “I don’t think—”

“Come here,” he repeats, and sighing in resignation at the steel in his tone, I do as he says, and he grabs my hand, an instant jolt of electricity zapping through me.

My passion that seems to know only one master truly is a curse no one can break.

He flips the box open, and I gasp in awe at the gorgeous emerald-cut diamond halo ring with a platinum band. The diamond is so crystal-clear it reflects the sunlight streaming through the window, and it casts blinding squares on us. Smaller diamonds surround the bigger one, creating a rather fine piece of art.

Remi takes it out and throws the box on the couch before lifting my hand up and slipping it on my finger, right against our wedding band, and it’s the perfect size. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper, rubbing my thumb over it and marveling at how pleasant it is to the touch.

“Whatever Florian designs is destined to charm women.” He gives me a crooked smile when our gazes connect, and he kisses the ring, my heart flipping inside me at the action. “Now no one will ever have doubts who you belong to.” Another kiss. “Your body and soul are mine, and any man thinking otherwise would meet nothing but death.”

For a second, I imagine what it would have been like being gifted this ring if Remi asked me to marry him while we fell madly love.

I'd be the happiest woman alive, soaking up all the attention and possessive ways, gladly showing off all the hickeys and elements of his absolute rights over me.

Because no one else would have mattered to me.

However, in this fairy tale of mine, there is no Prince Charming, and I'm all alone, faced with impossible choices while living in an illusion.

And all mirages need to be destroyed—otherwise, I will look at the world through rose-colored glasses, believing a man can change.

Only, villains don't change, because their greed and desire to burn the world are always greater than any love they might experience.

“Yes, I guess diamond handcuffs were out of the question. People might have frowned too much at you being so obvious about having a captive.”

I regret the words the minute they slip from my lips, as the energy around us changes instantly, polluting the air with wickedness and forbidden desires, warning me of the upcoming doom, as I dared to go against the monster's wishes.

Remi's eyes become pitch-dark, and he grips my hand hard, pulling me toward him and then pressing me to the nearest wall once again, my back connecting with the hard surface. My groan echoes through the room when his pelvis pushes into me, trapping me in his embrace and leaving no space to run away.

“What did I say about calling yourself anything but my wife?” he asks calmly, although by how his body vibrates with tension, I know he is far from it. His hand wraps around my throat, making me tilt my head, and his hot breath fans my lips as heat envelops me, sending scorching sensations all over my system while my body buzzes with anticipation. My core contracts at the action, needing very little to stoke the lustful fire within me.

His tobacco mixed with freshly consumed coffee scent tingles my nose when he leans closer, his lips brushing over mine as he speaks. “Is your pussy wet, *chérie*?”

I shake my head, refusing to admit it, because I’m such a weakling when it comes to this man. Which is my personal shame, even though the little voice in my head whispers that he’s been amazing toward me.

But his real identity has to keep me from falling for him. For if I can be enamored with the beast, then... who am I?

How can I accept his touch and this union for however long he plans to stay married to me, if he is a coldblooded killer?

“Stop fighting it,” he orders, skimming his lips over mine before pressing his thumb into my chin, forcefully opening my mouth for him. “I’m your husband.” A thrill travels through me, tingling sensations zipping in waves from the top of my head to the tips of my toes at the absolute obsessive way he utters this obvious fact. “You. Are. Mine.”

He sucks on my neck—hard, to the point of pain—and I whimper, lacing my fingers in his hair while he stakes his claim all over me again. The wind from the open balcony door whooshes over us, bringing much-needed relief to my heated

skin while desire consumes me, his touches setting my body aflame and driving me insane.

“Accept it. Learn to live with it. Fucking thrive in it,” he says harshly, tearing his mouth away from me before gripping my dress and ripping it in two. The cloth sliding down my form lands by our feet, leaving me standing in only my sodden panties in front of him.

His hand slides into my hair, fisting it hard as he tips my head back, exposing more of me to him while his hard-on grazes my stomach, adding to the blazing fire spreading by the second and breaking goose bumps on my flesh over and over again. My core clenches just remembering how the thick bulge feels stretching me, and I moan, hiking my leg over his hips, trying to climb up him.

He grips my hip, keeping me steady, and the action does little to give me much friction, and I cry in frustration, pulling at his hair and silently demanding he comply with my wishes. “Who do you belong to?” he asks. When I give him no reply, he slaps me on the ass, the action making my breath hitch in my throat. “Who owns this body, Penelope?”

I jerk my hips forward, seeking his cock, but he sways backward, making me groan in frustration. “Please, Remi.” Does he want my shame? Why can’t he just finish what he started, since we both seem to need it so much?

My body becomes an instrument in his hand that he plays so masterfully it should be forbidden, yet I come back for more over and over again.

Common sense. Dignity. Humanity.

All this is pushed to the back of my mind when faced with the passion this man inspires in me.

I claw at his shoulders harder, whispering again, almost in a frenzy, “Please.”

He places his hot palm on my bare stomach, and it dips under the touch, bliss traveling all over me, and then his grip on my hair tightens as he slams his lips on mine, sealing us in an all-consuming kiss. Our mouths fight for dominance while our tongues brush against each other, creating a whirlpool of sensations within me, and he swallows my moan as the kiss becomes hotter and deeper, mimicking the art of lovemaking.

This kiss seems a claim on its own, announcing to me that I can never, ever outrun this man who craves me and refuses to be alone in this passion.

In this dark abyss when darkness and vices rule, the monster keeps me caged so I’ll never escape the magical effect he has on me.

A protesting whimper rocks between us when he tears his mouth away, only to turn into a moan when he drops to his knees, his fingers digging into my skin when he takes my leg and throws it over his shoulder after tearing my panties off and throwing them away.

Resting my head on the wall, I thread my fingers in his hair as he rubs his face over my damp core, inhaling deeply, and his touch plays with my nerve endings, awakening everything female in me. The frenzy of need becomes almost unbearable, his hot breath tickling and tingling my skin.

“Remi, please.” My hoarse voice sounds painfully akin to the hurt my body experiences right now when he denies my pleasure.

My pleadings though have little to no effect on him. “Look how wet this pussy is.” He skims two fingers over my flesh,

gliding up and down, scooping wetness on his way, and my pussy clenches, wishing he'd enter me instead of torturing me. "Begging to be licked and sucked." He bites my lower lips, making me jerk in his arms, and my toes curl. "Let me oblige it then."

That's all the warning I get as he drives his tongue deep into me, my moan reverberating through the space as my husband widens his mouth on me, holding my hips tight.

He swirls his tongue inside me, pushing deeper, all while I clench around him, sucking him in and never wanting to let go. He presses his thumb to my clit, creating double sensations that send me flying into the abyss where only pleasure and maddening need exists.

Scorching heat travels through me in waves over and over again as he replaces his tongue with two fingers, stretching me wide while his tongue licks up and down my lips before circling my clit. He then traps it with his teeth and sucks hard.

I sway forward, gripping his hair harder, raising my hips in tandem with his movements, grinding on his tongue as he continues to fuck me with his fingers, allowing the inferno burning inside me to blaze in epic proportions, consuming my entire being.

One. Two. Three times he enters me, and then his fingers slip out, but he once again replaces them with his tongue, roaming between my folds, eating me out as if I'm his favorite meal.

"Remi, please!" I cry out, the desire pouring from me and fogging my mind, running toward the bliss on the horizon as it becomes hard to breathe.

Just when I'm hovering over the edge, with pleasure almost at my reach, he repeats his question again. "Who do you belong to?"

I bite my lip, still refusing to tell him, and whimper in distress when he continues to lick me yet does so in ways that only agitate me and give me no release.

Pressing his head to my core, I pull hard at his hair, making him hiss against my flesh, which sends a jolt of electricity through me. "Make me come, Remi."

The words sound so dirty on my lips, but by how he growls against me, I know he appreciates them.

He gives me two more long licks, from top to bottom, before wiping his face on my navel, the act turning me on even more. For a second, I wish his cum marred my skin, marking me in the oldest way and combining right along with my juices.

He skims his lips upward, nipping my stomach before moving up to the underside of my breast. Then he's flicking his tongue over my nipples, the lust cocooning me more, and he lavishes them with attention. He moves upward once again until he reaches my mouth and kisses me deeply, sharing my taste with me.

I circle his neck, pressing tight to him and rocking against his hard-on, needing him so much it sends an ache all over me while my body practically begs to be fucked, used, and abused by him, as long as it puts an end to this torture.

The kiss turns lazier and lazier till he just gives me a peck and then pulls at my lower lip. He steps back, and I watch him lower the zipper on his jeans, the sound making my entire

being buzz, and he fists his cock, jerking it off with a few strokes.

“Remi, please.” I lick my lips, wishing to wipe away the precum leaking from the tip with my mouth, but he clacks his tongue.

“Too late for that, *chérie*. I’ll fuck this mouth soon though. You’d love it and then beg for more.” I put my hands on my breasts, which only adds to the blazing heat burning me from the inside out. “Completely at my mercy while I teach you to take my dick deep in your throat.” Before I can even blink, he spins me around, ordering, “Hands on the wall.”

I do as he says, leaning forward and probably exposing myself to him, and he kicks my legs apart, making more room for himself.

The seconds tick by while the thrill and lust mix together within me, spreading like a wildfire and promising reprieve from this passion urging me to jump over the cliff and reach for the invisible bliss.

And yet my husband does nothing, so I beg, “Remi, please.”

He comes closer, his hot breath on my skin while heat surrounds me, making me still the moan ready to erupt from my throat, and I resist the urge to squeeze my legs together to give myself some kind of friction or I might just go insane.

“Who do you need, Penelope?” he asks, rubbing the tip of his cock against my opening, pushing in a little but then leaving me wanting him while my nails dig into the wall, my mouth gasping for breath. “Who makes this pussy so wet?” A slapping sound echoes when he smacks then clenches my ass cheek, the contact making my core contract and weep from his

absence. “Who makes my dick so hard I can barely think straight?” The last question sends a jolt of relief through me, because it shows I’m not alone in my need.

This lust that consumes me and knows no bounds holds him prisoner just as much as me, and in this, whatever we experience here is only ours to share.

Special.

I belong to him, but I think... I think he belongs to me too, and despite all odds, truth, and reality, this knowledge makes butterflies erupt inside my stomach.

“I do.”

“And who am I?”

Licking my dry lips, I respond, “My husband.” And I cry out when he grips my hips and enters me with one swift move, my back arching as my splayed palms push against the wall, keeping my balance while pleasure spreads through me. He thrusts back and pauses, so I say again, “My husband.” He drives into me harder and rougher than the previous time, powerful waves washing through me over and over again while he keeps the rhythm, thrusting in and out of me while sweat sticks us together and drips down my back. And then a word slips past my lips that I do not expect. “Mine.” Just the idea of another woman enjoying him like this sends me into a spiral of rage as possessiveness eats at me.

One second, he is inside me, and the next, he spins me around, catching my gasp with his mouth, kissing me deeply as he lifts me up. My legs wrap around him, and he slams into me again, stretching me to the brink as our tongues dance around each other, adding to the madness consuming us with each drive of his hips.

My nails mar his skin, leaving my own marks on his tan flesh, and he groans into the kiss, stroking our tongues while driving into me.

The scent of sweat and sex wafts into the air, my lungs burning for oxygen, and I gasp, whimpering when he latches onto my neck, sucking me hard. His hips piston, pleasure building inside me higher and higher until it erupts in all-consuming bliss, and my pussy clamps around him.

His thrusts become more erratic. He speeds up as I rest my head against the wall, letting him use my body for his own pleasure.

“You.” *Thrust.* “Belong.” *Thrust.* “To me.”

“Yes, I do,” I reply simply, finally accepting this fact, at least for the time being, having no strength left to resist him at any turn nor fight our connection that’s primal on another level.

I tighten my legs around him, scorching heat zapping through me, and he gives me three more deep thrusts before he groans into my neck, spilling inside me. I hold him close to me, our breathing the only sound in the room.

I married a monster.

So why not indulge in his dark pleasures before he shows me the door?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Growing up among the princes while their society considers you beneath them teaches you a lot of things.

One of them being ruthless.

For in order to survive and achieve things in this glittery world, you have to be an excellent chess player.

Your every move dictates who wins the game, and if you show compassion to anyone, it’s a weakness that can and will be used against you.

People are hungry for power and will do anything for it.

My enemies never could strike me, because I had no weakness.

Until her.”

Remi

*R*emi, 15 years old

Placing my foot on the shovel, I press on it hard, scooping up the soil and then throwing it to the side, preparing the ground for new rose bushes.

The sun beams above me, sending hot flashes all over me while sweat drips down my back and plasters the T-shirt to my

body.

Wiping off my brow, I grip the handle harder and continue the action, grateful I wore gloves, because blisters already mar my skin from all the work, and I really don't need new ones before my presentation in science class.

The private school is amazing for the opportunity it gives me, but it has some shitty people in there who still haven't grown tired of pointing out how I don't belong.

Anger rises inside me as I remember some of their words that echo in my ears every single day, merging with the other ones that awaken a monster inside me.

I wish to hurt them all in such a way they will shut up forever and stop existing in this world to spew hate at anyone who is just slightly different from them.

The poor kid.

Cortez's charity case.

Drunk's son.

Wanna come to my house and clean our toilets? Since you're the help's son, I figured you could start your career early.

One of us will have to fuck your future girlfriend or wife first. After all, you are used to getting hand-me-downs, right?

I shovel harder, wishing I could hit David with it and knock his teeth out, but his father is rich.

The Cortezes would save me from any trouble; however, the school would still put it on my record, and that would affect my scholarship applications in the future.

I have to go to school to get my education to build an empire in order to show all of these people that I deserve a chance.

And since when did working hard become shameful anyway? Almost everyone uses it as a slur against me.

So I stay quiet, never engaging in all the jabs, while fury inside me grows and grows, which results in me breaking things around the house and taking out my frustration during my boxing time.

Not that it helps.

I crave to feel human flesh against my fists, watching for bruises and blood, imagining everyone who ever hurt me.

Spitting in my food.

Spilling juice in my bag so that all my books got ruined.

Tearing my uniform down in the gym.

Making me trip in football practice, which resulted in me breaking my leg and never playing sports again.

Would they be brave once I had them chained somewhere and beat the shit out of them?

I bet these assholes would beg for mercy, and I'd love not giving it to them.

Daddies wouldn't be able to save them then.

The birds squawking above pulls me out of my hypnotizing thoughts that have such strong control over me they scare me, as their deadly nature speaks about the evilness residing in my soul.

Because I no longer feel guilt while imagining it.

I quickly finish this job and then drag the soil to the greenhouse so it can be used later. I still need to work on some bushes and water a few more trees later on tonight.

Walking to our small, one-level house at the very end of the property, I take out a cigarette from my back pocket and light it up, blowing smoke all around me.

Sighing as the nicotine hits my system, I exhale in relief, welcoming the taste grounding me in the present and not letting me succumb to the madness whispering in my ear to stop holding myself back from indulging in my cravings.

Smoking is a vice, according to some, and I'm not supposed to, but I still do it after a hard workday in the garden, which now happens more frequently, since father dearest can't keep himself sober enough to stand, let alone work.

Uncle Lucian and Aunt Rebecca don't make me work. They just want me to focus on school, but I know they won't fire Roland either because of me. Legally, he is my guardian until I'm eighteen, so they prefer to have him close.

Finishing my cigarette I step into the house, wincing at how it reeks of alcohol, then head to the kitchen, washing my hands before opening the fridge and welcoming the frigid air on my heated skin.

"Where were you?" Roland asks, and I look at him with his dirty beard covering his face, trying to stand up by the couch, gripping the arm. He blinks several times from the blinding sun streaming through our window.

Ignoring his question, I pick up a bottle of water and open it, gulping greedily as the cold liquid slides down my throat.

“You come and go as you please in my house,” he says, coughing. I kick the fridge door shut. “Think you’re old enough to be this brave, boy?”

Rolling my eyes at his ridiculous slurs, I turn on the coffee pot and stroll to my room, needing a shower to wash away all the dirt. Since it’s the weekend, I have to put the final touches on my group project and then go back to the garden to celebrate.

A shot of pain stabs me in the heart, my soul tearing in two as countless memories of my best friend play in my mind one after another.

Santiago.

People might say you can’t build a friendship for life at such a young age, and I’ll tell them they are wrong.

He understood me like no other, and nothing but loneliness fills me ever since he was kidnapped when he was seven.

He would have turned fifteen today.

Eight years.

Eight long years without him, wondering where he is and if he’ll ever come back. The police told his parents to give up; the possibility of a child surviving after the first forty-eight hours is slim. Besides, they found no lead in the case either and suspect he is buried somewhere.

Lucian and Rebecca refuse to believe that, though. They celebrate his birthday every year by building a bonfire in the garden and then sending white doves up into the sky as if hoping one of them will bring their son back.

Glancing back to the fridge, I study the photo of Santiago and me laughing into the camera while we hug each other

tight, wearing our school uniforms. It was my first day at their school, and we were so excited.

Are you really dead, Santiago?

“Answer me!” Ronald barks, bringing me back to the present, and I see him come closer to me, raising his fist to hit me, but I catch it easily.

He freezes when I squeeze it so hard he cries out in pain. Then I shove him backward, and he lands on his ass with a loud thud, erupting into tears. “Don’t fucking touch me again,” I warn him, my body still bearing the scars he left on me as a child. Placing my foot on his stomach, I press hard, and he bellows in pain. “Do you understand?”

After his favorite punching bag, aka my mother, died six years ago from overdosing on drugs, he directed his rage at me whenever I tried to remind him to work.

So that’s how all the blows from belt buckles and sometimes even choking me started to appear, because he would get lost even deeper in his addiction. He mixed whiskey with some pills, laughing for hours before itching to hurt me.

All while neglecting the work that paid for the fucking addiction in the first place. I was around nine when I started to pick up the slack for him.

I hid it well from Lucian and learned gardening while listening to how he regrets I was born and that I should have died instead of Judith.

Truth be told, I didn’t give a rat’s ass about his speeches, and Mother was never very kind to me, looking back on it now. I was sad she died, but that’s about it.

Santiago’s absence hurt me way more than Mother’s death. Especially because in her last two years, she just wasted all

the money on makeup or showing off to some new friends from whom she got the drugs.

“I’m your father!” he screams, rolling to the side and curling into a ball. “Show me respect. I deserve respect,” he whispers the last part, and my laughter rocks off the walls.

Respect?

For this asshole?

Fuck that.

I resume my walk back to my room.

“We should have never signed that deal.” He coughs again. “We should have never adopted you.” I look at him over my shoulder as our gazes clash. “Yes, you aren’t mine and never were. You think I would have treated you like that if you were?” While my face stays indifferent, internally fire erupts inside me, threatening to snap my iron-clad resolve and demand all the answers from the asshole. He’d probably get great satisfaction from that. He lost his power over me, so any weapon against me brings him joy. “Adopted you and had to change our names and identities just to have you. Fucking hate that day.” He chuckles, and the sound sends shivers through me. “They stole you from your mother and treated you like crap. We saved you!” He slaps his chest. “And that’s how you repay me!”

His voice grates on my nerves, speaking to the darker part inside me that constantly wonders how much blood a human body really has, and if I can use any of the people who treated me like him to find out.

Counting mentally to ten for patience, I breathe in and out, gathering myself and resisting the desire once again.

Spinning around, I fist his shirt and pull back my elbow, his eyes widening in fear as they fill with tears. “What are you talking about?”

Roland likes to spit bullshit whenever he gets drunk, and he thinks his words have the power to hurt me while I just barely tolerate them.

However, for the first time in my life, I don't think he is lying, because he shows too much joy from giving me this information.

Although this explanation makes sense, right?

Constantly moving around, alluding to some people they were afraid of, hiding my age, and then loving working at the Cortez mansion and rarely leaving it.

They acted all nice to them and did everything they could to show respect.

In fact, Mother felt like the fucking queen, buying all the shit for herself while Cortez took all the responsibility for me.

They fed me at the main house, let me study there, probably knowing full well my family situation was shit, paid for my school, and even tried to give me money for my daily needs.

I refused and instead found work in a grocery store after school, and then there was gardening.

It's been a hard life with constant stones thrown my way either with their cruelty or from society; the only good people are the Cortez and Price families.

All this time, while taking all this shit from my parents, they weren't even my parents?

*I shake Roland until his teeth clack against each other.
“Answer me!”*

A smile shapes his mouth, and he laughs. “I’m not stupid, boy. I’ll tell you only when you turn eighteen. Or you will leave me sooner.” He licks his lips. “You’ll work while I enjoy my life.” His muffled scream reverberates through the house when my fist connects with his nose. The cracking sound fills the air, and blood pours instantly from his nose.

I kick him hard in the side, adding to his misery, and point a finger at him. “You will tell me everything tonight, fucker. If you don’t, this will seem like heaven.”

He mumbles something, but I pay no attention to it. I go to my room and take a shower in record time. And then with steam trailing after me, I race to their room, searching everywhere for any source of information.

I even check under the mattress but find nothing, frustrated and angry but still in control of my emotions.

I’ll beat the truth out of him.

After all, Roland is a coward.

And they have a tendency to break easily.

* * *

*O*range and blue flames mingle, burning brightly in the fire pit as the sunset casts a beautiful glow on the horizon, basking us in warmth and calmness that none of us feel.

The family mansion is soaked in grief and pain, because its heir is still missing.

The maids walk around, setting up a round table with eight chairs and placing various dishes of food on it, from french fries to pasta.

Santiago's favorites.

Although, why the family cook bothers, I'll never know.

We don't eat, just stare at the sky in silence, interrupted only by Aunt Rebecca's quiet sobs.

I see her standing by the huge oak tree where we all used to hang out as kids, gently running her fingers over it while the wind billows her natural blonde hair backward, and her white dress plasters against her legs.

She hasn't colored her hair since she lost Santiago nor created art pieces for that matter. Whatever she paints, she destroys right after and then starts all over again.

She locks herself in the house and rarely leaves, always waiting for Santiago to appear. According to her, he needs to see his mother first to know she believes he is alive.

My gaze shifts to Uncle Lucian, who just watches her, thinner than he was a few years back and more stoic.

He never outwardly shows any reaction, always just hugging his wife tight when she cries or erupts in hysterics, the hurt pouring from her, and he's the only one who manages to calm her down.

When we found out Santiago was taken, Uncle Lucian disappeared for months, trying to find his son, using all his connections and underground resources. He came back defeated but then went in search all over again, never resting or caring about anything else but finding his son.

Their legacy was slowly falling apart; he wouldn't come to the office or conduct any business. Everyone predicted their downfall and bankruptcy.

That's when the Price family showed their loyalty to them. Grandpa Atlas went back to leading their jewelry empire, because Jacob stepped down to take the reins of the Cortezes'.

For four years, Uncle Jacob led the empire in such a way it not only survived the king's absence but thrived and grew even bigger.

What a powerful friendship Santiago and I could have had. Being there no matter what.

Uncle Lucian did eventually come back to a seminormal life; although, he still disappeared for a week every month and came back with either a gunshot wound or bruises on his body.

Aunt Rebecca still stays in the house, but she goes out to the garden now, laughing a bit more, although pain always etches her features.

And that happened all because of her.

A ray of sunshine who brightens up the darkness we all permanently reside in while harvesting hopeless dreams in our hearts for a happy future where the person we love most comes back to us.

A tiny, four-year-old thing who notices me as she plays with her doll on the blanket, and her ocean-blue eyes light up. "Remi!" Jimena exclaims, jumping up and running to me, her pink dress swaying around her, as well as her dark hair in a ponytail. "Catch!" she yells, opening her arms wide, and I do, raising her above my head and spinning around as her melodic laughter erupts.

Then I hug her close, and she squeezes me tight, leaning back and grinning, her lips smeared in chocolate. “Mama said I could have a cupcake before dinner.” Her brows furrow. “Is it bad?”

Tugging on her ponytail, I shake my head, and she grins back again, reminding me so much of her brother.

The minute they brought her home, she eased everyone’s pain, and she has been doted on constantly.

The princess of the castle deserves no less.

And strangely, she likes me too. I used to sing lullabies to her, and my voice calmed her down the most.

In a sense, I started to think about her as my younger sibling and filled the role my friend would have if he was here.

Besides... Santiago would want me to look after Jimena.

She loves to play in the garden and speaks two languages fluently while constantly interrupting my work or studies by coming to hug me or share a secret.

Or hear stories about her brother.

His picture is on all the walls in every room, and she loves to ask questions about him, already loving him by default.

That’s what Jimena does the best, showers everyone with love and makes us smile, even if we don’t feel like it.

She gasps and wiggles her body, wanting to get down, and I put her back on the ground, already knowing who awakened such a reaction.

There is only one person whose company she prefers above mine.

*She claps her hands together and screams, “Florian!”
With this, she darts off behind me, and I turn around to see my
two friends walking side by side along with Estella, who trails
in front of them.*

*Octavius doesn’t leave his little sister alone lately in that
damned house of theirs, where his stepfather does whatever he
wants and their mother is useless.*

*Sometimes it feels like his and Florian’s mothers are in
competition for who is the biggest bitch to their kids.*

*Countless new scars mar his body, added on top of the old
ones, not to mention the one on his cheek for everyone to see,
but Octavius takes it all.*

He will withstand anything if it means protecting Estella.

*Florian gets on a knee, opening his arms wide, and Jimena
almost knocks him down, slamming into him and wrapping her
arms around his neck. “Hi, my princess.” He greets her with
the nickname we all bestowed on her and then picks her up,
adjusting her on his hip. “How are you?” He wipes away the
cake from the corner of her mouth.*

*“Great. You’re here!” The girl loves Florian to pieces, but
then I think he is destined to be loved by women regardless of
their age.*

*He was a romantic at heart, dreaming about one big love,
and just glued his nose to his sketch book, creating all the
pieces he hoped to display in their jewelry house while
ignoring the constant gazes his way.*

*Something changed one year ago, though. He transformed
into a total whore and sleeps around with so many girls in our
high school I lost count.*

His only rule?

Never go for the younger ones. In fact, he doesn't even sleep with our classmates, finding it too messy, and just goes for the girls who are in the grades above us.

I like sex as much as the next guy, tried it myself a few times, and it manages to give me a temporary reprieve from the tension constantly present in my life that urges me to punish everyone around me.

But actually spending all my time on it?

Fuck that. I have more important stuff to do, like study and work, and girls are a constant distraction.

"Of course. We'd never miss it," Florian replies and then tickles her on the belly, which makes her giggle, and she presses her cheeks to his, sighing. He grins at me, rolling his tongue out.

Discretely from the girl's view, I flip him off. The asshole thinks her affection for us is a competition or something.

Although, he has a soft spot for her as well; he's already designed a few tiaras for her to wear and helps her with her puzzles. He can be an unbearable asshole to anyone, but never to her.

"Hello, my friend." He blows me a kiss, and I nod at him and then hug Octavius, who grunts yet still manages to keep a distance despite our close proximity.

Among us all, he despises any sign of affection or touch, which is understandable, all things considered. Sometimes, he takes all this shit to the next level, though.

He made an oath a year ago to never marry or have kids; that's why he still stays a virgin and intends to keep it that way for God knows how long.

“Hey. You’re late.”

“We had to pick up Estella from her dance class.”

She leans on Octavius and smiles at me. “Hi, Remi.”

“Hey, girl. How are you?”

“Good.” The redheaded ten-year-old is painfully shy, usually hiding behind her brother or opting for being silent. She loves to read, and that’s about it. During most of our meetings, she chooses a corner in the house and stays there or just watches TV.

Jimena soundly kisses Florian on the cheek and then asks, “Put me down, please.” He does, and she laces her fingers with Estella’s. “Let’s have some more cake!” They both dart to the table, and we all lose our smiles, the seriousness of the moment washing over us.

“Do you think he is still alive?” Florian wonders to no one in particular, flipping the lighter on and off, and his question weighs heavy on our shoulders.

Maybe because deep down we know that the odds are not in his favor, and most probably he’s dead.

However, such tragic realization has the power to destroy us, so we pretend otherwise.

“Yeah,” I say.

A moment passes, and Octavius informs me, “We beat up those guys who spat bullshit about you during first period.”

Florian barks a laugh. “You should have seen their faces; one of them even cried.” He points at his bruised knuckles. “Worth every moment. Now they will walk the other way once they see you.”

Not this again. "You didn't have to do it."

For some reason, they made it their mission to protect me in school since I can't defend myself without getting into trouble.

The kids don't dare go against a Reed or a Price, though, so they use their power constantly, either getting into fights for me or bullying the ones bullying me. They matched our schedule so we all have lunch together, and they even joined my gym to spend more time with me.

Or that's the excuse anyway. I know they know I love to destroy my opponents and even know about my side gig.

I'm taller for my age and bulkier, so I get to participate in underground fights by faking my age. Even if the club owner knew, he wouldn't care, since my fights bring him the most money.

They pay generously, and I get so much fucking satisfaction hurting someone it should scare me, and yet I just sign up for more fights, becoming addicted to it all.

The more blood, wounds, broken bones... the better.

"We are friends, a unit." Florian emphasizes the last word. "An insult thrown your way is an insult thrown our way."

"Yeah," Octavius says and then slaps me on the arm. "Besides, they're assholes, so our actions aren't exactly altruistic. We enjoy it."

Their friendship and support still surprises me. I expected them to naturally drift away from me. They live closer to each other, have no reason to show up here, and we're just different in a lot of things.

However, they've stalked me in school, come here for me constantly, and have dragged my ass to various activities, paying for them all.

Well, Florian handled the bills, since Octavius's stepfather refused to even give him food, let alone money.

Our friendship though, despite all our combined efforts, just isn't the same. I've felt like an outsider on most days, since they have a connection I could never be part of.

We were a unit as four, each one of us bringing something to the bond and then keeping the balance.

No one was alone or left out.

In the current equation, though... Santiago and I are alone, since we are separated, and God knows what hell he lives through now, if he's even alive.

Broken, separated pieces can't hold the unity, just the illusion of it.

"Let's go," Florian murmurs, motioning with his chin toward the fire as Rebecca takes out a white dove, murmuring something to it as she rubs her cheek over it, ready to set it free.

We all grab our own doves, surrounding Santiago's parents, giving them our silent support while the girls plaster themselves against the guys.

Florian gets down to let Jimena pet the dove, and she gasps in wonder when the bird shakes its head.

Uncle Lucian wraps his arms around Aunt Rebecca's waist, and a heavy breath escapes her. "Happy Birthday, my baby boy." She kisses the dove. "Wherever you are, please survive and come home. No matter what happened... just come

home.” Her voice cracks, albeit filled with so much love and pain, while longing is evident in every breath she takes.

For a second, I study her and remember Roland’s confession, which I pushed away from me in order to focus on my friend.

Right in this moment, though, I can’t ignore the knowledge that shook the foundation of my life.

They stole you from her.

Is there a woman on this earth somewhere who mourns her child as much as the Cortez family does their son, sending doves up in the sky with her heart aching and begging for him to come back?

Is there a mother who wishes for her son to walk inside her house and tell her he is alive?

Is there a woman... who actually loves me?

Unfamiliar emotions surround me, creating chaos in my head and urging me to run back home and demand answers all over again from Roland, because something in me doesn’t want to hurt that woman.

But the other part, abused and bruised through years of negligence, prays all he said is a lie.

Because just the idea of it is so devastating I’m not sure my psyche could handle the amount of pain it would cost me.

“Come back home, Santiago,” Rebecca whispers and then lifts her hands up, letting the dove go, and we all follow suit, watching the birds circle above us before darting in the opposite direction, disappearing in the sunset.

“Come back, hermano.” Jimena sighs, leaning on Florian as a tear slides down her cheek, and he wipes it away, hugging

her tighter.

Indeed, come back, brother.

Maybe then the truth will be easier for me to face with my best friend by my side.

A month later, the heir to the throne came back, beaten and abused beyond repair.

He'd changed, and we changed right along with him.

For his return was the beginning of our fall into darkness and vices eating at our souls, destroying any goodness in us.

Penelope

The golden iron gates slide open, the annoying sound reverberating through the space as the guards wearing black nod at us and salute Remi.

A narrow, asphalt road opens up, and the driver roars the car to life once again, flying inside while the breeze from the open windows tickles and brings relief to my heated skin.

Splaying my palms open, I place them on either side of me, too afraid to stain with my sweat the silky blue gown cascading down my form and hugging my body, showing every dip and curve with my back open. Silver shoes with four-inch heels finish the composition, giving me a rather sophisticated and elegant look despite my discomfort.

When Kelly brought it in, my eyes almost bulged out of my sockets, considering I never wore something so daring before. My husband loved it though, and apparently that was enough reason for everyone to put me in it.

Remi covers my hand with his, and his husky voice speaks up, soothing me to my complete dismay. “Don’t be nervous, *chérie*.” He squeezes me, pressing on my ring that announces to the whole world I’m his, and it glistens in the light, bringing attention to its beauty. “No one would dare hurt you.”

“These people will judge me.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. Showing him my weakness after I slept with him twice sucks.

Enough.

I will not indulge in self-loathing anymore, just make the best out of my situation.

And currently in this monstrous world, my husband is what’s best for me.

He lifts our joined hands to his mouth and gives me a gentle peck, holding my stare as his brown orbs flash with possessiveness and danger. “Who gives a fuck? They judge me all the time.” Another soft kiss and he pulls me toward him, our lips inches apart. “You.” He bites on my lower lip. “Are.” His tongue swipes over the abused flesh, sending tingling sensations all over me. “Mine.” He connects us in a toe-curling kiss, stabbing his tongue deep and coaxing mine to play with his, roaming inside my mouth and owning it.

Moaning at the contact, I fist his shirt, wishing to feel his naked skin underneath mine and forget myself in his arms once again, for my mind always calms then, because he has all the control.

In his arms, for the first time ever, I’m the center of someone’s attention, and the heady feeling only intensifies with each encounter, chaining me to the passion only he inspires.

His fingers slide over my bare back, dipping under the dress to the curve of my ass cheeks, electricity zapping through me, and I arch, giving him better access to deepen the kiss and do something about the fire spreading in my veins.

That's when he tears his mouth away, letting me gulp some air, and pushes me away, my back resting against the leather cushion again. A disappointed whimper slips out of me. "Believe me, *chérie*, I want nothing more than to fuck you right now, everything else be damned." His thumb rubs my lips, his eyes darkening when I bite on it. "We're minutes away from attending the party. I won't risk anyone hearing a single moan coming out of that pretty mouth of yours." Harshness laces his tone when he adds, "It belongs to me."

Slapping his hand away, I mutter, "You're no fun at all, Remi." He chuckles at this, clutching my thigh, and I straighten up, my attention momentarily shifting to the view greeting us outside.

I gasp in awe, studying the magnificent Price mansion, because simply put, I've never seen anything more stunning, and all the pictures floating around on the internet don't do it justice.

Emerald-green grass covers the enormous property, so smooth and neatly cut that it brings attention to the massive, marble statues depicting Greek goddesses from Aphrodite to Athena spread throughout the land, each more beautiful than the other.

I even recognize one of my father's works by how detailed the art piece is, with the goddess's dress giving an impression of movement.

A fountain stands in the middle of them all, a man holding an arrow as he points it at someone in the distance, and the

water falls from his mouth, giving it a rather dangerous and irking vibe, making me want to stop looking at it or he might actually come alive and send his deadly weapon my way.

His clothes are scarce, being a character from a myth, although when I rack my brain for who it might be, I come up blank.

“Paris.” I glance at Remi, who must have noticed my confusion. “Grandpa Atlas loves the character very much.”

I blink at this. “Didn’t he cause war that brought an end to his nation when he fell in love with a woman he shouldn’t have?” And what’s with everyone’s obsession with the Trojan War anyway? At this rate, I won’t be surprised if another horseman has a second name given to him as tribute to a beloved character. “He wasn’t a great warrior either.”

“His arrow killed Achilles. That impresses Grandpa Atlas.”

Well, a questionable victory really, considering Achilles’s one weakness was his heel, by which his mother held him when she was dipping him in the river to give him protection from any wounds.

We drive farther inside, where a mesmerizing garden consisting of various bushes and heavy trees greets us, the flowers blooming and giving the whole place a colorful and magical vibe contrasting with the earlier statues.

Countless lamps brighten up the space, showcasing its beauty under the most flattering light.

There are even alcoves with white roses climbing the walls, almost inviting you to indulge in sin and the most basic cravings inside them.

In fact, everything here reeks of carnal needs and vices permanently attached to us humans.

The moonlight casting shadows along with thousands of stars in the sky only add to the sinister atmosphere, bringing attention to the massive building in the distance with many expensive cars pulling up for people to emerge from, greeted by the staff.

The three-level mansion spreads horizontally, made out of brick and the finest wood, judging by how the double doors open widely to welcome all the guests.

The amount of windows alludes to a large number of rooms, and two more statues stand by the front door, lions roaring at one another in fighting stances, and several women even jump a little while passing them.

All in all, only two words describe the energy buzzing in the place and making me curious to get a peek inside the mansion and yet dreading it at the same time.

Power and status.

Whoever enters it, does so with a knowledge that the Price dynasty has the power to destroy them and strip them of all their riches, and just the idea of meeting them all sinks fear into every cell of my body.

Familiar nervousness shows itself when heat from behind blankets me, warming me up from inside out. “Penelope,” Remi whispers into my ear, “smile and always remember people are watching. Never let them see your weaknesses.” I look over my shoulder at him, and he nips at my nose. “You’ll get used to it, *chérie*.”

Will I?

Or will he cast me aside sooner, bored with little old me as his wife?

I have no time to focus on this depressing and confusing thought as the car door opens and a man bows a little, greeting us. “Welcome, Mrs. Reyes.” He extends his hand to me, and I grip it, getting out of the car, and instantly a flash goes off in my face.

The photographer checks the camera and smirks. “Nice.” Then he focuses it on me once again, when Remi wraps his arm around my waist, bringing me closer to him and pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Please look into the camera!” the man calls, and mortification runs through me at the prospect of posing for him and then having my photos in magazines for the whole world to see.

My husband ignores his request and instead nods at the staff member, who says, “Congratulations, Mr. Reyes.”

“Thanks. The dark four?”

The man motions to the doors. “They’re all inside.”

Remi pushes us toward the marble stairs and tells me, “Ignore the photographers. Atlas Price loves the press, so vultures will be on the hunt tonight.”

I glare at him, although still keeping my fake smile intact. “Do you know how to reassure a girl or what?” Sarcasm drips from me, and I hear a woman gasp, whispering something to her suitor as they look at us.

Great.

People are already judging.

Remi doesn’t let me dwell on it much though as he drags me inside the house, and instantly the scent of flowers and

expensive cologne mixed with tobacco assaults my senses as my eyes drink in the gorgeousness around me that could rival the one we just encountered outside.

A gold-and-platinum color scheme dominates the huge place with marble floors glistening under the light—so spotless it might even show us our reflection.

However, that's not what strikes me the most; it's the paintings hanging on the wall in this hallway, depicting gory images of four riders arriving into this world to cause chaos on humankind. The oil paintings almost serve as a warning to enter at your own risk and accept any consequences.

Massive staircases with brown railings invite you upstairs, yet the complete darkness there shows you that nothing good awaits you should you accept the invitation. Despite the mansion being featured in magazines due to its design, the Price family never, ever allowed anyone outside the family to go upstairs. Rumor has it, even their friends cannot go there, which rings alarm bells in my head.

Just what do they hide to have such rules?

I shiver a little at the weird feeling enveloping me in this house, stepping closer to Remi, who still keeps his hold on me while walking ahead to the arched doorway from where the music in the air comes.

And laughter.

Melodic and cold laughter designed to make me bite my nails in nervousness by being afraid to screw up somehow tonight, as I don't just represent Remi.

My father's name is on the line too, and the Walshes in general—not that I think anyone much remembers us, but still.

These are expensive clients, and I won't be able to forgive myself if my behavior causes my dad to lose any of them.

"Penelope, relax," Remi says once again, his fingers sinking into my waist and making me hyper-aware of him. "It's a birthday party."

"It's easy for you to say. You know them all." And he rules them all too.

The Four Dark Horsemen can literally bankrupt whoever they wish at this party, yet his power hardly calms me.

An emotion I cannot name crosses his face, and an odd note coats his tone when he replies, "Trust me, *chérie*. No one has the power to hurt me or what belongs to me. Not anymore."

The statement is so curt I have no idea what to say to that, because I feel like I've stepped on a mine but don't know what exactly it blew up within my husband.

Maybe I just need to shut up, as the aching throb in my head doesn't help the situation at all.

Various servers carrying trays with food and drinks move smoothly through the hallway toward the room, plastering polite smiles on their faces while wearing black uniform consisting of pants and a shirt.

One of them stops by us. "Would you like something to drink?" Since all she has to offer is champagne, I shake my head, and she darts off while I stand still in the doorjamb.

Since the people still haven't noticed our arrival, it gives me some time to assess the situation.

Women and men wearing expensive clothes from the latest designer collections occupy the spacious ballroom, engaged in

heated conversations with each other while either drinking or eating snacks, erupting in laughter every other second.

Their jewelry, probably designed by the Price family to show them their tribute, glistens under the crystal chandelier above us, brightening up the whole space and bringing attention to its magnificence.

Florian's great-great-grandfather created it, so its absolutely priceless, and no wonder several people gape at it in awe as the crystals cast colorful squares on the floor, and the moonlight streaming through the wide-open terrace door leading to the garden only intensifies its beauty.

Right in the center, a band plays classical music, their movements and notes so precise one might listen to them for hours, which gives this whole gathering a rather deceptively peaceful atmosphere.

Although, believing in it would be so foolish, as silent games are played here in which one establishes their power and connections by flaunting their wealth. They do it with so much class you'd never guess it if you didn't look close enough.

Servers roam around the room, offering everyone drinks, and I notice several tables spread around heavy with food while another arched door leads to the dining table, where the main dinner will probably be served.

"It's very... calm." I finally push out the words, even a bit disappointed for everything to look so normal.

Somehow, with the reputation the Price family has gained over the years, I expected more craziness.

"Did you expect naked women swimming in chandeliers?" Remi teases, snagging the whiskey and wine from the waiter

passing by, and practically shoves the wine in my hand.

I take a large sip, musing on his words, and honestly say, “Yeah.”

“They come later.” A beat passes. “Grandpa Atlas prefers to fuck women in the privacy of his country club. The party there will be wild. That’s why none of us are invited.” He shudders. “We are scarred for life after the last time.”

I choke on my drink, coughing a little while my eyes water, and gape at him in shock. “Really?” I mean, the dude turned eighty-five. How does he have all that energy to fuck around?

I guess he keeps the family reputation of massive manwhores who can’t keep their pants zipped for anyone, let alone their wives, alive and well.

Remi sips his drink and wants to say something, when I notice the crowd’s attention on us, women scanning me from head to toe, narrowing their eyes for a fraction of a second before shrugging and turning back to their conversations.

The men don’t even bother looking at me, either not finding me interesting enough or my husband’s deadly stare warns them off from letting their gazes linger on me.

And just like that, the most intimidating part of the evening passes, and I huff in exasperation.

Being Remi’s wife is truly an experience, because indeed no one can say a thing to what’s his without fear. “Well, this is very anticlimactic,” I mutter with disappointment lacing my voice. Before Remi can laugh at my expense though, I jab a finger in his chest. “Don’t laugh.”

“Wasn’t gonna,” he assures me and then clinks his glass with mine, and that’s when I notice four sets of eyes studying

us from the other side of the room.

And compared to everyone else, they don't shy away from drilling their stares into us.

I focus my attention on the first pair, a purple-haired woman who cocks her head to the side, grinning at us while her black pencil dress showcases a great figure. Her crystal-clear blue eyes radiate warmth, making her magnetic to be around, and somehow I wish to go closer to her. She says something to the dark-haired man standing next to her and rubbing her arm, and he gives her a smile before kissing her on her neck for everyone to see. The moment seems almost too intimate to watch.

My gaze shifts to the second couple, a redheaded woman who clasps her hands together, excitement shining on her face. Her silver dress falls down in waves although still emphasizes her curvy figure.

She elbows her husband, judging by how tightly he holds her in his arms, although they make quite an odd couple.

She looks way younger than him; however, he's still stunning for a man his age, while she is a bit too plain. Their relationship caused quite a scandal back in the day, as she happened to be seventeen years younger than him and was his six-year-old son's nanny. His father threatened to take away his rights to the empire, but he ignored the warning and married her anyway.

Interestingly enough, he is the only man in his dynasty who never cheated on his wives and stayed respectful toward them. In fact, his first wife was the one who ran away with a lover and refused to see her son, dumping him to be raised by his father. She even called him the devil's spawn.

They don't have to introduce themselves for me to know who they are.

Their heirs are spitting images of their fathers.

Lucian Cortez and Jacob Price.

Remi motions for the server to come and places his empty glass on the tray while I do the same. "Let's go. After the dark four and Jimena, they are some of the most important people in my life."

Oh God.

Considering both these families practically raised Remi, this is equivalent to meeting the parents, isn't it?

My heart drums loudly in my chest while my pulse speeds up, and the air hitches in my throat when we reach them, too nervous to utter a word, as first impressions are everything.

"Uncle Lucian and Aunt Rebecca," he addresses the first couple, and then he turns to the second one. "Uncle Jacob and Aunt Calliope." He presses me closer to him. "This is my wife, Penelope Reyes."

I barely resist the eye roll at how much satisfaction coats this statement and nod at them all. "Hi, it's nice to meet you," I say shyly to some of the most powerful people in the room.

"Ah, you grew up so much. I remember you being this small." Rebecca puts her splayed palm at her hip level. "With two pigtails. And now you're married to Remi." She comes closer to me and gives me a strong hug, her flowery scent hitting me and easing the earlier tension. "Welcome to the family, Penelope." She leans back and palms my cheeks. "Congratulations."

Yes, Jimena got her character and personality from her mother all right. They so easily accept people if one of their own chooses them.

For some reason, this moves me so much, because I never knew motherly love in my life, and while Dad loved me with all his heart, some voids just cannot be filled no matter how much we try.

“Thank you. And my dad still has your painting hung in his living room,” I feel the need to add, hoping she knows he values her as a friend and an artist.

“She’s very talented, so there’s no wonder,” Lucian says and then winks at me. “Congratulations. Your name is Reyes, but you are part of the Cortez clan now. Do not hesitate to come to us should you need anything.” He grips Remi’s shoulder. “You did well, Remi.” He slaps him on his back, and I see nothing but respect in my husband’s gaze when he looks at Lucian. “Although, as a loving father who has a daughter, I must say good luck getting in your father-in-law’s good graces.”

“It’s on my to-do list.” With the confidence he speaks, Remi really has no idea how long my father can hold a grudge.

Although, does it matter?

We might not even be a couple for long. I should not forget all this is just an illusion designed for the monster’s amusement.

My mood sours while my internal fight exhausts me. Losing my guard around this man and believing this arranged marriage can be successful in the future...is wrong.

Even if he kills just bad people, falling in love and building a life with a murderer hardly counts as a fairy-tale

love story.

He has a family who loves him, which is so strange, as you never imagine a villain who loves darkness to have any ties.

However, if he had so much love while growing up from them all, why did he become a monster in the first place?

What happened to him?

Calliope's soft voice brings me back to present. "You're beautiful." My cheeks heat up under her praise, and she hugs me before kissing me on the cheek and patting my arm. "Ah, I love all the kids getting married lately."

"Well, they are above thirty, my love," Jacob says and smiles at me but makes no move toward me. Compared to the other three, he is more on the reserved side, and yet so much softness and affection laces his tone as he addresses his wife. It leaves no doubt he adores her. "And if you need anything, you can count on the Price family as well." He looks at Remi. "I expect a proper party." My husband opens his mouth to say something, but Jacob's raised palm stops him. "Santiago and you robbed your wives from a good event. Organize something to combine the two." He motions to his friend. "This one married his wife in his own garden with his butlers as witnesses, so of course he approves and doesn't judge."

Lucian pulls Rebecca to him, plastering her against his chest as she muffles a laugh. "Thirty-two years and counting, *amigo*." A beat passes. "And didn't you drag Calliope to a courthouse, and I quote, 'to make this damned fucking obsession official'?"

"At least I invited you to mine."

"Because someone had to watch your kid."

"Still, the thought counts. I got nothing for yours."

Rebecca sighs while Calliope grabs a strawberry from the nearby table and pops it in her mouth, shaking her head at them.

“Oh I see we’re right on time,” an amused voice trills behind us, and I half turn to see Florian prowling toward us through the crowd along with Santiago and Octavius. “Dad still sulking over not getting an invite to the wedding?” He heads straight to Rebecca, ripping her from Lucian’s arms and hugging her tight, lifting her up a little, and then putting her back on the floor. “Hi, *Madrina*,” he greets her softly, and my brows shoot up at this, my gaze darting to Remi, who wraps his arm around me, running his fingers over me in soothing motions while I process this information.

Godmother?

The dude really tasted the forbidden fruit. He’s practically related to Jimena from left and right.

Does he really love her that much? Or couldn’t he help himself to indulge in her?

“Hi, godson.” She gives him a stern look and then glares at her son and Octavius, who freeze. “Haven’t seen any of you in a while.” Her focus goes back to Florian. “Especially you. Any particular reason?” Since everyone stays silent at this, she announces, “Next week, I’m hosting a dinner at my house. Everyone needs to be there.” Collective groans fill the air at her order, although they all straighten up when Lucian sends them a warning look from behind her. “And if anyone is late or doesn’t show, I will personally drag them by their ears to my house.” She places her hands on her hips. “Is that understood?”

“*Si*.”

She hooks her arm through her husband's and tells him, "Let's dance, *mi amor*."

He immediately pulls her to the dance floor, while Jacob says at the same time, "I'm going to check on Satan." He grabs his wife and murmurs something in her ear, and she frowns. "See you later, kids." With this, they walk off in a different direction while I exhale a heavy breath in the restless energy around me that's permanently attached to the dark four.

Blinking at my surreal reality, I try to make sense of the last ten minutes, when they seemed almost... normal, all things considered.

And this in itself should worry me to no end, right?

It's bad to be this comfortable in the company of people who approve of what their kids do, because there's no way in hell they don't know.

"This is so weird," I mutter out loud and groan inwardly when they all drill their stares into me. "Your parents are lovely."

Amusement flashes in Santiago's eyes, and he cocks his head to the side. "Did you expect us all to be raised by demons?"

I stay silent, because—damn it—yes! What people, who grow up in love, commit such hideous crimes as they do? Not that anything could ever justify their horrible deeds, but at least those who faced shit have their psyches damaged.

What's their excuse?

"The world is multifaceted, Penelope. Sometimes, the monsters are the only salvation against the poison polluting this earth." My brows furrow at this explanation, hating the metaphor used, because it hints at them having morals.

And if for a second I allow myself to believe that, then my heart might succumb to Remi and even view his family differently, which will be a big mistake on my part.

Don't all abusive relationships start this way? You ignore the signs and hope for the best, but the best doesn't come, and instead, it becomes worse until it turns into a nightmare?

Accepting our union for the time being for my own sanity and trying to make it work long-term are two different things.

"Don't scare my wife, Santiago." Remi places a gentle kiss on the curve of my neck. "Relax, *chérie*."

"Please stop saying that. Nothing has been relaxing ever since I met you," I grumble, and the men smirk.

"You'll get used to it." Another kiss and then he throws a question at Santiago. "Where is Briseis?"

"She's with Jimena." I notice Florian's jaw twitch. "She got sick on the way here, so they're in the bathroom. She must have eaten something." All humor is gone from Santiago's eyes. "She hasn't been well for months now but refuses to go to the doctor. Maybe you can convince her." He elbows Florian, who stands still, wearing an indifferent mask once again. "She always listens to you." A phone rings in his pocket, and he snatches it out. "I have to take this." He goes to the terrace before stepping outside, and that's when Florian spins on his heel and, without uttering a single word, heads right to the bathroom, I assume.

"What will happen once Lucian and Santiago find out Jimena is pregnant?" Dead silence greets my question while tension around us rises.

I mean, they can ignore it for only so long, considering she must be... what? Around three to four months along?

Octavius takes a whiskey glass from the passing server.
“Hell.”

“War,” Remi adds.

“Blood will be spilled.” Octavius rubs his chin.
“Friendships will be broken.”

More than one.

Lucian and Jacob might have been friends for more than fifty years, according to my dad, but the kings will protect their cubs if a fight erupts.

Will the Four Dark Horsemen survive it though?

If I were Santiago, I would show them all a giant middle finger for hiding such a huge thing from me.

Right after killing Florian, of course.

“In any case, it won’t be like your situation.” Octavius sips his drink. “Little conversation and a promise of marriage won’t fix this shit. Lucian and Jacob would go for each other’s throats over their offsprings and that grandchild. And since they have equal power in this world, it will be both fascinating and frightening to watch.” On this rather grim note, he walks off to God knows where.

The dark four come and go as they please in the oddest ways, for real.

The classical music changes to jazz, and Remi whispers in my ear, “Let’s forget about everyone else, *chérie*.” This man’s voice should be forbidden, for it makes me crave things I shouldn’t and speaks to the desire living inside me while muting common sense and self-preservation. “Want to dance?” I shake my head. “No? Why not?” His fingers trail over my neck, leaving goose bumps in his wake, and the familiar fire

spreads through my veins, which will soon turn into an inferno none of us can control.

How is it possible that with his touch alone he manages to block out everything else? It's a gift and curse at the same time.

Maybe that's why so many people get into arranged marriages; they end up being more passionate than a regular one.

Or the truth is even simpler.

Where there is great hate, there is great sex.

But did I ever hate him though? Or did my betrayed heart hurt from his true nature, because Prince Charming ended up being a beast?

To my surprise, I go for honesty. "I can't think when you touch me, and the last thing I want is for the press to snag a picture of us kissing." I shudder. "My dad might see it."

By how his brown orbs glint in possessiveness, I know he loves my words, and his hold on me tightens. "He'll just have to get used to the fact that you have a man in your life now." He places his mouth on mine, not kissing me, and yet the touch sends awareness through my whole system. "One who needs you constantly and will touch and kiss you wherever the fuck he wants."

He traps my moan with a deep kiss, my hand fisting his shirt and bringing him even closer while thousands of sensations travel over me in powerful waves, demanding an outlet. My body naturally starts to buzz with familiar awareness, already expecting to receive pleasure from this magnificent man.

A harsh and razor-sharp voice pierces through the fog though, dumping us in ice-cold water, and I tear away from him when Amalia's words register in my ears. "Well, look at you liking your husband already."

I swing my head to the right, where I see her standing in a stunning black dress that wraps her form, enveloping it so tight it leaves no doubt about the perfection that is her body. Several men glance in her direction and then do a double take while ping-ponging their eyes between us, and the murmurs already start.

Pushing Remi away, I step toward her and whisper, "Amalia."

She raises her splayed palm and replies, "Not interested in whatever you want to say, Penelope." She drills her stare into my husband who frowns, and his fingers squeeze me harder as if giving me silent support while my sister rejects me once again. "Let's sign whatever we need so I can finally leave for New York."

"Maybe we can talk afterward?" I offer, because the teenage girl who painted countless scenarios in her head about her twin still lives inside me, craving to get to know her and shower her with all the love in my pent-up heart.

But the remaining pieces of this said heart shatter when she sneers, "No."

My shoulders sag, and the arm around my waist tenses, the bulging muscles flexing. "Careful how you talk to my wife, Amalia." He issues a warning my sister hates, judging by how her eyes flash in annoyance, and yet she says nothing. Remi kisses my forehead, murmuring just for my ears, "Wait for me." One more kiss and he motions to the double doors

leading to the hallway, walking there as Amalia follows him, completely ignoring me.

I rub my forehead as a throbbing headache starts to form and go to the snack table, desperately needing to munch on something to calm my nerves. I almost jump in place when Santiago pops up next to me.

“Oh my God, you scared me,” I mutter, placing my hand on my chest and then biting a cookie.

He smirks, hooking his thumb on his pants pocket. “You’re an interesting woman, Penelope.”

“If interesting is the code word for weird, you aren’t the first person to point that out.” I’m still not sure what to make of the four, but hating them all is exhausting, so I might as well accept them while trying to get to know them.

“When you don’t fit certain societal expectations, or you behave in a way a lot of people don’t understand, you tend to gather a lot of labels.” A beat passes. “That’s why I don’t give a shit what anyone thinks.”

I glance in the direction Amalia disappeared, and my heart pangs, my insides rebelling at how much I’m affected by her rejection, since she doesn’t give a fuck about me.

It seems we are truthful representations of a medal with two sides, and my half got all the empathy and compassion.

Santiago must guess the train of my thoughts as he says, while snagging another whiskey glass from a passing waiter, “She’ll come around.” Our gazes clash, and an emotion passes in his eyes. “Maybe not today, tomorrow, or in a year. But eventually, she will.”

“I’m not sure I believe that. She probably wishes for me to never, ever speak to her again.”

Silence falls on us, and I lean on the table, sighing heavily, but freeze at Santiago's question. "Do you know her greatest fear?" When I shake my head, he answers, "Your rejection."

My brows furrow in confusion. "That makes no sense to me." I've been the one who sought her, and she was running away the whole time.

He takes a sip from his drink. "Accepting you means showing you her true self. Her past pain and her present, in which she does hideous crimes to shut out the hurt polluting her every breath. Because once you experience hell on earth, you cannot turn your back on people who suffer just like you did."

Swallowing past the bile in my throat, I whisper, "But I'm willing to look past it." Maybe I haven't made it clear enough? I'm sure her past is shit, and I assume she kills only bad people.

Not that it justifies it by any means, but in current circumstances, I'll take it.

Never in a million years did I think I could be accepting of such things, but here we are.

"Are you?" I blink at this. "Because if you are willing to do that for your twin who treats you like shit, why aren't you giving the same courtesy to my best friend?"

"It's not the same."

He twirls the glass in his fingers. "Isn't it? You're ready to hightail your ass out of here once all this ends, and yet he's treated you like a queen all this time."

"He blackmailed me into—"

“Arranged marriage. This was Amalia’s idea, not his. You grew up in love just like me.” His rapid changes in subject give me whiplash, because I don’t understand if it’s anger or annoyance in his tone that rubs me the wrong way.

Or maybe it’s the truth.

Not sure if he expects an answer to his statement, but I give it to him nevertheless. “Yes.”

“Remi didn’t. In fact, his family life was complete shit. Where he constantly heard how everyone wished he was never born.” I still, my hand clenching on my chest, and pain washes over me thinking about my husband, who was subjected to such cruelty as a child.

No one deserves to hear something like that.

“And now he has a wife who wishes she never met him.” I lean back as if he slapped me, and a dangerous expression settles on his features. “You treat him just like Amalia does you.”

“That’s not fair.” I cross my arms, doing my best to protect myself from Santiago, who’s decided to give me a lecture all of a sudden. And there’s some truth in his statement, although I hate it.

Because despite everything, I don’t want to hurt anyone the way my twin chose to hurt me, even the villain I married.

“I had no idea about all this or much of a choice. If people knew—”

He interrupts me, “Who gives a fuck about people?” Since the question is rhetorical, I stay silent while he continues.

“Remi is my best friend. I love him as a brother, and he deserves better than a wife who is ready to run away from him and sell him out to the cops at the first opportunity because she

thinks that's the right thing to do." My eyes widen at how he reads me so well. "We are a family. Think about your future actions well, Penelope. Because if you do anything to hurt my friend, I will destroy you." Absolute promise rings in his words; this man would punish me should I ever endanger Remi or his family.

I take a step back from the onslaught of fearful energy coming at me in spades. "Don't threaten me," I warn him, my voice trembling slightly, but I still keep my chin high, not appreciating how he decided to attack me while my husband isn't around. Not sure what shit Briseis lets him get away with, but like he said, I grew up in a loving household. I'm not alone in this world! "I'm a Walsh, and—"

He interrupts me once again, making me grit my teeth. "You're a Reyes. You married one of us, and your loyalty will stay with us. Should you ever go against us, you will not like the consequences."

I bristle at this. "Remi would never let you hurt me!" All his actions so far showed me he wouldn't physically do anything to me.

I'm his prized possession and obsession, and those are sacred to these monsters.

Santiago grins at my statement and then winks at me. "Isn't it ironic? A man you claim to hate is the only one you trust to save you." The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. "Not your sister with her dark brotherhood, and not your father with all his connections. But a husband who trapped you in this marriage. Think about it before you listen to common sense, what society thinks is right, and do irrevocable damage."

We stare at one another for a second, and then he picks up another nut, pops it in his mouth, and strolls after Remi and Amalia, probably to handle the paperwork, while his advice plays over and over in my mind.

All my life, I always chose what was right.

Would it be so bad for once to choose what my heart desires, even if no one understands it?

Would it be so bad to follow the unknown?

Would it be so bad... to fall for a villain instead of a prince?

*R*emi

Amalia signs her shares away with one signature and then slides the document to me, closing her pen before dropping it in her small purse. “They’re all yours.”

I glance down at the papers that announce my shares in *his* empire, and the familiar pleasure spreads through my veins in anticipation of my upcoming victory.

Now all I have to do is send distractions his way before publicly humiliating him.

Oddly enough, the thought that should calm the monster within me makes him more restless, as for the first time in my life, I have something to lose.

Penelope.

Tension drains out of me as her image flashes in my head, my beautiful wife with the most mesmerizing eyes that look at me with desire and fear alike, and I love every second of it.

This probably makes me a bastard, but I give zero fucks about it.

Amalia flips her hair back as she says, “Hopefully, it will put an end to your harassment.”

My brow lifts at this. “Me coming to New York and trying to have a conversation with you hardly counts as harassment, Amalia.” Although I haven’t spent time alone in her company at fucking all and mostly had arguments with Lachlan over her, the memories of my so-called obsession with her still inspires anger within me.

Because my emotions for her were never genuine, but even those fake emotions managed to hurt my wife.

My obsession and possessiveness belong only to her. I don’t want anyone—and especially her—to ever think otherwise.

She huffs, pushing her chair back, and it scrapes soundly against the floor as she gets up. “Miss me with that bullshit, will you? You’ve been the bane of my existence for years now, so trust me when I say I hope it’s the end.”

Santiago grabs the papers, running his eyes over it, and he nods in satisfaction. “I’ll send these now so we can start the process.” He barely spares Amalia a glance. “Do us all a favor and keep your family away from our city. Next time, we won’t react so kindly to them breaking the rules and deceiving us.” On this note, he leaves me alone with the woman who is almost a spitting image of my wife and yet does absolutely nothing for me.

In fact, the only emotion present is fury at her behaving so badly toward her and treating her affections akin to a pestering insect she wishes to kill off.

Amalia is a freezing winter, while Penelope is a warm summer day my darkness cannot help but long to bask in and believe there is something deep inside me besides anger and the desire to inflict torture.

The need to possess her rides me constantly. Even right now, I want to go back to her as soon as possible so no one would dare hurt her, and drink my fill of her.

The woman belongs to me. She will only ever be mine, and that's an aphrodisiac to a person who never had anything of his own, even his family name.

People who had everything would never truly get those who had to live without.

I get up as well, snatching out the pack of cigarettes from my back pocket and putting one in my mouth while noticing Amalia is still standing by her seat as if expecting something. "Amalia, you presented no interest to me besides the shares you owned." I light up my cigarette, sending the smoke flying around us.

She ponders this statement, her hand gripping the strap of her purse tightly to the point of her knuckles turning white and finally she spits out a question. "And Penelope?" She bites her lip, then adds, "You will treat her well?"

It clearly physically pains her to even voice her question, because we both know the hidden meaning behind it.

She cares.

Despite doing her best not to, she cares about her twin, and this is a weapon in itself, since I can always use it against her.

She shouldn't worry though. Penelope loves her, and what my wife loves will not be harmed.

Unless someone or something decides to take her away, then they will all fucking die.

“Isn’t it a bit late to be concerned with that? You made her marry me to save your family.”

Regret flashes on her face before she masks it with indifference and straightens up. “Just answer my question, Remi. Will you treat her well? Like Cortez men treat their women?”

“I’m not a Cortez, Amalia.” She hisses in anger, and I take a greedy pull, enjoying watching her frustration for my wife’s sake. No one gets to hurt her without facing some shit from me. “And you made it abundantly clear you want nothing to do with her, so our marriage is none of your business.”

She opens and closes her mouth, an internal battle going on inside her as she tries to rein in her emotions, but finally the most prominent wins when she screams, “If you hurt her, I’m going to kill you!”

My laughter reverberates through the walls, which in turn makes her red, and she pulls the door open, only to hiss at Florian standing in the doorjamb, “Move away, Price.”

“Aww, leaving so soon, darling?” he asks, sighing dramatically. “Not even going to stay for cake?”

She storms away while Florian smirks.

“Gotta say I’m glad you married Penelope.” He shudders. “Have you seen what she did to her last victim?”

Instead of answering him, I frown, noticing a red handprint on his cheek. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing.”

Tension rises between us while we both just stare at one another, knowing full well who slapped him. Which isn't surprising.

For the silver tongue Florian has, he spits straight-up cruel bullshit to the mother of his child.

“You know you won't be able to hide this forever, right?”

When I found out about Jimena's pregnancy, I beat the shit out of Florian and probably would have broken some bones if Octavius didn't pull me away.

Our little princess grew up in front of our eyes, and he fucking touched her.

Worse.

He fucking slept with her!

Once I calmed down, I reined in my instincts, because Florian didn't force shit on her, and she has been crushing on him for forever. And after speaking to her, I promised to keep my mouth shut—although I despised lying to my best friend.

Loyalty to Jimena comes first though; I'm her older brother as well, and Santiago's rage in her fragile state would have hurt her too much. Not to mention, I didn't want to subject her to such stress in her first trimester.

I waited and waited for Florian to man up, but the fucker just does nothing while they're running out of time.

“The minute I claim the child as my own, he will be a firstborn Price heir.” His Adam's apple bobbles when he swallows as dread fills me, reminding me about a psycho who has been hunting the Price family now for almost four decades. “Until I catch him, I will not claim my child.” His

tone leaves no room for argument, and I don't know what to say either, because deep down, I understand.

Firstborn children always die in the Price family. Florian lost his twin at the age of three. The child was brutally raped and then chopped to pieces, delivered to the Price family's doorstep with a note saying **Until the next heir.**

That's the reason Uncle Jacob didn't give any family fortune to his son with Aunt Calliope. While he has a billion-dollar trust fund, he won't ever be next in line to the Price throne or allowed to be part of the family business.

Otherwise, it would endanger Florian since he is an heir now.

Needless to say, the kid never took it well, and that's why he raises hell in the boarding school he currently studies in. Last I heard, he and his four best friends rule it while deeming themselves kings.

Florian even had to fly up there when the principal called with the report that his brother was bullying a girl so much she was afraid to show her nose in school.

"You're hurting Jimena. And you know better than me what Cortezes do when they are hurt. They retaliate."

That's why it will be a miracle if Santiago doesn't destroy us all once he finds out.

Florian's hand clenches and relaxes, while agony flashes on his face, but determination and absolute resolve covers it. He might have been a manwhore in the past, but he never as much as looked at anyone since she came back from boarding school a few years back. That was his only saving grace, stopping me from killing him.

"I think—"

“Don’t.” His harshly spoken word hangs between us, letting me know to not delve deeper, as Florian’s scars were always off limits.

Even Octavius knows his boundaries when it comes to his best friend.

I nod at him, pressing the butt of my cigarette into the ashtray, and he clears his throat. “There is a reason I came.” I look at him, waiting for him to elaborate, and when he does, the world around me stills as fury awakens. “The Carringtons are here.”

One single family name.

And yet it does nothing but send rage into my every pore, soaking it with so much darkness I forget how to breathe.

Although one thought remains.

Penelope.

I have to get to her before any of them can.

Otherwise, they will hurt the one thing that matters to me in this world, and I cannot allow it.

They ripped apart my soul.

They don’t get to touch her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*“His darkness has many layers.
Underneath it lies his soul and heart.
And I crave to possess them both.*

But...

*Then would his darkness claim me too?
For how can good and evil coexist?”*

Penelope

*R*emi, 18 years old

Gripping the heavy soil bag, I lift it up and throw it on the table inside the greenhouse, making the pots around me rattle.

Adjusting them all better, I open it up and then grab a small shovel, distributing the soil in each one of them, as these rose pots will bloom beautifully in several months under the beaming sun in the living room. Aunt Rebecca loves the flowery scent wafting through the air in their mansion, so I make sure to prepare enough for her.

I’ve already watered the plants and cut the grass, so after this is done, I can go back and do the assignment the principal gave us.

A growl escapes me at the thought, and the pot crushes in my hand, making me curse. "For fuck's sake." I throw the broken pot into the garbage and make a mental note to buy a new one.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and after removing the glove with my teeth, I take it out and check the message from Tim, the owner of the club where all my illegal fights happen.

<Tim> Fight. Tonight. \$5000.

My brows shoot up at the amount; usually I get around two grand, depending on what commission Tim decides to take.

A smile curves my lips just remembering my last opponent lying on the ground after I knocked him down and broke his nose. The asshole beat his wife just before jumping in the ring, so I punched him extra hard and even dug my fingers into his gallbladder, making him gag several times, and covered his mouth so he'd swallow it all back down.

Yeah, in the fighting arena, I have no morals or limitations. My rage is directed at the world out in the open, which pays me great, since I haven't lost in a while now.

Taking off the second glove, I quickly reply.

<Me> Five grand?

<Tim> A new guy, bulkier and heavier than you. He wants to fight the Odysseus, so the stakes are higher.

Since my name is so closely associated with the rich dynasties, I decided to use my middle one as my sort-of stage name. Besides, I find the name so ridiculous; Judith must have been high when she was giving it to me. At least the dude she named me after was actually a great character, and I applaud his sheer will to get back home, no matter the obstacles.

Plus, the scholarship invitations are rolling in now, and no way in fuck would I have jeopardized my chances to get into a good university. I've worked my ass off to get them, studied late at night while working essentially three jobs, and saved as much as I could to finally rent an apartment once school is over.

Rage and order all have a place in my life, and I've learned to combine the two to reach the top.

The Cortezes would never kick me out, but once Roland has no ability to screw up applications for me, Uncle Lucian will kick him out for sure. A son of a widower who works as a gardener to provide for his son looks better on applications than an estranged son with a drunk father.

Everything in this world is about strategy, the image we present to others being one of them.

Anger washes over me, thinking about the drunk who now mostly stays home; he doesn't even bother working, flaunting the fact that I'll keep him around just so he can deliver information about my mother to me.

No matter what I've tried, he hasn't confessed. According to him, his life would turn to shit anyway once I stop covering his ass, so why bother making anything easier for me?

I've used the limited resources I've had to search for any woman who lost a child early or reported a missing child who would be around my age.

Every hacker found through the underground by Tim came up blank, claiming the search terms were too broad. Thousands of cases fit my description, and they wanted more details. But I had none for them.

I just suspected they couldn't be from Chicago, since we moved around so much, and the flashes in my head of the tortured boy must have been me.

My photographic memory forever etched their abuse in me, but somehow it managed to still protect me from remembering it too vividly.

So Roland is alive for now, not that I don't deliver a blow here and there when he runs his mouth too much for not bringing him alcohol.

He was going insane without it for a week when I withheld it for fun, enjoying his suffering and the amount of begging he was willing to do for it.

He recently proposed me a deal. If I convince Uncle Lucian to let him stay without working till he dies, he will tell me.

Fuck that shit.

I will find what I need one way or another. I'm starting to think I need to use torture in order to make Roland talk.

Too bad there is no one to teach me this excellent skill.

For now at least.

My phone vibrates again.

<Tim> Do we have a deal?

Usually I ask for more details about my opponents, but five grand is an opportunity I won't pass up.

<Me> Yeah. I'll be there tonight.

Putting the phone in my back pocket, I quickly finish and clean the table, heading out to the main house, already despising the task ahead of me.

I stomp my dirty boots while sweat dripping down my back dampens my shirt, but I have no time to take a shower.

Rock music blasts through the speakers around the guest house as I walk toward it, bobbing my head to the rhythm, thinking about what other bullshit Santiago will tell me today.

He came back to us three years ago, all bruised and badly scarred. They took him to the hospital right away. I couldn't wait to see him; my happiness knew no bounds.

The guys and me bought his favorite chocolate and books, deciding to visit him together for the first time.

My best friend came back; he survived! I couldn't believe it all the way to the hospital, amazed by his strength and resolve. I heard some of the shit that was done to him when the FBI showed up.

My happiness was short-lived, though, as he refused to see us. Uncle Lucian and Aunt Rebecca tried to reason with him, but he flat out yelled "no," and they had to respect his decision.

Florian and Octavius proposed to give him some time, letting him adjust, all things considered, and decided not to push.

I said fuck that and pushed. I snuck inside his room and talked his ear off while he ignored me, staring at the window.

I showed up every single day, bringing games and books and even movies, since he had a huge-ass TV in his room. However, all my efforts were met with annoyance or an anger I didn't recognize.

Some asshole replaced my best friend, and he warned me he'd get a restraining order, so security had to escort me out, and that's when I stopped.

He studied with tutors the first two years, catching up on the material he missed. So he's lucky to be just a year behind us, but it was difficult to talk to him.

He was hell to live with, constantly had nothing but sarcastic jabs for us all, and continued to ignore us and just soaked up knowledge or disappeared who knows where.

The only people he was nice and semi-warm to were Aunt Rebecca and Jimena. Even Uncle Lucian got shit from him.

Overall, there was this deadly, almost vicious vibe around him that fascinated me in ways I couldn't explain. A certain darkness surrounded him, and I wished he would make me part of it instead of pushing me out.

Because I have my darkness too.

Lately, I've tried a different strategy, letting him be, but today I can't do it, since the stupid idea the principal came up with requires his cooperation.

Knocking on his door three times, I barge inside the guest house that he claimed as his for some reason, despising staying in the main house. I open my arms wide. "Amigo!" I greet him.

"I'm not your amigo. I don't remember allowing you to walk in," he replies coldly. He snatches his phone and cigarettes on his way and pushes past me to go outside. He strolls through the garden to the driveway, where his car already awaits him.

"You're still my friend. Where are you going?" I ask, unfazed by his words, as I march next to him, matching him step for step.

He could invite me anywhere, and I'd follow. I would have taken bigger offense if he'd become friends with anyone else

or even stayed in touch with the guys.

However, he ignores them too, although they are calmer about it, of fucking course.

They have each other; it's me who is the loner in this equation.

“No es asunto tuyo.”

I clack my tongue at his rude reply. “It's my business, because—”

Anger crosses his face, and bitterness fills his voice when he spits out, “Why? Because my father ordered you?”

This statement comes so out of the blue I'm taken aback, and my brows furrow. “No, he didn't say anything. I just want to make sure you don't plan to do anything stupid like the last time.” By last time, I mean when he burned his car and announced it proudly to his dad, expecting him to blow up or something. Uncle Lucian, though, took it all silently and just bought him another one.

He deals with a lot of shit from his son, but I guess we all know why he behaves the way he does.

I still see traces of the boy he once was when he is respectful to the staff or controls his anger enough not to shout in front of Jimena, who loves him very much.

He can't stand to be hugged and yet allows his mom to do it. His face during these moments though... it pains me, and I really want to shake him so he can fucking tell me the truth and not live in his nightmare all alone.

“Wait.” He's about to step on the asphalt when I grab him by the elbow and spin him around to face me, rage filling me

as realization hits me. “Is this why we aren’t friends anymore? You’re fucking jealous?”

Does he think his family loves me more than him or something? Or worse, resents me for being here with them while he couldn’t?

Then he should talk to me, and I’ll tell him the agony they all experienced awaiting his return, living and breathing just to find him.

Pulling his arm back, he pushes at my chest. “Don’t touch me, and fuck you. Who are you to question me anyway? I don’t want to be your friend. Stop fucking trying. When will you finally get it? You are nothing but a gardener’s son in this house. Know your place.” The hideous words spill from his mouth. This is the same boy who kicked our classmate in first grade for making fun of me for never riding in a plane before?

He knows better than anyone how much stuff like this used to hurt me until I learned not to give a fuck.

I step back, disbelief crossing my face, and then shake my head before laughing, although it lacks any humor.

“Seriously? You’re ready to go this low to push me away? It won’t work.” Mainly because remorse flashed in his eyes the minute he said it, so I know he regrets it.

Tough luck for him, because his jabs won’t push me away.

And just like that, his anger is back, and he smiles at me, although his eyes stay dead. “Careful, Remi. Your clingy ex-girlfriend act is starting to get on my nerves!” He shouts the last part, and I grin.

Emotions are good; at least it shows me he cares rather than always giving me cold indifference. Deep down, he

misses me too. "Good. And let's keep the statements accurate. My clingy friend act." I bump into his shoulder.

A voice a few feet away interrupts our conversation, instantly zipping annoyance through me. "Ah, the lovebirds are fighting again."

Florian stands near Santiago's car while his is parked in the distance. He winks at us, wearing a suit.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Hello to you too, Cortez." He glances briefly at me.

"Hey, man." I don't bother to reply.

In fact, we haven't spoken at all after I beat his ass when I found him fucking my girlfriend. While I indulge in sex more frequently now, especially at the club where there's always a wide choice of women who know forever is not promised to them, my heart is never in it.

Besides, I never slept with her, so at least there is that. I actually planned to treat someone as my girl for once, because a stable girlfriend works better for image than being a manwhore.

With the years, Florian's behavior has gotten worse, and none of us knows why, which makes it almost impossible to deal with him.

"I'm here to finish the assignment, so then I can proceed with my plans to have a threesome tonight," he says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Another threesome?

At the rate he's going, he'll be having a foursome soon.

"What assignment?" Santiago asks, and here we go.

The reason I went to him in the first place. “That’s what I mentioned earlier. The principal has ordered us to make a presentation on The Four Riders of the Apocalypse as a punishment for our nickname.”

Florian elaborates on this idiotic idea. She couldn’t come up with anything else? “She didn’t like us destroying the cafeteria.” He chuckles. “Raged and screamed, to be exact, but your father took care of it. We do the assignment, listen to her crap in front of the whole school, and she won’t put it on our records, screwing our paperwork.”

“What happened in the cafeteria?”

“David made a comment to Remi that he shouldn’t be in our school, since we don’t accept charity cases, and of course our friend here punched him in the nose.” He winks at me. “He’s good with his right hook.”

“Shut up, Florian,” I interrupt and continue the story. “His friends joined the fight, and Octavius rushed to my defense to help me out. It got messy.”

Octavius is the only stable guy among my friends, always stoic and silent yet will always save your ass if you need it.

He doesn’t have mood swings or changes of heart like these two assholes.

Florian puts his hand on his chest. “I couldn’t stand not helping Octavius, so I rolled up my sleeves and beat some asses. Before security showed up, we destroyed a few tables, cracked a window, and some other shit that requires renovations. Your dad will pay for that as well.”

“What does it have to do with me?”

I rub my chin. “The school kept on saying the dark four did it, started by the dark four and shit, since you know they

called us this back in the day. Anyway, the principal just assumed you were there, so you're guilty by association."

Santiago barks a laugh. "Fuck that. I'm not doing this assignment. Buena suerte."

With this, he strolls to his car. He's about to hop inside when Florian's words halt his movements.

Locking my arms behind my head, I tilt my face to the sun and listen to their conversation, not daring to come closer. My friend would run for the hills. "She'll kick Remi out of school. You know David's dad and his power. It will affect his scholarship if it goes on his record."

Ah, Florian has so much duality.

He cares about my scholarship but still fucked me up. It's not even the betrayal; it's how the whole school knew, and some snickered that he would have never done something like that to Santiago or Octavius.

Because they were of pure blood.

No matter what happens, though, I don't regret David's pain. That bastard has begged for my fist since first grade, and I'd restrained myself enough. He better never cross paths with me in the future. Nothing will stop me then from inflicting pain for every insult thrown my way.

I barely hold my laughter back when my friend poses a question to him, distaste lacing his tone, which speaks volumes. He disapproves of what Florian did, which shows me he still considers me a friend. At least there's that. "Did you care about Remi this much when you fucked his girlfriend?"

"I'm surprised myself."

“Remi!” he calls me for the first time since he came back, and I snap my head in his direction, shocked to hear my name from him after all these years. He motions for me to come to them.

I jog toward them and end up next to them, when he announces, “Let’s finish it quickly, and hopefully I won’t have to see any of your faces for a long time.” Yeah, that’s not going to happen if I have my say about it. He zeroes his focus on Florian. “Where is Octavius?”

“He should have been here.” He frowns, snatching out his phone and dialing him. A beat passes before he says, “He’s not picking up.”

I speak up, worry climbing up my back. “He went home after school.”

Florian dials again but has the same result; the tension between us rises, as probably a similar thought settles in our minds.

His stepfather has returned home after a long absence, and if he knows about what happened in school... repercussions might be severe.

With Octavius not picking up, we might need to act fast. My hands fist just imagining what he might do to him. Sometimes, I want to strap him to a pole and beat him to his last breath, so then he’ll know nothing but pain and fear for the rest of his life, because that’s what he’s subjected my friend to. Life trusted him with a child, and instead, he not only ruined that child but continues to use his goodness against him.

“We need to go to his house. Florian, ride with us,” Santiago orders, and I understand why he says it. Octavius’s

stepfather cares about image so much he won't dare hurt him in front of us.

Or rather he is afraid to touch him with the guys present, because they will tell their dads.

And their dads already sent him to the hospital a few years back. We thought the torture would end, but it continued.

Octavius just got better at hiding it.

We all quickly get inside, and I hope nothing has happened to him.

Because the darkness spreads inside me so much I think I will kill his fucking stepfather if he did something to my friend.

If there is even one more scar on him... or if he lies in a pool of blood and piss again... or if he is chained in the basement... I will snap his neck.

Back then, we didn't know that every action in this life has a reaction; our decisions bring consequences with them.

And what we did on that fateful date forever sealed our fates together, entwining them in such a way we could never again turn our backs on each other.

Because it awakened monsters inside us to whom we gave our first sacrifice, and then the darkness demanded more and more.

After all, we created a brotherhood.

And to have a dark brotherhood, sacrifices have to be made.

It's inevitable.

Penelope

As people dance and converse around me while I'm standing alone like an idiot, I grab a nearby empty plate and put a few strawberries on it along with chocolate, fully intending to head to the terrace, away from all these prying eyes.

I can feel the silent judgment over how my husband just hightailed his ass off with my twin.

I think someone already posted on social media how we are connected, so it's just a matter of time before I get another angry phone call from my father.

"Just great," I mutter, exhaling heavily, and then jump in place when a deep voice speaks up from behind me.

"Young women shouldn't sigh so heavily, darling."

I spin around, blinking in surprise at the tall, old man standing in front of me wearing a colorful purple three-piece suit while his wrinkled face smiles down at me. If the signature green eyes weren't an indicator enough, his stunning appearance for his age would have been a dead giveaway.

Atlas Price in the flesh.

"Hi," I say and then place the plate back on the table, slightly nervous knowing his reputation of blacklisting people left and right. "Happy birthday."

"Well thank you, darling." He roams his gaze over me and then smiles even brighter. "You're the spitting image of your mother." The air hitches in my throat; no one has ever said that to me. "She used to turn heads. No wonder your father fell for her." He opens his arms wide and then pulls me toward him, hugging me so tight it's hard to breathe for a second.

"Welcome to the family, Penelope." He leans back and pats

my cheeks. "I'm very happy for Remi." Then his brow furrows, and his tone grows cold. "Still don't appreciate Asher ignoring my invitation though. After everything I've done for him." He huffs, his eyes lighting up with a dangerous glint. "He's lucky I like his art enough not to take offense." Then he grins again, and I understand why his moods swings are legendary. Rumor has it he once demolished an entire jewelry collection because the lighting fell on it wrong. "If I was just five years younger, darling, I'd totally fight your husband for you." He winks, and nervous laughter escapes me.

What in the hell?

"Five years? Try fifty, Grandpa Atlas." Jimena, along with Briseis, dances toward us, and she is gorgeous in her red flowery dress skirting around her. "And even then, you'd still be older than Remi right now."

Atlas's eyes soften as they land on her, and he lets go of me, hugging her tight instead and kissing her soundly on the cheek. "The prettiest girl in the whole world is here." And then he glares at her. "Did you just call me old?"

She smiles up at him innocently. "No. Just too old for Penelope."

They have a stare-off for a while, and then he bursts out laughing, his mustache curling up, and he shakes his head at her. "Always smart, so smart." He addresses Briseis. "Glad to see you here too, darling. Stay till the very end. The show will be amazing." Then he claps his hands together, and two young, blonde women show up wearing short dresses, and they each grab him by an elbow. "Ladies, shall we proceed?" And just like that, he moves away, ready to talk to other guests.

I'm afraid to even imagine what the show later on entails with such an eccentric man.

"He's..." I try to find a perfect word to describe him but fail to do so.

"Interesting. I always go for interesting," Briseis suggests and then rubs Jimena's back when she covers her mouth and then waves her hand. "Are you all right?"

Even though she pales a little, she nods. "*Si*. Their perfume was so strong I just can't."

"When my friend was pregnant with her kid, it helped for her to smell a bar of soap." Shock is written all over her features, and I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I know, and no, I haven't said anything to Santiago." I glance at Briseis. "How mad do you think he's going to be with you?"

"Very. Which will result in angry make-up sex, so there is a silver lining."

He was mean to me earlier, but I do feel bad once the guy finds out about all this. "Well, as long as you stay positive."

Angry make-up sex.

I wonder how that one feels. Is it even better than regular sex? Although better sex might just kill me with pleasure, because I can't imagine getting off more than I already do with Remi.

"I'll handle my brother," Jimena assures us. "No one will be hurt. I have a plan."

"You do?" we both ask in unison, and she nods.

"And it's perfect. This way everyone will be happy and no one will be mad."

We share a look with Briseis, not quite sure what to make of this.

“What will make you happy?”

She seems taken aback by my question and then grabs the bottle of water, flipping it open. “It doesn’t matter. Our two families won’t fight and end century-long friendships over my stupidity.” She swallows hard. “Did you know that even our grandparents used to be best friends? I’m the only girl ever born in either of the dynasties, and I managed to screw both of them royally.” So much self-loathing reeks out of her, and I’m not sure what to say.

“Jimena—”

She interrupts whatever Briseis wants to say next. “No. I knew he would never commit, and I still chose him above anyone else. *La culpa is mia.*”

The fault is mine.

Briseis sighs in resignation and then shifts her attention to me. “Your friend stopped by.” My brows furrow, and she elaborates. “Isla. She tried to sneak inside, but security caught her, so Octavius is dealing with her right now.”

“What?” I think I’m going to have a permanent headache from all the drama erupting around me. Isla tried to reach me via phone multiple times, but her calls went straight to voice mails. “Where is she?”

“She was outside by the door.”

I head straight in the direction Jimena is pointing, and in record time reach the main door, only to halt my movements when I see Isla backed into a corner with a furious Octavius looming over her.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he hisses and slams his fist unto the wall above her head, and she just blinks, staring at him.

“I needed to talk to you. There is something—”

“I don’t give a fuck what it is. What part of ‘not interested in you’ do you not understand?” She flinches at his harshly spoken words and crosses her arms as if wanting to protect herself from his anger. “No man likes desperate women, Isla.”

Okaaay.

Isla is not my favorite person, all things considered, but this is over the line.

“Hey!” I call, and they look at me. “You’re here!” I decide to improvise and walk toward them. “Glad you got here okay.” I squeeze between Octavius and her, hugging her close, but not before noticing relief washing over her. “What took you so long?”

A raspy breath escapes her. “There was traffic on the road, and I forgot my invite.”

Octavius darts his gaze between us, clearly expecting an explanation, so I give it to him. “She wanted to see me, so we agreed to meet here.”

“Here,” he repeats, and I nod. “At this party? Who gave you the authority to invite anyone?”

In this moment, I’m really glad I married Remi, and even Santiago seems like a nice guy compared to Octavius. Why Isla is obsessed with him, I’ll never know. “Remi.” I raise my chin high. “Or is that a crime now?”

A smile curves his features, mean in its nature, announcing to me he doesn’t believe a word I say, and then I gasp when he

wraps his hand around Isla's throat, pressing her harder to the wall. "Do not wander around the mansion. Stay inside with the girls." Only then do I realize Briseis and Jimena have joined us. "If anything happens to her here, your husband will pay the price," he throws my way, giving one more light squeeze to her throat, and then pushes back, going to the party room and leaving us all speechless.

"I'm really confused about all this," I finally mutter while Isla rubs her hand up and down her neck. "Am I the only one?"

"Octavius is usually very reserved. That's so unlike him," Briseis says, grinning at Isla. "You must've unsettled him."

"He wants to kill me with his bare hands. I wouldn't call that unsettled," she grumbles, and Jimena laughs at this. Isla glances at me. "Thanks for saving me. You didn't have to."

"I think you need to stop stalking him."

Jimena shakes her head, bursting out another laugh. "Oh, please continue. Didn't you hear how protective he is of her despite being angry?" She pats Isla on the shoulder. "I grew up with these men. He doesn't want to kill you. Fuck you? Absolutely."

Our private investigator turns red as a tomato. "I wouldn't have stalked him if he just listened to me and agreed to help me." She runs her fingers over her simple black dress that does little for her beauty. The material seems cheap, and she stands out—not in a good way—among the crowd. "Why is it so hard for him?"

"Well, these men are difficult," Jimena states the obvious. "Let's go to the terrace? It has a nice view and a small gazebo where we can talk while all this madness is happening." She

swirls her finger in the air. “And maybe you can share your little problem with us. We are pretty powerful too, you know.” She winks at Isla, who relaxes a little.

“Sounds like a plan. I miss talking to someone. My best friend got married and lives in Houston.” Longing echoes in her tone, and she elaborates. “You probably met her husband. Callum.”

My eyes almost bulge out of their sockets at this.

Her friend married a psycho too?

At this point, I think we should all form a therapy group or a club.

“So I could use new friends.” Then she corrects herself quickly. “Not that I expect you to be my friends. I’ll just shut up now.”

Everyone laughs, and Jimena hooks her arm through her elbow, bringing herself closer to her. “Let’s start with a talk.” She pulls her in the opposite direction of the ballroom to a narrow hallway. “We should drink some tea too.” She grabs Briseis with her other arm.

“Whatever you say, sister-in-law.”

As I follow them, something on the wall snags my attention, and I change directions, coming closer to the magnificent masterpiece displaying a boat rocking in a storm as some mythical being tries to attack it.

Whoever painted it must have been a genius, as the oil colors are so precise and realistic it almost seems as if it’s happening in real life and you can watch this fascinating and frightening event live.

Running my fingers over the golden frame, I read the description.

Odysseus on the way to Ithaca.

Oh, he and his men faced a lot of storms, which served as one of the reasons for the goddess to catch him.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I blink at the woman standing next to me wearing a brown, silky dress falling to her feet while her dark, thick braid hangs over her shoulder. Her brown eyes smile up at me, although it seems as if permanent sorrow resides in them. “Shows in all its glory how powerless we are against nature.” Despite probably being older than me by twenty years, her tan skin is flawless, and such warmth comes from her I instantly ease in her company.

“Yes. Whoever painted it has a natural-born talent.” I study the piece once again, focusing on how much attention the artist paid to details. “He perfectly captured their terror.”

“And determination to survive on Odysseus’s face,” she concludes, playing with the sapphire neckless around her neck. “He chose a perfect character for it too. Nothing would have stopped this man from returning home.” Wistfulness rings in this statement, and I look at her. “That’s why he was always my favorite when it came to Homer’s heroes.”

I groan. “Really? I think I’m the only one who doesn’t find their love story romantic.”

The corner of her mouth twitches while amusement flicks in her eyes. “Sometimes, we end up in such impossible and difficult circumstances we have no choice but to go even against ourselves to survive. Some might even say judgment is the privilege of those who never had to choose between two evils.”

Is this what Remi had to go through while growing up?

Choosing between two evils and becoming a villain who kills all these people for whatever reason kept him semi-sane?

And my judgment of his actions without asking what truly happened to him in the past—is it my privilege because I knew love?

When you never had love in your life, what becomes of you?

I shift my focus back on the painting, seeing Odysseus in a new light although still finding the love story lame. However, the myth does show that sometimes, no matter how much you want something, fate just doesn't give it to you and throws battles and obstacles your way one after another, as if testing your true desire for the goal.

Those who give up don't get the rewards of those who hang on till their hands bleed.

Or is this also a myth?

What if sometimes giving up is the only option to survive? Even if it means giving up your humanity?

“Maybe. Certainly his skills during the Trojan War could be admired.”

“I always imagined him as this calm, protecting, and cunning man. One of the reasons I named my son after him.” Melodic laughter slips past her lips, and yet pain dances on the edges of it, pulling at my heartstrings for some reason. “In my opinion, the name by default gives a certain vibe to a person who carries it.”

How strange too. I've gone twenty-three years without knowing anyone named that, and now I find out a second

person is named after the mighty hero. “Yeah, well. I bet he loved the name while he was growing up.”

She freezes, the fingers clenching her necklace so tight the knuckles turn white and the air hitches in her throat. “He died just after he was born.”

Oh.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, honey.” Then she straightens up and shakes her head, plastering a smile on her face that once again seems out of place on her features. “I’m surprised to see such a young girl admiring art. Usually, it’s the older folks.”

Inwardly exhaling in relief at the change in subject, I say, “My dad would have my hide if he knew I didn’t show appreciation where it was due.”

Her brows rise, and for a second, the movement seems so familiar, yet I cannot place it. “Who’s your father?”

“Asher Walsh.”

Her eyes widen in surprise, and her red scarf slides down her arms when she steps closer to me. “Penelope?” she asks, and I nod. “We used to go to the same school, although he was younger than me by four years.” She is forty-six years old then. “Well, that and I was engaged to your biological father.”

My jaw drops at this admission, too stunned to utter a single word while my mind swirls with all this.

Theodore was engaged? And who is she anyway? Dad never mentioned this.

She must read the questions in my head, because she answers on them. “My name is Sofia Carrington. That

engagement lasted for a few months, and then your father met your mother. The rest is history.”

Oh shit.

“Theodore was a cheater too?” The words spill from my mouth, and she huffs, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture, although I think she finds my assumption funny.

“Of course not. He fell in love. Besides, I was happy when it ended.” She gently rubs her palm over my arm. “And it worked out for the best. They had you girls.” She clasps her hands together. “I was so happy to find out this morning about you two.” Sadness quickly replaces the joy on her face though, and she puts her hand on her chest. “Not everyone is so lucky. To know that your children survived despite everything. And yet we hope for the impossible, just like Odysseus did.” A beat passes, and then she fires another question. “How is Asher? I haven’t seen him since Theodore died.”

“He’s good.”

“Married?”

“Nope. Dad says he is forever a bachelor.”

She grins. “That sounds a lot like him.” She opens her mouth, wanting to say something, but Remi’s harsh voice interrupts us.

“Penelope.”

I look over my shoulder to see him joining us.

“Oh. The meeting ended?” I expect him to wrap his hand around my waist, but to my surprise, he stands next to me, his hands in his front pockets while he stays absolutely cold and still as a granite wall, his gaze trained on Sofia.

In fact, his stare is so intense it makes me shift uncomfortably while various emotions wash over me in confusing waves as awkwardness settles all around us.

Why is he acting this way?

Clearing my throat, I introduce them. “This is Sofia Carrington. We just met, and this is—”

“Remi Reyes. Your husband. I’ve heard so many things about you over the years.” She smiles softly at him, but my husband gives her no reaction.

He just stays silent, staring at her, while her eyes grow more concerned and confused with each passing second.

Who is this woman that she has such an effect on my husband?

I’d think they were ex-lovers or something, but it seems they don’t know each other.

But Remi’s drilling stare unsettles even me. Is he enamored with her beauty or something?

“I hope just good things,” I pitch in, hating how the tension grows rapidly within our circle, a bubble that might burst at any second, and God knows what will happen next.

“Well, my father wasn’t pleased to find out he now owns Amalia’s shares, but that’s business.” Her dry reply sends more havoc my way.

My brows furrow.

The shares. That’s what he wanted all along from Amalia? No wonder he’s this tense.

That’s probably why everyone now knows about my twin and me too.

“I have to go and congratulate Atlas on this amazing party, or else.” She rolls her eyes and wraps her scarf tight. “It was nice to meet you both. Congratulations on your wedding.”

“Thank you,” I manage to say.

She spins around and gracefully moves to the main room as I face my husband.

“Why were you so rude to her?” He stays silent, still staring at the place she was standing, and I grab his elbow, shaking it a little bit. “Remi?”

The rest of the dark four emerge from the party room, conversing about something; however, their attention is on us.

Then it dawns on me.

They are expecting an explosion.

Remi finally snaps out of his trance, but the coldness envelops him even more, if the deadly energy and don’t-fuck-with-me attitude is anything to go by. “Santiago!” His friend comes closer. “I’m leaving. Take Penelope home once the party is over.”

He turns around, heading straight to the exit, and I grab his hand, halting his movements. “What do you mean you’re leaving?” He pauses while I continue. “I’m going to go with you then.”

“No. You will stay.”

Is he kidding me right now? He dragged me to this place and now wants to hightail his ass out of here for the vultures to wonder why my own husband deserted me on the first day of our marriage?

“*Amigo—*”

“*Alejate de eso!*” Remi warns him to stay out of this, and Santiago’s eyes narrow, but he rolls his lips. Then my husband address me again. “Enjoy the evening, and I’ll see you at the penthouse.”

Taking a deep breath, I rein in the fury threatening to erupt inside me at his weird behavior and try to find a reasonable explanation for it. “Where are you going? Did something happen?” Maybe Amalia was extra rude to him and they have another problem with Lachlan?

“None of your business.”

“I have a right to know! I’m your wife.”

Hollow laughter, sadistic in its nature, sends freezing cold into every cell of my body, rocking off the walls as he peels my hand away from him and frees his arm from my hold. “Wife? Since when? As you so love to eloquently put it, you’re my captive. So, my captive—” He leans closer, and it takes everything in me not to step back from the onslaught of fury radiating from him and not get lost in the hurt slowly swallowing me whole. “—know your fucking place and do as you’re told.”

Who is this vicious man throwing daggers at me, wanting me to bleed? I don’t recognize him.

Santiago barks, “Show some respect to your wife, Remi!”

How ironic that he is the one who comes to my defense while my husband is intent on tearing my soul into pieces if I don’t comply with his wishes.

I guess his obsession was short-lived after all, and he already grew bored.

“Save it, Santiago.” He pushes through the doors and marches outside without so much as a backward glance or an

apology as the wind whooshes over me, breaking goose bumps on my flesh, but I barely register it in my mind.

The hurt becomes so strong in my chest I sway a little, and Florian catches me in time before I stumble against the wall. “I’m sorry about that,” I say, grateful that my voice stays even while tears form in my eyes, but I blink them away. “The little captive will stay put. I’ll go find the girls.”

“Penelope—”

I shake my head at whatever bullshit excuse Santiago wants to come up with to defend the monster who just sank his claws into me, and I face the wall, wiping away the single tear that slides down my cheek.

The man orders instead, “Octavius, follow him.”

By how the floor vibrates underneath us from the heavy footsteps, I know he listened to the request, and then Florian speaks up. “I’ll be here and will watch the women.” A beat passes. “Are you going after him?”

“I can’t. Your grandfather would whoop my ass. I’ll stay for a bit and then go.”

A gentle hand touches my shoulder. “He didn’t mean it.” Florian’s words do little to heal the wounds his friend inflicted on me. “Sometimes, emotions cloud our best judgment. Think, Penelope. Think and you will understand.” Giving me this cryptic advice, he leaves along with Santiago while I’m once again standing confused, hurt, and...

And just hurt. Period.

How is a woman supposed to act when her own husband scorned her like that in front of everyone and his best friends?

Even in front of Sofia, who....

I still, putting my hand on the wall in front of me while scattered puzzles float in my head, forming a whole picture that's terrifying for me to comprehend, and yet it explains so much.

A conversation we had earlier this evening flashes in my head.

"Why do you want these shares so much? You're a billionaire!"

"Some things cannot be bought with money, chérie."

"Like what?"

"Like birthright."

Remi pointed out multiple times that Amalia was just a means to an end to destroy an enemy who stole something from him.

Carrington.

That was his name.

And then Sofia's words echo in my ears, and I cover them up, hating the realization hitting me from every corner, because it turns the world around me on its axis.

One of the reasons I named my son after him.

Oh my God.

No, it's impossible, and yet with every fiber of my being, I know it's the truth that rocks the foundation of this entire marriage and the earlier encounter.

Sofia is Remi's mother.

He is a Carrington by birth.

And he intends to destroy his grandfathers' empire for daring to reject him.

A rejected prince who came back for revenge and won't rest until he sees it through.

Even if it means losing his soul in the process.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Mother.

One of the most important words in this world.

*For some, it means love and warmth, laughter and happiness,
acceptance and peace.*

*For some, rejection and pain, longing and anger, confusion
and the desire to please.*

*In my life, it only meant betrayal, though, since my adoptive
mother treated me like shit and my birth mom didn't protect me
from her father's fury.”*

Remi

*R*emi, 18 years old

*George pulls the car up by Octavius's mansion,
and Florian flies outside, a phone still pressed to his ear. He
has been calling him relentlessly the whole twenty-minute
drive here.*

*Santiago and I follow as he tells the driver, “You can go
home, George. We'll study here.”*

*He nods; we know he will keep his mouth shut no matter
what happens. He's known us all since we were small, after
all.*

“Fucking pick up!” Florian exclaims, and we race toward the front door that’s slightly ajar. Surprisingly, Antonio, the house butler, is not rushing outside to greet us.

Fear envelops me as this signifies something is indeed wrong, and when we start going up the stairs, we hear rock music blasting from speakers, rattling the walls. Exchanging looks, we speed up. Florian barges in with us bumping into his back.

Darkness welcomes us along with the smell of alcohol saturating the air. Florian flicks on the light, and the usual squeaky-clean house comes into view. Nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Well, besides the rock music that becomes louder the farther we get inside, music that’s forbidden in this house, because Octavius’s stepfather orders everyone to listen only to classical.

“Maybe we overreacted. Maybe he’s not home yet.” I break the silence, although I don’t sound convinced even to my own ears, glancing inside the living room. “Is anybody here?” No one answers though, which in normal circumstances wouldn’t have been so surprising, since the household only has Antonio, a driver, and two maids, because his parents believe in a minimalistic approach in life.

His stepfather even refuses to have security watch his property, and the iron gates have a special code that allows you to get inside.

Florian is one of the few who knows it.

However, right now when the music is blasting so loud in the emptiness, the silence is strange and alarming.

Octavius prefers to stay in silence as screams are all he has known. He sometimes even wears headphones so people won't talk to him.

Florian pushes Santiago to the side and then darts to the second floor, his boots thumping loudly on the marble, and we trail after him as the music becomes louder and louder, coming from the direction of the master bedroom.

This time, though, another sound joins it, a loud whimper followed by a cry of pain overshadowing the music.

Fuck!

The stepfather decided to indulge in punishment after all. That's why he probably sent the staff away. While he doesn't mind torturing Octavius in front of everyone, he prefers to be alone in order to deliver his most horrible blows.

As if the scar on his cheek hasn't been enough to serve as a permanent reminder of his hatred toward him.

"That fucking asshole!" Florian mutters, kicking the door open. We run inside, only to stop dead in our tracks when we see what's really going on.

Mr. Reed is on the bed, thrashing while whimpering something incoherently. Or tries to at least. Octavius clamps his mouth with his hand while his other holds a knife he is stabbing his stepfather with, over and over again. His clothes and the white bedsheets are soaked in blood.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Octavius screams, raising his hand and stabbing him again. The sight of it finally snaps us from our shock.

"Octavius, no. Stop!" Florian lunges for him first, yelling, "Stop!" He tries to catch his elbow, but Octavius pushes him

to the side, and Florian loses his balance, dropping on his ass by the bed and groaning.

I rush in next, wrap my arms around Octavius's shoulders, and pull him back, trying to separate the bloody bodies, which only results in Octavius spinning around still kneeling above his stepfather. He swings the knife at me, slicing my arm. I hiss at the fucking sting as I jump to the side and join Florian on the floor.

What the fuck's gotten into him? He must be in shock; he'd never treat us like this otherwise.

Octavius goes back to stabbing his stepfather over and over again, continuing to chant, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

"You're killing him! Fucking stop, Octavius!" Florian gets up swiftly, traps Octavius's arm between his palms, trying to drag him to the side, but it has zero effect on our friend, who's already in the zone, his eyes glazed while he delivers deeper and deeper stabs.

My wound bleeds, and I cover it with my hand, thinking how to stop Octavius. Couldn't give two fucks about his stepfather. In fact, I'd willingly stab him too, but the safety of my friend comes first.

We need to get him out of here before the staff comes back.

Florian lands on his ass once again. And that's when Santiago comes from a different angle, catching Octavius's wrist as he raises it, the knife dripping blood between them. His gaze is glassy with fury.

No rational thought resides there, and whatever his stepfather did this time around wiped away his humanity, because he just wants vengeance.

I'm familiar with his expression; I see it in the mirror before every fight.

He jerks in Santiago's hold, ready to deliver another blow, when Santiago pulls his arm back and punches him hard in the face.

Florian wants to dart toward them, but I wrap my arms around him, keeping him steady in my hold. "Let me go!" he screams, but I just tighten my arms around him.

Our friend is absolutely right in his action.

When a person is in the zone, under the effect of this rage, talking to them is of no use. They can't hear you.

They only hear the voice of their abuser whispering in his or her ear about how worthless and weak they are, wiping away all the self-control and dignity they have.

And the need to kill becomes so unbearable, they do it without realizing what's going on or who stands in front of them.

Octavius stumbles back, dropping to the floor on his knees, and the knife slips from his fingers, landing with a loud clatter.

Florian already slides toward him and places his hand on his shoulder, squeezing it roughly, but it brings no reaction from our friend.

He just stares into space, his chest rising and falling with each breath that's heavier and heavier. His splayed palms on the marble leave bloody prints.

I hiss again as the pain in my arm intensifies. Pressing my hand harder on the wound, I wonder how to stop the bleeding.

I blink in surprise when Santiago crouches in front of me, pushing my hand away to examine the wound.

He shouldn't worry; it isn't my first knife wound.

Things in the clubs get crazy.

Although the tip struck deep and might leave a scar on my arm, no major arteries were touched.

Considering the knife was in a now-dead body just seconds ago, I need to clean the wound and patch it up. "You okay?" I nod, glancing over his shoulder at the guys before shifting my focus to the body. "He's dead," he tells me while gauging my reaction as if he expects hysterics.

I smirk, pleasure filling me at the sight of that fucker on the bed, and spit to the side. "Good fucking riddance."

He doesn't even deserve to go to hell for what he has done to Octavius, so I hope his soul burns in purgatory with no relief in sight.

I wince again, studying the wound and wondering if it has the power to affect my fight tonight.

Tim will be livid once he hears about it. My arm injury will give my opponent the advantage, but I'll have to take the risk.

Tearing away a piece of my shirt, I press it to the cut while Santiago just watches me in disbelief. His brows lift in surprise, and noticing it, I whisper, "You're not the only one with secrets, amigo." Maybe if he'd looked close enough, he would have seen how we all changed.

And how we carry our own brand of darkness. We stopped being saints a long time ago.

"What are we gonna do now?" Florian asks calmly, patting Octavius's back, who now sits on the floor and hugs his knees to his chest, rocking back and forth, still in a trance. He probably doesn't even comprehend what he's done.

Santiago gets up, rolling his shoulders while focusing his attention on Florian, who has a bored expression on his face. The only concern he shows is when his gaze lands on Octavius. Yet the body on the bed earns only a snarl and a muttered, "Rot in hell, fucker."

Yeah, safe to say, none of us feel an ounce of compassion toward the fucker. We've hated him since we were little and he delivered the first blows to Octavius, marring his skin in never-ending scars.

However, Florian is right.

What are we going to do? He committed a crime out in the open in his family's mansion. If he had done it anywhere else, we'd have a better chance of somehow trying to sweep it under the rug.

"He turned eighteen last month. If we call the cops, they'll put him behind bars," Santiago finally states the truth we don't want to face.

I try to find the silver lining in this. "He can plead self-defense." I get up, hissing a little when moving my arm. "We can serve as witnesses." Because we're his best friends, would our testimony even mean anything to the police?

Florian shakes his head. "This won't count as self-defense. He was holding a fucking knife and stabbed him many times. He doesn't have any injuries." He lifts Octavius's shirt, and while his back can rival Santiago's in the scars department, there are no fresh wounds on his skin. "Proving self-defense will be almost impossible."

The asshole might have not physically touched him recently, but he played with him psychologically. Lately,

Octavius has been edgier than usual, constantly checking his phone, and preferring to stay in company.

What the fuck happened that led to such an emotional outburst?

“He’ll still get years behind bars. So either way, he’s gonna end up in prison.” Santiago supports Florian’s point. “Even years of abuse and a psychiatrist claiming he wasn’t in his right mind won’t save him.”

“Fuck!” I exclaim, stepping closer to Octavius.

He still rocks on the spot, chanting, “Shut up. Shut up. Shut up,” over and over again, his bare feet tapping the floor and smearing more blood on his skin.

“If we don’t call the cops right away, our asses will be on the line too.” Santiago addresses a valid concern. “The longer we stall, the guiltier we become.”

In fact, everyone will believe he planned this shit and got us involved since we are considered the inseparable four.

With the number of enemies Uncle Lucian and Uncle Jacob have, it’s a strong possibility a lot of people will do their best to try to get us into deeper trouble.

Florian pulls at his hair, standing up too and pacing back and forth. “They have security cameras. That might be good evidence.”

“And how do you plan to get them? Doesn’t Antonio oversee this shit? I hardly doubt—”

A harsh clattering sound echoes in the space, interrupting me, as glass shatters into tiny little pieces behind us. All our heads swing to the doorjamb where a man stands, a tray lying by his feet.

Fucking awesome.

A witness who will put an end to our argument. If he decides to call the cops, we won't be able to do shit.

Octavius grew up with him; in fact, the old man watched over him and tended to his wounds as he used to work for his late father. However, loyalties are a fickle thing.

We stare at one another for several moments, Antonio's gaze darting between us all, finally settling on Octavius. And then he focuses on the dead body.

He gasps, covering his mouth, and trembles slightly.

Several emotions flash, wave after wave, on his face before he finally straightens up, adjusts his butler jacket, and addresses me of all people. Maybe because Santiago is a stranger to him, and Florian flat out dislikes him and doesn't hide the fact. According to him, the butler should have protected Octavius better, and I agree with him. But then again, it's not like we can take our frustrations out on an older man who was too weak to do anything about the fucker.

"The driver took Estella to visit her friend, and the maids have the day off today." His quiet voice is barely audible.

"The camera footage is downstairs in the basement." He looks between us. "What should I do?"

Despite the seriousness of this situation, I barely control my laughter at Santiago's stunned expression. He must find all this beyond bizarre; no one is running around scared shitless.

A chuckle slips past his lips. Florian pushes him in the shoulder, and all the amusement is instantly gone. "What's so funny, Santiago? Octavius might end up in jail!" he shouts, raising his arm. Santiago blocks it and punches him in the gut instead, so he stumbles back.

“Then he shouldn’t have killed his stepfather for everyone to see,” Santiago replies, indifference lacing his tone, and fury travels through my veins at how unaffected he wants to seem.

That’s our best friend! Kidnapped or not, he didn’t stop being one of ours. When one of us gets in trouble, we all handle it together!

“Fuck you!” Florian spits, lunging for Santiago again, and that’s when I know I need to interfere and stay rational.

I stand between them, shouting, “Shut up, both of you! Shut up! Fighting right now won’t help! We need to think!”

Octavius whimpers, palming his head, and his rocking becomes more violent, snapping our attention to him.

I growl, hating our complete helplessness in the current situation. Our friend has suffered enough from his mother’s wrong choices.

He cannot be put in hell again for killing that man because he sent the demon where it fucking belonged.

Clearing his throat, Santiago orders Antonio, “Delete all the footage from the camera right now.” He nods, ready to bolt, but Santiago’s words stop him. “If you ever speak to anyone about what happened tonight, you will be guilty too. Keep that in mind.” He nods again and darts away while Santiago faces us. “Any ideas how to handle it? Think fast. At this point, we’ll all be guilty of the crime. Our lawyers won’t be able to help us.”

“We need to hide the body,” Florian says, rubbing his face.

I fist my hands. “There’s blood everywhere, his DNA and fingerprints. We can’t just hide it. They’ll search for it; he’s one of the richest guys in the country. Besides, how do you

plan to get rid of it anyway?” Not to mention we don’t have the professional equipment or the skills in order to do the shit people usually do in situations like this.

“I don’t know, Remi. What am I? A serial killer on the fucking hunt?” Florian spits. We stare at one another in anger, then look at Santiago when he snaps his fingers, holding our attention.

“Serial killer. We have one in the country right now, right?”

“Right. They mentioned it on the news. What does he...?” My eyes widen. “He might be the cover we need.”

Florian opens his mouth to comment, when Octavius whispers, “Florian.” He rushes to him and lands on his knees, mindful of not getting in the blood, and places his hands on Octavius’s shoulders. “What have I done, Florian?” His voice finally rings with awareness, and he looks over his shoulder at us. “What have I done?” A horrified expression crosses his face, and he shakes his head. “I killed him. Fuck, I killed him.” Tears form in his eyes. “Estella. She’ll be all alone,” he whispers the last part.

“No, we have a plan.”

“No!” he shouts, slamming his fist against his chest. “My fault. I did it. Get out. Get out, all of you, and I’ll call the cops. Turn myself in. Just promise to take care of Estella,” he tells Florian and adds, “Please.”

Florian squeezes Octavius harder, his voice turning deadly. “I’ll do anything for you, man, but not this. We’ll find a way.”

“There is no fucking way! I’m a murderer! Get out!”

I'm not surprised. Among us all, Octavius has the highest sense of morality and always admits his faults. He loves his little sister and us more than himself, so he won't even willingly subject us all to any danger.

He is the kind of person who will sacrifice his own soul if it means saving those he loves. He's one of a kind.

If I'm Odysseus, then he's Hector.

And I'll be damned if we let him do what he wants.

Santiago rolls his eyes and goes to him, then slaps Octavius hard across the face.

"The fuck, Santiago!" Florian roars, but Santiago pushes him back too, holding Octavius's gaze that's finally cleared, and his brown eyes comprehend information.

"No one is going to prison because of your irresponsible ass. Our future's on the line. Now snap out of your fucking shock. We need to take care of your mess, and we have no time to console you." Octavius blinks, and Santiago takes a deep breath, internally contemplating something, judging by the expression on his face.

He thought this assignment that requires us all to be together would put an end to our friendship once and for all, destroying our bond.

However, the assignment is just the beginning, because we have no choice right now but to work together to cover this mess and get out of this with our freedom intact.

So that's what we do.

We organize everything and just barely manage to make it to my fight club where I perform with my injured arm.

I win the fight, and my friends stay by my side. And later when Santiago stays over and tells us what happened to him...

We ask him to teach us how to torture people the right way, so we can punish those who deserve it.

Our best friend is reluctant, but he does as we ask, and that's how we become invincible.

Slowly, not instantly, we become an unbreakable unit, destroying anything standing in our way.

Our name alone inspires fear and awe alike in those around us.

Three days after that, Roland died of a heart attack but not before whispering my mother's name in my ears and how she never wanted me, so her father got rid of me.

I found out the truth with all my connections.

I was born into this world as Odysseus Carrington, heir to the Carrington empire, as Duke Carrington had only one daughter.

All the riches belonged to me if only my grandfather had kept me.

Instead, he ordered me to be killed. So for the first three years of my life, I was subjected to abuse I could see with my own eyes from the videos these assholes stashed. They documented everything as their insurance in case cops hunted their asses.

Kicking me, burning my skin with cigarettes, pushing me around, starving me, even forcing me to eat my own vomit, and some even poured whiskey in me just to laugh until I couldn't breathe from choking.

Turns out the images flashing in my head were my memories.

Assholes refused to kill me but didn't mind hurting me. Their addiction and lifestyles required money, so they kept me just in case they'd have the guts to blackmail Duke.

They gave me to the Reyes family with a generous check attached when Duke found out about their lie, and they had to hide from him ever since, even changing their identities.

They deserved no mercy, so I found them all and killed them in the most horrid ways, enjoying every drop of blood and every scream tearing out of their throats.

One good thing came from my past, though, despite only demons existing in it.

Everyone's cruelty aimed my way made me who I am today.

Powerful. Merciless. Heartless.

I, Remi Reyes, rose to the top and conquered everything in this life I wanted to, proving to everyone who wanted to destroy me that they lost.

I vowed to take away his empire as he took away my childhood.

The plan was going perfectly.

However, through all my calculations and schemes, I couldn't have predicted one thing.

Her.

For her presence alone awakens my good-for-nothing heart and reminds it to beat again.

Penelope

Still reeling from the information in my head, I dart to the main room, pushing through the bodies toward the terrace where I find the girls drinking in the gazebo that opens up to a view of the gorgeous garden.

Florian and Santiago lean on the railings, broodily watching their women.

“He is her son, isn’t he?” Their brows shoot up—although I don’t miss the approval in Florian’s eyes. “That’s why he wants to end them all.”

“Whose son?” Jimena asks, getting up, but I don’t pay attention to her, my whole focus on the two horsemen.

“Where did he go?” They stay silent. “I need to be with him.”

Santiago chuckles. “Trust me, Penelope, you don’t.” The way he says it speaks volumes about Remi’s whereabouts.

He was so angry, so, so furious with everyone, that this kind of rage needs an outlet.

His various scars pop into my head along with the cryptic comments. When I questioned him earlier about them in the shower, he gave me a curt reply.

I’ve gotten them by doing what I love the most. Fight.

Where does a monster go when faced with his past that still hurts and hunts him?

To the place where he can forget and establish his power once again, as physical pain has the ability to extinguish the fire of self-loathing eating at us from the inside out.

“I’ll handle it and will bring him home,” Santiago informs me, and I shake my head, making him arch his brow.

“Objections?”

“I need to see him. He will hurt himself.”

“Nothing new,” Florian muses, finishing his drink in one gulp and then twisting the glass in his hand. “Remi’s emotions are unpredictable right now. Whoever stands in his way will inevitably get hurt.”

“And we cannot let him hurt you. Because then he will go insane,” Santiago concludes and grins at his wife through the tension. She comes closer to him, rubbing his chest as she gives me a concerned stare. “Respect his wish, forgive his temper, and just wait for him to show up. We will get him.”

Anger boils my blood, fury washing over me and wrapping tightly around me at their advice, because that’s what I’ve been doing my whole life.

Waited and waited for fate to give me Amalia back, for private investigators to do their job and change something.

Waiting was a permanent fixture in my life for so long I no longer wish to do so.

Sitting on my ass brought me a twin who wants nothing to do with me.

My husband resides in darkness, where any wrong move might send him into a spiral of madness so deep and sadistic it will tear up his soul.

And I won’t let that happen.

He is a monster, yes, but he is *my* monster, so I’m going to do something for myself for once in this life.

Choose the man everyone warns me to stay away from.

“No,” I reply, and the men drill their stares into me. “I’m his wife. I have a right to be with my husband right now, and you will take me to him.” I point a finger at Santiago. “Because he is your best friend, and right now, I’m the only who can calm him down.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw, and something crosses his face. I know he is about to say something mean, when Briseis whispers to him, “*Mi amor?*” He looks at her as they share a moment. “If it was you and Remi kept me away from you...?”

He flexes his arm around her waist, bringing her closer, and she traces her fingers over his neck.

I’m ready to hug Briseis when he pulls his gaze away from her and nods at me. “I’ll take you with me.” I sigh in relief but then tense when he adds, “But if you decide to leave him after this... nothing will save you from my wrath. Be very sure, Penelope. Because after tonight, you’ll have no illusions about who you married.”

These words should scare me, but instead, they make my heart bleed.

My monster is in agony, as destiny dealt him a shitty hand, and as ironic as it sounds, I’m the only person who really understands him.

My parents loved me, and Sofia must have loved Remi... but their love didn’t save us from a tortured reality. Instead, their love served as poison in our blood, bringing pain that nothing could cure us from.

So no matter what I will see tonight, I will not leave him.

At least not because of this.

God help me.

*R*emi

Picking up the wraps from the bench, I tie them around my hands one by one, the white, spotless cloth contrasting with my tan skin that will soon be soaked in the blood of my opponents.

The AC buzzes soundly through the space, cooling my hot bare chest as I gaze in the mirror and study my deadly reflection.

And hate myself with every fiber of my being right in this moment, because my cruelty that knows no bounds struck my own wife.

I called her a captive after I've done everything in my power to prove to her otherwise, and the look of pain on her face followed me all the way here. I can't wipe it away from my brain, the beast in me roaring in displeasure and wishing to soothe her.

However, that's a luxury I can't afford in this moment while rage ricochets through my entire system, urging me to rip away at someone so it won't turn into self-destruction.

And then another face flashes in my mind, and I lean on the sink, gripping the basin so hard it might break.

Sofia Carrington.

My... mother.

The word tastes bitter on my tongue, and I scoop some water into my palm and drink it, wishing to wash it away, yet the taste stays with me.

I've never spoken to this woman in my life; however, I've seen her during countless functions and in newspapers and magazines, memorizing her every feature and desperately trying to see our resemblance while despising her happiness.

Not once was it mentioned she had a baby, and in a way, I was so grateful for that, because it allowed the room for all my revenge with little regard to her.

If she didn't want me, then she didn't deserve mercy, right? Besides, not being wanted was nothing new.

My adoptive mother wished for me to never be born, while my biological one got the wish fulfilled. Her father, aka my grandfather, freed her from the burden of raising a bastard.

Funnily enough though, my biological father came from a powerful dynasty, so only royal blood runs through my veins, but that's not enough.

You have to be born a prince to be considered worthy in this society; otherwise, you bring shame.

Shame pushed me into hell that stripped all my rights away, so my vengeance was never misplaced.

Why should they live happily, when I suffered?

However, tonight, I heard her, the trembling in her voice, the pain in her eyes when she spoke about her son, and it...

Angered me beyond belief, for she has no right to feel this way.

She adores her father. If she didn't, she wouldn't be playing by his rules, so how dare she mourn the son he ordered to kill?

And I rage at myself for still caring despite knowing better.

Even if I told her the truth and she welcomed me with open arms, I would never come to her.

Love cannot cure it all, especially not a soul who has suffered for thirty-one years.

Maybe that's just nature.

We cannot help but be attached to our mothers on some level, even though that only leads to downfalls.

Some relationships are just toxic and destroy you, so it's better to stay away or never know them.

Or that's the excuse I give myself to shut up the voices screaming in my head to go to her and shake her so hard until she answers why she didn't fight hard enough.

Why did she believe her baby died?

Why did she fucking give up so easily and never mourn me?

Why, Sofia?

The doors burst open, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I meet Tim's gaze in the reflection as he plays with his mustache. "Fight time."

He still owns and runs this small club on the outskirts of the city, making money with fights, and despite us being miles away socially and economically, I visit him from time to time to pay respect to a man who in a sense helped me as a teenager.

Although, this place is a complete ditch filled with filth and greed.

I push back, rolling my shoulders, and crack my neck from side to side, blocking away anything besides the pumping of

my blood and the adrenaline sliding into my veins, fueling it with rage over and over again.

“You haven’t done this in a while. The club is packed.” He sounds pleased, not that I give a fuck.

Spinning around, I give him a crooked smile. “Then you’re lucky, right? You’ll earn some cash.” He frowns but steps back when I step out to the roaring of the crowd as the smell of sweat and alcohol permeates the air.

Closing my eyes for a second, I drink it all in and allow the darkness to envelop me whole, soaking up the energy around me.

I’m a monster.

Why the fuck, then, did I dare touch a princess?

*P*enelope

A raspy breath escapes me when Santiago pulls his car into the dark alley, a few stray cats strolling through the perimeter while darkness and deception float in the air. It makes me shrink into the leather cushions, hating how it took us almost forty minutes to get here, as this club is apparently located in a God-forbidden place.

“Not too late to change your mind,” Florian says, turning to me from the front seat and lighting up his cigarette.

I don’t bother to reply; these two already tried everything under the sun to talk me out of attending, as if their friend becomes a beast in there or something.

It can’t be worse than what I’ve seen in pictures of the dungeon, right?

Grabbing the handle, I get out, followed quickly by the guys, and instantly cover my nose at the rotten smell polluting the air and something akin to... urine?

The double, metallic doors are located a few feet away, and vibrate with heavy rock music blasting from the inside, and that's when Santiago motions for me to walk. "Let's go, Penelope. Stay by our side always."

"And whatever you see, do not scream. He'll go ballistic."

With this little piece of advice, Florian punches a code on the door panel, and it opens, letting us in where a muscled bouncer greets us, holding a bowl full of cash. "Oh. The Dark Horsemen." He jerks his head. "The fight has started."

Florian drops a couple of hundreds into the bowl, and I barely have time to think about it as we get to another door, and this time when Santiago kicks it open, my eyes widen and a gasp slips past my lips as the interior comes into view.

Because I've never seen anything so raw—and dirty.

The spacious place is packed with people, countless bodies pressed against each other, occupying the various chairs, stools, and dancing to the beat of the music, pumping their fists upward. Servers go through the tables, holding plastic trays and wearing tight tops and shorts that barely cover their ass cheeks.

They have polite smiles plastered on their faces, but I don't miss how one of them glares at the man who tries to cop a feel and even slaps him, and he instantly raises his hands in defense, resuming his drinking.

Which speaks volumes about the owner. If his workers feel safe enough to object, he probably isn't so bad. Not something I'd expect of anyone owning this establishment, as even the

walls in here reek of vices and filth, as if darkness resides and rules in here, dictating to everyone how to behave.

Uneasiness washes over me, and I rub my arms, suddenly feeling chilled, especially when a man unzips his fly and wraps his hand around his dick as he watches a stripper swirling on the pole. She's flashing everyone her breasts and bare ass while the men all try to give her money.

"Gross," I mutter at the man and then see how another bouncer grabs him by the neck and drags him toward the exit, so I guess that's not allowed.

The bartender busily pours drinks into glasses, all while men demand shots, and some even manage to fuck women in darkened corners, if their motions are anything to go by.

The scent of alcohol tickles my nostrils while smoke floats in the air, making my eyes water, and I really wish to run back outside to breathe in some fresh oxygen. However, I glue my feet to the ground.

Any display of weakness right now will not be well received.

Santiago and Florian put me right in the middle of them as we start to move, protecting me from whoever tries to come in contact with me. People naturally part for them, allowing us to push through the bodies easily, not that it brings me any relief.

"Don't look around. We are possessive creatures," Florian advises, and I give him a baffled stare.

"I hardly care for these men!"

"Well, some of them have their dicks out, darling. Remi wouldn't appreciate that."

Admirable how they have each other's back, however this is completely ridiculous.

“They are disgusting.”

Santiago sends a wry grin my way. “You haven't seen anything yet.”

My stomach flips as dread fills my every cell, and despite being afraid of what I might uncover soon, I still make myself walk toward our destination.

Three more steps and we reach a dead end, so my brows furrow in confusion.

Now what?

Santiago glances at me. “Remember one thing. Their greatest fear is for you to give up on them.” I assume he alludes to Amalia too. “So stand by the choice you've made.” He puts his splayed palm on the wall, and it shifts to the side, making me blink in surprise.

A secret passage?

This only intensifies the uneasiness, rapidly transforming it into panic, because if they have to go through these lengths to hide it...what goes on inside must be illegal.

Fights.

My heart stops as realization hits me.

Fights without any rules? Meaning... until one of them is dead or too weak to even get up with the possibility of life-long repercussions?

Santiago enters first, then me, while Florian closes our circle as we descend the stairs, with chants growing louder and louder until that's all I hear.

The crowd in here is even more packed with people standing by the benches as they drink and wave their money, screaming either “Odysseus” or “Bellamy,” and then throw it in the bags servers hold, who scoop up the cash like their asses are on fire.

They surround a boxing ring right in the middle, the lamp shining brightly on it and showing in full glory two bare-chested men facing each other, sweat dripping down their skin, making them glisten while their veins pulse along their bulging muscles.

“Oh my God,” I whisper with horror and fascination as I watch my husband fist his hand and then hit his opponent hard in the stomach, which earns him a groan. The beefy man bends in two, and then Remi slams his elbow on his back, which results in his fall to his knees as he breathes hard.

“Odysseus! Odysseus! Odysseus!” the crowd chants like crazy over and over again, creating a frenzy around us as Remi circles his enemy, blood sliding down his forehead as a snarl curls his lip, reminding me of a caged animal who finally got free and demands vengeance.

And in a way, it’s true, right?

The monster he hides living deep inside him finally gets free reign for the time being and enjoys every second of the suffering he dishes out to those standing in his way.

“Bellamy, come on!” a bearded man shouts, shaking his whisky bottle. “I bet a grand on your fucking win!” He takes a larger swig from his drink and then wipes his mouth. “Kill that fucking assho—” Octavius, who walks behind him, shoves him to the side, and the man chokes on his own spit, his drink spilling.

The final horseman joins us, his jacket thrown over his shoulder while he nods at his friends. I guess he hasn't watched my husband well enough, since he is in a freaking boxing ring!

Bellamy gets up, though on shaky legs, and Remi comes closer, and then the man slams his fist into my husband's collarbone, making him stumble backward on the ropes, and then continues to beat Remi with powerful blows, one after another.

On instinct, I dart toward him, but Florian pulls me back to him.

"He's hurting him!"

Octavius chuckles, although it lacks any humor. "No, he's exhausting him." A beat passes. "Wait—why the fuck did you bring her here?"

"Era imposible detenerla."

It was impossible to stop her.

I mute them out though, focusing back on the ring, where the man delivers two more blows and then steps back when Remi leans on the ropes, breathing heavily as a smile curves Bellamy's mouth in the anticipation of victory.

Only for it to slip away when Remi raises his head and then jumps from the ropes, hitting the man under his chin, which whips back his head, and blood splashes the ring. Another hit goes to his stomach, and then Remi wraps his hand around the man's neck, holding him in the crook of his elbow as he presses his fist to the man's spleen, probably bringing a lot of pain.

The man struggles in the grip, pulling at the elbow slowly cutting off his oxygen supply, and his face turns red while

Remi just flexes his muscles, grinning at the display of hopelessness. My heart stops for a second, because there is no running away anymore.

The cruelty that lives within him shines for everyone to see, and the worst part about it?

Remi basks in it, soaking in joy with every second, because the darkness must shut out his heart completely, which mean he doesn't feel a thing.

Especially pain.

Placing my fingers on my lips, I understand with clarity why they all indulge in all their hideous crimes, feeling alive doing all these horrible deeds and never apologizing for them.

If they don't... it means they won't be able to fight the demons clawing at them and urging them to succumb to the dark side. They'd lose their humanity completely as the hurt becomes so unbearable they cannot take it anymore.

Tortured and dark souls roaming this earth in search of atonement they know they'll never get, so they go deeper and deeper, as if daring the world to show them otherwise.

Dare them to make them believe that someone might love them or accept them for who they are without trying to change them.

But they have no such faith, so when they see a woman they want... they force her to be with them, as who would willingly sign herself up for such a life?

Every beast who is angry... usually bleeds from the inside out, using their harsh exterior so no one can use their pain against them.

“Remi,” I whisper, his name almost a prayer on my lips, because right in this moment, the hurt he experiences pierces through me as well.

He claimed me in front of the whole world and in this silently asked me to accept him with all his flaws.

And I’ve been rejecting him time and time again.

How can you know how to love if you’ve never been loved?

A roar from the crowd snaps me out of my realization, and I look at the ring again where Remi drops the man on the ground, snatching the whiskey from the referee and gulping it greedily. Bellamy rushes at him again, but my husband grips him by the throat, freezing him on the spot.

Just a little more pressure and he will either choke him or snap his neck.

“Finish him!”

“Till the end, Odysseus!”

I clasp my trembling hands together, the fear gliding over my form slowly enveloping me, as I dread watching him actually kill someone.

“He should kill him. That fucker loves to beat women,” Florian muses. “And children.”

Octavius speaks up, “He knocked all his teeth out and I’m pretty sure fractured his arm in a way he won’t ever be able to raise his hand to anyone. His body is running on adrenaline alone.” He sounds pleased with it too, not that I blame him. If this man is cruel to people, then he has no compassion from me.

“You know Remi and his code.” Santiago doesn’t elaborate further, and then Bellamy’s scream reverberates through the space when Remi pulls at his second arm and breaks it in a way that makes it swing in an awkward position.

The man falls on his knees, blood slipping from his face, while he mumbles something as Remi rubs his chin with the bottle before throwing it away.

The referee runs to the guy and practically shoves the microphone into his face, and his tortured words wash over the crowd. “Please. Please stop.”

“Fuck it! Send him to the hospital bed,” someone yells, and I shake my head at them in disgust, hating how they all act.

Remi fists his hair, pulling his fist back, which is an answer in itself, when he raises his eyes—and they collide with mine.

We both freeze, and for a second, it feels as if the whole world ceases to exist, leaving us alone in it while we stare at one another. His dark orbs are horrified and furious, while mine are probably just all around scared.

The monster doesn’t appreciate me coming to his hunting ground without an invitation.

He breaks our connection by letting Bellamy go and then jumping through the ropes, heading toward me in long strides.

Florian whistles. “Good luck, darling.”

“Remember what I said about giving up,” Santiago adds while Octavius just laughs, finding this whole thing hilarious it seems, while panic and anticipation fills me to the brink as I desperately try to gauge Remi’s reaction but fail to do so.

Finally, he reaches me, gripping my chin and squeezing it hard as he breathes heavily. “Who brought her here?” he asks no one in particular. And then without awaiting a reply, he bends a little and throws me over his shoulder while everything turns upside down for me. He ignores my squeal, and I straighten up a little bit, sinking my nail into his back as his hard muscle digs into my stomach. “I’ll deal with you two later,” he hisses at his friends as he moves like a panther toward the exit, his hold on me so tight it’s a wonder he doesn’t crush my bones.

I have no idea where he’s taking me, but there’s one thing I know for sure.

He will punish me for disobeying his order.

Because I dared to see what he hid so well...

A bleeding heart desperate for love.

And this truth changes everything.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*“Everyone knows how the story ends when you fall in love
with a prince.*

How does it end though when you fall for a monster?”

Penelope

*P*enelope

The elevator dings, announcing our arrival, and the minute the doors slide open, Remi gets out and heads straight to our room while I huff in frustration.

After he ordered me to get in his car, he drove all the way here in complete silence, and since I had no idea what to say to him either, considering he was smeared in blood and seemed furious beyond belief, I decided to keep my mouth shut.

Only I didn't expect all this to last for so long.

Slipping off my heels and rubbing my calves at the pain shooting through me from wearing them, I follow him into the room just in time to see him getting in the shower and turn on the water.

“Remi, we need to talk,” I say, laughing at my choice of words.

Apparently, no man likes to hear them.

He doesn't reply, so I knock on the shower door and repeat, "We need to talk."

"I'm taking a shower," he states the obvious, and I lean on the sink, tapping my foot to let him know I'm staying, so he won't think he has all the time in world to avoid me.

It must work, as he showers in record time and after a few moments gets out in all his naked glory. He grabs the nearby towel, wrapping it around his hips, and runs his fingers through his wet hair.

Completely ignoring me, he goes back to the room and walks to the bar, pouring himself a glass of whiskey as the moonlight streaming from the open window brightens up the space around us and gives him an even more sinister appeal.

"Bring them on." He takes a large sip, closing his eyes as he swallows, and his Adam's apple bobbles, bringing attention to his throat and the bulging veins in it.

My brows furrow in confusion, and I turn on the dim light in the room, which allows me to study his expression better. "Bring on what?"

He sips more from his drink before pressing his back to the wall. "Hysterics." A beat passes, and he elaborates, "Scream at me how you hate me and what a monster I am for being alive. And don't forget to be mad for the way I spoke to you earlier." He salutes me with his glass, spilling alcohol on the floor. "In other words, my wife, curse me till you get tired. Come on."

My heart flips inside my chest, enveloping it in pain at the tiredness and acceptance in his tone, as if he expects nothing else from me.

Why would he?

I made my feelings quite clear and fought him every step of the way.

“I don’t want to do that.” He stills, his brow shooting up, and I can read on his face he doesn’t believe me. “The only thing I need is to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Will anything change once you fulfill your revenge?” He frowns, finishing his drink, so I add, “Will your heart settle once you punish your grandfather for what he did?”

He freezes, staring at me in shock that he quickly covers up with indifference, and reaches for the whiskey bottle again, throwing away the glass that lands on the carpet with a muffled thump. He drinks straight from the bottle, gulping it, because I think he needs the courage to talk about his pain.

Otherwise, he won’t be able to survive it.

“I don’t know,” he says, wiping his mouth. “It sure as fuck will bring me satisfaction.”

“Will it?” I come closer to him but don’t dare touch him. Instead, I sit down on the bed, my gaze trained on him, too afraid to spook him before he shares anything. “Or will you continue to fight in clubs and kill people?”

A crooked smile flashes on his lip while his brown eyes stay absolutely dead. “Once upon a time, four boys fell in love with a certain myth, because it represented our own qualities in a way. Four riders destined to bring mayhem to this world, and yet despite their differences, they always stayed together.” Another large sip, and I do my best to focus on this conversation, even though he doesn’t answer my question—although I think the truth hides behind their backstory. “Then one of us got kidnapped while the three others suffered in their

own ways, years and years of abuse and pain that bottled up inside us, demanding an outlet.”

“So you chose violence?”

He half turns, resting his arm on the window as he looks through it wistfully. “Among other things. I had no right to express my emotions, because I was nobody. My outburst might have cost me my future. Simply put, I had no such privilege.”

“You hated everyone.”

“No. I mean, the kids who made fun of me, yes. I wished to punish them, so fighting started. However, there was a certain sense of acceptance, because I went to school with princesses and heirs while my parents were who they were.”

No matter how pragmatic you are, people’s shitty behavior affects us all the same. He didn’t deserve their cruelty.

“Then we helped our friend cover up Octavius’s stepfather’s death, and everything changed. We became criminals.” I barely manage to cover my surprise, but honestly, good riddance. “And we discovered that punishing those who hurt the likes of us brought us pleasure and purpose, just like it had the actual riders. So that’s how we became the Four Dark Horsemen.”

While I appreciate this... “It doesn’t answer my question.”

“It does. Listen carefully. I’m a rider who thrives in darkness and will never, ever stop his deeds, because as bad as what I do is... the monster in me allows innocent children sleep. Because I eliminate those who wish to hurt them or hurt them in the past.” He glances at me, and resolve crosses his face. “It doesn’t excuse what we do or make us better than anyone. The true strength of a person lies in moving on from

bad experiences and never becoming like those who tortured you. Because as long as you hunt and kill them, you are just like them.”

“No,” I whisper, seeing the warped logic in this, and somehow this lets me breathe easier, because knowing who he punishes seems almost acceptable.

“Yes. We are standing on different sides; however, our weapons are all the same. Soaked in blood and pain and torture of those we get our hands on.”

I don’t condone killing, but is it such a bad thing to destroy those who hurt the innocent? In an ideal world, our past would have no hold on us, and we would be able to move on no matter what.

When in reality some of us never heal from our experiences. Either way, the only people who truly accomplish such tasks are those who lived through hell, got help and therapy, and live their best life to give a giant middle finger to their abusers until they no longer care about them.

Freedom costs a lot and requires work and a constant desire to do better. Remi and his friends though don’t need it.

They don’t seek validation. They are who they are and make no apologies for it.

“Why don’t you just torture them and then bring them to the police?” Wouldn’t it be better for his peace of mind? “We have laws to protect us and serve justice.”

His bitter laughter fills the space. “*Ma chérie*. You have no idea how powerful some of these people are. They have connections everywhere, and any scandal can be covered up with the right amount of money and strategy.” He gulps some more of the whiskey before putting the bottle away. “You’d be

surprised how many perfect saints with the most perfect families and images presented to everyone are so rotten inside you'd think a demon claimed them.”

Gripping the bedsheets, I ponder on this and silently agree with him on the matter, yet it paints everything around us in a rather depressing light.

“Monsters have different breeds too?” I tease, but he shakes his head.

“No, we're the same. Darkness consumes us. We just all channel it differently. Remember what I told you back in our club? Good and evil lie in the eye of the beholder.” A beat passes. “We have our moral code. If you hurt the innocent, we will kill you or punish you, depending on your crime.”

“A life for a life?” I ask just to make it clear, and he smirks.

“No. You think I give a fuck if they kill someone? Hurting is enough. Once the monster has tasted blood and sin, he won't ever stop hunting.”

Licking my dry lips, I finally ask the question that will probably ignite all his fury. “You want to destroy everything he built, not just punish him. Are you sure it's fair to your mom, though?”

His face becomes even more closed off if it's possible, and he crosses his arms while thunder echoes in the sky followed by the lightning flashing. It's quite fitting weather for the storm going on inside this room right now.

I've just stepped on the beast's wound, and who knows how he will react to it.

Time ticks by with him staying silent, and I think he won't answer at all, when he finally replies, “I don't have a mother.

You see, my birth one forgot about me, and the adoptive one treated me like shit.” He spins around, and the air in my throat hitches when he points at his scars again, more profound under the harsh light, showcasing lines upon lines on his flesh with belt buckle imprints along with cigarette burns. “Do I look like a child who had a mother?”

He turns back to face me. “Maybe it’s not fair to Sofia, but my life was trash until I met the dark four, and even after that, I suffered. All because I dared to live when absolutely everyone wished I never had been born.” I cover my mouth with my palm, tears filling my eyes at the agony he no longer hides in his voice. “So forgive me if I do not feel remorse. I want justice for once in my life. I cannot kill him.” He glances down, pulling at his hair before looking back at me. “I convinced myself I wanted his shame, and that’s true. But I also don’t have it in me to kill my own grandfather.”

“No,” I whisper, “because you’re nothing like him.” And although he probably refuses to admit it, he doesn’t want to hurt his mother.

“Are you sure?” More thunder booms through the sky. “You’ve seen what I’m capable of, and I will never change. Where is your desire to run away, my beautiful wife?”

The rage possessing him will never truly go away, because he learned to use it to his advantage, and if I choose to live with him, I’d have to accept it, among other things.

However, my man was and is always honest, right?

He doesn’t promise me he will change, just that I will always have his undying devotion.

If I give him the chance... I could live with a lot of things, even his darkness, but love would conquer it all, wouldn’t it?

Or help to withstand it?

Briseis loves Santiago despite his past and present, and that man adores her in his own way, I imagine.

We could have what they have if I just believe, right?

Finally, the internal struggle within me ever since we had sex that first time settles, and a bubble of laughter emerges from my throat, welcoming this freedom to maybe fall in love with a man who everyone says is a bad seed.

My handsome villain who would slay any prince and dragon standing in his way, and it's this that makes me feel the most alive.

Remi frowns and then stills when I get up, coming closer to him until the tips of my toes touch his.

Placing my palms on his skin, I slide them upward until they circle his neck and pull him closer to me, our mouths inches apart from each other, and a tremor rushes through him at the action as he must read my adoration and acceptance on my face. "No more running away. I will give this marriage a chance. I'm yours."

He stares at me like he cannot comprehend what I just told him and then with a groan slams his mouth on mine.

Yes.

I claimed one of the Four Dark Horsemen.

And he is all mine!

*R*emi

She moans when I seek out her tongue with mine, colliding in a hot kiss that makes her press to me so hard goose bumps already break on her skin while she throws her head back, giving me better access to her mouth.

Fisting her hair, I angle it better before diving in deep, dueling for dominance as she matches me stroke for stroke while, with this kiss—despite its passion—I do my best to communicate to her my gratitude.

Because under layers and layers of armor I acquired over the years to protect myself, she sees me.

For the first time since I met the dark four, someone wants me for me with all my flaws, giving me something I never knew in this world.

Acceptance and a place in someone's life not tainted by darkness.

We separate for a fraction of a second, both of us breathing heavily and then kiss again, this time slower, enjoying every touch of our tongues while our hearts beat against each other in an almost synchronized beat.

My beautiful, beautiful wife.

Love never had much meaning to me, and I still don't know if I'm even capable of feeling it, but with Penelope... she makes me believe there is atonement and a brighter future for the likes of me.

A future where a good woman can love you and spare you from the loneliness eating at you from the inside, never truly going away.

Love at first sight? No. Lust at first sight and the desire to possess so no one would ever get their hands on her, because she stirs my good-for-nothing heart? Yes.

I always knew what I wanted and got it.

My wife though... forcing her always felt wrong, because for once I wanted someone to choose me for me.

However, even right now, it's not really a choice, is it?

She is bound to me, for always, because I'd never let her go. Her acceptance soothes the broken part of me, but that won't change the outcome.

Monsters in this world do not give away what they cherish the most, no. We kill anyone who dares to even think about taking it though.

Slowly, as I own her mouth, I move us toward the bed, needing to indulge in my wife when she stops, pushing at my chest until our mouths tear away, and I growl, which makes her chuckle.

Gorgeous woman and all fucking mine.

“Regrets already, *chérie*?”

She shakes her head and dances even farther from me when I try to reach for her, swirling around, her dark hair cascading down her back.

“I want to play tonight.”

The softly spoken words laced with desire and need flare through me, making my dick twitch. “Really? Do tell, wife. What do you have in mind?” Her silky dress hugs her body so tight it shows me the tight buds of her nipples begging to be licked, and I tap on my mouth. “Come here, love. You're in bad need of my tongue.” She gasps at that, and her eyes roam over my form when I drop my towel to the floor, wrapping my hand around my dick and gripping it hard, letting her see the precum leaking out.

Her cheeks heat up, and desire flashes in her eyes while she squeezes her breasts in her hands, licking her lips, and I crook my finger at her. “Come here, *chérie*. This pussy must be soaked.”

She shakes her head from the haze and then, to my shock, unzips her dress, the silk slowly sliding down her flawless skin, opening up to a view of her beautiful body and curves that my hands are itching to touch and my mouth craves to bite.

The need to grab her and fuck her hard on the nearest surface beats at me, and I make a move toward her as she steps away from the dress flashing me her nude panties and wiggles her finger at me. “Nuh-uh.” But then she groans when I jerk my dick up and down, and a smile curves my lips.

Ah, yes.

As we both discovered, my wife is as addicted to me as I am to her, and the world burns to flames when we are around each other.

“All yours, *chérie*,” I tell her and wink at her. “My tongue. My fingers and my dick. Just choose and come fucking here.” I finish more harshly than I intended, but she just sends a grin my way that quickly slips away when she bites her lip as if thinking about something.

Then she sinks to her knees, and my heart fucking stops while I think I’ll come right here as she crawls toward me, begging me with her eyes to give her one thing in this life I’ve never given to anyone else.

Control.

When you grow up with nothing and learn to hide your emotions while people inflict pain on you, there is one thing

you wish to have. Control over your life and body so no one will ever dare hurt you again or think they have a right to rule you.

Penelope doesn't want to play; she wants to make love, and the idea terrifies me.

"Remi, please," she whispers as she raises her eyes to me, completely at my mercy, but we both know the minute she wraps those lips around me, I'll be the one begging and pleading. "I... I..." She searches for the words and then takes a deep breath of courage. "I want to show you my desire." She avoids the word love, because it's too soon for us.

But by this action, I know she will covet it and, worse, demand it from me, and what if I'm too fucking broken to give her that?

She found bravery in herself to choose me, so shouldn't I give her the same?

The monster is terrified to get hurt again, but he will do anything for his woman.

Threading my fingers in her hair, I fist it hard, and she gasps, lust filling her gaze again and pure joy at my approval.

She places her hand on my dick, rubbing it from the base to the tip, making it jerk while everything inside me screams to grab her and take her to bed, but I give this time to her.

Just the sight of her on her knees, preparing to suck me, makes me wild, but then anything this woman does turns me on. I fist her hair harder, and she moans.

"What are you waiting for? Suck, *chérie*."

She leans forward and sucks on the tip, swiping her tongue over it and groaning at the taste of me, shifting a little to

probably rub her thighs together. She draws me in deeper, her lips a sweet torture on my dick, while her hand works in tandem, gliding up and down before squeezing the root, and I see fucking stars.

She hums in approval at my groan and leans back, my dick slipping from her lips with a loud popping sound, before she rolls her tongue out and traces it all over my sensitive skin, brushing over the vein as if wanting to memorize its shape and length.

“I love this cock,” she whispers over my flesh, her lips brushing and only adding to the fire consuming me as the need to come pushes closer. “It brings me so much pleasure.” She puts her other hand on her pussy and presses the heel of her palm on her clit, gasping, and the sound flares my blood. “It soothes the constant need right in here.” She resumes her journey to the base and then skims her tongue back, keeping her death grip on me as if staking her own claim.

My fingers dig harsher in her hair, and I warn her, “Remove your hand. Only I have the privilege to make you come.”

She moans at the command, and then I angle her head, pressing on her chin to open her mouth wider. I drive in deeper, and instantly her wet heat surrounds me, her hand still working my dick creating an unbearable combination. I can barely resist fucking her mouth hard when my dick reaches the back of her throat.

“Suck, *chérie*.”

She does, learning anew how to pleasure me when her hot palm slides lower and grips my balls, earning herself more precum. Her moan sends a vibration through me while a hot flush washes over me, and I rock forward a little.

I'm too raw today to indulge in my fantasy though, so fucking her mouth will have to wait. Right now, I need my woman, to stake my claim on her.

Especially after that scene she watched at the club.

“Penelope,” I call her name, and she raises her eyes to me, still running her tongue over me. “I will fuck this mouth; have no doubt.” She groans, shifting once again, and I tug at her hair until my dick springs free. “But not tonight. Get on the bed.”

Slowly, she rises, brushing her body over mine, and my dick smears precum all over her, which I fucking love.

One day, I'm going to paint her in my cum and take a picture just for me. Just imagining it makes me hot as fuck, and I press on my dick to control my desire and not come right now.

I expect her to listen to my command, but instead, she kisses my chest, right above my scar, and I freeze when she murmurs, “I hate that they hurt you.” She shifts farther to my arm to one of the cigarette burns and gives it a light peck. “The idea of you suffering all alone pains me in ways I cannot describe.”

Her lips move to my shoulder, and I sigh when she places gentle kisses over my remaining scars before tracing them with her tongue. They healed a long time ago, but with her showing them love, she soothes even the memories of the pain I experienced.

“But they also speak about your strength to fight for life, when everyone wanted to take it away.” She walks around me, kissing every abused inch, and finally faces me again while my arms circle her. “You were meant to be born, Remi. I'm so

sorry all those awful people were too stupid to realize that. Thank you for surviving.” She raises on her tiptoes and kisses me quick. “And I don’t regret meeting you. I think... I think it might actually have been the best moment of my life.” She laughs through the tears and whimpers when I kiss her, tasting myself on her, and that awakens every primal part of me.

I walk us toward the bed until we bump into it, and snatching her mouth away, she grins at me, getting on the bed herself right on her knees, and winks at me over her shoulder. When she hooks her thumbs in her panties and slowly, agonizingly fucking slowly, takes them off, I groan at the sight of her perfect ass, and she throws them off the bed.

I grip her hips, biting on her flesh, and she laughs when I flip her on her back and spread her wide while lifting her foot to rest on my shoulder. I scrape my teeth over her calf while she lies on my sheets, dark hair serving as a halo around her, and she moans, fisting the covers.

“Remi, please.” She puts her palm on her stomach and shifts it lower until she lightly touches her clit. “I’m aching. For you. Always just for you.”

Giving one more gentle bite to her calf, I settle between her spread thighs and inhale the scent of my woman, my dick becoming so fucking hard it’s a wonder it doesn’t drill a hole in the bed.

Opening her up with my fingers, I roll my tongue and thrust it deep in her, groaning when her moan echoes through the space, and she grips my hair, her nails sinking into my scalp as if she plans to rip into it.

The taste of her in my mouth becomes my undoing, and I slide my hands under her ass and lift her up to me, fucking her

with my tongue as she writhes around, chanting only my name.

I slide my tongue up and down, scooping up her wetness, and nip on the sensitive flesh, earning myself a groan and a hiss, which in turn makes me growl. She tugs on my hair harsher, her foot pressing on my shoulder while she opens herself up even wider. "Remi, please." I catch her clit, playing with it and coating it in my spit before biting it, and she goes wild underneath me, her pussy clenching, begging for my cock.

Licking her from top to bottom, I slip inside her again, stiffening my tongue while her walls tighten and tighten around me, warning me of her upcoming orgasm.

She moans, rocking in tandem with my stabs, and by how she spasms around me while arching her back, just a few more drives of my tongue and she will come apart in my arms.

However, my need for her right now, so fresh from thinking I almost lost her at the club, wins, and I pull out of her but not before taking one last lick, craving to bathe in her scent forever.

"Remi. Oh God. Just fuck me already, please!" She half-pleads, half-yells at me, and skimming my lips over her stomach to her breasts, I draw her nipples into my mouth one by one until the tight buds are coated in saliva and harden, puckering the skin.

Leaving them, I nip at her collarbone and neck before finally looming above her, with my dick dragging up and down her center.

I press my lips to hers, sharing her taste, and since she still tastes like me, our combined flavor makes us groan, and she

hugs me close, hiking her leg over mine while her nails claw at my back as she kisses me with all her might.

And that's all the invitation I need to thrust hard into her, swallowing her moan while her pussy stretches around my dick and sucks it in.

Our mouths bruise each other while I pull out and then drive back in again, her heat surrounding me, urging me to drive harder and harder into her until we both get what we so crave.

She ends the kiss, gasping for air and groaning at each lust-filled slam, while we exist in this maddening desire, which creates a tight cocoon around us where past and future don't matter.

Just two people who want each other fiercely, and in this, our act trumps anything that we shared before, because in a way, I think of this as our true wedding night.

Her hand circles my neck, and she brings me back to her mouth, tilting her head as we kiss passionately while my movements speed up, thrusting so hard into her the headboard slams against the wall.

Nothing matters but our pleasure; everything else can fucking burn.

The blazing heat fills my blood. The desire sneaking up on me becomes harder and harder to resist, so grabbing her ass cheeks, I tear myself away from her and start to really fuck her hard, each thrust more powerful than the last.

She puts her hands on her breasts, playing with her nipples as her pussy clamps tighter around me, and the tingling down my spine lets me know my release is near.

Our gazes meet, and she whispers hoarsely, “Remi,”
breaking me and then putting me together with how much
emotion my name holds on her lips.

Three more slams and she comes apart in my arms,
moaning, clamping hard, while I find the strength to pull back
one last time before ramming into her. And finding my own
release, I spill inside my woman.

Our bodies are covered in sweat as we breathe heavily, and
she wastes no time in kissing me again, locking us in the
softest embrace while thunder continues to boom outside.

My life has been a storm.

But I finally found my peaceful shore.

And I’ll do anything to keep her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*“Can a heart that’s bled so much it no longer wishes to feel
anything... love?*

Or is it too damaged?

In the war between the past and the future, who wins?

What’s stronger?

The call of revenge decades in the making,

*or the person consuming your every thought and breath,
making you mad with just the thought of leaving them?”*

Penelope

Penelope

Wrapping my hands around the steaming mug, I take a large sip, welcoming the warm sensations in my throat as the wind blows over me, billowing my hair back.

Leaning back in my chair outside the busy restaurant located in the center of the city, I drink in the beauty surrounding me and smile.

Despite the place having enormous space inside, most people prefer to sit at the round tables on the terrace and enjoy the view while birds chirp nearby as they sunbathe in the trees.

A white-and-pink color scheme dominates the space, inviting you to relax. Small flower arrangements stand in the middle of the table, filling the air with pleasurable scents. Expensive china glistens under the sunlight while the silverware shows my reflection; that's how spotless it is.

The design and architecture of the building make it one of the most beautiful restaurants in the town with a mile-long waitlist that's almost impossible to get on.

Servers pass by in a blur, doing their best to deliver the orders as fast as they can, while people engage in heated arguments or erupt in laughter every other minute.

My phone dings loudly, and I glance down, grinning when my father's name flashes on the display.

<Dad> I sent you the tickets. Check your email.

Putting down my hot chocolate, I reply.

<Me> Hello to you too, Dad. We won't come. I really wish you'd stop spending so much money on those tickets.

Instantly, he answers, and I wince.

<Dad> You've been married for a month! You will come to France this week, or I swear to God I will come to Chicago myself. This husband of yours has kept you hostage long enough.

<Me> He has a very important project. I promise we will come as soon as possible. And you can't fly, remember? Your doctor told you not to.

My usual excuse doesn't *fly* with dad this time around, not that I blame him. I married a stranger miles away and refuse to visit him, no matter how often he's asked. If it wasn't for his heart, my dad would come and rip Remi a new one.

As it is, he already dislikes him.

<Dad> He's a billionaire with all the resources. This has gone on long enough. You might show me all the pictures and claim you're happy, but until I see it with my own eyes, I will not rest. You have until Sunday evening; otherwise, I'm coming to Chicago, everything else be damned.

I groan inwardly at his no-nonsense tone, letting me know he will do exactly as he says, although I can understand where he's coming from.

After that fateful night with Remi where I decided to give this obsession of mine that consumes me a chance, life has become passionate, dark bliss with a dash of crazy.

Since I'd never been to Chicago before, Remi created a whole program for me to explore the city, although it is very unusual.

Instead of dragging me to all the museums and famous places that Chicago is known for, he has taken me to less popular spots, showing me the hidden beauty of this magnificent city and the quiet atmosphere around us that still exists in megapolises. According to him, this way I get to discover my true love for the city, because it's just like with people; you learn to love them on the inside after being attracted to their outward beauty. Sometimes, I think that's how he longs for me to judge him too, from the inside instead of focusing on his outside deeds.

All the sightseeing hasn't stopped us from having hot, passionate sex on every available surface, and goose bumps break on my skin while hot flashes travel through me just remembering our last encounter in the park where anyone could walk up on us at any minute.

My husband quickly taught me not to be shy either and to succumb to our urges wherever the mood strikes us. Deep down, I know he will always protect me and will never let anyone see me in that state.

My eyes close when his whisper echoes in my ears.

“You’re mine, chérie, only ever mine.”

My stomach flutters while my heart contracts in my chest. The lustful and needy sensations envelop me whole, because I think I’ve slowly become obsessed with my husband as well.

The way he holds me... cherishes me... looks at me as if no one else exists for him. What woman could resist it, let alone someone like me who has fallen for the monster?

My bliss doesn’t make me blind to what he does in the darkness that’s a second home to him, and he doesn’t even hide it. In fact, whenever he comes to our apartment after killing someone, there is a challenge in his gaze, awaiting my reaction—or rather rejection.

A man who has known rejection all his life is ready to accept it with dignity, but I never do. Instead, I wrap my arms around him and let him touch me with those hands that should send fear through me and make me run far, far away from him.

He never gives me details, only tells me about their disgusting deeds and how such people never change, and while logically I understand... I know it’s wrong on so many levels.

We are not meant to kill others or decide our own justice; laws are in place for a reason, and what he does still speaks about a monster residing in his soul who will never leave him.

I can try to tame him or be his friend, but we both know he has such a strong hold on Remi, helping him through dark

times and pushing him forward, that they are almost one and the same.

And in such moments, I'm scared.

Scared to love a man like that in an all-consuming way, because then I am justifying his every crime. What if he loses his head and directs his anger to an innocent? Or hurts me?

I shake my head, already knowing he won't ever hurt me. However, sometimes I wonder if I'm just delusional, believing a little love can change a man.

Can I love someone who thrives in darkness, and instead of wishing to get out of hell, he drags me there right along with him so he can have a "peaceful shore," as he calls me?

He says I have all the freedom this world has to offer, and yet... if I dare to leave him, I think he will trap me in our house and won't let me go out until I accept him all over again.

A choice without a choice, we might have started over on that night, but the variables didn't change.

Falling in love with your captor even has a whole psychological term, but my heart tells me it's not what it is.

However, soon, he will get his revenge on his grandfather, and then he won't have a reason to stay married to a Walsh.

I will have my answer then. Because if he sees me as his woman, he will give me a true choice.

Because only a true choice can accept darkness and all the flaws in the person.

During this month, we have also formed a sort of truce with the dark four who can't be called the most welcoming bunch, but they've done their best to stay polite and even, dare

I say, be nice in my presence on the rare occasions Remi took us to the club. Octavius mostly stayed silent, broodingly watching us all, while Florian found ways to tease me and my husband to no end, which resulted in Remi threatening to snap his neck. Which of course only urged Florian to try to ruffle his feathers harder.

Maybe because Jimena recently got engaged to his worst enemy, who also happens to be his cousin. These two just complicate their relationship more and more with each passing day, and I feel bad for their families once it all blows up in their faces.

Not that Octavius is any better, though, considering he makes Isla's life a living hell after she tricked him into marrying her. It doesn't stop him from breathing fire at whoever dares to upset her or show her disrespect, but still. Their relationship is one of the weirdest I've ever seen.

Needless to say, the second group of the horsemen, as I call them, has a lot of issues to get through.

The only exception are Santiago and Briseis, with whom we have dinners once a week. While I'm still uncomfortable with the cruel man who apparently only has a heart for his wife—otherwise, he stays cold—I see how much he means to Remi but also, more importantly, how he values my husband. And because of that, I try to see goodness in him, in all of them really, since they are best friends.

Remi's python stays always in his dungeon as according to him he never plans to have any wild animals inside his home because they need their sense of freedom. While he adores his snake that still sends fear through me, he doesn't feel it's right to keep her at home. He still visits the python frequently and searches for good land to buy so we can build our own

mansion on it. I offered, despite my fear, to create a sort of space for the snake in there since he considers it family. He laughed and shook his head, assuring me that the python already has a perfect space to live in. Besides having the python was always about saving the animal from bad people and since he couldn't send it to the wild, he kept it. It was never about his deep desire to own it.

I'm still dumbstruck he owns a whole ass python but after I found out what kind of "pet" Octavius has I nearly fainted and was glad my husband has a snake. Too bad for Isla though since she has to live with that creature every single day.

A sigh escapes me, and the loud honking of a car in the distance snaps me out of my thoughts, bringing me back to the conversation at hand.

Remi has offered to visit my father, but I've always pushed it back, because I wanted to be 100 percent sure he is my choice. I've never introduced anyone to my dad, and it's a big deal to me.

Not to mention I don't want to lie to him.

But it seems I can't push away the inevitable any longer.

<Me> We'll come to France by the end of the week. Don't even think about traveling.

<Dad> Thank you. I love you, honey.

<Me> I love you too, Dad.

"Would you like to order some food?" a server, Bethany, asks and shoots a glance at the empty chair in front of me.

"No, thank you. I'm waiting for someone."

She nods, although I don't miss the pity on her face before she dances off to someone else.

I sigh in resignation, glancing at my watch.

It's noon, which means Amalia is thirty minutes late—or rather has ignored my invitation once again for our brunch.

After Santiago's words at the party, I decided to be the bigger person and reach out to my twin despite the hurt.

She postponed her wedding for some unknown reason, so it left me some room for contact, but she never has shown up after any of the five times I sent her messages, asking her to meet me at this place.

The aching pain in my chest appears again, and I shake my head, hating how disappointment always hits me in a new way every single time I come here.

I can't be angry at my twin; her pain is her own, but at the same time, I hate how she doesn't even give us a single chance to heal. We found each other against all odds, so shouldn't we be united? I even know about her brotherhood and what she does, so it's not like she has to hide her true nature from me.

I'm still determined, though.

Taking out the cash from my purse, I put it on the table and get up. I walk to the exit, tightening the coat around me to warm myself from the coldness always present at my twin's rejection.

I'm about to call the driver to pull up the car, when someone approaches me from behind. I freeze when something hard digs into my back. "Not a word," a male voice hisses in my ear while I hectically look around at all the people passing us by. My phone drops on the ground and crashes. "Walk to the car and stay silent, or I'm gonna shoot you dead."

Panic slowly swirls inside my stomach, and I gasp when he pushes me in the direction of a long limo. I'm afraid to make a sound, because I don't want anyone to get hurt.

He opens the door, and I get inside, my eyes widening when I see an old man sitting in front of me, wearing an expensive suit with a diamond watch.

He sips his whiskey as he sweeps his gaze over my form, a calculative stare flashing in his brown eyes.

Familiar brown eyes. Although they've never looked at me with such hatred as these.

A gasp slips past my lips, realization washing over me at who kidnapped me just now.

And because of this, a strong fear builds inside me. I'm afraid to breathe and clasp my hands together while the other man settles next to me, placing the gun right to my ear.

A grimace stretches the old man's mouth. The wrinkles on his face deepen when he says, "My grandson chose *you*." He clacks his tongue. "What bad taste he has. But then, what else could I have expected from a bastard?" He spits out the last part. "The bane of my existence."

He takes a large sip while I'm still trying to process it all before lunging into panic mode and thinking about how to get myself out of this situation.

"Little fucker who thinks he can destroy my empire." He grins, and this alone lets me know he has no soul to speak of, a demon who came from underground to poison anyone who even thinks to go against him. "He should have guarded his one weak spot." His laughter fills the car, sending me in a deeper spiral of fear and anger, because my fists are itching to

punch the fucker in the face for all he has done to my husband.
“Instead, he gave me a weapon.”

Remi’s grandfather, who ordered his own grandson to be killed.

The devil responsible for all the evilness present in his life.

And now he’s taken me to hurt him once again.

Oh my God.

Remi

Leaning back in my chair, I grab this month’s report on *their* company.

The less-than-stellar numbers on their latest transactions, various partners terminating contracts with them, and banks refusing to give them loans, as their position on the market is unstable, brings me joy.

I can almost imagine Duke’s face at the thought of losing his empire in such a shameful way, because people already whisper about his side business and wonder how anyone being friends with him can be associated with that shit by default.

I’ve learned a lot by growing up with my friends in high society, and their one absolute rule?

Reputation is everything. No one will sacrifice theirs for your sake, meaning that if any family name is threatened, they will end friendships to save their asses.

Right now, Duke calls in every favor to stay afloat enough for some bank to give him a chance, but it won’t happen. I made sure everyone knew that helping him would mean going against the Four Dark Horsemen, and no one will do it.

Losing our alliances in business means death in our world. We are all connected to almost all the important chains in this country.

I'm the storm that isolated their boat, aka their empire, in the bloody ocean, waiting for it to sink to become a floating memory in time.

The rest of the family will still have a few million to fall back on, so no one should hurt much. Besides, most of them disliked Duke's regime anyway, so I don't see anyone crying over the fucker.

My hold on the report tightens, bending it in half, as a dark-haired woman flashes in my head. Her kind eyes haunt me in my nightmares, and for a second, the betraying part of me, the one I always shut up during my revenge, wonders how she will be once all this is over.

She never worked a day in her life, dedicating her time to the family charity organizations and helping those in need while tending to the gardens at their family home. She could almost be called a recluse. She was married for only two years before her husband cheated on her, and due to the prenup, she got nothing from that disastrous union.

And now she will find out truths about her father and forever be attached to the shame he brought to their dynasty. As his only heir, she will face scrutiny too.

"You want to destroy everything he built, not just punish him. Are you sure it's fair to your mom, though?"

Throwing the report on the desk, I growl and get up, walking to the huge window with a view of the center of Chicago, where thousands of cars drive on the busy roads and people rapidly move, never catching a break.

Penelope's question still haunts me, always playing somewhere in my mind the closer I come to my revenge.

For all these years, my mom has been just a woman who gave birth to me, a confused teenager who enjoyed her life as if nothing happened after her father cleaned up the "mess" she had made.

She never seemed depressed and stood by her dad at all the functions, supporting him in various ventures and staying his golden child. It was hard not to feel resentment toward her too, even though I excused her actions due to her age.

Isn't it what all children do?

Excuse their parents, because it's easier than bearing the pain of knowing they just don't give a fuck about you?

But despite how much I haven't wanted to think about her after meeting her for the first time, somehow I can't shake the feeling that everything is not as it seems.

The woman I saw at the party didn't seem content, happy, or peaceful.

She was just... sorrowful.

And everything in me screamed to soothe her distress, to tell her the son she buried is alive and has lived in hell because of her father, who she loves so much.

Yet I don't dare do it.

I'm no prince, and she already thinks her son is dead. What's the point of opening up old wounds?

They have already festered and brought damage beyond repair.

I slam my fist on the glass, hissing, while hating myself for even having doubts about this.

Shame for Duke is not enough. I want him to lose what he loves most so he regrets his deeds till the day he dies.

Not to mention he has subjected my wife, my beautiful, beloved wife, to so much sorrow and pain. She had to grow up without her parents and twin.

With each passing day, I become more obsessive and possessive of her, needing her like the air we all breathe and wanting to be in her company constantly. She's my calm in any storm, temporarily taming the monster raging within me who craves blood and vengeance.

She inspires an ache in my heart that has been dead for years, and sometimes I wonder... is this the love all the poets speak so highly of?

Craving a woman so much, you no longer know how to exist in the darkness without her, because she's the only light this world possesses? Thinking about her protection first and doing your best to keep her safe?

And knowing without a shadow of a doubt that if she ever tries to leave you or gets scared... you will clip her wings and drag her deeper into your world until no one but you accept her?

My love is a curse, and unfortunately for Penelope, she'll have to live with it for the rest of her life.

Because no monster willingly lets go of their salvation; we, better than anyone, hold onto the things we cherish the most.

Because destiny has been so cruel to us, we rarely get such chances.

Kelly speaks through the intercom and pulls me out of my thoughts. “Mr. Reyes, there is a woman here. She is not scheduled, but she insists on seeing you.”

My brows furrow, and I spin around on my heel, glancing at my watch. “Who?” I agreed to meet with the dark four in half an hour at Santiago’s office to discuss Octavius’s latest fuck-up.

“Her name is— Miss, you can’t enter without permission!” The double doors to my office burst open, and a woman enters, stilling me on the spot.

She’s wearing a black dress and heels. Her hair is put in a neat ponytail while her kind eyes flash in fury.

Sofia Carrington in the flesh.

She crosses her arms and lifts her chin. “Remi.”

Kelly runs right behind her, breathing heavily as she rubs her pregnant belly. “I’m sorry, sir. She just barged in.” She glares at Sofia, who sends a tight smile her way, which makes Kelly blink in surprise.

“I’m sorry, but I do have to talk to your boss.” She shifts her attention back on me. “Alone.” She utters the word in a harsher tone, and for some unexplainable reason, I want to stand straight and fall in line.

What in the fuck?

This woman might be my biological mother, but she didn’t raise me, so I don’t owe her shit. In fact, my adoptive mother didn’t do much for me either. Aunt Rebecca has been more of a mother to me than anyone else.

Somehow, though, this justification seems wrong to use against a woman who thought her child was dead.

Kelly darts her gaze between us, confusion written all over her face, and I tell her, “It’s fine, Kelly.” However, since I don’t know how long this might take, I add, “Call the dark four and tell them to meet me here instead of the Cortez holding.”

She nods at me. “Will do, sir.” With this, she closes the door, leaving me alone with the woman who has all my insides flipping. My hands sweat while unfamiliar nervousness washes over me, which makes me almost laugh.

I’m a grown-ass man who has seen so much shit that this little encounter shouldn’t unsettle me at all.

And yet it does, and I loathe myself even more because of it.

“What do you want, Ms. Carrington?” After the divorce, she kept her family name that once again should prove to me how loyal she is to her family.

Who knows?

Maybe she’ll be glad once she finds out what he did. She got her freedom, and no one ever learned about her shame back then. She can spill truths now during dinners when it hardly affects her reputation.

Her father gifted her youth when he stole my childhood.

“Very well,” she says before walking farther, standing several feet away from me. “You’re ruining my family’s legacy. I’d like to know why.” She must read the surprise on my face, because she elaborates. “I might not be involved in the day-to-day action in the business, but I do recognize trouble when I see it.”

I go to the bar nearby and reach for the bottle of whiskey but then grab water instead, not wanting to drink in front of

her and show her disrespect.

A bitter laugh almost spills from my lips.

Look how much regard I show to a woman who forgot me so quickly and even now comes to me to save her father's ass.

My biological mother won't stop me from executing my plan though. Her father doesn't deserve to live peacefully when I've never gotten the chance.

Clearing my throat, I finally reply to her. "I'm a businessman, Ms. Carrington." I turn around to face her again. As she frowns, small wrinkles appear on her forehead. She shifts uncomfortably, and in this moment, she seems lost, but I fist my hand, not allowing myself to notice anything more about her. "If I see weakness, I strike." She opens her mouth to say something, but I beat her to it. "Your family's legacy has been on the edge of a fall all this time. I just pulled the trigger on the chain of unstoppable events." I motion to the bar and offer, "Would you like something to drink before you go?" The message between the lines is clear as fuck.

She needs to get the hell out of here before the bottled-up anger inside me erupts, letting me scream at her, asking how she can still come here and try to protect the bastard who took away her son.

I wash away the bitterness in my mouth with water, willing all my self-control gathered over the years to help me withstand this and never subject myself to such torture again.

"No, and I'm not done," she replies coldly, and my brows rise at her tone. She isn't known to be outspoken.

It figures. I'll be the one to make my mom lose her temper, and somehow this knowledge gives me pleasure.

I guess I'm more fucked up than I originally thought.

“You bought out all the shares, provided different contracts to our partners, shut out our various ventures by presenting such a good proposition to our opponents that they couldn’t resist. You isolated us on the market, and you know it!” She points a finger at me while I just sip my water, wishing it was whiskey, because the judgment in her voice annoys me. “And now you are coming after our family estate.” The bottle pauses midway to my mouth at this. “Our beautiful 19th century mansion that belonged to the first Carringtons on this land. My sanctuary.” She finishes her tirade on a whisper and grips the nearby chair, swaying a little. I shoot forward, the water spilling on the glistening marble, ready to catch her, but she shakes her head at me. “This is personal. Why are you so cruel to us, Remi? What has my family done to you?”

“My reasons are my own. Your father is not a saint,” I say with a snarl. “And just to make it clear, not that I owe an explanation to the Carringtons, I have no interest in your family estate.”

I only went for his assets and legacy; the various old buildings spread through the country with their rich history have no interest to me.

“He already brought a buyer there yesterday. He will sell it to cover other debts. He never liked the house anyway,” she whispers, staring in the distance, and then drops on the chair, clasping her trembling hands together. “The result will be the same.”

I resist any urge to console her and instead settle on something else. “I’m sure you won’t be homeless. Your father loves you too much to let that happen.”

“But *he* won’t find me anywhere else!”

“Who?”

“My son.”

I freeze. My heart stops beating for a fraction of a second as she raises her gaze, blanketed by tears, to me. Her eyes are so full of pain I can almost touch it.

“He won’t find me anywhere else.”

Thousands of emotions claw at me from every direction, opening up the wounds I patched up and shut away. It takes everything in me to push through the tightness in my throat. “I believe your son is dead. And wasn’t he just a day old when he died?”

She winces at my question, wiping away the tears sliding down her cheek. “That’s what my father says, but my son was wrapped in a woolen blanket with the family emblem on it that night.”

Emblem? I wasn’t even aware the Carringtons had one of those.

“I personally knitted it for him during the time my father kept me hostage in the family mansion so no one would know about his shame.” Distaste laces her tone on the last part as if she dislikes her father deep down and has no devotion to him. “When my son died, the blanket disappeared too.” She digs her nails into the chair’s arm, her knuckles turning white. “My father says I’m crazy, but what if my son is alive? Someone just took him for whatever reason?” The bottle of water scrunches in my hands when I grip it hard, trying to control the chaos slowly erupting inside me as this information goes against everything I’ve believed in. “That’s why I stayed at the house all this time. It’s the only one that has a family emblem on it.” She exhales heavily. “He won’t find me otherwise.”

“Ms. Carrington—”

She raises a splayed palm to stop whatever I want to say. “Please, don’t.” She places her hand on her chest. “My son is alive. I feel it here. I was powerless to stop my father from taking him away and couldn’t find him no matter how much I searched for him. But I’ll be damned if I’m willingly going to give up my last hope of reuniting with him.” Resolve flashes on her face along with pain. “Which means I’m not too proud to beg you to please stop your vengeance. Or do it in such a way my father won’t think about selling the mansion.”

I just stand still, staring at her as her lips quiver, and she does her best to catch all the tears dripping on her black dress, her eyes holding mine in silent request.

Was everything so far a lie?

My mother... she believes I’m alive?

Her logic is warped, of course. People rarely see their baby blankets again. The likelihood of anyone keeping it after kidnapping a child is slim to impossible.

But apparently a mother’s heart can nurture hope even in the worst situations without thinking about logic.

“I’m sorry for whatever my family has done to you. But please don’t take away my hope. The hope has been the only thing keeping me alive for the last thirty-one years.”

The little boy craving the acceptance and love of his mother awakens inside me, wishing to tell her the truth and find solace in her arms, so maybe she could bring relief to the aching pain in my chest that doesn’t go away.

But the man I’ve grown into knows it would be a terrible mistake. I’m not her sweet baby anymore.

Her prince grew up into a monster who sends fear in whoever crosses him.

“I wish you were never born.”

She wouldn't wish for such a son, and I've handled all the rejection I could in my life.

I won't subject myself to any more.

Before I can reply to her, the doors burst open again. My eyes widen at Amalia standing there, the blood dripping from her forehead, her jeans and shirt smeared in dirt. “Duke kidnapped Penelope.” She tugs on her hair as if in a trance. “I was supposed to meet her, and he just took her. I couldn't stop the car in time. He has her, Remi!”

No.

Fear unlike anything I've felt before wraps around me, strangling me, while the beast inside me roars so loudly his fury burns me from the inside out.

My woman, my beautiful woman, is in the hands of the madman who hates me viciously and will stop at nothing to hurt me.

And he didn't threaten me or send any clue about where to find him, which means only one thing.

He intends to kill her and deliver her body to me on a silver platter as a token of his revenge.

A man who didn't mind killing his own grandson would not even blink before killing someone's wife.

As madness slowly consumes me, pouring into my soul and smearing it in anger, determination urges me to find the motherfucker and torture him endlessly. My insides rip in two just thinking what he might do to my Penelope.

Feelings right now are a luxury I can't afford. Rational thinking and victories don't exist without a cold mind.

If I succumb to my fury, I won't help my wife. Instead, it will allow the monster to feast on her flesh, making her pay for my sins.

I should have never made her part of my plan or showed her affection; the fucker knew exactly where to strike me.

“Do you hear me, Remi?” Amalia shouts, coming closer to me and hitting my chest. “Your grandfather took my sister!”

A loud gasp echoes in the room, and both our heads swing to my mother, who blinks rapidly, drilling her stare into me and shaking her head in disbelief. “Remi,” she whispers, wanting to touch me, but I step away from her.

Right now, I can't focus on her or the questions swirling in her eyes.

Instead, I run through my photographic memories of all the information I've ever had on my grandfather—his patterns, likes and dislikes—to determine where he could have taken Penelope.

Since he thinks he is so smart, it means he would pick a place he predicts I would never consider. And killing her there would bring him extra joy, and he will be able to flaunt that fact afterward.

A place that would make him believe justice was served for all the shit I've done to him.

Where?

And just like that, the answer comes to me.

The Carrington family mansion. Where his greatest shame was born and he failed to end my life.

So he will try to rectify the situation today to give himself at least some sense of power.

He might be healthy, but his reputation and everything else is in shambles, so he has nothing to lose. I wouldn't be surprised if the fucker plans to off himself once he executes his plan.

I won't allow it to happen.

He took my birthright, my mother, my childhood from me.

He won't take my wife.

Heavy footsteps reverberate through the space as familiar energy buzzes all over me, promising me reprieve in chaos. I look at my friends entering the office, determination written on their faces as they wait for my reaction, which lets me know they heard the last part.

“Whatever you need, brother,” Santiago says. Without uttering a single word, I march to the exit, passing a gaping Kelly, while my friends trail behind me.

I remove my suit jacket and toss it down, rolling up the sleeves of my shirt, ready to unleash the barbarian always living inside me.

I've never been a fucking prince anyway.

This war started because he hurt me.

But I will end this war because he dared to hurt Penelope.

For in this dark world of mine, she is the only light I've ever known.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“A cub cannot survive in the wild without his mother, because predators would kill him.

But if for some miraculous reason he does?

Be afraid.

Be very afraid.

Because a strength like that is unbreakable and craves nothing but to destroy those who hurt him.

Especially if those people dared to touch what he loves the most.”

Remi

Penelope

I land on the ground with a thud, and pain shoots through me. My open hands grip dirt as I try to keep my balance.

My neck strains as the man fists my hair hard, tilting my head until I can face him. He smirks at me. “Do you know why I brought you here, Penelope?” He motions toward the vast property covered in emerald-green grass, glistening under the coming sunset. Magnificent flowering bushes and large

trees are visible, and the birds are chirping happily. A rather annoying sound in the current circumstances.

Sitting right in the middle, I see a three-level Victorian-style house; the massive brick structure has many windows. Several fountains are spread through the gardens, the water cascading down the statues and inviting you to close your eyes and let the sensations wash over you.

If I hadn't been dragged here against my will by a man who hit me hard in the car and then has kept pointing a gun at me, I might even find it beautiful.

Right now, though, I hope to see someone sane around who can stop this madness or find my escape, yet all my hopes are fruitless.

There is nothing but emptiness in sight, only interrupted by the few guards he brought with him.

Duke must read my mind, because he warns, "Don't even think about doing anything stupid. The people I hired won't hesitate to shoot you." I almost laugh in his face. How rich of him to threaten me with death when he wants to kill me anyway. "Now. I repeat. Do you know why I brought you here?" Since I stay silent, refusing to indulge him in his game, he kicks me hard in the stomach. I scream as pain flashes through me in waves, taking my breath away. "Answer me!" he shouts before slapping me hard across the face, then letting me go, which results in me falling to my side, breathing heavily.

My skin burns from the slap. I can't move my jaw to form a word, so I just shake my head, praying to win some time so Remi can show up and save me.

And he will, I know this for sure.

My dark prince.

“This is the place where all my dreams died,” he continues as his men circle me, pointing their guns at me.

I cough. Sitting up, I’m glad I wore jeans today.

Cowards.

“My daughter, my princess, got pregnant by my best friend’s kid at fifteen. She was beautiful, smart, and happy.” He spits the words, snatching the bottle of whiskey from the guard and flicking it open. “Whole future ahead of her, and she sacrificed it all because she fell in love with him!” He takes a greedy gulp and wipes his mouth. “And the fucker of course denied it. He went so far as to call her a whore!” He bellows the last part, making me wince.

It seems Remi’s biological dad was an asshole too.

“That’s why killing Keith brought me extra pleasure.” I gasp at this, my eyes widening, and he laughs, the sound breaking goose bumps on my flesh and creating more fear in the pit of my stomach. Just how many people did this man off in order to achieve his goals? “Forced him to overdose so his family would face the shame and not mine. You don’t call my daughter a whore and live!” He starts to pace back and forth, reliving the past, judging by his murderous expression. “Served my friend right too. His son destroyed my little girl.”

Since the subject makes him agitated and emotional, I decide to prolong it. “He was a child. He probably got scared too.”

Duke looks at me in bewilderment. “He was eighteen! My daughter loved him. Can you believe that? I never raised her to be stupid, but he confused her mind.”

I tense when he drinks more whiskey and then throws the bottle where it lands on the grass. He grips his cane again, holding it tight, and my insides flip just thinking he might hit me with it.

“What happened after you killed him?”

“Sofia became unbearable. She mourned that boy as if he loved her. All while taking care of the baby in her belly and knitting that damn blanket.” The way he says this, it seems he hates the blanket. At this point, I wonder if there is anyone this man doesn’t hate. “The baby. The bane of my existence.”

Anger sparks at this, and I’m powerless to stop the words spilling out of my mouth. “Your grandson. Remi is your grandson.” Even though admitting it out loud feels wrong.

My man is a monster, but he is not a demon like the man whose blood runs through his veins.

Duke is pure evil.

He huffs in displeasure. “I hated him the minute she told me she was pregnant. By the time I found out, it was too late to abort, so she had to give birth to it.” I bite my lip at him calling Remi an *it*. What an asshole. “I figured I could hide her in this house till the dust settled. Everyone thought she was in Switzerland anyway.”

“But she wanted to keep the baby,” I say. He nods, tapping hard on the ground until the tip of the cane digs into it and makes a hole. “You didn’t want Remi.”

“She was fifteen and confused. She didn’t need the baby to give her a bad reputation. No one needed it. Even Keith’s family preferred I get rid of it.”

Awful, awful people who didn’t deserve to have Remi in their lives anyway.

However, my heart aches for his mother who was deceived by everyone and didn't get to spend time with her child.

“So that's what you did.”

I press my hand to my cheek as he paces once again, continuing his tale. “Of course. After the birth, I gave her a few hours to enjoy her time with him and that night did what was right.”

“Ordered him killed.”

He shrugs. “I couldn't kill him myself. I love my daughter.”

I chuckle, which doesn't go unnoticed by him. “You have a weird way of showing it to her.” His brows furrow, and then annoyance flashes on his face. He doesn't appreciate my humor, and I see the error of my ways when another hit lands on my back, the pain sending me forward while my entire spine hurts.

“Don't talk about what you don't know,” he demands, then walks around me again, telling his story as if I really care what led him to his choices.

No matter how he wants to justify his actions, he can't.

A parent who loves his child would never do what he did to Sofia.

“She cried, drowned in her grief so much she lost her spark and never gained it back.” I see him circling something with the cane as he looks on the horizon. “In time, she went back to functioning, but she just existed. She did what I asked of her as long as I let her stay in this damned house. Even married the perfect man, but he couldn't stand her grief.”

I imagine no one could, least of all her father.

After such a tremendous loss, his daughter needed therapy, company, so she wouldn't feel so alone in what she experienced. Instead, he essentially ordered her to shut up about her pain and live as if it never happened.

And then whored her around whenever he felt like it, for connections and dynasty.

“And searched for the baby all the time. I was content, though, because I knew he died. Only that fucker couldn't go through with the deal and let him live!” he concludes on a snarl while I digest all this information.

I know Remi has destroyed Duke's reputation and plans to take away his empire, which would be a logical thing to consider; that's why he is so angry now.

However, after listening to him, the picture becomes crystal-clear.

“You're afraid Sofia will find out.” He stills at this, swinging his head toward me. “He will tell her the truth, and then your daughter who you love so much will know what a monster you truly are.” His face becomes red as his mouth opens and closes. He is a selfish bastard, but he has a soft spot for Sofia and doesn't want to lose her. Remi threatens that, though. Duke knows she loves Remi more than him, her own father.

And that's another reason he hates him so much.

“You better shut up, girl.”

“Remi deserved to grow up with his mother. He deserved better. What he didn't deserve, though, is to be related to such a bad man like you!” I cry out when he fists my hair again, pulling it so hard it feels as if he intends to rip it all out. Still, I say, despite the tears forming in my eyes from his action, “He

survived, and no matter what you do today, he will win.” If this man succeeds in killing me, then I want him to forever remember that.

In this war, his grandson won, because he has something destiny never gave Duke.

A heart.

“You’re such an idiot. Just like your father who crossed me.” I blink at him, uneasiness rushing through me, and he chuckles. “He fell in love and forgot about everything. That’s why both of them had to pay for it.”

No.

No, no, no.

“You—”

“Killed them?” he says and nods, pulling at my hair harder and making me whimper as he digs his cane into my stomach, the bruised flesh weeping from the contact. I don’t break away from his stare, not wanting to show him weakness. “Oh, yes. Brought me extra joy too. Why do you think Asher ran away to France? He wanted to protect you. As if I didn’t know about you.” Oh my God. “I just didn’t give a fuck. Your father left you nothing. He felt the need to separate you two in order to save you from me. So the reason he left all his fortune to Amalia was because she ended up with your aunt. He knew Asher would love you. Beatrice was a whore and died a whore too.”

Nausea hits me, sorrow awakening inside me again at losing my parents that I never got the chance to meet, but also my twin.

Everything that has happened to both of us is his fault!

“Paying off Beatrice to be extra cruel to her niece was a great idea. As long as she was mentally unstable, she couldn’t claim the shares, and that’s why my empire was safe.” He grimaces, spitting on the ground. “All of you survived though. Three kids I wanted dead, and none of you are in graves. I’ve had enough of this.” He drags me forward as I struggle in his hold, but my effort is useless against his strength. My knees scrape over the grass as he drags me after him. “I thought for a long time about how to hurt you all. Until my eyes landed on you.” It takes me a second to realize he’s brought me to the big, rectangular empty pool. “You see, Penelope, they both love you and need you the most. You are the glue holding everything together for them. Killing you will bring them so much pain no amount of torture would rival it. Bill!”

On cue, a man appears next to us and grips my ankle, wrapping a tight rope around it that’s attached to some heavy bag that must have stones in it. “Once you die, I will have my revenge. They will all pay for everything they’ve done to me.” With this, he pushes me hard, and with a yelp, I fall to the bottom of the pool. Piercing pain zips through me when my body lands on the hard concrete. My cry is stilled inside me; every breath is a struggle.

I roll to the side, something warm sliding down my forehead. I have no power to move a muscle. I can only stare up at the clear sky and long to run away from this anguish, but I can’t.

The onslaught becomes too much, but I struggle to keep awake. I want to close my eyes so I won’t have to experience this torture, but the sound of water slapping against the pool snaps my attention while slowly wetness forms underneath me.

He is filling it up. The attached bag of rocks leaves me no means to save myself.

And even if I can hold on enough to try to swim, the anchor will pull me down, and I will die anyway.

My prince hasn't come to the rescue in time.

I'm afraid. So afraid.

For if he finds me dead, darkness will forever fill his heart.

But as much as I try, I can't stay awake. I slowly succumb to the oblivion whispering in my ear to let go and not feel a thing.

Amalia was right.

I never should have come here.

Maybe then we'd all stay alive.

*R*emi

Santiago presses on the gas pedal harder, accelerating more the closer we get to the mansion. The windows are rolled down, and the wind slaps us in our face, not that I feel a thing.

Instead, I remove the safety from the gun and fire into any man blocking our way, the dead bodies dropping like flies around us. Octavius and Florian along with Amalia follow us.

Grandfather must have hired an entire army to guard his ass, but hell will freeze over before an army stops any of the horsemen from protecting what's theirs.

Thankfully, the mansion is just a few minutes from here, but each second counts. Losing my patience, I snap at

Santiago, “Faster!”

“I’m driving as fast as the car will go, *amigo*. Clear head, always clear head.”

That’s rich coming from a man who lost his damn mind when the situation was reversed.

If anything happens to Penelope....

I don’t even let myself go there, because I’ll go insane.

Instead, I change the clips in my gun, preparing to shoot several more men who jump from the trees.

“I’ve counted around thirty men so far.” Florian’s voice echoes through the car when Santiago presses the button on the steering wheel to accept his call. “Which means an equal amount might await us inside the mansion.”

He has always been good with numbers.

“So what?” I snap, hating his detached tone or generally him right about now.

“Don’t jump into anything until we can assess the situation. You won’t help Penelope.”

I barely pay attention to what he says as Santiago takes an abrupt turn to the right and speeds up again.

Finally, we drive to the narrow path leading straight to the massive, open iron gates. He flies through them, getting us in, only for our car to be hit by bullets one after another. We both duck, trying to avoid them.

“Son of a bitch,” Santiago shouts, the tires screeching as he spins it around, stopping the vehicle. We get out, hiding behind it and firing our guns at the men shooting at us.

Florian parks his car right next to us, and they all get out, pointing their guns at the enemy. I want to run to the mansion until I notice how all the guards are standing closer to the garden.

He is not inside, and yet ten more men come out of the house, holding rifles.

Santiago follows my gaze and nods at me, killing one more man before telling me, “You go ahead. We’ll cover you.”

I rush to the garden with the guys creating a circle around me, making sure no bullets hit me, although I hear them ricocheting.

It’s us four against God knows how many, but we’ve been in worse situations before.

All my attention is on the man, though, who stands with five guards, sipping a bottle of whiskey as he lifts his face to the sun.

“Ah, the grandson dearest has arrived.” His disgusting voice rings in the air, sending me into a spiral of madness. I can’t locate Penelope anywhere.

“Don’t call me that. As far as I’m concerned, you are nothing to me.” I point the gun at him. “Where is my wife?”

“Unless you want her dead, you will stay where you are,” he says, greedily gulping whiskey while pointing his own gun at me. “You ruined my life, you little bastard. You should have never been born.”

The buzzing in my ears starts, familiar fury sinking its claws into me and demanding I destroy the enemy who dares to do such a thing to me once again. However, I hold myself back.

Penelope. Only Penelope matters in this moment, and no one else.

I fire at the guards who dash toward me; one by one, they drop on the ground while grandfather stands unbothered, just laughing.

“Where is Penelope?”

“I won’t tell you unless you give me what I want. But the longer we stand here, the less chance she has to survive.” His words send a chill knifing into me, fear fighting for dominance. The coldness does its best to ignore his threats and stay calm. “Both of you.” He looks behind my shoulder, and I know Amalia stands next to me, holding her gun pointed at him, while hatred flashes on her face.

“I knew you’d come for her. She is the weak link.” I growl at what he calls my woman, and Amalia tenses. “She grew up in love, unlike either of you. She loves you. To save her, one of you must die.” My brows furrow at this. The old man has lost his mind if he thinks we will allow this. “You both should have been dead a long time ago.” He focuses his gaze on Amalia. “Kill him, and you will save Penelope. Think about it.” A beat passes. “I killed your parents. And he is my grandson.” Fuck, the gun in Amalia’s hand wavers at finding out this truth. “Do you want your twin to be with my offspring?”

The old man is an idiot if he thinks he will get out of this alive. Amalia won’t let him live long enough to utter his regrets.

Then why is he spilling all this?

Through the gun shots and screams echoing behind us and even grandfather’s annoying voice, there is something nagging

at my mind, something that demands my attention, but I can't figure out what it is.

Amalia fires a bullet by his feet, making him jump and drop the whiskey bottle, and he curses under his breath. "Tell me where my twin is, or I'm gonna shoot at that damned mouth so you'll finally shut up."

"Unless one of you kills the other, I won't say a thing."

That's how I know for sure Duke is prepared to die rather than live in a society that shuns him.

Which means all this is a trap to punish us, and he's just stalling.

Finally, the disturbing sound pierces through the fog. Water is falling rapidly, the sound different from the fountains, and I pinpoint the noise, my heart stopping when I realize there is a pool.

"Penelope," I whisper. I fire a bullet into his stomach, and he cries out, falling on his knees while I race to the pool, Amalia hot on my heels.

My lungs burn for air, but I ignore them, focusing only on the goal in the distance, running with all my might to save my woman. More men appear from the sides, shooting at us. Complete chaos surrounds me, and yet in a second, they are dead as my best friends run right alongside me, Santiago shouting, "The pool! Fuck!" And with this, I speed up, practically not feeling my legs. I reach the side to see a body on the bottom of the pool, more than half filled with water.

"Penelope!" Amalia screams as I jump into the water, diving deep, getting to her quickly and trying to lift her up. But the damn bag attached to her prevents me.

Amalia and Santiago swim right to me. My best friend dives deeper, removing the knife from his mouth and cutting the rope, while I count the seconds in my head, wondering how long she has been without oxygen.

If more than three minutes.... If she dies, then my life has no meaning at all, and the monster urging me to lose my head will win, sending me into the dark abyss of despair.

Santiago frees her, and we drag her upward until we push through the surface and all gulp for breath.

Octavius and Florian grab her and gently place her nearby. I roar at the sight of a deep wound on her head and her arm twisted in a weird position. They must have broken it.

I came too late.

“Penelope,” I call her name. Amalia settles next to me by her head as we watch Octavius perform chest compressions. There is no pulse.

“Please, *chérie*,” I whisper. Santiago grips my shoulder hard just in case I decide to push Octavius away while he tries harder and harder but with no results. “Wake up, darling.”

All my whispers are unheard, though, as she grows paler and paler as if life is slowly slipping away from her.

“Please, darling.”

If there is justice in this world... if there is destiny... then I paid all my dues and deserve happiness.

I always worked hard for everything I had in this life. Never begged anyone no matter the circumstances.

Right now, though, I beg.

I beg fate, who has been nothing but cruel to me, to save my wife.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Love and accept my darkness, ma chérie.

*It won't ever hurt you, but it will cherish you in ways you
never expect.*

For I can't live without you in it.”

Remi

*P*enelope

Discomfort.

That's the first thing coming to my mind as my eyes snap open, only to close again, because of the pain traveling throughout my head.

Wincing, I try to lift my hand to rub my aching forehead but can't because something heavy keeps it in place.

Despite the strong smell of antiseptics irritating my nose and the beeping machines nagging my ears, I bite my lip and slowly open my eyelids once again, blinking several times to adjust to the sunlight coming from the huge window and brightening up the hospital room.

A quiet, muffled gasp slips past my lips as I study my environment, from the cast on my entire right arm to the one

on my ankle and the IV attached to me. I whimper when pain zips through me, reminding me of what happened.

Breathing heavily, I manage to will enough strength into my uninjured arm to snatch the oxygen mask away and smile at my view.

The huge room has a TV hanging on the wall, a couch and two chairs with a small fridge on the side, and a round table with a vase of roses on it.

However, what has my whole attention are the people occupying the furniture.

Santiago sits on the chair, his legs kicked up on the table with Briseis sitting in his lap, hiding her face in the crook between his neck and shoulder. He gently runs his hand up and down her back, his eyes closed, but I know for a fact he is not asleep.

Jimena lies comfortably on the couch, her splayed palm on her stomach and her head on Florian's lap. He watches her intently, his hand hovering over her face as if wanting to touch her, but at the last minute, he squeezes it hard and puts it beside him, glancing away.

She probably has no idea she has fallen asleep on him; otherwise, she'd never allow Florian to be this close to her.

Isla rests on the second chair, her legs under her, and Octavius sits on the floor, leaning back, his head against her knees as she traces her fingers over his scar while her other hand runs through his hair. In this moment, he seems almost content, despite him always growling at her.

To my knowledge, no one is allowed to touch his scar but her. Maybe that's why he gave her that diamond necklace

instead of a ring; he has the key to it on a chain around his neck as well.

None of them have even changed their clothes. They are all filthy, and their shoes have left dirty tracks on the floor. How did they even get permission to be here?

Although that's a stupid question.

They are three heirs to powerful thrones after all.

These men are who society tells us to stay away from, and yet... they've shown me such loyalty by accepting me into their circle and risking their lives in order to save me. And through the years to come, they will do it again in a heartbeat, because once a horseman claims you, they consider you family by default.

Family might not like each other or support all the choices each makes, but they do stand by each other no matter what, so they'll never be alone in this world.

Warmth fills my chest along with gratitude toward these people who welcomed me, even if the ways they went about it were quite dark and *out there*.

My father loves me, and I grew up in a loving environment, but we mostly stayed alone. So how great is it that fate has given me another family, and a *deadly* one at that?

After seeing the true evil of Duke Carrington, I'll never consider them evil.

Not saints but sinners with their own moral code, and I can live with that.

Which obviously speaks volumes about me, since their actions can never be excused, but they can be understood.

And I have chosen my new family.

My gaze finally shifts to the heavy weight on my left, where my husband half lies on the bed as close to me as possible with all the wires and tubes. He breathes evenly, although even in his sleep, he frowns.

Love fills me to the brink, making it hard to breathe as I stare at my man who came into my life so unexpectedly and yet has given me so much.

My dark prince came in time.

I softly whisper, “Remi.” My throat is so dry I cough, and that instantly has him awake, his brown orbs clashing with mine, and they brighten.

He sits up, immediately reaching for the small cup beside the bed and lifting the straw to my mouth, letting me take a few sips. “Slowly, *chérie*. We don’t want you to get sick.”

A laugh bubbles up inside me at this, considering I’m in a hospital bed sporting God knows how many injuries, and I can’t resist teasing him. “A little nausea won’t kill me, I don’t think.”

However, hard lines appear on his face at my joke, and he perches on the bed, splaying his hands on either side of my head and caging me in his embrace. As he isolates us from the outside world, the air hitches in my lungs at how intently he watches me.

As if no one exists for him, and in a way, that’s true, right?

My possessive and obsessive man.

“I’m sorry, my darling,” he says, and my brows furrow in confusion. “I’m sorry my revenge has hurt the one pure thing in my life. I was blinded by my past. I ignored my present, and it’s not something that will ever happen again.”

A tear slides down my cheek, and he leans forward, scooping it with his lips as I ask, “Your grandfather?” A shiver of fear rushes through me at the thought of the despicable man.

“Shhh,” Remi whispers, leaving a small kiss on my lips before answering me. “I did shoot him, but the fucker is alive and well. He will go to prison in time, and everyone will know what he has done.”

My heart pangs painfully at this.

My parents. Remi’s parents. Amalia.

So many lives destroyed because of one man’s warped morals and ideas.

Then his words register in my ear.

“In time?” Shouldn’t he be in custody already? He almost killed me!

Something flashes in his eyes, and my stomach sinks. “Once he pays a debt to a person he hurt.” He doesn’t say my twin’s name out loud, but I understand it’s her anyway.

She is just like them, so I’m not surprised she wants to inflict her revenge on the man responsible for all the hell she went through.

Still, I wish she would rise above it.

True strength lies in putting everything behind you and living with light in your soul, because being a serial killer hardly makes you better than the ones who hurt you.

I don’t get to judge them.

I can only love them both, even if she refuses to see me.

Sighing in relief that this horrible man is finally caught, I put my hand on his chest right above his heart. “Are you okay now? The monster inside you, is he... content?”

He traces the back of his hand over my cheek, sliding down to my neck and then to my collarbone all while his eyes hold mine, so many emotions flashing in them I can't name them all.

But through it all, there is one that stands out the most, and I give him a shy smile.

“They say that only with the years are we able to see how destiny gives us exactly what we need, and someday we might be grateful for it, no matter how hard it was.” He places a butterfly kiss on my neck. “I was born a bastard who was forced to live in exile among the princes. And while I never wished for what they had, I just worked to be better. Even though my parents hurt me every day, and I wondered what I did to deserve such treatment. When I found out the truth... I hated my life with a passion. To be denied your birthright, your true name, your family. To be rejected just for the simple fact you are alive. It's the kind of pain no one should experience.”

My soul weeps for the lonely boy who once was lost in this world, who never understood why everyone kept rejecting him.

“However, if I was born a prince, I'd never have gotten the princess.” He cups my neck, his breath fanning my face as more tears form in my eyes. “A princess who has one thing in abundance he never knew. Love. My darkness craved her, needing her light like breath, because she consumed me and accepted me without reservation. To be wanted despite my hideous past is a gift she has given me that I will cherish till

the day I die.” I fist his shirt, dragging him closer, as he whispers, “I love you, Penelope. And just like in the epic poem, I’d face any hardship just to be with you.” He slams his mouth on mine, connecting us in a deep kiss, our tongues entwining and dueling for dominance, scorching heat rushing through me.

With this kiss, we seal our silent promises; we wash away the past that hurt us and hope for a better future where his darkness exists, but he no longer needs to thrive in it in order to live.

For our love is more important than any pain we experienced.

He will always be one of the Four Dark Horsemen; however, the difference is that I won’t ever let his darkness become what defines him or rules him.

His internal war can finally come to an end.

Tearing my mouth away, I rub his lips, and his brow lifts. “Any confessions, *chérie*?”

I laugh and then groan when my muscles ache. “I love you too, Remi. I’m so glad you married me and chased after my sister all those years.” He grimaces at the reminder. He hates that initially this information hurt me, and my teasing usually ends with him laying me flat on a nearby surface to show me who he’s always wanted. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have snatched me up on that first night.”

He captures my lips in another toe-curling kiss that lasts longer than the previous one. “I’d still find you. You’re my reward.” As we gaze at one another, I’m really grateful for every single thing that led me to this moment.

Even the madman and all the injuries.

“Not that all this is not cute as fuck...” Florian’s amused voice breaks the bubble we’ve created around us, and I gasp.

I totally forgot about our company.

“But can we leave before you guys cross the PG line? Or worse... I might fall in love with Remi myself.” He winks at me, and Jimena jumps up, scooting to the other end of the couch from him while twisting her engagement ring.

Isla laughs, and even Octavius smirks. “He’s right. Didn’t know you were such a poet.”

“*Bravo, amigo,*” Santiago says, sighing and placing his hand on his chest, batting his eyelashes at Remi. “Be still my heart. Even I almost shed a tear.”

The laughter erupts inside the room, easing the tension that was wrapped tightly around us all.

“Are you all right?” Briseis asks, getting up and coming closer to me. “The doctor said that you have no internal injuries, but the wound on your head worries them, so they are going to keep you for a few days.” Well, that’s great to know; although right now, I’m far from all right. Not that I will mention this little tidbit. “A broken arm and ankle, they’ll take time to heal, but then you should be as good as new.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind more painkillers, but I’m okay.”

Remi adjusts my pillow behind me and helps me to sit up. Although my head is a bit dizzy, this vertical position eases some of the aches.

Three loud knocks ring in the air, and Amalia enters, wearing a clean dress with her hair glistening in the sunlight. She stands out among us all, although nervousness emits from her as she shifts from foot to foot, glancing at everyone.

“We have to go. These guys need to wash off, because they stink,” Jimena says, patting me on the arm. “Glad to see you are okay, and we’re going to visit you soon.” The girls nod while the guys salute me on their way to the door.

“Thank you!” I call after them, and only Santiago looks over his shoulder, winking.

Yeah, they are an interesting bunch.

And I can honestly say I love them all.

Remi places a kiss on my forehead. “I will go and talk with the doctor about when they can discharge you.” I send him a grateful smile as he quietly exits the room, leaving me alone with my twin with tension rising around us.

The silence stretches, and I’m not sure she is going to say anything, until finally she speaks up. “I postponed my wedding five times.”

My brows shoot up, because this is not what I expected to hear at all.

“Okaaaay.”

She huffs in exasperation and strolls to the window, her back to me. “Lionel thinks I’m nervous about the marriage, but he couldn’t be more wrong.”

Still a bit lost with this whole conversation, I mutter, “Maybe it’s just wrong timing.”

“No. I just didn’t want to get married without you.”

My heartbeat speeds up, but I fist my hands, not letting myself hope.

She has crushed my dreams so many times regarding us that I prefer to be cautious from now on.

“My whole life, I wanted to reunite with you. We all need to hold on to something, and you were the anchor that kept my boat steady during the storm.” She spins around, crossing her arms; I don’t miss how hard she digs her nails into her skin. “And then when I was free to do so, I was afraid. Asher made sure you were loved. A perfect little girl living in a perfect world with perfect people. I could never be perfect. My flaws are deep and permanent, right along with all the scars marring my body.”

Oh my God.

The familiar pain hurts my heart again, crying out for my twin. “Amalia—”

She shakes her head. “No. It’s true, though. I’m not a good person. Never will be one either. We are like a coin with two sides. You’re the light, and I’m the darkness that shouldn’t exist in the same universe. When you found me, I was angry. Because I missed you so much, which is funny, because we’d never been together.” A hollow chuckle escapes her lips. “To protect myself from pain, I preferred to reject you first. I couldn’t stand the idea of you despising me once you learned about my past and present.”

“I would have never done that. All I ever wanted was to find you.” Sometimes it feels like it was my lifelong mission to reunite us.

Our parents separated us to save us, and I guess I can’t really blame them for it after witnessing Duke’s madness.

However, we deserved better. At twenty-three, it’s not too late to restore our relationship.

“I came for our meeting.” She hooks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I was too late, though. Duke had already taken

you.”

“You saved me. Thank you.”

“Yeah. Remi loves you, which is astonishing. I never knew he was capable of such emotion.” She frowns. “You should be with someone nicer.” A beat passes. “Preferably someone who follows the law.”

I smile.

Such a sister thing to say. A small thing, but it means a lot right now. “I happen to like him.”

“That’s great,” she mutters, and silence falls between us again. With the truth out in the open, we don’t really know how to act.

Amalia offers a sort of truce with her speech, and maybe in time we will build a normal relationship that—

I huff when she comes swiftly at me and envelops me in her arms, hugging me for the first time in our lives... and her perfume fills my nostrils.

And yet her presence in my space feels so familiar, so right and so needed, because I felt empty without her.

Remi is and always will be the love of my life, but Amalia is my soul mate.

Reflexively, my arm wraps around her as hard as possible, and I rest my chin on her shoulder, our heartbeats beating against each other. “I love you, Penelope. I’m sorry for being stubborn.”

Squeezing her harder, I whisper right back, “I love you too, Amalia.” And finally I find peace, because my search has ended.

It will take us a long time before we can truly be sisters,
but the link that got broken is intact again, and with it, we can
do anything.

My twin is with me.

And on this journey, I got my gorgeous man too.

What more could a woman want to be happy?

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Odysseus needed twenty years to find a way back home.

*He went through so many hardships yet withstood it all,
because his family was a star shining in the sky, guiding him
on his journey and urging him to keep going so he could
reunite with them.*

Wars, storms, goddesses, and curses...

*They were powerless against the sheer will this man
possessed, as the love burned in his soul so strongly
everything else paled in comparison.*

*I never understood why my second name was Odysseus, found
it funny even.*

Until today.”

Remi

*R*emi

Shutting off the engine of the car, I take a deep breath and glance at Penelope, who puts her hand over mine on the steering wheel. “No pressure, darling,” she whispers, and I lean toward her, kissing her on the mouth for several seconds before resting my forehead against hers. “No matter what you choose, I will love you,” she says, reading my mind,

although the heavy weight pressing on my chest rebels at the idea of disappointing her.

And yet I don't doubt her words.

"I know." Soaking up strength from her I do not possess, I straighten up and grab the handle. "Are you sure you prefer to wait in the car?" The doctor gave her the all-clear a few days ago. She'll have to wear the cast for about six weeks, depending on how the healing goes. Thankfully, she wears an orthopedic boot on her foot, so she doesn't need crutches to walk.

She nods, patting the book on her lap. "Yes."

Holding her stare for a few more seconds and reading nothing but acceptance on her face, I get out of the car, closing the door. I gaze into the distance, welcoming the harsh wind billowing my jacket backward while coldness sinks into me.

Maybe then it will extinguish the fire burning my insides.

Thunder echoes in the sky, and I look up to see dark clouds gathering, ready to pour some rain. The birds still chirp loudly, sitting on the branches, ready to fly away should nature change the weather.

And yet traces of sun push through the clouds, signaling that maybe this day will stay sunny despite the upcoming rain.

Or rather I should stop focusing on the weather so much and instead concentrate on what I came here to do.

An engine roars behind me, bringing attention to the car pulling up right beside mine before three men emerge from it.

Did I really think they would leave me alone on such an important day?

My best friends walk to me while waving at Penelope on the way.

Octavius places his hand on my shoulder, giving it a light squeeze and showing his silent support. "We're here."

Florian hooks his fingers on his pants and bumps me, grinning, but it doesn't reach his eyes that are so serious. "No matter how it ends, we will be here. Like always."

Always.

Isn't he right?

Once upon a time, I came to the Cortez mansion and met three boys who welcomed me with open arms and stayed my friends no matter what.

Nothing stopped them.

Not our social difference. My temper. How everyone at school told them to drop me and find better friends who would give them much-needed connections in the future.

We were, and stay, united no matter what anyone throws our way.

"Because we are more than friends. We are brothers," Santiago says, extending his hand to me and pulling me into a warm hug as we slap each other's back.

This friendship wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for my best friend.

A boy who gave me more than friendship, a boy who gave me a family and whose support I felt even when he lived his personal hell.

Penelope pulled me out of darkness and showed me there is light in this world.

Santiago?

Santiago helped me survive in it and become a king in my own right, showed me kindness when all I knew before the Cortez family was cruelty.

“*Gracias por todo, hermano,*” I whisper in his ear and can feel him smile.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, and we lean back when he motions with his head to the side. “Good luck.”

Luck.

I dislike this word, because in my opinion, life was never lucky for me, but I was wrong.

Even in the midst of despair, she gave me the dark four, and what man could ask for more?

Nodding at them one last time and leaving them with my woman, I roll my shoulders back and walk through the garden, my leather shoes soundless on the grass. My eyes are trained on the small figure standing by the rose bushes.

Because she is so far away, she has no idea about the visitors, and to my astonishment, no guards surveil the property.

Sofia Carrington.

She came to the hospital once, asking how Penelope was and then wanting to talk to me, but I shut it down. I wasn’t ready to face my past with my anger at my grandfather so fresh.

She understood, or at least understood it in her own way, because a day later, I got the notification she sold the family property to the highest bidder, paid her father’s debts, and bought a small house on the outskirts of the city.

A good property with an enormous garden spreading through most of it.

I think she took my words as a rejection of her and put two and two together to build a rather depressing picture for herself.

Where her son knew who he was and never contacted her.

However, how can I explain everything to her? All the shit that happened... based on what Penelope told me and how she suffered, she won't be able to take it.

I don't want to be the source of her grief anymore.

Especially when the past cannot be changed, and we won't get the lost years back.

Thunder rocks the sky once again, bringing me back to the present as I move closer. She is cutting leaves with scissors wearing special gloves to protect her dainty hands. Her dark hair flies in different directions as she shoos the gnats away so they won't disturb her work.

Stopping far enough away for her to hear me, I stand still as my heart beats so wildly in my chest I'm surprised it's not on the ground. No words come to me. Nervousness washes over me, my hands sweating as tremors travel through me, because I'm scared.

By default, a mother loves her child when he or she is born.

Will a mother love a son who grew up into a monster?

Right now, I'm not a man in his prime with all the power; right now, I'm a little boy who felt so bad and lonely he wondered why no one loved him and wished him dead.

And that boy is terrified to face such rejection again.

Inhaling much-needed air in my lungs, quietly, I say through the bile in my throat, “Mom.” She doesn’t react, still cutting the leaves, so I try again, a bit louder this time. “Mom.”

Still, it’s not enough, and she flips her hair back when the wind whooshes over her.

Gathering all my willpower and bravery, I clear my throat, and my voice booms through the space. “Mom.”

She pauses cutting midway, stilling in place before slowly turning to me, shock etched on her features while her mouth opens and closes.

She looks at me without blinking, probably wondering if she heard me right.

It takes all my self-control and the resolve acquired through the years to say the next sentence clearly and without wavering. “Mom, I’m home.”

She gasps, the scissors dropping to the ground with a thud, while she takes a single step forward but then one back, casting her gaze down, clasping her hands together and rubbing them nervously.

She whispers something under her breath, scrunches her eyes several times, and shakes her head, refusing to believe I’m standing in front of her.

So I repeat the words again, easier this time, addressed to this woman who should have been a part of my life from the very beginning. “Mom, I’m here.”

“Odysseus,” she whispers and raises her dark eyes to me, so much hope and love filling them I almost feel unworthy of it. “My Odysseus? Are you really here?” She palms her head. “I’m not imagining things?”

Swallowing past the tightness in my throat, I nod. “Yeah. I’m home, Mom.”

She steps forward, extending her hands to me but then pulls them back. She removes the gloves, throwing them down, and moves toward me, her palms covering her mouth all while tears stream down her cheeks.

I do the same, taking one step at a time, in the short distance between us that feels like a lifetime.

Because it took us thirty-one years to finally be able to do this.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

And we are standing in front of each other, just staring at one another as her flowery scent surrounds me, seeming almost familiar. Lightning graces the sky, and the first droplets of rain fall on us.

She slowly lifts her trembling hands, placing them on my cheeks, and her soft touch soothes some of the internal wounds as she glides them down to my neck, noticing the deep scar there. “My baby boy. All grown up,” she says and then laughs happily before big sobs shake her entire body. She traces my face with her fingers, her eyes studying every detail, and more tears flow. “Odysseus.”

“Mom.”

She closes her eyes when I call her that, her lips quivering as she tries to control her sobs, but fails to do so. “You found me?”

“Yes.”

Her hands slide to my shirt, and she grips it. “You won’t disappear again?”

Wiping away her tears with my thumbs, I tell her, “No.”

She looks at me again, more tears filling her eyes. “This time around my baby boy will stay?” She clenches the shirt harder. “I can’t lose you twice.”

My heart, my scarred and aching heart, beats wildly while whimpering at the anguish in her tone and regretting everything that prevented us from being together all this time.

My mother doesn’t care about my past, present, or future.

She doesn’t shy away from touching me, even though she knows what I’ve done to her father.

She doesn’t ask me any questions beyond the one that matters to her the most.

My mother accepts me without knowing me, just like she accepted me all those years ago when she wanted to keep me.

Her love never went away; she has harbored it in her soul and pours it into me so hard I don’t know what to do with it all.

Yet it gathers the scattered pieces of my dark soul and glues them back together, slipping into every crack and soothing it with the motherly love I never knew.

“No, Mom. You won’t lose me again.” She cries harder, if it’s possible, and I hug her close, pressing her cheek to my chest as I rock us both. “I found a way home.”

The little prince stolen from her in the night finally has his peace.

Reunited with the queen by eliminating the evil king.

I was always worthy of my mother's love.

And no one will take that right away from me ever again.

Because I was meant to be born.

EPILOGUE

“Once upon a time, she came to my darkness and wrecked the chaos in my carefully structured world.

Something so precious shouldn’t have been mine, but mine she became.

And as such, she lived happily ever after with the monster.

For even the most vicious villains... have hearts craving love and acceptance.”

Remi

*C*hicago, Illinois
Ten years later

*R*emi

The scent of freshly baked cookies penetrates my nostrils as I enter my house, giggles echoing in the air followed by loud squeals.

“Add some chocolate, Grandma!”

“And sugar!”

“She always adds sugar, duh!”

“Sometimes she doesn’t!”

“You just don’t feel it, because you have a sweet tooth!”

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

A smile curves my lips at the sound of my seven-year-old sons bickering. Throwing my jacket on the couch, I walk through the hallway to the kitchen where my mother stands by the counter and sprinkles some chocolate into the bowl before blending everything together, creating a brown mass.

My sons stand on each side of her, watching her with concentration while holding the sugar and chocolate, awaiting the shining moment to pour them in. Their identical features are striking; even their cheeks sport a dimple on the right side. Rarely can anyone tell them apart. It doesn’t help they prefer to wear identical clothes as well, and today they opted for black jeans and blue shirts.

Blond hair, and green eyes that seem to know more than they let on, their features stand out among our dark-haired family, and people love to joke that they look like Florian.

Needless to say, I hardly appreciate those and mostly growl at anyone who doubts my parental status to them.

They are mine, just like my wife.

Character-wise, though, they are very different; one is silent and brooding, preferring to watch people from afar and read books, and he despises loud voices. The other loves company and thrives on all the attention, becoming fast friends with anyone he sees.

Despite that, they are best friends and a tight unit who love each other dearly and can silently communicate with each

other, which amuses my wife.

Aegeus notices me first, his eyes flashing in happiness, and he shouts, “Dad’s home!” He races to me, smacking against my hip and tilting his head back. “Hi, Dad!” He grins widely, and my heart pangs painfully at him calling me that, softening under his trusting gaze.

It’s a word I never expected anyone to call me, because I considered myself unworthy of the title. And I thought it impossible to build a family.

And yet despite all the odds, it’s my reality now.

My mother grins. Flour smears her cheeks and the black dress that’s in bad need of an apron. “Honey!” Her entire face lights up with joy, and she looks younger than ever.

Sometimes, I think she got her youth back when she found me, as if she finally switched from merely existing to living to her full potential. She went back to get her landscaping degree and now creates art with nature, loving every minute of it. She moved closer to us a few years back, mainly so the kids could stay over longer, and they use any opportunity they have to indulge in her kindness. She lets them get away with everything, not that we mind. We never got to experience what it was like to have loving grandparents, so we love that our children will have such precious memories.

Although our initial reunion was very emotional, and we spoke for hours, as she didn’t want to let go of me even for a second, our relationship at the very beginning was strained.

We didn’t know how to act around each other or how to fit each other into our worlds. Explanations to everyone seemed daunting too, but slowly we navigated through those hardships

and found our ground where we could finally form the mother-son bond that will last forever.

Mom motions with her hand for me. “Odysseus, pass me the soda please.” She refuses to call me Remi, and in a way, I get it.

For her, it’s the name given to me by people who stole me. So, to her, it’s a constant reminder she didn’t raise me. I’m glad at least she dropped the whole subject of me changing my family name to Carrington to keep the dynasty going.

Yeah, fuck that. Thankfully, her extended family took all the millions after I eliminated their company, and they rarely reach out to us.

Grabbing the can, I walk to her in two short strides, giving it to her. She quickly hugs me. “So glad to see you. Don’t you have an important merger coming up soon? I didn’t expect to see you until next week.”

Merger, right.

This is my code word for killing, but my mother never learned the true extent of my cruelty, so whenever the dark four have to deal with shit, I just say I need to focus on the latest merger.

“It’s Saturday, Mom. Penelope would have killed me.” Besides, I don’t mention to her that I would never miss dinner with my family.

Alesandro stares at me and then whispers, making a move toward me, “Hi, Dad.” His voice is barely audible while he clenches the sugar harder, some of it spilling on the counter. Then he quickly comes to me and hugs me, pressing his cheek to my stomach while I softly run my fingers through his hair, giving him his moment.

He has trouble showing affection, and despite living in our house for the last three years, he's still a bit afraid we might hurt him like his biological parents did when they sold the twins to the highest bidder. Fury glides through my veins, awakening every monstrous trait of mine, threatening to make me lose control and wish for the time to go back so I could kill them all over again without an ounce of remorse.

Alesandro asks for hugs only when he feels lonely or cries; however, he knows he is loved and accepted just the way he is.

The other day, he even shared his latest poem with us and asked me to take him golfing; for a deep introvert, that's a huge win.

Compared to most of our friends, Penelope and I decided to have children right away, wanting to add to our little family. However, destiny sent us another challenge when she refused to give us a child, no matter how hard we tried.

The doctors just opened their hands and claimed there was nothing wrong with us, and yet every single time, the test was negative, which made my wife sadder and sadder as the years passed, especially when our friends started to pop out kids one after another.

She was happy for them, enormously, but she constantly searched for what was wrong with her. The last straw for me was Amalia getting pregnant. Somehow, that broke my wife, seeing her twin with a baby bump and basically showing her what she could have looked like if fate had been kind to us. Especially with how tight their bond has gotten over the years, as they've traveled to see each other every month.

So I did what was right. Threw away all the books about babies and infertility, redecorated the empty nursery, and took

her away for a whole year to travel around the world with all the resources available to us.

I spoiled her rotten so she had no doubt that our lives were perfect, even if it was just the two of us. She finally let go and became happy again, without any shadows in her beautiful blue eyes that still have the power to rule me.

We came back home, and that's when the guys informed me that they saved a few kids from a child-trafficking ring in my absence, and there was a set of twins who didn't talk at all and needed a place to stay for a while until their identities were sorted out. Most of the kids in that raid were kidnapped from good and loving families, so it should have been just for a couple of days.

The minute we found their parents, we went to talk to them about the boys, but the two junkies just wondered if they could sell them again, this time to us.

Santiago barely stopped me from beating the piece-of-shit father to death.

Penelope and I decided to keep them until at least one of them started talking while giving them a warm environment and all the psychological help they might need. Somehow, though, the more the boys stayed, the more we felt like family. Then one day, Penelope asked me if I was okay with adopting them.

So that's how they became part of us, and we couldn't have been happier.

Or at least we thought so, until recently.

"Where is my wife?" I ask, dipping my finger in the brown mass and laughing when my mother slaps my hand away.

“Outside. Enjoying the last days of summer,” a deep voice replies from behind me, and I look at the man entering the kitchen, wearing a scowl on his face when he glances my way, but then he grins when his grandkids run to him. “Hello, munchkins.”

“Grandpa! You’re here!”

He squats down, letting them both hug him, and then stands with them in his arms. “Of course. Your birthday is coming up soon. I wouldn’t miss it.”

Loud cheers echo in the space.

He raises his brow at me. “Remi.”

“Asher.”

Asher still gives me a hard time for marrying his daughter without him and never lets me forget it. While he is the best father-in-law one could ask for and frequently flies to us, living between the two countries... the man has a vicious streak in him. Which doesn’t stop him from calling me son, supporting me, and hugging me every fucking opportunity he gets.

I don’t mind, though, as shocking as it sounds. Our love for Penelope binds us, so we do have common ground.

He kisses his grandkids and puts them back on the floor as he walks around the counter and wraps his arms around my mother, inhaling her scent. “Hi, love.”

Mom’s cheeks heat up, and she leans on him. “Hi.”

And that’s how I know this is my cue to leave, because the last thing I want to watch is my mother being kissed by her husband.

Let's just say they shocked us all when they got married eight years ago, but they are blissfully happy. Considering they both suffered enough in the past, I'm glad they have each other.

What can I say?

Our family is very messy, and explaining all the connections to people is sure fun, but we wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm going to check on Penelope," I say as the kids jump around them while Mom nods. So prowling through the hallway, I head to the terrace where the wide-open door leads to the blinding sun and magnificent garden.

The wind whooshes over me, bringing relief to my heated skin, and for a second, I stand in the doorjamb, enjoying the warmth as a few birds fly up high in the sky and others chirp loudly from the trees.

I bask in nature until my body buzzes with anticipation and passion as my gaze settles on the beautiful vision in blue strolling through the garden and plucking roses on her way. Her dress is plastered against her legs. Her dark hair cascades in heavy locks, and she has this earthy vibe that makes my hands itch to grab her and hold her close to me.

Sharing her with anyone, even nature, seems an unforgivable crime.

My wife.

Mine forever.

Years spent together have done nothing to diminish my obsession and possessiveness of my woman and, instead, have only intensified them, making me wish to spend all my time with her.

I hate any man in her company but deal with it because she has a huge ring on her finger and now something else of mine that lets everyone nearby know she is taken.

Marching to her, I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her gently against me, the beast inside me roaring in pleasure at her scent washing over me and soothing my dark edges.

She laughs softly, resting her head on my chest as she runs her fingers over my hands. “Ah. Someone has missed me.”

“Always,” I reply, nipping her shoulder while my palm glides up and down her baby bump, grinning when I get a little welcoming kick from our tiny miracle. “She is excited to see me.”

Five months ago, we discovered she was pregnant, and that’s when I truly learned the meaning of fear.

The idea of something pure coming from me in this cruel world terrifies me to no end. I want to protect it with all my heart so no one dares to hurt my baby.

The boys already knew hell, so even as fucked up as I am... me being their dad has given them a better chance in this life, and I’m not afraid I’ll smear them with my darkness.

This little life, though...

Although the minute I heard her heartbeat, my heart calmed, and then when they told me it’s a little girl... I couldn’t wait to have a little dark-haired princess to spoil who will probably brighten the world just like her mother.

The boys are excited too. Alesandro wrote her a poem, while Aegeus promised to teach her to fight.

Santiago already bought a shit-ton of presents for his first goddaughter.

“I think she loves you more than me,” Penelope teases, spinning toward me and circling her arms around my neck, stepping even closer to me while I hook a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Not that I can blame her.” A raspy breath escapes her as she holds my gaze. “Everything okay?”

My woman has learned to coexist with my darkness, accepting my deeds as long as they stay true to my morals, even if she doesn’t understand.

We have no secrets in this marriage, and I will never stop fighting for those who deserve it, while punishing horrible men who steal childhoods and whose choices inflict evilness onto those around them.

She will have a lot of questions about our latest operation, reminding me to always be safe and come back to her.

She changed a bit after we got the kids; she warned me she wouldn’t tolerate any darkness around them, and if I succumb to it, she will take them all and leave so I won’t find them.

I would never harm a hair on any of them, for I truly love them in ways I thought my dark heart never could. But the idea of her thinking she can get away from me is truly hilarious.

My Penelope is forever trapped with the monster, even if it’s a beloved monster, not that I tell her that.

I’m powerful but not stupid.

“Yeah. Just a little trouble. Nothing we can’t fix.” She gives me a hard look, and I give her a kiss on the mouth. “Be brave, *chérie*. Always be brave.”

Because living with the Four Dark Horsemen requires patience and bravery to survive our brand of darkness.

“I prefer to be happy,” she whispers, raising on her tiptoes and connecting our mouths in a deep kiss, our tongues brushing against each other as she digs her nails in my neck.

My groan and her moan mingle together in our throats as I fist her hair, angling her head for better access. I deepen the kiss, roaming inside and seeking her complete submission.

Loud giggles burst our passionate bubble, our sons screaming, “The first batch of cookies is ready!” And then by the loud tapping on the concrete followed by silence, I know they are racing toward us.

I snatch my mouth away and rest my forehead against hers. “I love you, *chérie*.”

Tears form in her eyes. “I love you too, my dark prince.”

And as our sons come to us, lacing their fingers with ours and pulling us to the house where we can enjoy family time, I wonder about my past.

When I stepped on the path of revenge, I forever lost hope of finding love.

For who in their right mind would love a monster?

Our souls are broken and destroyed after years and years of pain, soaked in darkness that scares most people and disgusts the rest.

And yet...

A woman fell in love with me and, by doing that, gave me the world, filling the cracks in my heart with her so much I don't understand how I survived for so long without her.

I always thought my revenge gave me a clear purpose that helped me to achieve power and prestige, clawing from the bottom to reach the top...

But I was wrong.

My revenge set me on a specific path, leading to an inevitable chain of events that led me to this moment, and in this, fate has given me a priceless gift.

Her.

The End

Turn the page to read an excerpt from [Santiago's Conquest](#). Available Now!

SANTIAGO'S CONQUEST EXCERPT

Briseis

A raspy breath of distress slips past my lips when my hold on the bouquet in my hands tightens, the roses' thorns digging into my skin and probably drawing blood.

The priest's booming voice echoes through the space of the church, his smile so bright I wonder if it hurts his face.

Or do despicable creatures have no idea about the devastating emotions of mere mortals?

"Do you, Briseis Dawson, take this man..." With each word, I zone out farther and farther from this situation while the ringing in my ears replaces his rusty voice. I barely hold myself back from spitting on him for what he's allowing to happen inside these walls that should have been my sanctuary.

Instead, this place fed me to the wolves so they could shred my flesh to pieces, their sharp teeth sinking into me so harshly they won't rest until I bleed out on the floor... with God as my witness.

Monsters, hideous monsters led by the devil who....

A single tear slides down my cheek, hidden behind my veil made of the finest tulle. Nothing but the best for the bride of this groom, after all.

The groom, who I promised to hate till my last breath for what he has done to my family, stays oblivious to my begging, only a small smirk on his face while pleasure at his deeds radiates from him.

The King of Darkness and Deceit.

He chuckles, and I can almost imagine how his sapphire-blue eyes glisten with something wicked—the only expression that fills those orbs whenever his gaze lands on me—and I have to run far away from him... well, as much as I can in the current circumstances, in order to avoid it.

Not that he lets me do it for long; the freaking sadist enjoys my discomfort in his company, if his constant grins are anything to go by.

Madness has many forms and faces on this earth, covered in the masks of beauty and power, sneaking up on you when you least expect it, snatching you into its web of deceit and pain that follow you wherever you go.

His madness though?

Has no boundaries or control. Instead, it soaks up all the chaos around him.

The corset of my wedding dress is impossibly tight on my waist, and each gulp of air becomes a struggle, the pressure reminding me of the invisible chains the man has placed on me with no way of breaking them.

Shifting my focus from the priest, I stare at this unusual church they brought me to with its expensive colorful glass in the windows and the ceiling carved in an oval shape that almost gives a fairy-tale-like experience.

Except I'm trapped in a nightmare, which—no matter how much I pinch myself—doesn't transform into the fairy tale

I've pleaded for my entire life.

Despite its beauty that has the power to make one gasp in awe, the place reeks of doom and hopelessness that no amount of expensive artwork or luxurious design can hide.

A princess-cut diamond and sapphire engagement ring on my finger bumps against one of the thorns, the stone glistening in the shimmering light from above me, and I resist the urge to snatch it off and throw it at the groom, along with a few colorful word choices.

I catch Father Paul's stare on me; conflicted emotions cross his face along with distress that he soothes with his gentle smile, as if it can reassure me.

Nothing on this earth has the power to reassure the inferno burning in my chest or the monster claiming me as his because he wishes to.

The priest's lips stop moving, and he looks at me expectantly while my brows furrow, since I've no clue what he wants.

Panic shadows his face, and his lips move once again. I shake my head, hoping the ringing will go away so I can listen to him.

Still nothing though, and instead, my heartbeat speeds up in my chest, beating so fast I'm afraid it might jump out and land on the floor where the monster can stomp all over it.

Literally this time, since he has done it figuratively already.

A strong hand wraps around my waist and spins me so fast my head gets dizzy. I bump into the hard-as-brick muscles of his chest as his other hand captures my chin between his

fingers, raising it so our gazes clash. “He asked you a question, *mi novia*.”

Rage flashes through me so violently that for a second the air gets stuck in my lungs while I want to shout in despair from not being able to unleash it on him with full force.

Maybe then he would have choked on his words, because calling me his bride is an insult to all the married couples all over the world.

The only appropriate word is captive.

His deep, husky voice sends shivers down my spine, and revulsion runs through me at his touch, the rose thorns digging sharper this time, and I wince in pain, finding no wiggle room in his hold to step back and throw away the stupid bouquet I never wanted in the first place. “Will you take me as your beloved husband and promise to cherish and love me till the day I die?” A sinister smile widens his mouth while he winks at me. “Or, in other words, till death do us part?” His thumb slides over my cheek gently, evoking fear inside me, reminding me how this hand can kill someone with just one strike.

I twist my face to the side, avoiding his caress, but he tightens his fingers on me, digging them painfully into my skin, and a whimper of distress escapes me. “The choice is yours, *querida*.” He prolongs the last word, as if tasting it on his tongue when he addresses me.

I wish to slap him hard, so he won’t call me his darling again, then fist the skirt of my dress and, with my high heels clicking soundly on the marble floor, run through the heavy, wooden doors at the end of the church’s hallway to hide far away from here.

“I always keep my word, darling.”

He won't chase me, granting me my freedom he has promised from the very beginning, and with time I can forget all the events that have happened, like a bad dream that should have never even involved me.

However, all this musing has no point.

I stay silent, waves of shock rushing through me while I will myself to say the words everyone expects, yet they seem to get stuck in my throat, not wanting to be spoken for the destruction they might cause in my life.

The groom sighs, winking at me. *“Querida*, I'm starting to get bored. And it's never a good sign.” Someone clears their throat, and I shift my focus to the bench on the left where a blond-haired man flips a knife between his fingers while the man next to him, bound in tight, black ropes, groans in pain, blood seeping from various wounds on his torso and head.

The blond man puts the sharp tip to his victim's neck and nicks the skin, chuckling quietly, finding amusement in how his victim bursts into tears, his eyes pleading for mercy he will never get from the likes of them.

The victim mumbles something through the tape covering his mouth, and I don't have to read minds to know what he thinks.

Or rather asks of me.

After everything he put me through... he still expects me to do it.

“Choose, Briseis,” the groom says, boredom lacing his tone as he snaps my head back to him so his hot breath fans my face, his lips inches away from mine. “Either become my wife or I'll kill your father.” He waits a bit and adds, “Choose

wisely. Don't bargain with the devil if you are not ready for the consequences, *mi amor*."

Yes, Santiago Cortez has given me a choice.

But no matter the outcome... my soul will be crushed like a porcelain mug hitting the floor.

Turning away from him, I focus my attention on the priest and finally find the strength to utter the words that cut me from inside out, while self-loathing fills my entire being along with hate that burns brighter with each passing second toward the man standing next to me. "I do."

My life has become a nightmare.

Because a sinner decided to own me.

Click [here](#) for Santiago's Conquest.

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