



Savage

KING

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

DEBORAH GARLAND

SAVAGE KING

ASTORIA ROYALS
BOOK 2

Deborah
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AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

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Deborah Garland

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ASTORIA ROYALS

MORE BOOKS BY DEBORAH GARLAND

HERE'S DEBORAH

FROM THE AUTHOR:

The setting of Astoria, New York, is a real sprawling waterfront incorporated village of Queens County. It is named for John Jacob Astor, the richest man in America at the time, who was considered royalty.

The Astoria Royals romances are based on fictional characters, and, in some cases, locations are made up for storytelling enjoyment and drama.

About this story...

This romance contains subject matter that may be sensitive for some readers. There is triggering content related to: graphic violence, physical attack and an attempted sexual assault, death of a loved one, death of a parent, a parent with a terminal disease, and a miscarriage.

If these themes bother you, please skip this one, or read with caution.

I love hearing from readers and always welcome feedback.
Contact me through my WEBSITE.

CHAPTER ONE

Kieran

My palms sweat, and the veins below my knuckles feel ready to burst. I fucking hate funerals. Not that anyone loves them, except undertakers who rake in the cash. After burying the love of my life seven years ago, I'd rather set myself on fire than go to these things.

Outside, the acrid smell of smoke lingers in the air, making every corner of Astoria unbreathable. The Parisi mansion and surrounding compound's cottages still smolder from last week's explosion.

Gabriel Parisi survived. His wife didn't.

The church is packed with mourners. It's easy to tell the difference between grieving *family* members and the rest of us.

The rest of us being my younger brothers, who help me manage the Irish crime syndicate, and the Koslovs, Astoria's Bratva. Our expensive three-piece suits and the smell of our cologne drown out the candles perfuming the warm air.

"What balls they have showing up here," Riordan, my underboss, whispers to me from my right. "Balor has Alexei's death squad on tape speeding away from the house right after the explosion."

"Fucking brilliant, if you ask me. Reminding old Gabe they're watching him." Lachlan, my enforcer, sitting on my left, would see the cruelty as brilliant since he's our resident psycho brother. "In death and in life."

This was different, though. Rarely does a Cosa Nostra don's twenty-five-thousand-foot mansion fucking explode with his wife in it. Not in Astoria, anyway. The three power families have lived here in peace for decades.

Leaning forward with my head in my hands, thinking of Norah, as I do most days, I wish this church mass would end already. My brothers continue to bicker over my head. I came here just to show my face, even though it's killing me.

"That's enough," I snap at them. I push Lachlan out of the way to get the hell out of the pew.

I don't care how many eyes are on me as I storm down the middle aisle, glaring at Bratva pakhan Alexei Koslov. He quirks a forced smile and a nod.

Forced because six months ago, his oldest daughter, Stasia, went missing.

We don't have her—my family or my organization. We're not fucking stupid.

I push open the heavy ornate door, and the smell of putrid death hits me again. I swear, I can taste burnt flesh on my tongue. Norah asked to be cremated. Something her parents were dead set against, being Catholic. Her brother, Ewan, took her ashes home to Ireland, where she was born. Where we were all born.

I'd rather her be in the ether, where I can look up and smile at her, instead of sitting in front of a piece of stone in the dead

of winter or on a sweltering summer day like today, with her rotting in the earth beneath me.

“Are we going to the cemetery?” Riordan, who followed me out, asks.

“No,” I say easily.

“I have to go to the gravesite.” Lachlan unbuttons his suit jacket, as if that will help against the brutal August heat. “You get to be moody and busy. I have to keep the line of defense present at all times. That means reminding these motherfuckers—”

I grab his arm. “Lach, we’re in front of a church. Have *some* respect.”

Ushers in cheap suits working the funeral mass prop open the double doors, and people start pouring out.

“I heard you can tell who’s guilty by their behavior at the funeral,” Riordan says, standing tall at my side. “Nine times out of ten, they show up. All of our suspects are probably right here.”

“Did you learn that by watching those crime shows you binge?” Lachlan rags on him.

“I learned that in my criminal psychology classes at fucking Columbia, asshole,” Riordan curses back at him.

We’re monsters with blood on our hands, but my brothers and I are well educated. Except Lachlan, who got kicked out of Fordham his freshman year, when I was a senior. I’m forty now, and that feels like a lifetime ago.

“Speaking of guilty,” Lachlan says, not even trying to keep his voice down.

Alexei Koslov leaves the church through a side door and trudges into the courtyard. I’m positioned on the expensive stone walkway I paid for that leads to the only street entrance. The pakhan makes eye contact with me, and I step into his path.

“You did this,” I say, getting up in his face. “We have you on tape.”

“You have nothing,” Alexei spews in his thick accent, beady, ice-blue eyes drilling into me. “But I will do whatever it takes to find out who has my Stasia. When you have a child, you will understand.” He says that like it’s an insult that I don’t have kids yet.

“I’m working on it,” I grunt and move out of his way.

“That confirms it,” Riordan murmurs to me from behind.

He and I burned the candle on both ends for the past week since the explosion. We’re solid, my family and connections. We’re positioned, but we’re sitting this one out. Let the Russians and the Italians destroy each other. I’m assuming Gabriel will strike back soon.

There’s just one move for me to make.

“Give Gabe one more week. Then we go to him with my offer.” I’m about to turn away and get into my Range Rover, when glossy dark hair catches my eye.

Clutching her father's arm, Isabella Parisi, Gabriel's only daughter, falls in line behind him.

Beautiful. Perfect. Obedient.

Mine...

Gabriel and I went to prep school together right here in Astoria and were good friends at one time. When Gabe and I were young, our fathers worked together in harmony. Gabe married a woman his father brought over from Italy, and they had Isabella nearly nine months later. I can only imagine how he pounded that poor virgin on his wedding night without a care to her comfort or pleasure.

Adding to the reasons I've lost all respect for Gabe.

His Isabella is young enough to be my daughter. Something that should give me pause, but it only drives my carnal urges for revenge-spawned lust deeper.

And I plan to get deep inside *her*.

CHAPTER TWO

Isabella

It's been a week since Papa buried my mother. I've barely had any time to grieve or process. He moved us into a rental house a few blocks from the water instead of his Manhattan penthouse.

I've never been there. I assume that's where he entertains his whores. Mafia bosses are pigs, and I'm grateful Mama kept my father from marrying me off to one.

Now, she's gone. I haven't cried yet. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm...numb. I wasn't home when the explosion occurred. Thanks to a stupid speeding ticket, I had a court date. All I had on me was my purse and phone.

The sound of the gate to our rental house opening draws my attention. At the bedroom window, I push the cheesy lace drapes aside to see a sparkling black Range Rover roll into the courtyard. Probably another creditor or union boss looking for his payout.

I lose my breath, seeing Kieran O'Rourke emerge from the driver's seat. The head of the O'Rourke family is a savage, according to Papa. Tortured and cruel after losing his fiancée seven years ago.

Even looking down from two stories, I see how tall he is. He's dressed in a dark gray suit with a white, button-down shirt, but no tie. Papa mentioned they'd gone to prep school

together and had been great friends, but that Kieran was a different man now.

His three brothers get out of the car, as well, and they are dressed similarly to Kieran but wearing varying shades of gray down to jet black.

I wonder why the O'Rourkes are here. Maybe they have Stasia and want to make a deal with Papa. With the guards not drawing their guns, my father must not think they're a threat.

Figuring this has nothing to do with me, I go back to packing.

I'm leaving tomorrow for school. Mama had convinced Papa to let me attend a private Boston college. Personally, I would have preferred NYU, like my best friends, Samantha and Ginna. But Papa picked Taylor University because most students come from a "connected" family, where bodyguards outnumber coeds.

That was the compromise. He just had no idea why Mama really wanted me to attend college.

"It's so you'll be worth more," Mama assured me. *"I'm going to find you a powerful businessman who needs your father's money. You don't want to be married off to a cruel don like your father and live the life I've had to live with him."* She stifled tears, helping me pack freshman year.

That was three years ago. Now, she's dead.

My phone beeps with a call, and I crack a smile, seeing that it's Ivan, Alexei Koslov's nephew.

“Hi,” I say, happy to hear from him.

“Hello, beautiful.” He’s been flirting with me all summer, but I didn’t take him seriously.

The chaos of last week forced me to make a decision. With my mother gone, there’s no one to pick out a good husband for me. Papa will sell me to the highest bidder without a care for the kind of man he is.

Ivan says he’ll marry me when I graduate. Right now, he carries cash for his uncle’s gambling businesses. When I told him I wanted to marry him, he convinced his uncle, the pakhan, to let him scope out crime opportunities in Boston. By the time I graduate, Ivan will secure a capo position with his uncle and can ask my father for permission to marry me.

We’re counting on his uncle to put pressure on Papa to say yes. I sure hope this tension between Papa and Alexei goes away. Ivan swears his uncle didn’t blow up our house. And I believe him. My father has made plenty of enemies, it could have been anyone.

“Will you fly up to Boston this weekend?” I ask Ivan while I pack new clothes I had to buy for school since I lost everything in the blast.

I had twenty-one years to build up my style. Recreating it in one shot, while getting over the trauma of losing my mother, left me overwhelmed. I only concentrated on things I needed for school, plus a few dresses and one pair of killer heels.

“I’ll try, *dorogaya*.” The R’s roll off Ivan’s tongue in his thick accent that hasn’t faded, even after being here in the US for two years. At first, he scared me a little. But he turned out to be very sweet. Calls me *my dear* in Russian.

“The dorm is surrounded by guards,” I warn Ivan.

“I know how to get past them,” Ivan boasts confidently.

I had to sneak around all summer to see him, even though we were just friends. He knows I’m a virgin and never even tried to kiss me. It wasn’t easy seeing him. I learned to maneuver around bodyguards, giving them the slip in stores.

I don’t love Ivan, but I don’t want to be a Parisi anymore. My father’s organization is swimming with corruption and infighting, and considering that everything of value was stripped and sold off from our house before it blew up. I know he’s massively in debt.

The Koslovs are strong. When Ivan and I are married, I’ll be one of them, and they’ll protect me properly.

It’s all I want. To be safe...

A loud bang on my door startles me, and I drop the phone. I bend over to pick it up, and with my ass in the air, my bedroom door opens.

A man dressed all in black stands there. Kieran’s psycho brother, Lachlan.

“I have to go.” I end the call with Ivan. “Excuse me, this is my bedroom.”

“Hello, Isabella.” He smiles at me, the wickedness punctuated with a scar across his left cheek. Lachlan O’Rourke is considered to be only slightly less dangerous than Kieran because he’s rumored to be insane. “Nice bikini. Red’s your color.”

I cross my arms, although it’s no use. I’ve always been very big on top. After arguing all morning, Papa agreed to let my guard take me to meet my friends, Ginna and Samantha, at the beach club. I want to say goodbye to them before I leave for school. I’ve known them since kindergarten. Before college, they were the only friends Papa let me have because their fathers are union organizers, and he wants to keep close ties with them.

“What do you want?” I reach for my swim cover-up, but this beast snatches it before I do. “Hey, that’s mine.”

Lachlan just grins at me while we struggle, the lace tearing in his meaty hands. I let go before it shreds completely. “Your father wants to see you,” he snarls in a lilting Irish accent.

“Where’s Mario?” I ask about my guard.

“Your father sent him home.” Lachlan now leans against the door frame, watching me with that ridiculously handsome face full of dark stubble that does nothing to hide the deep scar.

Why would Papa send my guard home? This is a trap. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” I back up toward the window, wondering if I should jump. Slide down the support post and hide in the bushes until it’s dark.

“Are you going to make me drag you?” Lachlan takes out a neatly wound rope from his suit jacket. “I can put this around your neck or your wrists.”

Fear rakes across my skin like a wire brush. “Papa!” I yell, but Lachlan’s hand covers my mouth a fraction of a second later. How a man that tall moves so fast is both impressive and terrifying.

“I wouldn’t cry out for him. His men will find you in my arms, and next, your room will be full of bullet holes and blood.” He throws me onto the bed.

I’m not sure I can take any more loud noises, so I give up. “Stop. Fine. I’ll go with you.” My bikini top is askew, but those cold gray orbs of his just look me dead in my eyes.

“Are you walking, or am I carrying you, little one?” he mockingly asks.

Smart. Be smart. Mama always said: *“Don’t act hysterical. That’s when men in this world hit women.”*

“I want to get dressed.” I cross my arms again.

“No. I don’t think so. This works.” He reaches down, and next, this beast is carrying me over his shoulder, with my bikini bottom wedged in my ass.

We get downstairs, and he plops me into a chair outside the room Papa has been using as an office. I look around, thinking of ways to escape. I’ll run all the way to Ivan’s apartment on the other side of town if I have to.

For all I know, these Irish monsters have my father tied up.
This whole neighborhood has gone crazy.

Someone kidnapped Stasia Koslov.

Someone killed my mother.

“Wait here,” Lachlan says. “Do not move, little one.”

“Uh-huh,” I answer as another man in a suit appears from the shadows.

“This is Calder. He works for me.” Lachlan points to the man dressed similarly to him. “If she runs, you have my permission to hold her down.”

I have no doubt he’d enjoy that. “What am I waiting for?”

“My brother, Kieran, is making a deal with your father.”

“Deal for what?”

“For you, little one.”

CHAPTER THREE

Kieran

Out of respect for Gabriel Parisi's poor dead wife, I gave him an extra week to mourn after the funeral. He finally accepted my offer to meet. I was coming today anyway, with or without an invitation.

I play with Gabe a little at first by appearing to be on his side. I rattle off a dozen possible suspects who work for him, men even *I* know are shady.

“Who gave you those names?” Gabe turns red in this shite office, in a shite rental house.

“Ewan Quinlan does all of my investigations, and you know my brother Balor has eyes and ears all over Astoria.”

“Our people are none of your business, O'Rourke,” Dante Caruso, Gabe's underboss, sneers from behind his brother-in-law. The man's sister died almost two weeks ago, but you'd never know it.

The door opens, and Lachlan enters, his hair a bit out of place. “She's here.”

I stiffen, thinking of Isabella on the other side of that door and what it took to get her down here, if my brother let a woman get her hands on him. That vision immediately gets my blood pulsing under my skin.

Gabe stands up and barks at a clueless guard behind him. “You let this monster wander around my house?”

Blinking and turning white, the guard stammers, “He...he said he needed to use the bathroom.”

Gabe moves to the door, but Lachlan blocks it. “She’s fine. Calder is with her.”

Dante just whispers to the guard, putting me on alert.

“Get on with whatever the hell it is you really want, O’Rourke.” Gabe stomps back to his desk.

“You pissed off Koslov, my old friend,” I say to him. “He’s ready to go to war with you.”

“You’re also in debt,” Eoghan, my Harvard Law School valedictorian brother, adds. “That’s motivation for kidnapping a Russian princess and asking for a hefty ransom.”

“Stasia has been gone for six months,” Dante argues. “If she’s been kidnapped, someone would have asked for money right away.”

“The timeline does work in your favor. I’ll give you that.” I pace in front of Gabe’s desk. “Unless the plan is to keep her long enough to up the payout, knowing Alexei will be so unhinged—”

“How do I know *you* don’t have her?” Gabe interrupts me, irking the shit out of me.

“My house wasn’t bombed.” I bang on his desk. “And why would I need Stasia?”

“We can’t give back a person *we don’t have*,” Dante snarls.

“Is it possible one of your people fucked up?” Riordan, the negotiator, leans forward. “Hurt her? Heck, killed her by mistake?”

“She is a wild cat,” Lachlan mutters, and I shoot him a look, talking about her in the present tense.

Hmmm.

I also wasn't aware he'd met her, but I compose myself quickly, never wanting anyone to see anything but 100 percent unity between my brothers and me. When we're alone, that's a different story.

Gabe doesn't answer, but Dante dismisses me with a wave of his hand. “You're wasting your time here, Kieran. Are you done?”

“I'm just getting started.” I eye the useless bodyguard to get a read on if he has instructions to put a bullet in my head if I lose my shit. “Let's cut to the chase, Parisi. The Koslovs aren't fucking around. They know something about you or have very credible suspicions. They bombed your house. You need to respond. Hit back.”

“No!” Dante snaps, and it's like we're talking to *him* and not the don.

Riordan knows when to speak, so what's up here?

“I can handle Alexei just fine.” Gabe sits back, all smug.

“They. Killed. Your. Wife.” What the hell happened to his marriage that he's numb to her death? Sure, he has mistresses—they all do, those Italians.

That's not just blind pride on my part. I'm nearly positive my father never touched another woman after marrying my mother. And maybe not so much because he was the loyal dog, but my mother used to gut cattle on a farm back in Ireland.

Gabe pushes a pen around on his desk and says with little emotion, "Maria wasn't supposed to be home." His stiff voice doesn't match the sweat beading up on his brow. He might be innocent as far as Stasia, but too much is pointing in the other direction.

"You don't have any proof the Russians planted those bombs," Dante says.

"We have their death squad on tape leaving the scene," Riordan says.

"You look guilty by not retaliating against them." I stare at Gabe, who has his head in his hands, finally showing some emotion. Maybe it hadn't hit him yet.

I know what that's like. Walking around for days in a fog after someone you love dies. Turning every corner, expecting to see her standing there. I push Norah from my mind, considering what I'm about to propose.

"I have a solution for you." I rub my chest, pretending the heat is getting to me, but that's just to grab my gun in case Gabe gives his bodyguard the strike signal when I announce what I want from him. "I'm here to make you an offer that gives us both what we need."

"Us both?" Dante asks.

“Am I fucking talking to you or your don?” I snap, having enough of this guy. I roughly open my suit jacket, the heat really getting to me. There’s no fucking air in here. Either that, or I’m heated, just thinking about what I really want. Who I really want.

“Dante, shut the fuck up,” Gabe finally roars, and Dante’s hands close into white-knuckled fists. “What do you propose, Kieran?”

“Your daughter,” I say, resisting licking my lips at what my request will get me. A wife. A beautiful, fuckable bride. And power, once I give Gabe enough money to fight Koslov, who will just strike back, leaving both houses wrecked, and mine positioned perfectly to take over this entire city.

“For what?” Gabe asks. He can’t be that dumb. Maybe he’s still out of it.

Dante drops the smug grin he’s worn since we walked in. “No.” *He* figured it out.

“Aye,” I answer, gravel in my tone. “I’m *taking* your daughter, Gabe.”

“That’s why you brought that monster of yours?” Gabe lunges across the desk at me while his bodyguard draws a Glock. “To coax Isabella down here?”

Here we go...

I stop Gabe’s fist with my bare hand. “Hear me out, Gabe.”

“You can’t take Isabella,” he mutters hoarsely.

“I can. And I will.” I turn him around to see Lachlan with his Ruger aimed at the bodyguard’s temple, while Riordan points a knife at Dante.

Eoghan just taps the barrel of his gun on his crossed knee. He doesn’t pull it very often. That’s not what I need him for. I have enough crazy and muscle between Riordan and Lachlan.

“I’ll give you ten million dollars.” I lean in. “Use that money to buy an army. Weapons. Decent intelligence gathering.”

“Stand down, motherfuckers,” Gabe whimpers to the guards and stumbles back into his chair. “I don’t know where Alexei’s daughter is.”

“Then you have an even bigger problem,” I say. “He started a war with you. You have to finish it. Or you’ll look weak.”

Gabe turns to Dante, who starts arguing in a low, strained voice. After a few minutes, I think Gabe will tell me to go to hell, but he mutters, “You can marry Isabella. For *twenty* million.”

“Gabriel, what the fuck are you doing?” Dante grabs him.

“Shut the fuck up, Dante.” Gabe shucks him off and turns burning, mad eyes on me.

His underboss responds by storming out through a door that leads to the yard.

I glance at Eoghan, who nods. He manages our finances through an accounting firm in Manhattan. Twenty million is nothing to me. We topped over a billion in revenue last year

from legit *and* illegal sources. I didn't get us this far by making bad decisions.

"Twenty million. Why don't you make the formal introductions?" I button up my jacket and strut back to Gabe. "She comes home with me today."

The memory of Isabella's pretty face and delicate features from the funeral last week slams into me. Marrying her gives me permission to touch her. Although, I forgot what it's like to touch a good girl. I'm very rough with women in bed.

Which is why I use a sex club. A Mafia don's daughter as my bride will understand what kind of marriage this will be. She's also young, which means she's impressionable and easy to control.

She's perfect for me. With several marriage arrangements falling through after Norah, I realized, at forty years old, it was time to take these matters into my own hands. I need a wife. I need sons.

"No, no. You can't take her today." Gabe shakes his head. "I won't deny her a proper wedding."

I don't have time for a big wedding. Although my sister, the Hamptons premier party planner, would love to organize an extravagant show for me.

"I won't touch her until we're married." Then spend night after night breaking her in to get her pregnant. "If you think anyone will question my honor, you really have your head up your ass."

Gabe breathes heavily, his eyes focused. Maybe it's finally hit him. But pride makes men do dumb-ass shit.

"I'll give you another ten million to take her with me today." I up the ante. "That buys you ex-military mercenaries to comb through Astoria at night. That's when the Russian cockroaches come out. Kill them quickly. And quietly. Leave Astoria in one piece." I also hope Alexei fights the same way, clean, with minimal damage to our precious infrastructure.

"Thirty million." Gabe sticks out his hand to me, then glances at his bodyguard. "Bring Isabella inside, Rocco."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kieran

Lachlan doesn't wait for Rocco. He opens the door and waves two ringed, tattooed fingers. "Calder, bring her in."

"I can walk myself," a feminine, but very fiery voice echoes from the hallway.

Isabella struts in wearing a red bikini. Lust violently roars through me. She's a bombshell with curves and olive skin. Several birthmarks across her chest disappear into a swimsuit top that barely covers her breasts. Christ, she's sexier up close. Her dark eyes are big, and fuck...

My heart thumps in my chest. I don't know where *that* is coming from. I shake it away. I don't want to feel anything for a woman ever again.

With a room full of men, Isabella stands there, spilling out of a bikini. I tear my suit jacket off and cover her up.

Mine...

Gripping her shoulders to pull my jacket across her body, she stares right at me, unafraid. Fuck, I like that. With her beautiful face so close to mine, I see just how young she is. Is she too young for a savage like me?

The plan is to fill her with my seed and breed her. Her image was fuzzy in my mind, conjuring up this plan two weeks ago. Now, I don't know if I want to fuck her in the car

going home, then in my bed, or not touch her at all. Because perhaps I won't want to stop.

I break the stare and eye Gabe's bodyguard. "Get her something to wear. *Now*," I bark.

Either way, she'll be my wife, and no one sees what's mine.

Not even my brothers.

With Rocco out of the room, I eye Lachlan with more murderous rage than I've felt for him since we were kids when he tried to drown me for fun. He went to her bedroom. Found her like this. Dragged her down here half-dressed.

Getting my shit together, I turn to Eoghan. "When she's covered up, put her in my car."

"What?" Isabella snaps, stepping back.

"Isabella," her father says in a strong voice. "You're going to marry Kieran."

Her legs wobble and she looks dizzy, ready to pass out. I catch her and sit her in the chair I vacated earlier.

"No," she argues, shaking her head.

Whiffs of vanilla hit me from her lush hair in a messy bun, with pieces hanging out. One flits down her back in between her shoulder blades.

That curve drives me crazy, something I like, because I usually fuck women from behind. It's when I can be my most primal and get so damn deep. My eyes trail down Isabella's

back to the bathing suit bottom, which sits partially in her ass, exposing one big, round cheek.

Fuck.

I screw women who don't mean anything to me. This woman will be my wife. She'll live in my house. Sleep in my bed. Wait. No, I can't have that. It's... It's a betrayal to my heart. I'll only ever love Norah.

“Kieran?” Eoghan's voice knocks me out of my thoughts.

“Right.” I come up beside Isabella. Unable to resist, I put a hand on her shoulder.

She stiffens under my touch. “Stop. I can't marry you. I'm leaving for school tomorrow.”

This news comes as a surprise. Balor should have known this. I tighten my grip and smile down at her. “That's not happening, princess.”

“It is happening.” She gapes at her father. “You paid my tuition, Papa, right?”

“Actually, Isabella...” Gabe rubs his temple. “I didn't. Not yet.”

Because he's broke. Not anymore. But too late. She's mine.

She jolts to her feet. “You lied to me! And now you're giving me to a monster?” Her fire stirs my groin, something I didn't expect. Although, if she's arguing with her father, she'll argue with me, too. I'll have to break her of that early on if she dares to raise her voice to me.

Even if it does turn me on.

“*Isabella*,” I snap at her. “Your father has the right to arrange your marriage. And he didn’t just give you to me. I’m paying for you.”

“How much?” she asks, incredulously.

It’s going to get out anyway. “Thirty million dollars.”

The look of shock on her face tells me Gabe’s been in financial trouble for a while. An Italian mafia princess shouldn’t blink twice at that much money.

Isabella shies away from me. “I was told I can finish school first.” Her fiery spirit and willingness to fight for what she wants impress me.

I have nothing against her being educated. We all have degrees. “We can discuss that later, *Isabella*. You and me.” I grip her chin and gaze down at her lush lips. The image of how they’ll look wrapped around my cock hits me, and I have to let go or I’ll break her jaw.

That won’t get her pregnant, of course. It just warms me up. I’ll have permission to use her any way I want. I’m just not sure *how* I want her. I’m too rough.

Gabe’s bodyguard comes back with a zip-up jacket for her. She snatches it. But I take it from her and help her put it on. Dress her. Fuck, that’s a turn-on. Who knew?

“Eyes on me,” I order her and grow hard, zipping this thing over those full breasts. God, I’m just noticing how big they are. “Put her in my car,” I say to Eoghan.

“Papa,” she cries out. “Please.”

“This is what’s best for you,” he says coldly. “Someone is after me. After us. Our home is gone. Kieran will protect you.”

“What about you, Papa?” Her voice shakes.

Gabe and I stare at each other. I don’t know their relationship, another intel failure perhaps.

“I’ll be fine, Isabella. Uncle Dante and I have to get with my men and find out who did this to us and why.” He turns harsh. “I can’t be worrying about you at school. Or deal with your bullshit. Now, get the fuck out of my sight.”

A whimper vibrates from her throat, and rage soars through me at how he could be so cruel. It’s one thing to sell her to me, but making her feel like an unwanted burden is just being a scumbag.

“I can’t go with you like this. I need my clothes.” She breaks from me and storms out of the office.

I debate following her but don’t trust myself to be in a bedroom alone with her wearing a bikini. “Isabella,” I call out to her. When she turns to me, I say, “Please put on something appropriate. My wife doesn’t travel around in just a bathing suit.”

“I’m not your wife.” She holds her head up. “Not yet.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Isabella

This isn't happening.

The option of jumping out the window is looking better and better. Break my legs so I have to stay in a hospital. The idea of being in that much pain changes my mind. Not here. Not now. It's too risky. Perhaps Kieran will put me in a room in his mansion where I can escape. Run to Ivan so he can hide me.

Knowing I don't have a choice, I tear out of the bikini and prepare to chuck it. The way Kieran looked at me in it, though, suggested he liked what those amazing green eyes saw. I can use that to my advantage so he'll give me what I want.

What do I want, though? I have no idea because I'm being given to him out of nowhere. With no warning. I'll be in a cage like a lab rat.

But I can act like a tiger. Show these men who they're messing with.

Naked, I dig through the suitcase I packed with new school clothes. I throw the bikini in there, take out a pair of short shorts, and grab a thin T-shirt. Skipping a bra and panties, I dress in a hurry, tucking my phone into the front of my shorts.

If Kieran wants a wife, he'll get a hot, young one. I'm not completely naïve. I know men are slaves to the power between their legs. Kieran's heated gaze stirred something visceral in

me, though. Something I never felt with Ivan or anyone. I have to be careful and not fall for him.

Papa appears in the doorway, and I expect an apology. He doesn't say a word. Instead, he levels a rude once-over at me. A second later, he stomps over at me, and I get a stinging backhand across the face.

My cheek explodes in pain as I hit the carpet, seeing blood drip from my nose, which is also throbbing. Who the hell is he? Mama never let him hit me. She took his rage so he wouldn't hurt me. "What was *that* for?"

"Talking back to me in front of a don." He fumes with anger. "What the fuck are you wearing? You're going to be O'Rourke's queen. Not his whore."

"All of my nice dresses blew up, Papa!" I get to my feet and let him see the blood.

He pushes me aside and ransacks my luggage. Messing up the neat piles I made, he yanks out a pair of jeans. "Put these on."

"It's ninety degrees." I wrestle the luggage from him. "And I wouldn't hit me again if I were you. You sold me to the cruel Irish king, as you like to call him. I don't think he wants his *queen* walking around with a black eye."

After rifling through my bag, I find a simple black dress I forgot I bought in the mad rush to replace an entire wardrobe. Staring at my father, I pull on the hem of the T-shirt. "Can I change, please?"

He points at me. “Behave for Kieran. And keep your eyes and ears open over there.”

“I won’t be your spy.”

“You’ll do as you’re told.” He lifts his hand to me again.

“*Hey!*” Kieran’s voice thunders from the doorway. Noticing the blood smeared on my cheek, he grabs my father by the throat and slams him against the wall. “What the fuck are you doing to her? How dare you hit *my* fiancée, Parisi?”

“She’s under my roof and still my daughter,” Papa mumbles, his voice strained from Kieran’s fingers tightening around his neck. “I didn’t like what she was wearing. You ambushed me. Demanded to take her today. I haven’t had time to train her.”

“Train her? She’s not a dog.” Kieran seethes but lets him go. After a moment, he glances my way, his cheek ticking. “You look... That’s acceptable for the drive home. Is this all you have?” He eyes my luggage.

Home... A spark of safety hits me, spreading a burst of warmth through my chest.

“Um... Yes, and my purse. I lost everything else in the explosion.” I choke back a sob.

Kieran twitches at my vulnerability, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. “I’ll buy you new clothes. And whatever else you need.” He stomps over, takes the black dress from my shaking grip, and puts it back in the luggage.

After roughly zipping it up, he grabs my hand. “We’re leaving.”

“Wait.” I tug gently but don’t pull away. “I need another bag from the bathroom. Can I get it, please?”

“Yes, of course,” he says softly. “That’s how you talk to a lady, Gabe.”

“Get the fuck out, both of you.” My father strokes his throat.

From the bathroom, I grab my makeup bag with all my toiletries. I’ve been living out of it for two weeks. I know I’m leaving other things behind. Shampoo, perfume, razors... Kieran will just have to buy those things for me, too.

I have a few thousand dollars left in the account Mama set up for me freshman year. Unless my father emptied it.

Ivan!

Holy shit. How do I tell him I’m not going to Boston and that I’m marrying someone else? It’s so surreal, but I’m outnumbered. I have no choice.

“I’m ready,” I say, hiding my panic.

Outside my bedroom, the scary brother stands there, grinning at me.

“Put her in the car,” Kieran says to Lachlan. “I’m not done with her father.”

Ice goes down my spine. I don’t want to be an orphan. “No. Please.” I lay my hand on Kieran’s chest, feeling an odd sense

of comfort with him. Even though I feel like I'm teetering on the edge, an ache stirs between my legs. "*Please*. He's not worth it."

"I'll take care of him." Lachlan cracks his knuckles.

"All I have to do is give the signal, and none of you will leave here alive," my father grunts.

"I certainly want to stay alive for my wedding night with your daughter," Kieran taunts my father, pulling me against him. "And you need the money. Forget it, Lach. He's enough of a mess."

Kieran steers me out of the bedroom, and I don't look back. Walking through the upstairs hallway, down the steps, and out the kitchen door is a blur, with Lachlan in front of me and Kieran behind. I feel his eyes on my body, and his last words to Papa echo through me.

My wedding night with your daughter...

I'm breathless, thinking of what he means.

In the car I cluelessly watched drive up earlier, I sit in the back. Kieran gets in next to me after tossing the keys to his other brother, his underboss, whose name I forget. I'm reminded that Kieran drove, but he chooses to sit with me in the back.

"When...when are we getting married?" I ask softly, not believing these words are coming out of my mouth.

Kieran rubs his knuckles. "I'll work out those details. My parents are on a cruise."

Panic rises in my chest as it all hits me again, one blow after the other, now losing the chance to finish college.

He said we can talk about school, didn't he? I doubt he'll let me live in Boston if I'm supposed to be his wife. Maybe I can attend online. I've come so far. I want to finish.

"I'll call my sister to plan the wedding." Kieran lifts his hand to my face, and I flinch. His eyes go dark as he whispers, "It's okay. I'll never raise my hand to you. I just want to make sure you're all right." He takes out a handkerchief to wipe away any remaining blood from my nose. "I swear, I want to go back and fuck him up," he grinds out through clenched teeth.

"No," I blurt. "My father never hit me before." I stifle a sob, thinking of the monster my mother had to put up with. And how she protected me.

Kieran stares out the window for the rest of the drive, and doom sloshes around in my empty stomach, thinking I've been pulled out of the frying pan.

But now, I'm hovering directly over the flame...

CHAPTER SIX

Kieran

My home looks different, bringing a woman back to live here. A fiancée. Who's not Norah. With her gone, I gave up the idea that I'd be lucky enough to marry for love.

Right now, I have to get Isabella moved in and plan a wedding. It has to be a show. It has to send a message. I've bought Parisi's diamond, and now, he has money to fight. That should at least set Koslov on his back foot to better plan his next attack.

We get to the gate, and Isabella remarks softly, "This is beautiful."

"Thank you." Our compound, surrounded by a ten-foot wrought-iron fence, includes the sprawling brick colonial my da had built when we were kids. "It was my parents' house, and my father's headquarters, the symbol of his power. It made sense for me to keep it as my own when I took over. I bought it from them since they want to live part of the year in a warmer climate."

"Then he threw us out," Lachlan drones from her right.

"Where do you live?" Isabella asks him.

"Don't worry where I live, little one." He sounds rather comfortable talking to her, and I'm not sure how I feel about him calling her *little one*.

"Let's get you settled." I help her out and steer her into the kitchen. "I'll meet the rest of you in my office," I say to my

brothers.

I hadn't told Patricia, my house manager, that I planned to bring a fiancée back with me. Forcing a young girl to marry me won't sit well with Tricia. She knows I'm far from a saint. But my brothers and I direct our ruthlessness to the men in our world.

I still feel awkward announcing a surprise fiancée. But Tricia will hopefully understand this is a business arrangement and stick to her duties of managing the cleaning team, the groundskeeper, the rest of the staff, and keep this house and my life humming.

"Tricia," I call out to her, and she comes in from the mudroom, where she does my laundry. "This is Isabella Parisi."

Hearing the name makes her quirk an eyebrow at me. "Nice to meet you, Isabella Parisi. I'm sorry about your mum," she says cautiously as her eyes land on the suitcase I'm holding.

"Hello," Isabella responds in kind. "And thank you. You can call me Izzy." Funny how she didn't say that to me.

Pushing that aside, I straighten my back. "Isabella and I will be getting married." The words come off my tongue, and my throat oddly closes.

"Really?" Tricia crosses her arms.

I send her a look, only because Isabella is a stranger, and she needs to know I'm in control of my house. "Yes, *really*. It was a..." I glance at Isabella. "A deal I made with her father."

“Welcome home, then, Izzy.” Patricia lowers her head.

“We’ll talk more later, Tricia. I’m showing her to her room.”

When we get to the stairs, Isabella whispers, “My room? We won’t...” She clears her throat.

I freeze, hearing she expects to sleep in my bed. “Are you eager to share a bed with a man you just met?” My voice turns gruffer than I intended. “A man like me? *Every* night?”

“Um...” She pales at that last part. Not because I think she’s weak. Many women can’t handle the man I’ve become. I certainly don’t expect a twenty-one-year-old to satisfy my deep, carnal urges.

“Didn’t think so.” When she’s fertile, I’ll go to her room.

I move in front of her and climb to the second floor, with all the bedrooms we used as kids. “This entire floor is empty except for mine.”

She looks up. “Is there a third floor?”

Now she wants to be as far away from me as possible. “Patricia nannied Darragh and Cormac, my youngest twin brothers. She and my father’s bodyguards slept up there when they had to stay over for whatever reason.” I take her to the bedroom on this floor that makes the most sense. “This was my sister’s room. You should be comfortable in here.”

“Your sister? Where does she live?”

“The Hamptons.” Which reminds me, I have to call her to plan a wedding. “She’s a party planner. I’ll have her set up the wedding right away.”

Isabella folds her arms. “I have no say?”

“Let me call her. And then...” I rub my forehead, realizing I hadn’t thought the plan through *this* far. “We’ll meet with her.”

“Fine,” she huffs loudly.

Spoiled much? I’ll break that.

Watch this...

“Isabella,” I sternly address her. “Do you have a phone?”

She hesitates for a moment. “Of course, I have a phone.”

“Let me have it.”

“No!” she screeches, and it cuts through me. “I won’t be a prisoner.”

“You’re not *my* prisoner. Your fate’s prisoner. Someone tried to kill you. Now you live under my roof. I need to know everything about you. My brother Balor will give you a new phone.”

“Where’s he?” She looks out the window.

Balor runs our surveillance command center. But I don’t owe her that detail. She has to earn information about my family.

“Never mind that. Isabella, do you know what’s happening out there?” I meet her at the window. “Do you not still smell your home burning? Everything I do is for your protection.”

“And to keep tabs on me.”

“Aye. That, too. And it’s not negotiable. Please give me your phone. Don’t make me wrestle you for it.” Although the idea of pinning her down excites the hell out of me. “You won’t like it.” My cock hardens, imagining how she’d feel beneath me.

“Are you sure?” Her comeback shocks me.

What is this? She’s smiling to either tempt me or test me.

Traitors who fuck with my business don’t often live to repeat their mistakes. A woman challenging me is new territory. Nothing in my bones can lead me to hurt Isabella. Unless we’re in bed. And only if she likes it that way. Which I’m sure a good Italian princess won’t.

Jaysus, I don’t even know if she’s a virgin.

My eyes sweep across that bad little body of hers, my cock stirring even more. “Phone.” I hold out my hand. “I will never hit you, but I can make your life difficult. Don’t test me.”

Blushing, she reaches into the front of her shorts, and out comes a phone.

Interesting hiding place.

With the phone in her hand, she says, “I have to tell you something.”

My eyes practically roll into the back of my head. “What?”

“I kind of have a boyfriend.”

“A *boyfriend*?” I close in on her, my heart pounding as anger clouds my vision. How did Balor not know this, too? “A boyfriend who fucks you?”

“No. It’s not like that.” She goes breathless, twisting the phone in her hand. A phone filled with text messages that would have outed her. She came clean. That’s a point in her favor with me.

“Who is he?” I ask, keeping my cool.

“You’re gonna find out anyway.” She hands me the phone. “Ivan Petrov. He’s Alexei Koslov’s nephew.”

I grab her shoulders and push her down onto the bed, ignoring her sweet scent. “Isabella, are you spying on your father for the Russians?” Or the other way around?

“No!” She doesn’t struggle out of my hold. “We met at a pool party at the beginning of the summer. He’s... He’s supposed to move to Boston to be near me.”

“What’s in Boston?” I feel so fucking unsettled.

“The private college I’ve been going to for three years. I’m a senior and I’m supposed to graduate.” She lowers her head. “Ivan was moving there to expand his uncle’s reach.”

This news makes my head swim. Before my brain overloads, I get on my phone, keeping Isabella pinned with my free hand. “Balor, get over to the house right now.”

“I’m already in your office,” he says. “Eoghan called me.”

“Good. Ivan Petrov. Find him, and give me a report on him by the time I get downstairs.”

Isabella pushes on my arms. “Don’t hurt him. He didn’t do anything.”

I snicker and swing her legs to the edge of the bed. Those big, brown eyes kill me. Without thinking, I tap her lips with my fingers. Soft. Moist. “Listen, princess. Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Sorry.” She lowers her head, and all the fight leaves her body. Her submission should arouse me, but it’s born of fear.

My stomach twists, thinking I scared her.

I lift her chin, tempted to apologize, but it’s her first day here. She needs to know I’m in charge. I take what I want. That will include other women. It will be easier to accept her role here if I make that clear from the start. “Isabella, I’ll give you everything you need and want. Clothing. Jewelry. Protection. But understand, this marriage is an arrangement. There will be no love. I will respect you in public, show you off as my queen.”

“In private?” Her hands grip the bottom of her T-shirt, the fabric twisting. “Will you brutalize me every night?”

“As your husband, that will be my right.” I run my hand across her cheek, grateful it’s not swollen. “Brutalize isn’t what I’d call you screaming my name from the pleasure you’ll get when I take you.”

“Uh huh,” Isabella sputters, her cheeks heating up under my touch.

She grew up in this world. This shouldn't be a shock. Her mother's not here to guide her, as I knew my maimeó did for my mother when she was handed over to my father. I'll have to be patient with my bride.

School... She's going to school and getting an education. I can be...flexible. Then pivot if needed. “Isabella, what are you going to school for?” It will also give me more insight into this girl I'm going to marry.

“Women's studies,” she says softly. “With a minor in finance. Mama...” She chokes on a sob. “Mama wanted to arrange for me to marry a businessman. Not a...”

“Savage,” I answer with a grunt.

“A don.” She looks up. “Like Papa.”

Being compared to a man who would strike his own daughter enrages me. “I'm nothing like your father. I promise you that.”

“Okay.” She lifts those big eyes to me, doubt lingering there.

“What are you expecting to do with your degree?” I'm not against women getting an education, but it will be on my terms.

“I assumed a businessman would let me at least do charity work. I want to start a foundation that helps victims of domestic violence.” She lowers her head. “Papa used to beat

my mother. I understood her situation was unique. She could never leave him. But being away at school, I figured out that there are plenty of women who *could* leave but don't. Because they don't have the means."

I take in that one word. *Leave*. Would Isabella leave me? I will never hit her. Or hurt her. I, too, hate the idea of women being stuck with animals. I'm a businessman *and* a savage, but I consider myself decent. I tuck these thoughts up into my brain. Something to negotiate later.

"So, what do you need?" I ask her.

"This is my senior year. I'm supposed to do an independent study project. I was going to build a business plan for the foundation. And then figure out funding."

I shake my head, surprised at every turn with this girl. She's a senior in college. She's smart and caring. She also has a boyfriend, who's in Koslov's Bratva.

"Can you do your project online from here?" I get back to my line of questions.

"I guess." She crosses her legs. The sexy curve of muscle in her thighs has me picturing them around my waist or my face. "I have all my research in the school's cloud. I just need a computer to get them. Mine was destroyed. I planned to buy a new one when I got to school."

Complications, details, other people's problems, I'm ready to punch the wall. "I'll have my brother Balor come talk to

you. We'll get you set up with a new computer, but he'll monitor everything you do."

"Fine. I guess I don't have a choice." She exhales.

"No, you don't." I bite my lower lip, thinking of all the ways people have either abused or underestimated this girl. What the fuck did I get myself into here?

"What are you going to do about Ivan?" She pulls at her shorts, a sign of tension I'm picking up on.

"My brother Lachlan will handle that." When she looks crushed, I say, "You're young. I understand. I don't blame you for thinking you can trust him."

"Why shouldn't I trust him?"

"Because his uncle is a madman who killed your mother and burned down your house. He's ready to set Astoria on fire next," I bark, hoping Parisi puts a stop to it. "Did your father know about you and Ivan?"

"No. We had to sneak around. It wasn't easy."

"That's a relief," I bite out. "I'll get word to Ivan that you're getting married, with a warning not to go near you. Or contact you." I wait to see the sadness in her eyes. That will tell me if she cared about him.

She takes short breaths, meets my eyes, and then softens her spine. "Fine," she mutters quietly. "And *our* wedding?"

"Right. Give me a few hours to figure this out."

I open my sister's walk-in closet. Her sweet smell lingers on the few clothes she left behind before moving to East Hampton. One bar sits completely empty. "You can put your things away in here. As long as you're my wife, this is your house, too, but give me a few hours to set the boundaries. I have an office in Long Island City, but with you here, and the Russian threat looming, I'll work from home for a while until I know it's safe. You will not leave this house, though. It's for your safety."

"I guess." She wanders into the closet.

"Are you hungry?" I ask her.

"I am, actually."

"I'll send Patricia up to see what she can make you. Then give her a list of anything else you need to be comfortable. I have a business dinner tonight. She doesn't cook when I go out. But with you here..."

"I can take care of myself if you let me have free rein of the kitchen."

That's an easy concession to make right now. "Aye, you have free rein of the kitchen. But please stay here until I speak to Patricia. She'll come to collect you soon, I promise." I move toward her, and she doesn't shirk back. "Do you need anything else?"

She pulls a plump lower lip between her teeth as her eyes rake down my chest, that heat kicking up again. "Water?"

“There’s a media room a few doors down with a mini fridge.”

“Is this floor free rein, too?”

“Aye.” I assume my brothers took anything important with them when, one by one, they all moved out. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

The way she stares at me, a violent urge to kiss her hits me. Her scent does something to me. Maybe I just needed to force myself into this. Maybe I just needed permission to fucking feel something.

I leave, the vein in my neck throbbing as I walk down the wide staircase.

Patricia waits for me in the foyer with a look of deep concern, like I’ve lost my mind.

I wave my hand. “I’ll explain more later. I promise. I have to call Shea. I put Isabella in her room. She’s hungry.” I walk past her.

“Are you still going out tonight?” Her questioning me halts my steps.

“Aye.” I turn slowly to face her.

“Do you think it’s wise to be out so *late* with a fiancée here waiting for you?” She knows how I spend my nights.

I work sixty hours a week running our legitimate family businesses with my brothers. At night, I entertain investors

over business dinners and make it rain at fundraisers. Then I escape to my *club* in Manhattan.

I narrow my eyes at Patricia. It's not the dinner that will keep me out late. But hours at my club after. I don't date. I pay strangers for rough sex. It's the only thing that eases my pain. I will never use Isabella *that* way. Something I'm going to have to get over if I want an heir, though.

"I have no plans to make this a real marriage in terms of love. Isabella will learn to accept this, if she hasn't figured it out already," I say with a firm jaw.

"Aye." Patricia bows her head to me. "I'll go welcome the next Mrs. O'Rourke."

I hike to my office, those words ringing in my ears. The smell of corned beef lingers in the hall, and when I open the door, my brothers are devouring several stacked sandwiches and drinking Guinness.

"Congratulations!" Balor says to me with his evil-genius grin.

"We filled him in." Riordan hands me a plate.

I think of Isabella upstairs hungry. But Tricia will take care of her. I don't even know if she likes corned beef. She's Italian. I'm starving, so I take a bite and inhale half of the sandwich before I even sit down.

With my brain working again, I say to my brothers, "I have to call Shea to plan the wedding." I hadn't bothered giving her

a heads-up, on the off-chance Parisi pushed back enough for me to change my mind.

“Long live the queen.” Lachlan chuckles darkly, putting his feet up on my desk.

“And God save the king.” I sit down, the familiar squeak of Da’s old chair comforting me, bringing me back around to who I really am. “Eoghan, I need some kind of prenup for her to sign.”

“Who gets to tell Ma you’re getting hitched to a Parisi?” Lachlan takes out his knife like he’s going to use it to play darts on the back of the door.

Jaysus, I hadn’t even considered my parents’ reaction. They expected me to marry Norah. Then Ma’s MS diagnosis stole all of Da’s attention. For years, we were strong enough and didn’t need to make arranged marriages with an enemy. Ma and Da’s marriage was made out of a different kind of necessity back in Ireland. Survival.

“I’ll tell Da when they get back,” I answer gruffly. I made this decision. It also means confessing how serious the problem has grown with the Russians.

“This cruise they’re on is three weeks,” Balor tells me. “The Arctic, whale sightings, and watching glaciers melt from a cabin with glass walls. So Ma doesn’t have to...” He trails off.

“Aye.”

So she doesn’t have to walk around too much.

Balor holding his phone reminds me I took Isabella's and how she reacted. Getting my breath in check, I dig into my pocket. "Balor, this is Isabella's phone. Get her another one on our account."

"Sure." He takes it, looking at me. "What am I doing with this one?"

I snap my fingers to get everyone's attention. "Listen up. Isabella told me she had a relationship with an Ivan Petrov. Koslov's nephew."

"His sister's kid from Russia?" Riordan says. "We know about him. He's a low-level bagman."

"What's she doing with him?" Lachlan asks.

"I don't know." I shake my head. "His number should be in that phone. Check him out, Balor."

"Will do." He starts scrolling and then eyes me above the top of the phone. "There are pictures in here."

"What kind of pictures?"

"Selfies."

I snatch the phone from him, and when I look down, I see skin. Lots of skin. What the hell is this? Who the hell am I am marrying? I swallow and say, "Delete these. *All* of them. Wipe them clean from the cloud before you start going through her calls and texts."

"I'm gonna get Ewan on this," Balor says, taking the phone back from me. "Have them do a workup on everyone in this

phone.” He manages our contract with Quinlan Investigations, Ewan’s PI firm.

“Good.” I finish my sandwich, glancing out the window. I have a fiancée who is a blank slate. An open book. Living under my roof.

The last roof she lived under exploded.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kieran

My courtyard gate opens an hour later, and I reach for my piece, wondering who my guard, Calder, would let in without alerting us.

From the window in my office where my brothers and I have been discussing business, I see slender legs and high-heel shoes step onto the gravel from a white Escalade.

Shea.

“How did she get here so fast from the Hamptons?” I ask Riordan. “In the summer.”

“She took the bird.” He reminds me we have a helicopter.

“Right.”

Clicking heels on the hardwood floors leading to my office echo in the hallway, and Lachlan jumps to open the door. He picks her up and twirls her around. “Come ‘ere, *me a stór*.”

His *treasure* squeaks in his rough hold, but he adores her. We all do.

We haven’t seen her in a while.

Her sweet voice calms me as she goes from brother to brother, reaching me last.

“Alo, Shea.” I hug her, as well, just not as enthusiastically as Lachlan. “Thanks for coming on short notice. I know you’re busy.”

“The president is busy. I’m *drowning*.” She takes a glass of whiskey Balor hands her and sits in the chair Lachlan vacated across from my desk. “What’s so urgent that you flew me here from the Hamptons?”

My father warned me years ago, when I took over for him, to keep Shea far from our business. It’s for her protection. He didn’t want his daughter, his jewel, in danger. Now, I’m pulling her into this wicked game I started.

I glance at Riordan, who shakes his head, signaling he didn’t give her a heads-up. Exhaling, I say, “I made a deal with Gabriel Parisi. I’m marrying his daughter.”

“What?” The tumbler in her hand stops part way to her lips. “When?”

“When Ma and Da are back. I need you to plan it.”

She swallows the whiskey in one gulp, making me proud. Putting the glass down, she groans. “It’s the summer, Kieran. In New York City. I may be able to get you into the VFW on Ditmars.”

Lachlan chuckles.

“Very funny.” I’m the most feared man on the streets of this city, yet my siblings poke fun at me. Something I don’t want Isabella to see and think she can do the same.

“Hang on.” Swiping through her phone, Shea says, “You are one lucky groom. I just had an engagement implode after the bride was caught cheating. I figured I’d lose the room since it’s only a month away. How many people?”

“Balor?”

He rolls his eyes and opens his laptop. “This is a show, right?”

“Aye,” I say, grinding my molars. “How many people does the venue hold, Shea?”

“Small. One hundred.”

The idea of working up a security dossier for one hundred people—other villains like me who will want to see my prize—churns my stomach with worry. My parents will be there. My sister. My...wife.

Shea taps her manicured nails on her phone’s screen. “Do you want the room at the Orchid or not?”

“The *Orchid*?” Jaysus, that place costs a fortune, but it will send a message: I don’t fuck around. Nodding, I say, “Aye. But not for one hundred people. That’s a security nightmare. Balor, fifty, tops.”

“Got it,” he says and starts backspacing on his laptop.

“Shea, can you put this together for me?”

She leans a delicate elbow on my mahogany desk. “I had a huge waiting list of interns for this season. We’ll get a few more on board so I can do this for you, big brother.” She smiles at me. “The short time frame means I won’t have to work on it for very long.”

“Thank you.” I round the desk and hug her. “Work with the list Balor gives you. Bale, I’m trusting you on this one. You

know better than anyone who our enemies are.”

“Forcing Gabe to sell us his Italian princess means we just doubled them,” Riordan mutters.

“*Sell* you his princess?” Shea blurts.

“Can I talk to Shea alone?” I signal everyone to leave. We’re brothers. We’re a team. But I’m in charge.

And I don’t want them watching our little sister yell at me.

My brothers leave to do what they do best, run my family empire. Our legal businesses are profitable enough to shield us from curious eyes when tons of cash roll in from our illegal shit.

I’m left with Shea giving me a look of disapproval for buying a wife. It makes me wonder how my mother will take the news. Sure, there would have been some exchange of money. Clearly, Shea sees the brutality behind this deal.

“If you’ve got something to say, Shea-Lynne, say it now.”

“Oooo, my full name.” She stands up. “Do I want to know the details?”

“No,” I say firmly.

“When can I meet the next Mrs. O’Rourke?”

That’s the second time today someone’s called Isabella that, and I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it. “Her name is Isabella. And she’s upstairs.”

Shea’s hands fall at her sides. “You moved her in already?”

I'm not sure what Shea knows about the explosion. "I had to."

"*Had to?* Kier, is this a shotgun wedding I'm planning?"

I bark a laugh. "Hardly." I also spare her the gory details of how I don't plan to have a routine sexual relationship with my wife. She's here to give me an heir. Nothing more.

"What, then?"

"Shea, I don't tell you the particulars of our business for a reason."

"Right, right. Just like Da." She smooths her dress. "So? Can I meet her?"

"Sure." I smile. "I put her in your room."

"My room?" Her sculpted eyebrows arch. "For good?"

"What do you mean?"

"Kieran, you're getting married. She'll share your bed, no?"

My neck flames with heat at the idea of Isabella in my bed. The way she looked in that bikini doesn't help lessen the throbbing in my groin. "That's between her and me."

"Okay." Shea waves her hands, giving up on me. My sister is a romantic at heart. Maybe she's not living in the real world because, with our name, no man would dare hurt her.

I open the door to my office to find Isabella standing there. "Oh." I adjust my tie for some reason.

Isabella's eyes narrow at Shea. "What the hell is this? Will you be banging your mistresses under the same roof I'm being

forced to live under, too?” She seethes with jealousy, and it hits a nerve. How can she feel that way about me already?

I grin at her because whether or not I choose to ‘bang’ a woman in my house is completely up to me. Isabella needs to know sooner rather than later that I have no plans to give up my club in the city. Regardless of the oath I take in this arranged marriage, I’ll do as I please when it comes to other women.

“Isabella, this is my sister, Shea.”

Isabella sharply inhales. “Oh, shoot. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing. This was all so sudden.”

“It’s okay.” Shea steps into the hall and shakes her hand. “I’m glad to meet you. I’ll be taking care of the wedding.”

“Oh, right. The wedding. I’m a bride-to-be. Yay me.”

Shea gives me a side-eye.

Smiling, I say, “Shea, when do you have to go back?”

“Five minutes ago.” She checks her phone. “Kidding, I can stay for a while.”

“Aye. Why don’t you and Isabella talk in the library? I have to leave.”

“Where are you going?” Isabella asks, like she owns me.

A strange feeling washes over me that’s partly unsettling, partly sexy, and partly enraging. I haven’t answered to a woman in seven years. Not that I answered to Norah.

“I have a business dinner. I go out most nights.” I hear Shea clearing her throat behind me.

“Don’t business dinners usually include spouses?” Isabella crosses her arms. “I’m going to be your wife.”

“You’re right.” I give her a once-over. She’s still wearing that flimsy T-shirt. And clearly, without a bra because enormous tits bounce underneath. Those damn cutoff shorts have to go, too, because they ride up way too high on her thighs. How am I supposed to concentrate? “We have to get you new clothes right away.”

“And a wedding dress.” She puts her hands on her hips, and I imagine my hands there while I take her from behind—rough, the way I like it.

The forceful swelling in my briefs has me rubbing my aching forehead. “Right, a dress. Shea...”

“On it.” My sister takes out her phone and wanders down the hall.

When we’re alone in the hallway, I move toward Isabella, and she backs up against the wall. “It’s been a tough day for you. I get it. I also get that you’re young, and I’m sorry this situation has been forced upon you. But you don’t have a choice. You want to be on my arm for business dinners, playing my wife? You’ll play my wife in my house, as well. Important people come and go around here. You will dress the way I want you to when you are in this part of the house where people can see you. I will worship you in public, and I expect

the same from you. Upstairs is your space. I will make that concession, okay?"

"Right," she says softly, and her sweet, warm breath has me fantasizing how it would feel on my dick.

As I settle into this decision to get married, I suddenly feel wide open and free. Free to exploit it. I want Isabella pregnant with my child as we emerge as the family left standing in the war between the Italians and the Russians. Every abandoned business, legal and illegal, by Parisi and Koslov will be mine for the taking. Children will prove I am serious about my legacy. My brothers will need wives soon, as well, to start their families. People won't be able to turn a corner without bumping into an O'Rourke.

The way Isabella looks at me, though, I wonder if it's possible to have something real with her. Eventually. For the first time in years, I don't feel those rusty bars around my heart.

Maybe my dick is taking over. The same dick who's used to rough sex with tied-up and blindfolded women in the dark. Chained to all four bedposts while I violate every hole to get the rage out of my system.

Can I have both with *my wife*?

"Now, my sister is here. I would appreciate it if you would change into something—anything—more appropriate while you meet with her. She'll respect you for it." I brush her face.

“You’re so demanding. What about me?” Her eyes lower to my hand.

“Besides school, what else do you want, Isabella?” I hover, tempted to grind my dick into her stomach. I still don’t know if she’s a virgin. Considering the day I had, I don’t think I can handle the news either way.

“I don’t want to be ignored.” She folds her hands.

“That’s a promise I can’t make right now. But your request is noted.”

She rolls her eyes at me, and fuck... That turns me on.

Shea rounds the corner, halting when she sees us standing close.

Her confused eyes find me, but she smiles. “My sales rep at Crest Diamonds can see you tomorrow at eleven.”

“For what?” I ask, but it slams into me.

“Rings?” Shea blinks at me like I’m a Neanderthal.

The room starts to spin. I went through all of this with Norah. Her engagement ring sits in my jewelry box. I would never give it to someone else. “Aye.”

“And I have an opening with my personal shopper for next week.” My sister is on a roll, and it makes me wonder if this operation has been planned for years, and she’s just now breaking the seal to read the instructions like a soldier with nuclear codes. “She’ll have plenty of clothes for you to choose from for business dinners and parties.”

“I need a wedding dress,” Isabella says quietly. “My mother wanted me to wear my Nana’s gown. But that was in our attic.”

I don’t know much about women’s hopes and dreams, but I know weddings are important. The dress even more so.

I close my eyes and swallow. “Shea...”

My sister bites her lower lip, and I *know* what she’s thinking. *Shite*. I close my eyes and give a soft nod.

“My ma’s dress is available if you want to wear a family heirloom.” Shea takes out her phone. “I keep a photo of it to share with designers when a client wants a very traditional dress.”

Isabella gasps. I remember my mother’s dress was nothing short of a white explosion.

“That’s... That’s utterly beautiful.” Her eyes lift to me. “Are you sure?”

“So long as Shea is okay with it. She’s my only sister.”

“This is too much for me.” My sister shakes her head. “I’d rather wear something slinky with an open back.” Shea winks at me, knowing that gets my ire up—thinking of men looking at my little sister’s bare back.

“Then, yes. I’d love to wear this. Thank you.” Restrained excitement punctuates Isabella’s voice.

“Isabella, whatever you want for this wedding is fine with me. Why don’t you exchange numbers with Shea?”

“Where will we have it?” she asks, looking from me to Shea.

“The Orchid,” Shea answers and I can tell I’m being pushed out of the plans. “I had a wedding cancel on me.”

“The Orchid? Oh my God.” Isabella sounds breathless again and stares at me. Her energy hits me in the chest, and I feel the excitement thrumming off of her.

No. No. This is fake, as far as our feelings. I’m not sure my heart can take losing someone I love again.

“Can I ask my friend Samantha to be my maid of honor?” Isabella glances at me.

My sister smirks at me as if to say, *You wanted to marry an Italian princess to get more power. Now what?* Shea is now neck-deep in this scheme. I hope she understands this marriage is for the benefit of our family. Her trust fund depends on our wealth.

“Work with Shea on your guest list, and if Balor clears her, then yes.”

“Thank you.” Isabella smiles, brushing past me. “I need to change, Shea, and then we’ll talk more about the wedding. I’ll be back down in a few minutes.” The swell of her ass cheeks peeking out of those shorts hardens my cock to the point of pain.

Fuck.

Shea grips my tie. “Tell Ma immediately. If she finds out from me that her future daughter-in-law, who she doesn’t

know about, is wearing her wedding dress at a wedding she has no idea is happening, she'll blow *you* up."

"I'll tell her when they get back." I just have to figure out which brother I like the least that week to go with me.

Shea pokes me in the chest. "Be nice." Then she walks off.

Keeping my little princess upstairs happy is vital to making everyone understand she is mine, and anyone who fucks with that drags me into the war. Something no one wants. That means I'm playing the devoted fiancé for the next month.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Isabella

Patricia cooked us a wonderful dinner, and I let Shea, who's quite lovely and sophisticated, do most of the talking while I worked out the plan in my head. Play along. Submit. Give Kieran what he wants so he'll trust me. Then, as soon as I get the first taste of freedom, I'm taking off.

Thirty days gives me that window of time to figure out the weak link in the chain of this Irish operation.

I only start paying attention when Shea brings up Kieran. The mention of his name, the memory of how he looked in that suit earlier, and the way he touched me, even if it was a little rough and demanding, sends unexpected heat right to my core.

Then there's the way he went after my father for hurting me. The rush of his emotional response felt like fire in my veins.

I push all that away so I don't look too eager to be here. I can't help smiling at Shea's enthusiasm when talking about Kieran, though, and what it was like growing up with so many brothers. Looking around this enormous house and thinking of all those empty bedrooms on the second floor, jealousy chokes me, digging in deeper how alone I feel.

I'd only been around Kieran and his brothers for a short time, but I recognize the love they have for each other. I never sensed that from Ivan, who's an only child. The Koslovs are

cold and ruthless. The O'Rourkes are just as dangerous, but I bet they'd fight to the death for each other.

Am I choosing the right path? The right family? Swallowing, I push the doubt away, reminding myself that I have thirty days to fully digest what's best for me.

We take our wine into the backyard and sit by the pool. Shea opens up even more to me by diving into party-planning horror stories.

When the sun sets, she gets a call from her bodyguard, saying she should get back home.

She offers me a hug and leaves, saying she'll be in touch about her mother's dress. Again, I'm conflicted about this charade of submission. I'm lying to everyone. Kieran's mother is going to hand over her dress only to have me possibly stomp on it as I claw my way to freedom.

Finding myself alone, exhaustion sweeps through every muscle in my body. I had a crazy day. When I woke up, all I worried about was having enough sunscreen for the beach club. I slip into the bathroom off Shea's lavish bedroom and gawk. It belongs in a day spa. Papa is rich and always bought me nice clothes and shoes, but I never had a bathroom like this. The tub alone is massive. I don't know when Shea lived here last, but there's a basket of wrapped bath bombs sitting on the marble counter. I run the water in the spa bathtub until it's scalding, just the way I love it.

I strip my clothes off, and it takes me a few moments to realize I live with a strange man. And the bedroom door isn't

locked. I stare at my body of olive skin and curves. My boobs came in late and then didn't stop.

I drop a lavender bath bomb into the tub, hoping the aromatherapy will relax me so I can sleep. The chalky ball fizzes in the water, and when a layer of perfumed foam sits on the top, I sink into the water. Seconds later, I flip on the jets, and the pressurized bubbles soothe my shoulders.

The ones by my feet push water between my legs, and my mind wanders to the man who wants to marry me. Thinking of his full lips, and how he got so close to me earlier, my hands roam across my body. I spread my thighs to feel the pressure against my sex. Groaning, I sink deeper into the water but arch my back. The curve exposes my breasts, and the cool air from an A/C vent somewhere hits my nipples and hardens them. My body responds to the delicious warring temperatures, keeping me on edge.

That exquisitely-cut suit Kieran wore didn't hide what a muscular body he has. Those wide shoulders, broad chest, and thick biceps really gave the fabric a run for its money. Above the collar, tattoos crept up his neck, igniting my wildfire imagination that his sculpted chest is full of tats, as well.

My wedding night with your daughter...

What if it gets to that? What if I can't escape and have to go through with this? What if... What if I *didn't* run? I'll have a wedding night with a man who's so gorgeous it's a sin.

Desire lets my fantasies run wild, imagining Kieran making love to me. I slide pruned fingers through my folds, the

fullness nowhere near what I need to come. I rub my clit anyway, and my eyes flutter as my dark, nipples thicken above the foam.

Will Kieran put his mouth between my legs? Does any passion exist behind that savage smile? His vivid green stare penetrated me earlier, and I picture them boring into mine while he's on top of me, taking me. My fingers press harder against my clit, and I purposely keep myself on the edge. Perhaps this life wouldn't be *so* bad. Married to a king, being his dirty queen every night in his bed.

In five seconds, he proved he was nothing like my father.

"Mmmm," I pant. I'm so close, I feel light-headed as steam fills my lungs.

I want to wrap my legs around Kieran's thick hips. Give him my virgin pussy.

"Yes," I moan, on the verge of saying his name, when a noise pulls my eyes to the doorway.

A shadow with wide shoulders comes into view. "Keep going." Kieran's deep voice shatters my soul. "Don't stop on my account."

I close my legs, and while covering my breasts, I bark, "Excuse me! Don't you knock?"

"I did knock." He steps in and leans against the vanity across from the bathtub. "You probably didn't hear me over your moaning."

Embarrassed, I swallow. "I could have been asleep."

“But you’re not, are you, Isabella?” His eyes rake across me. Much of the bomb has dissolved, letting Kieran see my naked body. “Thinking of Ivan?” he asks with mischief in his voice.

“No,” I scoff. Sitting up, I add, “Are you going to stay there and leer or be a gentleman and give me a towel to cover myself?”

“I’m going to be your husband. I’m allowed to leer. And I don’t have to be a gentleman.” He does, however, grab the towel and hold it open. Wearing a wicked smile, he commands darkly, “Out.”

Adrenaline buzzes through me. “Out? As in, get out of the tub?”

“Or you can stay and finish. I’ll wait.” He lowers the towel.

Stay and make myself come while he watches? There’s a thought. Can I trade that for some freedoms I want? “I thought you had dinner plans?”

“I did. I’m home.” He narrows his eyes at me. “Earlier than I would have liked.”

“What does that mean?”

He pulls his lower lip between pearly white teeth. “I had plans to be at my club.”

“Club?”

“A pleasure club, Isabella. A place where I take out my aggression through brutal sex.” His honesty is *brutally*

shocking.

“And is this a club membership you plan to maintain once we’re married?” *This* could sway me to keep fighting for a way out. Maybe he’s more like Papa than I gave him credit for earlier.

“Aye.”

My breath leaves me, and I grip the side of the tub to stand, towel or no towel. “You plan to be unfaithful to me?” I give him a view of my body, thinking that makes a good argument.

His right cheek ticks, and a smile lifts from that side, as well. “This is an arranged marriage. I’m under no obligation to be faithful.”

“Then I’m not either, especially since I had no say in this.”

Fire burns in his green eyes, and I’m not sure if it’s that I dared to challenge him or the idea of another man screwing his wife. It happens so quickly. His hand grips my sex, fingers dangerously close to my folds. “Say that again—how you plan to let another man touch what is mine.”

Another hand snakes around my waist. I’m completely naked, and he’s completely dressed, the coarse silk suit jacket inflaming every nerve ending in my body.

“No comeback, princess?”

“I was just making a point.” My hands lay on his chest, but not to push him away. Damn, this feels nice.

“Did you make yourself come just now?”

Breathless, I utter, “No. You interrupted me.”

“Here’s a choice.” He dips his head to my shoulder and breathes against my neck. “You can finish in your bed alone, or I can finish you off right now. With my mouth, my fingers, or my cock. You decide, princess.”

My mouth goes dry, and my heart batters against my ribs. “I... I’ve never done anything like that.”

“Nothing?” After I shake my head, he presses his fingers deeper into my slit. “No man’s been inside you?”

“No one.” I catch our reflection in the mirror. My round, juicy ass glistens from the bath bomb.

Kieran stares at it, too, and our eyes meet in the mirror. He pulls my chin up. “I’m expecting you to be an obedient wife. In exchange, I’ll give you something that will be more important than my fidelity.”

“And what might that be?” Although I can guess since it’s growing in his pants and pressed against me.

“A crown. You’ll be my queen. You’ll be respected. Whoever is left to be loyal to your father will be loyal to you. And therefore, me.” He lowers his mouth to my neck, and hot breath fans the shell of my ear.

My breath hitches, and I consider whether I’ll be his greatest weapon or his greatest weakness. But his words have me seeing red. Fake or not. Arranged or not. He also just told me to my face that he plans to cheat on me.

“And people will respect me if you’re off with other women?” I ask with a tight throat, fighting the feeling of jealousy I don’t understand.

“The people who matter know what a powerful man needs.” His eyes sweep over me. “And that kind of rough sex is not something I care to inflict on a virgin. Now let’s take care of *this*...” His fingers swirl against what I’m sure is my swollen clit. “Open for me.”

The muscles in my right thigh relax, giving Kieran access to my center. His four fingers work my clit, and I explode in a matter of seconds. “Oh my God,” I groan, gripping his shoulders.

“Fuck, you’re slick for me.” He looks down at his hand. “Jaysus,” he growls, looking back at me.

My pulse quickens, and too many images fly through my mind. Visuals form and take root from reading too many romance novels. Now I’m living one, but it feels more like a horror story.

After a sharp exhale, Kieran covers me completely with the towel. “Go to sleep. We have our appointment in the morning.”

“Right.” I pull up the towel, amazed at how he broke the moment between us. “Ring shopping.”

“You’ll wear the biggest rock imaginable so everyone will know you’re mine.” He presses me against the vanity again with that hard cock rammed into my stomach.

My eyes lower. “But not in your bed. You’d rather use that tool between your legs with whores?”

He releases me. “Don’t be jealous of women who mean nothing to me, Isabella.”

“What will I mean to you?”

“You will be the mother of my children.” He steps back, licking the fingers he just used to make me come. “I bought you from your father so that you’ll give me the heirs I need.”

“And what if I can’t get pregnant right away?” I’m on the pill to stop terrible cramps, but I’m not telling him that.

“You will get pregnant right away, the way I plan to take you, over and over.” He tracks me in the mirror, and adds, “I expect you to not be on any birth control.”

“I see.” What if I *don’t* stop my pills after we’re married?

And make him come to my bed night after night to keep trying. My body is still quivering from that climax. That was just his hand, but it barely satisfied the aching need deep in my womb. I’m close to my period now, and my hormones are on fire.

Kieran’s eyes sweep over my body like a mocking promise to own me completely. After a grin at how I’m flushed and depleted, he leaves.

I can’t take my eyes off his ass in those slacks.

Damn, that man...

If I don't escape, he'll take me night after night to get me pregnant. I swallow, wondering if he'll even wait until our wedding night. I'm living in his house, caught in his web. He can slip into my bed and ruin me with that incredible length of his, spill his seed any time, and then my choices are really gone.

I have to hide my birth control. I wonder if there are cameras in this bathroom. More importantly, where will I get my refills if I no longer have the freedom to see my doctor or go to the pharmacy? I have one and a half packs left from my last ninety-day refill, so I have time to figure out how I'll get more.

Even if I'm trapped and have to marry him, maybe after months of not getting pregnant, he'll let me go...

But the way his cock feels against me—I can only imagine how it will feel inside me—I worry earth-shattering orgasms will make me want to stay.

CHAPTER NINE

Kieran

I don't remember the last time my heart pounded like this. I trudge to my bedroom in a hallway that doesn't look familiar because my head is so screwed up. I get there and slam the door. In my bathroom, I splash water on my face to calm down.

I kill. I fuck. I control.

I come hard from the satisfaction of ferocious sex, but my heart rate rarely gets this high.

My cock painfully throbs in my pants, and I hold my breath, unable to believe that little virgin makes me feel like this. I should send Isabella back to her father immediately.

It's not just her beauty.

Her body.

The sass.

Giving me lip while standing there naked with a body that can bring a man to his fucking knees. Looking me in the eye like she's not afraid of me. Jaysus, she's strong. She took a slap to the face from her father with grit. That burning memory of Gabe raising his hand to her, ready to strike another blow, sits in the back of my mind, erupting like a volcano.

My plan to forget she existed beyond giving me an heir is showing some serious flaws if I react this way every time I get

near that maddening scent or take in those big eyes. The way her body molded against me... My plans may have to change.

The feel of her tight cunt when she came on fingers sends scorching images of me fucking her flying through my head. She certainly can't take the sexual savage I turned in to. But maybe I don't have to be such a cruel lover with her. I can be myself. Whoever the hell that really is. The man I don't recognize right now. A man I don't remember.

The man I was with Norah.

I've been telling myself *that* man is gone, not only because the love of my life died, but in the seven years since her death, I had to play the role of king. I closed down emotionally to do it.

I strip out of this suit because my body is on fire. The warrior tattoo on my right arm looks like it's lifting off my skin, from my veins throbbing beneath. All of my muscles vibrate, and I don't know what to do with this energy.

My workouts in the early morning keep my body in top-fighting shape. Guns don't always solve the problem. I still use my fists, just not like Lachlan, who gets hard watching the light leave a man's eyes as he squeezes his throat.

I never want anyone to believe I can't also throw a vicious punch or slice a brutal kick to the kidneys. I want people just as afraid of me and what I can do with my bare hands as they are of Lachlan.

Naked, my cock still achingly hard, I step into the shower and throw the levers, bracing under the initial icy sting to lower my body temperature.

Despite being able to fuck for hours, I stroke my cock up and down, moaning from the friction, as scorching water rains down on my stiff shoulders. Jaysus, I can barely get my hand around it tonight. I come shockingly quick, visualizing myself sliding into that bald little cunt I saw and felt earlier, as ropes of my release coat the glass shower wall.

Fuck, I'm in trouble.



The next morning, the sound of high heels clicking on the foyer's porcelain tiles makes me look up from my coffee. Isabella gracefully enters the kitchen dressed in a tight lavender dress that is way too short. But it looks fucking stunning on her.

“Good morning,” I say with a strong voice, standing at my kitchen island and reading the morning news on my phone.

“Morning,” Isabella says softly and touches her hair. It's swooped up in an elegant twist that makes her look older.

Her mahogany updo lights up with the kind of shine that creates a halo around her. I don't think she's an angel. In fact,

she might be a demon for making me face emotions I've kept hidden for seven years.

She aligned with the Russians on her own without her father's knowledge. But confessed to me without pressure. And probably for her own survival.

Ivan Petrov... I'll deal with *that* once Balor gives me an assessment report on the relatively unknown Bratva soldier who orchestrated to marry the Italian princess behind all of our backs.

"Coffee?" I ask, moving toward the counter where the carafe sits half full.

"Um..." Isabella lowers her eyes. "Can I have an espresso?"

"Tricia?" I ask my house manager, who lingers at her desk right off the kitchen.

She wanders over to intervene. "I can only offer you some French roast at the moment, miss." Patricia pulls down a bag of roasted beans I wasn't aware I owned. She doesn't live here, but she's worked in this house for nearly thirty years and knows every nook and cranny. "I'll add espresso beans to the weekly shopping list and purchase a special espresso maker."

"Thank you," Isabella says and then pushes off the island. "Is this satisfactory, Kieran?" She makes a small turn, like she's taunting me or being sarcastic.

"Aye." I should tell her she looks beautiful, but I don't know what kind of couple we're supposed to be.

My parents' marriage was arranged, but I grew up watching love blossom between them. Maybe it was an illusion. A show they put on for us. I have seven siblings, so they clearly got along in the bedroom.

Ew...

That reminds me to check on Darragh and Cormac, my youngest twin brothers who moved to Seattle to do residencies after they graduated from UCLA School of Medicine. Moving out west reeked of them wanting to get away from the life here to make names and social standings of their own. Not linger at the end of a long line of O'Rourkes, including their sister.

Darragh's a single father with a daughter—Sophie, my niece. The only wee one in our family is practically a stranger. With the dangers my other brothers and I face every day, I'll keep anyone at a distance if it keeps them safe. That includes not inviting them to my wedding. It's part of the sacrifice I make for the power I wield as head of my family and king among the Irish syndicate in Astoria.

After placing a mug of coffee in front of Isabella, Patricia leaves, giving me the side-eye. I already feel outnumbered by these two.

I watch Isabella take a few sips of coffee, and her eyes land on mine. "I still need a phone." Her mouth opens, and another gulp slides down her throat. The muscles move so seductively.

Fuck.

"Balor will have one for you this afternoon."

“Can I assume all my calls will be monitored?”

“Who you call, yes,” I answer sharply. “Who will you be calling?”

“I have friends. In fact, I’d like to go to my friend’s birthday party next month. I was supposed to be away at school. But I’m home, so I’d like to go.”

My jaw twitches. Friends. Birthday party. Grunting, I say, “Where is the party?”

“Solo, in Manhattan.”

“The dance club where there’s a shooting every other weekend? No.”

She slams down her empty mug. Surprisingly, it doesn’t shatter. “You can’t keep me a prisoner in this house.”

“That’s precisely what you are.”

“You said I’m a queen.”

I hiss a laugh and move toward her. “What queen do you know freely comes and goes without bodyguards and a meticulously vetted schedule?”

“Seriously, I can’t attend Sam’s birthday party?”

“Who the fuck is *Sam*?”

“Samantha,” she barks back and rolls her eyes at me.

That little move makes me want to bend her over one of these stools and spank her. “I’m sorry, no.” I lower my head and collect my thoughts. “Isabella, once again, someone blew up your house and killed your mother. You’re a smart girl. If

you want me to respect you, you have to earn that by not being a brat.”

“I don’t know how I’ll be respected if you keep going to a sex club.” Shit, she hadn’t forgotten *that* rage confession.

Patricia gasps in the walk-in pantry.

“My club is my business.”

“Calder is waiting outside with your car, Kieran.” Patricia breaks into the conversation, saving me from myself.

“Do you want to eat something before we go?” I ask Isabella.

“Someone was nice enough to leave me a fruit plate.” She sends a smile at Patricia. “I’m good for now. What about you?”

“I had a protein shake right after my workout this morning.”

“Where do you work out?”

“Basement gym.” I strut up to her and grip her chin. “Another concession. You are free to use it, too.”

“Are you saying I’m fat and need to work out?”

I huff a laugh. “Not at all. In fact, I like those curves on you.”

She touches herself and blushes. “That reminds me, what size is your mother’s wedding dress?”

“I have no idea.” I push a hand through my hair, already feeling sweat on my scalp. “Shea will have it altered for you.”

Patricia cackles a laugh in the corner.

I still haven't told my mother what's going on. I pray she and my father won't pull any last-minute vetoes and interrupt the fake wedding of the century.

CHAPTER TEN

Isabella

Kieran stays on his phone for most of the drive to Manhattan. It's a short ride across the bridge, but a guard sits in the front passenger seat with the driver.

No matter what, I'm going to Sam's birthday party. Even if I'm still here and we're married. I'll figure out a way.

We arrive at Crest Diamonds, and a man in a suit opens the car door for Kieran. "Hello, Mr. O'Rourke. Your sister reserved the private viewing room for you and your fiancée."

"Thank you." Kieran helps me out, and I expect him to let go of my hand. But he doesn't. In fact, he tightens his grip.

"Hello." The man bows his head to me.

I think of what Kieran said to me last night about being a queen. I lower my head in faint acknowledgment. Stores like this cater to the rich and powerful. I grew up rich, but not feeling very powerful. If I marry Kieran, that will change overnight.

We walk inside, and the smell of fresh linen with a hint of citrus soothes me. All eyes land on us as we stroll past glass cases filled with sparkling diamonds. No, the eyes are on Kieran.

I think of his bold confession about using a sex club and whores. Not to disparage any of the very pretty women who work here, but any one of them can be a part-time sex worker and could have slept with Kieran. Does he remember the

women he bangs? Does he even look at their faces, or does he bend them over and take them from behind?

I consider whether canceling his sex club membership is something I really should demand. If just to assert myself. That I won't be made a fool of. But what the hell will he want from me in return? The same rough, dirty sex he gets from strangers?

A shiver runs through me as I consider it. But will he respect me if I let him tie me up and violate me like a whore? I want his respect, either way, but I doubt I'll get love from him.

We enter a private viewing room, and it's an elegant suite with a white-lacquered desk and two posh chairs in a butter-colored jacquard fabric. Against the wall is a sofa in the same fabric, but navy blue. I picture the brides who go down on their fiancés to get bigger rings.

I swear, my six-inch heels sink into ultra-plush carpeting that is the color of fresh-fallen snow. The walls are wood panels, painted silver, and the grains sparkle like diamonds. The room takes my breath away, it's so elegant. My house reeked of gaudiness. This is chic. If I get a chance to design my own home, this is what I would want.

Picking out the engagement ring was easy. They showed me several large diamonds and gorgeous settings. Emotionless, Kieran said I could have whatever I wanted. To be honest, that got more rise out of the saleslady than me. I'm being forced to marry him and wear his ring. Still, I'm a girl, so I chose a five-carat emerald-shaped diamond with a two-carat halo setting.

That, combined with the wedding ring—dozens of small, round stones set on a platinum band—takes up nearly half my finger. The weight, too, symbolizes Kieran’s strength over me.

So he thinks...

“Sir, for you?” The saleslady lays a velvet tray with several chunky men’s wedding rings in front of Kieran.

He waves her off. “None for me.”

“None for you?” I snap. “You’re not wearing a wedding ring?”

“It’s not a custom in my family for the man to wear a ring. My father never wore one.”

“How did people know he was married?” I sit back and cross my legs.

He lowers one dark eyebrow at me. “My mother walking around Astoria pregnant for over ten years straight was a hint.” He attempts to make a joke.

I don’t want to argue, but I won’t insult the man’s mother. I’m ready to just shrug this off, but something claws at me to fight. If I wanted to marry this man, especially *this* man, this god of a man, whose beauty clocks in at a twenty-five on a scale of one to ten, then I would want to brand him with a ring, like he’s doing to me.

Plus, giving up so easily may tip him off that I’m looking for a way out of this.

“No.” I shake my head. “That won’t work for me. This no-ring business. We’re starting a new tradition. You’ll wear a ring.” I point to the velvet tray. “Which is the most expensive?”

“Isabella,” Kieran hisses.

The saleslady clears her throat but looks at *me* when she speaks, giving me a taste of superiority for a split second. “It’s this one, but if I may offer my expertise, having worked with plenty of couples like yourselves.”

I chuckle low in my belly. I doubt she’s had a couple like *us*. “Go on.”

“A man like your fiancé, who does not usually wear rings, would be more comfortable in something like this.” From the tray, she takes out a matte platinum band. “This is called a link edge. Its open design is breathable for new grooms who aren’t used to rings.” She gives Kieran a knowing look.

I gently take the ring from her. “This is gorgeous and elegant.” I hold it up. Perhaps my being excited about it will spark some excitement in him. “Like you,” I whisper and hold my breath, thinking he’ll explode for sassing him.

Kieran only grunts. “This is fine.” But he takes the ring, and after a long look at it, he lifts his gaze to me. “You really like it?”

“I do.” I give him a wide smile. “I think it’s sexy even.”

“Sexy?” He puts the ring down and reaches into his suit jacket for his wallet. “Wedding rings are not meant to be

sexy.”

“Because you’ve never worn one.” I bury myself with an eager comeback.

The saleslady jumps on his weakness about the ring and says, “Let me take your measurements. I’ll have these delivered to your home by tomorrow.”

The way the woman slides several silver bands clamped together with a wand up and down Kieran’s thick finger, sends jealousy firing through me. I look down at his lap, though, and see no sign of arousal.

Then again, he is annoyed.



We get into Kieran’s Range Rover, and I expect to be taken back to Astoria. Back to my prison. Instead, he asks me to join him for lunch.

“That fruit plate sure has worn off,” I joke and hide the sudden buzzing of excitement to spend more time with this man. Although, I’m not sure where it’s coming from.

“Why do you really want me to wear a wedding ring?” he asks, leaning in with a menacing smile.

His stare wrecks me, as if he sees through my charade. If he came up through the ranks of his organization like my father did, Kieran worked the streets. Which means he can do a lot of

damage with just his hands, the fingers I want to brand. Yet, where I saw evil in my father's eyes, I don't see that in Kieran's.

I'm a challenge for him, sure. Somehow, I think that sparks intrigue in him. My mind swirls as I consider what I really want. Kieran wants to prop me up as a queen and parade me at dinners and balls. But with Ivan, I'd be in the shadows since a bagman doesn't get invited to the Met Gala. Obscurity sounded so delicious when we were getting to know each other this summer. Ivan's hands were always cold, though. Even in the sweltering heat.

My heart pounds, remembering Kieran making me come with just his hand. His very warm, very big hand. His smile was more wicked than evil—seductive. He loved his former fiancée. Which means he could love again. Unless her death tore his heart out.

“It's like I said at the store...” I answer him about wearing a ring with a simple shrug, inwardly doing a happy dance at the victory of getting what I want. “If you want everyone to know you're married, especially to a woman who's not allowed to leave the house, a ring will do the trick.”

“I didn't say you can *never* leave the house,” he utters through clenched teeth. “I said give me time to arrange your security first.”

I know he's right, but it doesn't stop me from wanting to fight him anyway. I can't make this too easy on him. This situation sure isn't easy on me.

The car pulls up to one of those exclusive restaurants where you have to step down to get inside. The hostess, who's wearing a long, backless white dress, smirks at Kieran.

Who wears that at noon?

"Come here often?" I sass him as we follow her.

"Yes, it's one of my favorites. When I meet someone who I'm afraid I'll lunge across the table and kill, I bring him here so I'm restrained."

I don't know if he's joking. "I'd like to know more about your businesses. All I know is Papa runs the docks."

"And gambling, which probably got him into trouble. The house always wins, until it doesn't, because the boss is skimming."

"You don't know that," I say forcefully, sitting down. "Then again, I don't know either."

We're seated at a corner table in the back. Immediately, a basket of bread and a whiskey for Kieran is set down as someone else hands us the menus.

When they leave, Kieran leans in. "Your father is in massive debt, Isabella. He ruthlessly took away benefits and pay raises from longshoremen. They're not exactly altar boys who let *'Jesus take the wheel.'*" He makes air quotes. "They're coming after him. My theory is your father needs cash to renegotiate those contracts or he'll lose thousands of men. I can't prove it, but I think he had something to do with Stasia Koslov's disappearance."

“Why, though?” I didn’t see the connection. Maybe because I’m hungry.

“To blackmail her father.” He sits back. “That would have gotten him out of the red. But now, a grave, because Koslov suspects him.”

“Papa wouldn’t do that to another father,” I argue out of habit.

“You think he’s a saint? How’s your cheek feeling this morning?” he snaps.

I gasp and lift my hand, the tender bone feeling like the size of my head. “Jerk,” I mutter freely, feeling in my gut I’m safe to express myself.

“Shite, I’m sorry.” He reaches out to hold my other hand and squeezes it. “He won’t ever touch you again. I promise.”

I clear my throat and nod.

Exhaling, he says, “And I get what it’s like to only want to see the good in a father. I lied to myself for years when my da came home covered in blood. My mother would say he hit a deer upstate.” He scoffs and then rips off a piece of bread from the basket put in front of us. “That didn’t explain why he was in a suit.”

I chuckle and reach for a piece myself. To my surprise, the slice Kieran just buttered gets handed to me on a plate. “Here.”

Our eyes lock, and I’m not sure he realizes what he did. I don’t suspect he butters bread for an enemy sitting in this seat. Instincts maybe? From his fiancée who passed?

A waiter comes by a moment later and looks at Kieran to take his order.

He puts his glass down hard on the table and glares up at the waiter. “First of all, this is my fiancée. *She* orders first. Next, why aren’t you asking her what she wants to drink?”

“It’s fine.” I try to smooth things over, although the chivalry turns me on. “Just some club soda. And a grilled chicken Caesar salad. Dressing on the side.”

Kieran barks his meal order of grilled trout with asparagus and rice then lifts the whiskey to his gorgeous mouth again.

When the waiter, who turned as white as the tablecloth, leaves, I say, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, excuse me for a minute.” He puts his drink down and storms away.

I exhale, thinking he’s going to really yell at the waiter.

Moments later, Kieran returns with my club soda himself and a small plate of lemons. I didn’t ask for them but really wanted them. It’s like he knew. Handing the drink to me, he pulls it away to be playful. “What do you say?”

“Please.”

“Good girl.” He places the drink down in front of me. “And when I’m taking my husbandly liberties with you every night, I want to hear you say *please*—often.” The gruff tone and devilish look in his eyes set me on fire. “I’m going to make you beg for it, Isabella.”

I take a sip with his eyes watching me, my heart pounding.

“You only want a salad for lunch?” he asks to break the tension.

Smiling, I answer, “My stomach is still in knots.”

“Aye, then we’ll stop at a pharmacy.” He brings the glass of whiskey back to his lips and glances at his chunky masculine watch.

“Got somewhere else to be?” I lean my elbows on the table, wondering if I’ll get a tongue-lashing for my bad manners. None comes. But what does his tongue taste like? And how will it feel between my legs?

“As a matter of fact, yes, I do have somewhere to be,” he answers me.

“So, go.” I lean back and wave my hand. “I can eat lunch by myself and get my own antacid. I’m not completely useless. Or helpless. I managed to live away at college by myself for three years. Sure, guards were always nearby. But they didn’t buy me tampons or get my—” I stop, almost saying my birth control pills.

Kieran exhales. “I in no way think you’re helpless or useless.” He purses his lips like he’s thinking of ways to *use* me. “Isabella, we’re here so you have a chance to get out of the house.”

“Thank you. I was thinking maybe it was an apology for walking in on me naked last night.”

“I told you, I knocked. I won’t apologize if you were too busy playing with yourself to hear.” He taps his fingers on the table. “I certainly won’t apologize for what I did after I saw you naked.”

I lean in. “Went right to sleep?”

“Hardly.” He smirks. “I won’t get graphic with you about *that*. Not yet. Not until you’re my wife.”

He takes a few more calls while we wait for the food, but he doesn’t say anything about who the caller is or what they wanted.

Our meals come, and he shoves the phone inside his suit jacket. Sitting back, he waits for me to eat while I cut up the chicken and mix in the dressing.

I catch him staring and smile. “You can eat. I like it mixed well.”

But he keeps watching me. And waiting. Nerves pool in my stomach, and I can barely finish the salad, all while he inhales his meal.

“Can I bring this home? It’s good. I just don’t want to fill up.”

“I don’t take leftovers home. If you want another salad, I’ll send someone back here to get you a fresh one. Or whatever else you want.” He stands up. “I’m going to the men’s room. Do *not* move from this table.”

“You’re serious? Why?”

“Because my guard is in the car, and I don’t have one for you yet.”

“And why is that?” I lean back.

“When you’re with me, *I’m* your guard. I protect what’s mine.” He drops the napkin onto the table and struts away, turning a corner.

Mine? His? Sounds very medieval. Barbaric even.

After finishing the entire club soda, I have to pee. I can’t see what the big deal is if I don’t *leave* the restaurant.

I peek out from the wall that separates our seating area and glance at the route to the bathroom. It’s clear, so I hoof it that way and turn the corner.

But I slam into a wall of muscle named Kieran O’Rourke.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kieran

I grab Isabella out of pure instinct. My brain immediately screams that she is trying to escape. Trying to leave me. I have nothing emotionally invested in this woman in twenty-four hours, except thirty million dollars and the bloodlust of wanting the Italians and Russian to destroy each other.

The thought of Isabella walking out on me awoke a visceral fire in my gut. For a second, I fell down the same vortex, the same black hole that swallowed me when I watched my sweet Norah flatline. Which makes no fucking sense.

Breathing heavily, I pin Isabella to the wall. “Where are you going?”

“I had to pee. You should have asked me and escorted me here with you. You’re annoyed about the waiter. Meanwhile, your manners could use some polishing.” Her words roll over me, and I drag her farther down the darkened hallway.

She gasps and claws at me to cover her face. “Sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t hit me.” Her shattered voice guts me.

“I told you I will never hit you.” I pull her trembling body against mine. It’s soothing me, as well, because I feel fucking wrecked. “And *I’m* sorry. You’re right. I...” I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. What the fuck *is* this?

My schedule this week included meeting with Ewan about dock permits and then developers to build state-of-the-art

warehouses. Not buying wedding rings or eating lunch with a fiancée I just met.

“I’m figuring shit out, Isabella. Work with me. We’re in this together.” Slowly, I hear the man I used to be with Norah. The reasonable boyfriend who wanted the woman I loved to be my partner. Not my prisoner. Not my trophy.

My father hadn’t retired yet, and I worked for him right alongside my brothers, pretending I wasn’t the heir who would be wrenched out of the street work I was doing for him and then made the boss.

Of everything.

“I... I like that,” she whispers. “Us being in this together.”

I run my thumb across her lips and realize she’s not wearing lipstick. And not that it came off when she was eating. Her lips are as cherry-red right now as they were this morning while sipping her coffee.

Jaysus, how these lush lips would look wrapped around my cock. Could I be a real husband to her? Let her sleep in my bed every night?

What if the man I am in bed is too much for her and she ends up despising me? The idea of being the emperor of Astoria and not just the O’Rourke King is now too sweet to turn away from.

I have to make it work with this girl.

But how?



A week later, I'm sitting on a white silk sofa with my head in one hand, thinking, *not like this*.

This being giving a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down to dresses. They all look lovely on Isabella. Red dresses. Black dresses. A long, silver-sequined one, although I have no idea where she'd wear that.

I'm only here because the last seven days hadn't gone as smoothly as I'd like. I hadn't been home much. The town recently knocked down dilapidated warehouses along Shore Road on an un-dredged section of waterfront across from Randall's Island. Ewan secured me the permits to build my own docks so I don't have to pay Parisi's skyrocketing "handling fees".

Then there were my nightly activities. Not the ones where I end up coming all over someone. For a reason I can't fathom, I've not been to my club. To fight the frustration of needing rough sex, I've been tagging along with Lachlan while he punishes eejits who steal from us. Even taking part in pounding the daylights out of our prey to give Lachlan a smoke break.

If anything, it reminds me of the man I used to be. With those punches, I'm making a real difference in protecting our interests. Not just expanding them in an expensive suit and sucking up to sleazy bankers.

I'm still figuring out where I will find time to parade my new fiancée around town to show off the deal I made.

I gave Isabella a credit card, and she signed up for online classes through her college and works every day in the library. She doesn't say much to me when our paths cross. It feels like a lifetime ago when we had that moment in the restaurant. I had easily seen me taking her home and pushing her down onto my bed to...

That's where I get stuck. Because my feelings are not just wrapped up in lust. Something cracked my heart. I know the difference. I felt it. And then I wanted to get as far away from it as I could.

When I overheard a phone call with Shea about this appointment with the personal shopper, I sent Riordan to talk about zoning issues with the developer and offered to escort my bride-to-be. To challenge myself. If nothing else, to prove I can do this without feeling anything.

Now, I want to put a bullet in my head to stop from feeling. I sit, watching Isabella go through racks of expensive dresses, pants, and shoes. She moves beautifully, so poised. Despite walking around the house in tight jeans and thin tops with frilly sleeves because of the heat—all things I've come to appreciate because, after all, she's a college girl—she's pure elegance and class.

"Where will we go on our honeymoon?" she asks, wearing a blue coat dress, holding something long, floral, and skimpy.

I dig my fingers into my eye sockets. “We’ll have to wait on a honeymoon. There’s too much going on right now. I can’t leave if a war is going to break out.”

The way she exhales kills me. This girl might slit my throat in the middle of the night—unless I keep her tied up in my bed. My cock stirs, and I feel shame for associating these vile thoughts with a *wife*.

“Excuse me.” Erin, my sister’s personal shopper, pops her head into the VIP salon room. “I was able to get the photographer over here. I didn’t say anything in case it fell through.”

“Photographer?” I rise slowly, my blood pressure going up, as well. All I think is paparazzi, and, well, I hurt those people when they try to photograph me at fundraisers.

“For your wedding. Shea knew you wouldn’t want a traditional engagement shoot.” Erin glances at Isabella, who blushes.

“Did she, now?” I cross my arms over my chest in protest, not because I want engagement photos that will sit in a drawer somewhere, but because my sister made an assumption about me. And looks to have conspired with Isabella on the matter.

Isabella turns to face me. “I said I didn’t think you wanted that. But your sister planned a slideshow for the wedding. I didn’t have any pictures of me as a baby since...” Her breath halts in her lungs, and she turns around.

Feeling like an asshole, I go to her and pull her into my arms from behind. “It’s okay. There were eight of us in that house. I’m sure no one can figure out who the hell I was as a baby,” I attempt a joke.

She snickers and turns around. “Even though our wedding isn’t real, Shea has a portfolio to maintain. She can’t skimp. Especially for her billionaire brother. So, I said maybe just do some photojournalistic pictures of us together.” She looks up at me with big eyes, and my heart flutters.

Whoa. What the hell was that?

“Aye,” is all I can manage. I’m so caught up.

“She got Crest Diamonds to send her the security footage from when we bought our rings,” Isabella continues, and I realize now that she’s been doing more than schoolwork with that new laptop and phone I gave her. “She spliced some of the shots from our ring appointment. It’s just something she can play during the cocktail hour.”

This wedding sounds like it means something to Isabella. Her enthusiasm hits a nerve. In a good way. I glance over her shoulder at Erin. “Send in the photographer.”

A team of three people amble into the salon, and my guard goes up immediately. Especially since Erin leaves to take what sounds like an angry call from someone.

“Hi, I’m Alvin,” the lead guy says, sounding nothing like a chipmunk. “I hear we’re not posing?”

“Right,” Isabella says quickly, taking charge. “This is my trousseau shopping, really. My fiancée is a CEO. He’s buying me fancy dresses and shoes for business dinners and fundraisers. The O’Rourkes are very charitable.” She sounds so fucking practiced.

Did I sound like that when I told her I needed her dressed up to be on my arm? CEO, huh? That was a nice touch. She’s smart.

“In fact, right now, I’m asking him what he thinks of this.” Isabella keeps talking and gives a delicate turn. “This is good for brunches. What do you think, honeybun?” Now she’s playing with me.

“Aye.” I sit back down, giving in.

“Okay, we’ll just be off to the side. Ignore us.” Alvin pushes a leather jacket off his shoulders, dropping it lazily onto the floor behind him. No one picks it up. Odd. “And keep up with your fashion show.” He crouches down with a camera, his team of two on his six. One holds up a light reflector and the other, a broad-chested male with an ice-blond flattop, holds his phone up, taking his own photos.

I’m not sure what the hell that’s about, but my sister sent these people. I trust her completely.

Isabella blushes and says to me, “Why don’t we go stand by the rack of clothes. Help me pick out something for the next event you have.”

Nodding, I stand up, and my hand falls to the small of her back with natural ease. We're being photographed, and I want anyone seeing these pictures to at least understand that she will be my wife, and I protect what's mine.

I will *kill* for what's mine.

Isabella takes out a pink dress and puts it in front of her. She looks down at it with a genuine smile, and it gives me a chance to take it in, too.

"That is beautiful. It will look great on you." I take a lock of her long, dark hair in my fingers and hear a staccato of shutter clicks behind me.

"Thank you," she breathes and then sets the dress back on the rack. "The house felt empty without you this week," she whispers.

"I was home."

"Not much." She smiles and holds up a midnight blue dress with a high neck and long sleeves. Conservative and classy, but with a dangerous slit that damn near goes up to her hip. "Do you like this one?"

"I do." I move closer and whisper back to her. "Show me something else you want."

"Okay." She eyes my chest, and something snaps in me.

I grip her arms until her breasts pin against my chest, making every muscle in my body rigid. Including the one in my pants. More shutter clicks have me glancing over my

shoulder. Alvin brings his hands together and puckers his lips. For fuck's sake, he wants me to kiss her.

I can't help but want that, too. Which shocks the hell out of me since I haven't kissed anyone since Norah. It's been a hard and fast rule that has served me well. I had stupidly thought I could keep that rule intact when I came up with the plan to take a fake wife.

"Will you be away at night like that all the time?" Isabella says softly.

"I don't know." I clutch her hips, easing closer to her, pulling her scent deep into my lungs. "It's not up to me when people piss off Lachlan."

She snorts a laugh, and her head falls onto my shoulder. The camera noise fades into the background, and I don't look for cues anymore.

But Alvin has to be wondering why the hell I've not thrown this gorgeous woman down and kissed her.

He doesn't know that we're not in love.

Yet, Isabella makes the blood pulse hot under my skin. I certainly feel lust for my fake wife-to-be. Enough to make good on my need to get her pregnant when the time is right.

It should start with a kiss.

I stroke her neck and lean in. "Just breathe," I whisper. "This won't hurt."

As I hover over her mouth, she utters, "Speak for yourself."

When her lips part, I brush my mouth over hers, and I'm shocked at the warmth and the softness. Isabella's body melts into to mine. Fuck, she tilts her hips into me. The memory of her naked in that bathtub removes all rational thought. If Alvin and his friends weren't here, I'd drag her to that couch and stick my hands up her dress. Make her come again with my fingers.

Maybe it's for my own good that they're here.

Our lips stay closed for a breath, and before I can tap the seam of her mouth with my tongue, she opens for me. I deepen the kiss, and my spine quivers.

Holding back the instinct to go wild, I grip Isabella's hips with bruising strength and push my hard-on into her stomach. Do I have to wait for the wedding night?

That answer is looking like a big, fat no. Her arms wrap around my shoulders, and everything around me crackles with electricity. My pulse buzzes under my skin. I've not been this charged up since...

Ever.

Shit, how can that be?

I never had a fake fiancée before.

Isabella feels anything but fake right now. And she won't be a fake wife if I let her share my bed. I want a child with her. The way she writhes against me, suggests she'll enjoy making our wee ones, as well.

She breaks the kiss before I do, looking flushed and confused. “Wow,” she whispers.

It hits me like a freight train. I see myself entering her. Her beneath me. Me taking her from behind. Her on top of me. Having that control over me. Me wanting to be inside *her*. *Only her*.

It’s too startling, too soon, and I don’t know if I like it.

“We got what we needed.” The photographers gather their few pieces of equipment and shuffle out of the room.

Our eyes don’t budge, and I’m ready to either kiss her again or drag her over to that sofa and penetrate her. At the same time, I want to leave her here and call the whole thing off.

My heart is crashing. I’m in a free fall. This isn’t right. Isabella’s soft, sweet lips and her innocence, mixed with mischief, make me think Norah might be sitting up there looking down at me and laughing her ass off at how I don’t know what the fuck to do.

I can’t do this sits on the tip of my tongue when I see that the tall, blond man hadn’t left. He’s walking toward me with purpose.

I hold my head up high. “What the fuck do you want, you dossier?”

He says nothing, but a shine reflects in his hand.

A blade.

This prick is coming at me with a knife.

Not at me...

At Isabella.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Isabella

“That is one dead Russian,” Lachlan says as someone on his cleanup team wraps up the body. “Nice shot.”

“Thanks,” Kieran says, staring at the gun sitting on the carpet.

Riordan and Ewan Quinlan are talking to the dress shop owner, dolling out cash to pay for the rugs to be cleaned and to keep their mouths shut, while Balor erases their surveillance tapes.

I sit on a folding chair, shaking, still wearing the blue coat dress, although it’s covered in blood. I just witnessed a murder. My first. Shocking, considering who my father is.

Kieran paces, slipping me looks that kill me. He’s not marrying me for love. This is a business arrangement. And he just unloaded his clip into a man rushing at his forced fiancée with a knife.

“One thing is certain,” Kieran says to Lachlan, but his eyes are on me, “no showboat wedding. I don’t know who to fucking trust anymore. We get married in the city council’s office. Today.”

“Today?” I shriek, feeling the walls close in around me, my plan to escape dying in front of my eyes.

That’s the end of my freedom, for sure. I still had hope, despite playing along. It was an act. Part of it, anyway. Not how I reacted when he kissed me. *That* was real. At least I

enjoyed it. Really enjoyed it. Okay, my panties got downright soaked when he kissed me.

“Ma and Da are still away,” Lachlan says, with no emotion.

Time, that buys me time. “My father needs to be there, too. I’m sure he can’t just drop everything.”

“Fine.” Kieran’s stare penetrates me. “*Tomorrow*. Call your father. Now.”

“Um...” I have my new phone, but I can’t move. “The phone is in my bag.”

Kieran roughly pulls out his cell from his suit jacket that is also covered in the Russian’s blood. It’s lying on the floor and needs to be burned, along with a dress that’s not even mine. He unlocks the phone and hands it to me.

I bring up the call icon. Staring at the keypad, I mutter, “I don’t know his number by heart.” Now I feel like the stupid, helpless, useless girl I swore I wasn’t a week ago. Worse. Now, I’m a liability.

Kieran stomps back to me and takes a moment to really look me over. His sad eyes finally register that I’m a mess. But I see that he’s wrecked, too.

We’re in this together...

He just murdered a Koslov soldier, and I witnessed it.

Kieran takes the phone gently from me. “Sorry,” he whispers and then hands it back to me, with my father’s number ringing.

“What?” Papa answers.

“It’s me, Papa.” I close my eyes, knowing when I tell him the big wedding is off, he’ll scream at me and everyone will hear how he talks to me. “Kieran and I are getting married tomorrow at the city council’s office,” I blurt.

Silence stretches out. “Why tomorrow? What happened to the big wedding?” Sure, he wants to parade me around in a white dress to boast how he swindled the Irish king for thirty million dollars.

“I just want it over with.” I look at the body inside a black plastic bag being wiped down by a man in a hazmat suit. Another man fists a blue light, looking for traces of blood, and gently sprays a cleaning agent on the sofa. “I don’t need a big wedding. If you still want to give me away, meet us there.” I hang up and hold the phone against my head.

When I bring it down, Kieran is there with a look of approval. Kneeling, he takes the phone from me. “It’s not gone unnoticed that you talk to your father with a lot of hostility.” He holds my chin, and next, he’s wiping tears that have leaked out of my eyes. “And that even when you’re sassing me, you speak to me with respect. I appreciate that.” He leans forward and presses soft, warm lips to my forehead.

His cologne soothes me, and the heat coming off his body makes him seem even bigger.

I think about what he said, how I don’t need a guard when he’s around. That I’m his to protect. He proved that in bullet-whizzing spades. “I guess we should call Shea. And, um, your

mother's dress is too much for the courthouse. I can wear something from here." I stand, and on wobbly legs, walk to the metal rack where the dresses I chose sit on hangers, waiting to be wrapped up.

I take the pale pink raw silk dress and hold it against me again. It's V-cut and shows too much cleavage for a wedding. "I'll wear a scarf or a chunky necklace," I say, then break down, remembering once again that everything I owned, my Hermes scarves and all my jewelry, are gone.

Kieran holds me against his chest. My head is turned, and I see Lachlan standing there with his hands shoved into his pockets. He stares at us with steady scrutiny, as if he's not seen his brother act like this. At least, not since Norah.

Lachlan doesn't wear suits like Kieran or the others. He's the enforcer in the family and doesn't pretend to be a businessman *or* a gentleman.

"Shhh, it's okay, Isabella." Kieran snaps his fingers to the store's owner, who ambles over, looking shaken. "Bring us every white dress you have in her size. *Now.*"

"Yes, sir."

While the O'Rourke brothers wrap up this crime scene and cover their tracks, Kieran helps me try on several white dresses in the dressing room. It's just us, and there's no need to be shy since he's already seen me naked.

Tomorrow night, I'll be in his bed.

When we get to the white silk A-line dress with princess sleeves and a high embroidered neck, he says, “That’s bleedin’ stunning on you.”

“Thank you. I think it says city council wedding, don’t you?” The tension in my throat strangles me.

“Isabella, I know this is all rushed. We don’t have to do anything tomorrow night that you’re not ready for. Especially since you’re a virgin.” He unzips the dress, his breath hot on the back of my neck. “I don’t know how to be gentle,” he hoarsely whispers.

I don’t know if this is a new opportunity for me to get away. “I see.”

He turns me around and his eyes roam my body. “But I want an heir and will be taking you eventually.” Breathing heavily, he says, “And when I do, cancel all your plans, Isabella. The way I fuck, you won’t be able to walk or think straight for days.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kieran

“**M**a *is* going to blow me up, isn’t she?” I adjust the tie on my onyx tux less than twenty-four hours later.

“Move your hands. I’m trying to pin your boutonniere,” Shea snaps at me. “They’ll understand. They’ve lived your life for forty years.”

“Are you happy out in the Hamptons, Shea-Lynne?” I ask her in a moment of weakness, drawn in by how much I miss her. Even though it’s for her own safety. “Away from all this?”

“Huh?” Balor speaks up from a burgundy utilitarian sofa with his legs crossed, looking stressed. “Da specifically said —”

“If anything will get you blown up, Kier, it’s pulling Shea into our world,” Riordan adds, trying to pin his own boutonniere.

“Aye.” My sister saves me. “I’m very happy.”

“All signed.” Eoghan struts in, shoving the prenup into his briefcase. “Worked on it all night. And wired the money to Gabe.”

“Thank you, Eoghan.”

“Do you want me to send Lachlan to grab Ma and Da from the cruise?” Shea asks softly. “We can delay this for a day.” She looks at her phone. “I can send your jet and have them wheels up by tonight.”

I glance at Lachlan, who doesn't seem phased by our sister volunteering him without asking. Shaking my head, I say, "No. They'll think one of us is dead and will fucking have a heart attack before Lach tells them the truth." I meet my sister's raised eyebrows in the mirror. "What? No one in the Hamptons drops the f-bomb?"

"Not like you." She sticks me with the pin.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry." She winks. "I'll call Darragh and Cormac for you if you want."

"No. They made their choice to live a separate life from us. I don't like it, but I respect it. They're adults. And, unless they want to be backroom butchers, their medical degrees can't really help our business." I don't bother to remind my siblings it was Father's decision not to force them into our world. I'm just abiding by his wishes. "They wanted to live in Seattle, and Da let them go."

"They'll want to know." Shea sounds like she misses them. Younger than her, they were her little toys. She grew tired of us bossing her around. When I don't say anything, Shea sits next to Balor, and those two start whispering.

I ignore that. They were always the closest. I'm dark and intense. Balor is lighter and more fun. He doesn't have to physically face the brutality of our world. I pull a gun. Lachlan brandishes a knife. Riordan's bare hands are close to lethal weapons with the way he boxes at the gym. Eoghan is the

Harvard lawyer in a suit, who will chain someone to his bumper and drag him several blocks.

We're monsters, and my sister is an angel.

So is Isabella. And I'm the one with chains dragging her into my world now. But she was bred for this.

My phone beeps, and everyone stares at me like they know what it means. It's my wedding day, but the long-awaited club appointment I've had on my calendar rubs against my skin like steel wool. A woman I've wanted to fuck for years is finally in New York after traveling through London and Hong Kong.

I'm so wound up that I won't dare touch Isabella. I'll hurt her.

Shouting in the adjoining room catches my attention, and I hear the delicate squeak of Isabella's voice. The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

"Rior, Lach, on my flank, right now." My brothers follow me down the hall and into another waiting room.

Gabe screams at Isabella, who's covering her ears. He sees me and pushes her out of the way, but Riordan immediately grabs her and tucks her against his chest.

With eyes full of fury, Gabe lunges for me, but Lachlan holds him back. "She was fucking a Bratva snake and you didn't tell me?"

"I wasn't sleeping with him, Papa," Isabella hisses at him.

“And then they bomb my house!” Gabe shakes, wearing a suit that looks like it hasn’t seen a dry cleaner in months.

I have to teach Gabe a lesson about what happens when someone touches what’s mine. Throwing him against the wall, I push my forearm into his windpipe. “She’s going to be my wife. You don’t talk to her anymore. Do you hear? You talk to me.”

“How did you even find out about Ivan?” Lachlan asks, sounding surprised.

“*Ivan...*” Gabe nods sarcastically. “You know the prick’s name, and he’s still got a pulse?”

“That doesn’t answer our question,” Lachlan says, breathing down my neck.

A scoff from the other side of the room catches my attention. Dante. He just stares. How can an underboss be so irresponsible, letting his don lose control? “Do you think we have zero intelligence-gathering capabilities?” he mutters.

I resist being drawn into this debate. Isabella dated Ivan all summer, and they didn’t know. “We got word to him that Isabella is getting married. He’s irrelevant,” I say.

Gabe bristles out of my hold. “You keep guards on her,” he whispers to me. “God knows what she did to mine to make them look the other way.”

“My guards are better than yours,” I bark and then take Isabella from Riordan. “Are you all right?”

“I am.” She gets her breath back. “And thank you.”

“You look beautiful,” I say on a breath and lay a kiss on her temple.

“Thank you. You look...so handsome.” She’s shaking, and I assume it’s from the incident with her father. But there are faint tracks down her cheeks like she’s been crying.

Does she really not want to get married? For a split second, I’m ready to take Shea up on her offer to delay this. Something isn’t right. My parents aren’t here. Gabe is off the rails. My bride is *crying* about having to marry me.

“Judge Donnelly has to get back to his hearings.” Ewan Quinlan pops his head inside to inform us. “He’s out for a week after today.”

Just then, Balor steers Shea out of the conference room we used to get ready, holding two bouquets. I stare at my family standing in the hallway. Shea, Rior, Lach, Eoghan, Balor, even my best friend, Ewan, is here for me. I can’t call this off.

It’s just the opposite behind me. All Isabella has is her piece-of-shit father and creepy uncle. Friends. She mentioned she had friends, but they’re not here. Is she ashamed of me? Of her marriage to me? Perhaps I should have asked questions, but we put this together in twenty-four hours after I killed a man. I spent much of last night in my basement gym, burning off the rage from taking a life.

Now I’m taking another life.

Isabella’s...



Jaysus, I'm married.

The ceremony lasted a shockingly short amount of time. Shea spent more time pinning the boutonniere on me.

Isabella looked out of it. I gave her a chaste peck on her lips. I'm so filled with rage that I can't touch her.

"Patricia has a spread of food ready for us at the house," Shea says, and I wonder what she did about the unused room at the Orchid. If she's stuck with it, I'll pay.

"Behave." Gabe waves his finger at Isabella.

"You're not coming back to my house to break bread and celebrate?" Not that I want to look at his face. We'd drifted apart over the years, me keeping out of his business. The way he treats his daughter disgusts me. He's not someone I would be friends with now, even if he weren't the enemy.

To continue to hurt Isabella after I've made her mine is an even bigger insult that enrages me.

"We've got better things to do." Dante steps in front of Gabe and levels a stare at Isabella over my shoulder. "Do as your papa says, *mia cara*. Be a good girl."

Mia cara?

They turn to leave when Balor clears his throat. "Oh, Gabriel... Any day now, I'll have all your capos' phone

records. I already have Stasia's last known mobile number and call logs. I'll find out if anyone carrying your water was communicating with her on a regular basis. Especially the days leading up to her disappearance."

"Don't even think of planting evidence on me, hacker," Gabe scowls.

"MIT-educated computer specialist, thank you very much. Not a hacker." Balor keeps his eyes on his phone and then gives Gabe the finger when he turns around.

"Stasia was a beautiful young woman who was *loose*, from what I heard," Gabe says with no emotion. "I'd be shocked if any of my men didn't fuck her."

"Including you?" I meet his eyes.

He just shakes his head. A man like Gabriel Parisi wasn't faithful to his wife. My throat goes tight, realizing Isabella might see me the same exact way since I admitted to using a sex club. Fuck, it's not the same thing. My club will allow me to burn off steam so I won't hurt my wife.

I stalk over to Gabe and take him by the arm until we're out of anyone's earshot, sneering at Dante, who wants to follow. "Just confess right now that you killed Stasia. Or that you trafficked her. Talk to me, Gabe. I can help you. I'll get you out of this. I have no love for the Russians."

He and Dante exchange glances, and he scoffs, "You'd love that, wouldn't you? I don't trust you."

“You’re on your own.” I let go, and he staggers away, Dante just watching us.

“Go easy on my daughter with that giant dick I recall you swinging around in the locker room,” Gabe mutters instead of addressing what I just said.

Gasps sound out around me. I push Gabe, watching him teeter at the top of the stairs. “Take your filthy, inappropriate mouth, and get the hell out of my sight.”

I lock eyes with Isabella as her father storms down the steps without even a look in her direction. Dante slowly ambles behind, staring at her, though.

What’s up there?

How did Gabe’s relationship with Isabella get so bad? I’m forty years old. I cut the cord a long time ago with my parents. But I have their love and respect.

At least I hope I still do when they find out I got married without telling them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Isabella

It's bizarrely surreal. Here I am on my wedding day, standing around, eating appetizers under Kieran's portico. Alone. His yard is immense, and the property goes right down to the water. Hundreds of people can fit here.

But not even ten people showed up to celebrate.

My father and uncle didn't want to come back to Kieran's house. Especially after he tried to choke Papa again. Not that *he'd* be talking to me. It all happened so fast, Kieran rushing me down the aisle. I would have wanted my best friends here. I was too stressed from the Russian coming at me with a knife to have a conversation with Sam and Ginna about how I was sold off to the Irish. Then to add: *Oh, by the way, the wedding is tomorrow.*

So, I let it go.

I really miss Sam and Ginna, though. If it's the last thing I do, I'm sneaking out to go to Sam's birthday party.

Kieran stands near the outdoor bar in a huddle with his brothers. Shouldn't he be with me? Right, this marriage isn't real, and there's no one here to fake his love for me.

Escaping to be with Ivan is no longer an option. Unless I want to start another war. I'll keep taking my birth control so I don't get pregnant. It's all I have to protect myself. For all I know, Kieran may divorce me if he thinks I can't give him a child.

Will Ivan still want to marry me if I'm divorced and...used? It's only been two weeks, and I'm not sure how safe I am with the Irish. I have to keep my eyes and ears open. Clearly, going home to Papa isn't happening. I doubt he'd take me back, anyway.

One by one, Kieran's brothers leave. I hug Shea, and even though we just met, talking to her nearly every day while planning the wedding has made me feel close to her. Now, I'm losing that. When Riordan says goodbye, he kisses my hand. It's the first time I feel like a queen.

Until I see my king on his phone. I'm not sure how I expected him to act on our wedding day, but I remind myself that we've only known each other for a couple of weeks.

We're married strangers.

With nothing more to do, I pick up the dirty plates—good bone china with soft blue diamonds around the edges that Shea brought out from the dining room. Kieran's mother's good china, perhaps? A monstrous cherry-wood breakfront is filled with these plates and expensive-looking Irish crystal.

Something else I'm not getting in this wedding package, in addition to a honeymoon. Presents. Am I even getting a wedding night?

A hand reaches around me and takes the plates. "Put those down," Kieran grunts, trying not to sound like a tyrant. "You don't clean." When I turn to face him, something in his expression changes while looking at me. Perhaps it's the white dress, a reminder of what it really means, what it symbolizes.

“I don’t mind helping out.” I push my hands through my hair, dislodging a pin with soft blue crystals, a gift from Shea.

Pale blue was the theme. The place settings, the blue roses in my bouquet, and the same ones on my wedding cake, which we didn’t even cut. Shea pulled an astonishing number of elements together for this wedding in twenty-four hours.

Kieran kneels to grab the pin. He stands and holds it out to me, but when I go to take it, he steps back. “Let me,” he whispers, staring at my hair. He gently fists a bundle of waves. He stands over me, looking amazing in his tux and smelling delicious with that spicy cologne. I’m dizzy.

He’s my husband. Today’s our wedding day. He barely kissed me. And I don’t think he has any plans to consummate our marriage tonight, given the look of anger that can’t seem to leave his face.

I step back before he can put the clip in my hair, and then I take another one out. “I should get out of this dress.” I look to see what kind of reaction that gets.

He pulls his lower lip between a set of perfect pearly white teeth for a moment. “I have plans tonight.”

“Business dinner plans? I can change into—”

“No,” he deadpans and stares at me until he looks away, a faint splash of pink coloring his cheeks.

“Oh.” I fold my arms. “A little crude, don’t you think? Going to a sex club on our wedding night?” I didn’t expect *that*.

“That’s got nothing to do with you.”

“And what will people think?”

“No one who’s paying attention will care if I maintain regular nights at my club. My enemies will be more suspicious if I stop going. They’d think I was in love and then use that against me. Use *you* against me.”

“Are you sure?” My skin pricks with goose bumps from the slight chill since the sun went down. “Koslov already sent someone to kill me.”

Kieran takes his coat off and wraps it around my shoulders. “Aye, good point. But I don’t think Alexei sent that nut ball. Too sloppy.”

“Hmph,” I croak. As far as I know, Balor hasn’t figured out why that Bratva soldier came after me. Unless... *Gasp*. Was it Ivan’s handiwork?

“Killing you wipes out leverage. Alexei would take you hostage first. Which is why we have to discuss your security detail.” He crooks a finger for me to follow him.

I take a step and glance down, seeing the tips of my white shoes. At least I’m getting something on my wedding day.

A bodyguard.

We get to Kieran’s office, which is locked with a keypad and opens with a code I easily figure out. Inside, he steps behind his desk and gets on a walkie-talkie. “Calder, bring Christian inside.”

“Christian?”

“He’s your bodyguard. We’re going to sit down and hash out the rules.”

“Rules?”

Calder and a very tall, hulking man with reddish-blond hair follow him in. I can maybe outrun him if he’s stronger than he is faster. But if he catches me, I’m guessing him pinning me to the ground will hurt.

“Christian, this is Mrs. O’Rourke.” Kieran tugs at his bowtie. “Isabella.”

He dips his head at me. “Ma’am.”

“Call me Izzy,” I say, assuming it will piss off Kieran.

Narrowing his eyes on me, he keeps talking to Christian. “She is your priority. You go where she goes.”

“Even here in the house?” I snap, thinking of someone watching me take a shower.

“No, of course not,” Kieran grounds out.

The idea of *Kieran’s* eyes on me taking a shower rushes a blast of heat across my skin. When not reliving the nightmare of almost being killed, I can’t stop thinking about Kieran’s mouth on mine yesterday. The kiss was staged, in the moment, and prompted by a photographer, who wanted a good photo for his collection and nothing more.

But now that the memory is in my head, it washes over me. The strong set of his lips and body, radiating with heat, makes

my heart skip a beat. The memory of how his hands felt all over my body stays with me. Don't even get me started on how good this damn man smells.

And now that he's going off to be like that with another woman... I'm breathless and furious. It's not something I expected to feel because I don't want to stay in this marriage. He'll breed me, and any hope of a professional life with any freedom will vanish.

"I'll need the missus's schedule of events." Christian speaks with the same Irish accent, knocking me out of my lustful, confusing thoughts.

"That's easy." I wave my hands. "I don't have a schedule. I'm not allowed to leave here. This should be a breeze for you."

"I told you we needed to get your security squared away first." Kieran shakes his head. "I asked Lachlan to send me someone I can trust."

"I was on an assignment for Ewan Quinlan, ma'am." Christian nods.

"When she's around, your eyes are on her." Kieran ignores the stress on Christian's face. "Someone tried to stab her yesterday."

"No one will get near her, boss." He's robotic.

Not even my husband, I want to murmur, but I know better than to disrespect Kieran's sexual hang-ups about deflowering his virgin wife in front of the guards.

“Once we have a schedule for her, I’ll share it. She doesn’t have her own car. Use Ma’s old Cadillac in the garage if you need to take her anywhere. Drive her yourself.”

“Yes, boss.”

“You can go, Christian,” I say with a forced smile and then narrow my eyes back on my husband.

“Sir?” He looks at Kieran.

“You heard her. You can go.”

“Ma’am.” He bows to me again. “When you need me, just have Patricia ring the guards’ booth.”

“Thank you, Christian.” I won’t negotiate basic freedoms in front of staff, who will gossip behind my back.

When the door clicks shut, Kieran and I stare at each other.

“I want to go back to school in Boston,” I say before I lose my courage. “That goon can shadow me.”

Kieran’s brows furrow. “Even if I had no issue with you living in another city and didn’t want a child right away, I would never let you live completely on your own. *Especially* not now.” He fingers his wedding ring, but it doesn’t appear to bother him. “Have you forgotten yesterday already?”

Crest Diamonds sent our rings in a beautiful velvet-lined cedarwood box. Kieran took his and just stuck the cube in his pocket without even looking at it. At least Shea liked them.

Shea. The Hamptons...

“No, of course, I haven’t forgotten. Then, can I go stay with Shea for a couple of days? You clearly don’t want a wedding night or a honeymoon. I assume you keep your sister well protected.”

“Shea is busy.”

“You’re all too busy for me.” I dump myself on a silk-tufted wing chair and cross my legs, slowly trying to get a reaction out of this savage. “Just for the weekend?”

“Isabella...” Kieran puts his head in his hands. “Did you not listen to a word I said two seconds ago? Not only do I not want you bringing any danger to my baby sister, but I don’t want anything to happen to you, either.” His voice sounds strangled but sincere. “In fact, I’m thinking Ivan courted you to trap you so his uncle could—”

“Stop. No. I don’t want to hear it.” Although, he may be right. “I don’t want you to tell me I’m stupid, too, because I got involved with the Bratva behind my father’s back.” Stifling tears is my new superpower today.

“Isabella, look at me.” Kieran gets up from behind his desk. Kneeling in front of me, he waits until I meet his eyes. “I do not, in any way, think you’re stupid. I think you’re a young woman who was sheltered with false promises from your mother about who you would marry. I’m sure your father had every intention of giving you to a man like me. A man who wants only...” He stops.

“Go on. A man like you who only wants a baby mama.”

He snickers at my reference. “No.” He stands and then sits in the seat next to me. “I confess I wasn’t prepared for this kind of marriage either. I was engaged to a woman I loved and thought that would be it. Then she died, and it became shockingly clear that any marriage thereafter would be for business purposes. But I never really knew what that would mean. Or that I could have a real...” He trails a hand up my leg. “How having a real wife would feel.”

I swallow. “Okay...” For a moment, I take him in and consider his side of the story.

His words make sense, as does the earlier suggestion: *We’re in this together.*

I glance around and wonder if I can make this marriage work with Kieran. I truly don’t have a choice. I’m married. We don’t live in ancient biblical times, but husbands do have power over wives, even in the courts.

“Thank you,” I say softly to him and rub my temples. “I don’t think I’ve said that to you. For school. For my clothes. My rings.”

“Those were easy.” He nods. “But please understand something about me. I have needs that I don’t expect you to satisfy. They came with the territory after losing Norah. I can’t just turn them off.” He holds my chin and looks like he’s going to kiss me. What’s holding him back? “Do you understand me, wife?”

Why is he calling me his wife if he’s going off to be with another woman?

I pull back. “I’m not getting you all excited when you plan to go sleep with someone else.”

“It’s for your own good. Trust me.” Kieran takes off his wedding ring, breaking my heart a little more.

He stuffs it into his desk drawer, no less. Not even a jewelry box in his room, which I assume he has because he wears expensive watches and even a gold braided chain around his neck with a religious medal of St. Patrick.

Figuring I lost this round, I storm out and go up to my bedroom so I can eat my wedding cake alone in the bathtub.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kieran

She's on her way up, boss.

Calder's text doesn't affect me the way it should. A gorgeous woman, who loves my style of fucking, and who can handle the savage I become in bed, is on her way up to the suite I keep at my club.

It takes a hot shower and lots of soap to rid my body of the stench and shame of filthy sex. Because deep inside, that's not me. It's a product of the man I turned into after losing someone I loved.

Does that mean the real me is still here, buried somewhere? Like a scented memory, I've tasted my old self here and there since Isabella has come into my life. But I have to be careful. With her heart. And mine.

I plan to sleep in the apartment tonight because I won't go home to a wife smelling like another woman.

It might look callous and reek of bad taste to sink my dick into another woman's pussy on my wedding night, but my wife needs to learn her place. Our marriage is a business arrangement, nothing more. When I get her pregnant, she'll have my baby to focus on. She'll learn to be happy as soon as she accepts her life with me.

The house has felt so congested the last couple of weeks. At every turn, Isabella was there. For a petite, curvy brunette, she has a presence that fills every inch of the place with her

perfume. Or it finds me in the house with a cackle of her laughter. Those high heels of hers clicking on the center hallway's porcelain tiles after she comes down the stairs, get my heart racing. Even though she doesn't leave the house, she makes up herself with a cute outfit every morning. Even wearing just jeans and a light lacey top, she's always in nice shoes with styled hair and makeup.

Yes, it's her beauty that's crowded the damn house. And the smiles when she doesn't think I'm looking.

Meanwhile, I'm here in this sterile suite while Isabella is home. Alone.

Well, not alone. Patricia doesn't live on the grounds anymore, but I keep a contingent of guards there at all times. Isabella is safe. Protected.

But still alone.

On our wedding night.

My fingers rest on my phone's keyboard to type out a message to Calder to get the woman out of here. But there's a knock on my door.

Fuck, that was fast.

With my hand on the piece in my suit jacket, I check the monitor near the door from the camera Balor installed for me. Calder's long nose and scruffy jaw look dramatic in black and white.

I trust that ex-Marine with my life and my secrets. I considered putting him on Isabella's detail, but somewhere

inside that monster is a beating heart. I wouldn't want him to watch her through the same eyes that see me do despicable things to women.

The screen reflects the shape of my face, and I see with my own eyes that I'm frowning. I'm never a smiling fool while waiting for a woman to fuck, but frowning?

I open the door to get it over with. Fuck me... Fire-engine red hair, milky skin, big tits popping out of a very low-cut dress. I would lose my shit if Isabella wore something like this.

But she's my wife.

And I guess red, here, *is* my whore. Even though I don't pay her directly. I usually tip the women who are brave enough to get naked and on their knees for me, suck me off, and then let me sink my giant cock into them.

"Inside. Now," I say gruffly, planning to be as brusque as possible to keep my heart frozen.

She glides inside, the carpet cushioning the clicking noise I'd otherwise hear. A sound I now associate with Isabella, and I thank fuck it's silent.

"I'm glad we're able to hook up." She glances around, dropping a sparkling bag onto a side table between two chairs. "I plan to stay in town for a few months. I can make room in my schedule to sleep with you *exclusively*."

That word sends ice through my veins.

I have a wife now. I can't have a mistress. My club is for straightforward, onetime-only sex with ravenous strangers. A mistress is a commitment. Someone that I'd be willing to put whatever matters to me at risk.

No fucking way.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I roughly reply. "How about you just take off that dress?"

"I heard you like to tear clothes off women."

"Did you bring an extra dress?" There's a bite in my tone, thinking she'd let me rip her dress to shreds in an angle to stay the night with me.

Not. Happening.

"No, sir."

Damn, my mind wanders to Isabella again. What the hell am I doing?

I know myself all too well. These are deep cuts of guilt because I haven't had time to mentally arrange my brain to accept a wife and fuck a woman in my club on the side.

Yet my heart is pounding. My cock is plenty hard looking at this woman. But it can be my greatest weakness, making me do things I should know better not to do. Like taking Isabella's virginity tonight when I'm wound up and would hurt her. How the hell I'll broach that, I have no idea. That's not my problem right now.

I need to get out of my head and this girl on my dick. ASAP.

She finally strips off the dress, peeling it like a second skin from her body that, other than the big tits, is just a milk-colored board.

I've only seen Isabella naked once. Every inch sticks in my brain. Her rich olive skin, curvy hips, and real tits that bounce so deliciously under her T-shirts when she sneaks down for her espresso before she thinks I'm awake, are starting to get to me.

"What's your name?" I ask, to get as much distance as possible from my wife.

"Layla."

I scoff, wondering if it's a fake pun of a name. "Layla. Are you going to get completely naked for me?"

"I thought maybe you'd like to take *something* off of me."

Anger fires through me. I don't have time for this fucking chitchat. I can be smooth and charming. Then inwardly revel in the look on a woman's face that she thinks some nice guy swept her off her feet in the bar area. Those looks quickly turn to stunned, and even a little frightened when I unleash the beast.

"Panties. Bra. Off. Now." I sit on an armchair and point to the floor in front of me. "Then get on your knees." I unbuckle my pants to avoid verbalizing what I want her to do to me. If I hear the words come out of my mouth, it will be too real, and I'm not sure I can take reality right now.

Yesterday, watching a man come at Isabella with a knife flipped a switch. A switch I didn't know I had. I'm sucked into

this now. It's personal. Sure, she's my possession, and I'll destroy anyone who takes her from me. But it's deeper than that. She's gotten under my skin.

Unzipping my fly, I feel my cock is hard as steel. I'd be more worried if it wasn't. This is a necessary evil for me to survive. A disgusting habit I allow myself because someone I considered the Almighty, and who had my utmost loyalty my whole damn life, stole the woman I loved from me.

Then gave you Isabella...

For a split second, a blueprint spreads out before me on how to make a relationship work with Isabella. The same way I made it work with Norah. Because I loved her.

Somewhere deep inside me, I know how to do this.

That whispers through me, and as Layla brings her hands to my knees, it feels as if acid's been dripped on me. I bolt out of the seat and zip up. The idea of fucking her has me ready to vomit on the plants.

"Get dressed."

"Mr. O'Rourke?" Layla says my name with a shaky breath.

I never hide who I am here. I pay a lot of money for this club to vet the women they hire to satisfy members. I trudge to the whiskey bottle I keep by the bookshelf along with thick cut glasses on a mirrored tray.

No longer worried about going limp from ninety-proof fire, I say, "Sorry, Layla. I can't do this tonight. Go home."

I pour myself the equivalent of two shots because filling the entire glass in front of her means I'm falling apart, which, in a way, I am. After I throw back the whiskey and let it burn down my throat, I take five crisp one-hundred-dollar bills from my wallet and toss them onto the table near her bag.

"I don't want your money if all I did was show you my tits and pussy." She runs a finger through her folds.

Fuck me. My cock is throbbing because he's disconnected from my heart. Yet, the image of gliding my hand along Isabella's leg earlier in my office flashes at me, and it blindsides me even more. I keep telling myself I'll only fuck her to get her pregnant. Damn, I want to do a lot more to her now. Mostly because she'll only know my cock. My hands. My mouth.

"Take the money," I say to Layla. "I'm sure you gave up someone else tonight. I've changed my mind."

She slips the dress back on with a sigh. "I'm in town for a while, like I said, but I will make time for you, Mr. O'Rourke, if you change your mind."

I squeeze my fist, thinking of the ring I so callously took off an hour ago like it meant nothing.

Isabella didn't want this marriage, yet she's at home. Being a good wife. And here I am, ready to cheat on her night one.

The door clicks shut, and I finish the whiskey. The whole bottle. I throw it against the wall and then smash all the glasses. I won't be back in this suite anytime soon.

Calder knocks, hearing the crash. I open the door to see him leaning against the frame. His right eyebrow raises, seeing me stumble to get my suit jacket on.

“Okay there, boss?” He takes his phone out and sends a text to Pete, my driver. “Your date, there, said you threw her out. Didn’t touch her.”

“Didn’t feel right.”

“There’s always tomorrow.”

“Aye. Take me home, Calder.” Tomorrow *is* a new day for me, but I have a score to settle tonight.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Isabella

I toss and turn, thinking of Kieran at his club with someone else on our wedding night. I know it shouldn't bother me. But it does. I'm confused because I thought he liked me.

The way he kissed me at the salon messed with my head. I saw in his eyes that it affected him, too. But then he backed off. The fight with my father must have reminded him that this is just a transaction.

Feeling stressed, I push away the covers and head down to the kitchen to make a pot of warm milk. The house is dark, but from the wrought-iron-framed windows that line one wall of the living room, I see amber light burning at the bottom of the hill. Smoke from the guards' cigarettes floats in the air, comforting me. At least they're here. Nothing will hurt me.

It feels hollow, though, because I wish Kieran was home. It's only been a couple of weeks, but I've slept better, more soundly, knowing he was just down the hall. This is the first time I've felt truly safe in the weeks since my mother was killed.

In the kitchen, I find pots just where I suspect they'd be. I haven't cooked anything since Patricia takes care of all my meals. Even on the weekends, she leaves prepared food in dishes for Kieran and me. In the double-wide refrigerator, there's enough milk to make a nice amount to comfort my stomach. But Kieran won't have any for his coffee tomorrow.

With a throaty laugh, I take the container out and pour it all into the pot. After a few clicks, the stove lights up, and I set the saucepan on the burner. A loud buzzing overhead makes me look up. Zings of panic hit me, but then I remember this house sits on a busy approach to the nearby airport.

A trail of night-lights leading down the hallway to Kieran's office like a runway catches my attention. I think of his wedding ring sitting inside the desk. Next, I'm padding barefoot down the hall. He didn't give me the code, but I watched him put it in. He may or may not access an entry report, but I don't care. I haven't been told his office is off-limits, but once I'm inside, my skin pricks from discomfort. I shouldn't be in here. This is Kieran's private space. I wouldn't want him rifling through my room.

My room.

His room.

We're just roommates, aren't we?

Still, I want that ring. I need to make my point to him. Be strong. Stand up to him. Thanks to the moonlight, the office softly glows. I amble to the desk, the thick carpet cushioning my bare feet.

As suspected, the top drawer is locked. Seeing a letter opener, I grab it without thinking. I figured out how to break into Papa's desk, where he hid keys to a gate in our fence. My heart beats loudly in my ears, but I grip the letter opener in my hand.

The ceiling light blazes to life.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kieran’s voice startles me, and I drop the letter opener with a sharp clang on the desk before it bounces onto the carpet.

“Shit,” I say and bend down to pick it up, but a polished shoe is there.

“You didn’t answer me. What are you doing in here?”

I glance up, expecting to see his hair all messed up, and for him to stink of cheap perfume. All I smell is whiskey.

“I couldn’t sleep.” I grip the side of the desk to stand, but surprisingly feel Kieran’s hand helping me. “Thank you.”

“Were you planning on sleeping in here?” he asks, with a touch of humor in his drunken voice.

“No.” I push a hand through my hair, noticing his eyes raking across my body under the thin nightgown. An acrid smell drifts into the room. “The milk!”

I run past Kieran, even though I already know I’ve burnt the milk and ruined the pot. Moving it off the burner, I cry out from the fiery handle that scalds my palm. “Ahhh,” I gasp in pain.

Kieran grabs my wrist and rushes me to the sink. “Stop squirming. Let the water run across your hand.”

I soak in the whirlwind mixture of sensations: the cold water splashing onto my burning palm, the feel of him holding

me so gently, the vulnerability of the moment, letting him care for me.

“Why are you here?” I ask, my lips pressed into his shoulder, dealing with the pain.

“I live here.”

I scoff, “I thought you’d be out all night.”

“No,” he grunts. “I didn’t...” He keeps my hand under the ice-cold water.

My throat tightens again, taking in his words. “Oh. That was nice of you,” I say sharply, instead of coming out and saying thank you, which would make me sound pathetic. A wife shouldn’t thank her husband for being faithful.

“Keep your hand under the water.” He lets go and struts to the freezer, where he takes out some ice. After dropping several cubes into a plastic bag, he hands it to me. “Here.”

“Thank you.” A fair retort, given he’s comforting me.

“You’re welcome.” He watches me with steady scrutiny.

It annoys me that he’s still wearing the tux he married me in. He’s been gone for hours. When *didn’t* it happen? Was he even in the same room with a woman? “It’s *our* wedding night, Kieran.”

He studies me, a range of emotions playing out on his face. After a moment, he exhales and looks me dead in the eye. “Isabella, I know you were rushed into this. But let me make my intention clear. This isn’t a real marriage. I can’t say right

now if that will change. You need to give me space and stay out of my way at times. But I will always treat you with respect and care for you because I do value you as a wife.”

“A possession.”

“Yes.”

I swallow and bring up the obvious. “You want children with me, though.”

“I want an heir from you. That’s not the same thing.”

“To make that heir, you need to have sex with me.” I set my shoulders back. “And I’m not sure I like your attitude.”

Kieran barks a laugh. “You’ll spread your legs for me and beg for it.”

“Wanna bet?” I fidget with the ice. “You’ll just have to do something crazy like charm me. Make an effort.”

Kieran fixes a powerful gaze on me as he stalks my way. “Or this.” He lifts me over his shoulder and carries me out of the kitchen.

He climbs the stairs with me like I weigh a feather. At the top, he turns sharply to his sister’s bedroom. My body betrays me, screaming to say that I want to be in *his* bed. But I’m not sure I can take what he would do to me there if he *just* turned down the kind of woman he needs to roughly fuck in order to stay sane.

Inside, he lowers me down onto the mattress. “Let me see your hand.” He takes the bag of ice and then twists to flip on

the lamp.

I forgot I had a hand. “It just feels cold.”

“Stay right here.” He leaves, my eyes glued to the way he moves in that tux.

As if I’d leave.

My thoughts shock me because I don’t know if my thoughts meant leave this bed right now or this house, if the chance arose. I signed a marriage license today, a backdated one so Kieran and I could be married and not wait the required extra day.

I committed to Kieran with that signature. I *have* to stay here. Right? I glance around the nice bedroom and breathe easily, knowing guards are outside and that Kieran will provide me with a solid security foundation. As long as it doesn’t turn unbearable, I guess I have no reason to escape. I’m taking my classes. I’ll get my degree. When Kieran gave me a credit card to pay for school, he also told me I could buy whatever else I wanted and needed so long as I agreed to get it delivered. I was tempted to have a car delivered but decided against it. Instead, I just loaded up a cart with a few small things I needed just to feel comfortable in this fully furnished house.

The only point of contention I have is that he wants to breed me soon. I’m not ready to be a mother.

Kieran strutting back inside my bedroom, shirtless and in gray sweats, empties all those thoughts out of my head and

stops my heart. The only thought in my head whispers, *Yum. Mine.*

This is looking pretty bearable to me.

Holy. Shit.

Sculpted is the word that describes this man. This... This man is my husband. That gives me rights to him. Right? To use him the way he wants to use me.

That ache rears up between my legs. And I don't think I'm alone, seeing a long, thick erection bobbing in those sweatpants. How does he think with that thing so hard?

He sits next to me on the bed. "Give me your hand."

"Hand." I'd give him a kidney right now. Even if I only had one. Maybe. That's how insane I am from just one glance at him shirtless.

From a tube he brought back, he squeezes a pea-size glob into the middle of my palm. "I can rub it in, or you can," he says breathily.

Oh, I want to rub something...

Smiling, I say, "You seem to know what you're doing."

He chuckles darkly. "Burns are actually not my specialty." The circular motions he makes with the burn cream are so delicate, and it makes me shiver because the scorch mark sits right in the middle of my palm. The pressure and the movement of his fingers awakes the pulse between my thighs.

"What is your specialty?" I return the breathy tone.

“Gunshot wounds—in a way. I know where all the arteries are to put pressure.” He keeps his voice oddly casual given the subject matter.

“I see.” I exhale. “That feels good.”

“It should. It’s prescription strength.” He shows me the tube. There’s no label, only a tag. The name O’Rourke catches my eye.

Dr. Darragh O’Rourke

“Is that another brother of yours?”

“Aye. He called it in several years ago when I grabbed the fireplace grate without thinking.”

“You? Not thinking?”

He rakes his eyes over me. “It was...the anniversary of Norah’s death. Not a good day for me.”

“I’ll make sure to watch what I do when the one-year mark for my mother comes around.”

“Shite, Isabella. I didn’t even think...”

“It’s okay. Like you said, this all happened so soon.” I clear my throat. “I saw you at the church the day of the funeral. But you didn’t go to the cemetery.”

“Aye.”

The one-word answer confuses me. “Is...Norah buried there?”

“No. She’s cremated. It was her wish.”

“Where are her ashes? Here in the house?” I *feel* like eyes are watching us.

“No. She wasn’t my wife. I had no right to them. Plus, she wanted them brought back to Ireland. Ewan took her home.”

“Home?”

“Where she was born. Where I was born.”

Swallowing, I say, “Have you been back to Ireland?”

“No. Just too busy.”

“I’ve never been. I’d like to see where you were born.”

“Really?” He lies lazily next to me, his elbow propping him up. Like this is normal. Like we’re just two people and not a don and the princess he forced to marry him. This is comfortable. “Maybe someday.” He glances down at me, and I’m not sure I understand the look in his eyes.

Could it be happiness? Contentment, anyway. I feel it, too, but I suddenly want more. I stuffed away the ache to be loved. Perhaps this is the last place I’ll get it. But this man loved someone once. It’s deep within him. He’s handsome as hell. Powerful. I know how to fight for what I want. I’d been doing that with my father. I also know that means compromising and giving in at times.

“Kieran?”

“Isabella.”

“Can you kiss me again?”

His face goes blank. “Why?”

My heart starts to pound, thinking I read all of this wrong. The kiss yesterday, the erection in his sweats, the seductive pressure on my hand, and the way he carried me off to my bed. “Never mind.”

“No.” He tugs my chin when I look away. “Kissing means something to me. I did it yesterday for the photographer.”

“Kissing means something to me, too. Considering...” I shift closer to him. “You’re the only man who’s ever kissed me.”

“You didn’t even kiss Ivan?”

“Did you read somewhere that I wasn’t a good girl?” I argue with him.

“I hadn’t given it any thought to be honest, but after you told me no one’s been inside you, I’ve thought of little else except being the first man to fuck you. Making you mine and only mine.” His husky voice and provocative promises send trembles through me.

“I liked the way you kissed me yesterday. It’s something I want when we...get physical.” I think about my poor mother, who I’m sure just lay there while my father violated her. I doubt he ever kissed her. And she always looked unhappy. No. I don’t want to live like that. “If we don’t hate each other, why not?”

He purses his lips, nodding. “That’s a good point. Kissing is something you need to be happy?”

“When we’re like this? Yes. It would feel less forced and sterile.”

“I can agree to that.” He bends toward me and brushes his mouth against mine. It’s soft but powerful. His tongue trails along my lips as he breathes. “Open for me.”

My lips part, and he sinks deep into my mouth, adrenaline rushing through me. A whimper tears from my throat, a cry of helplessness mixed with pleasure.

“Make that sound again, I dare you.” He rubs a thick finger across my wet lips. “You’ll do it with a mouth full of my cock.”

“When?” I reply shockingly fast.

“When you’re *ready* for that, bella.” He kisses me again, sending erotic waves through me. “Hey,” he whispers, moving his hands down my body. “Stop. That.”

“Stop what?”

“Moving your hips. I may get the idea you *want* to take this further tonight.”

Licking my lips and staring at his, not believing they were just on my mouth, I say, “Maybe I do.”

“Isabella,” he whispers, darkly. “I can’t. I’ll hurt you.”

“Not... Not all the way. Just...” I inhale. “A little more.”

His eyes bore into mine. He takes a moment before his one hand comes up and cups my breast over the nightgown. “Fuck,” he mutters. “That feels good.”

“It does.” I arch my back.

A sharp exhale escapes his lips, and he sits up. “Okay...I’m gonna need you to tell me to stop when it gets too much.”

“When what gets too much?”

He answers me by slipping the side of my nightgown down and exposing one breast. My nipple is raging hard. Long and thick. “Isabella, do you want to come?”

“God, yes.” I tug down the other side, the short, puffy sleeves clinging to my upper arms.

Kieran lowers his mouth and takes a nipple between his lips. It’s so wet and warm, sending a delicious shock to my senses. “You taste incredible.” He fists the bottom of my nightgown. “No panties?”

“No. Not for sleeping.”

“Fuck. Open your legs for me, wife.”

I tingle all over at hearing that. “Yes, husband.”

“Fast or slow?”

“Fast or slow, what?” My brain short-circuits when his fingers brush the sensitive, throbbing nub between my legs.

“These circles. Fast so you explode, or slow to drive you crazy?”

I truly don’t know what I can handle. “Somewhere in between.” I bite my lip, pushing into his hand.

“Mmmm.” He returns to my breast, wickedly flicking his tongue against a nipple. His fingers move in sync until one

slips completely inside me. “Oh...” I kick out my leg.

“Good, aye?”

“Aye,” I repeat.

“That’s just one finger, bella.”

“It’s Izzy, in case you didn’t hear me tell someone else.”

“I heard. Bella is because you’re fucking beautiful.” He adds another finger, and when they come out, they circle my clit.

It’s not fast, and it’s not slow, but I’m ready to shatter. I feel myself falling over the edge. “Don’t stop. Please. Right there.”

Kieran’s mouth lands on mine, and he kisses me through my climax. Moans and groans squeak from my throat in between breaths. “Jaysus, you’re so tight. You’re strangling my two fingers inside you. I could question if you’re really a virgin, but your cunt is so damn snug.”

“I promise,” I whisper. “Just you.”

“Damn right, just me,” he growls possessively, then takes both fingers out of my pussy and circles my nipple.

I’m about to complain that he wiped my juices on me when he lowers his mouth and licks it off my skin.

“So sweet. Incredible.” He brings his mouth up to mine, and with his hands in my hair, he devours my mouth.

My head is spinning at this point, and I want him inside me. But I heed his warning that he’ll be too rough with me. I feel

sore from only two fingers, so we're going to have pace ourselves.

His eyes bore into mine as he rubs my clit. "So wet."

My body sings with electricity and that climactic rush attacks me. Stronger than the other night in the bathroom. "I'm coming," I moan shamelessly. The walls of my womb throb, and my clit feels soaked.

"Good girl," Kieran whispers.

I think of that massive bulge in his sweatpants and consider asking him to show me how to please him with my mouth. It's something I'm sure he wants. He needs. "Are you going to, you know, *take* me now?"

His eyes darken, and he licks the finger he used to make me come. "No."

"Why not? I'm your wife."

"Aye, but I'm a monster. I'll hurt you, Isabella. I need time." He lays a kiss on my forehead. "I want your first time to be good."

"Okay." I'm exhausted anyway. Plus... Shit, I think I just got my period. We're married now. There's always tomorrow. "Stay until I fall asleep?" I mutter softly, stretching my back.

"Yes, wife," he says with a smirk and lays his head next to mine on the pillow.

Kieran strokes my face, and magically, all the pain leaves my body as I drift off.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Isabella

It's been two weeks since my wedding night, and I've not seen much of my husband. Despite us kissing and him making me see stars with just his hand, he seems distant again. Maybe I pushed too hard to see a tender side of him when he made it clear that this was a business arrangement.

And my end of the bargain is to give him an heir. Only, I don't know how or when to tell him I'm not ready to be a mother. I want to finish school and be something first, have a man look at me with some modicum of respect for being my own person. What is this? The dark ages?

I sleep in Shea's room, and Kieran sleeps in his bedroom. Every night. I almost wish he wouldn't come home. Ignoring me while under the same roof hurts worse.

When I do see him, he smiles politely, but he's always on the phone.

Sitting on my bed with the laptop and a cup of Kieran's favorite tea, lemon ginger, I log into the college portal to work on my independent project.

Balor helped me find all my previous schoolwork from the cloud and downloaded it to the new laptop he gave me. He's very nice. Geeky. And Kieran's most lethal weapon, since he could hack into everyone's bank accounts and empty them.

At the bottom of one of the portal pages, there's a link to hook up with local students to alleviate feeling so alone while

doing online coursework. No way will Kieran let me go sit in a coffee shop all day with strangers.

Still, I click on the link and put in my zip code. I suck in a breath when I see there're two students, a girl and a guy, who meet regularly in Manhattan every day at two p.m.

Tomorrow night is Samantha's party. My friends have not heard from me. The last they knew, I was a day away from going back to school. I never told them about Ivan. I have to find a way to go to that party. I can explain everything in person and not worry if someone is listening to me.

Kieran mentioned going to a fundraiser tomorrow night but didn't say anything about me going with him. Meeting those other students gives me the perfect excuse to go into Manhattan during the day. I'll just stop by the club after. I'm entitled to a night of fun. I want to see my friends and tell them what's going on.

Dressed in a pair of terrycloth sleep shorts and a tank top, I amble down the hallway to Kieran's bedroom. The door is closed. It's *always* closed.

I lift my hand to knock but stop. He deserves to be walked in on. Only... What if something is going on in that bedroom I don't want to see?

Figuring we're still newly married, and I just moved in, I give him the courtesy and knock. A few breaths later, the door flies open, and Kieran stands there in a towel slung low on his hips, so low it might fall off.

I'm paralyzed, staring at his cut, muscular chest dotted with water droplets, planes of abs, and sculpted biceps.

He leans against the door and says, "Can I help you?"

Like I'm a door-to-door salesperson.

"Am I interrupting anything?"

His lips form a smile, and he steps back, inviting me into his room. Is that all it took? For me to knock on his door? "I have a meeting with Ewan Quinlan this morning." He turns to a lighted mirror over his dresser. "What do you need?"

Looking at him, the first thought that screams at me is sex. I *need* sex. I've been married for over two weeks, and I'm still a virgin.

"I was checking my school's website."

He blinks a few times, and I wonder if he's picturing me in a schoolgirl's uniform. "And?"

"There're a couple of students who meet—"

"No."

My shoulders slump. "You didn't let me finish."

He crosses his arms over his broad inked-up chest. "Finish."

"Can I meet some students in the city at a coffee bar who are also doing online classes? You know, just to share our experiences. So we don't feel so alone."

He blinks, taking in my words, but utters, "No."

"Why not?"

“It’s not safe.” He goes back to the mirror.

“When will it be safe?”

“Isabella, I’m trying to keep you alive.” So he can breed me.

“Never mind.” I wave my hand, preparing to leave.

“Wait.”

I stop and feel the heat of him at my back. “Yes?”

“Turn around.” His voice sounds thick with lust.

I do, and I wonder if he’ll drop the towel. Ask me to go down on him in exchange for going out. Which I won’t.

“What?” I fold my arms to match his.

“Where are you in your cycle?”

“My *menstrual* cycle?”

“Yes.” He tugs at the towel, his fingers brushing against a taut stomach. A glint catches my eye. His wedding ring!

“Don’t sass me. You won’t like what I’ll do to you.”

“I might.” I snicker. “I think you’re the one who won’t like it. What’s the deal, anyway? Too freaked out that I’m your old friend’s daughter?”

“Actually, that’s a huge turn-on.” Must be, because the towel is starting to look a little tighter.

“You want to get me pregnant now?”

“That was the deal.” He gives me a once-over. “You’re not on birth control, right?”

The way the question is worded might get me off on a technicality. “No.”

He pushes me up against the closed door, his fingers gently tightening around my neck. “When did you bleed last?”

Our wedding night, which would have been a terrible inconvenience if my husband stuck his dick inside me and not just his fingers.

Since I’m on the pill, the answer doesn’t matter because I won’t get pregnant. But he wants a sex playdate with me. And if he understands how cycles work, he’ll figure out if I got it on our wedding night, that means I’m fertile right now. He may tie me up in this room and rail me all weekend. I want to go to Sam’s party tomorrow night.

“I have to check my calendar,” I say cagily.

He strokes my cheek and then brings a finger down to my collarbone. “You are mine, Isabella. I *can* take you whenever I want.”

“You must not *want* to have sex with me. I’ve been down the hall for weeks.”

“I’ve been busy, and I am giving you time to adjust.”

“Adjust to what?”

“Everything. Being married. Living here.”

“I’m not a rescued puppy. You should be helping me adjust to *you*. The man you are. Your moods.” I reach out and stroke

the tattoo on his right arm. The darkened blocks with floral overlays flex at my bold reply.

“You’ll adjust,” he says wryly and grinds against me harder.

He’s truly the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen, and this body is made for sinful pleasure. He’s so controlling and annoying, but I want to run my lips over every inch of his body and feel his mouth on mine again so badly.

“So, can I meet these students or not? You’re paying for me to finish my degree. I read that it’s good for online students to get together to create some semblance of campus life. It enriches the college learning experience.” My voice chokes because I’ve never felt more alone in my life. Just safe.

“When is this?” He studies me, and in a second, I *will* get on my knees if that’s what I have to do.

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll think about it.” He turns, leaving me panting and wanting his cock.

Shit, that doesn’t sound too promising.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kieran

Isabella stalks down the hall, and my eyes zero in on the swells of her ass peeking out of those shorts.

You must not want to have sex with me.

Her words broke through the hazy denial I've been living with since the wedding night. I regret not giving her what she clearly wanted that night, and I did need to get off. I just took care of myself because I would have hurt her.

The last two weeks have been nonstop meetings during the day and then dealing with eejits who need to be taught a lesson not to fuck with us at night.

My sexual appetite is at its peak, and the last two weeks have been torture without sex. Now, I'm a ravenous maniac, and the next woman I fuck will leave my bed sore, bruised, and possibly unable to walk.

Of course, I don't want to do that to Isabella.

I just don't know what else to do about this. Either I cheat on her, stay in this purgatory, or hold her down and deal with the consequences after.

Thankfully, my phone rings with Riordan, who usually takes all the calls needed and then funnels only the important stuff to me. "Yeah, Rior?"

"Code red. Ma and Da just got into a limo at LaGuardia. The driver congratulated them on you getting married. Ma

demanded they go straight to the house. The driver sent me a text, thinking he fucked up.”

My blood runs cold. “Shite.” I scrub a hand over my mouth. Shaking my head, I say, “I’ve only been married for two weeks. And the story is we didn’t want to disturb their vacation. Where are you?”

“A few blocks away. I’ll wait at the gate. Am I telling them it’s true if they ask me?”

“No. It was my decision. I’ll tell them.”

“Is Isabella there?”

“Aye.” Jaysus, I have to go to her room and look at her in that tank top with her tits bouncing. Those hard nipples make my mouth water. I’m on the edge as it is. “We just had a…”

“Sex?”

“No. A conversation. She wants to go into Manhattan tomorrow to meet with other online students.” I put the phone down, switch it to speaker, and start getting dressed. “Does anything about that sound off to you?”

“Not really. No one cares about us there. Send her with her guard.”

“Aye.”

“You can’t keep her prisoner, Kieran. And don’t piss her off.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” I button my shirt and struggle with the cuffs. “It’s probably not a good idea to tell Ma and Da

in front of Isabella. Who the hell knows how they'll react to finding out I didn't wait for them to come home."

"Agreed. Meet me in the courtyard, and we'll tell them together. I'll back you up. This is a business arrangement. Da will understand." Our father married our mother in Ireland to finance his wicked business dealings when he was squeezed by a corrupt tyrant. With the influx of cash from Ma's father, he dove headfirst into starting his own gang by controlling drugs, prostitutes, and weapons.

He was so successful that he brought the operation here to the States, moving us all when we were little. But with the FBI breathing down bosses' necks and fierce prosecutors handing out RICO indictments like fucking Halloween candy, Da backed off the super-illegal shit. Russians filled the vacuum, and given how ruthless they are, I almost wish my father would have stuck it out and worked with the feds. There are always agents willing to look the other way for cash.

Rior ends the call, and I see his Audi at the gate from my window. With my shoes on, I leave the bedroom and storm down the hall to warn Isabella. I brusquely knock and then open the door.

She's on a yoga mat with her ass in the air, even more of it hanging out of the shorts. "*Now* you come into my room?"

"My parents are on their way here, and I haven't told them I'm married. I need you..." I'm at a loss for words. "Please, get dressed. I'd like this to go smoothly." I should tell her my mother is sick, but I'm not ready to talk about it.

She pops off the mat and folds her arms, pushing those tits together. “Let me go into the city tomorrow.”

“Are you really using my parents’ visit as some kind of bargaining tool?” I back her into the side of the bed and grab her waist.

“I sure am.” She pushes on my hands and then exhales.

Something feels off, but I have to trust her. Give her something to show I can be reasonable to get what I want later. “You’ll take Christian.”

“Thank you.” She sits back down and puts her hands together. “Namaste.”

“Good girl.” I bend down and press my lips to her temple when I really want to grind my hard dick between her legs. “Be a good girl for Christian, too.”

“Uh-huh.” Her answer sounds cagey, and I think about that day I saw her at the city council building and overheard her tell a guard, ‘*Don’t tell Papa.*’

I also remember the guard agreeing. I snicker deep in my chest. No way would Christian betray me.

Looking at her, my hard-on returns with a vengeance. I need to make another deal with her before I lose my mind. “When they leave, you and I are going to have a long talk about getting you pregnant. You have things you want, and I—”

“Have needs?” Her eyes tilt down to the hard-on I have pressed into her stomach.

“Yes,” I ground out against the shell of her ear.

Her eyes go wide. “What do you want me to wear?”

I imagine her in leather cuffs, a black lace thong, straps everywhere, and chained to my bed. “That pink dress you bought looked nice on you.” I go as opposite a direction as I can if I have to look at her in front of my mother.

“Pink dress it is.” She struts toward the closet and glances over her shoulder. “Should we get our story straight? Are you telling them that you came to my father’s house two weeks after I lost my mother and bought me like a piece of property?”

Ironically, I don’t know what my mother expected of me getting married after Norah died. It’s being blindsided she won’t appreciate.

“Riordan and I will tell them. Not in front of you. I want to spare you the embarrassment if they’re annoyed that we did it without them.” I get close to her again. “When I’m alone with my father, I have to tell him about the war ready to break out. I want him and my mother in Arizona sooner this year.”

Her face pales. “Do you really think they’ll destroy each other? My father and the Russians?” It’s the first time she’s brought up the impending doom.

I’ve lit a match to make the Russians and the Italians fight to the death. I have the Italian princess, who will have to watch everything she’s ever known explode before her eyes.

“Koslov thinks your father has his daughter, or at least had something to do with her disappearance. In turn, he killed your mother. Your father has to retaliate with something darker.” I only wonder what the hell it will be. “But understand, bella...” I brush a hand down her cheek. “You are mine now. You are not part of that fight. You are safe. So long as you let me *keep* you safe.” I catch sight of the driveway gate opening. “They’re here. Please be downstairs in ten minutes.” I kiss her on the forehead, but she grabs my face and kisses me.

It’s gasoline on the fire, and I pull her in to go wild on her mouth. I grind my hard-on into those tiny shorts, the friction bringing me so close to the damn edge. I’ve only had my hand and hot showers all week.

Another option would be to lie through my teeth and tell my parents I’m madly in love with Isabella and her with me. Then if I come downstairs looking wrecked from a wild fuck, Ma and Da would shrug it off.

“That’s playing dirty, you know that?” I say, pulling away.

She fans herself. “You left me all hot and bothered plenty of times.”

“As soon as you’re ready, I’ll make you climax over and over until you pass out. Then I’ll—”

“Kieran...” Riordan’s voice sounds from the doorway, and I go still.

Pulling Isabella behind me because, as far as I’m concerned, she isn’t decent, I curse. “Jaysus, Rior. What? I’m dealing with

my wife here.”

“*Wife?*” My mother’s slender frame comes out from behind Riordan, who’s so big he could hide two of our mothers.

I push away the pain of watching her struggle to walk. “Ma. Why did you climb those stairs?” Her MS is the reason they moved to the one-floor penthouse condo a few miles from here. Their house in Arizona is also one sprawling floor.

“I tried to stop her,” Riordan mutters under his breath.

Ma looks around the room. “Why is your *wife* sleeping in Shea-Lynne’s room?”

Fuck.

“Hi. I’m Isabella.” She practically pushes me aside.

She reminded me that her mother was gone. She now only has my ma.

“Nice to meet you, Isabella. I think we met when you were little.” My mother narrows her eyes at me. “Which wasn’t too long ago.”

“I’m twenty-one, Mrs. O’Rourke.”

“Aye. And I hear *you’re* Mrs. O’Rourke, too, now?” Another harsh stare. “Can’t have people confused. Call me Clara.”

“You can call me Izzy.” Isabella shakes my mother’s hand. “And Kieran’s room is very crowded with all his things. We’re figuring out which room here we want to make ours. Maybe knock down some walls and build one from scratch.” She eyes

me with a silent threat of fucking contractors crawling all over my home.

“And I’ve been very busy, Ma. Let Isabella get dressed. We didn’t know you were coming straight here.” I steer Ma out of the bedroom with Riordan on our six and send one last grateful smile to Isabella before shutting the door.

Outside, my mother slaps me in the face. “That’s for getting married without me.”



My father’s take is much different. He squeezes my shoulder in the office. His old office. “Aye, smart move.” My quick grab of another don’s daughter impresses old Fergus O’Rourke. “You really think Parisi took the Russian girl?”

“It’s the only reason why Alexei would strike like that,” I answer my father.

“In my day, you called a meeting first. What has happened here?” he pushes out in a hoarse voice from vocal cords that no longer roar with orders and threats.

He handed everything over to me after I adequately proved worthy of his crown. We had several years of relative peace. By peace, I mean capos and their soldiers were only fighting it out over nonsense. Nothing rose to two dons going to war. Until now.

“How’s Ma’s MS?” I ask.

Da shakes his head and gives us a lengthy medical update that I don’t know what to do with. I think of Isabella, who lost her mother in the blink of an eye. I’ll have to watch mine die slowly. I’ve been telling everyone I need sons to signal that my legacy will go on. Now I have a wife that I’m taking my time to fuck and impregnate.

Rior and I give Da a few more details, conscious not to fill his head with anything sensitive to make him a kidnapping target of the Russians. Alexei accepted my rise to power, and as pakhan, treats me as an equal. Or at least a worthy adversary. I’m sure he’s heard I married Isabella.

That’s how in the weeds he is with searching for his daughter. He should have sent Grigori Laskin, his underboss, for a briefing the next day.

Ivan...

The Russian who tried to murder Isabella...

How do they fit into this? Are they a connected ploy to finish the job they started three weeks ago by blowing up her house? Or are they a sign that the Koslov Bratva is in as much disarray as the Italians?

Da, Rior, and I leave the office, walking out onto the patio in the yard, where Patricia sets one of the tables. The poor woman has to whip up something out of nowhere. But when I see a hefty food delivery at the gate, I smirk at her quick thinking to just cater this last-minute brunch for five.

Knowing I have to play a dutiful husband for the next hour or so, I pull Riordan aside. “Where’s Lach?” While we all usually show our faces in the office every day, Lachlan is unmoored and works on the streets.

“Lachlan is stalking an apartment in Brooklyn, searching for the driver of a truck with those pallets of stolen Italian marble we’ve been looking for.” Rior takes out his phone. “He’s got that taste of blood in his mouth. We won’t see him for a while.”

Outside, the sun blares hot, and I regret wearing a suit. I planned to be in my air-conditioned car all day, going to meetings. Not sitting outside having an impromptu brunch with my parents, who wanted to meet a wife I bought so a massive war would break out around us.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Isabella

*O*h, fake husband of mine, I got you right where I want you.

Kieran's mother, Clara, is a beautiful woman with golden-blonde hair. Wisps of gray frame the front of her face, but it works into the rest of her hair magnificently.

"That is a lovely dress, Isabella." She eyes me up and down.

"Your son bought it for me." That memory is a bittersweet mixture of our first kiss and the first real attempt on my life. "Not that I'm spoiled and demanded he buy me clothes. I lost everything when my house..."

Kieran clears his throat. "Ma, you know there's sensitive information we simply don't want to burden you with."

"Sensitive?" Clara huffs. "Her house exploding was on the news. Someone killed her mother." She turns sensitive eyes to me. "I couldn't imagine what you went through, dear. Including losing your ma." Clara hugs me, and the memory of *my* mother slams into me.

The shocking warmth tightens my throat, and I'm overwhelmed with wanting to stay with Kieran. Make this a real marriage. Make him love me. He's determined to breed me for a couple of kids and then what? Ignore me? No way. If his mother doesn't think he's serious about me, she'll alienate me. I don't want that.

"Thank you," I say softly.

We finish brunch, and Kieran's parents leave. Each with a hug. They say the Irish are cold, but Fergus and Clara O'Rourke really welcomed me.

Despite being told on my wedding day not to clean, I help Patricia clear the table.

Kieran comes up behind me and presses his lips into the back of my neck. "Thank you."

I breathe for a moment, considering what to do. The feel of Kieran's arm around me and the smell of his cologne is pure bliss. I turn in his hold, and his stare penetrates me. Those green eyes follow mine, and I *almost* consider backing down from my request to see the other students since it's just a ploy to run off and go to Samantha's party.

Living in a gilded cage with my father, I understood the art of negotiation. Which hills to die on and when to retreat. A party with my friends doesn't sound like the right stick to poke this bear husband of mine, but it's early in our marriage, and I need to set expectations that I won't be his prisoner.

Stasia used to ditch her bodyguards all the time. I take a moment to let that sink in. Maybe she went too far, and that's why she's gone. Perhaps there is something to being heavily protected right now. Still, I deserve to see my friends, even if it's the last time in an open setting for a while.

Solo is very dark. No one will notice me. And no one in Manhattan knows I exist.

"So, we're good for tomorrow?" I ask Kieran.

“Aye,” he says, pressing his lips to my temple.

“I have the fundraiser at seven.”

“Noted.” That means I can spend at least a couple of hours at Solo.

“I’m heading out to the office to discuss a few things with Eoghan. I’ll be back later.” He turns to leave, but I pull him in again for a kiss.

It’s wild and passionate, and it wrecks me. He lets me go and breathes heavily, hovering over my mouth. “That will get you into trouble, wife.” But he struts away, giving me a great view of his high, round ass in those dress slacks.

“I’m counting on it getting me *out* of trouble, husband,” I whisper to myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kieran

I glance at my phone to distract the need to retch from the overwhelming metallic smell of blood. I've been here for almost twenty-four hours, and I'm ready to collapse.

Lachlan called me at the office late yesterday, saying that he and his guys hit pay dirt and dragged these scumbags to our black site. A warehouse where we punish people who rip us off. I called Isabella, saying I wouldn't be home, but heard mixed signals in her voice.

"Tell me again where you got these pallets." Lachlan, who's shirtless and covered in blood, paces in front of two men his capos tied up.

"Talk, you pieces of shite. My brother is just getting started," I say to make sure it's known that nothing happens in my organization without my knowledge. Not that three pallets of stolen marble from a truck they highjacked is worth my time financially. But no one fucks with me. "Give us the name, and the pain will stop."

Not really, but what do I give a fuck about lying to low-level thieves?

My gut tells me it's an inside job. One of the many long-haulers we used to ship our merchandise just walked away from the truck. Riordan and *his* capos are hunting that guy down. He'll get reprimanded worse. The higher up they are,

the more severe the punishment. Balor is here because he gets bored just sitting behind his laptop.

Lachlan barely notices us. Right now, he's technically in charge. These thieves can't forget that.

I'm the boss, the don. I get my hands dirty from time to time, spill blood when it's necessary. Another reason I kept my distance from Isabella these past two weeks. I came home most nights with blood on my clothes.

Isabella... My thoughts can't seem to escape her. I wonder what she'll wear tonight to the fundraiser I told her we were going to. Meanwhile, my window is closing to get the fuck out of here. I need to scrub the scent of blood, vomit, and feces off my skin. One of those fuckers shit his pants.

"Any idea when we think Parisi will strike Koslov, Balor?" I whisper and pray Parisi took my advice to do it covertly, under the cover of darkness, and not shoot people in broad daylight while kids are walking to school.

"No. All his communication channels are fucking muddy as hell, Kier." Balor wrinkles his nose, bothered by the smell, as well. "There's something I picked up on, though. Dante, his underboss, is really the one running the show."

That's a shocking piece of news that I don't know what to do with right now. I scrub a hand down my face and turn to Balor. "Any talk of them *not* hitting Koslov back? That's what the fucking money was for. I financed his revenge." And bought a wife I'm losing my mind over.

“It’s just business as usual over there.” Balor shakes his head. “Like...we didn’t hand over the money.”

“Where is the money?”

“Dante parked it in the Caymans.”

Ordinarily, that wouldn’t be suspicious. “And no unusually large weapons purchases made from any of his IP addresses?”

“None.”

“That makes no fucking sense. Parisi is just sitting there, begging to be hit again.” Nothing is really clear to me so long as these idiots are screaming, and I’m choking on the smell. Balor drove himself in his batmobile, so I clap him on the shoulder and say, “I have plans later. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I storm outside and into the sunshine, but the rotting wood of the docks nearby isn’t much of a relief from the putrid smell stuck in my lungs. Calder opens the car door for me and gets in next to me, while Waylon sits up front with Pete, the driver.

We’re back at the house, and I blow past Patricia, who’s talking on the phone with someone about repairing the dishwasher. With tonight’s guest list on my mind, and who I want to speak to at the fundraiser, I take a shower, quickly shave, and dress in my tux.

Ma used to help Da with his cufflinks. I’d sit on their bed and watch them when I was young. I used to think, *how hard is it to put on a tuxedo?* I realized years later, she just wanted

to be close to him. They didn't marry for love, but it turned into that.

Maybe it was all the fucking. Not that I want to think of my mother that way, but Jaysus, they had eight kids. After me, she could have moved to a bedroom of her own with a lock, telling Da he had his son and to leave her the hell alone. But they slept together every night because they fell in love.

Could I fall in love with Isabella the same way?

Something hits me as my brain catches up. I didn't see Ma's Cadillac in the driveway. Or Christian. My heart spikes as a feeling of terror passes through my soul, telling me something is wrong.

I storm down the hall, and without even knocking, I open the door to Isabella's room. I don't think of it as Shea's anymore. "Isabella?" I call out, figuring she's in the bathroom.

Maybe Christian's filling up gas in the Caddy.

There isn't even a hint of a recent shower. The towel hanging on the back of the door is damp, but that's because humidity clings to everything as we round out August.

Summer in the City... That song's lyrics ring in my ears.

City.

Isabella had her online student meeting at a coffee bar in Manhattan. Checking the time, I see it's after six p.m. I told her we were leaving at seven.

Wait... *Did I?*

“Tricia!” I roar, leaving Isabella’s room and shuffle down the steps.

“I’m here. What?” she whines with the phone is tucked into her shoulder.

“Where’s Isabella?”

Her face goes white as she mumbles into the phone, “I’ll call you back.” Fuck, she doesn’t know. “She left with Christian around one p.m.”

“They’re not back?” I grab my phone and look for Isabella’s phone number. I’ve not had to call it yet, so it’s buried.

“Should she be?” Tricia sounds surprised, and my heart skips a beat.

I stop scrolling. “What do you mean, *should she be*? I have that fundraiser tonight. You knew she was coming with me.”

Tricia folds her arms and glowers at me. “I might have a full head of gray hair, Kieran O’Rourke, but I’m not losing it. I don’t recall you telling me you planned to take Mrs. O’Rourke with you.”

Now we’re being formal, great.

I hate that I can’t go off on her because I’m not sure. “*You* knew I was going.”

“Aye.” Her brogue is richer than mine, and nowhere near as Americanized. “*You*.”

“I know I told Isabella I was going.”

She quirks an eyebrow and flaps a finger at me. “And did you word it exactly *that way* to her?”

“What difference does it—” I stop. I told her *I* was going. Not *we*. I close my eyes, ready to scream. “I just got married two weeks ago. *We* isn’t tattooed on my brain yet. She should have known.”

“Evidently, she didn’t. And if she did—” Patricia stops and covers her mouth.

“Don’t stop now, Nanny Dearest,” I tease her since she used to be Darragh and Cormac’s nanny. “What were you going to say?”

“Have you not figured out that your wife has a massive crush on you?” She looks ready to slap me harder than my mother did. “If she thought for a minute she was invited, she’d be in the car already, you git.”

“Fine. Point taken.” I scowl at her. “And don’t call me a git.”

She just smiles and gets back on the phone.

I call Isabella’s cell and breathe in relief when it rings. Since I wasn’t here, I have no idea what she wore to her student group meeting. I’ll have Patricia pack up a dress and some makeup for her so she can get ready in the car. I’ll pick her up wherever she is in Manhattan.

Only, the call goes to voicemail.

Next, I call Christian, who answers right away, but he’s breathing heavily. “Sir.”

“Sir? Christian, where is Isabella?”

“I tried calling Lachlan, then Ewan Quinlan, who your brother said to call when there’s an issue.”

I freeze. “There’s *an issue*?” I don’t have time to argue with that shite escalation process. True, our bodyguards report to Lachlan, and they’re hired as contractors by Ewan’s investigation firm. Only, Lachlan is covered in blood in a warehouse, and Ewan is in Ireland. “Where’s *my wife*?”

“Sir, I don’t know.”

My throat tightens. “You *don’t* know?”

“No. She asked me to wait outside the coffee bar since it was small, and she said I was hovering.”

“And?”

“She gave me the slip, sir. I’m not proud of this. I... I didn’t know what else to do. I kept out front like she asked me. The coffee bar seemed safe. When the couple she met with left, I went inside to get her. I waited a few minutes, then went into the ladies’ room. The window was open. A girl was standing there, and she handed me a note from Mrs. O’Rourke that said she wanted time to herself and that she promised to call me in a few hours to pick her up. Sir, this has never happened to me before. I didn’t know what to do.” He gets all of that out in practically one breath, his voice panicked.

“Why didn’t you call *me*?” I grind out between my teeth.

“Lachlan’s my boss, sir. I left *him* a message.”

I'm sure Lachlan tells the guards never to call me, but I'm ready to explode. This isn't his first gig. He knows he's in trouble. I've not had to kill a bodyguard before. No one's ever fucked up like this. My father killed one once... Someone who let Balor get the crap beat out of him at MIT. I remember the mixture of emotions when I found out. I saw red that my little brother was hurt, but five guys went after him. How was one bodyguard supposed to fight five guys without emptying a clip into their chests?

My head is spinning, and I have to calm down. "Christian, did she leave anything behind?" A window... She escaped out a window.

"No, sir. I downloaded an app to find her phone, but it's not working right. Sir, I'm *trying* to find her."

For a second, I calm down because she wasn't grabbed. No, she willingly escaped. But why?

Your wife has a massive crush on you.

"Christian, listen to me. You call Lachlan's service and talk to Andre. I need a team combing Manhattan. Find. My. Wife."

"Yes, sir."

I hang up.

"Problem?" Patricia's voice sounds from behind me.

I feel my face go hot as embarrassment swamps me, thinking Isabella took off on me. Like I'm not worthy. "Isabella gave Christian the slip."

“Oh, dear.” Patricia dumps her head in her hands.

“She’s not answering her phone.”

“She left here with her schoolbag.”

My brain ticks to life. “Her laptop. How can I—” I curse under my breath and quickly call Balor.

“Yeah?”

“Isabella is missing.”

“*What?*”

I don’t bother with the details. “Her laptop, her phone. Tell me you can track them.”

“I can track her phone if it’s on.” He clicks his own laptop as we speak. “If not, I can remote into her laptop so long as she’s connected to Wi-Fi somewhere.”

“The phone rang. It’s on. She *was* in Manhattan. Christian is still there. Just tell me where she is, and I will send him to grab her.” It eats at me, whether or not I should cripple Christian over this.

“Oh, no,” Balor says, and my heart lands in my throat.

“*What?*” I jog into my courtyard, snapping my fingers for Calder to bring my car around.

“Oh, shit.”

“Balor, I’m ready to kill you. Where the fuck is she?”

“Lower East Side. A club called Solo.” His words wake up something inside me.

Solo. Why does that sound so familiar? She... My throat swells with fire. She asked me to go there.

And I said no because the place wasn't safe.

She went anyway.

“Balor... Please tell me—”

“Yeah, there's a major drug deal going on in the offices above.” We don't run Manhattan, but there's overlap. Balor and his team know everything that's going on for intel purposes, but we don't engage. “The last ping I saw was rival dealers were on the way. I didn't do anything because it's not our turf. Fuck, Kieran. It's going to be a bloodbath.”

And my wife is right in the crosshairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Isabella

The couple who takes online classes from a college in the city was really nice. People I probably never would have met or possibly even approached if I'd not been in this situation. I also loved that they didn't grill me for personal information. When I said my first name, no one blinked. Astoria is a unique bubble. A small city outside Manhattan with three major crime syndicates most people don't know about—because the dons have kept it that way. It's about to change, and for all I know, I'll be on lockdown forever.

This might be my last chance to see my friends. In the coffee bar, I borrowed Sage's phone and called Samantha, who squealed at hearing from me.

I asked if her party was still on. When she told me yes, I told her I was coming and that I'd catch her up when I got there. Then I ducked into the bathroom and bribed a girl with a gift card I'd bought with the credit card Kieran gave me to hand a note to Christian. I knew he'd come barging in any second. I made sure he got it before I took off. Then escaped by climbing out the window. Knowing that bodyguards endure worse punishment than their wards, I don't expect him to tell Kieran I took off. The note said to hang tight and that I'd call him in a few hours.

Honestly, if I get caught and Christian rats me out, I don't care. How will Kieran punish me? With his cock? I shiver at that thought, to be honest. But will he use it like a tyrant who's

been defied? Or a husband who truly cares about my well-being?

I can't, however, use Kieran's credit card to get into Solo or buy drinks. Stopping at a bank where Mama deposited my school money, I pull out the debit card I used for three years. She always kept this account flush with cash for me. I haven't been able to check the balance lately in fear that Balor would see the account if I logged in from the laptop.

\$0.00.

Shit!

Last I remembered, there were several thousand dollars left in there. This branch is open until eight p.m., so I take the risk and go inside.

I eye the cameras but calm down. Kieran can't be looking for me yet. He's on his way to his precious fundraiser without me. I hate how it hurts that he didn't want me to go with him. What the heck did he make me buy all those dresses for?

"Can I help you?" a teller asks me.

"I had a few thousand dollars in this checking account. But it's showing zero." I slide the card under the glass.

"I'll check that for you." She eyes me suspiciously, like I'm a scammer. "Just type in the PIN on the pad to your right." When I do, the teller blinks and then stares at me. "All the money was transferred out of this account." She tells me the date, and I cringe.

The same day that Kieran bought me.

I swallow and take back the card. “Thank you.”

“There is money in the savings account, though,” she says softly, glancing at her monitor.

“What?” My heart starts to pound.

“This is a high-interest money market account. The interest was deposited into a separate savings account.”

“And that...” I stare down at the card, never even once looking at the savings account. “That money is still there?”

“Yes. There’s \$184.59.”

I exhale sharply. “Can I take some of that out?”

The teller glances left, then right. “I suggest you take it all out.” It’s like she knows something. Like maybe another teller typed in a note when Papa took all the money out of the checking. Maybe someone told him the savings balance was zero, knowing I’d need the money. Especially if he did that at our neighborhood bank. Someone looked out for me.

Nodding, I say, “Yes. I’ll take it all out.” I enter the PIN again, and next, she’s counting out tens and twenties.

There’s not much I can do with this money after tonight, but at least I can have some fun with my friends and not sponge off them.

I arrive at the club, show my ID, pay the cover fee, and oh... That walk through the tunnel, the cool air on my skin, the smell of fun, and the *thump thumping* of the music thrills me.

Samantha, the daughter of a wealthy and somewhat corrupt union boss for my father, scored a VIP table with bottle service. I assume her father is paying, but I don't have a gift for her. At least I can buy a nice bottle of champagne.

I practically jump over the velvet rope to see my friends. Samantha greets me with a big hug, choking me with how much I missed her. How hard it's been to be so isolated.

I give both Sam and Ginna a watered-down version of how I ended up married, but still, their jaws drop. They knew I hadn't expected to be married off so soon. And not at all to a don.

"Let me see the rings." Ginna grabs my hand. A diamond bracelet dangles from her wrist, holding a flute of Dom P. Fingers with perfectly manicured nails, latch onto mine to inspect my rings.

My nails are long but bare because I haven't been allowed to leave Kieran's prison. Still, I wave the gorgeous rings my rich husband bought me. I kept them hidden in my schoolbag at the coffee bar because I had every intention of wearing them. I'm a married woman with no plans to betray my husband. Even if our marriage isn't entirely real to him, he wears his ring every day. He hasn't been to his club, either. He made that sacrifice to be faithful to me. It's only fair I give him the same courtesy.

"Hmmm." Ginna doesn't seem too impressed.

"They're gorgeous." Samantha grabs my hand from hers, probably seeing the look of disappointment on my face from

Ginna dissing me. “You’re just jealous, Gi.”

Ginna shrugs and starts scrolling through her phone. When she waves an empty champagne bottle, another one is shoved into the standing ice bucket.

“The next bottle is on me.” I snatch a flute and sit with my knees pinned.

I also asked the teller at the bank if I could use their restroom to change into my short red dress with an open, asymmetrical back. My jeans, blazer, and designer T-shirt are shoved inside my schoolbag. The early September weather stays quite warm in New York, so I didn’t bother with an extra jacket.

I don’t worry about it getting chilly later since I plan to call Christian and confess where I am, as I promised in my note. No doubt, he’ll come get me. I also don’t worry about my husband finding out because he went to a fundraiser and will be out late. He won’t miss me and I doubt he’s even thinking about me.

Christian won’t rat me out because he’ll get in trouble, too. It will be a test if I can trust him.

“Do you want something else to drink?” Samantha asks me.

I think about the Irish whiskey my husband drinks. It smells good in his glass when he passes me in the house, holding it to his lips. “Maybe a shot of whiskey when this is done.”

“Whiskey is disgusting,” Ginna barks.

Samantha rolls her eyes. “Ignore her. So, tell me, how is being married to the Irish king?”

I spin my marriage in the most positive light. Enough so they don’t worry about me living with a savage. But indulge in enough of his scary habits to stop any ideas forming in the Italians’ heads that he can be trifled with.

GINNA, who I didn’t think was listening, says, “Is he good in bed?”

Heat rises in my neck from shame that Kieran, who by any standard is a god, hasn’t wanted to sleep with me yet. Playing Gi’s game, I bite my lip and sip my champagne.

“He is fucking hot,” she says. Just not with the *you go girl* intonation but something darker, something that reeks of mean-spirited jealousy.

“Oooo,” Samantha squeals when the opening notes of a song start. She grabs my hand. “I love this song. Let’s dance.”

Glancing down at the bodies below, I’m more hesitant than excited to wedge myself into a mosh pit. But it’s Sam’s birthday, so I finish my drink. With her hand in mine, off we go.

GINNA just rolls her eyes.

“What’s wrong with her?” I yell to Samantha over the music when we get a good distance away. “Is she on the rag or something?”

“I don’t know.” Samantha shrugs. “Maybe she is.”

GINNA must be on her period three out of four weeks a month. She's always prickly. But I grew up with her and Samantha. Friends are hard to make the older I get. So, I put up with her nonsense.

The dancefloor is jammed, but Samantha and I find an empty pocket and move to the beat. I close my eyes and let the rhythm take me to a place far away from my real world. This whole night, the risk I took was to forget reality and feel free for a couple of hours.

As I move my hips, big, meaty hands close around my waist. For a split second, I think it's Kieran. I'm both thrilled and terrified. I spin around, and the man standing there peers down at me.

Not Kieran.

"Turn back around, beautiful. Let me feel that ass against my cock," he whispers in my ear.

I lurch back, the weight of the commitment I made to Kieran driving me. I hold up my hand. "I'm married. I suggest you back off."

"Then why are you here shaking those big tits?" His eyes land on my chest.

"It's called dancing. Girls are allowed to dance by themselves." I consider name-dropping my husband, but that can backfire.

Samantha dances with two guys, looking like she's having a great time, so I turn and push my way through the crowd to

leave. As glad as I am to be out, it feels wrong. Ginna is too pissy, and Sam is in her own world. I should be home. I put Christian at risk. I put myself at risk. Kieran's trust anyway.

“Where are you going, you little tease?” The man pulls my hips again.

I push his chest, but he's made of muscle. I certainly didn't hurt him, but he sneers like he didn't care for me getting aggressive. How ironic.

His eyes get beady, and he lifts his hand, ready to strike me. I'm wedged in here. I can't move. I'm transfixed and triggered by Papa hitting me. I brace myself for the blow.

A hand closes around the man's fist, and he drops to his knees, squealing in pain. I think it's a bouncer, but then I see that hand is attached to a crisp white sleeve with diamond cufflinks. My eyes follow the onyx black coat of a very expensive tuxedo right up to a pair of muscular arms and those broad shoulders I'd know anywhere.

Kieran.

My heart drops at the look of murder in his eyes, holding this man's fist. The music is so loud the man's screaming is barely audible. But surely, there are cameras, and a team of bouncers will be closing in any second.

Riordan, dressed in a suit jacket, a silk shirt with a few buttons open, and jeans, stays behind Kieran. My husband shoves the man off the dancefloor and toward a rear door. Riordan takes my hand and yells, “I'll put her in the car.”

“No,” Kieran barks. “She watches this.”

Kieran grabs the man by the collar and disappears while Riordan gently steers me in the same direction. After Riordan hands over a wad of cash to a bouncer, I’m dragged down a back-of-house hallway.

We reach a door that’s already open to a dark alley. The air has cooled off like I expected, but I’m still warm. On fire, even, watching Kieran throw the jerk, who tried to molest me, up against the brick wall by the throat.

“How dare you lay a hand on my wife.” Without giving the man a chance to utter a word in his pitiful defense, Kieran smashes his fist into the guy’s face.

The sound of bones breaking should terrify me. What power in my husband’s hands. I’m incredibly turned on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Kieran

Anger fires through me, and it's the most irrational I've felt in years. I'm mostly mad at Isabella, but I would never strike her. Not in a million years. I have other ways to punish her. Which she'll get a dose of when I get her home.

The worry that coursed through me on the drive to Solo, knowing Isabella was in danger, ate me alive. The emotions for her that I stifled these last few weeks attacked me, fueling the fire, ready to ignite at the first lit match.

The pounding rhythm of my cold heart was the first time it beat for a woman since Norah, and I don't know what to do with that.

I take it out on this asshole, who more than deserves it.

This prick is just a typical scumbag who has no idea who I am. Manhattan isn't my turf, and that works in my favor. I can pummel him with little repercussions. To him or anyone watching, I'm just a jealous, possessive husband. And he's the idiot who touched what was mine.

I smash his face again and again until he's a bloody pulp and I've ruined my tux. "Next time you see a rock that big on a woman, be warned that the man who bought her that ring is never far behind."

He slumps to the ground, and I kick him until he's not moving. I step back and push my bloodied hands through my

hair, feeling something warm and wet smear across my forehead.

Riordan snickers from a few feet away, impressed that his tux-wearing, business-meeting boss still likes to get down and dirty with scum. In his arms, Isabella stares at me with wide eyes. I hadn't noticed her tucked against him at first.

Jealousy fires through me because I'm already so worked up, but my brother would never betray me.

Fear takes over Isabella's features, getting a good look at me seething, fists and sleeves covered in blood. She should be afraid. Not of me, but of what I can do. What these stunts of hers will do to other people she drags into her games.

"Now you can put her in my car," I ground out.

Riordan nods to me, but Isabella breaks away from him. "No!" she screeches.

I worry she'll run, but she stomps up to me, her eyes brimming with anger. Me? She's mad at me?

She stares down at the man on the ground. "I told you not to touch me, asshole!" she barks and then kicks the guy.

I stifle a laugh, but I'm still mad at her. Holding her with bloody hands, I say, "Good woman yourself, there, bella." My grip is near bruising, and I breathe until I have control again. "That means well done," I clarify when she looks at me like *I* just got kicked in the head and am talking nonsense.

"I—" she starts, but I stop her with a hand on her mouth. Her eyes drop to my chewed-up knuckles.

“Not here.” I tuck her under my arm and signal Riordan to get the hell into the car.

He smoothly slides into the front passenger seat of my Range Rover without a look back at the guy we left wheezing on the ground.

I put Isabella in the back with me and close my own door. I grab her hair with my blood-soaked hands and hover my mouth above hers.

“Do you see what you do to me?” I breathe in the scent of vanilla coming off her. “You’re mine, Isabella. I will *kill* the next man who dares to touch my wife.”

Isabella grunts, dealing with the pain of her hair being pulled like a little fucking champ. She clawed at me for weeks to get under my skin. To tear me open. To shred my soul. She forced me to live again.

To feel again.

Now I want her to feel every fucking inch of me. I want to destroy my little virgin wife’s sanity. The Italian mafia princess giving this cunt only to me reinforces my coronation as king.

“Go now, Pete. Get us the fuck out of here.”

“Wait,” she whimpers. “My bag is in there. My schoolwork, my laptop!”

“Oh, those were really students you met with this afternoon?”

“Yes. Ask Christian. And don’t you dare hurt him.” She shoves a finger in my face. “This was all me. I tricked him.”

Sticking up for her bodyguard shows balls *and* class. “Riordan, get her bag.”

Huffing, he gets out.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

I never expected she’d act like this. Do this to me. Make me feel these things. I’m not sure I like it. “You’re formidable, Isabella. I’ll give you that. But I refuse to live with a wife who doesn’t *respect* me.”

“I respect you,” she whispers.

“Not from what I’ve seen.” I let go of her hair. I have to be better than Gabe as far as how I physically handle her. But I keep her close, knowing my driver can hear me. There’s no partition in this car. My men are loyal, but I won’t tempt anyone with gossip that can betray me.

Her eyes sparkle when she looks at me. They’re dark, so damn dark that I think she could also be the devil—and may be better suited for Lachlan. No. Mine. *She’s mine.*

I brush my lips against hers and push my tongue into her mouth, tasting her. She claws at me, moaning against my lips. She tastes like champagne and peach gloss. She wore that sexy-as-fuck dress with the open back, but her face isn’t caked with makeup. In fact, I don’t see a speck on her. Still, she’s fucking gorgeous. My little olive-skinned Italian princess with banging-hot curves keeps kissing me—so damn nicely, too.

The front passenger door opens, and I see Riordan slip in through my hazy sight. As the car moves, I pull Isabella onto my lap and push her hips down to feel my stiff erection. “Feel that?”

“I do,” she mewls with her legs spread wide as the dress rides up.

“That’s *not* because you were in danger, and I was furious that you could be hurt.” I run my hands along her exposed thighs, smooth as fucking silk. “That’s from beating the crap out of him for you.”

“I could have handled that guy.”

“Overconfidence will get you hurt.” I grip her face gently. “I told you Solo was bad news. Did you know there was a drug deal about to go sideways in the offices upstairs?”

“No. Samantha!” she cries out. “We have to go back.”

“I got them out,” Rior says from the front seat, not turning his head. “I put them in a taxi.”

“Thank you, Riordan,” Isabella says.

“What about me?” I rock her in my lap, creating mind-blowing friction.

“Thank you.” She licks her lips.

“I called Christian, too, Kier,” my brother informs me. “He’s glad she’s okay and safe. I told him to go home.”

“Send Lach a text about what happened. We’ll talk more about it tomorrow.”

“Please don’t fire Christian, or hurt him. This is my fault.”

“You should be more worried about what I plan to do to you.” I take a breath and grind out, “I missed my fundraiser.”

“Why?”

“*Why?*” I scoff. “Because my wife, who was supposed to go with me, didn’t come home. She went to a club with her friends instead.”

“You...” Her eyes peel wide open. “You *wanted* me to go with you?”

I chew on my lower lip. “I did. But it *was* brought to my attention that I didn’t make that clear.”

“No. You didn’t.”

“And if I had?”

She glances out the window. “Where was it?”

“Midtown.”

She gathers her dress in her hands. “I might have asked you if you could take me to the club for a little while after. I just wanted to see my friends, Kieran. I wasn’t trying to run away from you.” She squirms against my hard-on, her head dipping back like a cat in heat, like riding my cock could be her weakness.

“Clearly, we have to communicate better. Both. Of. Us.” I move her off my lap to think straight. “You’ll feel me again like that after you and I get home and come to an understanding.”

We get to the house, which is completely empty since Patricia left shortly after I tore out of there. I'm reminded this was a miscommunication. I wanted Isabella with me tonight and didn't tell her properly. Part of this is my fault, and that includes Christian being put into a no-win situation. Still, Isabella asked me to go to this party, and I told her no.

I'm new at this marriage thing, and so is she. We have to figure each other out.

Inside, I take her by the arm and bring her to my bedroom. The sexual energy I've built up in the last few weeks can no longer be denied, and I'm ready to explode.

I close the bedroom door and lock it with a code I don't give her. Not yet anyway. "You sleep in here every night from now on. In my bed. You were told not to go to that party, and you did anyway."

She glances at the bed. "Some punishment, sleeping with my husband." Her snarky tone tells me she can't help the back talk, and, fuck, I love it. But she needs to be reminded, I'm in charge.

She needs a lesson if she's going to survive. Both this marriage and us.

I sit on the bench at the foot of the bed and crook a finger. "Come here."

Smirking like she's won here, or that I'm still not furious, she saunters over. As she swings her leg to sit on me like she's

getting more of my hard cock rubbing against her pussy, I flip the script and drag her across my lap face down.

“Wait,” she cries out.

I grip the back of her neck securely, cautious not to hurt her because she’s struggling already. She’s petite but feisty and strong. Only, she won’t escape my hold.

I yank up her dress and staring down at plain cotton panties, my breath stills. “No fancy thong for your fancy night out?”

Struggling, she mumbles, “Those thongs you bought me are for my husband.”

“Aye.” I grip the end of the cotton panty and drag it down just below her sweet ass cheeks. Without warning, I land a sharp slap.

She yelps and her body goes rigid. “What the heck?” “You’re hitting me?”

“I’m *spanking* you, wife. A much different thing,” I say gruffly. “And you need more for how you made me feel tonight. How you scared me.” I spank her bare bottom again and again, right in the fleshy part to turn her ass bright pink.

Isabella’s thighs part slightly and if I’m not mistaken, her hips rock like she’s enjoying this. With the gap she made, I slip my finger inside and find her soaking wet.

Fuck...

I keep going in the same rhythm with stinging slaps that catch the most fleshy part of her ass. Watching it jiggle so

deliciously, my mind goes hazy, thinking of how they'll shake as I fuck her from behind.

Isabella lets out a moan and I finger her again. She's even more soaked, coating my slacks. She's sucking in ragged breaths, and I'm struggling too, I'm so turned on. She's trembling, but not from fear, not the way she's squirming.

My dick throbs in my briefs and I need relief.

"Isabella," I say through clenched teeth. "Do I need to keep going?"

I'm daring her to be defiant.

"Maybe," she groans face down on the bench.

I lose my breath, she should be screaming and kicking.

Her cotton-candy pink butt, her hole contracting, fuels me with the savage need to fuck her there. But she's not ready for that.

Right now, I need to free my aching cock and bury it deep inside her cunt once and for all. Make her mine. Pin her down and fuck her hard until she's crying out my name as I unload inside her weeks' worth of buildup.

Do I want our first time to be punishment? Domination? Force her submission? I need to make her mine. But I don't want to scare her and make her first time traumatic.

I've already made the decision to only have sex with her. Can I make her the woman I need to satisfy me? Forever?

“Isabella,” I call out to her. “I didn’t give you a safeword before, that was my bad. Do you want me to stop?”

“Stop what?” she turns her head and looks at me.

I don’t know what look is on my face, I never spanked a wife. Heck, I never spanked Norah. Whatever my face is saying, makes Isabella drag in a shaky breath.

I growl, “Everything. You can leave if you want. If this all too much.” I loosen my grip, waiting for her to spring off of me. The words echo in my head, I just told her she can leave me.

She’s unusually silent, clearly aroused, but not struggling. She likes being spanked. Likes letting me punish her simply because she frightened me.

Her cheeks are nearly as pink as her face as she catches her breath. “No.”

“No, what?”

“I want to stay with you.” Her words sound bland, but her writhing and soaked pussy suggest something very different. She was raised to be a good girl, perhaps taught shame and sex go together.

“Tonight changed things for me,” I admit with a tight chest. “*This* changes me too. Don’t hold back on me now. We can have something very explosive.”

She pushes her face into the cushion.

“No, look at me, wife.”

Her eyes land on me and electricity fires through my veins. “I want that. I want us to have more than my parents did. Please, Kieran.”

Her begging destroys me. Undoes me. A life that was stolen from me has landed in my lap, wrapped in a cherry-red butt and writhing pussy that wants more of my savage love.

This is our beginning and I’m not passing it up.

My dick feels like steel, my balls throb, I want her so much, I can barely breathe. I exhale slowly, my control on thin ice.

I drag those panties all the way off and pull her back into my lap. “Spread your legs. Grind that wet pussy on my cock.” Holding her face, I kiss my wife, deeply, madly, insanely because I’m more wound up that I think I’ve ever felt with a woman.

Isabella eagerly returns my kisses, hugging me tightly. Moans, soft and so fucking feminine mewl from deep in her throat. We go at each other’s mouths for what feels like forever and I’m ready to explode. I gently push her off me because I’m about to come in my pants.

I eye her dress, her breasts moving underneath. “Take off your clothes.”

“I have nothing else to wear.”

I smirk. “That’s the point. Take off that dress, or I’ll rip it off.”

“Asshole,” she mutters, and I can’t help but laugh. “At least help me.” She offers me her side to unzip the dress at the hip,

as it's mostly open in the back.

“Aye, my pleasure.” I skate the zipper down then brush my knuckles along her exposed back. Touching her sparks my heart to life again. I push the parted half off, but she steps away.

“I can finish.” She turns around and drops the dress, kicking it away with umph.

I swear, she's enjoying stripping for me. Standing there in just a bra, she makes my mouth start to water. “Can I get my pajamas?” she asks.

“Oh, no, bella. In my bed, you sleep naked. Like me.” I stand, hovering over her. “Completely naked. Now.”

She unclips the bra that opens in the front and... *Fuck*. Her naked body thrills me more than it should. She's too young for me. But she's bleedin' perfect. And untouched, something I'm not sure I know how to handle, given the man I am today.

“Good girl,” I say above a whisper, slowly removing the jacket of my ruined tux first, then the shirt. I keep the pants on and stay shirtless. The jacket and shirt bore the brunt of the fight and are mostly caked in blood. “Now on your knees for part two of your punishment.”

Isabella doesn't move. Not to be defiant, she looks shocked. My voice changed at seeing her naked.

“You demanded I stay faithful. You will now get a taste of that request. Now you'll see the man I am in bed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Isabella

Kieran teases me, taking off his shirt. His warrior tattoo is so damn sexy. Anyone would pay to see him strip. Sounded like Ginna would. The throbbing between my thighs can't be denied. I can't hide how I want Kieran. I never expected to feel so desperate and needy. To crave a savage like this so fiercely.

His sharp jaw, chiseled cheekbones, and vivid green eyes just paralyze me at times. No matter how I try to push away the feeling, I'm a moth to his flame. My ears ring from the thundering of my blood and beating heart.

Yet, this is the safest I've felt in a long time. I sink to my knees, mostly because I'm not sure I can stand for much longer, I'm so wet and aroused. "What are you going to do to me?"

"You're my wife. Whatever I want." Kieran takes his blood-soaked bowtie and ties my hands together behind my back.

Shit, I want to touch him, but the way his eyes rake over me, the naked me, this is almost just as satisfying.

"Are you going to just stick your dick in my mouth?" I say, even though I'm not sure if I'm allowed to talk. "Seems like a fair punishment."

"Don't tempt me with a promise to like it. You may find yourself beneath me, swallowing me down all night." Kieran studies my face, searching for my submission or a fight.

Getting neither, he smiles, opening his pants in dramatic fashion. He doesn't yank them down, though, just teases me by running a finger along my lower lip.

He uses a sex club to fuck women who know how to satisfy him. Hell, they are probably the super made-up gorgeous types with perfect fake boobs, hair extensions, lip plumping injections, and false eyelashes.

Pure fiction and fantasy. But that's what the club is for.

Still, thinking of those perfect specimens, and now, he has only me. I'm none of those things, and a wave of self-consciousness hits me. Instincts make me pull on the tie to cover myself, even if it's no use.

“Don't fight me. You won't like how I fight back.”

I struggle against the binding on my wrists. “I know I'm not your type.”

He grips my face. “Don't ever say that. I married you because I craved you. I'm hard as a rock to be inside you. I want you, Isabella. I could have fucked a naked woman dripping for me on our wedding night. I came home to you and made *you* come.”

I sure did...

His eyes rake over my naked body for what feels like forever. “You're gorgeous, my bella,” he grinds out. “I'm proud *you're* my wife. And not *just* because you're the Italian princess.”

Pride swells inside my chest. I consider returning the sentiment, but next, he's kissing me again like he's caught in this moment between us.

His warm, wet tongue glides inside my mouth, capturing me in a fiery kiss.

When he leaves each morning, his shirts look painted on. I hide my gawking at him behind my espresso cups, squeezing my thighs together at how those dress shirts of his fit across his thick biceps.

He stands and slides down his trousers. Tight black briefs with a designer name stands out boldly on the waistband. They sit so perfectly on his hips. There's not an ounce of fat on this man. Just ridges of abs and that sexy V-shaped muscle disappearing into those briefs.

Good Lord, his thighs are not just thick, but sculpted with cut muscles. An image of him propped up on them, fucking me for hours, shoots even more warmth through me.

Eyeing me, he pushes the briefs down and steps out, kicking them aside like they don't matter. His body is an inked-up work of art, only eclipsed by a massive cock. Thick and bobbing, with the tip dripping. Despite being sinister and even a little cruel, in the looks department, he's perfect. Which means he gets whatever he wants from women. The fact that I'm not crying out to be untied is evidence of that. Standing in front of me completely naked, he grips his cock, which he can barely get his hand around.

This is gonna hurt...

After a smirk, he pulls my chin up and his mouth crashes down on my lips with a deep, feral kiss. His tongue batters against mine as his hands roam my body. I can't help but melt against him. The intimacy of it blows my mind. He moans, deepening the kiss, as his grip feels like a stranglehold. Like we can't get close enough.

He lines up his hard cock with my lips. "To my count, I've given you two orgasms. You owe me one, *wife*."

By the look on his face, he's serious. I can't necessarily argue the count with him. I eye him holding his thick cock. Nodding, I lick my lips, submitting to him. This is a punishment, after all.

"That's a good girl," he groans, stroking his cock. Does he want it to get bigger?

I should be terrified by its size, and I am...a little. Oddly, I'm more aroused. "What do I do?"

"Open wide, I'm going to stick my cock in and run it along your tongue," he says, his voice full of gravel.

Next, he's inside my mouth. The smell is not what I expected. It's pure and clean and even musky. "Fuck," he mutters. "I love this. I need you to get used to it." He tilts his hips, rocking himself in and out of my mouth on his own. "That's right, let your husband fuck that bad little mouth of yours."

A heady moan echoes out of my chest.

“You like this, aye?” He holds my face and seductively keeps moving in and out. His eyes never leave mine as we stare long and hard at each other.

He may want some doe-eyed *What are you doing to me* look on my face. Instead, I narrow my eyes and actively participate, suggesting: *Whose mouth are you fucking? Who’s making you feel so good? Oh, your wife, motherfucker.*

I tighten my lips around him, and suck harder, meeting his thrusts, taking it. Showing him I can do this. The power gets me wetter and wetter.

“Whoa, slow down, bella. I don’t want to come so fast.” There’s only so much of that power and strength he’ll tolerate from me.

His hands wind through my hair, messing up the mountain of curls I made for my night out. He decimates what took me an hour to do with pins as they fall around my face. Gripping the waves, he growls, “I said slow down. Let me fuck your mouth slowly.” He slides back in, and next, he’s moaning. His dick feels so thick, and it’s so long that it’s hitting the back of my throat.

Drool seeps from my mouth, but with the way he smiles down at me, he must like that.

“Can you breathe, baby?” he asks with kindness in his tone. “Push the air out of your nose. Let me teach you how to take care of your husband.”

I pull off on my own, this time to take a breath. Instead of letting him shove it back in, I drag my tongue up and down the incredible length of him. “You wanted slow...”

“Fuck, yeah, that’s good.” He dips his head back. “Suck on the tip, baby.”

I swipe my tongue across the pillowy mushroom tip, lapping at the creamy beads sitting on top. My eyes roam over his sexy torso of rippling muscles. With every teasing lick and suck on his tip, his abs roll and vibrate. The muscles look ready to spasm. Like every part of him is ready to shatter.

“Fuck. You’re going to make me come,” he says with a groan, staring at me. “Right there, baby. Don’t stop. Take it down your throat like a good girl. That’s what I like. Oh, yeah. Swallow me down, wife, all of me.”

I relax my throat as hot ropes of his release splash across my tongue. Life is about choices. Marriage is about compromises. If blowing my husband is what I have to do to get what I want, before or after, then I’m gonna order a pair of knee pads online. I’m soaked, so it’s not like I don’t enjoy it.

Kieran pants but doesn’t even blink. He just stares at me like he can’t believe what just happened. Like maybe I just gave him the best BJ of his life.

He strokes my upper lip with his thick finger. “That was amazing. You did good, baby.” He pulls out and tries to kiss me, but I turn my head. Holding my face, he says, “Don’t you dare turn your head from me. I want to taste myself on your lips.”

For a moment, we're breathing the same air. I've just ingested his cum. By the way he's smiling, he likes everything about this moment.

His lips gently brush against mine again, and it's much different from the way he kissed me a few minutes ago when he wanted me to suck his dick. Still, just feeling his mouth on mine sends an explosion of fire through my veins, straight to my inner thighs. Every inch of me goes electric, and my center aches.

He lifts me up and lays me out on the bed, refastening the tie to loop around the scrolls on his headboard. "Now you're mine." He kisses down my body, suckling my nipples. He stops when he's seated between my thighs. I honestly expected he'd be inside by now, ramming into me. His stare rakes over every inch of me, settling on my quivering slit.

"Don't you need to wait to get hard again?"

"Apparently not." He grips his fully erect cock. "I'm still rock-hard, baby." His hand gently skates down my body. "Open for me," he growls. "Or I tie these legs down." Mischief laces his tone.

My right knee falls to the side, and within seconds, his fingers caress my wet folds, pulling a groan from me. The contact with my hot slit makes my hips buck.

"That's right, little wife. I can make you feel so good. Behave, or I'll stop."

"God, Kieran," I groan. "That feels so good."

“I know it does. Remember that. Remember, I can be your greatest enemy or your greatest source of pleasure, Mrs. O’Rourke.”

My heart explodes at hearing him call me that, like he really thinks I’m his. I’m too lost in a haze to ask questions. “Don’t stop.”

“I won’t. I’ve not been able to get the idea of you in that bathtub playing with yourself out of my mind. But there’s no need for that after tonight. I make you come. *Me*. I make you lose control. Do you understand?”

“I do.” I arch my back as two fingers circle my clit. The sensitive bud throbs, ready to explode like on our wedding night.

“Fuck, you’re so wet for me,” he says, gravelly, slipping both fingers inside me, their thickness stretching me.

The pressure builds between my thighs as Kieran slides his fingers in and out of me, rubbing my clit in between. “Please,” I moan.

“Please, *what?*”

“Fuck me like you promised,” I forcibly spat.

“What a dirty mouth on you.” He brings his lips back up to kiss me. “And this belongs to me.” He grips my entire pussy, two fingers sliding into the cleft of my ass. “This gorgeous, wet pussy is mine.”

“Please, Kieran.”

“I knew you’d beg for it.” He sucks on my nipples some more. “I need to taste you first. Get you addicted to not only my cock but my mouth.” His face dips between my thighs, and his hot tongue probes my opening. It sweeps up and down the entire slit, landing on my nub. “Christ, so tasty. I could live on this for weeks.”

He goes at me harder, and I feel dizzy from holding my breath. It’s too much. His hands slide under my ass, and he holds me in place to lick and lave me in a relentless rhythm. At one point, I tilt my hips and ride his tongue. I moan his name under my breath, lost and consumed.

“Come for me, baby. My cock inside you will feel better after you’ve come.”

As if I’ve been waiting for permission, a huge wave crashes over me, wiping me out. My womb contracts around his tongue. I gasp. I curse. I buck.

Everything rushes out of me, including a few tears. Kieran comes back up to my face and kisses them away. “That good, aye?” His accent sounds thicker, the real beast more present than before.

“Perfect,” I groan.

Kieran kisses me again, positioning himself at my entrance. Just the tip of him resting against my quivering slit jolts me. Only now do I really understand what I’m in for. What he plans to do to me. Not just have sex with me but ruin me.

“There’s no way to do this without hurting you.” He nuzzles against me, those thick thighs bent as he pushes past my folds.

I brace against the intense stretching, the delicious friction of his skin against mine. I welcome it as he slowly glides inside me, inch by torturous inch.

“Fuck... Breathe, baby,” he whispers. “It will only sting for a minute or so,” he says this with cocky confidence.

The feel of his thick, veiny cock against my clit drives me crazy. I explode into another orgasm from this alone.

“Damn, wife.” Kieran pants, lifting his eyes to see me. “I really hope you’re always this orgasmic. It will make fucking you all the time so much better, knowing I’m driving you crazy like you’re driving me.” His cock turns slippery, sliding easily into me. “Jaysus, you’re dripping wet. I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m ready to just go off on you.” The strain in his voice is palpable.

He continues to ease inside me, his eyes sealed shut, but his mouth drops open, deep groans echoing in his chest.

“Husband,” I call out to him, to which he opens one brilliant green eye.

“Wife?”

“*Fuck. Me.*”

“Oh, baby, you asked for it.” He grabs a knife from his bedside table and cuts the bowtie keeping my hands from touching him. “That’s better. Grab my ass. Let’s fuck now.

Really get to know each other.” In an instant, he thrusts all the way in. To the hilt.

The burst of pain is immediate and draws a sharp breath from me. Sliding in and out, Kieran whispers, “Ride through the pain with me. It will go away.” He seals his mouth over mine. “I promise. Stay with me.”

As if I’d tell him to stop.

His bare chest presses against mine as his hands circle my waist, pinning our bodies closer together. My flesh thrums with need. I feel wet like I’ve never been wet before.

It’s just a tiny movement, a curl of my hips, but the ridge of his stiff cock sinks into my slit. Kieran hisses, “Bad girl.” He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth and gently bites down before speaking. “Keep those legs open. Relax your hips. Let me in deeper. Fuck, yes.” He moans with his head against my chest. He roughly pushes the covers away until we’re going at it directly on the sheets. “Look at you, taking all of me. Good girl. Let me fuck you senseless.”

Waves of unbelievable pleasure fire through me. Every cell wakes up, all while Kieran ruts on top of me, moaning in such a masculine and powerful way.

“Don’t stop,” I beg, sliding my newly freed hands down his damp back.

“Not stopping. Not even close. It’s too fucking good.” He keeps going, taking what he needs. He’s been celibate for a

few weeks, and now I can feel how difficult that must have been for him.

His lips brush against mine again briefly, saying something in Gaelic. But then he sits back and grips my hips, pulling me closer so he gets even deeper.

With him pushing in and out of me, I see my tits bouncing from the force of his drive. “Right there. God, don’t stop.” I dig my nails into his ass.

“*I am your god. Don’t forget it. Your savior. I’ll give you the world, so long as you give me what I need. Right now, all I need is this tight cunt.*” His dirty talk excites the hell out of me.

I’m not a fan of the c-word, but it’s an Irish thing. They place the emphasis on the *u*, extending it. Everything about the way Kieran talks is sexy.

Every muscle in his body throbs with each thrust. Slick with sweat, the curves and cuts in his arms look more pronounced. Dangerous and feral.

Wisps of his dark hair hang in front of his eyes. He turns into someone else, watching his cock impale me. “You’re still so fucking wet, you’re loving this, aren’t you?” He groans and pumps. His head dips back, and his tongue licks his full lips. “Right there, bella. Right there, aye. I’m fucking coming again. Take me. Milk me.”

I plunge into yet another orgasm. He owns my body. I belong to him. To make his orgasm more powerful, my womb

tightens around his cock.

“Fuck, that’s so damn good.” He falls against my chest, pulling my hips closer, but kisses me through the rest of his waves. His. Mine.

I didn’t know whose are whose, but I’m about to find out it doesn’t matter...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kieran

When I open my eyes, I don't know where I am. Even though a quick glance around confirms I'm in my bed. It's the body wrapped up in my arms that's throwing me for a loop.

Isabella.

Naked and no longer a virgin.

Jesus-fucking-Christ-almighty, the sex last night was hotter than I thought it would be. Fucking my *wife* wasn't something I thought would get me off the way it did.

I even woke her up a few times and fucked her again. Each time she took me into her body. Her cunt quickly warmed up and got wet for me.

I don't go without a condom, ever, which made the sex so wild for me, thinking I was getting her pregnant. She spread those gorgeous legs for me, taking my cock so deep inside her like she wants to be pregnant with my baby. I've made it clear that's what I want. What I expect. Do I need to remind her?

Waking up with my cock burrowed sublimely between her beautiful round ass cheeks, there's only one thing I want to discuss. Getting inside that tight pussy again.

My hands skate across her shoulders and down her arms. She's so fucking silky smooth. I reach her stomach, my earlier thought racing back. I need to put a baby in her. Now that I

know she loves sex, and that I can fuck her the way I want, I can bury myself inside her every chance I get.

Every part of me is sore from going at it with power, but also with constraint so I wouldn't hurt her. Which is new for me. The slow torture felt even better.

Tilting my hips to mount her and wake her up to fuck me again—in that order—a sharp sting reminds me of how her nails dug into my ass. Not my back, as many women did. But my ass to power up my fucking and take her harder.

My wife *loves* it rough!

I lost track of how many times I made her come. I had enough trouble keeping score of my own orgasms. I still don't know for sure because I never got soft. I climaxed inside her and then kept going. Making both of us a slippery mess.

The sheets are bloodstained, for sure. That's to be expected when your wife is a virgin and you penetrate her for the first time. Over and over. Seeing my blood-coated cock last night initially wrecked me. In a savage way. Deflowering and claiming my wife, my queen, I damn near turned feral and took her brutally. I was so charged up with power lust.

“Are you awake, bella?” My cock is throbbing to get inside that tight heat of hers.

Awake enough...

She mewls and clenches her ass cheeks with my cock between them.

“That’s dangerous, bella. I will take you there if you tempt me.”

She chuckles low and brings a hand around to grip my cock. It thumps hard in her delicate fingers. “Whoa, are you always like this in the morning?”

“I am.” I kiss her shoulder and run my tongue up the side of her neck. “And I’m tired of waking up alone and having to deal with it on my own.” Her long, dark hair is so thick, and I bet it’s great for holding on to when I take her from behind. “On your stomach, wife. Ass in the air.”

“Um... Are you doing that to me there now?” Her tone is hesitant, yet she turns over and gives me what I want.

“Not yet.” I kiss down her back. The line of her is perfect. I settle between her legs and spread them apart, eyeing her tiny, pink, bare slit. Possibly that color from being sore. But fuck, she’s already dripping for me. “We’ll get to that.”

“Kieran,” she moans into the pillow, and it drives me fucking nuts.

“I’m going to show you how I get when I fuck in this position. Last night was just a taste of the real me.”

“You don’t say...” She turns her head, and I see her smile.

Minx loves this. Damn...

“Are you sore?”

“A little. But I doubt that will stop you.”

I wrap her hair around my hands and lift her head off the pillow to breathe in her scent. “I want you to enjoy it. If it’s too—”

“No...it’s not. I want it. Please.”

“Good girl.” I stroke the smooth but drenched slit. “And keep this pussy bare like this for me. I’ll lick and fuck it all the time.”

“Not all the time,” she scoffs. “There’re times when you can’t. Or shouldn’t.”

“Ha, if you mean when you’re on your period, I’ll still make use of you.”

“When I’m bleeding?” She buries her face in the pillow again.

“I know women pretty well, and don’t you feel more desperate for sex during those times?”

“Um.” She turns her head again. “I guess.”

Which brings me to the question swirling in my head while I’m fingering her and she’s writhing, soaking the sheets even more. God, what a mess we made. “When are you due for it, by the way?”

“Next week, I think,” she pants.

“I intend to have my cock inside you every day. When you’re on your period, the orgasm will ease the pain.”

“And how do you know that?” she sasses me.

“Don’t worry about how I came to know that. Just know that, as my wife, you’ll benefit from it.” I kiss her lower back. Her skin smells so fucking sweet while I keep fingering her. “You’re sore, so I’ll get you extra wet.”

“Yes, please,” she squeaks, pushing her ass against my hand.

“I want to show you one way I really like to fuck. Can you handle that?”

“God, yes. I want it so bad. You’ve had sex all these years. I’ve...”

I bring my mouth down to her ear again. “You’ve been a good girl. You waited.” I think about that guy, Ivan, still wrapping my head around what he wanted her for, other than the obvious. But a bagman nephew of the Bratva pakhan had no business trying to land the Cosa Nostra princess.

“I waited.” she repeats.

“For me.” The bulging head of my cock lines up with her entrance while I spread her cheeks. “Now you’re mine. You already have me on the edge of my control. Last night I held back. But you disobeyed me. Now I’m going to fuck you like an animal to make you pay for that.” Without warning, I thrust inside, ripping a scream from her throat.

“Kieran!” she cries out, her fingers gripping the sheets. “That’s... That’s...”

“This is me. This is the savage you tempted.” I relentlessly pound into her from behind, feeling her tightening around me,

but she's still very slick.

“Don't stop. I want to be what you need in the bedroom.” Her words shatter through me. “So you don't want anyone else.”

She wants us to have an intensely sexual relationship, and that means she already understands the kind of man I am. I need to know more about her, though. Right now, I need to fuck this tight, wet pussy until I lose my mind.

Isabella groans and cries out. For the first time, I consider that Patricia must be downstairs and will hear a woman screaming from my bedroom. Since Isabella has been staying in Shea's room, my house manager might consider I have a woman other than my wife in my bed. I don't care, but I don't want an employee disrespecting me.

“Shhh,” I breathe into Isabella's neck. “Patricia doesn't know I'm fucking you.” I slow down, realizing that makes it better for both of us. The measured torture lights me up like last night. Being gentle, but also cruel enough to bring us both to a razor-thin edge.

Isabella gets wetter and tighter with every drawn-out glide of my cock in and out of her. I feel my balls tighten, and that electricity shoots up my spine. “I'm gonna come, bella. Are you close?”

She whimpers and pushes her ass against me. “Harder,” she moans.

Son of a bitch, she loves getting fucked like this. I thrust some more, desperately waiting for her to fall over the edge. Playing dirty, I push my thumb on the seam of her ass. With that, she screeches, and I feel her throbbing around me.

She moans my name, and I can't take it.

"That's right, wife, come for me. Fuck..." I throw my head back and feel my load pulse out of me. Ropes of warm cum mix with her juices, and it's mind-blowing.

I fall forward and drag my teeth across her shoulders. Once again, I don't soften, even though I just came violently inside her. She stays with me thrust for thrust, wanting more. I lift her hips to find her clit. The second I touch it, she cries out, and this climax is even stronger for her. She clamps down even harder, the waves more intense. It's like she's possessed, the way she bucks and shakes on the bed beneath me.

Being quiet is a long-lost endeavor, as we're both making so much noise at this point.

By the time we're done, I'm holding her against my chest, both our breathing erratic. "Fuck," I mutter into the back of her hair. "What are you trying to do to me?" I whisper, not even sure if she can hear me, and I doubt she has an answer.

She wiggles and twists until she's facing me. Feeling overwhelmed, I kiss her. Keep kissing her, swirling my tongue deep into her mouth. "I wish I can say that's the worst of me."

"There's more?" Her eyes find mine, and it's pure adoration, but I don't know what to do with that. This is supposed to be a

convenient transaction, a wife I need to give me sons in exchange for money my enemies will use to destroy themselves. Allowing me to expand my dynasty and take over all of Astoria. “I’m just getting started with you.”

My phone ringing reminds me of the outside world and that I can’t stay in this bed all day. I’ll tear her apart and leave her too sore for days. I see it’s Riordan and groan.

Lifting off Isabella, I swipe to answer the call. “I’ll ring you back.”

Isabella sits up in bed and stretches with that beautiful back to me. Fucking the crap out of the Italian princess is the last place in the world I thought I’d end up.

I started in such a different place. A crown prince who fell in love with a sweet girl from the neighborhood with no thought to how I’d live my life as a king. That was the kind of love I knew. Not this. Not falling for a wife who’s in my bed and fucking me because it’s convenient. For both of us.

Maybe it’s selfish of me, or maybe I just like it. My life hasn’t been about what I want or what I like for a very long time. Until I know for sure what my relationship with Isabella will be when no one is watching, when it’s just us, I have to keep my guard up.

“Why don’t you go take a bath? I’m sure you’re sore.” I stand up and snag the briefs I tossed yesterday. Fuck, just looking at her used and debauched naked body, I’m growing hard again.

“Oh, no...” She looks down at the bed and shucks the covers. “I ruined your sheets.”

I grin. It’s a badge of honor for me to deflower my wife. “There’re more sheets. I’ll have Patricia—”

“No!” Isabella shrieks and starts pulling them off the mattress. “I’m mortified. Plus, that woman watched you grow up. Spare her the embarrassment or the visual of picturing you ramming me to the point I bled.” Her spunk makes me smile, but not too wide. I don’t want to give too much away of how I love her like this.

“When you put it that way... What do you suggest?”

She glances around. “This is my bedroom now, according to you. That makes this my bed. I’ll change the sheets. Where are they?” She sounds sincere.

“Closet in the bathroom.” I stalk up to her, and she covers her breasts.

I gently pull her wrists away. “Stop. You don’t hide yourself from me. I’m your husband. It’s my right to look at you.”

“Doesn’t mean I feel good—”

“About what?” I stop her.

“I’m too big on top. I don’t like it.”

“Oh, bella, I love it.” I reach down and kiss each nipple. “My opinion is the only one that matters. You feeling otherwise is an insult to me.”

She softens to me, and next, she's kissing me. I stop her before I throw her down and fuck her again.

I don't know why I'm struggling to just walk away from her. Go in the shower like she's nobody. She's gotten under my skin, and I'm not sure if I want to rip off my own flesh to get rid of her or wrap us both up in a blanket and hide us from the world.

Being the mob boss means anything I hold dear is at risk. She's a strategic match. But if my enemies think I love her, that's a sharper knife to plunge into my chest. Conversely, a made man—a don, at that—in love is more dangerous.

I bring Isabella into the bathroom and run the water in my jet bathtub. “The sheets can wait. Soak in the tub. You need it.”

“I don't want to get in your way. I can soak just fine in my ___”

I hold her face. “You're not in my way. I'll let you know when you are. I'm not shy.” I brush my mouth against hers because I'm finding I can't resist those full lips anymore. Christ, they sucked my cock just the way I liked. “While we're waiting for the water, know this, bella. I want you pregnant. Do you understand me?”

“Uh-huh,” she says with no emotion. When I nod and go to turn away, she blurts, “I have something *I* want.”

I close my eyes, figuring it would be more freedom, which I won't agree to. “I'm listening.” Yet her fighting spirit turns me

on.

“How about we take turns?”

My pulse thickens as I face her. “What do you mean, *turns?*”

“One night, we do what I want. And one night what you want.”

“Do you mean sexually? I’d love to know what you want that you didn’t get, Isabella.”

“I will definitely leave the sex up to you. In the bed, you’re in control.” She blushes. “I want us to go on a date. A first date. Something special. Something I deserve. I want to get gussied up. You bought me all those dresses, and I made you miss that fundraiser.” She’s pushy. I like that.

“There will be more.”

“Just something you and me.”

Nodding, I say, “If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.” She gives me a cute curtsy. “Thank you.”

“What should I tell Patricia to bring you for breakfast?” That will raise her curiosity, getting my wife breakfast when I don’t get my own.

“You’re gonna bring me my breakfast?” she sputters.

“Aye, what do you want?”

Sinking into the tub, her eyes flutter closed. “Just this right now.”

With her in the tub, I stand there naked to watch her. When her eyes lift to my body, I ask, “Like what you see?”

“No,” she sasses me.

“Liar.” I stroke my chest, feeling short stubbles of hair that I sometimes shave. “How is the water?”

“Great.” She sinks in deeper. “I think I’ll stay in here all day. I’ll text you what I want for dinner. That’s if you’re coming home.”

“I heard that, you little brat.”

Balancing my need to dominate with making sure my wife only wants me, that I’m her source of pleasure, drives my next move.

I kneel in front of the tub and wade my fingers in the water.

Isabella’s bites her lip because she thinks I’m going to stroke her to another fever. Only, I grip her calf and drag her body closer to the jet.

“Whoa,” she moans.

Pulling her to a seated position, her legs hanging off the side, I cup her bottom so her cunt is right up against the jets.

“Wait,” she urgently tries to stop me.

“No. Take it.”

Our heads press together, the up-close glance at her taking pleasure looks so fucking erotic.

“How does that feel?”

Breathing heavily, she moans, “Oh God. Oh God.”

“Put your arms around my neck,” I demand low and throaty.

With my free hand, I increase the pressure on her ass to feel the jets stronger.

She pulls away, but I hold her ass tighter. “Don’t come yet. Hold on. It will feel so fucking good.”

Her head dips back and I feel her ass muscles contract like she’s fucking the jet. Letting the pulses massage her clit. “So good. Damn you.”

“Aye,” I say gravelly. Watching my wife get off is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

I feel like I’m growing as a man, giving pleasure, not just obsessed with receiving it. The act of selflessly making my wife come like this makes me feel powerful.

“Kieran, I can’t take it. Please let me come.”

I kiss her roughly, stroking my tongue with hers. Holding her ass, I notch my finger into the seam. Tapping on her ring of muscles, I feel my index finger slide right in, the water is so slick. “Tell me to stop,” I groan against her lips. “Do you like this?”

“God, that feels so good. Don’t stop. Please... Please...”

“Come for me, baby. Come with my finger in your ass.”

Her muscles explode, off the charts. I feel the contraction around my finger. Fuck, how it will feel to fuck her like this? Next... My cock is pulsing against my thigh.

Watching her come made me come.

Isabella wants independence, but something else tells me she wants to be mine. She wants to be kept safe. I want a woman I can fuck the way I need to.

We both might have won the lottery here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Isabella

Kieran wants babies and obedience. And I want fidelity and to finish my degree. As my skin thrums with pleasure from the first night with him, I just arrived at where those two worlds intersect. Unless I do something drastic and demand to be let out of this marriage, I have to give Kieran a child. My options are limited, but those options include living on the run my whole life, where I'll be hunted.

This...

This incredible pleasure, with a promise to have it any time I want, is messing with my head. If nothing else, Kieran can be bargained with. He's a savage on the street, but he's been decent to me. Strict, sure. I'm the enemy's daughter living under his roof. The more obedient I am, the more he'll give me. In time.

And if he falls in love with me...

Then he can be talked into letting me have some kind of life beyond pushing out babies.

But what if I fall in love with him first and he breaks my heart?



I wander into the bedroom, clean and smooth, wearing my T-shirt, the one I stuffed into my bag after the coffee meeting. My laptop and school bag sit on the bed. On the nightstand sits a dish of fruit and my espresso.

He really wants me to move into his bedroom. I have to prove I can be trusted. Sneaking off on Christian was wrong. Going to the club when Kieran told me not to was also wrong.

Kieran's punishment hardly hurt me. Last night and this morning were amazing. Sex was nothing like I had expected. It was better. Kieran made it better. I felt how he restrained himself, and that forced him to be gentle with me. Brought him down to my level, where we were equal. That part meant everything to me. Then he ramped it up, forcing me to his level. Just a little by probing my butt. God, that felt amazing.

I exhale, knowing it's time to behave. Papa always threatened that something terrible could happen to me, and I laughed it off because, growing up, things were relatively peaceful. With Stasia missing, my mother killed, and someone coming at me with a knife, it's all finally resonating.

I'm sitting on the bed with my laptop when Kieran comes out of the bathroom wearing only that damn towel, and my breath goes still.

Oh, mio Dio, my Nana used to say.

What a body that man has. Is he even real?

I sit back and stare at him, feeling my pussy—my very sore pussy, by the way—throb for him. Again. What is it about

him? He calls it the c-word.

“Cunt,” I whisper to myself, and it feels liberating.

He told me flat out he wants to have sex with me every night, maybe during the day, too, until I’m pregnant. I’m not ready to tell him no. It’s too soon. Things are too raw, especially after last night. He’ll think I want to leave him, and I’ll never step foot outside this house again.

I just need time.

I have one more batch of unopened pills on hand. And a few months before I graduate. I need more pills.

Kieran drops the towel, and any and all thoughts about birth control leave my head immediately.

I give up on my schoolwork and watch him put lotion on his face in the mirror. His ass is perfectly round and looks hairless, even though he’s covered in soft coils of light brown hair. The Irish are fair in skin tone, but Kieran’s dark brown hair makes him stand out. The oldest O’Rourkes have dark hair, like Fergus, their father. Then there’s Eoghan and Balor, whose hair leans to a sandier blond. From what I saw in pictures, the twin brothers, who live out west, are golden blonde like Clara. Shea is naturally dark-haired like Kieran but gets blonde highlights that complement her fair skin.

Kieran turns to put on a pair of briefs. His cock isn’t erect, but it’s thick and long, hanging from a very powerful and taut pelvis. “See something you like, wife?”

“Do you?” I spread my legs for him to inspect that my sex is glistening for him again.

He struts over, his dress shirt hanging open lazily, and lays a kiss on my thigh. “*Alainn*, beautiful.” He growls against my skin. “Mine.”

“Considering what you did to me all night, I’d say I was yours.”

“Smart mouths get fucked with a cock.”

Promise? I don’t voice that because I know he’ll make good on it. Shit, I have to catch my breath. I hop off the bed and grab his tie, making the knot for him. “What about our date?”

“Am I planning it, or you?” His spicy cologne makes me feel warm and gooey down in my belly.

“You’re the man. It’s a date. It’s up to you to plan.” I smooth the tie under the gold and diamond bar clip. The matte-gold cufflinks shine with diamond-encrusted raised initials. KO. He is the most polished, beautiful man with a dangerous edge who makes my already wet pussy even more drenched.

“All right, wife.” He steps back, deflating me.

I was hoping for another kiss.

Grrrr.

“Let me look at my schedule, and my first night free—”

“And no going to your club.” I hate how my voice cracks. “Right?”

He smirks. “There are other events I have at night during the week. Some of them at black sites, *dealing* with people.” His voice goes cold, giving me a chill. “If I come home one night and take a shower right away, it’s to wash blood off me. Not perfume.”

“I see.”

“My first night free is yours.” He shoves a thin wallet made of leather I can smell across the room into his suit jacket.

“Okay.” I fidget, watching him put on his watch and his wedding ring.

“I’ll see you later.” He struts dramatically toward the door.

“Wait!” I rush across the room to stand in his way. “Kiss me goodbye.”

“Why?”

“I’m your wife. I want a kiss goodbye.”

He growls, lowering his head. The kiss makes my knees go weak, and he gets caught up, too. But he breaks it, swearing under his breath. “Now be a good girl.”

I plop onto the bed. “Sure, I’ll just be here...touching myself.”

Kieran rolls his eyes and leaves the room.

O’Rourke-1, O’Rourke-0.

I’m just not sure which O’Rourke is really winning.



A few days later, after sleeping in Kieran's bed only to be held all night and nothing more, my phone beeps, and I see it's a text from my elusive husband.

Him: *What are you wearing?*

I smile and type: *Your shirt.*

I started wearing the ones he strips out of when he gets home. The ones not covered in blood, that is. Last night, the one he took off had tears in the sleeve. From a knife, he said, but he wasn't cut. He tossed it aside and stared at me. I was ready for him to take me, but he said he was too worked up from hurting people for hours and just needed to sleep it off.

His hold strangled me most of the night, but I let him use me for comfort.

Him: *And?*

Me: *Nothing else.*

Him: *Good girl.*

Me: *Do you need something?*

Him: *I need something very badly. Did you touch yourself today?*

Me: *Maybe.*

Him: *Brat. And, wife?*

Me: *Yes, husband?*

Him: *Go pick out a dress.*

Me: *For what?*

Him: *Tonight.*

My heart thrums with excitement. *Tonight?*

Him: *Aye. I'm taking you out on a date.*

Me: *Where?*

Him: *You'll see. Be ready at six.*

Me: *Whatever. (Eye roll emoji)*

Him: *Try that in front of me and your eyes will be rolling into the back of your skull for sure. See you at six.*

“Woo hoo!” I bounce out of the bed and don’t reply. When I open the bedroom door slowly, I see Patricia walking upstairs with my lunch tray. “Kieran and I are going on a date tonight.” I take the tray from her and put it on Kieran’s bed.

“Could be why he looked so happy this morning.”

“He looked happy?”

“Aye. The other mornings, I didn’t even want to ask him any questions. Anger hummed off his skin.” The note of fear in her voice sets me back.

Probably from his nights at the black sites. Nights he might have gone to the club to work off the anger and aggression. I stole that outlet from him, demanding he honor his vow to me. A request he agreed to when he could have blown me off.

“Thank you, Patricia, for bringing me my meals, but you don’t have to keep bringing them up here. I like this bedroom, but I want to start working down in the library again.”

“Can I give you a word of advice?”

I exhale. “Please.” Although I’m not sure where she’d start.

Looking around, she says, “This was his parents’ bedroom. It was the biggest, of course, so he wanted it. He asked me to hire a decorator to change it up, new wallcoverings and new furniture. But...”

“But...”

“This is for a bachelor.” She looks at her phone. “I’ll call the decorator back to make it how you want it. For both of you. But now, you have a date with your powerful, handsome husband. Are you excited?”

“I am. Do you know if Christian will be coming with us?”

Patricia stiffens but doesn’t say anything.

“What...what happened to him?”

She clears her throat. “It’s best you ask your husband.”

“Have you seen Christian? Please answer me. Is he hurt?” I now have these horrific images of him walking around with either a busted-up face or on crutches from a broken leg. Or maybe he’s smoking a cigarette with his left hand because Lachlan cut off his right.

“I’ve not seen him, missus.”

My stomach twists. *What have I done?*

“Kieran does what he thinks is best,” she says quietly. “I don’t question him. My other advice is that you don’t either.” She leaves, and I’m gobsmacked.

Feeling sick, I amble down the hall toward Shea’s bedroom, the elation of going out tonight deflating like a week-old party balloon.

Patricia said Kieran had been unhappy all week. I didn’t even think about Christian. The blood on his clothes every night. The anger coming off him. Oh, no. But today... Today he sounded happy. Maybe Christian’s on another assignment. Maybe they gave him a timeout. Maybe he quit because of what I did after realizing if it happened again, they’d certainly hurt him.

I hope he quit. I hope that’s all it is.

Opening the door to Shea’s room, the air feels stale now, or maybe it’s my mood. I consider for a second if I should move back in here. But that feels wrong. I like sleeping with my husband. I like how it feels to be held all night. Plus, a wife *should* sleep with her husband.

The other night, he said we need to communicate better. I need to ask him directly what happened to Christian.

In the closet, I stare at the dresses hanging on the rack. It lifts my mood a little more because Kieran wants to take me out. He sounded happy and wants to be with me.

The blue high-neck, high-slit dress he bought me really hugs my curves. Will he like that for our date? I loved how I

looked in it. He did buy it, after all. Then again, things got a little chaotic after the man with the knife came at me. Maybe he doesn't remember the dress. I want to wear it, and that's all that matters to me.

With it hanging over my shoulder, along with a pair of silver heels and my makeup bag in the other hand, I traipse back down the hall to Kieran's bedroom, where all my toiletries are. I set them up next to his in the bathroom like we're a real couple.

My parents didn't share a bedroom. Hadn't for as long as I could remember. Patricia said this was his *parents'* bedroom. That meant his father didn't pack his wife off down the hall to another room.

I tuck that thought away, excited about tonight.



At close to six p.m., I lean against Kieran's lighted mirror, applying one last layer of mascara. The sun had just set, and sparkles dance on the river below. The hydraulic sound of the gate opening sends my heart soaring with excitement. Before all hell broke loose and my house was bombed, I had a social life. I saw Sam and Ginna all the time when I was home. I enjoyed going out to fancy restaurants and clubs. I just always had my guards. Even at school.

Now, I have a husband who wants to take me to nice places. Okay, I asked for the date. But he agreed. He could have said no. He could have kept ignoring me. Kept me in Shea's room and only came in a few times a month to try to get me pregnant.

This has turned into something more, as far as what I feel for Kieran. I think he feels the same way about me. Sure, I'm still on lockdown, but it's for my protection.

I leave the bedroom and approach the top of the staircase. Voices sound out on the floor below, and for a moment, I think something is wrong and the date is called off.

Kieran struts through the center hallway below dressed in the same suit he had on this morning. I don't want him to change. I'm sure it's soaked up his cologne by now.

Calder and Waylon follow him, as well as Lachlan. There's an issue, but I can't make out what they're saying because they're talking over each other.

"Just *handle* it!" Kieran roars at them, making me jump.

The movement surprises him by how he looks up at me. Immediately, his eyes roam my body. With the silence behind him, it's like he can really take me in.

"Hello," I say softly, a clutch in my grasp. "Problem?" I put my hand on my hip, ready to argue if this date is being canceled.

"There sure is a problem," he says wryly.

I glance down at the three men who stare at their king with perplexed looks. “And what is this problem?”

Slowly, he ascends the stairs, his eyes on my legs. “Is that what you’re wearing?”

“It is.” I drop my hands. “Do you not like it?”

“Aye. I like it too much.” He leans on the banister, looking at me like I’m his last meal before going to the chair. “I don’t suppose you’d give your grumpy husband a good fuck before we go out?”

I’m not sure if he’s kidding. The way he goes at me, I doubt we’ll leave. Straightening my back, I say, “I’m hungry.”

“Aye. So am I.”

“For food.”

He grins. “Good girl. Standing up for what you want.” He takes my hand, and with his arm draped around my waist, he leads me down the stairs.

Kieran opens the front door, which doesn’t get much use since we’ve not had any guests besides his sister and parents. When his brothers come by, they all come in through the kitchen.

Lachlan stands there, hands behind his back, grinning. “You look lovely, Mrs. O’Rourke.”

“Thank you, Lach.” I use the nickname I hear Kieran and his other brothers call him. For better or worse, I am part of this family.

A sparkling black limo idles in the courtyard, and my heart thumps. “Is that for us?”

“Aye. You told me to handle the date.” He kisses me on the neck, and shivers roll through me.

I’m dying to get out of this house, but wanting my husband’s mouth on me wars with my better senses. It’s like he’s trying to get me addicted to his body. His touch. God, I may already be there.

“Are you joining us, Lach?” I ask him when he opens the limo door for us, and I hear Kieran grunt.

“No.” He shakes his head. “Just briefing my guys. We’ve never been to this restaurant before, so I had to scope it out.” The bodyguards report to Lachlan, who is the enforcer. Kieran mentioned that he leads a team of *bad dudes* and handles *things* when people step out of line.

“A new place?” I ask Kieran.

“A place more appropriate to take my new wife.” He helps me inside the limo. When his hands run up my leg, he says, “This still may be a very short date.”

The fire in his eyes after several days of darkness there makes me smile. “It’s my turn. I say when it ends.”

“You won’t want this to end.” His hand glides into the slit of the dress, and with frightening precision, he finds my sex. “Oh, bella. I’m gonna take you tonight, over and over.”

I think he’s going to kiss me, but it’s a short drive to a swanky restaurant in the older part of Astoria. We hover at the

end of the block until a signal is given to pull up to the building with a black awning and gold-script lettering. I blink and see a...

A red carpet? Lights flash, and I spin my head toward Kieran. “Who’s having dinner here tonight? Why all the cameras?”

“We are.” He kisses my hand. “They want to see my wife.”

A frown takes over. “You’re showing me off?”

“I sure am. Anything wrong with that?”

I knew someday this would be my life. But with a powerful businessman. Not a don. And *not* in the wake of the tragic loss of my mother and then forcibly married weeks after meeting the don my father chose. No, he didn’t choose Kieran. Kieran chose me.

“And if people want me dead, like you’ve been telling me for weeks, this isn’t making me a target?”

Kieran strokes my cheek. “Not the way I’ll hold you and look at you. This is the show that was robbed from us when the big wedding didn’t happen. This is to make clear to anyone watching that, no matter what happens between your father and Koslov, *you* are off limits. You are *mine*, and no one *touches* what is mine.” He’s using the date as an opportunity to stake his claim on me.

His words are chilling, but his power is electrifying. Sexy, the way he wants to protect me. Smiling, I say, “Thank you for this.”

He leans in to kiss me, but the door opens. “Good timing, Calder,” Kieran sneers, but it melts into a smile. He’s next to the door, so he gets out and then offers me his hand.

I step out, and I’m immediately blinded by all the lights. Kieran doesn’t address the cameras or the questions, so neither do I. He just holds me close, looking like he adores me as we stroll in. It doesn’t feel fake.

Next, we’re seated in an elevated section of the dining room with no one else around us. Below, the tables are practically on top of each other. Kieran holds out a chair for me and brushes his lips on the back of my neck. It sets my skin on fire. The man is so passionate.

The waiter immediately comes over with menus, ruining the moment.

Kieran orders the wine and then lets me order my dinner first. After, he says, “Is this okay, bella?” He reaches for my hand. “I assumed you like Italian food.”

“Yes, I do.” I swallow hard, and Kieran notices, even though the waiter is showing him the wine bottle.

“What’s wrong? You had a very faraway look.”

“I was thinking of my mother.” I tap the tablecloth. “She cooked authentic Italian.”

“I hope this food is somewhat satisfying.” He takes the first poured glass of wine and hands it to me.

By the smell of garlic and basil, I’m sure I’ll like it. “I’m not *that* spoiled, Kieran. I’m just glad you thought of this. For

me.” I clink his glass when it’s filled. “We have something in common, you know. We’ve both lost someone we care about.” I thread our fingers together. “I’m sorry about your fiancée. I’m not sure I told you that.”

He quirks a sincere smile. “People will have to stop calling her that, I guess. I’m married now.” He runs a thumb over my ring, and I see he’s still wearing his.

We make small talk over the salad and some shared bread. Before I know it, the waiter creeps back over, and the meal is put down in front of us.

Kieran ordered the beef shank and mushroom-filled pasta with a cabernet reduction, and I ordered the ravioli in a creamy tomato sauce stuffed with taleggio, fontina, ricotta, butternut squash, toasted pumpkin seeds, and sage.

I cut up a ravioli, which is massive, and hold it across the table. “Want a bite?”

He wipes his mouth and smiles. “I was hoping you’d give me a taste.”

I hold the fork steady and watch him close his lips around the tines. “Kieran, you’re the king. You only have to ask for what you want. Or take it.”

“Like I took you?” His voice gets low. “That I saw you and thought... Her... I want *her*.”

I stop cutting up the next ravioli. “What do you mean, you *saw me*?”

“That day your house exploded. You were at the courthouse. Strutting in a short skirt and high heels, looking like you owned Astoria.”

I blink, thinking of that day. “A lot happened that day. I don’t remember...”

“It’s okay, bella. I didn’t bring it up *because* of what happened that day. I’ve been figuring out how to confess that I didn’t just wake up the morning I met with your father, made my coffee, and thought, *I think I’ll offer Gabe millions of dollars for his daughter today*. You were carefully curated. And part of that came from my desire when I saw you. *Really* saw you.” His confession floors me.

I’m stunned into silence. I wish I could say the same. I never bothered looking at Kieran or Alexei Koslov that way. I trusted my mother had a different plan for me.

Eyeing that delicious cut of beef of his, I change the subject. “Are you going to offer me a bite?”

“I’m waiting for you to open your mouth.”

“A lady doesn’t sit here with her mouth open.”

Kieran grunts a laugh. “Always the brat.” He holds out his fork. “Have a taste, bella.”

Smiling, I lean in and let him slide the beef all the way into my mouth. The savory flavor explodes on my tongue. “That’s so good.”

“Wait till you taste what I put in your mouth later.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Isabella

Kieran listens as I tell him more stories about my mother. His eyes on me suggest he's not only listening but hanging on to every word I say. Like he really wants to get to know me. I've been in his bed every night, but we still feel like strangers in a way.

I finish my dinner, which isn't a feat. It's the hottest new Italian restaurant in the city, even if the portions are small. One waiter takes our plates, and another one changes out our tablecloth even though it's not dirty.

"Espresso, dessert?" he asks.

"I'd love an espresso. Double shot, please," I order without Kieran asking me.

"Cream or lemon, ma'am?"

"Lemon."

"A rebel," Kieran says, sitting back with a grin. "The Louis XIII cognac. And just a few biscotti."

"Very good, sir."

The waiter leaves, and the way Kieran looks at me, so open and trusting, I push out the question that's been plaguing me for hours. "What happened to Christian?"

He drags in a breath through pursed lips. "Don't worry about what happened to him."

The ice-cold response guts me. “That terrifies me for two reasons. One, I told you, I *begged* you not to punish him for something I did.”

“Isabella—”

“Let me finish.” I fear this full explanation is too late. Bodyguards came and went in my father’s world. I hate that I never paid attention. What I did to Christian feels different. Maybe I’m growing up. “I thought you’d be out all night. I didn’t know you wanted me with you at the fundraiser.” When he opens his mouth, I hold up my hand. “We addressed that part. But because I didn’t think you’d be looking for me, I planned to call Christian and tell him where I was. The note was for his plausible deniability.”

“He was in charge of protecting you, and he failed.”

“How? Nothing happened to me.”

“*You were almost attacked in that club!*” The potency of his voice sends chills through me, but I hold firm.

“True.” I nod. “But, let’s just say you allowed me to go there. You allowed me to go to the coffee bar. Let’s say someone *there* jumped me or hurt me. A bodyguard can’t protect me every second unless they are on top of me. I get I was Christian’s responsibility. But *you’re* my husband.” I’m practically yelling too at this point. I’m so wrecked over this. “Aren’t you responsible for me, too?”

Kieran’s face turns to stone as he flips his phone over and over on the table. He sits back in the chair, looking down, like

he's thinking.

“Shit happens, Kieran. I don't blame you for someone getting handsy with me. I really don't. My mother had three guards, and she...” I squeeze my eyes closed. When I open them, Kieran's kneeling at my feet.

“I hear what you're saying, bella.”

“Did you kill him? Christian? There's really only so much I can take.”

“No. I didn't.” He pulls me into his arms. “Don't cry, bella. But he doesn't work for me anymore. I don't personally blame him, either. But I can't have anyone think I'd let a bodyguard lose my wife and get away with it.”

“Thank you.” Sniffing, I add, “I feel horrible.”

“You should, bella. You forced him into a no-win situation. And I'm not saying that to be a jerk.”

“I know. Do you hate me?”

“Did it feel like I hated you when we got home that night?” He gets comfortable, kneeling. “Christian was fired, not because he allowed you to get away from him. He was fired because he should have figured out a way to get ahold of Lachlan, of Riordan, or of me.”

Nodding, I say, “Then it's *still* my fault. My note said that I'd call him. That I was fine.”

“He worked for me. Not you.” He kisses my wedding ring. “This matter is closed. He wasn't hurt. He was let go. And I

did that because I saw the fear in your eyes when you defended him. It's the only reason I didn't do more." He kisses me, and it's possessive and wild, the way he takes my mouth, but he breaks the kiss. "Whoa. Don't get me too worked up. You wanted to leave the house, and I have a whole night planned."

"You're my husband. I'll kiss you whenever and however I want." I stress with a tug on his tie before letting him go. "I have the right to claim you in public, too."

He smirks, taking his seat. "I like that, you know. You taking what you want."

"Good. I plan to keep doing it."

We leave the Christian conversation be. It is what it is. I've learned my lesson.

Kieran's phone rings, and he picks it up immediately. The waiter brings his cognac and my espresso on a tray, along with the biscotti. While Kieran takes the call, I mindlessly squeeze the lemon into my espresso, thinking the call is business. The thing goes off all hours of the night when he's home.

"Is she ready?" His words make me drop the wedge. "Aye. Thank you."

"Have another date after this?" I ask with snark, even though my heart is pounding, questioning him.

Kieran sits back and swirls his cognac. "Would that bother you?"

I nearly choke on my sip of espresso. "Of course, it would."

He smiles. “Good. But no. Not another date. Just an extension of ours.”

“Adding a girl to our fun?” I bite off a piece of the biscotti and place the other half on the plate.

He laughs. “Not a chance.”

“We’re not going home after this?”

“Dying to fuck me, wife?” His brutal dirty talk makes my pussy throb with need.

“Do I not call out your name loud enough in bed?”

“You like going toe to toe with me, don’t you?” He reaches into his suit jacket for his wallet.

I close my lips around another bite of biscotti to tease my husband. The waiter takes his credit card, and it doesn’t go unnoticed that he didn’t even ask to see the bill. He’s so rich it doesn’t matter.

“Come here.” He pats his lap.

“Here?” I glance down below, but no one is looking at us anymore. Lachlan didn’t let anyone with cameras in.

“Why not?” His wanting me to grind on his cock is just for us.

I stand and scoot over. He pushes away from the table and lifts my leg, spreading me wider until I’m placed firmly on his lap. I gasp at the massive hard bulge.

“Feel that, aye?”

“Hard not to.” I grip his shoulders.

“Nice choice of words.” He presses me down harder. “Fuck, you’re so warm.” His lips brush my collarbone and down the center of my chest. “This dress... Holy shit.”

“You like it on me?”

“Very much. I think you need some diamonds around your neck. I know we were rushed that day we bought the rings. How about we go back and I buy you a nice necklace? Or two. Or three.” His fingers play with my neckline, and I think of Ginna dripping in diamonds with an attitude. How I saw her in a different light. Spoiled. Privileged. Mean.

“I wouldn’t mind some nice necklaces, but I don’t need heavy, chunky diamonds. Maybe just simple ones that accent my new dresses. Nothing flashy.”

“Aye.” He kisses me. “I have a surprise planned for you that, I have to admit, is very flashy.”

“Okay, just this once,” I tease him.

He brings my mouth to his. “Kiss me, wife.”

“Mmmm,” I groan and press my lips against his.

Kieran devours me. We go at it for a few minutes until we’re breathless.

When he picks me up to place me back on my feet, I see the credit card resting on the table but no bill. I don’t question it. Next, his hand captures mine, and we’re leaving through a back door after walking down some utilitarian black metal steps.

Calder is waiting by our limo, which is now in a back alley. Waylon sits in the front seat, talking on his phone.

“Where are we going?” I ask, getting inside.

“You’ll see.” Inside the limo, he pulls me onto his lap again, and we kiss some more. Kieran gets frisky, but because both bodyguards are on duty, Calder sits in the jump seat behind the driver.

“I’d love for us to be alone in this one night,” I whisper to him, grinding on his erection.

“You’ll get naked for me and let me take you hard in this?” His voice carries, but Calder doesn’t react. I wonder if Kieran banged anyone in this thing with his guards watching.

Those days are over for Kieran. He’s mine.

“Yes, I will. I’ll let you do whatever you want to me. I’m your wife.”

“And will you be bargaining for more privileges?”

“A girl has to do what a girl—”

“You’re not a girl anymore. You’re a woman. A wife. *My* wife. And next, a mother.” He gently presses down on my stomach. “I want you pregnant, bella.”

“Soon.” I kiss him and go along with it. “I hope.” Even though that’s a lie.

He’s acting on some visceral instinct. He’ll appreciate me as a real wife when I have the chance to prove to him the benefit of all my attention.



We drive for a few minutes until all I see is water. Then propellers come into view in the distance, up on a hill. “We’re going on a helicopter? That was the ‘she’?”

“Aye.” Kieran kisses my cheek. “I want to make you come while making your heart fall.”

I don’t think he means that the way it sounds, but it’s one hell of a challenge. “I love that idea.”

Calder goes into the brick waiting room, and a pilot in a bomber jacket with headgear struts over to the helicopter. With the propellers starting to rotate, Kieran helps me out of the limo. The sharp gusts of air whip my hair around. I pinned it earlier, but it holds. My dress, however, flies up, and I shove it down to keep from showing Calder and Waylon what belongs to my husband.

“How much does this cost to rent for a few hours?” I yell above the noisy propellers.

“I own it,” he boasts seductively.

“We do?”

“I do,” he says with a smirk.

Right, I never got a chance to read the prenup I was forced to sign right before the rushed wedding ceremony. I’m guessing it wasn’t very favorable. He gave me the name

O'Rourke and nothing else, as far as assets. I'm not sure what I need in my name if he's committing to give me whatever I want.

If I had the chance to sit and discuss it, if it wasn't so rushed, I might have had the forethought to ask for time to get pregnant. Or at least set an expectation. Too late now.

Or is it?

Kieran helps me up the short set of airstairs, and the rich smell of steel hits me. I've been in a helicopter before. Rentals that took my father, my mother, and me to Nantucket a few times in the summer. This one is luxurious, with a separate compartment. The rear one that Kieran leads me to has leather-tufted seats, plush carpet, even two televisions. Heaven forbid one O'Rourke gets to watch television and the other doesn't.

On one side, there are two bucket seats, but the other side has a loveseat. We sit in the two individual seats for lift-off because they have seat belts. The loveseat doesn't.

"Don't we need headgear?" I ask him.

"No. This section is soundproof. Lachlan is in the cabin in front of us. If there's an issue, he'll come get us." He buckles me in, and I pull his face down to kiss him. "This is such an amazing surprise."

We lift off, and my stomach drops, but it's exciting. It feels like a roller coaster climbing a steep hill.

There's a console between us in the two seats, but Kieran leans over. "So, we can look at the view or we can fuck on that

couch over there,” he growls in my ear.

I shiver at his words. Patting my cheek with my finger, I say, “Is this the only time I’ll be in this thing?”

“No,” he answers, smiling. “We can take rides whenever you want.”

“And if you’re busy?”

“I’ll make time for you. I promise.”

Within seconds, I hear his seat belt clang open. “No. It’s too dangerous. Let’s just look at all the lights.” I try to push him back into the seat.

“I’m fine. I trust the pilot. And Lachlan.”

“Then I trust them, too. I trust *you*, Kieran.”

“Good, now spread those thighs for me. Nice and wide. I want to make you come with my mouth.” His face turns serious and deadly.

Heat rushes through every corner of me, especially my cheeks, which flame hot. Smirking, I pull the dress up past my knees and spread my bare thighs. I didn’t bother with pantihose, and my shoes are open-toe, strappy stilettos.

Kieran’s gaze drops to my lap as he grips my thong. “Up.” It’s all he has to say, and I lift my hips for him to remove my lace thong. “Jaysus, you’re so beautiful. And mine.” He forcibly pushes my legs open wider and strokes me.

“Please do that again,” I beg, loving how it feels.

“I created a monster.” He lowers his head until I feel his breath on my pussy. “Mmmm,” he groans, inhaling my scent. “So fucking sweet.” His entire mouth closes around my opening, and he suckles, drawing a gasp from me.

“Right there. Yes. That’s amazing.”

“Say it loud, bella. They know what we’re doing back here.”

“You want your brother to hear me?”

“Why not?” he says wryly.

Admittedly, the idea that Lachlan could hear his brother, his king, getting his queen off, sends shivers through me. Kieran goes to work, using the flat end of his tongue to lave me, while poking the tip inside, teasing me.

I lift my leg and let out a whimper that has him moaning against my skin. As I curl my hips, he works his tongue up and down the entire length of my slit, grunting like an animal about to annihilate his prey. These orgasms destroy me, and he knows it.

Slipping his tongue inside me, after working me up, sends a rush of heat and electricity through me. I can’t control myself. I cry out.

He works his tongue in circles around my clit, and it’s too much for me. I grip his hair, the soft ebony waves always styled perfectly, except when they’re slicked back after his shower.

“Stay on the edge, wife.” He gently licks. “It will be better. I promise.”

“It’s just too good.” I’m somewhere in between, feeling the rush of heat as low-level pulsing builds and builds.

“Wait...”

I arch off the cushion to feel more. More. More. More. His tongue sears me with heat while he sucks my clit, only stopping to rub the thing mercilessly, capturing it between two fingers.

“Kieran, I can’t. Please, I need to come.”

“Brat.” He pushes two fingers inside me, and I lose it.

My orgasm explodes, and I hear how wet I am as he rams me with his fingers, lapping me up at the same time.

I’m so far over the edge, but the waves don’t end. It’s crest after crest. The bastard doesn’t stop. He keeps working me until I’ve embarrassingly gushed all over the seat. I want to kick wildly, but he’s got my leg pinned. I’m near the end of my control while he licks me to another fever.

The dam breaks, and it’s full on. My sex clenches, and my body convulses. I’m very new to this, but how in the world can anything top that?

Kieran glances up. “He’s taking us over Connecticut now.” He pulls our mouths together for a kiss. It’s deliciously frenzied.

“You taste good,” I joke, seeing his shiny upper lip from my arousal.

“So do you.” He opens his suit pants, and his cock falls heavy into his palm.

I reach forward and stroke it. “This. I want this.”

“Good girl.” He eases forward and pushes the tip against my entrance. “You ready for me, wife?”

“By how wet your face looks, I’d say so.” I take a breath.

He doesn’t offer a comeback, just pushes inside me. Deep. It’s fast, but I feel every wicked inch, that thick vein dragging along my nerve endings.

I’m sitting up now, so the angle hits my clit and stretches me, rubbing against some unknown erogenous zone. Kieran holds me by the ass as I wrap my arms around his shoulders.

With our heads pressed together, he manages to piston his hips and cripple me with such delicious friction. “Jaysus, your cunt feels so perfect. My cock is fucking soaked. You’re dripping all over the place.”

“Sorry,” I groan, my eyes closed.

“No, look at me.” When I open them, his brilliant green eyes crash into my soul. “Don’t ever apologize for reacting this way to me. It’s the biggest turn-on of my life. All I can think is, how can I work when all I want to do is fuck you?”

“So don’t work so hard.” I lick his nose as he keeps going. “We’re newlyweds. We didn’t even have a honeymoon.”

“I know. It’s just too dangerous for me to be far away enough where I’ll want you to be naked 24/7.”

“Let’s fly this thing to the Hamptons then. See Shea.” I look out the window. “We’re so close.”

“Mmmm,” he grunts. “*I’m* close. Come with me, wife. Clench around me.”

It just takes a few more pumps, and I’m falling apart in his arms, and he’s falling right along with me.

Kieran rests his face between my breasts, his breathing erratic. “I may not have ever come that hard in my life.”

I say nothing. I’m too speechless because that means a lot to me. And we’re both fully clothed—except me, I’m pantiless.

“I sense the pilot is swinging back around.” He pulls out and shoves his dick right into his pants. Holding my chin, he whispers, “Did you enjoy tonight? And not just the sex?”

“I did.”

“Anything else?” He lifts me and puts me back into my seat, buckling me in. He smiles, putting my lace thong in his suit jacket pocket.

“I loved just being with you. Talking to you. I felt like I really had your attention.”

“Aye.” He looks away. “I’m not taking you to the Hamptons. But not just to be a dick. I stay away from Shea out there. I don’t want anyone bothering her. She has a bodyguard, but there are unwritten rules for family members who are not

part of the business. Especially females. It's the same with my younger brothers in Seattle. Cormac and Darragh are doctors and have absolutely nothing to do with our business. We don't even really talk to them. That's on purpose. Though it pains me that I don't know my niece very well."

"Will that hold for Shea?" I ask him. "She's only seventy miles away. Lots of rich people vacation out there. I assume some of them are connected."

He blows out a breath. "Good question. Between you and me, Balor monitors her communication to make sure she's not getting any mysterious calls or texts. Her home and office are wired up with a team watching twenty-four seven. If someone gets close to her, I'll know."

"Good." I hug him. "I like her."

"She likes you, too." He grips my face again. "What about me? Do you like me?"

I purse my lips like I'm thinking. "A little bit."

"Brat." He releases me, then takes what looks like a nourishing breath. He opens the door that sealed us in here and bellows, "Land this thing. I want to go home."

He sits back down and buckles up in time for the pilot to put the nose down, and we're racing against the wind. A few moments later, we land.

Kieran glances out the window and tenses up. "What the fuck?"

He unbuckles and then reaches for my hand. Lachlan is already out and running across the landing pad to the limo. Two more cars are parked there now, too, with their headlights on. When we reach the landing pad on foot, Kieran runs, breaking away from me.

Riordan, Eoghan, and Balor stand around the limo while Lachlan paces, questioning Calder and the driver.

Kieran reaches the limo, leans inside to look, and then starts shouting.

“What happened?” I ask.

Kieran sees me ready to glance inside, too, and with fire in his eyes, rushes to me. “Don’t look.”

“What? What happened?”

Stroking my back, he snarls, “Someone put a bullet in Waylon’s head.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Isabella

It's been a week since someone killed Waylon. I feel like it's my fault because I asked for the date. Kieran's not said much to me. At night, he crawls into bed late, and some mornings he's already gone when I wake up.

Feeling this day won't be different from the rest, I trudge to the library to work on my independent project and ignore messages from the meeting group when they ping the chat box to catch up again. No way will Kieran let me go now. And I don't want to.

It's finally hit home. I'm not safe out there.

Lost in my schoolwork, I hear a noise and look up to see Kieran standing in the doorway. He's wearing shades, and his hair looks like he's been pulling on it.

"Hi," I say, giving him a once-over.

"Hi." He slides the shades off smoothly. "Are you busy?"

"That's the benefit of online courses. They're self-paced." I close my laptop. "What can I do for you?"

"It's what I can do for you." He holds out his hand.

Normally, I would take it, but his entire body is rigid, and his jaw seems tense enough to break. "Why? For what?"

"You'll see." He wiggles his hand.

Swallowing, I take it. I have to trust him. Unless... God, unless I had everything wrong about this man. His hand in

mine, we walk through the kitchen. For a moment, I think he's going to take me upstairs and use me for his pent-up anger. No, he takes me to the kitchen door.

Outside. He's taking me out of the house.

I pull my hand away, panic rushing through me. "Where are you taking me? No. No, I don't want to go back to my father."

Kieran's skin flushes a deep red. After a moment, he says, "So if I offered to return you... You wouldn't want to go?"

"No." Saying that so easily makes me feel light-headed because it's the truth. This is where I want to be. "Please. Please. I'll—"

He shushes me with his lips. "No. I'm not bringing you back to your father. Not even close. Trust me, bella."

"I do. I really do."

Kieran's eyes shine. "You didn't say *I do* that enthusiastically a month ago."

"Things are different now."

"Aye." He winds a hand around my waist and steers me to his car.

Calder and two new bodyguards, whom I met briefly, but their names escape me, pace in front of the guards' booth. Kieran puts me in the front seat of his Range Rover.

"Where's Pete, your driver?"

"I gave him the day off."

Fear rakes down my spine. “Kieran, no offense. Are you taking me somewhere to dump my body?”

He barks a laugh. “You have an active imagination.”

“That’s not a no.”

“No.” He kisses my hand. “This is something I should have done a few weeks ago. A month ago, really.”

We leave the property, and it feels so weird to be in a car like this. Sitting in the front seat, like we’re not the mob king and queen. It makes me realize how out of touch I’ve been. After a few turns, a feeling of dread hits me again as we take the long stretch to...

I grip the armrest. “Why are we going to the cemetery?”

“To pay my respects to your mother. I didn’t go on the day of the funeral. I wanted no part of it. Being in that church was hard enough.”

“Because of Norah?”

“Aye. Even though she’s not buried here. It’s the symbol of death all around that I can’t take.”

I squeeze his arm. “You don’t have to do this. I can come back another time.”

“Please. Let me do this.” His voice guts me. It’s so hard for him to be here, but he knows what it means to me.

“Okay.” I sit back.

Kieran parks at the office and goes inside to find the location. I honestly don’t remember. I was out of it that day.

He drives to an older section. *This* I remember. Gothic-like headstones and statues. My mother was buried in her family plot. I don't know if my father still plans to be with her. I haven't talked to him. Don't want to talk to him.

We find the row, and Kieran stops. He gets out and opens the door for me. "It's down here."

Hand in hand, we walk, and it all comes back to me. I'd been here before when I was little, too. Nana is buried here.

"Shite, I didn't bring any flowers," Kieran says, regretfully.

"It's okay. We just do this..." I bend down and find a smooth rock to place on the dark, granite headstone filled with names. Mama's hasn't been added yet. Still, it's a lot to take in, knowing she's in the ground beneath me.

I was so numb that day, but now I feel like I'm choking.

My chest heaves, and warmth fills my eyes. Next, I'm sobbing. They're the first tears I've shed for Mama. I could have cried every night alone in the dark, but they wouldn't come.

Kieran pulls me against his chest and strokes my hair. "Let it go, bella. I'm here."

His heart pounds, and I know why I'm crying *now* and not before, far away from here. Mama needed to see this. Even if she's in the ether and can see everything. The moment is more powerful here. She knows I'm okay.

I'm okay...

Looking at the ground, the mound of dirt, I feel dizzy. “No. I... I don’t want this.”

“Don’t want what, bella?” Kieran holds my face, terror in his eyes as if I mean him. Our marriage.

“To be buried. To be in a box. Your... Your Norah had the right idea. Please. Please don’t bury me.”

Kieran turns pale. “Honestly, Isabella, if I have to bury you, too, I’m slitting my throat, and then they can burn us together.”

His words shock me, but I see the point. My God, the man might have to bury two... A fiancée and a wife. But he loved her. He doesn’t love me. Maybe it will still hurt either way.

The tension breaks, and he just holds me under the gray October sky. When I shiver from the cold, Kieran takes off his jacket and drops it around my shoulders.

“Thank you for this.”

“You’re welcome, wife.”

“What made you think to bring me here?”

“Lachlan went to Waylon’s burial a few days ago.”

“You didn’t go?”

“No. I couldn’t send the message that I would pay my respects to a bodyguard and not the mother of my wife. *You* are worth putting aside my agony.” This is so hard for him to be here, but he’s doing it for me.

“Let’s go. Life is for the living.”

“Aye.”

We turn and a man in a suit stands there. Kieran shoves me behind him and pulls his gun.

“Whoa, sir.” The man shows his empty hands. “I’m the Director of Family Services. My assistant mentioned you were here visiting Mrs. Parisi’s site. I’m here to offer any assistance.”

“Wait, I remember you,” I say, loosening from Kieran’s hold. “It’s okay.”

Kieran lowers his gun. “I can never be too careful when it comes to protecting my wife.”

“Agreed.” He nods. “Can I offer any additional assistance? I have expedited your mother’s engraving, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” I say softly and look around. “My father told me he’d have Mama’s favorite flower planted when the ground is settled and grass sod put down.”

The man cocks his head. “I’m not aware of that request.”

My throat tightens. “Can you check?”

“Absolutely.” He takes his phone out of his suit jacket and walks away.

“Bella?” Kieran touches my face, noticing my strained throat muscles.

“He just left her here. He *never* cared about her. He can’t even follow her last wishes.”

Kieran holds me and I sense the man has walked back toward us.

“Ma’am. Sir. I’m afraid—”

“Do it,” Kieran interrupts. “And bill *me*. Whatever my wife wants for this gravesite. Do you understand me? *Whatever* she wants.”

“Absolutely, sir. Ma’am, which flower?”

“Chrysanthemums,” I say and hold back tears. “She and I planted them in our yard. That too was destroyed.”

“I will take care of it, Isabella.” Kieran holds me tight and it feels so good.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I bury myself in his chest.

The cemetery director comes back and asks me a question about which color flowers I prefer. Kieran releases me and gets on his phone.

I tell the director that pink Japanese was Mama’s favorite and I love how they will look against the dark granite headstone. Kieran returns and pins me against him softly again. “All set?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll have the office call when the planting is done.”

“Thank you.” Kieran takes my hand and puts me in his car.

Whereas his facial muscles were tight and stressed on the way here, he grins all the way back to the house.



We get home, and white box trucks line the driveway. I expect Kieran to start screaming. But then I see the name on the side of them: *Astoria Landscaping*.

“What is this?” I ask Kieran, squeezing his hand.

“They are planting those flowers here in the garden. For you.” He kisses my hand. “I called Patricia while you were talking with the director. Told her to get someone here *now*.”

I throw my arms around him. “This is so wonderful of you.”

“I can be wonderful.” He strokes my cheek. “You reminded me how to be a nice guy.”

Patricia is directing the planting team but stops to wave to us.

We go inside the house and with no one around, I kiss my husband seductively in the kitchen. Rubbing his cock over the suit pants, I say, “You did something nice for me. Now it’s your turn.”

“I didn’t do all that to have sex with you.” He presses my hand with his, putting pressure on his cock.

“Lucky you, then. You get a freebie.”

His brutal hands grab my hips, and raw emotion takes over as he kisses me, hot, hard, and heavy. He gets on board very quickly. For some reason, my mind wanders to my abandoned

schoolwork that I have to finish. Probably later, when he leaves for his evening...activities.

“Let me just get my laptop from the library and plug it in.” I break away, needing to catch my breath.

But when I get into the library, I hear the door close and realize my husband followed me inside. His rich green eyes wander to the polished table.

He stares at me, loosening his tie. “Take your clothes off.”

“Here?”

“Why not? No one’s here. It’s just you and me. This is your house, too, bella.” His words roll through me. He means it metaphorically.

I slide his jacket off and lift my sweater over my head, but before I can tug my jeans down, he’s there, like he can’t wait.

One hand yanks my jeans down more, exposing my butt cheeks, while the other hand strokes the need between my legs. He works my clit like magic, teasing it between two fingers. “Fuck, so warm.”

I wrap my arms around him. “Go deeper. I’m wet, too.”

“Already?”

“Always when I’m with you, Kieran.” My right leg lifts to wrap around his waist. “Mmmm,” I purr against his chest.

“Aye, let me get deeper, brat,” he whispers in my ear. “Give my wife what she really wants from me.”

I consider telling him I enjoy talking to him, as well. But it's a new relationship, and from what I've heard, those are mostly physical. Like this...

OMG, I'm gonna explode.

"Kieran," I pant, stars clouding my vision. It's almost too much pleasure for me to handle. But the fire in my belly isn't doused.

More. I want more.

Kieran kisses me, gnawing at my lips. "Now that I've taken care of you, will you take care of your husband in our bed?"

Looking around, I say, "No. Here. Take me here. On the table."

A look of unexpected shock crosses his face. He rubs a finger across my lips and through my hair. "You, my Italian brat, are giving me a run for my money."

I breathe, wondering what he meant. "Is that bad?"

"I'm on the fence." He strokes my hot, yielding mouth like I've not stepped out of line. "Now, take those pants completely off so I can fuck my new wife on the table like she wants."

With his eyes on me, I strip completely. My jeans peel off, then the bra, my undies, too, until there's not a stitch on me. He wears a wolfish grin that widens with every inch I expose. "It would go faster if you help me."

"Who says I want this to go faster?" He leans against the wall, watching me.

Naked, with my clothes in a ball next to the table, I stand there, my knees pinned. Kieran frowns like he expected me to just lie flat with my legs spread. What fun is that?

He lifts me with a strength I wasn't expecting and lays me out on the library table. I sit up and notice he makes no attempt to undress. "What about you?"

"This is my turn, and I get what I want. I *want* you naked." He loosens his tie. "Remember when I said you're my queen?"

"I do. And that queens are basically prisoners."

He laughs. "That's what you got out of that conversation?"

"In a way." I shrug. "What else..." I stop, watching him get down on one knee. "Are you bowing to me, husband?"

"Maybe." He stares at my legs and tilts his head. "Show me what's mine," he hoarsely whispers.

Biting my lower lip, I slowly spread my legs, but don't get too far before he slaps his hand on my calf and yanks them wider.

"Jaysus," he mutters and leans in to breathe against my skin. "You smell so good."

"It's those bath bombs." I run my hands through my folds, letting him lick my fingers in between. "They have so many great scents. And they make my skin soft, too." I brush my hand across his rough, stubbled cheeks. God, the beauty of him.

He's gone a bit off the rails since Waylon was killed and has been acting edgier than ever. His hot breath fans my skin, and his tongue teases my slit.

My breath hitches. "God, that's good."

"I just want to lick you over and over. See how many times I can make you come. Torture you, really."

"Torture?" I breathe heavily from his fingers probing me. "How can orgasms be torture?"

"When they come at you like a freight train, one on top of the other."

My heart spikes in my chest. "You... You can do that?"

"I can. And I will. If you let me."

"So confident."

"Brat." He lowers his head, and his tongue tickles the entire length of my sex. One finger rubs my clit for added pleasure. In and out until I easily explode into his mouth.

"Aye, tastes so good. Thick and sweet."

I catch my breath, but he keeps going.

With his mouth between my legs, and fingers everywhere, Kieran takes me to that place he mentioned where orgasms just fold into themselves, and it's a free fall toward insanity. I lose the ability to speak. It's all inaudible. Just moans and groans as I'm dragged to my baser level of needs.

And wants.

Kieran chants to me in what I think is Gaelic, like this is some ritual. I lose track of how many times I come because it's all one big rush of ecstasy. All I feel is that adrenaline, and my womb won't stop throbbing.

“Right there,” he mutters, turning back to English.

There's a quick shift and a jingle of his belt, next the feel of his suit is gone. My throat goes tight, watching him roughly undress. His skin vibrates after he yanks off the shirt, exposing thick biceps and that torso rippling with ab muscles. I'm always floored by his sculpted chest and those incredible arms, especially the one inked from wrist to shoulder.

Now I feel that scorching skin against my legs.

Without another word, Kieran climbs up on the table and enters me in one swift thrust. “Fuck, you're throbbing and tight.”

“I feel like I'm going to split apart at the seams, Kieran.” My entire body hums and vibrates. “But, God, you turn me on so much.”

“Even when I'm like this?” He scrapes his teeth along my neck.

“Especially when you're like this,” I admit, feeling shame from liking it so rough.

“You feel so fucking amazing,” he growls in my ear, tilting his hips to get even deeper. “I've wanted to fuck you all week, but I knew I'd hurt you. I had to get the rage out of my system first.” He thrusts harder and harder. “This fucking erection for

you wouldn't go away. I jacked off in the shower every morning, wishing you were in there with me. But I'd be too vicious. You don't deserve that."

"I'm your wife." I dig my nails into his back. "I want to be everything you need."

"God, yes, tear up my back. I want to feel pain."

"Me, too. I'm only as tough as you teach me to be."

"You're right." He pushes even deeper inside me.

"Harder, Kieran. Take what you need from me." My back arches, and feeling so full of him again makes tears leak from my eyes.

He sits back and pulls me by the hips, using me for his pleasure *and* to get rid of his pain.

"Don't hold back. I can take it. Let me see the real you."

His eyes meet mine, and the green is almost gone, they're so dark. "That's a dangerous request."

"Try me. Work me," I moan.

His phone rings, vibrating off the table. "Fuck," he curses and answers it.

While he's inside me! Okay, this might be too much.

"Parisi, are you fucking kidding me?" he snarls into the phone at my father.

When I hear yelling on the other end, I think Kieran will stop, pull out, and storm away.

No, he...

He leans on one elbow and props his knees on the table. Those thick, muscled thighs are now in perfect position to fuck the shit out of me. His relentless drives light up my skin as he hits that spot so deep inside me, my body trembles.

“Hang up,” I whisper in his ear, trying to calm him down.

“Oh, yeah? Fuck you, Gabe. How dare you bring that up. I’ll do whatever I want for *my wife’s* mother. A woman you never respected. *Why?*” He thrusts harder and harder until he hisses out his climax, howling. “Did you hear that? That was me coming inside *my wife*. The wife you sold to me. She’s mine. Don’t you dare say *that name* to me again.”

He pulls out and hops off the table. I watch his ass flex from so much rage. His entire body has gone crimson. He keeps his hands on the windowsill, his back slick with sweat.

I couldn’t hear what my father said, but I’m guessing he heard about Kieran’s anger at him for blowing off what my mother wanted for her final resting place. “Talk to me, please.”

Shaking his head, he yanks his pants on. With everything else in his hands, he storms out of the library. All I do is put the sweater back on and chase after him with my ass hanging out, really hoping Patricia is still outside with the landscapers.

Inside our bedroom, I hear Kieran rummaging around his closet. When the phone rings again, Kieran flings it across the room, whizzing it past my head.

He storms out and pulls that familiar pair of gray sweatpants over his still-erect cock. “Not now, bella. I can’t talk to you. Your father has some set of balls talking to me like I’m a piece of shite. Telling me to mind my own business. That I had my chance...”

“Chance for what?” I ask but then gasp. “No. Please tell me he didn’t bring up Norah.”

“He did. I need a few hours alone, please.” He yanks a T-shirt over his sweaty body.

I step back, his anger triggering me. *He won’t hurt me*, I tell myself. All of this is a learning experience. He’s a powerful man with a lot of responsibility, and when that’s insulted, he responds with rage. It’s how he has to function to stay king. To keep order. To keep control.

“No, I’ll leave. This is your bedroom.”

“It’s *our* bedroom!” he roars.

“It doesn’t feel like it belongs to either of us.” I go into the bathroom and lock the door.

Staring at the stand-up marble shower, I remember him saying he jerked off in there each morning instead of sleeping with me because he didn’t want to hurt me.

He cares about me.

Just has a shitty way of showing it sometimes.

As I feel his cum trickle down my leg, I also spot some blood.

Shit, my period. Fuck. The cramps hit, and the pain is overwhelming.

Um, I can use that orgasm now, husband.

That means I'll be starting my last pack of birth control pills.

I run a hot bath and lose track of time. When I come out, I'm smacked in the face with the earthy and herbaceous aroma of chrysanthemums. Vases teeming with the pink and white flowers sit on nearly every surface in the bedroom.

Looking around, I see Kieran's not in here, though. An envelope sits on his dresser with my name printed on the front: *Isabella*.

Wrapped in a towel, I open it, my hands shaking. It's a crisp white notecard with an embossed KO in the corner that reads:

I'm sorry, bella. I'll be home late. I need to meet with Riordan about your father.

I crumble the card, glad he recognized he fucked up.

But is he going to kill my father?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Kieran

“Do we know if Gabe is going to strike Alexei? What is he waiting for?” I ask, pacing in Riordan’s living room.

My underboss sits in a leather armchair. He owns the entire top floor of the only high-rise in Astoria. When he told the developer he wanted to buy the penthouse, the dick said there wasn’t one. My cocky brother showed him up and bought all six top-floor apartments. Then he started knocking down walls, creating a penthouse with panoramic views.

“No,” Rior says. “But we have our defenses in line to make sure nothing of ours goes down.”

“That’s damn odd.” Lachlan plays with his knife. “Everyone knows by now that it was Alexei. We leaked that. We’re all holding our breath, waiting for the first strike.”

I rub my chin. “He called me, screamed at me about something stupid. He sounds as unhinged as Alexei does.” I don’t repeat the cutting words of how I committed a sin, letting Norah be cremated, and that I’m going to hell. Changing the subject, I say, “Any idea who the hell that Russian was that I killed?” I fist a tumbler of whiskey so hard I could break the damn the thing.

Rior gives a calm shrug. “Couldn’t identify him. Balor came up empty. Neither his DNA nor his prints were in any database.”

“How is that possible?”

Lachlan gives a throaty, sarcastic laugh. “Don’t question Balor like that to his face.”

“I’m not afraid of Balor,” I argue back.

“You should be,” Riordan deadpans, and I’m not sure to what degree he’s kidding. “It basically means that the guy is fresh. Fresh from some camp in Siberia.”

“Set up a meeting with Alexei. We should have met with him sooner,” I say, hiding the regret in my voice from that misstep.

“Doing that right away would have made us look guilty.” Riordan, my strategic thinker, attempts to get me off the hook.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I pat my suit jacket. “I seemed to have misplaced my X-ray twenty-twenty hindsight glasses.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Lachlan keeps it real with me, something I appreciate, even if it makes me want to bash his face in.

“I’ll handle it,” Riordan says and then steers Lachlan down the hallway that leads to his front door. A small parlor room sits by the entryway, where his capos and personal guard hang out when they’re not out on the streets.

Riordan puts his arm around Lachlan’s shoulders, and their closeness makes me jealous. Left out. They might feel like they got left behind, but I got shoved to the front of the line and handed a crown.

Rior, Lach, and I worked the streets for my father as a team, reporting to his revolving underbosses. We had to prove ourselves. Me included. I'm just as fierce as they are. But when my mother's illness started to progress, Da kept me inside more. Got me fitted for suits and brought me to business meetings. Next thing I knew, it'd been weeks before I was in a pair of jeans.

Being king was my destiny. And for that, I have a queen I left quivering for me. I look out over the East River to Manhattan.

What irony. Living outside of the world's most famous city gets you the best views. With water on two sides, multiple key subway lines, thriving businesses, and one of the major commercial routes into Manhattan, Astoria was perfect for what Da wanted to achieve. Plenty of money to be made here with underground dealings and *without* everyone on the planet wanting a piece of it.

Across the river, Manhattan is the perfect shiny diversion where many global syndicates planted their flags, most without even knowing Astoria, and its riches, exist.

For years, my father, along with Gabe Parisi Sr. and a very young Alexei Koslov, the Russian who just wouldn't take no for a fucking answer, carved up Astoria into three lucrative opportunities.

Riordan finally struts back into the living room and pours himself another drink, calm and collected. A glance around

has me wondering how many women he fucks here. He doesn't belong to my club.

“Want to tell me what's really bothering you?” Riordan holds out the bottle of Macallan 25 to me, and I let him fill my glass.

Time to face my demons.

“Did I make a mistake marrying Isabella?” I take a sip, stalling. “Be honest.”

“Want the truth?” Rior sits back in the leather club chair and crosses one leg over his ankle. He's wearing his usual black slacks and a dark blue dress shirt.

Lachlan dresses almost identically, except he goes all black.

“Yes, I want the truth. I did this. I can undo it,” I say, ignoring the pinch in my heart at the idea of sending Isabella back to her father, raging at the thought of not only losing her but sickened at wondering who he might give her to next.

“I think the move was brilliant,” Rior pays me a rare ass-kissing compliment. “Within minutes of that house exploding, you saw war on the horizon. And when you told me you wanted to buy Isabella to finance Gabe's revenge, I saw the look of bloodlust in your eyes. Right there...you earned that crown.”

I play with my wedding ring. “That's it, huh? Just to see the Italians and Russians destroy each other?”

“Thirty million means nothing to you. You could have offered him the money through a shell account and walked

away. You took Isabella because you wanted her as a wife. Not *any* wife. *Her*.”

“I... I feel things for her that I didn’t think I would. It’s messing with me. I feel like it’s a damn betrayal to Norah,” I grind out and squeeze the glass so hard, this time it does break.

“Fuck!” Rior jumps up and grabs a dishtowel. “Are you cut?”

Shaking my hand, I smile. “Not too bad.” I take the towel and hold it against my palm, ignoring the sting. “Sorry about the glass, though.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I... I like her. I’ve gone so many years just using women for sex that I forgot what it’s like to like someone. Feel anxious to see her. Try to make her smile. Make sure she’s happy. Isabella somehow brought all of that back. With a vengeance. Like it was bottled up, waiting to come out. Explode, really.” I take a heavy breath. “But...”

“She’s *not* Norah,” Rior finishes my thought.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “Guilt is eating at me over this one.”

“Can I say something you’re probably not going to like?”

I toss the dishtowel, noticing blood on my sleeve. “Don’t stop now, little brother. You’re on a roll.”

“You and Norah wouldn’t have made it.”

My throat goes tight, and fire rushes through me, not because of what he said, but because he’s vocalizing

something that's haunted me for years. "Go on."

"Norah..." Rior shakes his head. "Sweet Norah wasn't bred for the man you are today. She may not have even liked the man you became, Kier. Isabella was prepared for this. She's who you belong with."

"Aye." I mutter softly and fist the bottle.

"Want a fresh glass?" Rior quips.

"No. I'm... I'm going home." I take a sip from the bottle. "She can handle me, you know. In case you're wondering."

"I wasn't, exactly. But that's important. She needs to be strong. Head held high and, on your arm, if we want to rule this damn city alone." Rior spills more words of wisdom I appreciate. "You bought her to further our empire. But now you like her, and she's satisfying to you. Do you know what a blessing that is?"

"I do." Now I'm the one more enthusiastic than on my wedding day.

"Go home and enjoy fucking your young, pretty wife."

I hug Riordan when he tries to shake my uninjured hand, and next, I'm in the elevator. Then walking to my Range Rover. Calder opens the back door for me and sits next to Pete in the front.

I call Isabella and think it's going to voicemail, but she picks up at the last possible second.

“Oh, you remembered you had a wife,” she snips at me, without even a hello.

“I’m coming home.”

“Whatever...”

“Brat.” I smile into the phone because I know she’s playing with me. “Now, go into my office and wait for me.”

“Why?”

“I have a surprise for you.” The idea forms in my head as I speak.

“Did you buy an arboretum for me too?”

“If you want one, I will.” I take a cleaning breath. “I’m a few minutes away.”

The line goes dead, and I laugh to myself. I pass the gate and get out of the car, saying nothing to my men. In my office, I see the light is on under the door. I open it, and she’s...

Sitting at my fucking desk. Her hands grip the leather arms of my da’s old chair, and her legs are crossed. Her olive skin glows against that damn white tank top dress. “Get out of my chair,” I say, just be a jerk.

“Come lift me out of here.” She leans forward and taps her nails on the desk blotter. “So, what do you want for your turn? Did you want me to kneel for you? Crawl for you? Have anyone to call and yell at while you’re fucking me?”

She thinks I want a turn. I do, but that’s not why I asked her to meet me in the office.

“Tell me that didn’t get you off. That I had your father on the phone while I was buried deep inside you. I felt you get wetter on my cock.”

Her cheek ticks up. “Only because you got so much bigger.”

“Hold that thought.” I go to the credenza under the window and take out a folder.

“What’s that?” she asks me when I drop it in front of her.

“The prenup you signed.”

“Oh...” She goes quiet. “Kieran, my father...”

I pick up the prenup and rip it to shreds.

Isabella gasps, and tears pool in her eyes. She stands up on shaky legs, using the desk to help her. “I’ll go pack.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” I grab her and kiss her. “I want to stay married to you. I want... I want this to be more.”

She throws her arms around me. “Me, too. I’ll... What can I do to make it better?”

“Nothing. You’re damn near perfect. There is one thing you can do for me, though.”

“Just one?” Her hands brush down my shirt.

“Okay, maybe two.” She’s going to be the death of me. “Just put up with me.”

“That’s easy.” She kisses me again, and I’m lost in her.

I pull her hair back and devour her until we both can’t see straight.

An hour later, we're in my bed—*our* bed. I warned her this would be rough and that I'd be feral. "Can you go again?" I press into her, already growing hard.

"Yes, don't stop."

I sit back on my knees and hold her head, cradling it like she's precious. She found a small crack in my heart and took a fucking hammer to it. The lock I've put on my soul has been picked.

"How about a bath?" I kiss her lips. "That will help if you're sore."

"I ordered more of those lavender bath bombs."

"Let's go." I take her hand.

Inside the warm, filled jet bathtub, perfumed with lavender, Isabella rests her head on my shoulder, her long wet hair tickling my nipples. "This is heaven."

"You mean my hard cock poking your ass?"

"I can't believe you're hard again." She twists around and sits in front of me.

I palm her tits and thumb the dark nubs. In her ear, I whisper, "You're my goddess." I lean forward and lick each nipple. "Now get on my cock, brat." I lift Isabella's slick and glossy body right onto my hard cock.

She groans as I fill her.

Her tits glisten and bounce as she rides me. "Is there something wrong with me that I love sex so much?" She

mewls with her hands gripping the rim of the black porcelain tub.

It sits on a wall made of mirrors, giving me a view of both her front and the line of her back, especially her ass with the way she tilts her hips and takes me deeper. “So long as you love it because of me.”

“Maybe...” She gives me more of that lip I love.

Her tiny waist is perfect for my large hands to guide her. She keeps a tuft of hair above her cunt, and that bare slit filled with my massive dick drives me crazy. “This is now your turn, isn’t it, brat?”

“That’s right.” She moans, her head thrown back, loving every second of riding my dick.

“Fuck, you look so good like this.” I take both breasts in my hands and let her thick, dark nipples slide between my slick fingers.

She fills my hands, and I love it. Every grind of her hips makes us both slippery, so I can get even deeper.

“God, I’m close.” She lets a moan slip. “You did this to me!”

“Made you love sex, it looks like.”

“I do,” she breathes but lowers her gaze to me. “With you. Only you.”

“Better be only with me, unless you want some jackass to die.”

She chuckles. “Mmmm.” Her head falls forward, and she gets even tighter, bringing me to my edge. But I want to lay her out on the other side and drive into her.

I lean forward and take one breast into my mouth, while my right thumb finds her clit. With an arched back, she comes violently, her throbbing cunt strangling me.

“That’s right, come on my cock, you bad girl. Look at you, spread wide, loving my dick.”

“Kieran,” she groans. Her tiny fingers sparkle with the rings I gave her, gripping the sides of the tub as she grinds through her orgasm. She scoops up a handful of warm, slick bathwater and rubs it against her nipples, droplets sluicing down her shiny Italian skin.

“Fuck, wife. No one’s ever looked this good coming all over my cock.” Maybe because I never bothered to pay attention to their faces when they come. Maybe I never really wanted to look.

This is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

She collapses against my chest. A comical amount of water splashes up at my face, making it drip off my chin. I capture her with a quick kiss and then breathe against her mouth.

“My turn.” I lift her by the waist, holding the side of the tub and gently laying her out. “Keep those legs spread for me, wife. Remember, you’re mine to do with whatever the fuck I want.” I shift her ass to line up my dick with her pussy. We’re

both so slick. Without warning, I slam my cock back into her and get so fucking deep, hitting the end of her.

Isabella grunts a moan from the impact. She bellows from the pleasure, the sound echoing off the tiles. I start to savagely fuck her, water splashing all over the place, but I don't care. She's mine to take like this, so I steal her sanity with every jackhammering thrust to get all I can from her.

"Mine," I grunt, and I'm even more of an animal like this than when I had her tied up the first time. "Say it. Say you're mine."

"I'm yours," she moans.

My head buried in her shoulder, I dig my fingers into her ass and grunt out noises I don't even recognize from my own damn throat. "You're my wife. I'll fuck you how I please."

"Yes." She arches her back to take me on with no hint that the man I am right now is too much for her.

"Fuck, yes." I drive her harder and deeper.

Within seconds, her cunt sears with heat. I lift my head to see her eyes closed. She's licking her lips, and her nipples are more erect than ever. She's loving this. Her tight, hot cunt convulses around my dick, squeezing it, strangling it as I ride her hard through this fucking amazing orgasm that has taken us both over.

She moans beautifully, and her heel kicks me in the ass, landing right in my damn crack. Fuck, that feels good. My

balls draw up, and electricity sparks through every cell in my body.

“I’m coming,” I grit out in her ear. “See how much you make me come? You’ll be pregnant for sure after tonight.” I breathe heavily, waiting for a reaction. “Don’t worry, bella. I’ll still fuck you when you’re pregnant. Just the thought of it makes me crazy, to be honest.”

“Mmmm,” she responds and holds me closer, those nails digging into my shoulder.

Her body trembles as we fall apart together, shaking uncontrollably with pleasure.

I’m ready to just collapse, but Isabella grabs my face. “Do not ever just leave me like that again.”

“You’re making demands of your king?”

“As the queen, yes.”

I bark out a laugh and kiss her roughly. “I agree to that demand, but remember one thing, queen.” I turn her head toward the window. “Out there, I will bow to you. Put you on a pedestal so everyone respects you. But when it’s just us, you bow to me. Understand?”

“Yes, my king.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Isabella

Three weeks go by, and Kieran and I can't keep our hands off each other. Considering all the fundraisers and business dinners we've been to, we've kind of made a spectacle of ourselves. If anyone thought our marriage wasn't real, we've changed their minds. At least as far as our white-hot attraction.

For the fundraising ball I wanted us to attend, one that raises money for low-income women suffering from domestic abuse, I chose a thin, high-neck, yellow gossamer gown with the sides open down to my waist. When I turn a certain way, I show off some good side-boob. I appreciate my boobs a little more after seeing them through Kieran's eyes.

Eyes that stay on me most of the night, even now, when he's a few feet away, talking to the mayor.

"A little birdie told me I should talk to you," a woman's voice sails over my shoulder.

I stiffen briefly but turn around. "Does the little birdie have a name?"

The older woman, who is the epitome of 'handsome', thin and statuesque with flawless makeup on aged skin, smiles. "Shea."

I let go of a breath. "My sister-in-law?"

"The one and only." She holds out a hand. "Marilyn Asher."

“Isabella...O’Rourke.” I shake Marilyn’s firm, warm grip.

“Getting used to that name?” An onyx ring sits on her index finger, and on her wrist is a thin diamond and onyx bangle. The subtle beauty is stunning.

“Yes.” I tuck a hair behind my ear. “It’s just been a couple of months.”

“Enjoy the honeymoon phase.” Before I can remark about her bracelet to make small talk, she says, “Shea tells me you’re looking to work for a foundation when you graduate.”

I go still. Shoot, that afternoon, my first day with Kieran when I met Shea, the wine made me chatty. “I am. My senior independent study project is a business plan to start my own. But I’d like experience first, of course.” And I’d *love* for this not to be a fantasy, since I’m certain Kieran won’t let me work.

Then why did Shea mention it? Maybe she knows her brother better than I do.

“Here’s my card.” Marilyn takes it out of a black, patent-leather clutch. “Send me your project. And we’ll meet to discuss how you can help me. I’m always looking for fresh ideas.”

“I will.” I take it, nodding, containing my excitement.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to hit the ladies’ room. Again.” She squeezes my arm. “Don’t get old, dear. It sucks.”

“I’ll join you.”

We walk there together in silence. It sits right across from the main doors to the ballroom. Calder and Denton, my new guard, hang out in the lobby, so there's no reason to find Kieran to get permission to leave the ballroom without him. Despite his boasting that when I'm with him, he's my guard, events like this require more protection.

The ladies' room is divided into three parts. A sitting room with a mirror along one wall and tufted slipper chairs. Beyond that, a row of sinks and a counter with toiletries to use. Then, to the left, a narrow corridor of toilets, each with a wood-paneled door.

I use one, and Marilyn takes another. It only takes me a minute, and when I come out, I don't see Marilyn. Not wanting to pressure her to finish, I approach the sinks. I consider how my project is worded, especially if a professional will be looking at it and not a professor.

The opening mission statement sticks in my brain, but I hear something that whacks me right out of my thoughts.

“Did you see who your Kieran brought?”

My steps halt, and I see two women washing their hands at the sink.

“I saw him. Holy shit, can he be any more handsome?” a woman wearing a gold chiffon gown, with platinum-blond hair in a chignon, practically hisses. She's looking down into the sink and not at the round, framed window above. She doesn't see me, so I step to the side, tucked behind the wall for the touch-up section.

“Who is she?” her friend, whose features don’t register, asks.

“I have no idea.” The blonde wrings her hands. “He’s not been to the club. I haven’t seen him.”

Thanks to a full-length mirror on the right, I see her turn around. My heart shoots into my throat, taking in her perfect basketball-shaped pregnant belly.

From behind, she looked stick thin.

She and the friend walk my way, and I manage to slip back into a stall, my heart pounding and my head swimming. Of all possible emotions, jealousy fires through me the most. What if... What if she’s carrying Kieran’s baby? For the first time in all these months, *I* want to be pregnant, and a jolt of competitiveness hits me out of nowhere. I’ve never felt that before.

Now...it’s suffocating.

A whisper of floral perfume floats past, and their voices, talking about something else, drift away. I open the door and quickly wash my hands. With still no sign of Marilyn, I hoof it back to the ballroom. If that woman tracked my movements, she’ll see I’m not around and perhaps try to talk to Kieran.

Your Kieran...

“Oh, no, he’s *my* husband, bitch.” Shit, I feel bad calling a pregnant woman that.

Given the size of her belly, if that baby is his, it was before we were married. I can’t be mad at that, except for his obvious

carelessness. Protectiveness surges through me, as well. A child from a mistress could hurt Kieran as the king. Our marriage *is* a business arrangement, despite what we've grown to feel for each other. I'm his partner if nothing else. It's my duty to protect the family. The name I proudly said earlier.

I find my husband standing alone in the lobby, staring out the large plate-glass windows that face the busy city street. My eyes track the rest of the lobby and see no sign of the blonde. How did she miss him?

I get a few steps away, and as if he senses me, he turns around. His wide smile as I approach him sets butterflies off in my stomach. "Everything all right?" He presses a kiss to my temple.

"Yes. Of course." *Not.*

"Things are winding down. Ready to leave?"

God, yes. I nod heartily. But Kieran stiffens, and that gardenia perfume I smelled a few minutes ago hits my nose. I turn, and she's there. She waited... Waited until we were together.

"Hello, Kieran." Her voice sounds different, sultry.

"Hello," my husband replies after a beat. He either forgot her name or doesn't want to say it out loud.

Out of respect for me, perhaps.

The tension that surged through my body in a matter of seconds, the pressure that strangled me so tightly that I'm

ready to snap, vanishes when Kieran slides a hand around my waist. Claiming me in front of this woman.

She glances down and sees my rings. Plural. I'm not a fiancée. I'm his wife. That means I'm permanent. She must not have realized it when she remarked about me earlier. Wait... She didn't remark about me. At all. Not my dress. My curves. My large breasts, or that I'm the Italian princess he bought. All she saw was him, and I was just a yellow blur at his side.

"Congratulations," she says.

"You, too," my husband remarks with a tight smile. "Apparently."

"Thank you." She rests her hand on the crest of her stomach, and her lips part.

I brace for the words to come out of her mouth: *It's your baby.*

I can see my bladder giving out now. Even though I just peed.

"We're thrilled." She glances at the lobby bar where a man in a dark blue suit with a beer glass in his hand watches us.

We. *We're* thrilled. The baby must belong to that man.

"Congratulations, again. Take care," Kieran says, steering me away, still not addressing her by name.

And I don't want to know. I'll imagine him saying it, whispering it, groaning it when he came inside her.

I have a decision to make. Address the gold pregnant elephant or let it go. If anything, he'd like to know women talk about him behind his back. And it shows him I'm not afraid to bring up sensitive subjects.

Although I'm terrified, I have to address it. What if that *is* his child? Could this be my way out? My chest heaves, thinking about that. No. I...like Kieran. A lot. I'm happy. This isn't such a bad life. It's not *too* different from living at school, where my guards followed me around, or at home, where they were up my ass. If I married a businessman like Mama wanted, I would be right here, anyway.

Kieran is a businessman. A better one than Papa. Then again, Kieran has his brothers. Papa only has Uncle Dante.

Our eyes meet, and he narrows them. "No."

"She was in the ladies' room. I heard her talking about you."

His face turns to stone. Odd, like he didn't expect his lays to brag about it.

"You were with her. At your club." I don't pose it as a question.

Without hesitating, he says, "Aye. I was with her. Over *a year ago*," he mutters resolutely. Which means he remembers the encounter distinctively. And probably her name. Just chose not to say it to her. For me.

"Just once?" I ask quietly.

"That is *not* my baby."

I nod, all flushed. “Just checking. It wouldn’t be good for either of us if—”

“Isabella, I used condoms there. Every time. No exceptions. Not. Once.” He glances around and exhales. “I didn’t anticipate this, though.”

“What?”

“That someone from my past would be in a place like this.”

“Men don’t bring...”

“Sex workers... High-price escorts, sure.” He shrugs. “I wouldn’t know. I used women like that for one thing. I never needed someone on my arm here. I had nothing to prove, and I wasn’t embarrassed that I was still single.”

From what I experienced in bed with Kieran, his voraciousness and stamina, he had primal needs and chose that route.

“You never ran into a woman at one of these things before?”

“No. That doesn’t mean they weren’t here. I just never noticed.” He shrugs, and I believe him. “I’m here for business reasons.”

“Then why am I here?”

“I’m a married man. To be here without my wife sends the wrong signal. It’s why I had every intention of you being with me that night. Plus, I want you with me. For me.” He places a gentle kiss on my lips, but I feel the energy buzzing under his

skin. I recognize how he'll need to be inside me soon. "But *you* appeared to be talking business."

"I was." I straighten my spine, the preggo lady forgotten, because he has, too, apparently. "Marilyn Asher, she—"

"I know who she is." He brushes a finger across my lips. "What did she want?"

"She heard I want to do charity work for a foundation. Your sister mentioned it." I don't mean to throw Shea under the bus, but I don't want my husband to think I came here to pitch myself to investors.

"I want you pregnant, bella."

"Mothers do work, Kieran."

"Mine didn't."

Because it looked like she was always busy *working* on having another kid. But I don't voice that, obviously. Having babies was her choice. I respect her for it. She and Fergus raised a wonderful family. Even if they're criminals and murderers. As a family unit, they love and respect each other.

I consider this an opening to negotiate. A child in exchange to work.

But...

I know Kieran well enough by now that it's not the time. He gently takes my hand and leads us to his car.

We go home and make love nearly all night.

The next morning, I stumble to the bathroom to catch my breath after Kieran just spent an hour pounding me into the mattress. He climbed on top of me the moment I woke up, and I didn't even get a chance to pee.

I amble to the toilet, sitting behind an octagonal privacy wall, and the euphoric feeling of emptying my bladder steals my attention for a moment as I close my eyes.

When I open them, Kieran is standing in front of me, naked, with a half-erect cock. He folds his arms across his chest, the muscles in his shoulders and biceps taking my breath away every damn time.

Just not now. I push on his sculpted abs. "Do you mind? My legs are spread so I can pee. Give me a minute, you beast."

Kieran huffs a laugh. "I saw some blood on the sheets. Are you okay?"

My body tenses. My period. I should have gotten it a few days ago, actually. I've been a little crampy. But I've been busy with schoolwork. And between spending an hour a day shaving to keep myself smooth the way Kieran likes it, and then being railed for hours, I've lost all track of time.

Maybe my period is just light this month from the stress finally catching up to me.

"Bella," Kieran calls out to me and then crouches, ignoring the fact that I'm on the toilet. "Did you get your period?" He's expecting me to be pregnant. And given we saw a very

pregnant woman last night, he might see me as...defective if *I* can't pregnant. But it's because I'm still taking those pills.

"I... I guess. Was there a lot of blood?" I push a hand through my hair. "I'm sorry. I'll pull the sheets off and wash them myself."

"I already stripped the bed." He brushes my cheek. "Don't worry about the sheets. Are you all right? Are you in pain?"

Is that a trick question? "A little," I say, to slide by on a technicality because my pussy is sore as hell from all the sex.

"I was hoping you'd be pregnant." His intense green eyes bore into me, and in that moment, I want to be pregnant.

That fades when I think of his mother and seven pregnancies to carry eight kids. And how I might bulk up. I heard that's when powerful men get mistresses. They watch a kid pop out of your pikachu and never want to put their face near it again. A sudden prudishness comes over them, thinking they can't get nasty with the mother of their children.

"I'm sorry," I say to play on his sympathies. I *am* sorry, in a way.

I'm only twenty-one, and I really want to finish my degree. I hope Marilyn gives me feedback on my independent study project and maybe hires me to get experience. Even when I do become a mother, I assume Kieran will hire me a nanny, and the children will be enrolled in an expensive preschool.

"Don't apologize, bella." He kisses my forehead and stands up, my lips in line with his cock.

God, that thing is beautiful and deadly. Kieran smirks, catching me looking at it. “I guess it’s another month of unbridled fucking, aye?”

“Aye,” I mimic him, attempting the accent.

I peek over the privacy wall to watch him open the glass doors and step into the shower, his muscles flaring as he moves. I look at him and then at me, not a dent of muscle on me. All round, curvy flesh with a potbelly of baby fat that Kieran seems to love.

The shower quickly steams up, and I watch for another minute as he lathers himself with expensive and amazing-smelling bodywash.

I get up and notice a few spots of blood on the toilet paper, too. *Hmmm.*

“Joining me?” Kieran asks from the open door, the steam pluming out behind him. The man is a machine. “Orgasms are great for cramps.”

How he knows this boggles the mind. “In a minute.”

“That wasn’t exactly an optional invitation, wife.” His voice gets dark.

“Be right there, husband.”

He closes the door, and I skip into the bedroom to look at my phone. I had an app on my other one that tracked my period, but I didn’t load it onto the new phone. I’ve marked my calendar with a fake assignment for school to note the days I got it.

Sure enough, I'm late getting it, so that's odd. I blame it on all the sex. Not to mention all the cum jammed inside me. That's got to be throwing my system off.

I go still, realizing I'm also out of pills.

I return to the bathroom and slip into the shower, where I'm immediately pushed against the wall, lifted up, and filled with a cock. "You feel so fucking good. My Isabella, you were made for me. Every inch of this curvy body is mine. Now I'm going to consume you with every inch of me."

An orgasm tears through me right away from the angle and deep-as-shit penetration. Cramps. Gone.

"Aye, keep coming. I can go for another hour. Anything to make you feel better, wife."

I just smile because his head is already on my shoulder, driving me insane. I hold on for what I know will be a wild ride.



After lunch, Kieran disappears to watch Sunday football with his brothers, Ewan Quinlan, and Ewan's brothers. It's like a rugby team in the media room on the second floor, and I'm surprised the ceiling doesn't crack or cave in. That and I'm blinded by the male beauty.

Meanwhile, I'm sitting at the kitchen island, researching other foundations for my project when Balor struts in.

He's an adorable nerd with sandy-blond hair and dark-rimmed glasses. "It's Sunday. You shouldn't be working. Come watch the game with us." He reaches into the fridge and comes out with a handful of longneck beers.

Other nights, it's an Irish whiskey drinking contest in suits and cigars. On Sundays, my house smells like a pub. I smile, though, because Kieran loves when his brothers are here. But his face is brightest when he's inside me. He does seem a lot happier overall now that I've completely moved into his bedroom and we go at it every night.

"I'll be there in a minute." I close my laptop to crash the all-male football party, when my phone rings, and I see it's Samantha, returning my call from earlier.

Through my eyelashes, I watch Balor and wonder if he's listening in on my calls, as well as checking who I'm talking with. I can't ask because that will tip him off.

When he leaves, I step outside and call her back from the yard, facing the kitchen so no one can sneak up on me and listen.

"Hey." Sam sounds out of breath, probably at the gym. "What's going on? I saw you called me."

"The usual. Sunday football. A house full of thirst traps." I take a breath. "I need a favor."

"The kind that will land an Irish bullet in my head?"

I bark a laugh. “No.” *Maybe*. “I need a package of birth control pills.”

“Did you lose yours?”

“No. I finished my last package. I’m supposed to be... We’re supposed to be trying to get pregnant.” I hear Samantha exhale. “Don’t sigh your disapproval like that.”

“What are you doing?” When I launch into my *school should come first* excuse, she cuts me off. “Why are you lying to him? He’s going to find out and be furious. You’ve gotten so far with him. He totally trusts you now.” She’s right.

“I just want to finish college and maybe work for a year.”

“That’s a long way off. How long do you think he’ll just let you keep getting your period before he drags you to some doctor?”

I shudder, remembering his twin brothers out west are doctors. I might wake up one day to see Cormac or Darragh standing over me, ready to take cervix samples.

“Kieran... He’s intense. And I’ve figured out that I can’t come at him with anything big. My wanting to work at a foundation when I graduate and then start my own is a big deal. I need time to ease him into the idea. But once I do, I know he’ll be proud of me. Besides, everyone is still buzzing about Stasia, and all the Irish families have lined up behind Kieran.” I have to be careful, remembering I’m talking to an Italian who can use the information I give her to blackmail her union-boss father for a trip to Hawaii. “Kieran doesn’t need a

baby right now, this second. He used that as an excuse when we first got married as a way to give our marriage a purpose. He just hasn't recalculated yet. But he's getting there." The way he went at me in the shower didn't hint at the slightest disappointment that I wasn't pregnant.

And damn, he was right. I felt a little crampy, but the orgasms made them disappear.

"Or, he still wants that, and you're telling yourself your marriage is real when it's not." Her words anger me, and I want to hang up on her.

But I need those damn pills. "Well, you don't know him."

"You're right. I don't. You should change that. Let's all hang out."

I scoff a laugh, remembering the last time we hung out. But she has a point. She's my best friend, and she should get to know my husband. "Where?"

"There's a new club called Juicy I've been dying to check out."

I dump my head in my hands, not knowing what to do with that one. "Really? Juicy?"

"I didn't name it."

"I don't know. Can you just meet me in the damn bathroom at the pharmacy on Steinway?"

"No, ma'am. I'm playing hardball because I want to see you. You deserve a night out. And if you have Kieran with

you, there's no reason for him to push back. I want to meet the king."

"My father is *your* king." My sense of loyalty is messed up.

"Are you sure about that?" She sends another dig my way.

"What does *that* mean?" I glance in the kitchen, knowing someone is coming for more beer at any moment.

"The word around town is, your uncle and your dad have been fighting. Like, *fist* fighting in the street."

I don't know how to feel about that. Only that Uncle Dante is close to seven feet tall, thanks to some suspicious German ancestry in his and my mother's bloodline. My father is a short, pudgy Sicilian. "I'll check in with him this week."

"I read on a review site that Tuesday nights are not so busy at the club. Let's go out. Besides, Ginna is being a pain in the ass."

"How can you tell?" Honestly, I was hoping Samantha wouldn't invite her. I don't want to make Sam a third wheel, though. "I'll bring you a pack of pills. *One* pack. I'll tell my doctor I lost mine and to call in another prescription."

"Playing dirty."

"I'm Italian."

"Not to give too much away, but these Irish... Holy shit." I think of all the blood I find on Kieran's clothes.

"I look forward to meeting him. Who the hell knows what will happen with your father? I may have to marry one of

those Irishmen.” That gets a laugh out of me. “I’m texting you the address.”

“No. I’ll look it up.”

“Tuesday. Juicy. Or no pills, and you’ll have to carry the baby of a man with very wide shoulders.”

“That’s really playing dirty.” I hang up.

I see my dark-haired, broad, and proud husband in the kitchen, watching me.

Here we go.

I slip inside, and he pulls me into the mudroom. “Talking to a boyfriend, wife?” He kisses me and rams his hips at me. I’m alarmed at the hardness there.

“Yes, he’s coming over in a few minutes, so enjoy the fourth quarter. I’ll keep it down.”

He barks out a laugh and holds my chin. “That sounded rather convincing.” He kisses me, making me dizzy, until I feel the phone slip from my fingers. He jumps back, scrolling through it.

“It was Samantha, you maniac. She wants to see me. *Us*, actually. She wants to get to know you.”

A wrinkle forms over his nose. “Me?”

I shimmy back up to him and rub his cock while getting my phone back from him. “Why wouldn’t she want to meet my king? My powerful and ridiculously handsome husband.”

“When?”

“Tuesday night.”

He steps back and crosses his arms. “Sounds like this is already a plan and you didn’t ask me.”

“I just hung up the phone, and you grabbed me.”

He thinks about that. “I have to check.”

I exhale because I really need those pills. “That is *my* turn. For us to go out with *my* friends.” I start touching him again. “If anything, this should be a bonus turn for me, since you dragged me away from Sam’s party.”

“That was to protect you.” He kisses me, and I feel like I’m about to get banged on the washing machine. “Who are these girls, by the way?”

“Their fathers are union hotshots. My father likes to keep them happy.”

“He hasn’t lost *all* his good business sense.” A cheer erupts from the media room. “Aye, we’ll go.” He steps back and adjusts himself. “But then I get a *big* turn, wife.”

“I’m counting on it.” I lower my eyes to the bulge already growing in his pants and let my stare linger as he turns away.

Thirty more days of sex without worrying I’ll get pregnant.
Woot.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Kieran

Choose your battles.

But win the war...

I said yes to taking my wife to a club, but not to the place she wanted to go in favor of a place where Riordan knows the security team.

Isabella agrees, saying she trusts Riordan. Her concurrence, with a thoughtful nod, and not a pouting foot-stomp, shows how she's matured since I met her. She is capable of agreeing to strategic moves and will hopefully make them on her own. My mother was my father's greatest advisor. I'm only seeing that now in an appreciative light. That. I want that. This marriage has turned quite real, and that's the role I want my queen to play.

But she needs to give me a child right away first.

Tonight, I send a limo to pick up her spoiled little friends. Pete drives my Range Rover, and Riordan sits in the front seat while Calder follows us with his car.

We blow past the long line around the corner to get in, and my wife's face lights up when we get inside the snazzy club. The glittery glass mosaic columns, with a touch of industrial-chic finishes and very well-dressed people, give me an insight to my wife and what makes her happy. She's young. Things like this still matter to her. I understand. Crawley's Pub on Steinway Street used to mean everything to me and Riordan.

Different vibe, sure. But I wouldn't expect an Italian princess to guzzle pints and have cursing contests.

I much prefer her sophistication and wanting the finer things in life because that is the man I am now. We're seated on the second level in a roped-off VIP section overlooking the dancefloor. It's Manhattan, so the whole freaking floor is VIP. That's to be expected. I'm not here to be anyone's king tonight. I'm here for my wife to have a good time.

She throws her arms around my shoulders the minute we sit down and thanks me with a very hot mouth and playful tongue. The area is dim, and no one looks at us, so I slip my hand under her dress.

"Open your legs, brat." I bite gently on the shell of her ear, pulling a tiny squeal from her. "Don't kiss me like that and not expect me to want to take things further."

"We're in public!" she argues.

"You think I give a fuck?" I finger her panties, loving the heat and dampness already there. "If I want to take you right here, I will."

"And how will you do that?"

"Put you on my lap. Pull these annoying panties aside..." Which I do to make my warning clear. "And penetrate you with my cock instead of my fingers, like I'm doing right now."

Her head falls back, and I consider how far I want to take this. A buzz in my pocket has me slipping out of her wet heat and licking my fingers. "Saved by your friends."

“They’re here?” She adjusts her short gold-sequin dress, which is better for everyone.

“Yep.” I stand up and shove my hands into my pocket, bumping into my hard-on. This night better go quickly.

Lachlan got to be the big shot in the limo to pick up Isabella’s friends. They look adorably terrified with him on their six when they find Isabella at our mirrored table and six velvet-tufted chairs.

Girly squeals usually sound like nails on a chalkboard, but Isabella’s joy at seeing her friends is real and palpable. And damn, I love how her tits bounce when she jumps up and down. Nothing compares to how they move when she’s naked and under me while I fuck the crap out of her in my bed, our bed, every night, though.

“This is Samantha.” Isabella holds my arm. “Sam, this is Kieran, my husband.”

Sam gives a cute curtsy, and I like her already. “Nice to meet you.”

“Aye, same. Happy belated birthday,” I say, remembering, and tracking my gaze to Isabella as a reminder of the punishment she got that night.

Even if it led to us being the way we are now.

“This is Ginna,” Isabella says with a little less enthusiasm.

“Hello,” the girl says, all sultry, and immediately, my guard goes up.

I'm used to women undressing me with their eyes, but the way Isabella's friend stares at me, her gaze soaking up the entire breadth of me, infuriates me.

Honestly, I want to just take a night off from fucking drama.

A server shows up a few seconds later, and I handle the drink orders. This is my wife's night to have fun, and I'm her arm candy.

"So, how's married life, Isabella?" Ginna says with a thick New York accent, and tops it with a cluck of her tongue, showing how fucking spoiled she is.

"It's great," my wife answers and snuggles against me.

Playing along, I take her hand and kiss it, displaying the rock I put on her finger. Bragging, sure. I don't fuck around.

Isabella leans forward and whispers, "We can't keep our hands off each other."

Samantha offers a genuine smile and doesn't look at me, while Ginna narrows her eyes right on me. Okay, this is going to be a problem. I hope this Ginna isn't the kind of friend that will be hanging out in my house and in my pool, eye-fucking me behind her friend's back. I won't tolerate it.

It perplexes me why she'd need to do that. She's beautiful but in a fake kind of way.

Our drinks come, and the women fall into mindless back-and-forth chatter about school. I tune it out, and when I check again, I see nearly an hour has gone by.

The music changes, and Samantha stands up. “I love this song. Can I dance with your wife?”

“You don’t have to ask him,” Isabella scoffs and takes her hand. “Ginna, come on.”

I give her a death stare that suggests she’s not staying here with me. My chest relaxes when off the three of them go. I signal Riordan down at the bar to keep an eye on them from his vantage point.

I lean back and sip my whiskey. As far as clubs go, Riordan sure can pick ‘em. I’ll give him that. Right away, I know the place is safe. A shit-ton of cameras line the walls, and I see at least four panels with smoky two-way mirrors on the floor above me. Security teams are watching with their own eyes, as well. Sure, every fucker up here, on both sides of me, is wearing an expensive suit, but even the average Joes below are well dressed. No dirtbags.

The music, however, beats a little irritatingly loud. That’s to be expected. Before I know it, my wife bounces back to our table and sticks her ass in my face on purpose to get to her seat.

“It’s crowded down there,” Isabella says, sipping the champagne I ordered for the table.

Samantha thanks me. Ginna doesn’t. She swipes her flute and sips it like she’s the fucking queen. I tamp down my anger. This is Isabella’s night, and I won’t ruin it by being a dick.

Samantha holds her stomach and announces, “I need to use the ladies’ room.”

This I know is a multi-person event, and I pray Ginna goes with her so I can be alone with my wife for two seconds. Only, Isabella crawls over me with her purse in hand.

“I’ll go, too.” She kisses me, distracting me with her tits. The dress is very low cut, and she’s not wearing a bra. Something I’d never let her leave the house wearing alone. But she’s with me.

I stand up and see a well-lit hallway to the right and deem it safe. This whole section is VIP, and no one’s looked at us twice. I can see us coming back here. Fuck, to feel anonymous like this is fantastic. Something I didn’t expect.

“No funny business, brat,” I whisper and squeeze her ass.

“Nah, I’m giving you a night off from worrying.” She pats my abs, and her fingers slide down my dress shirt. Next, she’s gripping my belt.

“One more hour, and we’re out of here.”

“You’re no fun,” she pouts adorably.

“You’re very wrong.” I kiss her on the temple, and over her shoulder, I catch Ginna smirking at me.

She stands, and I breathe a sigh of relief, thinking she’s going to join them, even if it means she plans to talk shit about me. But when Samantha and my wife leave, Ginna plops down on my lap, her legs spread wide.

What. The. Fuck?

“Wrong seat,” I warn, ready to throw her off. Sudden moves, though, especially against a woman, could land me in trouble.

“Are you sure?” She grinds her pussy against my hard-on. “I think you like this.”

“That erection is for my wife. Now get off me before I toss you off.”

“Please...” Her arms wrap around my shoulders. “Isabella won’t care. It’s not like your marriage is real.”

I grip her wrists. “It’s very real. She took my name, sleeps in my bed, and I fuck her every chance I get.” I don’t know why I’m graphically defending my marriage to this rude woman, who’s hitting on her friend’s husband. “Now. Get off me.”

“Just one kiss, handsome,” she purrs at me, and I see red.

I roughly grab her face, smearing that overdone shiny lip gloss. She emits a sigh, thinking I’m actually going to kiss her. “Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to? How dare you touch me? Do you have any idea what I can do to you? And not in the way that skank pussy of yours wants. My wife is the heir to your world. Who are *you*? You think I’d lower myself to fuck a union boss’s daughter?”

“Um...” Words escape her.

“Isabella thinks you’re her friend. This will hurt my wife, and my marriage is real enough that I’d hurt someone for

that. Man or woman. Now, get the fuck off me before I stand up, and you go flying over that banister. My brother will hack into the cameras and make it look like you jumped. Add drugs to your system when they perform the autopsy to make it look like a suicide.”

GINNA’S jaw drops. Without me even touching her, she bolts out of my lap to stand up, wobbling on six-inch heels. When the red clears from my vision, I see Isabella standing there, looking confused. Ginna adjusts her dress and stalks off. I don’t give a shit how she gets home. She’s not my responsibility.

“What happened?” Samantha asks, her purse clutched under an armpit.

“She said she’s not feeling well. Might be leaving.”

Samantha rolls her eyes. “I’ll make sure she gets a cab.”

Isabella and I lock eyes, and I don’t have to say a word. “We’re gonna get going, anyway, Sam.” Her voice is strong, but she looks hurt.

“Okay. I did have fun.” Samantha is sweet and genuine. She reaches out to shake my hand like a lady. “I hope we can do this again.”

I shake it back. “My brother will get you home.”

“I have the Uber app. We’re fine. Thanks.” She hugs Isabella, whispering something to her.

A wife will have secrets. I accept that. If she trusts me, then she’ll know what’s important enough to share with me.

“Another round?” A nervous-looking female server, wearing all black, sneaks up on us.

“No. Just the check.”

“It’s taken care of.”

“I don’t take handouts.” I yank my credit card from my wallet. “And I’m a big tipper.”

“Your brother gave a card to the bartender earlier.”

“Aye.” I drop two hundreds on the table anyway. “Thank you.”

With my hand on the small of Isabella’s back, I steer her to a far corner where there’s an elevator.

“Wanna tell me what happened?” she asks cautiously.

A man in my position might tell his wife to fuck-off and mind her own business. A man with my kind of power fucks mistresses or his wife’s best friends without a blink of an eye.

Isabella gives me everything I need. Sure, we have a long way to go before she can deal with the hardcore side of me. But I’m being patient with her. I will not fuck around on her. Or lie to her.

Plus...I like her. Enough to be honest with her so that she knows who’s in her corner and who isn’t. “In a nutshell, your friend sat on my lap and propositioned me.”

“Really?” The astonishment on her face sets me back.

“Find that hard to believe, do you?” I’m almost hurt that she doesn’t think her friend would want me. Do I really want to

defend that?

“That Ginna would embarrass herself like that? Yes. She’s very full of herself.”

“She sure is. So full of herself that she thinks she can walk all over *my* queen in front of me.” I back my wife up against a wall, only pin lights shining down on us. “And she’s insane to think I’d touch her.”

“So you...” Isabella stops herself. “No, of course you wouldn’t. I’m sorry. I’m just floored that she’d do that. I wasn’t expecting it.”

I pull her close to me. “I’m sorry, bella. It’s hard to find out who your real friends are. She won’t be the first person to disappoint you. It’s a sad fact in our world.” I lay a gentle kiss on her mouth. “I won’t shelter you. You’re my wife and my queen. That means you need to know hard truths. I can get Balor to pull the security tapes, and you can see exactly how it went down.” I hold her chin. “Knowledge and truth are power, bella.”

She blinks, listening to me, taking in my words. “I don’t need to see it. I believe you. And I’m going to address it. You’re right. How dare she?” The fire in her voice turns me the fuck on.

She puts her arms across my shoulders. “I think I owe you a turn now, husband. How do you want me?”



On the first floor, I signal to Lachlan and Riordan that I want the limo.

We catch Samantha on the street, waiting for an Uber. Ginna smokes an e-cigarette a few feet away, scrolling on her phone. Isabella convinces them to take my SUV and hugs Samantha.

My hands ball into fists seeing my wife storm up to Ginna. My bella shoves her fingers in the woman's face, murmuring something I can't hear. Ginna eyes me without reacting. Smart girl, not to fight back. I'd take her down in a second.

When the two girls get into my SUV, I pull Riordan by the shirt. "Watch that blonde. She thinks she can manipulate anyone to get what she wants, and I bet her father is just as bad."

"You got it." My underboss pats my arm.

Riordan and Lachlan all pile into my car with Isabella's friends, and I steer my wife into the limo. The partition is down. When I see the back of Calder's head, I bark an order to just drive around, and give me some fucking privacy.

Before it even takes off, I take out a knife from my ankle holder.

"Kieran!" Isabella gasps, shirking back.

"On your hands and knees, wife." I pat the leather seat.

Eyes sparkling, she does what I ask, and I pull her butt right up to my lips. “You think I didn’t catch you shoving this ass in my face before?”

“Um...”

“Um?” I push her short, sequined dress up, exposing sweet ass cheeks and a tiny thong. I grip the thin lace material with my fist, and my wife lets a moan slip.

“Oh, you’re in for a rough night, princess.”

“I’m your queen,” she bites back.

I scoff a laugh. “You’re *their* queen. Right now, you’re my little princess, and I’m in charge.” Without warning, I slide the blunt end of the knife tip across her lower back, then turn it around to cut the damn thong right off.

“God, yes,” Isabella grunts.

With her ass so high, I don’t even need to bend down to lick her from behind. I run the tip of my tongue the entire length of her opening, teasing the slit with my wet tip.

“You were such a good girl for me tonight. I wanted to fuck you right in the elevator.”

“How... How was I a good girl?”

“You acted like a mature, elegant queen.” I slide my tongue all the way inside her. “Fuck, you taste so good.” It’s thick and salty, but also sweet.

Fingering her clit, I get my belt open with the other hand. I consider if I want her naked. She’s not a whore I don’t care

about. We're in a moving car. Something can happen. She deserves respect.

"I want to take your ass, bella. Say no if you don't want that. A real no. This isn't a game. You're not my whore, or sex plaything, you don't need a safeword to make me stop."

She glances at me over her shoulder. The lights on the street catch her eyes. They're wide, sure. I brought this up out of nowhere. Right now, I need to be in her ass. When she licks her lips and smiles, it makes my cock throb.

"Will it hurt?" she asks, breathing heavily.

"Yes, but not for long. I'll make it good for you." I lick my fingers and circle her hole. "Just tell me to stop if it gets too much for you. I want you to love it as much as I do. It's something I'll want often."

On a shaky breath, she says, "I want to be everything you need."

I push past her ring of nerves with my finger and she lowers her head, moaning. My other finger probes her slit and I feel how wet she is. I usually only penetrate a woman here, but this is my wife. She's only ever been with me. So I use my tongue and my wet mouth to make sure I can slide my cock right in.

Isabella whimpers, "Please. Please fuck me there."

With my hard, throbbing cock fisted in my hand, I nudge her tight hole, her dripping cunt also coating my cock.

With the force of a freight train, I slam into her tight ass.

“Ah!” she bellows as I bring her hips down to fuck her deep.

“Tell me to stop.” My hands grip her hips as I pump my heavy cock with my eyes fixed on the line of her back, the stiffening of her shoulders.

“No. Don’t stop. It’s so good.”

“Good girl.” The way she takes my dick feels so fucking good. “I knew you’d love me fucking you like this, bella.”

With my head tipped back, I’m lost in the pleasure, letting the orgasm build and peak to an almost unbearable wave, battering every inch of me.

I stop and slowly ease out, shocked at how wet we both are. I flip her over. “I need to see your face,” I growl. “Pull your dress down. Show me your tits.”

She parts the front, exposing bare tits. Her nipples are raging hard, and her olive skin is slowly going red as she heats up. Her one leg is thrown over the seatback; as the other hangs on the floor like she can’t get wide enough for me.

“You are so fucking beautiful, Isabella. My wife.” I pull out and bend to lick her pussy again to hold back my orgasm. Grabbing her ankle, I stroke the black satin high-heel shoes I know I bought her.

Her hands pull on my hair as she gasps for air. “You’re killing me.”

I can nail her into oblivion back here, erase the memory of any feeling she ever had except my cock driving so deeply into

her. Right now, my mouth burns for her. I savagely lick the entire length of her cleft while she whines and bucks against my mouth.

“Fuck, bella. I can devour your pussy for hours.” I lick my lips after kissing the entire opening.

“Oh, God.” Isabella pulls my hair harder, her nails digging into my scalp. “You bastard, that’s so good.”

I groan a laugh, swirling my tongue over her clit, squeezing her ass to pull her cunt closer. Keeping my head between her thighs, I lick and suck her throbbing clit.

“Kieran, please,” she begs as I taunt her over and over.

“Not this time, bella. I want to feel your tight ass spasm around my cock.” After a final lick, I sit back and line up my rock-hard dick. “Fuck, you’re so wet. This is what you really want, isn’t it? This is what you waited for? Me? A man with a cock like this?”

“Yes, I waited for you. I’m so fucking glad. I only want you,” she whines, and her voice sounds beyond lust. There’s a soul-shattering sincerity to it I’m not prepared for.

This marriage wasn’t supposed to be about love. It was supposed to be about power and respect. Maybe I’m misreading things, and she’s just in a lust haze.

Her hips buck as I stroke her clit. “Oh, bella, I’m gonna bury my cock inside you so deep. You won’t know where you end and I begin.”

She lifts her head at that and stares into my eyes. Her mascara is smeared, my debauched little princess, tits hanging out, legs spread with a drenched pussy dying for me is the most gorgeous goddamn thing I've ever seen. Feeling like an animal, I ram back into her ass, shivers running down my spine.

While fingering her cunt, I fuck her ass harder and faster, my belt's buckle jingling against her thighs in the most beautiful ringing combo I ever heard. She climaxes against me, her muscles closing around my cock, but I keep going.

She's gone incoherent, just mumbling whimpers of pleasure, and it fuels me to continue. I fuck her with a vicious and unyielding pace. I'm not slowing down now.

Sweat drips into my eyes, and I glance at my wife, lost and out of control, writhing beneath me. Going crazy on my thick cock, pounding her ass to the hilt.

"Bella, you okay?" I ground out.

All she does is pant and whine. She's out of it. Lost in a euphoric state. It's fucking beautiful to watch.

I'm holding back my orgasm while she falls over the edge again. The clenching is tighter this time, more strangling.

Fuck, this is so hard. But my cock doesn't want to stop feeling this. I'm on the verge of my control, battling my own limits.

She's wearing me down, not crying out or telling me to stop. I'm losing my breath. All I have is ragged air burning my

lungs, but I keep thrusting.

Isabella bucks again.

Fuck, three orgasms. Okay, I need to land this fucker. I gently pull her thighs around my hips while I drape my body across hers. We're a wrangled mess: half-dressed, her tits lewdly hanging out, and my shiny, wet cock slowly entering her and pulling out all the way.

I fuck her gently for a brief moment, feeling every spasm of the nerves I've shredded. She'll have trouble walking tomorrow for sure, and I love it. I seal my mouth over hers and kiss her deeply. She whines and clings to me, her nails scraping my shirt. I wish I was naked to feel the sting of her clawing at me.

I reach behind her head and pull her hair for leverage. My pace kicks up, and I start my descent. It won't be a soft landing. It will be a fiery fucking crash that might kill me.

Every nerve ending in my body screams like I'm on fire.

"I'm gonna fucking come. Hold on, bella." Like a bomb going off, my climax finally crashes against me.

I've never unloaded this much. I've never come this hard. I collapse on top of her and hold her against me. My cheek feels so hot against hers, both scorching and wet with perspiration.

"Good, bella?"

"Beyond good." She turns her head, and I devour her with a kiss. "Where are we?"

“I don’t care. I’m with you, and that’s all that matters.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Isabella

Kieran never held me so tightly. Something changed in him. Ginna got an angry earful from me. I tried to be reserved and classy. But I made my point clear. She and I are through. How dare she sit on my husband's lap and proposition him? Faced with a woman who would have fucked him in a dark shadow and never tell me, it forced Kieran to face how he really feels about me.

He's never been more passionate. This marriage actually might turn into something real.

Like love. I want that. I want what my mother didn't get from my ruthless don of a father.

After we both come in his limo, he puts me together and pulls his pants back up. I lean against his chest for the rest of the drive home. Turns out, we were circling our block. Good thing the windows were tinted.

We get to the gate, and Lachlan is there. Kieran rolls down the window. "Problem?"

"Not at all," he snarls, licking his lips. "Just making sure you got home safe."

"Since when do you check up on me out of nowhere?" Kieran's guard goes up, and I feel him stiffen.

"Why don't you send your wife in the house and then meet me here."

Shit, something did happen.

“Did you hurt Samantha?” I screech, crawling out of the window, Kieran grabbing me.

“Which one was she?” Lach rubs his chin.

Kieran pulls me back inside the car but opens the door. “He’s playing with you. You’re playing with her, right?”

“Maybe.”

I get out of the car, but the gate stays open. I should just walk inside and leave my husband to deal with his enforcer. I’m sure this has nothing to do with me. Kieran still comes home with blood on his clothes. I ignore it. If anything, he fucks me harder on those nights.

I’m not sure I can handle him screwing me like an animal again, though. Tapping him on the shoulder, I whisper, “I’m going to take a bath.”

Kieran kisses my forehead. “Good idea. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Take your time.”

“Sore, brat?”

“Very.” I smile and turn to go inside when I see Denton has a man in a headlock. I recognize the spiky blond hair, the square-shaped face, and sharp jaw. The familiar face wrecks me from the guard booth.

“Isabella. Run!” Ivan yells, and my husband whips around that way.

Lachlan has his gun pointed, and I realize he had it cocked the whole time. He just had his hands tucked into his armpits so I wouldn't see. "Isabella, we found Ivan trying to break in."

"Ivan?" The sharpness of Kieran's voice scares me. "I'll handle this. Get in the house, Isabella."

Ivan was always nice to me. I don't want him to get hurt solely because he liked me. Then again, trying to break into my house deserves an ass-kicking.

"We found this in his bag." Denton, who stayed behind to help man the gate, kicks the emptied contents of his bag. Rope, a brown bottle of something to drug me, a knife, and a blindfold tumble out.

"You were going to kidnap me?" I screech at Ivan.

It happens so fast. He breaks from Denton and kicks him in the balls. Ivan takes off, but Kieran pushes Lachlan aside to tackle him down to the apron right in front of the gate.

"Get him the fuck away from my house!" Kieran roars, shoving him at Lachlan. "Bring him to the warehouse. I'll be there in a few."

"No!" Those bloodstained hands flash through my memory. "This involves me. You interrogate him in front of me. I won't let him tell you lies."

"I have no lies to tell." Ivan's thick Russian accent scrapes my insides, as I haven't heard it in a while. "Just truths for your fake bride."

“You’re pushing it, Ivan,” Lachlan says, holding him against a pole. “We can’t do this here.”

Kieran breathes heavily and eyes me. “I trust you told me the truth about this piece of shite.”

“Every word.” I stand tall. “Please. Don’t hide me away. I am your queen.”

He shakes his head and threads our fingers together as we walk up to Ivan together. With burning, angry eyes, Kieran mutters to the Russian, “Who sent you to kidnap my wife?”

“No one,” he answers right away. “She was promised to me first. I’m just taking back what was mine.”

“That’s a lie,” I bellow.

“Ask her uncle,” he says with beady eyes I’ve never seen.

My blood runs cold because no one was supposed to know about us.

“Admit it, Kieran O’Rourke,” Ivan says, his voice sinister. “You just want her for the same reason I do.”

My throat goes tight. Ivan didn’t care about me after all. And Kieran doesn’t deny the accusation. He’s made a point of calling me his wife all this time like he’s happy with me. Why doesn’t he tell Ivan he loves me? That should scare the crap out of his enemies, to be fucking with a woman he loves.

Maybe he doesn’t...

Lachlan stands there with his piece tucked against his chest. “I’ve had enough. You attempted to break into our house. That

gets you a bullet to the head. I don't suspect your uncle will let one of *my* guys crawl over his fence and not pay." He brings the gun to Ivan's head.

Kieran stops him. "We already killed one Russian."

In the confusion, Ivan kicks Lachlan in the shins and runs off.

"You little prick," Lachlan groans and prepares to run. "I may not shoot you, but I'm going to bash your head in."

Kieran holds his brother back again. "No! Set up a meeting with Alexei about this. *Tomorrow!* We know who he is. Don't go running into the night. For all we know, their death squad is around the corner, ready to ambush us. They killed her mother! They burned down her house!" Kieran is screaming, pointing at me, and I feel like one big bucket of trouble.

Too much trouble.

Seeing the brothers argue with no attempt to drag Ivan back to get more info, I turn to go into the house.

Alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Isabella

Kieran turned distant again this past week after the confrontation with Ivan, and sex now feels like he's just trying to get off. Trying to get me pregnant.

I hate it.

I hate this.

All while I'm waiting for him to explain why he didn't defend our marriage to Ivan.

I wake up alone, but spotting Kieran's favorite watch and wallet on the dresser, I assume he's in the basement gym. Watching him work out is not something I can handle at the moment. I snuck down there once. He works up a sweat, and the way his muscles glisten weakens me. I'm afraid I'll agree to anything to hear him say the words I need to feel comfortable in this marriage.

Patricia is at the market. I know her routine by now, so I fire up the espresso maker on my own and go through my phone. There is a text about another study group in Manhattan.

Excitement sparks through me, but with Ivan coming here to kidnap me, I wonder if Kieran will put me on lockdown again. Before I can process another thought, something drops in front of me on the marble kitchen island.

I jump, seeing the pink plastic box, and my heart flies into my throat.

My birth control pills.

I spin around, and Kieran is standing there in all his sweaty glory, but he's not smiling like he usually does when he finishes a workout.

"Care to explain this?" His voice is sharp and deadly.

I consider if he can be fooled that they are pills for something else. If they were in a bottle with no label, I could say they were for headaches or cramps. Birth control pills still come packed individually by day because pharma execs think women are too stupid to take one every day on their own.

The pack is open, too, which shows today's pill sitting there. I usually take it after breakfast, so I didn't go looking for it when I woke up. "Where did you find this?"

He lowers an eyebrow at me. "In your purse."

"You went through my purse?"

"You're my wife. That gives me permission to look anywhere I want."

"But why did you go into my purse?" I fold my arms, stalling to think of an excuse.

"To go through your phone," he announces proudly. While I'm gasping, he adds, "To see if Ivan contacted you."

"Don't you think Balor would tell you?"

"Don't change the subject." He presses the plastic lid with a thick finger, cracking it. "Why are you on birth control? I asked you specifically if you were."

I bite my lower lip. “You asked me with a double negative. I technically didn’t lie.”

“That’s shitty, Isabella.” He runs a hand through his wet hair. “And a betrayal either way. You know I want you pregnant.”

“What about what I want?” I arch my back, standing up to him. “I want to finish school. I’m only twenty-one.”

“I bought you from your father because I needed a wife to give me an heir.” He approaches me, darkness in his eyes. “That was the deal. You said *I do* in that courthouse. You’ve been letting me take you without force. I told you what I wanted from you, and you lied to me.” He grabs my face.

I hold still, taking the pain. Showing him I can handle it. I have to stand up for the things I want so he’ll respect me. Our eyes sear together, but he blinks first and lets go.

Swearing Gaelic curses under his breath, he paces in the kitchen. Finally, he looks up, shaking his head. “Isabella, do you even really want to be married to me and have my children? I’ll let you go right now if you don’t.”

My heart sinks, and I don’t think this conversation taking place within a week after Ivan tried to break in is a coincidence. My worst fear is unfolding. Kieran thinks I’m too much trouble.

“Let me ask you a question.” I point to him. “Do you love me?”

His face contorts, and a crimson blush colors his cheeks. “We *just* got married.”

Talk about getting things backward. “Fair enough. *Can* you love me? Someday. The way a woman wants to be loved?”

“This is not the time to discuss love.” He lowers his head and pinches his nose. I’m forcing him to face his demons about losing Norah.

“Yes, it is.” I bat my eyes, feeling tears I’m trying to hold back. “Kieran, please?”

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Isabella. No, I can’t love you or anyone else.”

My heart flies into my throat. “Are you sure?”

“Aye. Not because I don’t want to. A part of me died with Norah. I wish it weren’t so. I care about you. I respect you. I want to stay married to you.” He laughs out of nowhere. “Apparently, you’re the one who doesn’t want this to be a real marriage if you don’t want to give me children. That’s what a marriage is.” He takes the pills and throws them across the room.

This is exactly what my mother promised me. An arrangement with a powerful man who probably wouldn’t love me. I grew up in a loveless household and thought I could handle it.

I was wrong...

“That’s not what I want,” I whisper. “If you’re willing to let me go, I’d like to leave now.” My stomach violently flips, but

it's my only chance to fight for what I want. If I give in, I'm wrecking both our chances at happiness. If I stay and let him go on without love, I'm letting Kieran settle, too.

I don't have the strength to live with a man I'm falling in love with, who will *never* love me. Sure, I could keep working on him, but I have my pride.

I need time to think.

Without saying anything else, I leave the kitchen. My suitcase sits in Shea's closet, something I didn't think I'd need again so soon. I carefully take only the clothes I came with and leave the rest.

Including my rings.

Packing is a blur, to be honest.

I get downstairs, and the emptiness guts me. Until Patricia comes from the laundry room. She begs me not to go, to not give up on Kieran, who screeched away in his Range Rover shortly after our fight. I can't argue my point with her, commiserate, because I can't speak.

Broad shoulders and dark hair steal my attention when Riordan arrives, saying he'll take me home.

I slide into his Audi, but when we get to my father's rental house, I can't get out of the car.

"Isabella?" Riordan calls out to me softly.

"Can you take me somewhere else? Please? Do you have any idea how much my father will hurt me?"

Riordan gets on the phone with Lachlan, and they murmur for a few minutes. Turning to me with concerned eyes, he says, “Where do you want to go?”

I give him Sam’s address in Brooklyn.

He idles in front of the building for what feels like forever as I muscle through the courage to get out of the car. Riordan joins me in my silence, supporting me. When I reach for the handle, he stops me with a hand on my shoulder.

Besides Kieran, he’s the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. While my husband is all hot fury and passionate intensity, Riordan is smoldering, quiet power.

“You need a guard. Please give us twenty-four hours to arrange it. Promise you’ll stay inside until he arrives,” he says, his voice deep and so very male. “You’re still an O’Rourke. We protect what is ours.”

It makes me think of Shea.

I nod, silently agreeing.

Sam lives in a luxury loft, paid for by her rich daddy. She takes me in, and I cry for what feels like hours. I get a text around eight p.m. from Connor Quinlan, saying he’ll be guarding me until other arrangements can be made.

I push so much sadness away and spend the next week digging into my schoolwork. Samantha leaves every morning for her in-person classes at NYU, and I’m left alone in this loft. There’s no reason to go anywhere. Every time I peek out the window, I see Connor’s car, or someone else’s, double-

parked, watching over me. All while my phone stays deadly silent.

Not even Shea calls me. Or Clara. Which hurts.

Were they all faking how they felt about me?

That afternoon, Sam comes home. I'm sitting on her living room sofa with my laptop, and her Rottweiler named Peaches, who can't get close enough to me. I always wanted a dog, but my father always said no.

"Are you feeling okay?" Sam drops her schoolbag on the end of the sofa, and her face contorts.

I look up. "Yeah, why?"

"Peaches always cuddles like that when I'm depressed."

"I'm not depressed," I say, even though I have no clue what this is. It feels more like grieving. "And why in the world would *you* be depressed?"

"You think my life is so free and easy?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just still out of it."

"It's okay." She hugs me. "Later, there's another episode of that sexy romance series streaming. Want to watch it and stuff our faces with that gelato my mama sent over?"

"Sounds great." I stroke the dog's silky coat, loving the warmth.

Fall is really in full swing, and it gets colder and darker every day. Like my life.

I finish my schoolwork, and when the sun goes down, Sam mixes up two heaping gelato sundaes. I didn't bother with toppings. My tears dribble the top of my two scoops of chocolate hazelnut. The scene is definitely depressing. It's Saturday night. We're young, hot daughters with rich fathers. Yet, we're watching some other chick get the guy while snuggling with a dog. I would have been with Kieran at the Fashion Week fundraiser tonight. I think of him there alone.

Or worse...

With someone else.

As if on cue, the boyfriend lays his girlfriend out on the couch and buries his head between her legs. I wonder if the sex is real.

My chest caves in, and the tears come on stronger now.

"Why are you crying, Iz?"

Sniffing, I point. "That's the way Kieran went at me. He was so powerful in bed." Or in the library, the bathtub, the shower, his limo.

"Oh, Iz." Sam pulls me in for a hug.

"I thought he loved me. All those times he defended our marriage and made me sleep in his bed every night." I drag in a breath. "I got through to him. I saw the difference in his eyes."

"You had to give him time."

“People can fall in love in three months. What happened to love at first sight?”

“That’s an old myth when the world wasn’t so complicated.” Sam sits back and strokes Peaches, who looks like she’s smiling. “Now, it’s lust at first sight.”

We had lust all right, but I don’t voice that. “He said he’d *never* love me,” I whisper my greatest shame.

Sam studies me. “Men don’t like being put on the spot.”

“Then he should have said that. It doesn’t matter. He let me go.” I hate that I expected he’d come to grovel by now.

I’m really surprised that neither my father nor his bodyguards have shown up to drag me home. I’ll have to call him eventually. I can’t live off Samantha forever. I know Kieran tore up the prenup, but that was more symbolic. I don’t want anything from him. Just his love.

Shaking my head, I vow to stay single. I put my marriage on the line by taking the birth control pills. I’m tempted to throw the few I have left out the window. No point in taking them anymore. Bring on the bad cramps.

My phone beeps, and my heart leaps into my throat, reading the text.

Uncle Dante: *Mia Cara... I’m outside.*

“Samantha, did you tell your father I’m here?”

She lowers her head. “Izzy, it slipped. I’m sorry.”

I tamp down my anger, but I believe her. “I guess it was only a matter of time. My uncle wants to talk to me.”

“About what?” She stands up.

“I don’t know.”

Me: *What do you want?*

Uncle Dante: *To talk to you. See how you are. See if you need anything.*

He sounds too reasonable. I glance out the window and don’t see anything.

Me: *Where outside?*

Uncle Dante: *In the back courtyard. I see one of those Irish pigs is still guarding you.*

This is no way to live. Afraid of my family. Both of them. I’ve learned a lot in the past few months. I have the strength to stand up to my father and uncle and perhaps figure out a way for them to talk to the Russians. Come to some kind of understanding about Stasia.

Me: *I’ll be right down.*

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” I stick my phone in my back pocket and take the elevator down to the lobby. When the door opens, I quickly hook a left toward the back hallway to reach the courtyard. I consider texting Connor, who’s on duty guarding me, that Uncle Dante is here, but I decide against it. He’s my uncle, for crying out loud. He won’t hurt me.

The courtyard backs up to a walking path along a part of Upper New York Bay. It's usually well lit, but it feels dim tonight. Maybe it's my mood.

Uncle Dante stands with his arms folded near the gate to the walking path. He must have come up that way to avoid Connor. His face is unreadable. With my back arched, I stop a few feet from him.

"Isabella," he greets me with a nod.

"Hello. How's Papa?"

"Busy," he says, and I wonder if my father knows he's here.

"What do you want?"

"I want you."

"What... What do you mean?" I take a step back, but my heart starts to pound out of nowhere. Adrenaline soars through me. God, I'm having a panic attack. That's when I notice the pain in my neck.

I reach up, and there's...something sticking out of my skin.

I pull it out. It's a tiny needle with a red rubbery end, and the tip is dripping. I look around, and in my blurred vision, there's another man coming at me from the left. Connor? No, too short.

"What is this?" I say, but my words are slurred. "What's going on?"

My sight turns cloudy, and I reach for something to hold on to. Uncle Dante approaches me, his arms stretched out. I'm

fading. Falling. I try to scream, but nothing comes out. I can't keep my eyes open now.

Then...nothing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Kieran

My brothers are quiet in my home office and even look surprised when I tell them I hadn't heard from Isabella. More surprised that I hadn't called her. That I hadn't stormed the Brooklyn loft to kidnap her.

She is still mine.

But she had enough of me. I saw the disappointment in her eyes. That morning wasn't the first time. Every time I reminded her that our marriage was a business arrangement, tears welled up in the corner of those beautiful brown eyes. She'd turn to wipe them away, thinking I didn't notice. But I noticed everything. I just ignored it.

"When are we telling Ma and Da that Isabella moved out?" Riordan flips his phone in his hand, never dropping the thing.

"And Shea," Balor adds.

"Not yet," I mutter.

"Here." Eoghan drops a set of papers onto my desk.

"An annulment?" I lower a dark eyebrow at my consigliere.
"The marriage *was* consummated, Eoghan."

"It will allow you to get married in a church with someone else." His voice cuts through me, making this so fucking real.

I can't even think about marrying someone else. I'm still working to get past this agony to start using my club again. "I'm not asking her for an annulment." I've been hiding how

empty my heart has been without Isabella. Every day, I struggle to breathe. Everything around me feels deflated without her around.

My brothers noticed, apparently.

“Kier, what *do* we tell people about why she’s living with a friend in Brooklyn?” Riordan asks.

I look around. “Last I checked, we’re a fucking criminal organization. I don’t owe *anyone* an explanation.” When no one brings that up again, I say, “Can we get back to business?”

Riordan faces me after getting a nod from Balor. “Kier, we didn’t find anything on Parisi regarding Stasia. We also see zero movement as far as weapons, bomb making, or training mercenaries to hit Koslov.”

“Nothing, really?”

“The Italians going to war with the Russians would have been nice.” Lachlan twirls his knife in the center of his scarred palm. “But they played us.”

“What do we do about the money we gave them? Isabella left on her own,” Eoghan persists.

“Odd that Gabe hasn’t called.” Rior strokes his chin. “Just to chew you out, at least.”

“At least.” God, this house sucks without Isabella here. Never mind the bedroom. Changing the subject, I say, “We still need to work on another angle to find Stasia, Balor. Koslov may hit us next. Especially if they, too, cleared Parisi.”

“Ewan’s got eyes and ears everywhere.” Balor rubs his temples, messing up his glasses. “It’s like she vanished into thin air.”

Or she’s six feet under.

If I find out anyone under my control had something to do with this...

“That’s our focus. Fuck Parisi. Rior, when are we meeting with Alexei?”

“Still waiting for a call back.” Riordan looks at Lachlan. “Maybe we just show up?”

“Just say when.” My psycho brother would love to stir some shit with the Russians, especially after two of them tried to hurt Isabella.

Fuck, now I’m really worried about her. Will Koslov try to take her? I trust Connor Quinlan and his team to protect her. Lachlan is working on a permanent guard for her. As long as she has my name, she’s my responsibility.

That horrible morning plays over in my head like a bad movie, again and again. Should I have just lied to her so she’d stay? Even if that wasn’t fair? She forced me to face what I thought my heart was capable of. She thought I was in love.

I wasn’t. Because... It didn’t feel the same as it did with Norah.

That was pure love.

Sure, Riordan reminded me that I’m not the same man now.

A glance at the annulment papers sitting lazily on my desk triggers me that letting her go is real. That I failed.

My brothers murmur behind my back while I'm lost in thought, staring out the window at the front iron gate. A sea of pink and white flowers captures my attention, along with a whiff of fragrance from the open window. I screamed at Patricia to get people here to plant immediately.

Why?

Why did I lose it when she went missing that night?

Why did I agree to take her out on a 'date', knowing what that meant to her?

Why was making my wife happy so important to me when I said I could never love her?

Finding that birth control pack and realizing she was lying to me set me off. Irish tempers are legendary, and I blew a gasket. I worked out twice as hard that morning, punishing myself so I wouldn't drag her out of bed. Go off on her to the point she'd never look at me again with anything other than fear.

Like her father.

Shit, did I make a mistake by not fighting for her? Not fighting for us? By opening up and explaining *what* was holding me back? She always had an answer for everything. I'm older and jaded, but she's young, fresh, and full of optimism.

Fuck, I need to make this right. We should talk. That's a start.

My heart already feels lighter at the idea of seeing her. "Rior, take me to that loft."

"You sure?" He stands, already digging out his keys from his black trousers.

"One hundred percent."

"Can I tag along?" Lachlan asks, showing a rare sentimental side, like this is going to be the end of a romantic movie.

"Sure." I leave the office and rush up the stairs to get her rings. Mine never left my finger.

Eoghan stands in my kitchen, holding the annulment papers, which I tear up like I did the prenup. I don't bother telling him that. He's looking at me like I'm crazy enough.

I am crazy. Crazy... My heart pounds as it hits me. What all of this means. Why I felt so shitty. I thought I missed her out of pride. Lost property. No, damn... I missed her because, fuck, I love her.

No, it's not the same as before. It's different because *I'm* different.



We arrive in a trendy part of Brooklyn where I know a few of our guards live. At Sam's building, we ring her apartment. On

the street, I say to Lachlan, “Where’s the guy watching Isabella?” My hackles go up immediately.

“Fuck me,” Lach swears and pulls out his phone.

There’s no answer from Sam’s loft, and I go to call Balor to hack into the door locks and open them, but I hear my name being called.

I turn around, and Samantha approaches slowly, her eyes cautiously tracking me and my brothers. She probably thinks I’m here to give Isabella a hard time. Force her to come home. I plaster a smile on my face and walk toward her slowly. “Alo, Samantha. I’d like to talk to Isabella.”

“She’s... She’s not here.”

For a second, I relax, thinking that explains why there’s no guard either. Maybe she went somewhere and he took her. “Did she go meet other online students again?” I consider just calling her, but something tells me she won’t answer. “Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“She’s not *living* here anymore.”

My heart stops, but I keep my face even. “Where did she go?”

“Her... Her uncle came and picked her up.”

Any other place and time, that would be a perfectly normal explanation. But that fucking creep was anything but normal. “When?”

“Five days ago.” She looks around and into the street. “He said he told the guard to fuck off.”

I snap my fingers at Lachlan, who jogs over with a phone to his ear. “Who was on detail five days ago?”

“Hang on, Connor.” Lachlan shakes his head at me. “We’re battling a thousand with fucking new guards. Connor is *just* finding out that his guy’s been lying about being here. He just confessed that Dante told him she was going home five fucking days ago.”

I grab the phone. “Connor, what the fuck?”

“Kieran, I’m on my way to see this clown right now with Ewan. He wanted the pay. Said he didn’t think anything was wrong about her uncle picking her up, so he didn’t bother ringing the alarm. He liked the gig, apparently, just sitting here. I’m sorry. Ewan and Griffin will be at your house tomorrow to give you a better explanation.” His brother Griffin is Ewan’s second in command.

“I don’t want a bleedin’ explanation. I want *my wife*.” I take a breath to calm down. I’ve known Connor a long time. Shite like this happens. “Have Ewan call me.” I hang up and turn to Riordan. “*Find Dante*.” Something about this feels so damn off.

Samantha lets us use her loft. Even with this beast of a Rottweiler sniffing me, I smell Isabella’s scent. I don’t go into the room where she slept. It would hurt too much.

The dog whimpers and paces back and forth in front of the door, making it hard for me to think. “What’s wrong with the dog?”

Samantha shrugs. “Been that way since Izzy left. They really bonded. Peaches even slept with her.”

“Aye, pup.” *I know how you feel...*

“Now I feel extra bad,” Sam says, fidgeting.

“For what?” I hate chitchat, but I need something to do, or I’ll scream while Riordan talks to Balor on a video call from his phone.

“I’m going to Italy next semester. I have an internship at Prada-Milan. I need to re-home her.”

“Her?” I look down at the dog’s thick, flat skull. “What’s her name?”

“Peaches.”

I smile, thinking Peaches and I have a future together. Especially if this beast loved my Isabella.

“Balor, are you *kidding* me?” Riordan says, holding his head in his hands, then glances at me with horror in his eyes.

“Bale?” I glance down at his face on the phone, also looking worried. “Talk to me. What the hell did you find?”

“I tracked Dante’s cell phone to a house a few blocks from his. No signal from Isabella’s new phone. But I picked up on another one pinging from there.”

“Whose house, Balor?” Riordan asks.

“It came up owned by some dummy corporation. One of my guys is peeling that onion.”

My head is spinning. “Okay, so she’s at this house. Let’s go get her.”

“Hang on!” Balor screeches. “There’s more. I... I broke into Dante’s phone once I homed in on his signal. Shitload of texts. Can’t go through them all. Guy fucking deletes nothing. Except...”

“Except?” I’m definitely going to scream.

“There’re several he *did* delete. But I was able to dig them up. Okay, it’s muddy. But here’s what I’m seeing at first glance, using keywords in my search tool. Turns out, Koslov’s death squad *didn’t* peel away from Parisi’s mansion after it blew up.”

My body goes still. “Those *weren’t* Russians?”

“They were Russian,” he says, almost with a laugh. “It was Ivan and this guy. Recognize him? I just got a match.” He holds up a photo.

Jaysus, our mystery Russian from the dress shop.

“And that other phone pinging from the house?” Balor keeps going. “It’s Ivan.”

“Fuck me.” The memory of the rope, the drugs, and the knife he dared to bring onto my property slams into me. Ivan. “I’m not surprised he still wanted my Isabella. But Dante? He’s *helping* Ivan?”

“I dug up Ivan’s buried texts, too. His Russian friend wasn’t there to *kill* Isabella that day. He was there to kidnap her.”

I snap my fingers. “Balor, hold on. Guys, we’re fucking out of here.”

“What’s wrong?” Samantha goes pale. “Is Izzy in trouble?”

“We don’t know.”

Samantha sucks in a shaky breath. “Her uncle... He scares me. I didn’t question him that night when he picked up her things. He said she was in his car, and she didn’t want to face me to say goodbye. It sounded strange, but the way he looked at me... If I questioned him... God, I should have, right?”

“No,” I say firmly because I don’t want to tell any woman to purposely get in the way of a man like Dante Caruso. “He’s your... He’s Gabriel’s underboss. Questioning him would have gotten you hurt.” I stroke her arm, containing my fury, even though I want to rip the world apart. “Don’t worry. We’ll get her. She’s coming home with me *today*.”

Samantha nods. “She missed you. So much. I’m pretty sure she was days away from calling you. She wanted to be with you.”

“Aye, me, too.” I give her a hug, unable to hear more. We both made mistakes.

Rior, Lach, and I dive into the elevator, and when we’re back in my Range Rover, with Lachlan driving, I say to Balor, who stayed on the line, “Go on, Bale. We’re heading back to Astoria. Get your guy to text Lach the address.”

“Sent. So... According to Ivan’s texts, he drove by the Parisi compound the day of the explosion to make sure Isabella was out of the house.”

My breath sticks in my lungs. “She was at the courthouse. I saw her myself.” That day rams back into my brain. I quirk a bittersweet smile in the midst of this madness, remembering how she acted, ordering her guards around.

“Ivan didn’t know exactly where she was, according to his texts,” Balor says. “He and Dante went back and forth that day.”

“Aye.” My bella didn’t look like a princess who reported her whereabouts to a Russian bagman. Especially if she didn’t have any real feelings for him.

My brain finally pieces together what Balor is telling me. “So, if Ivan wanted to make sure Isabella was out of the house, then he *knew* his uncle planned to blow it up.”

Balor shakes his head. “Not *his* uncle.”

My blood runs cold. “Wait, what?”

“Dante and Ivan were working together to take down Gabe.” Balor talks fast now. “Gabe was supposed to be home that afternoon, not his wife, Maria.”

“No one knew Isabella had that court date,” I mutter. “She...snuck out.” She didn’t want her father to know she had a speeding ticket because she probably wasn’t supposed to be driving herself around in the first place. That ticket saved her life. She’s alive because she rebelled.

“Holy fuck,” Riordan says, brushing a hand down the back of his neck. “Am I the only person who’s figuring out what this *really* means?”

“*Dante* wanted Gabe dead,” I say, going numb because now *I’m* ready to start a war. “It actually explains fucking everything. Koslov *didn’t* bomb Parisi. That’s why Dante *didn’t* mobilize a response. All he wanted was to head up the Cosa Nostra. Not start a war with the Russians, which would be expensive and bloody as hell.”

It doesn’t bring us any closer to finding Stasia, but I got my own princess to fucking find right now. “And we were all sitting here wondering how the fuck a Russian bagman could marry the Italian princess.”

“Dante arranged it, as far as Ivan,” Riordan echoes my assessment out loud. “He convinced Ivan to court Isabella.”

“But if he meant to keep Maria alive...” I stop myself, realizing that was Dante’s sister. *She* was the obedient wife who wouldn’t have questioned anything. The wife I thought I wanted. Now, nothing is farther from the truth. “Where’s Gabe right now?” I ask Balor with a tight throat.

“Can’t locate him. Another team is tracking him down. His phone is off. Not pinging.”

“To sum things up...” Riordan takes out his Desert Eagle, checking the clip. “What we’re walking into... Dante wanted Gabe dead, and now we don’t know where the don is.”

“And Dante has my wife in a house with Ivan, who tried to abduct her from me twice.” For a second, I consider stopping at our armory to pick up more weapons. But every minute counts.

“If Dante is still planning his coup, he needs Isabella out of the way.” Balor’s voice is somber.

She left me, so Dante will pressure her to marry Ivan. Which I doubt she will. She’s headstrong and independent. She’ll push back. Leaving Dante no choice but to...kill her.

“Step on it, Lachlan!” I yell.

I really could use that fucking helicopter right now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Isabella

I lift my pounding head but don't get too far with my vision when all I see are my bare thighs. That's why I'm so cold. Where are my jeans? I'm only wearing my bra and panties. Granny panties, no less, because I didn't bring any of those sexy thongs with me when I left Kieran.

I try to move, but the immediate burn of coarse rope against my skin makes me squeal in pain.

Everything is still fuzzy as I breathe to get my bearings. I'm alive, and other than my aching head, I don't think I'm injured. Just in pain and dying of the worst thirst imaginable.

As I inhale, the telltale damp, musty smell registers. I'm in a basement. A thick, scuffed-up flashlight sits a few feet away from me at an angle, providing some light. I glance around slowly, mostly to make sure I can move my neck and that it's not broken. There's only more pitch-blackness to my right. To my left, where the flashlight is pointing, is a...

A bed.

A mattress is a better description. On the floor.

Finally, voices reach my ears. Or maybe the sounds were there all along and my brain just caught up. The one sound that immediately sends ice through me is a Russian accent. Thick and authentic.

Ivan.

Oh, dear God. Ivan's here? He's in on this? He's a dead man. There's another voice arguing with him, and I pray it's that Irish brogue I've come to love. No, it's Italian.

Uncle Dante. Now it's coming back to me. Meeting him in the courtyard. Then passing out from a needle in my neck. He's a dead man, too.

"Oh, shit, she's awake," Ivan says and stalks toward me.

"Get the fuck away from me," I bellow, my throat burning from dryness. Kicking only makes the rope cut into my skin. "Ouch."

Ivan kneels in front of me. "Stop struggling," he whispers in a kind voice and lifts a bottle of water to my lips. "Here, drink."

I suck it down until I'm choking, but I swallow the whole thing. Now, I'll have to pee soon. When did I pee last? I don't feel dirty. I just don't have any memory from the drugs they've given me. They must cause amnesia. I must have gone to the toilet. I just don't remember.

"She's a fighter," Uncle Dante hisses from a few feet away, leaning on some kind of counter built into the wall.

"Where am I?" I search for anything familiar in case I can get to a phone and call for help.

"It doesn't matter," Ivan says.

"Why are you with my uncle? Why were you arguing?"

“Shhh. Stop speaking. He’ll hurt you,” Ivan grinds out between his teeth.

“How long are you going to keep me here? My husband is looking for me. The head of the *Irish Mob*, with an army that will level wherever the hell this is if I’m not returned to him immediately. Let me go, and maybe I’ll tell him to go easy on the both of you.”

“Your husband threw you out,” Uncle Dante says, smoking a cigarette. “Why would he be looking for you?”

“I’m still his wife. I’m still his *property*. Do you think he’ll let *that* go?”

“Shhh.” Ivan strokes my hair. “Just listen to us. It will all be okay. I promise.”

I shake my head until he stops touching me. “Is this why you tried to kidnap me?”

“Da.” He’s firm in his Russian answer. “I wanted to avoid *this*.”

“All right, enough talking.” Dante smashes his cigarette under a polished dress shoe. “Untie her legs and bring her to the bed. Get on with it.”

“On with what?” I ask, even though I can guess.

“Ivan is going to get you pregnant.”

My breath burns in my lungs. “*What?*”

“Don’t worry,” Ivan whispers. “I won’t hurt you. Just don’t fight me, Izzy.”

Dante hears him anyway. “For fuck’s sake, what kind of pakhan are you going to make?”

“Pakhan? You?” It seems no matter what, my fate is to be the bride of a cruel king.

Ivan snaps up and grabs my chin. “Why not me?”

“He’s the only living male heir.” Uncle Dante strides toward me, his height even more brutal. “Even if it’s through Alexei’s sister.”

“There’s a big flaw in your plan,” I say to buy myself time.

“And what is that, princess?” Uncle Dante pushes Ivan out of the way. Pretty dumb treatment of a future pakhan.

“I’m still married. The child will be a bastard.”

Uncle Dante laughs in my face, spittle hitting me. “Do you think those savage Russians care about that?”

“Hey!” Ivan pushes him back. *Sure, when he’s insulted.*

But Dante grabs his hand, and Ivan winces, nearly falling to his knees. My uncle has incredible strength and can snap someone’s neck with his bare hands. I’ve watched him and my father deal with people in Papa’s office.

“No one’s coming for you, *mia cara,*” Dante smugly adds. “King O’Rourke is at his whore club right now, banging thin blondes because they look nothing like you.”

My throat tightens, but I do my best to hide the pain that causes me. “No, he’s not. We’re just taking a break.” God, I miss him. Every cell in my body yearns for Kieran. I should

have tried to make it work. He said he didn't love me, but it'd only been a couple of months. I'm sure he lied when he said he could never love me. He was hurt because I hid my birth control. I could have healed his heart. "We want different things right now. And I *don't* want a baby." I glance at my uncle. "You're going down, you and my father. Kieran uncovered your secret, Dante."

Dante's jaw twitches. "And what secret is that, princess?"

"That *you* killed Stasia." I try to kick him for effect, even though I'm lying. "You sick fuck. Do you hear that, Ivan? He killed your cousin."

Ivan cocks his head toward my uncle.

"She's lying, you imbecile," he snaps at Ivan.

"You fucking call me one more name, and I will have my uncle's army take you down, Caruso."

"If your uncle Alexei could have wiped out my organization, he would have done so by now."

"He blew up my father's house and killed my mother," I point out, angry at Ivan. "Sounds like someone who wants to start a war."

"It does. Doesn't it, princess?" Dante lights another cigarette.

"Are you going to tell her?" Ivan asks him.

"Tell me what?" I say, squeaking.

“*Your* uncle wanted your father dead,” Ivan says, and looks at Dante. “He used my missing cousin as the excuse.”

I can’t breathe now. “Dante...”

“*Uncle* Dante, to you,” he barks at me. “Your father was weak.”

“*Was?*”

Dante grins. “He’s nothing anymore.”

My jaw drops at Ivan. “You killed my father?”

“Not me.” He backs up and roughly grinds his fingernails across that shorn blond hair. “Uncle Dante here was just shooting from the hip.”

“No,” Dante mutters. “My magnum was firmly in my hand when I shot that loser in the head.”

I’m conflicted with so many different emotions. My father made my mother’s life hell. Now he’s gone. I’m torn. I should feel sad, but my father’s death makes me the heir.

I’m the Italian queen as well as the Irish one.

“I suggest you untie me right now, Dante. I am your queen. I’m not sure what you—”

“Shut up!” He lunges forward and smacks me in the face. “You are nothing. You are going to get knocked up by Ivan and go off to live with the Bratva, like I planned all along.” He smiles. “Then we’ll take that money your husband gave us and use it to annihilate the Irish.”

“*That’s* why you were really dating me?” I ask Ivan, hiding my hurt.

Ivan gives a reluctant nod. I want to be angry, but I didn’t love him either.

“Now you know the plan, you little bitch.” Dante stalks toward Ivan, shoving him. “Now, fuck my niece and knock her up so I can finalize the deal with your uncle to wipe those scummy Irish off the planet.”

I gasp. “Ivan can fuck me all he wants, but he can’t get me pregnant. I’m on the pill.”

“You *were* on the pill.” Dante laughs.

I swallow. “How many days have I been down here?”

“Five.”

“What?” No wonder I’m lightheaded and dying of thirst.

“That’s long enough for you to start ovulating,” Dante says, and pushes Ivan. “Now fuck her already. We have to get to my safe house and wait for the pregnancy to take hold.”

I stare at Ivan, something dawning on me. Something Dante overlooked. “Ivan, you’re not the heir if Stasia is dead. Katya, your other cousin, is still very much alive.”

“*She’s* a bastard,” Uncle Dante hisses.

“You just said they don’t care about things like that.”

Dante lights another cigarette. “They care that her mother was Koslov’s whore, who he passed around.”

“Shut up!” I like Katya. I haven’t seen or spoken to her in a while, but the few times I saw her at the beach club, she was nice. Focused on her ballet and certainly didn’t want to be a crown princess. Just wanted some recognition from her father. She wanted no part of this world, yet here I am, elevating her to next in line. I don’t think Stasia is dead, though. I think she wanted out of her father’s world.

Who can blame her? Look where being a princess got me? Tied to a chair and about to be raped by my ex-boyfriend.

“Alexei assured me he’d make Ivan *Pakhan Heir Apparent* when he marries you.” Dante stands tall.

“When was this?” I glance at Ivan, who lowers his head.

“I thought if you liked me, you’d go willingly. I didn’t want a forced bride.”

My head is spinning. What was supposed to be a secret relationship with a *comrade* far from the Russian throne so that I wouldn’t be pawned off was an orchestrated plan behind my back.

“So, what happened?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

“My stupid brother-in-law sold you to the Irish instead,” Dante snarls. “That blunder will be his legacy. I’m sure those in power under me will see his murder was worth it.” He takes a knife from his back pocket and stomps toward me, pushing Ivan out of the way.

It's like I can feel my throat being slit. Without me, he's the heir, since my father didn't have any brothers, and Italians respect an underboss's ascension in those rare cases. No one will question him.

So why *doesn't* he just kill me?

"Do it," I say, when he holds the knife in front of my face.

He lays the blade on the side of my cheek.

"You remind me of my sister. I always wanted to fuck her, but she fought me off."

"What?" My stomach turns over. "You tried to rape my mother?"

Ivan pushes him and stands in front of me. "You're a sick bastard."

"Deal's a deal, Ivan. You get her pregnant and marry her, but behind closed doors, you're mine, *mia cara*."

Gulp.

Ivan grabs Dante's knife and slices through the ropes around my calves. "I'm sorry, Izzy. Really. I liked you. I wanted us to have a shot. I know your father made a deal with Kieran to marry you. And I don't care if you're not a virgin anymore. It's best if you're my wife. Once you're pregnant, it will be okay." He whispers, "I'll assign my best guard to you. Your uncle won't get near you."

That means Kieran can never rescue me either. That crushes me, and I can't breathe all over again. When Ivan grabs my

arm, I start to cry. If he gets me pregnant, I'll lose Kieran forever.

Ivan gently pulls me from the chair and carries me a few short feet, but it feels like forever. When he lowers me onto the mattress, it turns so real so fast that uncontrollable fury erupts inside me. Ivan's touch makes me convulse to the point my insides protest, and I projectile vomit all over the mattress. I haven't eaten in days because they kept me drugged, so it's all smelly, yellow bile.

"Fuck!" Uncle Dante storms over and smacks me in the face again. "You dumb little bitch." He yanks me by my hair. My feet, devoid of rope but rubbery from days of unuse, struggle to keep up as he drags me back to the metal café chair. He dumps me into the seat, and it nearly falls over.

"Now clean up the bed," he orders Ivan.

"Fuck you. You clean it. You wanted me to rape her here. I told you..." Ivan's words melt into a blur as they go back to the bickering I first heard.

"Looks like you're gonna fuck her on the floor, then," Dante sneers, and takes out his gun this time. "Do it, or I shoot you and find some other male in your bloodline. Do you think your uncle cares about *you*?"

Takes one evil uncle to know one. Shit, I can't believe this is happening.

Ivan lifts me again from the chair and lays me out on the floor. It's cold and dirty. The smell is overwhelmingly rancid.

“Izzy, remember we had plans, you and me,” Ivan whispers. “You wanted to be with me. You wanted me to be your husband, your first. Don’t make me force you.”

“I know. But now I love Kieran. I want my husband,” I sob, watching Ivan unbuckle his jeans. “Please get me out of here. Kieran will protect you for saving me, I promise.”

“No, not after that night at your house.” He lies on top of me.

“I have power.” I pin my legs together. “Kieran will give me whatever I want.” So long as I give him what he wants. A baby. I’ll give him a child if it will save his family from being slaughtered by my uncle and the Russians. If it will bring the Cosa Nostra to my side.

It happens so fast. Ivan pulls my panties down and lifts my right leg. Next, the head of his cock bumps against my entrance. It’s cold. Ice-cold. But also feels slick. That’s impossible. I’m not turned on. I’m full of disgust and crippled with horror. So why am I wet?

“Fuck,” Ivan blurts, and pushes my leg down.

“What is it, limp dick?” Uncle Dante hisses, with the gun pointed at us.

“She’s bleeding.” Ivan sits up and shoves his dick into his pants. “Put that fucking gun away.”

Blood? I’m bleeding? “You waited too long,” I sneer as the pain grows more and more intense, my womb throbbing. “I need more water. I need something to eat, you assholes.”

“Don’t talk to me that way. I’m trying to help you,” Ivan snaps at me.

“I’m in pain,” I bark. It’s a dull ache that lives with me now. “My head. These cramps. My back. My wrists are raw. Untie my hands. Please!”

Ivan cleans the bed and lays me out on it with a towel under me. But it keeps soaking with my blood. He tries again, but he does go limp this time.

Dante yanks him off me and sticks a gun in his face. Bloodlust burns in my uncle’s eyes.

“Your men may forgive you for killing my father,” I choke out to him, trying to save Ivan, who is my only hope for survival. “But you can’t kill the next in line to rule the Bratva.”

“Oh, yeah?” Snickering at Ivan, Dante pulls the trigger like it’s nothing. “Watch me.”

Ivan falls to the ground and doesn’t move.

“No!” I struggle to get off the bed, but every corner of my body aches, and I’m dizzy. “You bastard!”

“Shut up.” Dante slaps me again and again. He wanted me out of the way, married to Ivan, but he just killed him.

“What are you going to do with me now?”

“I don’t *need* you.” Dante shoves the gun against my head, the barrel sizzling from the recent discharge. He glances down at me, full of rage. The wheels fell off his plan. He should

have been back in his penthouse by now. Instead, me and my heavy period kept him in this dirty basement. Whatever he's going to do to me, he'll hurt me more to punish me.

"Uncle Dante, please." I do my best to sound like a little girl. "Don't do this. We can work something out. You were right. My husband doesn't want me. I... I will be yours. Just not like this. Please." Sobs build in my chest, and warm tears leak from my eyes.

"Oh, so sweet. I was hoping for some of that fight from you, like your mother." He grins, the gun digging into my temple. "Do not move, niece. I'm gonna tie those legs to your arms and fuck your ass for fun, like I've always wanted."

Oh, no...

No one is here to stop him.

I lose track of how long Dante takes to get more rope, but when he returns, I give him the fight he wants. I kick wildly and scream. I catch a few blows against his chest and stomach. He takes that knife out and slices my legs, and I'm pretty sure my knee is dislocated. It's pure adrenaline at this point, but I manage to hold him off for about an hour as I keep kicking so he can't tie my legs down. Once he violates me, it's over. I'll never be the same.

I don't know why I'm still bleeding so much. It's usually light because of the pills.

God, I'm exhausted. I can't fight him. Dante pins me down. Only one leg is tied, but he's so big that he's able to keep my

other leg down. He undoes his pants, and this is it.

My life is over. I take a breath, submitting to whatever comes next. It's my own fault, I guess. I open my eyes to see Dante staring down at me with black eyes of hatred. He smirks, ready to ruin me forever.

When...

A loud whack sounds in the room, and Dante slumps on top of me, a warm trickle of blood hitting my shoulder.

“Get the fuck off my wife.” Kieran stands there, holding a baseball bat with a giant blood splotch on it.

Three hulking figures come into the light. Riordan, Lachlan, and Ewan Quinlan. Ewan pulls Dante off me and drags him to the chair. Despite the massive blow to his head, he perks up and starts screaming. Lachlan helps Ewan hold him down as Riordan ties him up.

Kieran drops to the mattress and wraps me in a blanket. “Oh, fuck. What the hell did he do to you? You're covered in blood.”

“I tried to fight him off, but he swung at my legs with a knife,” I squeak.

“Don't move, bella. I'm here. It's over.” Kieran cuts what's remaining of my rope, cursing under his breath. It takes less than a minute, and I am in his arms, crying hysterically now.

Because I can, I let go. “How did you find me?”

“We found out Dante took you from Samantha’s apartment. We tracked his and Ivan’s phone here.” He looks around. “Where’s Ivan?”

“Now we have another dead Russian.” Lachlan shakes his head.

I take a breath. “He tried to help me.”

“You’re too kind, Isabella.” Kieran scans me like I’m a victim, not like I’m the wife he missed. Like maybe he’s just here to collect his property. He’s so cold and emotionless. “Riordan!” he yells to his brother.

“Yo.” He’s different, too. This is a rescue mission, and they are all on alert. “Hold her.”

“No. I want you.” I claw at my husband.

“I have business to finish here.” He drops a kiss on my forehead, relieving me. “We’ll talk when we get home.”

Home...

Which could still lead to a divorce.

When I’m lifted, Kieran barks, “You’re lying in a pool of blood. Did those bastards rape you?” His eyes are beady, black dots. Even I’m afraid of him.

“No. No one touched me like that. I’m still... You’re still...” I shake my head, which is pounding. “I... I got my period. I’ve been bleeding heavily for hours. It hurts.”

Kieran’s walls crack, but he lifts the bat and rushes to my uncle. “*Move, Quinlan!*” He hits Dante in the kneecaps, and

my uncle screams in pain.

My husband drops the bat and punches him in the face, over and over. The sound of bones breaking echoes in the emptiness. Next, it's all pulpy sounds that make me want to throw up again.

"Enough." Lachlan pulls him back.

Kieran is covered in blood, his hands, his arms, his pants. "Let me go."

"I just got a message from Balor." Lachlan holds his phone. "NYPD Harbor Patrol just found Gabe's body. He's dead. Dante is now in charge. That makes him the don. You *can't* just kill him."

"Isabella is Gabe's daughter. *She's* in charge," Kieran roars, pointing to me.

Riordan helps me hobble over. I lost track of what's cut, what's broken, what stings, what hurts.

"I am in charge," I mutter, pushing away from Riordan to drag myself to the gasping, pulpy man I've secretly despised my whole life.

"Aye," Kieran says, and kisses my hand. "Ceremoniously. It's up to you to call a council meeting and appoint a new don."

"Stay the fuck out of our business," Dante wheezes from the floor.

"They can still appoint this douchebag," Riordan says.

“Does anyone know you’re here, Caruso?”

“Balor can erase all traces of him,” Lachlan snickers.

Kieran picks up the bat. “It’s up to you, bella. I’ll take him out.”

“Then what?” I ask, our eyes locking, and for a minute, it’s him and me again. Like we were before I left. But different. Stronger.

Kieran holds me up by the waist. His eyes twitch, seeing Dante’s handprint on my cheek. A glance at my uncle, and I see he got it so much worse. “Then I’ll help you. We’ll figure it out together.”

“He planned to take that money and partner with the Russians to kill you. Scummy Irish he called you.”

“We’ve been called worse,” Lachlan jokes.

“My name is O’Rourke. I’m Irish now.” I hobble over and spit on Dante.

“Either way, he’s a walking liability.” Kieran nods and lifts the bat. “He killed his don. Then he beat and almost raped my fucking wife.”

“RIP, asshole,” Lachlan mutters and pulls me back as Kieran takes the first swing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Kieran

*R*IP, asshole.

My brother has a way with words.

I'm very much aware I'm about to kill a don, but I doubt anyone can blame me. He abducted and tried to rape my wife.

Death by a thousand cuts...

A few fucking swings of the bat is quicker.

This goes beyond justified revenge. My gut is twisted, and I've snapped for sure. This is the most feral I've ever felt for another man's blood in my life. I'm not surprised in the least that it's because someone hurt the woman I *love*.

Seething with rage, I lift the bat.

"This is for kidnapping my wife and keeping her in this disgusting basement." I swing the bat out of blind rage, not giving a fuck about the consequences.

WHACK.

"This is for finding her a bloody, broken mess."

WHACK.

"This is for all those cuts on her legs and your fucking handprint on her face."

WHACK.

"She's half-naked."

WHACK.

“You were on top of her, unbuckling your pants, you vile scum.”

WHACK.

WHACK.

WHACK.

A thunderclap of noise buzzes in my ears. It’s a cocktail of my savage roaring with every swing of this bat and the cracking of Dante’s skull. I’m snarling with rage when a hand rests on my shoulders, and I think it’s Lachlan, Riordan, or Ewan. Dante is toast. His head split open.

I glance over my shoulder to see it’s my *wife* who had the courage to stop me. She stands there, beaten up, hobbling, blood dripping down her legs. *She* needs me.

Dropping the bat, I pull her into my arms, but she collapses.



I stare at the doctor, who’s spewing words from his ugly mouth, but I can’t hear him. My brain won’t allow it.

“I’m sorry, Mr. O’Rourke, there was nothing we could do for your wife.” He folds his arms, and I think of Darragh, my younger brother. Why only Darragh, I don’t know. Cormac is his identical twin, but he’s not as serious as Darragh.

“No,” I manage through a tight throat. “This isn’t happening.” My brain is misfiring because I just got awful news, and I don’t know how to process. I can’t believe I’m here again.

Mourning...

“Really? Nothing?” Riordan asks from my six, ready to catch me, to cover for me. Like a good underboss should.

That takes on a whole new meaning after what we witnessed six hours ago.

“There was too much blood,” the doctor adds with little emotion.

My heart pounds in my throat, and I’m ready to throw up. “Can I... Can I see her?”

“Sure.” The doctor eyes me cautiously, noticing I’m covered in blood, too.

Lachlan and Ewan are talking to the administrator, who immediately tried to call the cops when we showed up with Isabella unconscious, beaten, cut up, and bleeding. They’re giving the hospital an altered version of what happened. Mostly trying to keep my ass from being arrested.

I take a breath and step behind the curtain.

Isabella’s cheek is twice the size, and her lip is split. They took the oxygen mask off, and she looks peaceful. I wonder if she knew. There was such little time to speak.

Shaking, I slide my hand in hers, and Jaysus, it’s ice cold.

Why?

I feel Riordan behind me, but he's giving me space.

I squeeze and think of what the hell to say. But only tears fall from my burning eyes.

“What the hell are you crying for?” Isabella murmurs softly.

I sniff and open them to look at her. “Bella,” I whisper. “Get some rest, my love.”

“It's all I've been doing. Resting.” Her hand, with a giant needle taped to a vein, strokes her neck. “The pain has finally stopped, but I need...”

“What?” I get closer. “What do you need, my love?”

“For you to keep calling me that.” She coughs.

“My love. My love.” I kiss that bruised hand, even right on the needle.

She shifts her hips. “Am I still bleeding?”

“A little.”

“It's never been this bad.” She stares at the ceiling. “My period.”

“Oh, bella.” I lean forward and kiss her swollen nose. Then I kiss every inch of her face, dragging my lips across swaths of blue and yellow skin. What I have to say to her, I can't say too loud. “You didn't have your period, my love. You were pregnant. You had a miscarriage.”

She just breathes in shaky waves, staring at me. “How was I pregnant?” Her breath is shaky.

“Birth control pills are only ninety-something percent effective,” I mutter. “And we are newlyweds.”

Isabella moans loudly and pulls me against her, her nails digging into my shirt. “No. No. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. They abducted you.”

“It’s my fault. Because I left you.”

“No. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let you leave. I was angry because of those stupid pills. I didn’t handle it well.” I take a breath, trying to be strong for her. “Look, it’s possible you would have miscarried anyway. You were still taking your pills.”

“Then it’s *still* my fault.”

“No. You had no idea.” We can go round and round on this. “Let’s just get you home, and we’ll...”

“We’ll what?” She looks at me with glassy obsidian eyes.

“We’ll try again. When you’re ready.” I hold her. “Or not. Whatever you want. I love you. I love you so much. It’s not worth losing you over.”

“You *do* love me? I asked you, and—”

I kiss her mouth. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything. I’m so sorry.”

“I love you, too. Please, just keep holding me.”

“Forever, bella. I promise.” I breathe into her hair, ignoring the rancid smell from those animals holding my wife in a dirty basement. The house belongs to a slimy motherfucker of a

union boss. And *not* Samantha's father. Lachlan is dealing with Ginna's scumbag dad as we speak. I'll let Isabella decide what to do about Ginna.

All of House Parisi will have to be dealt with. I have their queen.

My savage queen.

"I missed you so much." Isabella is still crying. "Even before they took me, I wanted to call you."

"Me, too. This will never happen again." I kiss her forehead. "Whatever you want, Isabella. Kids, no kids. Just please, come home."

"Okay. My father... My father's dead."

"I know." And the underboss, but I'm not worried about House Parisi at the moment. There's time for that. "I'll wait until you're ready to tell me what to do with his body."

"Ivan," she whispers. "Dante killed him. The Russians will decimate my father's house. Me..."

"Not a chance." I kiss her hand. "Never, my queen," I mutter, as I slip her rings back onto her finger. "He won't dare touch my wife."

"You." She clears her throat. "You touch me. Hold me. Please."

"We'll let you rest, sister." Riordan winks at her. We rarely use *in-law*. Once you're married into the family, you *are* family.

Riordan leaves, and I prepare to just sit and take care of my wife. The wife who brought me back to life, dragged me out of the cold, harsh grave I buried myself in. And now, I can't wait to spend every minute giving this woman everything she wants, because she's given me everything I need.

"Do you really love me? Do you really want to stay married to me?" I ask to be sure. "You've seen more of me than anyone. You understand the man I am more than Norah ever would have understood me. You're better for me," I assure her. "If you don't want to stay married to me, I'll understand."

"You're not getting rid of me so easily this time." She licks her lips, and I kiss her. "You're the first person to see the real me, too. To treat me with respect and appreciate me for who I am."

"That wasn't very hard. From the moment we were in the same room, I felt your power." I squeeze her hand. "I wanted to be inside it," I whisper.

"You can be inside me all you want now."

"We can't have sex for six weeks."

"That's nothing." She grabs me, and we're tangled in the hospital bed. "We have forever."

"Aye, bella. Forever."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Isabella—Four Months Later

I check every nook and cranny for construction dust. The general contractor promised me there wouldn't be any. This is an older house, and I'm always worried about mold and asbestos, which he also assured me there was none.

Still, I can't be too careful. Not after what happened the first time.

Kieran lets me steer him along the hallway while wearing a blindfold. It's the red satin mask he bought me for when we play our games.

On the third floor...

That was phase one. A playroom.

"Are we still in Astoria, bella?" he mocks because I've taken him past what was our bedroom.

In my house. Kieran added me to the deed. And he gave me that helicopter, too, as a belated wedding present.

And...

"Come on, Peaches," I say to the dog Kieran brought home for me when Sam went to Italy for a semester abroad.

The dog turned out to be a great watchdog. The guards have been training her. To me? She's an angel, sleeping at the foot of our bed every night.

"And you be patient, husband." I slide my hands up and down his arms. The feel of his suits always excites me because

he often leaves it on when he's inside me during our afternoon trysts. Not much has changed in four months. We still can't keep our hands off each other.

"Here." I open the door, and the smell of fresh paint on all the heavy wood trim and decorative wainscoting below the chair rail comforts me.

Smells trigger me now after my week in hell. I need fresh and clean everywhere.

"Can I see?" Kieran asks, his nostrils flaring.

"Aye, husband."

He lifts the mask cautiously, a teasing grin on his absurdly handsome face. "This is what that noise was about?"

"What do you think?" I swat him with the mask as I glide into our new bedroom.

I combined Lachlan's and Eoghan's bedrooms, which were joined by a bathroom, to make a large suite for Kieran and me. It's not much bigger than the bedroom he took over when his parents moved. This one is *ours*, though.

He steps inside and glances around at the clean, mid-century modern furniture, the color of chestnuts. There was no way to mix and match the heavy ornate Italian style and the very minimal Irish one. So, I created a neutral design that suited us both. I went crazy on the décor. My favorite elements are the gray-and-gold shimmery wallcovering above the chair rail and the canopy bed with an authentic lace cover from Ireland, thanks to Kieran's mother, who I now call Ma.

Kieran grips the matte-finished posts. “I can tie you up nicely with these.”

“Me, too.” I nudge him. “Do you like it? I can start moving our things in this weekend. You don’t have to rush.”

“Aye, bella. I love it.” He glances around. “It’s chic-badass.”

Laughing, I push my way into his arms, his warm chest always comforting me. Touching was difficult for a while, and I’m still a little traumatized. It was hard for us to get close again once we left the hospital.

But he was wonderfully patient.

For exactly six weeks. Then he said I needed to be chased down to get past the trauma and replace what I’d been through with memories of him. *Only* him. No one would ever hurt me again.

It worked. Even the ropes he used got me past what happened.

Peaches makes circles at our feet, looking for attention.

Kieran grows hard against me, reminding me what I do to him. Before he throws me down on our new bed, I grab his hand because I have another surprise.

Two, really.

“Hang on, husband. There’s another reason all that work took longer.” I ease him back into the hallway and into what was Kieran’s old bedroom.

He stiffens. “What’s this?”

“I think you’ll figure it out.” I open the door, and that same fresh-paint smell thrills me.

He steps slowly into his transformed old bedroom that now showcases a dark-wood crib and cornflower blue bedding with a stars and moon mobile overhead. “Are you pregnant?” he asks, tearing his eyes away from the crib to land right on me.

From my pocket, I show him the sonogram photos. “I wanted to be sure.” My voice chokes up. “I already lost—”

He shushes me with his lips. “It just wasn’t meant to be.” Tears cloud his eyes.

“Look closer in the crib.” I reach in and show him the double set of blankets and pillows. There’re no names inscribed yet because I want him to choose. No doubt, he’ll give his twin sons those authentic Irish names. Just as long as I can spell and pronounce them without looking like a git—a slang word I’ve taken a shine to.

“That’s a lot of stuff in the crib for one—” He stops. “Wait.”

“According to the doctor, this right here wasn’t a shadow. There’re two babies inside me.” And these sons in my belly were conceived out of love and not misplaced lust.

Kieran takes the photos in one hand and pulls me in by the waist with another. He won’t cry, and I don’t expect him to. But he nuzzles my neck and it’s wet. His eyes are red, and he’s sniffing.

“Are you happy?” I ask, hugging him.

“Aye, bella. So happy.” His heart hammers against my cheek, then he lowers his head. “Are you? You said you wanted to wait.”

“I know.” But I never took birth control again. Even though the doctor, who examined me in the hospital to make sure the miscarriage didn’t damage anything, prescribed me a fresh batch.

Every time I looked at that pink case, I felt sick. Those lies almost cost me everything. There’s one I kept to myself, *where* I got those pills he found. Samantha worried enough about telling Uncle Dante where I went. I forgave her. The man manipulated my father, someone who could have him killed with the snap of his fingers. Samantha had no choice.

I miss her, being in Italy, but we text every day. When she comes home, she’ll find out *she’s* now the Cosa Nostra princess, since I put her father’s name to the council. And by a slim margin, they crowned Salvatore Gallo as their new don.

“I can still build the foundation from here. I’ll still graduate.” I kiss my financier. He agreed to fund the initial stage of the *Maria Caruso-Parisi Women’s Foundation*.

In four months, Kieran has supported everything I’ve wanted to do. Even if that meant completely waiting to have a baby. I made a promise to the ether that day in Ginna’s dad’s basement that I would give Kieran a child. He, in turn, gave me the same control.

I heard it would take a while to get pregnant after a miscarriage, so I let nature decide.

Once Kieran brought me home, to *our* home, right where I belonged, we waited until it was safe, and then nature picked up right where we left off.

Kieran's phone rings. "It's Balor." He answers the call and puts it on speaker. "Bale, what's up? I'm spending the day with Izzy." He winks and I love that he calls me that now.

"Kier!" The alarm in Balor's voice sends ice down my spine. "Riordan's meeting today with Grigori is an ambush. Maxim is planning to kill him. Lachlan called Riordan's guard, but he didn't pick up. Lachlan's racing there now with more men."

"Stay where you are. Call Ewan. Get extra guards on Ma, Da, and Shea. Everyone is on lockdown *right fucking now!*" my husband screams into the phone.

My heart pounding wildly, I grip the side of the crib with one hand, the other on my stomach. Word travels fast, guards outside already wield their AR-15s and stand in front of our tall iron gate.

Kieran's fury is palpable. "Get to the saferoom, Izzy. Take the dog. You know the combination to the gun safe in there. I'm going." He glares at me expecting an argument.

"Go." I don't dare stop him. It's his *brother*.

Kieran kisses me roughly and when he pulls away, I take a deep breath and say, "Kill those motherfuckers."

Find out what happens to Riordan in Sleeping with the Enemy.

Scroll down to read a sample.

**Due to material that may be triggering for some readers, the sample below is an abridged/edited version of the heroine's POV. All trigger and content warnings for Sleeping with the Enemy will appear in the final version.*

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY EXCERPT

Riordan

“Say it, you Irish scum.” The Russian underboss grips my collar, pinching my windpipe. “On your knees and apologize to Grigori.”

The smell of vodka on his breath can knock me over. Passing out would be a relief. “Nyet,” I say, mocking his accent. “You’re insane if you think I will.”

Torin, my guard, stands down after my hand signal.

Grigori releases me when my wild Irish eyes convince him I’m not getting on my knees. Normally, I would fucking kill anyone for touching me like this, but I came to this meeting with the blood of two dead Russians on my family’s hands.

A feminine chuckle sounds from behind Grigori. Only Bratva bring their whores to high-stakes meetings. If I had a woman, she wouldn’t be rubbing my cock while I’m trying to negotiate with the enemy.

Sucking my cock under the desk? Maybe...

Long, red nails slither over Grigori's shoulder. He hisses at the stunning woman with ice-blonde hair, wearing a black, leather strapless bustier, and a tight, red suede skirt with a slit so high, if she turns a certain way, I'll be able to see if she gets her pussy waxed.

"You like my cologne, *shlyukha*?" Me calling her a slut wipes the smile off her face, but Grigori grips her by the diamond-studded collar I now notice. It sits around her neck with a metal ring in the front.

She's his pet.

He goes through submissives so often, we no longer pay attention to them.

I fuck a different woman every night in the privacy of my penthouse. I don't parade them around on a leash.

"Are you going to lick my nut sack and *apologize* or not?" Grigori pushes his sub to the floor. "Perhaps you need a lesson on how it is done."

"I told you, *nyet*," I bite out. "I'm here as a courtesy to inform you of how your pakhan's nephew died."

Grigori lifts a chunky watch on his wrist, looking bored about that. "And what time did you tell that lunatic brother of yours to come banging down my door?"

"That's for me to know." I eye *his* enforcer, Maksim, who lingers in the back of the room.

I personally had zero to do with either Russian being killed, but as my brother's underboss, peacekeeping and negotiating,

sounding like the reasonable one during a knife fight, is my job.

“How are you going to make reparations, O’Rourke?” Grigori still wants his pound of flesh.

“*We* plan no such thing. Dante Caruso, the Cosa Nostra underboss, killed Alexei’s nephew.”

“Caruso is dead,” Grigori remarks and strokes the woman’s hair, who’s still kneeling.

“And *Italian*.” I shrug, because I’m Irish. “Go talk to them. They owe you the apology.”

“Your sister-in-law is Italian.” Grigori’s lips lift into a smirk. “Shall I talk to her?”

“She’s an O’Rourke. Married to my don. Heavily guarded. You won’t get near her.”

With Grigori communicating silently with Maksim, I stare at his sub. Our eyes connect and the energy around me rearranges. Something fiery passes through me. Fuck, my cock hardens, taking in her alabaster face with hazel eyes and shiny, wet peach lips that curl into a faint smile.

My cock thumps at the idea of dragging her down a dark hallway and roughly fucking her against the wall. If *I* was owed reparations in this meeting, I’d take that cunt in a second.

She looks tough, and I bet she’s wild in bed. With that collar around her neck, I’m guessing Grigori doesn’t let her freak shine on. I would.

“What’s your name, *dorogaya*?” I ask her, greenish-blue eyes still glued to mine.

“None of your business,” she purrs in a thick Russian accent like it’s foreplay.

I mutter dirty thoughts in Gaelic because saying *I’d love to fuck you in a dark alley* out loud in English would get a bullet in my eye socket.

Grigori shakes his head at me, thinking I’m just another pissed-off mick, cursing to myself.

I glance at the time on my phone, practicing my exit speech. When I look down, the sub is blushing.

Did she understand me?

High-class, educated Russians speak many languages. I’d just never met one who knows Gaelic.

I’d love to whisper: *While you’re on your knees, suck my dick* to see the reaction, but too many of those words in Gaelic are recognizable in English.

“Gentleman, *dorogaya*,” I call her *dear* again to get a rise from her. “I’m here to make sure there’s an understanding that we don’t want a war with you.”

“And your brother did not buy his Italian wife for thirty million dollars to finance a war with us?” the sub says boldly, getting to her feet.

Grigori backhands her in a shocking swift move, sending her knees back to the cold cement floor. “*Khvatit, the*

khitrets!”

I’m shaking with rage and I don’t know why. Why should I care about a Russian submissive? Even one who makes the air in this room unbreathable with palpable tension. Something I’ve not felt before.

Well once, but that was for a whole other reason. And it was a long time ago. A lifetime ago.

When Grigori doesn’t help her up, I push forward, but the Bratva underboss steps in front of me.

“We don’t hit our women,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Then it is good she is not your woman, O’Rourke.” Grigori reaches to help his sub up by the collar, but she snaps her hand away. “But she makes a good point.” He takes her hand roughly and kisses it. Next, he’s devouring her with his mouth, licking the blood from her lip and nose.

She’s rigid as fuck. I know a fake kiss when I see one. A submissive is supposed to adore her dom. Not talk back, or fight back.

Grigori is handsome in that brutal, Siberian mountain-man stock, fucking the sheep when there isn’t a woman around, kind of way. He’s got a face full of deep lines and a full head of dark brown hair, graying at the temples. He’s nearly as tall as me, and by the way he’s built, I’m guessing he packs a punch in the cock department.

Grigori lets her go and then pushes her down again like she’s trash. I’m transfixed on her for some reason, but the

underboss drops the leash to grab my cheek, the smell of vodka less, and the sub's peach lip gloss makes my nostrils flare.

Fuck me...

"I will talk to Alexei, and recommend my pakhan consider this matter closed." Grigori backs off from wanting to blame me for two dead Russians. "This makes you happy, da?"

I want to argue that we're owed *something*, but a Russian agreeing not to kill me is a win. I'm taking my chips and going the fuck home.

I need to get laid. Christ, I'm gonna be thinking about the blonde, aren't I? Maybe I'll find someone who looks just like her tonight. Make her get on her hands and knees and let me fuck her from behind for hours while pulling her hair.

That woman's voice is now permanently seared into my brain.

Shaking those thoughts out of my head, I signal I'm ready to leave, when Maksim, the Bratva enforcer who's been silently leaning on a wall in the corner this whole time, says something in Russian to the sub.

When they start arguing, Grigori pushes me out of the room.

"Till next time, Riordan." He says my name for the first time and it sends chills down my fucking spine.

I signal for Torin to open the door for me and I walk backward remembering to never turn my back on the enemy. I

get my ass to the other side, putting layers of wood between us.

Checking the .50 automatic I refused to let them take from me, I hoof it down the hall, glancing behind me every few seconds. Torin's on my six, but my ears are still on alert. All I hear is my pounding heart.

The knob to the metal and glass commercial storm door is nearly frozen. Typical for February in New York. Grigori's primary meeting place is a ground-floor apartment under one of the many import businesses the Bratva pakhan, Alexei Koslov, uses as fronts for his primary crime trio of drugs, guns, and whores.

Could that woman not be a sub, but a bought-and-paid-for whore?

I haven't paid for sex in forever. But her... Jesus, I don't want to think of what I'd pay for one night with her.

Torin and I get to my Audi. "Where to now, boss?"

"Home," I say, but the idea of what Grigori is doing with that woman clouds my judgment.

Fuck, why didn't I get her name? Something tells me she means more to him than a sub. Despite the crack to her jaw, I can see that one is special to him.

Torin nods, but then his eyes widen, tracking over my shoulder.

I lay my finger on the trigger of my Desert Eagle, thinking one of Maksim's unhinged scabs is rushing me with a knife.

Only I turn around and it's...

Her.

The blush from possibly understanding me telling her I wanted to fuck her is now gone and she's even paler than before.

"Get the fuck out of here," she says quickly in an American accent with a hint of something familiar.

"What? Why?" Is all I can ask, over the dozen other questions flying through my mind.

"He's going to kill you." Her voice quivers.

"He?"

"Maksim. I barricaded the door. *Get out of here!*"

"No. I'm not running away." I can't wrap my head around the threat, plus her Russian accent is *gone*.

A small army thunders toward me. My life flashes before my eyes, seeing several gun barrels pointed at me. Glancing down, I see a spot of red laser right over my heart.

Bollocks.

I raise my Desert Eagle, but the sound of deafening gunfire erupts all around me.

"No!" the woman yells out and...

Jumps in front of me. Her back slams into my chest as her head jerks forward.

She slumps to the ground, but I catch her. Blood pours out from her shoulder. She took a fucking bullet for me.

Grigori Laskin's submissive just saved my life.

Torin pushes me *and her* behind my car and returns fire.

A freight train out of nowhere dressed in black, rushes past me. My brother Lachlan roars as he empties his clip and next, two of Maksim's guys fall flat on their faces, each with bullet holes in the head.

Lachlan and Torin keep shooting until another guy goes down and the rest scramble like roaches back into the building. That piece of shite, Maksim, sent five fucking guys to kill me?

Now I've got a dead woman at my feet.

"Holy fuck, who is that?" Lachlan asks me, as I tear open her jacket to find blood pumping from a hole in her shoulder.

"She warned me." I press on her wound, my hands full of blood. "She took this bullet for me."

"We have to get the fuck out of here, mates," Torin says, looking around for cops because we're on a public sidewalk.

"My guys are on the other side of town. We got a call from Balor. This was a setup." Lachlan keeps his gun trained on the metal door to Grigori's basement. Maksim is probably ordering more recruits to suit up for a slaughter. "Leave the bitch and let's go."

"She took a bullet for me. I'm not leaving her to die."

“Riordan, we don’t have time for you to play the hero to a whore.”

“I’m not. She’s not. And fuck you, Lachlan. Just help me get her in the car.”

“No time to argue with you. We’ll dump her at the hospital.”

“You don’t call the shots here,” I remind him, as I press my mouth to her lips to feel if she’s even breathing, but my ears are fucking ringing from the gunshots. “Don’t die on me,” I whisper.

She doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t open her eyes. And I’m fucking terrified for a submissive I shouldn’t care about.

“I told you to let me go to this meeting with you.” Lachlan shakes his head and holsters his Smith and Wesson.

“A phone call warning me would have been nice,” I grumble as Lach helps me get her into my Audi.

“We had no signal down there, boss.” Torin jumps into the driver’s seat. “Which hospital?”

“No hospital. Not this time. My penthouse,” I answer, keeping pressure on the wound gushing blood. “Call the butcher. Get him over there.”



Priscilla- 17 Years Ago

A car pulls up and two men get out. Their swagger, dark hair, fair skin, and long overcoats leave no mistake about who they are. The O'Rourke brothers rule the streets of Astoria for their father.

"You brought Kieran?" Riordan asks the really tall one. "Lachlan!"

"I'm not invited?" Kieran, the oldest brother, quips.

"You told me to bring heat." Lachlan saunters toward us.

"I meant guns, *Lachlan*," Riordan lashes back.

"What happened?" Kieran asks, and then swears, seeing my busted-up face. "I assume you found her like this."

"Fuck, do you think I'd do this to a woman? This is *Nolan's* daughter." Riordan uses Father's name like he's famous, but I've never met Kieran, so I don't expect him to know me by sight.

"Fuck me." Kieran scrubs a hand down the back of his neck.

"There are three guys near the dugout. All dead. I think they're Bratva. I heard their accents," Riordan whispers.

"Do *they* know who Nolan is?" Lachlan asks.

My last name being said again and again has my heart pounding. "They sounded like they knew who Father was." I'm trying to help them. I'm broken and wrecked, but my mind is working.

"Shhh. It's okay, Prissy. I got this." Riordan hugs me, and tears leak from my eyes, his arms feel so good around me.

“Don’t call me Prissy,” I softly argue to make this a normal conversation like the ones we’ve been having for years.

“I’m bringing you to the hospital, I’ll call you whatever I want.” he says sweetly to me.

“Give me a rundown.” Kieran sounds serious, like a future king. “I have to call Da.”

“I found one animal...” Riordan holds my head against his chest so I can’t see what he’s mouthing to his brother. A moment later he lets go and I see the hard expression on Kieran’s face. “Two others were watching. I grabbed them, bashed their heads with a pipe.”

“What about the one who raped her?” Lachlan says with no emotion.

“Shut the fuck up, she has no memory of it,” Riordan sneers through clenched teeth. “I want to keep it that way.”

The hell I don’t remember. But I don’t want to think about it, let alone talk about the worst moment of my life. I won’t let this ruin me. I have that power.

“What did you do to him?” Kieran asks.

“I gutted him.” Riordan hands over a knife full of blood.

“Did she see you?” Kieran sounds panicked all of a sudden, and the tenor doesn’t sit right for him.

“You can trust me,” I whisper, but no one acknowledges me.

“She’s one of us.” Riordan declares, like all those dinners at my house, sharing stories, and telling him about the sleuth

books I was reading sunk in. He knows me so well. “And she’s traumatized.”

My body is broken, but my brain is crying out for them to recognize that I’m strong. I can help them.

“Three Bratva dead because they attacked a *Nolan*.” Kieran lowers his head. “That will start a war.”

Lachlan looks around. “I don’t see any cameras. Let’s just dump the bodies.”

“I’ll do it.” Riordan nods. “After we take her to the hospital.”

I’m piecing everything together. Bratva. Riordan killed three men. I’m a victim, but I’m also a witness. And that makes me a liability. Kieran and Lachlan will silence me. One way or another.

And Riordan...

After what he saw happen to me, he’ll never want me the way I want him.

“Stay right here, Prissy. I’m just walking over there.” Riordan lets me go and I slump forward, my legs cold on the metal bench.

With the three of them talking far off with guns drawn, watching for more Bratva, I shuck off Riordan’s coat. I can’t deal with his scent around me any longer. It hurts too much. I back away, inch by inch, the cold stinging my skin worse than the bench. When the coast is clear, I make a run for it. But I

don't go home. I can't go home to Father. Not looking like this.

Someone sent those Bratva bastards to hurt me. Now they're dead and I have to leave Astoria or a war will start because of me.

I'll do everything I can to forget this horrible night.

And Riordan O'Rourke.

Present Day

I wake up on my left side, pain radiating from my right shoulder. I dreamt of my violent past and the boy who rescued me, but it felt like yesterday. Or today.

"Where am I?" I mutter blankly in some jumbled accented combination of Russian, Irish, and American, my brain confused. I struggle to remember where I was before I blacked out and who I am today. Priscilla, Pasha, or someone else entirely.

My eyes stay closed, too heavy to lift, but I sense a presence, my brain waking up faster than the rest of me.

"Don't move," a voice with an Irish accent answers, and I freeze.

The harsh, acrid smell of metal flares my nostrils. I open my eyes to see a dark metal cylinder. Swallowing, I look up at Riordan O'Rourke covered in blood.

Déjà vu hits me so strongly and if I weren't lying down, I'd fall over.

He's also holding a gun, *my* gun, with the barrel pointed at my forehead.

No, no, no... Please tell me he doesn't think I'm *actually* a Bratva whore who will stab him in the back the moment he takes his eyes off me.

Riordan gives me a wicked grin. "Hello, Prissy."

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