



# SINFUL CROWN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AVA HARRISON

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Sinful Crown

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## **AUTHOR NOTE**

THIS BOOK MAY BE TRIGGERING. For a full list of triggers head to my [website](#). This is a work of fiction. I took creative liberties in regards to locations, city names, details, and ethics. Enjoy the ride!

## **EPIGRAPH**

Whatever is done for love always occurs beyond good and evil.  
-Friedrich Nietzsche



# PROLOGUE

GIDEON

DEATH HAS NEVER BOTHERED ME. It's inevitable. A slice of nature. One of two guarantees in life. We're born, and we die. They say it's getting from point A to point B that sucks. Living that proves difficult. Well, for most.

*I, for one, live pretty fucking well.*

The man wedged under my loafer worms, dislodging an old ball of gum from the cement. "P-please." Unfortunately for him, he's about to careen headfirst into point B.

He might be dying, but I feel no pity for this man after what he did.

Whoever left him here did me a favor. *He's practically gift-wrapped.*

"Can't hear you." I slide a pair of leather gloves up my hands. "Try harder."

He splutters beneath me, chasing his next breath like it's running from him. I don't usually toy with my victims. This is a courtesy I offer as his friend.

As he nears death, it's my duty to remind him how low he's fallen. That he, and he alone, is responsible for his current state. If there's a next life, I'm certain he'll remember this moment and proceed accordingly.

I sigh, bending forward to readjust my grasp on him. "Don't speak."

Through a lone window on the compound's roof, a ray of moonlight streaks across the abandoned warehouse. It offers a sliver of illumination in the stark black space. Just enough to expose pale skin and glassy eyes as the body beneath me trembles with a wet cough.

The pathetic wheeze echoes off the metal walls, slicing through the silence. A chill races up my neck. This, too, is an unfortunate byproduct of

my familiarity with this man. Because I'm expected to calm him. Because I won't do a good job. And because when I see his soul off to its next destination, I know it will be Hell. Well, that's not certain. If I were the devil, which has often been speculated, I'd slam the gates shut on him.

"I-I..."

"Everything will be okay." I pat his ruddy cheek, checking the Rolex on the same hand. This has gone on long enough.

Fresh crimson bubbles out of his mouth, calling me out on my lie. A distinct metallic scent punctuates the revelation. His death is a foregone conclusion. It's only a matter of time.

His lids flutter shut. "I—" It's all he can get out before his voice cracks. His eyes pop open, and a shadow of hesitation darts from them to me.

Roman.

His name is Roman, and he isn't a faceless man.

I know him. I know his obsession with smash burgers and chili cheese fries. I know that he once lost half his savings on a ridiculous World Cup bet. That he followed up that loss with the utter destruction of his virginity by his bookie, of all people. A washed-up, chain-smoking former model. We share a past as colorful as a crayon box.

This singular brief moment of unease is all I gift him. His death will not be the first I witness. Or the last. Consider it a career hazard. The fruits of my life choices.

I am not a good man.

And I will never pretend to be.

The blood loss rips all focus from his gaze, leaving behind two lifeless, glazed-over orbs. Somewhere, within those dull spheres, there's an internal battle waging. But pain robs him of whatever he wants to say. His throat bobs with a swallow.

I watch blood trickle from his wound. "If there's something you must say, your window is closing."

The wax-like pallor and sweat beaded on his brow betray his pain. His mouth opens and shuts several times, seeking strength to release words.

"M-my." He coughs, spilling blood past his lips.

Sighing, I prop him up. It would be inconvenient if he choked to death before spitting out his deathbed confession. I suppose it's the least I can do. Allow the man his final words.

Sudden determination, as hot and radiant as the sun, burns through him.

“My sister.”

*His what?*

That’s a first. Of all the possibilities, that’s the absolute last thing I expected him to say. For starters, I didn’t even know he had a sister. If he could hide a sibling from me, what else did Roman hide?

The man isn’t trustworthy. Drug addicts never are. The cardinal rule of a drug dealer...*Never test your own product.* Evidently, Roman missed class the day they taught that lesson. The man enjoyed partying more than he enjoyed breathing.

Which is what brought us here.

Roman Lennox.

Bloody.

Dying.

And confessing to shit I should have known about years ago.

I lose my patience and, with it, all semblance of humanity. “Talk. Now.”

This cretin’s lies mount higher and higher by the minute. Just how many ways did he betray me? And how did I miss each and every one? It’s not like I’m a bad businessman. I’m a goddamn good one. Unrivaled.

I don’t miss shit.

*Except this time, you missed an entire person.*

Fuck. That.

Roman’s weak fist latches on to my dress shirt, leaving a fresh stain. “S-she’s younger. I-I let her down...they’ll come for her.”

The effects of this little speech are immediate. His lips turn blue. I don’t even think he sees me. Not through those glassy eyes.

*If only you were honest. You wouldn’t be on a first-class trip to Hell.*

“M...my...s-sss...”

Consider my curiosity piqued. What about his sister? The secrecy shrouding her intrigues me. Why will they come for her?

Actually, better question...

“Who?”

His eyes shut. At this point, he’s almost limp in my hands.

My jaw tightens.

“What did you do, Roman?” I shake him. *Fucking hell.* Useless in life and in death, it seems. “Don’t you dare die on me.”

Yes, dying is inevitable, especially *his* death. But the fucking oaf is not allowed to pass until I get the information I need. Why would someone want

to kill his sister? And how do *they* know of her when I didn't?

When his eyes remain shut, I press two fingers to his artery. More blood flows over my hand. He has enough holes in him to sink the Titanic. And still, there's a pulse. Faint but present.

The look he delivers me once his eyes open—dazed and utterly confused—is one I'm familiar with. After all, in its usual state, his body has more drugs in it than a pharmacy.

Roman looks like he's already dead. Like his soul has left his body, and if I inquire about the afterlife, I can trust whatever answer he gives me. Well, as much as I can trust anything that leaves Roman Lennox's mouth.

Case in point: the existence of his supposed sister.

For all I know, he's sending me on a wild goose chase. One last fuck you before he croaks. Or maybe he's turned a leaf. Odd timing, but who knows? We might all be redeemable in the face of death.

*Doubtful.*

I fist his shirt. "What did you do?"

Goddammit. He's fading again. I'm not sure how much time he has left.

I shake him, slapping him awake. "Speak."

His hand barely manages to latch on to mine. "Promise me..."

My eyes narrow. "Promise you what?"

At first, he doesn't answer. His eyes are still closed. I'm about to check his pulse again when his faint breathing tickles my ears.

His throat bobs, his hold on me tightening. "Promise me you'll protect my sister."

The absolute nerve of this man.

Still, I can't help but wonder...

"Why do I need to protect her, Roman?"

He swallows, eyes blinking several times. "Th-They want s-something."

"What do they want?"

"Some...thing she h-has."

I jerk my hand out of his grip and knead my temple. A headache is building, just in time for my thinning patience to take over. "You need to tell me what they want. Otherwise, I can't promise to protect her."

It's obvious that every word hurts, but that doesn't stop Roman. "Please.... p-promise me."

"Roman—"

"No." A burst of energy pulses through him. His eyes become focused for

the first time since he started dying in my arms. “They will kill her. Save her.”

I shake my head again.

His hand latches around my arm once more, tightening with a strength he shouldn’t possess at this point. “You have to.”

I don’t answer. Just peer down at the man I once trusted. He is living (okay, dying) proof that you can’t trust anyone but yourself. Secrets and lies always lurk beneath the surface.

“Sasha doesn’t deserve it.”

*Sasha.*

It’s his first time speaking her name. I roll it in my head, over and over. Who is she? What does she look like? So many questions. Interest shouldn’t be building in me. Neither should the odd urge to seek her out.

Will I help her? To be determined.

“I’m sorry.” Roman’s apology is so soft, I wouldn’t hear it anywhere else. But in the harsh quiet of the vacuous warehouse, it’s as loud as a plane’s roar.

Finally, I look at him. Really look at him. Tongue lolling past his lips, a pool of blood sprawled beneath him, and eyes Bambi-wide, he resembles a mortally wounded Disney cartoon.

*Pathetic.*

I glance at my men. All of them lined up and ready for my order. Whatever the order will be. I might not trust them with some secrets, but I know they’ll follow me. I pay too well for them not to.

With a nod, they know our time here is ending.

I turn back to Roman. “I’ll find Sasha.”

“Y-you’ll protect her?”

“Yes, and unlike some people, I don’t break promises.” The bite in my voice is evident.

He grimaces but doesn’t address his betrayal. Doubt he has the energy to. “Th-thank you—” A groan interrupts his apology. Even in death, he pisses me off. More blood gushes past his blue lips. “Gideon.”

A tear runs down his cheek.

Death, the fickle beast, is slow to claim him.

I set him down.

This will be my last act of mercy.

One Roman Lennox does not deserve.



## GIDEON

THE SHOCKER of the night comes in the form of an actual dump. Also known as Sasha Lennox's home.

"Are you sure this is the place?"

"Yeah, boss, I'm not a complete idiot," Tony huffs through the line.

"Could have fooled me."

I throw my car into park in front of the run-down apartment building. Stacks of water-stained crates sit adjacent to the front stoop. A rust-pitted dumpster is located only a few feet away.

*This place should be condemned.*

I transfer the call from my Bluetooth back to my phone and step out of the car. "It's a shithole."

"Yeah?"

"It should be boarded up. Actually..." I gaze up at a window on the second floor. The one missing a glass pane. A broken plank of wood slices across the cavity, nailed to each side. "Already is."

"She a junkie?"

She has to be. Otherwise, why would anyone choose to live here?

"Don't I pay you to know this information?" I sidestep a muddy plastic bag the wind sweeps into my path. "Which apartment is it?"

The gravel crunches beneath my feet as I stalk down the sidewalk, headed toward the entrance. There are more holes than there is pavement.

*Wow, Roman. You really were a piece of shit. So much for that sudden burst of concern for her safety. I almost believed it.*

Tony's fingers clatter across his keyboard. "From the schematics I have,



it's on the side. First floor. Her apartment is right off the fire escape."

I locate the exact one according to the dipshit's description. Although it's off the ground, it's still only one flight up. Mold climbs the exterior, flush against her oversized window. It offers a clear view inside—and no protection whatsoever against a half-decent burglar.

What the hell was Roman thinking, letting his sister live here?

I knead my temple to stave off the brewing headache. "Do you have any other information on her?"

At this point, it makes more sense to hop in my car, head back to Jersey, and chalk up the broken promise to my lack of morals. Wouldn't be the first time anyone accused me of being an ass.

"It's like she's just...existing. Taking up space." Tony *tsks*. "The girl has no life. No friends. No education. No social media. No current extracurriculars on file. I've seen Witness Protection files more colorful than this. There's nothing of any real importance."

"I don't care how important you think it is." I grit my teeth, the words seething past them. "I want to know everything."

If there is, in fact, anything to know. Judging from her life resume, she sounds like a waste of oxygen. It seems the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Sensing my obvious irritation, Tony types faster, slapping his fingers against the keys. "She keeps to herself. Not a lot of information on the web about her." A few more clicks. He clucks his tongue. That better mean he landed something worth hearing, or the consequences won't bode well for his life expectancy. "She works part-time at a local diner."

"That's it?" The headache is a full-blown issue now.

"Pretty much."

I don't have time for this shit. "Do you at least have the diner's name?"

"Mel's."

"Which Mel's? There are several in the tristate area, for fuck's sake."

The urge to send him straight to the unemployment line grips me, but there are more pressing issues at hand. Like the fact that I care about these mundane details.

*Fucking Roman.*

How did I get myself into this mess? The dick pisses me off more in death than in life. And that's saying something. Yet, here I am, lurking in a filthy alley in hopes of catching a glimpse of the mystery girl.

*Fuck this.*

Roman's dead.

I owe him jack shit.

No reason for me to keep the promise I made to him. Not when I'm learning he kept half his life hidden from me.

I pivot to leave when I spot her through the window. Thick blonde locks cascade past her shoulders. She pushes them aside, reaching up to open the panes. Her petite body shrugs past the frame, slipping onto the fire escape. It creaks beneath her slight weight, more suited for a landfill than the stunning creature it holds.

And she *is* stunning.

And gorgeous, striking, magnificent—all unfortunate things I shouldn't be thinking. It occurs to me that I've stepped closer without realizing it, unhappy with my distance. Too far to make out the exquisite details of Sasha Lennox.

The dumpster conceals my presence. It's a new low—stalking a stranger amidst rotten McDonald's, expired milk cartons, and soiled diapers. Apparently not low enough for me to stop.

I advance, edging close enough to enjoy an unimpeded view but far enough that she can't see me.

The perfect voyeur.

What's she doing out here anyway?

*And you care...why?*

Her legs dangle off the escape as she sits, lowering her head to her hands.

Is she crying? Did she hear about her brother?

Nope. That's impossible. Roman's body is barely cold. The cops haven't even found it, and they won't. Not until I decide it's time.

My curiosity should concern me, but I'm too preoccupied with the view. The evening sun strikes down on her blonde locks, illuminating the little I see of her face. A halo of light reflects off the building, hovering above her head. She looks ethereal from this angle.

Temptation in the sweetest form.

When she removes her hands, her face comes into view, confirming my assessment.

A goddamn siren.

I don't know what I expected, but she isn't it.

She's nothing like her brother. She's a loner. Existing in a world of her

own. Shuffling from work to this dump, if Tony is to be believed. And somehow superb.

*What the fuck, Gideon?*

I know better than to let her beauty cloud my judgment. In my world, beauty is a weapon, and this woman is the sharpest, deadliest of them all.

I continue to observe her, trying to determine whether she's strung out. If she's anything like her brother, fuck the promise I made. Drug abusers are loose cannons, and I don't have time to babysit.

She does nothing out of the ordinary. Just sits and stares at the building across from her, lost in thought.

I wonder if I should step out of the shadow and tell her she's in danger. Allow her to take care of herself. Then I won't have to deal with this ridiculous promise. One destined to end with her writhing beneath me. My willpower is only so strong.

Yeah. That's exactly what I'll do. I'll warn her and leave her to fend for herself.

Wipe my hands clean of this whole mess.

I'm about to do just that when my phone rings.

I hit the answer button, growling out, "Speak."

Julian chuckles. "Is that any way to answer the phone, darling?"

As my right hand, he's the only person allowed to speak to me like this. Since Tobias Kosta stepped down, the two of us have run the show.

I keep my voice low. "When it's you, always."

He laughs. It lasts a single beat before he clears his throat.

My back goes ramrod straight.

Something's wrong.

"What happened?"

"How do you know something happened?"

"Don't draw this out." My foot taps the ground. "We both know I'm good at reading the room. Right now, the room says you're calling with bad news."

"There's an issue with a package. I need your help."

"Take care of it. There's an eight-figure cavity in my wallet that says it's what I goddamn pay you for," I snap. "I'm currently indisposed."

"Stalking..."

I hang up without a word. When I step out from my hiding spot, Sasha Lennox is no longer there. Pity. I'll have to deal with this later because, unlike her, my shipping problems can't wait.

*Well, maybe for a couple more minutes...*  
Just long enough to get a closer look.



# SASHA

“HOW’D YOU DO?”

Johnny asks the same question every time I clock out. And every time, I offer the same half-hearted shrug.

He adjusts his apron, which has his Head Chef title stitched onto the breast. “That bad?”

*Understatement of the year.*

I nod, crinkling my nose. “Let’s just say that today was a bust.” A long, drawn-out sigh sails past my lips. I finger the flimsy wad of cash before shoving it into my purse. “I won’t be paying my rent with it.”

*Nor will I be paying for dinner, groceries, electricity...I wonder how much a kidney goes for these days. Enough to buy a four-ounce steak and fries?*

On second thought...I turn my nose up, inhaling the fragrance wafting from the kitchen. It’s an assault against my senses. It smells foul and looks unappetizing. My belly churns, my mouth dries, and my appetite has long since fled the building. Am I desperate enough...?

My stomach heaves, as if to say, *I swear to God, Sasha, if you eat that, I’ll be your first organ to volunteer for black-market removal.*

Normally, the food here is decent—greasy but edible. Today, Johnny tried something new for a special. Spoiler alert: it won’t be on the menu again anytime soon. And I might just petition our boss to demote Johnny from head chef to anything that pries him away from the stove and the crime against tastebuds that just left it.

“You’re working at the wrong diner, kid.” Johnny snorts. “Nobody’s

paying their rent on tips from this hellhole.”

He isn't wrong. This isn't exactly the best place to work for tips in the city, but it's a quick walk up the block to my apartment, and with enough shifts, I can actually pay my bills.

However, today crawled by with half our usual customer flow. A setback I can't afford. These days, I can barely afford to breathe.

“It's even worse that the tips were abysmal because the people sucked too.” Johnny snaps off his latex gloves, shoving them in the breakroom's trash can. “If I have to hear one more person bitch about the eggs, I'm gonna lose my goddamn mind.”

To be fair, Johnny's idea of eggs over easy is eggs nuked to the point where the CDC, a hazmat team, and full-body PPE couldn't revive them.

“They were especially rude.”

A harsh breath rushes from my chest as I think about one customer in particular who practically hurled her plate at me, with the added bonus of calling me a floozy when it was her husband who checked out my ass, not the other way around. I was minding my double-cheeked business when her country-fried chicken frisbeed past, crashing into the wall above me. I just know it'll take two showers to wash the gravy out of my hair tonight.

“Well, I'm headed home.” I sling my purse over my shoulder. “See you later.”

A raised hand is all I get. No goodbyes. Typical Johnny.

I've learned not to expect more from him than two minutes of feigned interest before I leave. In fact, I appreciate it. There are few things I can count on in this city, and Johnny being Johnny is one of them.

I swing open the door, blending into the crowd within seconds. Hours of running from table to table weigh down my steps. I trudge through the busy streets. Everywhere I look, a flurry of movement flashes, people rushing past in a blur of hurried energy. The volume of their voices overwhelms me. Sometimes, the thing I dream of most is escaping this oppressive city. More than I want my next meal. More than I want to play the cello at Juilliard. More than I want my brother to be clean after all these years.

The sun shines brightly, but I feel engulfed by shadows. Weaving my way in and out of the typical midday foot traffic, I narrowly miss a head-on collision with a man whose face hovers a mere inch from his phone.

“Watch it,” he snarls, not even bothering to glance up.

Apparently, he missed the fact that *he* was the one to swerve onto my side

of the path. It takes everything in me not to fling a coupon to the optometrist at his feet. (Yes, in addition to being broke, I have devolved into a coupon hoarder. Not the glamorous life I expected to live at twenty-one, but what can you do?)

“Asshole.” It’s spoken under my breath. Thankfully, he doesn’t hear it, because I can’t afford a fight today. Or any day. I’m barely functioning as is.

Today is a typical day in New York City. People tend to be prickly, especially in the afternoon when they’re stuck in the drudgery of their less-than-fulfilling careers.

*City of dreams, my ass.*

After a few blocks, I make it home. Walking through my front door doesn’t have the soothing effect one would hope for. Today, the walls feel like they’re closing in on me, and I haven’t even been here for more than a second.

At only two hundred square feet, my studio is too small, but it’s all I can afford. Just the sight of the dreary place is enough to remind me of the meager tips dancing inside my purse. If I’m being thrifty, it’ll pay for whatever mystery meat is on sale at the local market, but nothing more. Which is the only reason I can’t move out of the city. Well...the second reason. The first is that I don’t have enough money for a car. Call me spoiled, but trekking tens of miles to work by foot just isn’t in the books for me at this particular stage in my life.

Palming my phone, I hover over the three missed calls from Roman. It’s been two days, and I still haven’t dismissed the notifications. Something about them lingers in my mind like an inoperable tumor. I can’t shed my worry like I normally do. Can’t excise the chunks of fear edging their way into my brain.

My brother never calls. Ever. Certainly not three times in one day. And for good reason. I’ve asked him not to. Demanded it, actually. His propensity for trouble, specifically with drugs, drove us apart years ago.

The fact that he left a voicemail has my stomach doing somersaults. Sweat beads on my brow. I swipe it off, wondering whether I should call him back. What trouble has he gotten himself into now? Better question—is it worth letting him re-enter my life over?

Finally, I cave, pressing the play button on the voicemail.

*So weak. And you swore you’d never entertain him again.*

Roman’s voice rasps through the speaker. “Sash, it’s me. You said not to



call, but this is serious. I need you to call me back. I have something I need to tell you. Please.”

The line goes dead. I can't help but fixate on his tone. He sounded nervous.

Desperate.

*He needs money for his next fix.*

Money I don't have and wouldn't give him even if I did.

I set my phone back in my purse, throw it onto the outdated yellow chair in the corner, a thrift store find that's not wearing well, and head into my room.

To my one happiness in life. My cello.

A gift from Roman.

*The brother you're turning your back on.*

“Ugh,” I yell, breaking the silence.

Only Roman can manage to invoke such emotion from me, despite our estrangement.

Though we haven't talked in years, I can't help but worry about him.

We were close once. Very close.

I shake off thoughts of Roman and return to my cello. I should practice now that I'm home from work, but my fingers feel like they need surgical removal from my hands, which feel like they need surgical removal from my arms, and so forth. At this point, a total body transplant is the only solution to recover from the fatigue.

These past few days, sleep hasn't come easy, and work has been extra difficult because of it.

*Who are you kidding? You're waiting for Roman to show up at your door, strung out and looking for money.*

I moved to this apartment in my rush to hide from Roman. It's the first place I've ever lived that he doesn't have the address of. I don't feel even an ounce bad about it. My sanity—and my wallet—thank me for cutting off his frequent visits, which always accompanied demands for cash. My job doesn't pay enough for me to support myself *and* an addict. Yeah, he's my older brother, but most times, I feel like his enabling mother.

I couldn't do it anymore. Had to break the cycle that I'd allowed to persist.

Maybe that's what worries me. That he'll find me. That the cycle will start all over again.

It wouldn't be too hard for him to track me down. He has connections that I don't even want to know about. I know enough.

I'm finally saving money, and if I keep it up and qualify for a generous financial aid package, I should be able to apply to Juilliard next year. It's hard when I make crappy tips and a base salary that's even more pathetic, but I'll get it done.

You know it's bad when the world's biggest pessimist turns to optimism.

It's true, though. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. It's just close enough that I can almost reach it. Sitting pretty in my bank is practically enough money for tuition, rent, and living expenses. Yeah, it took forever to earn. And yeah, I had to distance myself from Roman. But I did it. I freakin' did it.

There's only one remaining problem...I still have to audition.

Stage fright is a bitch. It's also quite a problem to have when your dream is to be a concert cellist.

The bane of my existence, in fact.

I can barely play in my own apartment. I certainly can't play in front of other people.

Like every hurdle life has thrown at me, I'll figure it out. I have to.

*Enough stalling.*

I take a seat, adjusting until I'm comfortable. Okay, stalling until I muster the courage. Once in place, I close my eyes and bring the bow up, allowing myself to fade into the music. Only a few chords ring through the air before I hear my cello's rumbly voice and still. I hold my movements.

This is my life. I start. I stop. I breathe. I play.

Once I'm sure it's nothing, I resume my practice. The music fills the room, a deep, mellow melody. I can feel the cello's vibrations across the floor, through my feet. They seep into my bones. It's almost like I can feel the music resonating in my heart.

I wish I could be braver. Stronger. I wish I was able to perform like this in front of a crowd.

I haven't played in public.

Not since...

I shake my head.

*No. Don't go there.*

My fingers toy with the bow again, bringing it up to the strings. The second I start again, a loud boom shakes the ceiling. Speckles of dust sprinkle

over me, peppering my cello in white. A piercing shout follows. “Shut the fuck up! I’m trying to sleep here.”

The clock on my nightstand reads six at night.

“Oh, fuck off,” I roar back before remembering that, with the state of my bank account, this place may as well be a five-star resort. On top of everything else, I can’t lose this crappy studio, too. “Have a nice nap!” I tack on, hoping I won’t get a call from my landlord in the morning.

*Oops.*

Just as well, since I can’t seem to actually play. Instead, I press my fingers on the strings, forming the right notes. Then I move the bow in front of the strings, not quite touching, and pretend to play. And what do you know? The stage fright is gone. Somehow, I doubt the admissions officers at Juilliard will be impressed with this style of play.

Once I’ve practiced long enough, I place my cello back down, reach my hands above my head, and stretch out my arms, yawning. From here, my night crawls by. The sun slowly descends into the horizon, casting an orange-pink hue over the neighboring buildings. I feel like I’m suspended in time, my mind whirling in uncertainty.

*Should I call Roman back?*

I force out a long breath. My feet ache. My back aches. And, if I must admit it, my heart aches, too. Sweat coats every inch of visible skin. The gravy from earlier is congealed in my hair. Disgusting is a generous description of my current state.

Maybe I’ll call after the shower. Yep. That’s what I’ll do. Or maybe after I shower *then* eat. An even better plan.

I’m about to head into the bathroom when I hear a knock on my door.

My shoulders stiffen, and my mind wanders back to my brother. It can’t be him, right?

Moving to the door on autopilot, I peek through the peephole. In an instant, my heart beats a little faster in my chest. Two police officers stand in the hallway, and although I can’t think of one reason they’d be here, I’m on edge.

Their position obscures their faces, but then one of them moves, and I recognize him in less than a second.

It’s Matt.

A friend of mine from high school. Nice guy who was friendly to everyone.

Especially to me.

We remained friends after graduation, and through the years, he monitored Roman for me. When I moved to the city, Matt promised that he'd tell me if anything ever happened to my brother.

My jaw tightens.

The fact that he's here now doesn't bode well. It means something has happened.

Roman is probably in jail and not getting out anytime soon.

This isn't the first time Matt has stopped by unannounced, considering my brother has always been in trouble with the law.

That's not true.

There was a time when he wasn't. That was when our parents were still alive, and he was able to be a normal teen.

Then they died, and everything changed.

Suddenly, the stakes were higher, and in order to make ends meet, he took the first job he could get. *But that's a whole other story.*

Right now, I have to deal with my unexpected guests.

I turn the knob, swinging the door open. With a shake of my head, I look directly at Matt. He's still handsome if you like the nice-boy-next-door type. He's clean-cut with short, perfectly styled blond hair and warm hazel-brown eyes.

Not my type, which made it awkward when he asked me out years ago. I said no because there's never been a spark between us. That, coupled with the fact my brother has always been in trouble with the law, and I considered it a conflict of interest.

Regardless, I appreciate Matt's friendship. Finding out that your brother is in jail is always easier when coming from someone you know and trust.

I speak first, a fist resting on my hip. "What did he do now?"

Matt doesn't reply at first. He glances over at his partner as if to silently ask him to break the news this time.

I take a deep breath. "Just tell me how much bail is."

Matt swallows. "Sasha, can we come inside?"

No.

My nails dig into my palm. "Um, yeah. Okay."

This is a first. For starters, there's barely enough room for me in my studio, let alone three people. And typically, Matt comes alone and never bothers to ask to come inside. I always have to insist.

I don't like this.

My back feels stiff as I lead them inside my tiny apartment. With each step, my anxiety increases tenfold. I can barely move. The three of us are like sardines, wedged between the furniture that fills the tight space. I might've gone overboard at Goodwill. In addition to being a coupon hoarder, maybe I'm an actual hoarder.

"Sash—" Matt hesitates.

I spin to face him. "Just tell me."

I hate drawing things out. Matt knows this, too.

Still, he takes his time sighing, and when he does, I notice how tight his jaw is clenched.

Whatever Roman did, it's bad. A heavy feeling weighs down my stomach. An imaginary bowling ball, sending bile up my throat.

"There's no easy way to tell you this..."

"Then just spit it out," I fire back. My defense mechanism—fight-or-flight—kicks in. Fight wins. Always does.

"Sasha...Roman." His head shakes back and forth, and his shoulders slacken. "He's dead."

*Dead.*

Roman's dead?

I roll the words over in my head, and with each second that passes, it feels more absurd. Like it isn't my reality. Surely, this is another stunt my brother has pulled. But I don't think it is. It's the other cop's face that seals the deal. Somber, apologetic, and eager to flee. The dread from earlier gets heavier until I give out.

My legs buckle under the weight of Matt's words.

He shoots forward to catch me before I fall. "Whoa, Sash. I got you. You're going to be okay," he whispers into the top of my head.

My whole body shakes, and I can't speak. My mouth is dry, and my jaw quivers. We stand like this for several moments as I work to get myself under control. To process what he said.

When I finally find the strength to move my mouth, I ask the question eating at me. "How did he die?"

The one thing I really don't want to know but have to.

Again, Matt looks at his partner, who remains stoic. When he glances back at me, his face is paler. "Sasha..."

"Don't 'Sasha' me. Tell me!"

He steps forward, and I edge back. “You don’t want to know the details.”

I know he’s just trying to protect me, but I don’t need his protection. I’ve never been the type to need coddling. My brother is dead, and I need to know why.

“Matt,” I grit out. “I need to know the details.”

This time, the quiet officer beside Matt speaks, “Ma’am, you really don’t —”

“Now!” I yell with a force I didn’t realize I possessed.

Again, my upstairs neighbor jumps on his floor, hollering at me to shut up. He must be wearing space boots, because the ceiling rattles so hard I half-expect it to collapse.

“Sir, this is the police!” Matt thunders back.

“Yeah, right!” He jumps some more. “Nice try, Sash!”

I barely pay attention to the exchange, unable to contain the fireball of emotions growing in my stomach. The heat spreads through my body.

It’s easier to be angry than it is to be sad.

A motto I have always lived by.

I take a calming breath. “I’m...sorry.”

*Calm down, Sasha.*

“Please tell me.” My voice drops an octave. “I need to know.”

Matt’s eyes close, and his nostrils flare. It looks like he’s fighting an inner battle with himself. To tell me or not. From his audible sigh, I know which side wins, but I’m not prepared for the words he utters next.

“He was tortured.”

My hands tremble. My knees, too. Hell, my whole body is shaking now. On a sharp inhale, I push past the pain building inside me. “Was he on drugs again?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I won’t know until we get the full report.”

I ball my fists and shove them into the pockets of my waitress dress. “When will that be?”

“It’ll take some time for the toxicology reports to come back,” Matt says, eyes dropping to the floor. “I’m sorry, Sasha. I wish...I wish I could’ve done more.”

He isn’t the only one who’s sorry.

I can’t help but feel that my own stubborn nature killed Roman. No matter how ridiculous it sounds. “It’s my fault. If I hadn’t...”

Matt’s arms jut out, grabbing my hands in his. “Don’t say that. It’s not

your fault. He went to work for bad men.”

“Who?”

Knowing their names won't help at all, and still, I need to know.

*What will you do? Hunt them down? Get real.*

No. Nothing good could come from tangling myself in Roman's messes.

“Roman had ties to Gideon Byrne and Lorenzo Amanté.”

I shake my head. “Who are they?”

They sounded like overpriced Italian handbags.

“Gideon is responsible for bringing some pretty serious drugs into the city, and Lorenzo...well, you don't want to even know that name.”

I gulp down the lump sitting in the back of my throat. What could these men have done that even Matt looks a little shaken by their mere names?

“This wasn't your fault. Your brother was troubled, and it didn't help that he surrounded himself with people like that,” Matt continues.

I know his words are supposed to help me, but they don't.

My chest still feels hollow all the same.

I pushed Roman away. I ran from him. Hid here in my crap apartment, saving up money to make my life better. All the while, he was out there making his worse. Maybe if I'd begged a little more, he would've straightened up. Maybe he would've given up that life.

The sad truth is, I didn't try, and now I'll never know what could've been.





# GIDEON

I LURK in the shadows like some fucking psycho, waiting for the perfect moment to make my presence known.

No matter how often I watch her, I can't stop the need building within me. My desire to look at her, even from a distance, is never quenched.

It's been a little over a week since the police informed Sasha of Roman's death.

It's been ten days since I first laid eyes on her, and it's never enough.

I'm not sure what it is about this girl that has me so consumed...but I am. She has become my new obsession.

It's driving me insane.

I've tried to play my interest in her off as strictly business. To make it all about the promise I made to her brother.

I know it's bullshit and so do my men.

There's only one solution. I need to follow through.

I need to bring her in on everything.

"How long do you want to stay?" Julian asks from behind me.

I don't turn in his direction. "Not sure yet."

There's no reason to tell him anything more. When I'm ready to go, he'll find out. For now, I'm going to continue to observe her. From this angle, her blonde hair seems too bright amongst the sea of black clothes. She reminds me of a firefly brightening up the summer night sky.

She flits around from person to person, accepting condolences. There aren't many here, maybe fifteen max, but I'm still surprised by the turnout Roman has received. In the years I've known him, he never once spoke of his

personal life. He only talked about the chicks he was fucking. No mention of family. He didn't seem to have friends outside of my crew, and currently, none of them are here. They wouldn't be.

These people are here for Sasha. That's the only thing that makes sense, but that leaves me even more confused. I would think someone like her would have more friends and family.

She's a conundrum, that's for sure.

The dynamics between these people and Sasha make me wonder what their relationship to her is. She speaks to everyone who approaches, but not one has embraced her. It doesn't even appear these people know her well.

*What's that about?*

That's until I see the frame of a large man walking her way. I can't see his face from this position, but when he stops in front of her and pulls her into his arms, my fists clench at my sides.

I move a few feet to my left to get a better view, and when I do, I realize he's the same guy who was at her house the day she found out about Roman. A fucking cop.

Who the hell is this fucker, and why is she hanging around the police? Why is he comforting her?

I don't fucking like it.

Who is he to her?

He shouldn't have his arms around her...

I should.

*What the fuck.*

I cannot be having thoughts like this. She isn't mine.

She can't be.

Stepping closer, I continue to watch them interact. They're very familiar. Too familiar. It makes me uneasy.

Is this a ploy to find out information from her? Is he getting close to Sasha to uncover her brother's activities before his death?

Maybe the guy's crooked. It would make sense. Roman said she's in danger. Maybe he's working for whoever is after her.

Fuck.

I need to intervene—and fast.

The longer he comforts her, the tighter my fists clench. I feel like a ticking time bomb.

The need to separate them fills me, but I know I can't. Not here.

She doesn't know me, and coming between them could tip people off.  
Keep telling yourself that's the reason you're pissed.  
I can admit that this woman is driving me mad. That my obsession with her is growing more than it should. That I'm losing my goddamn mind.  
But crossing the line is dangerous. Especially if she's close to this guy.  
Despite my desire, I know to hold off. I can't approach her. I have to wait.

Patiently.

Something that doesn't come easy to me.

Drifting back into the shadows, I watch her as the funeral starts. Where everyone else wears the typical mourning colors of muted grays and black, she stands out in a pale-pink dress that fits her like a glove.

Sophisticated. Beautiful.

She's stronger than I thought she'd be. She's sitting in the front row of the funeral home, back straight. Head held high. Not a tear is shed for her brother, which makes me wonder.

What was their relationship like?

I expected her to be crying inconsolably like most would be, having lost someone in their family so tragically.

So fucking strong.

The decision is made before I can think better of it.

I could protect her from afar, but that will never work now. No, another plan filters in my head. One so incredibly stupid, I almost want to shoot myself in the foot to stop this shit.

As soon as the service concludes, I make my move without second-guessing it. I straighten my shoulders and slip on the mask of power I wear when dealing with my subordinates. My stride is assured, and several heads swivel as I glide by. I don't pay them any attention. I fix my gaze on Sasha.

Her head lifts as I approach, and her eyes meet mine.

They're cornflower blue, ringed in gray. Mesmerizing.

Like the sky at dusk when the sun is setting. They sparkle in the light and draw people to them like a magnet with their intensity.

She looks at me with curiosity, her eyes narrowing as she must be trying to place who I am. But as I step closer, her features shift, and a scowl forms on her face.

She's pissed.

That much I can tell.

I don't need to wait long to find out why, because the next thing I know, she's stalking toward me.

"How dare you," she hisses, her voice low, but still, there's a bite. "I know who you are."

I smirk, unable to help the reaction. "Do you now?"

"You're the reason my brother was on drugs. You're the reason he's dead."

For a moment, I'm speechless. Despite the end of my relationship with Roman, that accusation landed like a blow to the gut. The feeling doesn't last long, though. Pure fascination replaces it.

*No one speaks to me like this.*

They'd die if they did.

Yet this tiny, beautiful woman isn't afraid of me at all. And she claims to know about me. About my dealings.

"Why. Are. You. Here?" she grits through her teeth, enunciating each word.

My lips part, but no words come out.

She's a spitfire.

And I like it.

Fuck...this shit turns me on. She turns me on.

"What are you smirking at?" she hisses, and I can't help but smile wider.

"You."

She looks like she's about to throttle me. "You have a lot of nerve." She can't contain the volume of her voice. It rises to a pitch, drawing stares from those around us.

"Careful, firefly," I warn, never removing my eyes from hers.

Her small hands ball into fists. "Careful? What are *you* going to do?"

I move closer, ready to answer her question, when the fucking cop sidles up to her.

"Everything okay?" he says, pulling Sasha into his side as if he has the right.

That move will cost him his life. Painfully, too.

But how?

A good old fashion torture session could work. Maybe I'll even get creative?

"Yes. Matt. Mr. Byrne was just leaving." She doesn't even look at him, her glare pointed directly at me.

“You *do* know who I am,” I retort, and she practically snarls at me.

“Leave.” The douche’s arm tightens around her.

*Acid?*

*Drowning?*

“It’s time to go,” he says with as much bravado as he can muster.

I laugh because it’s a pathetic fucking try. We both know I could kill him with my bare hands. *Add strangulation to the list.* “I’ll go when I’m fucking ready to go.”

Matt steps forward, and Sasha jumps in front of him, placing her hands on his chest. The move only works to piss me off more. *Buried alive? That could work.*

“Matt, let’s go. I can’t do this today.” She sighs heavily. “He’s not worth it.”

Matt looks down at her, his features softening. *He’s in love with her.*

With a simple nod, he grabs her hand and pulls her away. Neither of them looks back at me as they leave. I watch their retreat, recognizing the signs that Sasha doesn’t feel the same way, and a bit of tension rushes from my body. Just a small amount, though, because that fucker disrespected me and touched what doesn’t belong to him.

He’s *still* touching her.

Yep, Matt needs to die.

And Sasha...

Well, she needs to learn a lesson.

No one walks away from me.



# SASHA

TWO DAYS HAVE GONE by since the funeral, and despite what Lucinda, my boss at the diner, offered, I didn't take any time off.

I can't afford to miss work.

I'm so close to my goals, and I can't fall backward now.

So here I am, walking home from a long day on my feet, desperate to lie down, get out of my tight leggings, and throw on an oversized sweatsuit or pj's. I feel disgusting from all the beverages spilled on me and the plate of food the runner dropped in my lap—while I was on break, no less.

Today is hotter than normal, so I'm sweaty, which only adds to the level of grossness I'm feeling.

A shower is definitely needed.

I speed up, eager to get home. I'm about a block from my apartment when I hear the thump of a heavy pair of shoes. Halting, I peer over my shoulder.

Nothing.

No one is even behind me. *I'm totally hearing things.*

It must be that I'm tired and overworked.

Yep. That's it.

I'm not being followed.

First, I thought I saw someone outside my window the other day, and now I'm hearing phantom footsteps.

This isn't a teen show on CW, Sasha.

No monsters are lurking in the corners, ready to end your life.

I groan, head falling back on my shoulders. "Pull yourself together."

I'm losing my damn mind. I've been out of sorts for weeks, but even more so after the run-in with Gideon Byrne. He wasn't what I expected at all. Not that I'd know what a drug lord looks like, but I didn't anticipate refined and handsome beyond measure.

*It's not okay.*

He's an Adonis. A god amongst men. Too attractive for his own good *and mine*.

His unruly brown hair makes me want to run my fingers through the strands, but his eyes, stormy blue and almost glacial, have me rendered useless.

*He knocked me off guard.*

I'm not even sure how I strung together words that made sense when I demanded he leave and hurled insults at him.

I also didn't expect him to just take it like he did. Isn't a drug lord supposed to be brutal? I'm sure other people have been cut down on the spot for saying less to him. So why did he take it from me?

*You were at a funeral in a room full of people.*

With a shake of the head, I continue toward my apartment, where, once again, the main door is not locked. Apparently, for the price I pay in rent, safety isn't the landlord's concern.

Normally, I'm not as bothered by this, but seeing as I just recently had a run-in with a drug lord...I'm concerned.

It's that vile man and the thought of him that has me on edge.

*Gideon Byrne is not worth it.*

Pushing all thoughts out of my mind, I step inside, making my way to my home.

I should count myself lucky I even have a place and that it's relatively clean and safe around here. It's actually a steal, seeing as I'm in the city. I got lucky, as I sublet it from my boss. It's yet another reason Lucinda doesn't understand why I work so much.

The thing is, Lucinda doesn't know about my dreams of Juilliard. Hell, she doesn't even know I play the cello.

No one does, to be honest.

Roman knew.

*But he's gone.*

My stomach sours as I walk through the hall, making my way to my door. I'm not sure if it's from my wayward thoughts or the smell permeating the



area. Someone must have left their garbage out, which I wish I could say wasn't a typical occurrence. It is. People just don't respect others.

Who knows, but I could throw up all the same.

The lights above flicker, making me blink.

Those have needed changing for some time, but I can't be the one to say anything. Technically, I'm not supposed to be renting Lucinda's apartment. It's rent-controlled and not allowed to be sublet, per the landlord. It's only worked out because I'm a good tenant that makes herself scarce and doesn't cause any issues. However, it also means I have to suck it up and deal with the shit conditions that others impose on me.

I'm so focused on all the ways in which this building is falling apart that when I grab my key and push the door open, I almost miss the thumps of soft footsteps behind me.

My hand stills, and I can feel the tickle of breath on the back of my neck.

Everything happens at warp speed from there.

A large hand covers my mouth, and I'm shoved through the door.

"Shh..." the voice coos in my ear. "I'll let you go if you promise not to scream."

No way am I not screaming. A strange man is in my home. His hands are covering my mouth.

Fuck that.

I'm screaming like a damn banshee the moment he removes his grip on me.

*Only me. This shit only happens to me.*

I have no idea who this crazy man is or what he wants. My heart rattles in my chest as I try to figure out what to do. Better yet, what does he want with me?

"Come on. Be a good girl, firefly. Nod your head...tell me that you'll remain quiet."

Firefly?

Where have I heard that nickname before?

*"Careful, Firefly."*

My knees feel wobbly as the memory hits me. That was the random name Gideon Byrne called me at the funeral.

*He's the man holding me.*

I stop struggling, but my pulse continues to race erratically.

He wouldn't hurt me.

Would he?

Of course, he would. He's an evil drug lord.

Why is he here? What have I done?

You insulted him in front of a room of people. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

If I don't nod my head, he'll kill me. If I scream, he'll definitely kill me.

Dead at twenty-one? *Sounds about right.*

I did my research on Gideon after Matt came to tell me what happened to Roman. I had to know what he'd been involved in to understand why anyone would want to torture him like they did.

Gideon Byrne won't think twice about ending my life if I act out of turn, and I'm not in the mood to die today.

I give him the nod he's been waiting for, and his hands drop. Now free from his arms, I turn to face him.

My arms cross over my chest protectively. "What are you doing here? I told you to leave me alone."

Even knowing who he is, I can't seem to get my mouth to stop running away from me. This man brings out my fight.

He mirrors my stance, crossing his own arms over his chest. "Can't do that."

"Why the hell not?" I bark back, moving my hands to my hips. "This is ridiculous. Isn't it bad enough he died because of you?"

"Now who's being ridiculous." He flicks invisible dust off his shirt sleeve.

*Is he trying to piss me off?*

I steel my spine. "I'm ridiculous? How so?"

"Your brother was a big boy, Sasha. His death isn't on my shoulders."

"My brother was a drug addict...and you are a drug—" He steps closer to me, his formidable frame too big for the small space.

"Careful what you say, firefly...I'd hate for you to lose your spark."

I grit my teeth together. The man doesn't make idle threats. "What do you want?"

His eyes explore my body up and down, and I have to force myself to remain still and not buckle under the weight of that heavy stare. It's not sexual. If anything, it makes me feel inferior. Like he finds me wanting. *I hate him.*

"I need you to come with me," he says, so nonchalantly I think I've misunderstood him for a moment. "Now."

My mouth drops open at his words. No way did I hear that right.

“Are you insane?” I reply before I can think better of it. Surprisingly, he doesn’t take out a gun and shoot me in the head. Instead, he moves until our bodies are almost touching. I swear we are so close I can feel the way his chest vibrates as he breathes.

I should retreat. But like a moth to a flame, I want to move closer.

*My reaction to this man is concerning.*

“I promised your brother I’d protect you.”

My head snaps back. “You’re lying. Roman didn’t care about me. We didn’t have a relationship.”

His eyes narrow slightly as if this is news to him.

Maybe it is. Who knows what, if anything, Roman shared with this guy.

“We don’t have time for this,” he grunts. “You need to come with me now. I made a promise, and I will keep it, Sasha.”

“Fuck your promises,” I say, brushing his shoulder as I walk past him to the kitchenette. Sometimes I don’t know what comes over me.

*You have a death wish. That’s all. This is old news.*

I know this man is dangerous, but at this moment, I’m tired, cranky, and in desperate need of a shower and bed. He’s only managing to piss me off.

“It’s not just about promises, Sasha. You’re in danger,” he says, coming up behind me.

He’s close. Too close.

“If you think I’m a bad man, you have no idea what awaits you out there. What hunts you now as we speak.”

I swallow, dreading the grim picture he’s painting.

Who could be worse than this man?

“I can protect you,” he promises.

“I want nothing to do with you.”

He laughs, but it lacks humor. He’s mocking my bravado, and it stings. “You don’t have a choice.”

I’m about to object some more, but I don’t get the chance. Before I can voice any more rebuttals to his offer of safety, I’m being thrown over his shoulder and forced to bend to his will. He stalks out of my apartment without a care in the world who sees.

“Put me down,” I yell, hitting his back and kicking my legs. But my attempts to stop him are futile. He marches all the way to the back entrance of my building before stopping abruptly and dropping me on my feet.

“Listen to me...” he grits out through clenched teeth, leaning down so we’re practically nose to nose. “You’re in *danger*. I’m only here because I promised Roman to protect you. The truth is, I don’t give a fuck what happens. Fight me, and I’ll leave you to brutal men who will torture you until your life seeps out. Or you can come with me.” He raises back to his full height, towering over me. “Either way, I couldn’t care less.”

Sweat beads on my brow. For some reason, I believe him. Being tortured sounds like the worst kind of death. I stand here weighing my odds as if they’ll somehow change. There has to be some other way.

If bad men are really after me, I know I don’t have a choice. I have to go with him. But it doesn’t stop me from being scared of him too.

The back door swings open, and in walk three more men. The burly guy at the front raises a brow at Gideon, who simply rolls his eyes. With that one facial expression, my choice is taken away.

Gideon sweeps me off my feet, and we’re out the door when I hear him say, “Time’s up, firefly.”



# SASHA

I DON'T FIGHT this time.

A part of me wants to kick and scream, but I don't.

It won't change anything. The only thing it will do is serve to piss off this man even more than he already is.

Which is not something I want. Especially with the entourage he's brought with him.

All the energy is zapped from my body, and I hang limply over Gideon's solid shoulder as he carries me out the back entrance of the building.

It's rare that I'm out here, but this area is actually worse than the front, and from this angle, over his shoulder, it's gross: crumbling bricks, peeling paint.

A bunch of the windows are broken—some with glass still jaggedly sticking out of the frames, others with wood haphazardly boarding them up.

This place may be run-down, but it's my home, and I don't want to leave.

I focus on anything but my current situation. Which at the moment is the faint smell of his cologne wafting through the air. I hate to admit it, but he smells divine. If he were any other man, I'd lean in farther and inhale deeply.

Lucky for me, I'm dropped unceremoniously onto the black leather seat in the car before I can do anything stupid, like take a sniff.

As we move, I quickly become disoriented. No matter how hard I try to keep track, I have no idea where we're headed as the driver turns so often once we're out of the city.

The wheels of the SUV spin out, and my arms stretch forward, trying to find purchase.

“Stop squirming,” Gideon commands.

“I’m not squirming. I’m trying to not die. Your driver is driving like an asshole.”

“Sasha...” he warns. “Stop talking.”

Not wanting to anger the drug lord, I concentrate out the window, taking in the landmarks. The more I pay attention, the more things look familiar. Just as I realize where we’re going, one of Gideon’s goons leans over the front seat and throws a bag over my head.

“It’s for your protection.”

Fuck that.

My hands lift to remove it, but they’re caught. Then I’m being pulled toward the middle of the back seat, right into my captor. Our bodies are so close, I’m tempted to smell his intoxicating cologne again.

*What is wrong with me?*

His arms wrap around me so I can’t escape. My back is to his chest, and he holds my squirming body tight. I have to admit, a part of me wants to melt into his touch. It’s been so long since someone has held me.

*Don’t romanticize this.*

My body and my mind are not on the same page.

I can feel the way his heart beats through the material of my shirt, and it causes shivers to run down my spine. His nearness. His smell. He’s...he’s a sensory overload. It’s too much.

I shouldn’t be attracted to this man, yet my body has its own response despite what my brain is saying. *He kidnapped you.*

The idea of being whisked out of my apartment, taken by a stranger to an unknown location, should be enough to wipe away any untoward thoughts I’m having. He’s my captor.

I should want to fight him regardless of the fact, but deep down, I do believe that someone is after me. I can sense it in my gut. That uneasy feeling of being watched. Being followed. I felt it all over the past few days.

Maybe it was him.

*But what if it wasn’t?*

Not a single person came to my aid, and a struggle had ensued. Someone had to have heard it. Yet nobody helped me. He promises safety, but the next person...will likely kill me on the spot.

My mind races with all the deadly possibilities, and for a moment, I start to come to terms with my current situation. Alive is better than the

alternative, and for now, that's good enough for me.

It isn't long before we finally roll to a stop. My heart beats so fast it feels like a hummingbird is living in my chest.

Where am I?

What happens next?

Before I can think up any more questions and horrors, the bag is lifted off my head.

It takes me a minute to get my bearings. Blinking several times, I work to let the lights from the car give me sight. Eventually, everything comes into focus.

We're parked in front of what I assume must be this man's house, but house is a gross understatement.

This place is like an English manor. Its sprawling acreage boasts manicured lawns and mature trees you don't see in the city. The grounds are beautiful, and I can't help but want to explore.

But the home...it's something else entirely.

It's the largest home I've ever seen.

The more I study it, the more I realize it looks like a museum. One I went to with my parents before they died.

When life was still easy and dreams were possible.

Going down memory lane is not a good idea right now, so instead, I continue to take in where I'm apparently going to be staying for lord knows how long.

This place is fit for a king.

Which makes sense since Gideon has such a high opinion of himself.

I have no idea where we are, but the opulence of the façade alone has my breath leaving my body.

I'm enamored. That much is for sure.

What has me shaking is how awful a man he must be to afford this monstrosity. It's not like he's a doctor.

He's a drug dealer. No...drug lord.

The number of people he must be responsible for hurting—killing—to be able to accumulate this type of wealth...is staggering.

I hate him and all he represents.

“Get out of the car.” His voice cuts through my inner ramblings, and my shaking immediately stops, giving way to a building anger.

That's right, Sasha...harness the anger.



My jaw tightens as I glower at him. “Fuck you.”

His grin nearly sends me overboard. “Oh, look who came back to the party. I was worried I broke you already.” He laughs.

“You wish,” I snap back, sounding like a petulant child. I have to refrain from cringing.

“Trust me, firefly...I do.”

The comment is so confusing. His voice is so melancholy that my eyes narrow in on him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His lip tips up. And what I see knocks the breath from my lungs.

A smirk. But not just any smirk. It could quite possibly be the sexiest smirk I have ever seen. I hate myself for thinking it, but it doesn’t stop it from being true.

“As much as I enjoy your spunk, it’s time to get out of the car,” he says, stepping to the side and motioning for me to step out.

My finger points toward the manor. “I am not going in there.”

“Not nice enough for you?” He lifts an eyebrow. “Seeing where I just rescued you from, I’d think this would be a significant upgrade for you.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I huff. “And you didn’t rescue me.”

“Didn’t I, though?” He folds his hands in front of him. “Should I throw you back over my shoulder? Or will you make one thing easy today?”

“No.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I am not going into that house.” My voice loses the fight, and I just sound pathetic.

“Why? It’s a fantastic house. I think you’ll rather enjoy it.”

“I can see it’s fantastic. Perfect even,” I seethe. “That’s not the fucking point.”

He huffs out a breath. “You’re making no sense.”

“It’s what the house represents,” I blurt out, not meaning to. I didn’t want to give him any insight into what I was feeling, but he infuriates me so much that it just sprung out.

“Still not following you, firefly.” He shrugs, and I want to get out of the car just to punch him in his smug face.

“Will you stop calling me that?”

His lips thin as though he’s contemplating my request. “No. Now, tell me...what does my house represent?” He throws my words back in my face, and my anger intensifies.

I climb out of the car and step into his face so we’re practically toe-to-toe.

“It’s blood money, and all that blood is on *your* hands.”

I don’t wait for a response, walking around him toward the house, needing some space and wanting my words to sink in. It doesn’t take long before he’s approaching.

“You don’t know a fucking thing about me,” he grits through his likely clenched teeth.

I ruffled his feathers. Good.

His hand wraps around my wrist, spinning me around to face him.

“I said...you don’t know anything about me.” He repeats the words.

“I don’t want to know anything about you, Gideon.”

I whip back around, needing to get away from him. I’m not sure where I’m going, but I refuse to be a part of this game.

The distance doesn’t prevent me from hearing his words. “The kitten has claws.”

“Should we clip them?” one of his goons asks, and my shoulders stiffen.

“No, I like my guests feisty.”

“Ugh.” I ball my hands into fists and pick up my pace.

I don’t even make it a few feet before arms wrap around me.

“Let me go,” I yell, flailing in his arms.

“Are you going to play nice?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’m not going to let you free.”

He tightens his hold, and no matter how much I squirm. I can’t get loose. Not when he starts walking, not when he opens the door, and certainly not when he stops in the foyer.

If I ever wondered about my strength, I now know. Against this man, it’s nothing. I can’t beat him physically, but I can beat him mentally.

I stop trying to get free.

Not just because my attempt is pathetic, but also because my mouth is hanging open in shock.

This place is incredible and not at all what I would expect.

Everywhere I look there are ornate details and intricate craftsmanship — from the marble floors to the gilded chandelier that hangs above me. As I take it all in, a feeling of awe washes over me. My eyes wander to the twin staircases that lead to the upper floors, both lined with red carpets and framed by mahogany banisters.

*Holy crap.*

“Good girl,” he praises.

Those simple words snap me out of my thoughts and, for some sick reason, also just about undo me. Heat pools in my center, and I don’t know how to stop it. I feel my body relax despite my wishes, and he doesn’t miss it.

“Firefly...do you like praise?”

I don’t answer because I refuse. Gideon won’t get another thing from me.

When he realizes I’m not going to respond, he swoops down and lifts me back over his shoulder on a yelp, carrying me up one of the grand staircases. It’s hard to see much from the position of my body. Flung over his shoulder and upside down, I don’t miss that he’s now walking down a long corridor.

A few feet away, I see two figures down the hall. I squint my eyes to see them better. Who are they? Maybe they can help me? But when my gaze catches one of them, my pleas become lodged in my throat.

There in the corner, cloaked by darkness, is a large man, but that’s not what makes my breath catch. It’s the look in the woman’s eyes that has me shaking.

Fear.

She’s shivering in fear at whatever the man in the shadows says. Is she here against her will, like me? Is that man hurting her?

Gideon throws open a door before I know what’s happening, and the man and woman in the hallway are now an afterthought as I’m being flung onto a large four-poster bed.

“Right now, I’m going to close the door and lock it,” he says as if he’s giving flight instructions on a plane.

Like he’s done this before. Maybe to the woman in the hall? I know this man is a drug dealer, but is he a trafficker too? My stomach lurches at the thought. This can’t be happening.

His assessing gaze tracks my movement. “You need to calm down,” he adds. “Only after you’ve settled will I open this door.”

I don’t answer him. What’s there to say? Plus, with the way my jaw trembles, I don’t even know if I could get words out if I wanted.

“Nod, if you understand,” he commands.

I give him what he wants.

The faster he’s out of my vicinity, the faster I can calm down and come up with a plan.

There’s no way I’m staying here. Someone might be coming for me, but I’m no safer inside these walls. I could be sold off for all I know. Everything

this man has said could be a lie.

“Take a shower; you smell like shit. You’ll find clothes in the closet,” he says before slamming the door shut and locking me in.

I crumple into a heap on the floor. I’m not scared. I’m not even sad. I’m fucking furious.

It’s just I can’t decide what I’m more furious about. Him stealing me from my home? Some unknown villain is supposedly after me for some equally unknown reason? Or the fact he said I smell...

The last one being entirely too ridiculous to consider.

Why the hell do I care what the man thinks of me?

I don’t.

Lying back on the carpet on a huff, I can’t help but inhale sharply, which only confirms Gideon’s words.

I do, in fact, stink.

Fuck my life.



# GIDEON

THIS IS A HORRIBLE IDEA.

Having Sasha under this roof is a fucking awful plan.

I'm pissed.

And as much as I want to say that I'm pissed because of the things she said to me, which I am, the real reason I'm livid is because I want her.

I fucking want her.

Her fire.

Her strength.

Her tenacity.

She's a firefly. Lighting up the night sky with her bright fucking light, and I hate the fact that someone wants to snuff her out. Worse yet, I can't figure out who's after her and why.

Roman and all his secrets are why I'm in this mess. He's the reason I'm going insane.

There's also the matter of me always being turned on when she's around. That pisses me off more than anything.

I haven't gotten to where I am today by not having control. I pride myself on always being in control. Yet she unravels me in ways nobody has ever come close to.

Which doesn't bode well for getting shit done. Now that she'll be living in my house for the foreseeable future, I know my productivity will suffer.

My cell vibrates in my pocket. I fish it out, scanning the group chat from Hell.

LORENZO

@Gideon, you avoiding me?

TRENT

Lorenzo can't come to the phone right now. He's too busy being pussy whipped. Please leave a message after the beep.

LORENZO

Have you looked in the mirror lately?

TRENT

Yes, and it's a wonder how I haven't landed a modeling contract.

LORENZO

And you obviously have a death wish.

TOBIAS

Children. Some of us are trying to enjoy our day.

LORENZO

Come out of retirement, Tobias. Gideon is dropping the ball.

GIDEON

I'll call you in a few.

LORENZO

Took long enough.

GIDEON

Fuck off.

WITH A SHAKE OF MY HEAD, I PLACE MY PHONE BACK IN MY POCKET AND continue my trek to the basement.

I need eyes on Sasha. The desire to figure her out, to know what makes her tick, consumes me.

She's so much stronger than Roman ever was.

That part makes her fascinating because not only is she beautiful and defiant, but she's also so fucking strong. The notion makes me gravitate toward her.

I despise that I can't get her out of my mind. I know that this will be a problem. The smart thing to do would be to put her in a safe house.

A safe house far away from me.

Instead, I find my way down to the basement. My shoes echo on the stone floor as I stride down the long hallway. This wing of the estate is only open to a select few. This is the area that hosts my security. There's a biometric lock on the steel door in order to enter.

Where Sasha is concerned, I'm taking zero chances.

I step forward and allow the machine a retinal scan, and once it clears me, I head inside. My security is excessive, but after what happened to my predecessor, I know that no chances can be taken.

Which is why I brought in the big guns when I outfitted this place.

I enlisted Jaxson Price, a well-renowned billionaire and the head of one of the most sought-after security firms, to set up my system.

Jaxson doesn't work on-site. He's a hacker and prefers his own space for the jobs he does. For other clients, what he will do for the right price is personally set up a layer of security that no one can penetrate.

The door swings open, and I'm instantly met with the set of monitors that line the large wall in front of me. I have five men who work the screens; their only job is to monitor them.

"Boss."

I nod to the head of the operation, Rick. I incline my chin to the screen in front of him.

"Bring up footage for the room we put our guest in."

It's wrong. I know it's wrong. But yes, I have cameras in every room of the house. Even mine.

The bedrooms are only monitored when I say so. Case in point, now.

There, on the screen, is a very animated and pissed off Sasha. She's pacing like a caged animal, walking back and forth across the gray-painted room.

I wouldn't be surprised if she's made a hole in the tread of the cream-colored carpet from the number of times she's marched the same path. Her mouth opens, and although I don't have the volume on, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize she's cursing.

Her hands fly into the air with each step she takes. Then she pivots, faces the camera, and mouths the word, asshole.

That's undoubtedly for me.

Rick chuckles, which might be a first. I've never seen the man exude any emotion.



Sasha would be the one to bring it out in him.

My firefly.

*You're nothing, idiot.*

After several minutes, she stops walking right in front of the bed and throws herself onto it. At first, I don't know what she's doing, but then I see. Her back rises and falls in staccato motions, and when she tilts her head to the side, I see her jaw tremble.

"Zoom in," I command Rick, and he does.

My strong girl has broken.

"Shut the camera off," I snap. "I want a passcode installed on that camera. Only I'll have access to it. Set up the feed to be sent to my phone." I spin around, glaring into the side of Rick's head. "Do you understand?"

"Yeah, boss."

The idea that any of my men could see her makes me irate. When I first set up the cameras in all the rooms of the house, I never realized anyone would occupy that room. At least nobody I wouldn't want my men to observe.

What I saw doesn't sit well with me. There's an ache in my chest from seeing her that way. I realize that her pain was caused by me. Her hatred... reserved only for me.

A few seconds later, my phone chimes, indicating that I have a message from Rick. I look up at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Click on the link," he instructs.

"Can I trust you?" I joke. I know I can. He's someone who has proven his loyalty from day one.

"Yeah, boss. You can," he responds. His voice was low, with no sarcasm present.

I nod in acceptance. "What next?"

"It's going to ask you to connect to facial recognition. It'll scan your face, and then from now on, your ugly mug will be the only one who can access this link."

"Did you just crack a joke?" I say, grinning.

This is a new side of Rick.

He shrugs, and that's all I get.

"Thank you," I say, following his instructions to finish the task. I click on the link, allow the phone to register my face, and then watch her.

She lies in the bed for a few minutes more, her body still. Did she fall

asleep?

My heart beats a little faster as I wait for her to do something. Anything. I don't like the reaction I'm having.

It pisses me the fuck off.

But no matter how much I want to, I can't pull my gaze away. In a daze, I leave the security room behind and make my way to my bedroom.

Once in my personal quarters, I shut the door, throw my phone on a chair, sit at a table at the side of the room, and pour myself a glass of scotch. I eye my phone for several minutes, refusing to give in. To watch. I can resist.

The burn of the amber liquid is enough to calm the angry thoughts of why I can't pull away from her.

Fuck it.

I grab the phone and prop it up, refusing to spend another minute analyzing how fucked I am.

I'm midway through my glass when she gets out of the bed and wipes under her eyes. What happens next has my balls swelling and my dick hardening.

Sasha removes her shirt and steps out of her pants, standing nearly naked in the middle of the room. Her back is turned to me, and my eyes scan the curve of her back all the way to where her thong begins. They travel over the perfect round ass cheeks and down her slender legs. Her golden hair hangs loosely to mid back. She pulls it over one shoulder, turning toward the camera.

A lump forms in my throat, and I have to swallow it down.

She's fucking gorgeous.

She's likely about to head to the shower, but as I take her in, I hope she doesn't. That's the one room that doesn't have a camera. There's no need. Without a window and being on the top floor, there's no possibility of escape from that room.

I want a few more minutes to watch her. To see her completely bared to me.

*What the hell?*

Even thinking the words makes me feel like a creeper. She doesn't know I'm watching, which just makes it wrong. I shut off the feed just as she lifts her hands up to remove her bra. I can't do it. Can't watch when she's vulnerable.

I might be a bad human, but I would never be that type of guy.

A guy who preys on unknowing women. Watches and gets off.  
It's fucking sick.

Men who mess with women and children are the lowest form of evil, and I'm not one of them.

Needing a distraction from her, I dial one of my men to check on the delayed shipment.

"Gideon," Tony answers.

"Is it there?" I ask, putting just enough bite into my tone to send the message that this is unacceptable and someone is going to pay. It isn't Tony's fault, so it won't be him.

He sighs. "It's not."

"Fuck. Okay. Call me as soon as it fucking gets there."

Heads will roll for this, and hopefully not my own. There are men worse than me running this show. Men who don't give a fuck how successful I've been at running this operation. There's always someone waiting in the wings to take my spot.

Next, I dial the one person I don't want to speak to right now, but unfortunately, it's a necessary evil.

He might be my friend, but in business, especially *this* type of business, he doesn't give a fuck who his friends are.

He will murder them regardless. The line rings once before he picks up, a telltale sign that he's been waiting for this call.

Fuck.

"You better have good news for me," Lorenzo says, sounding more bored than anything.

It's his MO. Calm and collected until he isn't. It's a scare tactic. One that is very efficient.

*He's a crazy motherfucker.*

"Well, unfortunately, you might be waiting a while for good news," I retort, which probably isn't the best way to deliver bad news to a guy like Lorenzo.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" His voice rises in anger, but I don't so much as flinch.

He might not be able to see me, but in this industry, you can't show weakness. Ever.

"There's an issue, Lorenzo, and out of respect for our friendship"—I throw that in to remind him of the fact that he can't just go cockeyed and kill

me—"I'm going to give it to you straight. There's been a delay. Your delivery is not in, but I'll keep you apprised of the situation."

"You better," he snaps, and it pisses me off.

Maybe it's this whole day that sets me off, but I can't help but react to his veiled threat.

I lean forward, placing my elbows on my knees. "Or what?"

He laughs menacingly. "Don't fuck with me, Gideon."

"What other option do you have, Lorenzo? You gonna work with the Russians?"

There's no way he's dealing with them, and we both know it.

"You better make this right," he mutters back, completely ignoring my comment about the Russians. "I'm losing my patience."

"Don't I always?"

He grunts. A second passes. No words are exchanged. Then I hear him breathe out. "You going to Cyrus's this week?"

And just like that...my friend is back.



# SASHA

I CAN'T BELIEVE this is my life.

Here I am, a few months from my twenty-second birthday, with little to show for it. This should be the prime of my life. I should be living it up in college, hanging out with friends, and studying cello like I always dreamed. Enjoying myself.

Enjoying life.

Instead, I've been kidnapped by a criminal. And why? Because he made a promise to my brother? *If that's even true.* A brother who had to have gotten himself into something big—dangerous—if more criminals are looking to kill me.

How many years will I be punished for Roman's failures?

I loved my brother, but since the day my parents died and he took over as legal guardian, it's been one shit show after another. When I could, I moved out without a backward glance because Roman had brought me nothing but pain.

Even now, my heart hurts from all the hurt. Of course, I mourn his death, but it doesn't erase all the bad that came along with him. I'll always miss the big brother I idolized when I was eight years old, but that boy was long gone years before he died.

Turning to my side, I eye the door from the largest, comfiest bed I've ever lain on.

The large four-post bed, lavender sheets, and the umpteen pillows piled at the headboard probably cost more money than I pay in rent per month.

Oh, who am I kidding? The sheets probably cost as much as a full year's

rent.

I don't bother to get up as I glare at the knob on the door.

It's locked, and I'm trapped in here for God knows how long, with nothing to do but stare at the mostly bare walls. One ornate clock stands next to the door, and a large, framed picture sits centered on the largest wall in the room, but outside of that, only furniture and air are in here.

Gideon said he'd let me out when I calmed down, but what does that mean? Will I have free rein to roam the estate? Is that even safe?

He says I'm here for my own protection, but how am I supposed to believe him?

He's the villain.

Not my savior.

My brother worked for this man, and I know too many sordid tales to give the guy any passes.

My brother is dead, and he's the only one with any answers.

Which means I can't believe a word Gideon says. I can't trust him or anyone else involved in this world.

It hasn't even been that long, but it feels like the walls are already closing in around me.

I need an outlet. Something to keep my mind from wandering to who's after me or how long I'll be locked in this room. I can't stay here indefinitely.

I'd rather be free in the real world and playing my cello than locked in this fortress.

*My cello.*

In the confusion of leaving (i.e., me kicking and screaming), I didn't pack my belongings. I didn't bring anything.

How am I going to practice? How will I get into Juilliard if I'm stuck here hiding?

*Shit.*

"What am I going to do?" I don't mean for the words to be spoken out loud. These walls probably have ears...and eyes.

That thought gives me chills. Could someone be watching me now? My eyes scan the area, but I see nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that screams *camera*.

My gaze skates the room and lands on the window.

I stand from the bed and head over to it. Reaching my hand out, I try to open it. But it won't budge. It's stuck, but is that purposeful or coincidental?

The latter is doubtful. It's probably nailed shut to keep me—or whoever was kept here before—prisoner. It's one more layer of security for the drug lord.

*Fuck. This.*

I'm pacing the room, fixating on all the ways I'm well and truly up shit's creek. This place is a fortress designed to entrap.

I crane my neck to see if I can locate anything else out of the ordinary.

Not that I know what I'm looking for.

I highly doubt Gideon would put an obvious camera in my room.

If anything, it would be hidden and discreet.

My skin crawls. I can feel eyes on me even now.

*He's definitely watching me.*

Corner by corner, I search the room. The window is where I start. I check each light. I search through every nook and cranny in the armoire that sits across the room. Lifting my hand, I run my fingers along the seams of the large ornate piece of furniture. There's nothing there.

Am I making it up?

Are the goose bumps caused by my overactive imagination? Is this feeling of being watched all in my head?

My head shakes.

No.

I have always trusted my instincts in life because they've never led me astray. And my instincts tell me a camera is in this room...somewhere.

There has to be. I just need to figure out where it is. I'll search this whole damn room, top to bottom, until I find it.

Next to the piece of furniture is a night-light plugged in. At first glance, it looks ordinary, except for the blinking red light at the bottom.

That's...weird. Right?

I don't remember a blinking light on any night-light I ever had during childhood.

That's got to be the camera.

I move closer, my feet slapping against the hardwood floors. When I'm standing in front of it, I kneel. Staring directly into it.

It's a backup battery.

*God, I'm such an idiot.*

On a huff, I lie down and look up at the ceiling, wondering if I'm losing my mind with every second I'm stuck in here.



That's when I see a little blue light gleaming from above.

My gaze narrows in on the smoke detector.

I scour my brain and try to remember what color a smoke detector is supposed to be. I don't have one in my apartment, but we did back when I was a kid and my parents were alive.

It was located in the hallway of my old house. When my parents would argue, they'd do it from their room. I'd sit just outside their closed door to listen in. I never understood the words they slung at each other, and I'd find myself focusing in on the detector out of boredom.

Green.

The smoke detector flashed a green light.

Not blue.

Bingo.

That's the camera.

It's by the door, far enough from my bed that he wouldn't get a close-up but would be able to get a clear shot of the entire room.

My heart hammers in my chest. A hummingbird trying to take flight behind the golden bars of a cage.

I was naked inside this room earlier. Who saw me? Who watched while I stripped off my clothes before heading to the bathroom? Was it Gideon? Or maybe one of his goons? Worse yet, some faceless man who got pleasure out of watching me. Looking at my body.

I feel sick to my stomach.

The need to flee is so intense that my legs bounce in anticipation. Except that's not possible.

I'm trapped.

What do I do?

Taking a deep, calming breath, I try to rein myself in, but it doesn't stop the sweat that has broken out across my brow.

I cross my hands over my chest and try to ground myself. Try to stop the impending panic attack.

Inhaling, I hear the melody in my head. The one that calms me.

My fingers move.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I need to be rational.

Maybe he'll let me out if I play the game right.

Concentrating on the vibration of the beat, I feel my pulse slow, and my

nerves come back under control. Music has always been a way I've dealt with stress in the past. Stress typically associated with Roman. How unfair that his actions are still causing me havoc.

Once I'm completely calm, I slip into strategy mode.

I need to get outside to get a better lay of the land.

The only way to do that is to get out of this room. I jump up from the floor and step toward the door, banging my fist against the wooden barrier just hard enough to get someone's attention.

"Hello!" I holler. "Anyone out there? I have questions."

When no one answers, I try again. "Please...I want to talk," I beg, and the sound of my pitiful pleading pisses me off. "Open the damn door."

I hit the wood with my palm, and pain ricochets from the move. It's too sturdy. Much thicker than the crappy ones in my apartment. It might as well be steel. Yet another reminder of where I am.

I slink back down to the floor in a pool of pathetic.

Damn, that hurt. Everything hurts.

My life is one giant mess.

I look at my hands. The insides and knuckles are both red from my attempted assault on the door. I'm lucky I didn't break the skin. I'll probably bruise, though. And for what? No one has answered. I'm still stuck in this room.

I slump against the door, ready to give up and accept defeat, when something occurs to me. Just because he didn't answer doesn't mean he can't hear me.

I tilt my head up and look straight at the smoke detector.

*Here goes nothing.*

"I know you can hear me." My gaze is heavy on the camera. At least, I hope that's what it is. Otherwise, I'm losing my mind. I shake that thought off and continue. "I need answers about my brother."

I inhale deeply before pushing the oxygen out of my mouth. "I'm ready to talk," I promise. "I'll be calm. I just need to know why he would want me protected."

My hand lifts, and I run it through my unruly hair. I probably look like a wild animal after my fight with the door. Feeling self-conscious, I give the strands a tug, further irritating me.

I'm frustrated. A part of me wants to crawl into bed and hope that when I wake up, all of this is just a bad dream. Unfortunately, I know it's not.

“We didn’t have a relationship,” I admit, dropping my hands to my sides and lowering my head until my chin almost rests against my chest. “You really don’t need to protect me. I’ve been taking care of myself since I was fourteen.”

That truth washes away the anger and frustration and allows sadness to creep in. I’ve been on my own for so long. I’ve fought my own battles and demons, and today isn’t any different.

Except it is.

I’m at the mercy of monsters, and I don’t even understand the full extent of it.

I lift my head to lay it against the door and close my eyes. Exhausted from the day.

Exhausted by life.



# GIDEON

SASHA IS AN INTERESTING CREATURE.

As graceful as she appears, she's got quite the temper.

Granted, I'd be just as furious if the roles were reversed.

She's fascinating to watch.

I keep waiting for her to break down, but as the minutes pass, she doesn't. Her strength doesn't diminish with time. If anything, I can see that she's resilient even from the black-and-white image on my phone. She's plotting.

It's not that she's doing anything out of the ordinary. But as I track her movements on the screen and watch her mannerisms, I just know. I've watched men do it a million times while locked behind doors thicker than that one.

The way her slender shoulders tense. The way she looks up at the camera. It's in her eyes as they dart around the room. Not haphazardly but calculating.

Does she know?

I don't have to wait long for that answer. A laugh escapes me when she talks to the camera. Directly at the camera.

The volume was turned off, so I didn't have to hear her screeching. But now I fix that, wanting to hear what she has to say.

Before, she was getting the lay of the land, but she knows it can only go so far locked in this room. She's playing the game and beginning the questioning phase. By engaging me, she thinks she'll glean more information that can help her run.

Rope me in.

By the soft tone of her voice, she's planning on trying to pull a fast one

on me.

I can see her move already. She will play on my heart to let her go; if that plan doesn't work, she *will* try to escape.

It won't work. Not if she wants to survive because, outside these walls, she isn't safe.

A thought pops into my head...

If she escapes, I'll be forced to keep her close.

My lips split into a large grin. That is exactly what I want.

I want her to feel a sense of false security. Then, when she thinks there's a chance, I'll let her escape. I won't let her get very far, of course. But I'll let her believe she's in the clear, and then when she finally lets out the breath she's holding, I'll swoop in, catch her in the act and drag her ass back here.

The punishment for that level of defiance will be fast and severe. She'll no longer have the luxuries I have given her. No freedoms. No room.

She'll have to relocate.

*To my room.*

There I can have eyes on her all the time. My eyes.

The Cheshire grin I'm sporting probably looks maniacal, but there's nobody around to see just how much this woman affects me.

It's a good plan.

The intensity of my want for her makes the decision final.

My eyes sweep over the screen. She's still on the floor, eyes closed. It's now or never.

I head toward her room, prepared to start the charade. As I approach the door, I look at the image staring back at me one more time.

I want to hold her. Lift her in my arms and carry her to safety. Place her in bed. Strip her out of her jeans and make her comfortable.

The idea of her stripped and lying on her back has my cock straining against my zipper. I push the thought away.

Fuck.

I need to pull myself together. All in good time, but right now, the only thing I need to do is set the plan in motion.

I pull up Matilda's details and shoot off a text for her to bring up firefly's dinner. I can't have her going to sleep without food. She'll need her strength for what's coming because I expect her best effort.

A few minutes later, light footsteps come from down the hallway behind me. I stop watching the screen and turn to see Matilda carrying a tray of food.

“That was quick,” I say, offering a nod.

Matilda wouldn't know what to do with me if I was playful. She's accustomed to the hard-nosed drug lord that all my other staff have come to know. It's the way it has to be. I can't allow people in. It's dangerous for them and even more so for me. In this world, you never know who you can really trust.

“That will be all,” I say, grabbing the tray from her hand. She doesn't say a word the entire time because it's what's done here.

I take one last glance at the screen to see that Sasha has shifted away from the door. She's curled up into a ball on the floor, giving me enough room to enter without bumping into her. I want the element of surprise.

Time to get the ball rolling.

Reaching into my pocket, I grab the key and unlock the door that separates her from me as quietly as possible.

It doesn't work. The girl's a light sleeper, apparently because the sound of my approach startles her awake. I take her in.

Her hair is disheveled, her blue eyes glassy with broken sleep.

She rubs at her face. “Why are you here?” she asks, voice deep and scratchy, likely from the screaming earlier.

“To feed you.” I walk around her to sit the tray on the nightstand next to her bed.

“Or...you could just let me out. Then you wouldn't have to bring me food or anything else, for that matter.”

“That seems like a great idea, firefly. Too bad it isn't happening.”

Her legs are crossed, and her hands lie on top of her thighs, balled into fists. “Stop calling me that.”

“And why would I do that? I quite like it.”

She huffs exaggeratedly. “You're intolerable.”

“Careful,” I warn. “You know what happens to pesky fireflies...right?”

She stares at me blankly, so I continue.

“They get caught and put in a jar.”

“I'm already in a cage. Might as well barricade me further,” she seethes.

“This is hardly a prison, Sasha. It could be so much worse.”

“That might be true, but it's my right to choose, Gideon. You've stripped me of that right, and I'll always resent you for it.” Her eyes shift to the floor, the fight bleeding out of her. She looks and sounds tired.

“Then ask to be released.” It's a shit thing to say since I'll never allow it,

but she needs that false sense of having options, so I'll give it to her. Momentarily.

"I won't beg," she says, looking up at me once more. Tears well in her eyes, and for a moment, I want to drop the act and pull her into my arms.

"But if you don't ask, how can I ever grant your wish?" I smirk, trying to shift the energy in the room to something lighter. Something that will get Sasha to let her guard down, if only a little.

She bites her bottom lip, looking contemplative. We stare at each other for several long minutes, neither saying a word. In this scenario, the first one to speak loses, and that will never be me.

"Can I leave the room?" she finally says in a small, mousey voice.

I hate it.

I want her fight. Her strength. Not this broken version she's showing me now. Or...is it all an act? A part of *her* plan. Guess we'll see.

I give a shrug. "Very well. Tomorrow you can have some liberties to roam, but be forewarned...I won't take kindly to duplicity. Be a good girl, and you can have freedom, but if you try to leave, you won't like the consequences."

She grits her teeth. Her jaw is tight with barely restrained anger. She wants to say something. To fight back. But she's playing a game right now, and she plays it well...to a degree. I read people better than most, and despite how hard she tries, I can see the defiance shining in her eyes. I welcome her fire.





# SASHA

EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT streams in from the window next to me. Blinking my eyelids, I push away the sleep lingering in my body and work to rid myself of the morning fog.

As my vision clears, my surroundings focus, and confusion bleeds away to panic.

Where the hell am I?

My body springs up from the soft mattress I had been lying on as I work to get my bearings.

I shake my head back and forth, opening and closing my eyes several times, but it only takes a moment for my reality to set in.

Gideon's house.

Scratch that.

Gideon's fortress.

His evil lair, where he resides and probably tortures unwilling guests.

My body shudders at the thought, but I push the idea away. There's no reason to believe he'd hurt me. Not when he maintains that he's only trying to protect me.

Why should I think otherwise? Hell, he agreed to unlock the door. To give me freedom and free rein.

As if the house can hear my thoughts, something, somewhere in the room, begins to ring.

I look around and spot a phone or some sort of intercom beside the bed.

Narrowing my eyes, I inspect it further.

It's not a regular phone. At least not one that can make outside calls.

Obviously. Pressing the button to answer it, I wait for whoever is calling to speak. Something tells me I know exactly who it will be.

“Good morning, firefly.” His husky voice washes over me, and my belly flips in response. “Breakfast will be served shortly.”

I open my mouth to respond but decide not to.

Screw him.

Screw him for invading my privacy by watching me from what I am now sure is the camera. How often is he watching me?

A groan leaves my mouth as I thrust my hands through my hair and pull.

“Not a morning person?”

Of all the stupid, arrogant—

My internal tirade is cut off. “Either way, you can get around and come downstairs. The door is unlocked. Food will be served in the dining room on the main level.”

My ears perk up at this news.

He didn’t lie. He kept his promise.

The door is unlocked. My plan is coming together.

I stretch my arms over my head, preparing myself for the task ahead. Get the lay of the land and make a plan.

Pushing off the soft, pillow-like mattress, I step down onto the plush area rug that sits beneath the massive bed. The creamy white comforter slips away from my body, and even though it’s summer, I feel the chill from the air conditioner hit the exposed skin not covered by my pajamas.

At least he had the decency to provide me with acceptable clothes. This set of buttery cotton button-down sleep shirt and shorts is to die for. I’d never admit it out loud, but in any other circumstance, I’d love to stay at a place like this as a guest. It reminds me of a fancy hotel. One I haven’t been able to afford—and likely won’t for some time.

With Gideon’s words filtering through my brain, the idea of freedom has my feet moving toward the door. My steps are slow and steady as I walk on my tiptoes. It takes me longer than it should, but I’m afraid if I move too fast, everything will come crashing down around me. That it will all end up being a dream, and freedom won’t be beyond the door.

When I get to the large and heavy wood frame, I tentatively reach my hand out and grab the knob. The cold of the brass sends a shiver up my spine. I swear my heart beats faster as I turn and pull. No resistance is met as it swings open.

A long, drawn-out exhale escapes my mouth. It feels like I haven't been able to breathe since I got here, not that everything is perfect. Obviously, I'm still stuck here, but at least I can see a glimmer of hope. My initial instinct is to run as soon as I see the open hallway, but I know I won't get far.

I don't know the layout of this fortress. I need to take the next few days to explore and investigate the best way out of this place. To glean as much information about the danger that awaits me out there.

Escaping is one thing, but I also need a plan to keep whoever is after me off my tracks.

I'll call Matt. He'll know what to do.

Stepping back into the room, I quickly throw on clothes. I don't even bother to hide from the cameras. What's the use? At this point, he's seen everything there is to see.

I'm not sure if there's volume to the intercom. Can I speak to him? Will he hear me even if he's not currently watching? I'm banking that between the speaker and the camera, Gideon is, at the very least, listening. If he's going to take away my privacy, I'm going to mess with him.

"Enjoy the show?" I sing-song. "You can look, but you'll never touch, asshole." Swinging my hips, I make my way out of the room, but not before flipping the camera the bird over my head.

He better have caught that because I mean what I said. No matter what his plans are for me, if he tries to touch me, I'll kill him.

Somehow, I'll find a way. I'd rather die than ever be touched by that man. When I leave here, I'll never see him again. Well, maybe once the bastard gets himself arrested for kidnapping—or worse—he'll see me because I will testify to put him behind bars in a second.

For Roman.

I'll be the girl sitting behind the glass with a phone in my hand, talking to him in the prison he'll find himself locked up in.

That's where I'll get my answers. I can ask him about Roman's part in this world of drugs and God knows what else. I need the closure.

I could do it now, but the idea of being close to him scares me. Not because I think he'll hurt me but because I'm afraid of the way he looks at me.

He stares at me like he's intrigued. Like he wants to unravel my secrets. And I'm scared of what that will mean.

It's better I hold off on the questioning.

I'll stay as far away as possible.

As I step out into the hall, I take my time roaming the space. The place is beautifully decorated. You can tell a woman helped with all the details. It's masculine but with a feminine touch to not make it feel sterile or cold. Expensive but tasteful artwork covers the gray walls.

My eyes travel over every nook and cranny visible to the eye as I gather my own intel. By the time I make it to the grand staircase, I realize my escape won't be easy. Not unless I have free rein outside. There's literally nowhere to hide. I can run, but his goons will find me.

He'll find me.

I turn the corner once I get to the bottom of the stairs, in search of the dining room, when I walk straight into a hard wall. My hands thrust out to catch myself and land on a firm chest.

*Okay. Not a wall.*

My head tilts up, and my breath catches. The hard body beneath my hand belongs to Gideon. Our eyes lock, and I slowly let out the breath I'm holding.

"You need to be more careful where you walk, firefly." His voice is buttery smooth. Decadent. My body shivers at the same time my face heats.

Is it hot in here?

His full mouth tips into a smirk, and any lust that was building is doused by the nickname and the cocky attitude attached to it.

I might hate him.

But I really hate the way I react to him more.

"Hungry?"

"No," I snap.

Jeez, Sasha. Acting like a petulant child is not part of the plan. It's only been a few minutes, and you're already deviating from the course. Typical.

If my behavior isn't bad enough, my stomach chooses that moment to argue with me, and he doesn't miss it. He chuckles, and I want to die.

"Come. I'll show you to the dining room," he says, placing his hand beneath my elbow to usher me toward sustenance, but I won't go that willingly.

I need to set boundaries. To stay strong.

My feet stay rooted in place. "I'd rather eat alone."

"That's not going to happen, firefly."

I yank my arm out of his grip. "I told you to stop calling me that."

He completely ignores me. "What kind of host would I be if I let you eat

alone two times within twenty-four hours?”

“The kind of host I’d prefer,” I say, glaring up at him.

He takes a step back, staring at me a little too intently. “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way, Sasha. Your choice,” he says, inspecting his hand. “But I’ll warn you, I’m not someone you want to make an enemy of. Especially considering I’m only trying to help you. To keep you safe.”

I blow out a harsh breath, realizing by the second that all my plans of escape are even less likely. Worse than that, do I really want to make more enemies?

At least he’s one you know and can avoid. Maybe.

“Fine. I’ll eat, but then you need to show me around. The place is a maze.”

He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth, looking way too amused. “And we wouldn’t want you getting lost.”

That’s exactly what I plan on doing. Except I won’t be lost. I’ll be hiding.



# GIDEON

FROM ACROSS THE TABLE, I watch as she takes a bite out of the croissant. I didn't know what she'd like to eat, so I had my chef create a buffet for her. Turns out it was all a waste since all she's eaten is one croissant. My men will be happy. Her eating habits will allow them to feast.

When her plate is clean, she looks up, and our gazes lock. We sit in silence for several tense seconds, neither saying a word. I wait. She'll eventually give in.

This is all a game. One I intend to win.

"I'm ready for my tour now," she says, dropping her eyes to her lap.

"You sure you don't want to eat more?" I gesture to the long table packed with food behind her.

"I'm not very hungry."

"In that case..." I push off my chair to stand. The legs scraping against the hardwood floor is jarring amongst the silence.

My house is large, and the space echoes. Sasha's head jerks up, clearly startled. I'm sure this place and the quiet are all new to her. "After you."

Sasha still looks rattled. The sounds of the city have been her background noise all these years. She's probably not used to the silence. My home is tucked away on several acres, far outside the city limits.

For privacy. For safety.

Although I employ a lot of men, most are stationed downstairs in the security room, and the rest are neither seen nor heard as they make their rounds. I also informed them to keep out of sight on purpose. I want her to have a false sense of freedom. I want her to try to escape so I can put my plan



into action.

When she doesn't move to stand right away, I cock my head to the side. "Well...I don't have all day. Let's do this." She jumps to her feet and moves around the table, closer to me but still keeping her distance. I have the desire to move closer to her. To position myself until she's right beside me.

There's something about Sasha that I can't shake.

Maybe it's the haunting look in her eyes. Maybe it's the connection to her brother. But I want her close.

Without another thought, I step into her space, not allowing her to move away. When I place my hand on the small of her back, I feel her body quiver beneath my touch.

It's not out of fear. Her eyes are closed, and her bottom lip is between her teeth.

I affect her.

Good.

I lead her out of the dining room and into the hallway. She doesn't step away. She allows me to direct her.

Interesting.

My little firefly is playing my game. She's walking right into my hands. Gliding straight into the gilded cage that I've left wide open.

I can't wait until I catch her.

"This way is the library," I say, smothering my smile so that she doesn't see I'm on to her.

She peeks her head in, and I take a step away from her. I want to watch her reaction. Will she head straight to the books? That's what most people would do.

Not her, though.

She does move in the direction of the shelf, but her gaze isn't on the books.

Nope.

It's on the window. The vast backyard is visible from this room. She's forming her plans as we speak, and the devil within is waking up at the idea of what that'll mean for me.

"Like what you see?" I stride over to her.

She shrugs. "It's beautiful. All the trees and flowers. It's well kept."

She has no fucking clue.

She isn't seeing the rolling hills or the well-trimmed bushes.

She sees an escape route.

I won't tell her the whole property is walled off.

Nor will I tell her beyond the hills is a small pond, then marshes. Marshes that are too thick to cut through.

It's why I bought the land.

No one can get in...

Or out.

"Can we go out there?" she asks.

I hold back my chuckle. "You aren't a prisoner here. I told you, you have free rein."

"Then why..."

"I told you before, your brother was murdered, Sasha. Whoever killed him wants you dead too. You're in danger, and Roman made me promise to protect you. I know it's not ideal, but this is the only place I can keep you safe. Your apartment is a logistical nightmare."

Her forehead furrows, and I can tell she wants to ask questions.

"I'm doing this for your safety," I repeat, hoping to drive the point home.

Her lips form a thin line as she considers my words. "But for how long?"

Fair question. And one I don't have an answer to. My men are still trying to work out who's behind this. When they do, I'll kill them. To keep my word.

*To keep her safe.*

"For however long it takes," I vow, staring directly into her deep eyes. "Come on." I pivot toward the door. "Let me take you outside. Let me show you the grounds. Once you see the place, you'll know this is no prison. Not for you."

"What am I supposed to believe? Huh?" Her cheeks suck in like she sucked a lemon. She doesn't believe me and is having a hard time not launching a verbal attack on me.

I shrug one shoulder. "Think of it as a short getaway."

"You can't possibly believe that I'll consider this a vacation."

My eyebrow lifts in reaction to her snippy demeanor. I like it. The fire.

"Not just a vacation, firefly. An all-expenses-paid one."

She huffs. "I need to work."

"Don't worry about that. I'll handle everything." I already have. Her rent is paid for the rest of the year. Her debt is cleared. She doesn't need to know that. Not yet.

“What does that mean?” she asks.

I ignore her. Too much information is never a good thing, especially in this case. She’d fight against the gesture, not understanding that it was the least I could do.

When we reach the large glass door that leads outside, I push it open, allowing the fresh air to filter in around us.

What Sasha doesn’t know is that all the doors have actual biometric locks on them. But this morning, to fuel my plan of forcing her deeper into my domain, I had them shut off.

I allow her to head outside first, giving her space and allowing her to take in the large property.

Her eyes are wide and round as she spins in a circle.

*Not feeling so sure now, are you, Sasha.*

She takes a few tentative steps toward the stairs that lead down a short path to the pool. I close the door behind us and follow her, keeping a few feet between us. Allowing her the false notion that I’m not worried she will leave.

Which is the understatement of the year. I hope she does. I welcome it.

I want her sequestered in my room. Completely at my mercy.

Imagining her spread out on my bed, ready and eager for all I have to give, has my dick growing in my pants. I’m so engrossed in the fantasy that I allow her to get quite a bit ahead of me. She’s no longer in my view.

Picking up my pace, I take the bend that leads toward the pool, and in the distance, I hear sounds. I’m practically jogging when I’m able to make out voices. Sasha’s and a man...

Who’s talking to her? All of my men—

Fuck.

Not all of my men have been warned about keeping their distance. Today, a few of the guys rotate in. One, in particular, is newer and outside doing the rounds. He was here when she arrived, but I never got to speak to him. He wasn’t brought up to speed on our guest.

When I make it to them, Sean, the asshole, is standing way too close. He’s leaning down toward her, a predatory fucking smile plastered all over his smarmy face. His arm lifts, and his hand touches her cheek.

I lose my shit.

All I see is red.

My hands are fisted by my sides as I stalk forward like a panther. Before Sean knows what’s happening, I attack. My fingers wrap around his throat,

and I squeeze with so much force I'm lucky I didn't crush his larynx.

Sean gags, and his eyes are wide. He's panicking. Good.

"You don't look at her. Do you fucking understand?" His lips are turning purple as his hands try and fail to disengage mine. "Touch her again, and you will die. Keep your head down and hands away." His eyes roll back into his head, and I know I only have seconds before he loses consciousness—or worse. "Do you understand?"

He tries to bob his head, but with my grip on him, it's more like a twitch.

I drop him, satisfied that everyone will now know, without a shadow of a doubt, where I stand on this matter.

No one touches Sasha.

No one but me.

I take Sasha by the arm and drag her back into the house. It's not her fault, but my mood is soured, and I need to get away from Sean before I decide to finish him.

"I...wait—" she says, but I cut her off abruptly.

My rage is barely contained. I'm a boiling pot of water about to burst over the edge.

"The tour will have to continue another time, Sasha." I continue to pull, never stopping or looking at her.

She jerks hard, trying to get out of my hold, so I grip her harder.

"Gideon, stop," she bellows. "You're hurting me."

This gets my attention, and I come to a halt, loosening my grip and turning toward her. She rubs at her wrist, and I see the angry red marks I caused.

Shit.

I run my hands back through my hair, trying to calm down further.

"Listen...I'm sorry. I just wanted to get you to safety," I say, and her eyes narrow.

"From your men? Isn't that why I'm here? Because it's safe?"

She throws the words like accusations. A sign that, due to my reaction to Sean, my own men can't be trusted, and this place isn't as safe as I promised.

I move to her side and grab her by the elbow, careful not to be too rough but hoping my facial expression says not to fight me. She allows me to steer her through the house until we're walking into the movie room.

In the doorway, I stop short and turn around quickly, stepping toward her until her back hits the wall. We're close enough that I can smell the lingering

scent of her body wash.

Fresh flowers. Lilac, to be specific.

A warm spring day.

*What the fuck?*

Where are these thoughts coming from? Someone needs to grab my gun and shoot me. Put an end to this nonsense.

I'm losing my goddamn mind. This woman undoes me. Makes me crazy. I almost take off for my office with the intention of drowning myself in vodka. The utter bullshit running through my brain is more than I can handle. Fresh flowers? Fucking spring day?

I push it away because there are things that need to be said before I take a time-out from her. To calm down. To pull my shit together.

Seeing him touch her drove me insane, but I can't let her see that. Even if it's the truth.

She's mine to touch.

Only mine.

Sasha stands tense next to me, clearly shaken by the way I've acted, but I'm not going to apologize or back down.

"I made a promise, Sasha. Nobody touches you, or I'll kill them. I won't apologize for keeping you safe."

I lean in until we're a breath apart. She has nowhere to go. She's a trapped firefly in a glass jar.

I lift my hand up and tilt her chin so our gazes meet. Her pupils are dilated. My eyes trail down to her mouth. Her tongue darts out, trailing a line across the bottom lip. I want to close the distance and take that lip into my mouth. But I don't. Not yet. I step back, putting distance between us.

Sasha's throat bobs, and her eyes close. I wonder what she's thinking, but realize that right now, I just need distance.

"Now be a good girl and make yourself at home." My hand lifts, and my finger touches a loose strand of hair. "I have some things to take care of, but I'll find you later."

Her eyelashes flutter, and her chest rises and falls. "Oh...okay. I'll just... stay here?"

I smile. "You can go wherever you want, Sasha. But there are plenty of movies in here to keep you entertained if you'd like. I'll check back in here later."

I toy with the ends of her hair, eyes never wavering from hers. She

shivers beneath my touch, and her cheeks flush. Is it from my touch or my words? Either way, she seems off balance for the first time. The anger and fight dissipate, giving way to something else. Something...sensual.

She's turned on.

Now, this I can work with.



# SASHA

HIS BODY IS TOO CLOSE.

I can barely breathe.

The steady rhythm of Gideon's chest rising and falling is hypnotic, but it's the way he's looking at me that has me lost in a trance.

His gaze is unwavering. Crystal-blue eyes, clear as a tropical ocean, keep me entranced.

Then he speaks, and my knees wobble.

"Be a good girl and make yourself at home." I can barely stand. My cheeks warm to inferno levels. I feel like I'm on fire. And by the way his lip tips up, he sees it too.

Luckily for me, he can't see the other reactions my body is having to his words.

The way my heart beats a bit faster in my chest. Fluttering like an excited swarm of bees who just found a new flower fully bloomed. The way my face warms as he praises me. Hopefully, he doesn't see how my body trembles. Or worse, how my nipples pebble against my top.

A part of me wonders if I should just listen to him. Make myself comfortable and choose a movie to get lost in. I can always search for points of exit later. I need my strength after all, and maybe a day of relaxation would do me well.

More than anything, I want to talk to him. To dig deeper into this man and his empire.

I know I said I'd wait for him to be arrested before I asked about my brother, but I can't help it. The urge to speak when his guard seems to be



down and his temper back under control is intense.

“I’ll let you get to your work and keep myself busy, but...”

His finger plays with the one loose strand of hair that fell in front of my face, and I’m momentarily distracted by the tenderness of the action.

I want him to stop, but at the same time, I don’t.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I hate the way I react to the gesture, but it’s like I’m trapped in quicksand. The harder I want to pull away, the more encased I become.

I let out a breath, and his eyes drop to my mouth. Nervously, I bite my lip, a habit I’ve always had. He tracks the movement, and I don’t miss how his throat bobs.

My heart is racing, but I keep still, willing myself to remain calm.

“But?” he prompts, and for a moment, I’m not sure what he’s asking me.

“Oh, I...wanted to talk.” The words are awkward and unsure, and I’m internally kicking myself.

“Is that so? I didn’t think you wanted to be anywhere near me,” he says with a smirk that I want to wipe off his handsome face.

“Forget it. I don’t want to talk to you,” I huff, and he full-on smiles.

“What, pray tell, did you want to talk about?”

I wait a beat, trying to determine whether I should refuse to answer and drop the subject for now, but my hesitation doesn’t last, and the words are blurted out without another thought.

“My brother. I still want to talk about Roman. That hasn’t changed.”

At my words, his hand drops, and he takes a step back. My irrational mind misses the loss at once. I want to step forward and close the space, but I shut that thought down as fast as it pops into my head.

Jeez, Sasha, is it possible to get Stockholm syndrome in one day?

He’s not kidnapping you, you idiot.

Well, not technically. But he’s not allowing me to leave, either.

My internal monologue has me questioning my damn sanity. I’m losing my grip, which doesn’t bode well for trying to escape. I need my wits about me.

“I don’t want to talk about Roman,” he grits out.

His swift denial rubs me the wrong way, and anger rises. How dare he keep me here and refuse to give me more answers? He claims I’m not a prisoner, but his actions say otherwise.

I take a deep breath and temper the rising anger bubbling inside me that’s

threatening to explode.

Gideon needs to think I'm agreeable. That way, he lets his guard down.

I'm probably being stupid for escaping, but no way am I blindly giving up my life without answers.

I open my mouth and close it. I'm a fish out of water. A guppy trying to figure out how to breathe in this situation.

The problem is that despite my anger, I'm turned on.

I hate it.

Hate *him*.

I don't understand why my body betrays me when he's around. This is the guy who turned my brother into a degenerate. He broke apart the one piece of my family that I had left. He's the devil, not my savior, and I need to remember that. Even if my actions, for now, don't show it.

"Fine. But please, can you tell me what, if anything, you've learned about who's after me?"

He sighs, head rolling back on his shoulders. "We don't know much, Sasha. Whoever it is, they're keeping a low profile. My guys are searching day and night, but so far, nothing substantial has come up."

"Roman said they were looking for me?" I ask to keep him talking.

"Yes. He didn't tell me who or why they were coming for you, but he was adamant that I look after you. So that's what I'm doing."

I nod, new thoughts circling in my mind. Thoughts about my brother and what the hell he could've been involved in.

*Roman, what were you mixed up in?*

What could be so bad that even this man doesn't know? Better yet, what could they possibly want from me?

With every question and every minute that goes by, my dreams of Juilliard diminish, and it makes me want to throw up. It's the one thing in my life I've always wanted. The thing I've worked toward forever, and it's being taken away from me every second I stay here.

I need to be free. Free to live my life. Free to pursue my dreams.

Freedom is the key.



## SASHA

WHEN GIDEON LEFT, I'm sure he expected me to relax. To keep myself entertained by watching a movie. Maybe even curl up and read a good book.

That's exactly the opposite of what I want to do.

This place is uncharted territory, and I want to explore it. It's necessary to forge a plan of escape should I need to run at a moment's notice.

The fact that I can't follow directions has always been a problem for me, mostly because my impatience has a tendency to get me caught. Because of that, I wait a few minutes before sneaking out of the room.

My shoes clap against the marble floor. Something about it is both calming and eerie.

Like rain on a windowpane or leaves rustling in the wind.

The hairs lift on the back of my neck.

With every step I take, I could be caught. It's a gentle reminder that people could be watching even though I can't see them, and I best remember that while moving through the place.

I peer around a corner, turning left and right, scanning the area for anyone. When the coast is clear, I step out and walk briskly through the wide-open foyer, heading toward the back of the place.

I'm not even a few steps away from a deserted corridor when a woman rounds the corner from the opposite hall. She's dressed in an all-black ensemble. Simple and elegant, with a clean and classic look. It consists of a black skirt, black blouse, and an apron. Taking her in, I notice that she has a rag in her hand.

She must be one of the maids.

“Hi, I’m Sasha.” My voice doesn’t even sound like my own. The tone and pitch are a higher octave than is normal for me, but she wouldn’t know that.

A second passes before her lips part ever so slightly, a shy smile now on her face.

I wonder if anyone here has ever spoken to her? Or if she’s seen and not heard around this place. In a mansion like this one, the maid is probably invisible to those around her.

She cleans.

That’s it, and because of this, she’s also probably the perfect person to ask questions.

She stares at me for a moment, her eyebrows pinching together. I can almost see the moment in which she decides to acknowledge me as she lets out a soft and barely audible sigh.

“Hello,” she mumbles, but doesn’t offer anything else.

A house this big probably has many maids. Gideon most likely employs an army of people to run this place.

A luxury that is foreign to me.

There was a show on television that portrayed the staff as secret spies for their boss.

Is this woman a spy for Gideon?

I smile broadly at her.

Kill her with kindness.

It’s not that I think she would run off and tell Gideon I’m walking around since I supposedly have free rein, but I still don’t want to throw off any red flags.

When she doesn’t offer her name, I know the chance of getting any information freely from her is unlikely. So, I pivot my strategy and just come out and ask her where the exits are.

“I was in the middle of a tour that was cut short. I never got to see everything.” I smile, pushing down the anxiety building with every second she remains quiet and motionless.

Good grief, this world I’ve been thrust into is bizarre.

“Can you tell me which way to the backyard? I’m all turned around.” I keep my voice soft and sweet.

She spins in a circle, lifting her hand to point in the direction of a glass door leading to another section of the mansion. “Right this way.”

Smiling brightly, I walk to the room she pointed to, and when I step

inside, I'm met with floor-to-ceiling windows. It feels like I'm transported into a secret garden.

In the center of the room are couches and a collection of beautiful green trees, all enclosed within the glass walls. Never in my life have I seen a home with its own atrium. Then again, I've never seen a manor like this before.

Inhaling deeply, I breathe in the scent of moss after an early rain. The smell of damp earth and fresh foliage wash over me, creating a peaceful moment that reminds me of the beauty of nature.

It makes me feel as though I can reach out and touch it. Running my hand over morning dew that clings to fresh fallen leaves.

"Does that go outside?" I ask, despite knowing the question is dumb. The real question is: Is there a lock on the door, an alarm, or a guard dog...but for obvious reasons, I can't ask any of that.

"It does, miss. If that's all—"

With my gaze still fixed outside, I cock my head toward the door. "Is it usually quiet outside?"

Real question: Are guards roaming around out there?

"I'm not sure, miss. My work keeps me inside."

Turning back to face her, I take in her posture. Her shoulders are slumped forward, and her eyes are downcast.

She's scared to death of something.

*Or someone.*

I nod, even though she doesn't see it. She's the first of what is likely to be several dead ends. Eventually, I'll stumble across something. I have to have hope.

I'm about to step away from her when her hand reaches out, stopping me. I turn to look at her over my shoulder.

What I see takes my breath away.

Chocolate brown eyes meet mine, and the haunted look reflecting back at me reminds me of a skittish child afraid there is a monster under their bed. Her gaze darts to the door.

Is she looking for someone? Her jaw trembles, and she steps forward until our shoulders line up next to each other, then she leans in. Her voice is barely above a whisper.

"They're bad men."

I open my mouth to ask her what she means, but before I can, she shakes her head frantically and dashes away.

*What was that?*

Her words bounce around like a ball in a pinball machine.

*“They’re bad men.”*

Is it more than just the drugs? Did the maid mean something else? Was she hurt? An image of her being cornered in the hallway on my first day here flashes in my mind. The guard’s threatening pose and her cowering beside him.

Goose bumps break out on my arms as I pace back and forth like a caged lion.

*“They’re bad men.”*

I knew that, so why does what she says make me feel even more unsettled? My heart and my mind race.

I need to get out of here.

I weave through the atrium until I make my way over to the door, lift my hand, and fiddle with the handle.

With the amount of security Gideon appears to have around here, I don’t expect it to open. I’m surprised when it does.

It probably doesn’t bode well for my escape. If he’s not concerned about the doors being unlocked, it probably means he has plenty of security on the ground.

Maybe I should just ask him again if I can go back to my life. Would he really object?

*Yes.*

I can tell him I’ll take the fate of my life into my own hands; how can he argue with that?

*He will.*

Gideon is too stubborn and too caught up in his promise to Roman to listen to reason. I’m a grown-ass woman, but that doesn’t mean anything to a burly alpha male whose life revolves around ordering people around and killing them when they don’t listen.

“Ugh,” I groan into the silence of the room.

I don’t need protecting.

Especially when he’s not even sure who the enemy is or why they want me. Roman was an unreliable drug addict. How can he take his word seriously? There might not even be a true threat to my life, and here we are, wasting time and resources for nothing.

I take a deep breath and prepare myself to see my mission through. Get

the lay of the land and form a plan in case Gideon decides to keep me here forever.

As I take a step outside, I can't help but admire what a beautiful day it is. The warm air caresses my exposed skin, warming me from the outside in. It's the first time I've felt anything but cold since arriving at this sterile place.

The path away from the manor consists of small stone pavers stretching out to form a walkway. Unfortunately, the full path is blocked from my view, making it difficult to know what lies beyond. Regardless, I follow it around the corner, prepared to come face-to-face with any number of unsavory characters.

Or maybe I'm just being dramatic, and it will lead me to the pool.

When I come to the end, I realize it doesn't.

This path leads to an open field of grass. Rolling hills spread as far as the eye can see. In the distance, large pine trees act as a natural fence to whatever is beyond them. A neighbor, perhaps?

I wonder how far it is.

How long would it take me to get there? Hopefully, beyond the tree coverage is a road or clearing.

It's not going to be easy, but it's a risk I'm willing to take.

A part of me knows I'm actually the one being stubborn.

He hasn't hurt me. Hell, he's even offering to protect me.

Knowing who he is and what he does, I don't want anything to do with him. Help or otherwise. I can't sit and wait until the day he deems it safe. I have a life. Dreams. My subconscious screams for me to run, and if I've learned one thing through the years on my own, it's to trust my instincts.

After I grab some provisions, I'll make my escape.

Turning back, I retrace my tracks, making my way back to the atrium doors and into the hallway to cover more ground.

The atrium is definitely the easiest way out, but I'm sure there's another exit, and I intend to find it.

The dark hallways have me confused as to where I am at any given point, but eventually, I find my way to another door. This one is behind the kitchen.

It's probably for the staff to use to gain entry to the house. Which means it will likely lead to the driveway.

Driveways lead to roads, which will be the best and most efficient way out.

I vaguely remember when they removed the bag from my head that the



driveway had trees lining it. If I can leave and camouflage myself amongst the tree trunks, I should be able to make it to the street.

Yep, that's what I'm going to do.

A throat clears from behind me, and I practically jump out of my skin.

"Shit," I pivot. "You scared me." I lift my hand and place it over my racing heart as I watch Gideon stride into the room.

Oh God.

Being near him makes my hands feel clammy, and I swear my legs quake just at the sight of him.

I'm not sure what to say. My mind conjures up a million lame excuses about what I'm doing, but before I can offer any of them, Gideon takes a step closer to me, and I freeze.

His proximity sucks the air out of the room, and I feel like I can't breathe. He's so tall and intimidating. So damn handsome, and I hate that I think so.

Gideon's eyes are narrowed, and I can't tell if he's about to smile or growl.

He's a conundrum.

On the outside, I hopefully look calm and collected. My brain is firing off orders to take a deep inhale, stay calm, and wait for him to speak.

Despite the internal commentary, my heart jackhammers in my chest.

"Hungry?" he asks, and my nose scrunches in confusion.

"What?"

"Are. You. Hungry?" he repeats, and my head shakes back and forth.

"No." It's all I can muster with him so close.

"Then what are you doing in the kitchen?" The tone of his voice is playful, but it makes me shiver.

"I-I was just looking for something to eat, obviously."

He tilts his head to the side, watching me. "You just said you weren't hungry."

"Sorry, you caught me off guard. I meant yes." I'm practically falling over myself, trying to correct my epic errors. "Yes. I'm hungry."

A smirk spreads across his face, and I want to smack him. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," I say with a bite.

"Well then, you probably would like to know where the fridge is...or maybe the pantry?"

Dumb. Dumb. Dumb, Sasha.

I allow myself to look around the space, and that's when I notice that I

am nowhere near either one of them, making my excuse just that—an excuse.

“What are you really doing here, firefly?”

I cross my arms over my chest in a protective move. “I’m hungry.” I huff.

“Then let me make you something to eat,” he says, making his way toward the refrigerator.

“What? Why?” My head shakes back and forth, and he stops to look back toward me.

“You said you were hungry, and the chef isn’t here.” He shrugs. “So that leaves me to ensure my guest is fed.”

He’s trying to call me on my bluff. He knows it. I know it.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I take a step back, putting distance between us. “I’m fine. You’d probably poison me anyway.”

“Why would I go through all the trouble to keep you safe just to turn around and try to kill you?”

“Why do you kill people, period?” I snap, earning an eye roll from him.

“I’ll make us sandwiches; that’s easy,” he says, not bothering to reply to my accusation.

“I don’t need anything from you. And I definitely don’t need your protection. All of this”—I wave my hand in the air around me—“is too much. Let me go home.”

“We’ve been over this. I’m starting to sound like a broken record. Dangerous men want you dead. That’s not going to happen. I promised your brother I’d protect you, and until I find out what they want from you and why, I’m keeping you here. Safe.”

“No need. I absolve you of any responsibility. I’ll just get my things...” I turn to walk away, but Gideon reaches out, his hand wrapping gently around my bicep. It’s a soft hold, but it feels heavier as I turn to look at him over my shoulder. His gaze is steady and hard.

“I made a promise, and I keep my promises. I *will* keep you safe, firefly.”

My shoulders straighten, and I call on any courage I possess to plead my case.

“Am I to be kept as a prisoner as some misguided attempt to honor the request of a man who didn’t even care about me?” I hiss back. “Because he didn’t. Roman used me time and time again.”

“If keeping you a prisoner is the only way you will stay, then yes. So be it.” He chews on his cheek, and the move is somehow boyish and sexy all at once.

From where I'm standing, I glower at him, but I can't think of a response. Truth be told, I can't think over the pounding of my heart. It beats so hard and fast; I wonder if he can hear it.

Can he see the way he's affecting me?

If so, it's not noticeable, as he's too wrapped up in what he's doing.

What is he doing?

That's when I notice that while I was having an inner crisis over how affected I am by him, he was grabbing bread.

He's making me a sandwich.

Despite everything, he's feeding me.

It makes no sense. Is this who he is? A man who makes me a sandwich because I said I was hungry.

This man doesn't match the version I have in my head.

"Here." His voice breaks through my inner rambling.

"I don't want it." *Petty on aisle one.* I do want it. I just don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I do.

"Have it your way." He moves to pick up the plate.

"Wait," I say, my stomach rumbling. Blue eyes meet mine, the expression unreadable. He watches me, his gaze trailing over my face, lingering on my lips, and making my cheeks warm.

I drop my gaze, needing to break the connection. When I do, I notice the smirk, and that he's lifting *my* sandwich to his mouth.

Then he takes a bite and swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing with the movement.

"You're intolerable."

"Call me whatever you want, firefly. As long as you're safe, I'll be whatever you want me to be." He places the plate on the counter in front of me, a small piece missing from the sandwich, and licks his lips. I follow the movement, heat pooling in my stomach. "Even if that makes you my prisoner. Tomorrow..."

"Yes?"

"Eat a bigger breakfast." Then Gideon strides out of the room, sucking out the air with him.

I stare toward the empty space as my heart hammers in my chest, and my face warms. I'm tingling with emotions, like a live wire that needs to be shut off.



# SASHA

SOME DAYS ARE GOOD DAYS, and others are bad. Today is the latter.

My head swirls with dark thoughts. My hands twitch, and I can feel the anger bubbling through me like molten lava.

Why?

That's an easy one. I've been here for a week, and he's avoiding me.

I still have questions, and I know he has the answers.

Maybe he doesn't know who wants me dead, but he certainly knows about my brother's life before he was killed. Roman wanting to keep me safe doesn't mesh with the last few years of his life. Since Gideon spent those years working with him, I'm hoping to reconcile the two versions of a man that I clearly didn't know.

That's the only thought I have as I'm storming through the hallway from the dining room to his office.

This morning, I assumed that I could speak with him over breakfast, but once again, he's left me alone again.

To fend for myself.

Now, while this idea holds merit, it doesn't work for me when I'm trying to get to the bottom of why I'm here.

What threat could be so big to warrant me having to live here?

I'm fuming as I make my approach, my heart pounding with rage. Hell, my whole body is shaking, the anger coursing through my veins like lightning. I am a storm of emotion, gathering strength with every step that brings me closer to confrontation.

When I reach his office, I throw the door open and charge inside.

There he is.

Lounged behind his desk, radiating the aura of a twisted tyrant. A cruel king commanding a sinful crown.

The interior of his office is as grand as the rest of his home.

It's not what I expect from him. He seems like the type of man who would have a contemporary home. One with gray walls, metal appliances, and slate floors.

*A bachelor's pad.*

This place is the opposite. It's filled with mahogany furniture, rich tapestries, and an unlit fireplace.

The tension in the air is electric, charged with the energy of my fury.

A tightness spreads within my chest. It wells up from somewhere deep inside me and takes over my entire body.

I clench my fists and grit my teeth, trying to control it, but it's too strong. The anger is a hurricane; it swirls and whips around inside me until I can't think or breathe or do anything but lash out.

"I want answers."

He leans forward in his chair. Calm and collected. There is no visible reaction to me barging in.

"Sasha, to what do I owe this pleasant surprise?" Gideon's stormy blue eyes sparkle mischievously, like a summer sky twinkling with tiny stars.

It feels like I've just walked into a trap, but even if I am, I won't back down, no matter what he throws my way.

"As I said when I first walked into the room, I want some answers. I've been here for a week, and you haven't told me anything."

"There is still nothing to tell." My breath comes in short bursts at his response.

"Is there something bothering you?" he says in a silky voice.

I take a step closer to him, my anger building by the second. "Can't you stop for a minute and be real?"

"Calm down."

"Calm down? Seriously. I'm here, and you're avoiding me. I want to talk." He pushes up from his chair, his steps eating up the distance between us.

Beside him, I feel so small. "Is that what the problem is?" Another step closer.

My butt hits the edge of his desk as he cages me in.

“Do you miss me? Do you want my company?”

“What? No.” My head shakes. “That’s not it at all.”

“Then what?” He reaches forward, his hand brushing a fallen strand of hair behind my ears.

There is no stopping the way my body trembles. “Don’t touch me,” I hiss.

Gideon raises his hands in mock surrender, but he’s not fooling anyone. He’s loving this game he’s playing.

“This is all your fault.” I push past him and start to pace the room.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” I throw my hands up in the air. “My brother would still be alive if it weren’t for you. I wouldn’t have to live here if it weren’t for you.”

When he doesn’t answer, I halt my stride and turn to face him. He’s staring at me, his face emotionless. “I had nothing to do with your brother’s death.”

My head sags forward. “Then why won’t you tell me everything?”

“And what do you want me to tell you?” He raises an eyebrow, his lips twisting into a smirk.

“Something. Anything.”

“Do you want me to tell you about how I found your brother and why this threat is real—” His words tighten around me like a boa constrictor, but I shake them off, pushing my shoulders back, not allowing my fear to take over.

“I just want to know how he came to work with you. How did you allow him to become the monster he became? You want me to believe he cared about me? Then tell me how you know this? Did he talk about me? Did he tell you why he abandoned me? Why he chose drugs over me? But you know what? You wouldn’t tell me anyway. This was a big waste of time.” My jaw trembles.

Tears form right under my skin, ready to burst out. I can feel them trembling inside me like a storm cloud about to downpour.

My throat feels tight. Filled with words that I can’t say. They pile up inside me, wanting to explode, but I won’t let them.

I refuse to cry—not in front of him, no matter how much I may want to. Instead, I bite my lip and then turn on my heels and walk away.

My mind races in random directions. I can’t keep track of my thoughts;

they come and go in flashes faster than I can blink an eye.

The world around me swirls, and the air feels heavy, like I'm strolling through fog. The type that is so thick you can't see your own hand.

I'm so confused.

Gideon says he's protecting me.

He implied that what happened to my brother should be a big enough warning to stay here without complaint.

But I cannot believe him.

For the last four years of my life, I have relied on only myself. Trusting someone else is hard for me.

Couple that with the maid's warning, and I don't think I can.

Approaching Gideon was a waste. What was I hoping to gain?

Insight? From a drug lord.

*Real smart, Sasha.*

But back to the plan at hand: finding a way out of this place.





# SASHA

ANOTHER NIGHT.

Another day.

At this point, I'm starting to feel like a hamster stuck in a cage, running on the damn wheel, but never getting anywhere.

It's infuriating.

My head tips, and I glare at the smoke detector. "Today, I'm going to search around your mansion," I tell the stupid little piece of plastic. The blue light taunted me with its presence. "Yep. Hope you have nothing to hide. Because if you do, I'll find it, and then you're fucked."

If anyone is watching me, they probably think I'm nuts.

I don't care, though. I'm on a mission.

Throwing open the door, I trudge down the hallway.

This time I take a different path, heading toward the east wing, but instead of staying on the main level, I take the back staircase.

What's Gideon hiding down here?

*Most likely a dead body.*

Unlike the rest of the manor, this section is poorly lit.

The darkness is oppressive and all-encompassing.

It reminds me of being a kid, when Roman and I would play, and he would throw a blanket over my head. It always felt like it would smother me.

That's how I feel right now, drifting down this path.

Like I'm being suffocated.

Shadows loom, and the air is thick. I can almost feel the walls closing in.

With my luck, spikes will pop out. *This isn't a movie, Sasha.*

Still...

*Turn around, you idiot.*

No. It could lead to a way to escape.

I have to keep going.

Taking a deep breath, I forge ahead into the unknown. The darkness taunts me as I continue, but I refuse to give in to my fear. Instead, I hold my head high and keep walking, my eyes peeled for any sign of an exit or even evidence. I'm not opposed to getting this man arrested. This place might not be in Matt's jurisdiction, but I'm sure he can help me lock Gideon behind bars.

That would be fun.

Bet he'd look good in orange.

Enough about *him*. Back to my quest.

My path soon leads to an open room.

Dungeon.

There is no way to sugarcoat it.

*This exploration will not bode well for me.*

The walls are made of cold concrete, and in the corner, there are actual metal bars to hold someone.

Hell.

This is what I imagine hell looks like.

"What do we have here?" The voice comes from behind me. My breath comes out in a short gasp as I whirl around and am met with a shadow creeping out from behind the darkness.

It's the guard.

The one from the pool deck. The one who I saw in the hallway.

I take a step back, trying to distance myself from him.

"Looks like you made a wrong turn." He moves closer.

There is something sinister in his tone; he was the guard that corned the maid.

I remember seeing fear in her eyes. My heart starts pounding faster in my chest, squeezing and crushing until I can hardly breathe.

*They're bad men.*

Before I can think better of it, I take off past him, running back down the corridor, tripping, and falling forward.

Pain radiates down my leg. It feels like someone tore through me with a jagged knife.

*Shit. That hurts.*

Suddenly, out of nowhere, large hands grab me under my arms and lift me.

“Get off me!” My hands turn into fists, and I start to hit.

“Shh, it’s only me, firefly.”

The fight leaves my body. It’s only Gideon, and as much as I should fear him, at this moment, I don’t. He won’t hurt me.

But the guard...

I shiver.

“Are you okay?” His voice sounds velvety smooth yet edged in steel.

“I fell,” I respond matter-of-factly. Now that I know I’m safe, my fear has been replaced with a mix of embarrassment and anger.

“I see that, but what are you doing down here?”

I bite my lip, trying to think of a plausible answer. I can’t come right out and say I was trying to escape. “You said I had free rein.”

“That I did, but I didn’t think you would come here.”

“And where is here? Is that your dungeon? Is this where you keep your prisoners?” There’s a bite to my words, but he doesn’t acknowledge my comment. Rather, he places me on the ground, towering over me.

*Smart move, Sasha. Why don’t you piss off the ruthless drug dealer?*

*Not my finest hour.*

His gaze is dark, and I can’t read it. “Are you hurt?”

“I think I’m okay.” To prove this point, I move, transferring my weight from one foot to the other. Unfortunately, I realize my mistake too late, because before I can stop myself, I’m hissing in pain.

“Let’s get you back up to your room and look at your leg.”

“Okay...”

Gideon sweeps me into his arms, and for a moment, I consider objecting, but my leg does hurt. I’m pretty sure I’m bleeding, so instead, I just allow him to carry me down the hall and up the two flights of stairs.

It feels like I’m floating.

The whole way up, I bury my head in his chest.

I shouldn’t.

I know I shouldn’t.

But my ego is bruised, and I’m too tired not to relax into him.

He smells delicious, but I refrain from inhaling. It’s already humiliating enough that he not only caught me lurking, but I also don’t need to add that to

the growing list of things I have done today that I regret.

I should have just stayed in bed.

“I’ll be right back.” He places me down, and I nod as he leaves me alone with my thoughts.

Not a good thing if you ask me.

Now, without him here, I get to chastise myself.

I really am the biggest idiot ever. Who goes down a shady, dark path in an evil lair filled with criminals?

Me.

Apparently, that’s who.

Could this day get any worse?

A minute later, he returns. This time he’s carrying peroxide.

Great. Now he has to care for me too.

It’s not easy to hold on to hate when the dick is being so nice.

My hands are trembling as I brace myself for Gideon to clean out the cut. His touch is surprisingly gentle, but it’s the look in his eyes that is anything but.

They speak of need, lust, and desire.

I shiver.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just cold,” I mumble back, looking anywhere but at him. My gaze wanders around the room for something to focus on, because if I don’t, I might melt into a puddle as he takes care of me.

“Sorry about that.” His warm hands continue to touch me, and my breathing feels labored. Fingers run up my calf. My eyes flutter closed. His touch feels so good.

“Why were you running?” His voice is rough around the edges.

“I—”

“Tell me.” His deep baritone has me looking back up at him.

My hand drops to the hem of my shirt, twisting the material between my fingers. “I was scared.”

His brows knit together, two small lines forming between them. “Did someone scare you, firefly?”

I nod, looking down.

His fingers lift my chin so our gazes meet again. “Who scared you?”

I shake my head back and forth, his threat from the other day playing in my head. “He didn’t touch me. He didn’t do anything.”

“Who.”

“The guard. The one from the pool.”

His gaze turns murderous. An involuntary shiver works its way down my back.

Goose bumps form on my skin.

Gideon is fear personified. The thing that lurks in the dark, waiting to pounce. He’s the heart-pounding, breath-stealing sensation of being chased by a monster.

He’s what keeps you up at night, terrified to close your eyes. But at this moment, I’m not afraid for myself, but for his soul.

“I’ll take care of this.” He drops my leg and stands.

“Gideon, don’t kill him. He didn’t touch me.”

But before I can say more, he’s already storming out of the room.



# GIDEON

I STORM into the basement control room, my fury boiling over.

“Where is he?” My voice booms like a cannon, reverberating through the space, echoing around us.

From the confused expressions I’m met with, no one knows who I’m talking about.

Julian looks over at Rick, whose eyes are wide.

“Sean, where is that fucker?”

As if he heard me, he walks in from the far door. The air around me turns electric with my rage, and before anyone can stop me, not that they would, I throw my fist back and punch him in the face.

His body jerks as my knuckles collide with his jaw.

“You fucking scared her. You made her bleed.” Not true. But it’s still his fault she was running.

Sean tries to block my attack, but he’s no match for me. I’m too fueled with anger. My muscles tense, and my heart races as my fists fly.

I don’t stop.

Landing hit after hit.

Blood runs from his nose. It’s busted and bruised. Probably broken.

Good, because he fucking deserves it, but a crushed face isn’t enough.

“Never touch her. Never talk to her.”

Hitting him once more, before he drops to the floor. Crimson drips from his mouth. His eye is swollen shut. Panting and choking, he tries to get up, but I’m not done with him yet.

This time, I grab him by his neck and push him against the wall in a



chokehold.

Sean's eyes start to bug out of his face, and his lips start turning blue.

"Boss, you're going to kill him."

"Good."

"Gideon," he says again, and this time through my haze of anger, his voice penetrates my bloodlust.

"You're only alive because you didn't touch her." My hands drop, and he falls to the ground, a heap of blood and bruises.

I march away, my steps so angry they reverberate through the ground. My head is spinning, and anger churns in my stomach. I take deep breaths and try to focus on something else.

"Boss." I hear Julian call out as I stride back into the hall and up the stairs. I turn to look over my shoulder. "I need a quick word."

I incline my head in the direction of my office. He nods and follows as I barrel my way.

My vision is still blurred with my rage. It feels like my whole world is spinning out of control.

I'm still fucking pissed. Kicking the shit out of Sean did nothing to tamp my rage.

Once inside, I wait for him to enter before slamming the door.

"What was that about?"

My jaw tightens, and my teeth grind together. "You aren't the one to ask the questions, or have you forgotten your place?"

The Gideon Sasha knows is long gone; the ruthless boss has taken his place.

"Understand." He shifts where he stands. He knows not to fuck with me when I'm like this. However, his answer appeases me. Calms the beast inside.

Heading toward my chair, I pull it out and take a seat. "What did you want to speak to me about?" I reach for the decanter before gesturing for Julian. "Sit."

He doesn't wait for me to ask again, pulling out the chair and taking a seat across from me. I pour him a glass. We both need it.

"The shipment."

"And..." If he tells me the drugs are still missing, I might march my ass back downstairs and kill Sean.

"Nothing yet."

“Fuck.” Today is not my day. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do, the overflow in the warehouse in Jersey, send it to Lorenzo.”

“We’ll take a hit.”

I sigh. “So be it.”

Julian nods. It sucks. We’re out a shit ton of money, but I’d rather give Lorenzo the drugs, lose money, but keep my reputation, than piss him off and put a target on my back.

Friend or not, if I don’t come through, Lorenzo will kill me.

With that matter of business settled. I lean back in my chair. “Any word on Sasha?”

“No, but we have everyone on it.”

“Good.”

I lift the glass to my mouth and take a large gulp. I need this girl out of my head. She’s messing with it, and it’s only been a week.

Something tells me this is just the beginning too.



# GIDEON

SINCE THE INCIDENT in the cellar, Sasha has been laying low. Biding her time, most likely.

Days have passed, and despite my best effort to distance myself from her, I can't.

She's too good for me, but that won't stop this madness. My morality has been in question ever since the first drop of blood was spilled by my hands. It grew when I added stalking, kidnapping, and defending her honor to the mix. It only gets worse with every immoral thing I think about doing to her.

Case in point, I'm sitting in my office, scotch in hand, all while I watch the computer surveillance monitor like some sort of pervert, all in the name of ensuring she's safe.

Bullshit.

It's another form of stalking, and I'm leaning right into it without a second thought.

At this point, I'm contemplating whether I'm a complete psycho.

Jury's still out.

As soon as she left her room, I stopped watching the smoke detector video on my phone and turned on the larger monitor on my desk, cueing up the cameras set up around the house.

If sitting in the dark and watching the footage is wrong, I don't ever want to be right.

Especially when the prize for her attempted escape will be so sweet.

I say attempted because I'm going to allow her a head start. It'll be more fun that way.

The chase.

The catch.

The punishment.

I don't truly understand the strange obsession I have with her. I've gone over it several times, and it never provides a reasonable excuse. No matter, I can't push thoughts of her away.

I track her every movement and watch as she slips through the kitchen, making her way to the service entrance. Unlike a few days earlier when I bumped into her, this time, she pretends at least.

After the run-in a few days ago with Sean, I expected her quest for escape to be paused, but as usual, she surprises me. She's been searching every inch of the manor ever since. She must have decided the kitchen door was the easiest way out.

She walks over to the fridge and pretends to rifle around for something she has no intention of finding. Her head peeks around the door, eyes darting around the room, likely trying to ensure no one is around. When she feels secure, she makes her way toward the door.

My hands clap together as I wait for her next move.

Everything is going according to my plan, and I can't keep the smile off my face.

It won't be long now. I'll have her right where I want her.

In my bed.

Ever since I saw her on that fire escape, I've dreamed of this. Needed her beside me. I feel like I'm losing my mind, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm excited for what's to come. What she's going to force me to do.

I'm practically jumping out of my skin as I wait for her to fall into my trap. To try to run from me.

"That will never happen, firefly," I say to the monitor.

Not until I consume her light.

The only way to do that is to catch her.

Envisioning a glass jar, one with tiny bright lights fluttering around, my smile widens.

I'm well and truly losing it.

I continue to watch Sasha on camera. Her lame attempt at escape is comical, and it brings me joy. There are so many other things I should be doing, but stalking Sasha is my new favorite pastime.

I'm staring at my computer monitor, watching the screen flicker and

glitch. It's like a broken television with black bars flashing on the screen and images jumping around.

My pulse accelerates.

Where is she?

Grabbing my phone, I scroll through my contacts and hit send.

The picture on my security footage still looks like grainy snow. My fist slams down on the desk as I wait for Jaxson to pick up.

"What the fuck is wrong with the cameras?"

"I don't know, Gideon. Ask your paid IT guy on staff. Rick, is it? I'm fucking busy."

"Fix it now."

"For fuck's sake. You don't pay me enough," Jax mumbles, but I hear him typing away, and before long, the screen lights up, and I see her again. "There. Happy? Now leave me the fuck alone."

The line disconnects.

Fuck.

My heartbeat starts to regulate.

This obsession will be the death of me.

Fucking Jax.

He's not wrong. I don't pay him enough to put up with my crazy. Especially now that it's multiplied since Sasha's arrival.

I need to send him a gift for putting up with me.

I also need to start checking in with Rick from now on.

That's what I employ him for.

Looking back at the clear picture in front of me, I watch as she makes her way outside, and I have to flip the camera view to those I have surveying the trees lining the drive. She's getting pretty far up the path, and if she gets any farther, I'll lose sight of her.

Not that I need to see her to know what she'll find. The small hole in the fence she's about to stumble upon isn't an actual hole.

It's an illusion I set up. I'm sick like that.

She'll get excited, but once she gets through the hole, she *will* be cornered. She'll be stuck because right beyond the fence is a solid wall that she couldn't scale even if she wanted to. There's no escape.

It's time to put a stop to this charade.

Standing from the chair, I head toward her, thinking about all the excuses she'll give. By now, she's taking the narrow passageway that will lead her to

her capture.

This whole attempt is ridiculous.

Here, she can have anything she wants. She'll be safe.

She has no idea what's out there if she thinks I'm a monster.

Beyond the wall, anything can happen.

She isn't worried because I don't have tangible details to give her of the danger she's in.

That's the part that probably bothers her the most. I'm working on it, but I don't know where the threat is coming from.

She thinks I'm lying.

I'm not.

My own sick desire to have her close is what drives me. If she runs, I have no choice but to keep her close. For her own safety.

Total bullshit.

It's a low move even for me, but I never said I took the high road.

Sasha doesn't hear me coming, and in the dark of the night, she doesn't see me either. Excitement courses through me like a shot of adrenaline.

*Epinephrine straight into my heart.*

I reach out and grab her arm. A gasp slips from her lips. The sound is an aphrodisiac to my sick, twisted soul.

I pull her back until my arms are bracketed around her. A cage that she won't be able to break away from.

The rise and fall of her chest spurs me on. Leaning closer to her, I place my head in the crook of her neck so my lips are right by her ear and whisper, "There's nowhere you could go that I wouldn't find you."

And it's true.

My obsession with this woman hasn't diminished since the first time I saw her. On the contrary, it's grown. Every day she's in my presence, it morphs into something more. It makes me feel off-kilter.

I don't do attachment.

Yet for her, I'd change my ways.

*Why am I so enraptured by her?*

"Let me go," she breathes out, and my cock hardens against her ass.

I move my head closer until my nose brushes against her skin. "Things are going to change, firefly."

She quivers beneath my touch.

From fear?

No. She's turned on.

I spin her around, pulling her toward me until we're chest to chest. I like the way she feels against me. The way her body trembles at my touch.

I wonder how she'll feel beneath me as I thrust inside her.

It's inevitable. She doesn't know it now, but we are inevitable.

Before she can argue or object, I throw her over my shoulder. She must be resigned to her fate because she doesn't kick and scream, and like the sadist I am, I miss the fire.

I make my way up the path and back into the house. I take the back stairs so nobody will interrupt us. This place is crawling with people, who typically remain unseen, but tonight, I'm taking no chances.

We pass her door, and that's when she comes alive.

"Where are you taking me?" Her voice shakes with what I can only assume from the pitch is a combination of fear and rage.

"You can't be trusted."

Her hand connects with my back. "What does that mean?" she shouts, but I don't answer. I continue to carry her down the long, dark hallway while she thrashes in my hold.

I'm tempted to smack her ass, but I won't. I'd never touch her like that without permission, but at this moment, I'm hoping she begs me to one day.

Oh, the things I'd do to this woman. *For* this woman.

When we reach the large mahogany door that leads to my bedroom, I kick it open and storm inside.

"W-why am I here?" Her hands hit my back, and she yells out, "Put me down!"

"As you wish, firefly." I toss her on the bed. The moment her body hits the mattress, she backs away, moving farther and farther up and out of reach.

"Since you can't be trusted, you're staying with me," I explain. "That way, I can keep an eye on you."

Her head shakes back and forth. "No. You can't do that."

"I just did." I smirk.

Sasha takes that moment and the distance to jump off the bed and make a dash for the door.

She's fast, but I'm faster.

Just as her hand reaches out to grab the door, I slam it shut.

"Did you really think I'd let you get away that easily?" I laugh.

Her hands bang against the door. The slaps echo off the walls, filling the



space around us.

“Help!” she screams. “Someone let me out.”

“Enough.” I pull her away from the door, spinning her around and stepping into her until she has nowhere to go. “Nobody out there is going to save you, Sasha. They’re likely to hand you over to whoever is hunting you. This world is violent and full of traitors just waiting for their opportunity to rise in the ranks. You’d provide the perfect chance.” I search her eyes for any indication that my words are sinking in. “You’re only safe with me. You can fight against that truth, but it won’t change the fact.”

“You’re no savior,” she spits. “You’ve stolen me from my life without my permission. I can take care of myself.”

“You couldn’t even manage to keep yourself safe roaming the grounds tonight. You want me to believe that you can save yourself from men who won’t think twice about using your body before ending your life?” She gulps but remains quiet. “You’ll stay here, and that’s the end of it.”

Her chest rises and falls, and then she exhales, her shoulders slumping forward in defeat.

“Good girl. Now go lie down. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

The thought of her in my bed is almost more than I can take.



# SASHA

MY HEAD SHAKES BACK and forth, and that's when the fog inside my brain clears, and I hear the words he just spoke.

They ricochet in my brain like a ball in a pinball machine.

He wants me to stay here.

In his room.

I can't breathe.

The air in my lungs feels like shards of needles are tearing me apart.

This can't be happening.

My hands hurt. My soul hurts. My pride is obliterated.

I couldn't even manage to sneak out of here without being caught. I should've known better. If he has cameras in my room, he has them all over this property.

But that's not the reason I'm dying inside. I'm being held here against my will, and now, I'm being forced to stay in his room.

He said I was here for my safety...

He lied.

*They're bad men.*

Will he hurt me? Will he take advantage of me like the guard did the other maid?

Tilting my head to the side, I peer over his shoulder, taking in the entire space.

There's only one bed.

Shit.

My hands start to tremble at my side, and all sorts of horrors circulate

through my brain.

Does he expect me to have sex with him? Is he going to force me to?

“I’m not sleeping with you.” The words fly out of my mouth before I have a chance to rein in the terror. My voice shakes, and my palms sweat.

“Who said anything about sleeping,” he says, running his eyes from the top of my head to my toes in a way that has my stomach dropping. My legs wobble, and I lose my balance. “Relax. I’m not into taking that which isn’t offered freely. Especially when I have more offers than I care to have.”

Something about that doesn’t sit well with me, and I don’t even want to begin dissecting it.

“I meant...I’m not sleeping in that bed with you. Sleep, Gideon. Not sex.”

Lies. I absolutely meant sex, but I feel foolish now.

His grin tells me that he isn’t buying it. I avert my eyes, looking anywhere but at him or the bed.

“Have it your way, but for the record, the floor isn’t very comfortable. At least I’ve been told.”

What the hell does that mean?

Has he locked someone else in here with him before?

My brain is going a million miles a minute, but when I see the way that his lip tips up, I realize what he’s just done.

He’s baiting me, trying to rile me up, watching me a little too closely, and it pisses me off.

I hate him. “I’d rather sleep on the floor than next to you.”

He shrugs, grabs a pillow, and hurls it at me. “Don’t cry to me tomorrow when you’re in pain.”

“I’ll be fine,” I shoot back, looking around for the perfect spot. Somewhere that I won’t have to see him all night. “Do I get a blanket?”

“There should be a couple of extra ones in the closet.” He doesn’t even look at me as he pulls back his silk sheets, readying himself for bed.

“You have an extra one on your bed,” I say, pointing at the folded blanket at the foot of his bed.

“I get cold at night.”

For a second, I just stare at him in disbelief. I cross my arms in front of my chest and narrow my eyes.

“Seriously?”

He shrugs, taking a seat on the edge of the bed, watching me curiously.

He stares at me like he's enjoying my discomfort, and I don't want to give him another minute of my time.

I don't want to see his smug face or twinkling eyes. Very alluring twinkling eyes.

"Ugh," I groan out loud, only furthering his amusement.

Twisting around, I head toward the door he pointed to, swinging it open with more force than necessary.

As stated, it's his closet. His very large closet. Oh, who am I kidding? It's massive.

It's like he had one of those HGTV interior decorators come over and style it for him.

I have never seen anything like it. Why am I surprised?

The whole estate is ridiculous. This is the master bedroom, after all. Nothing in this place isn't amazing.

It's bigger than my studio apartment.

An idea pops into my head....

Who needs a bed when I could just stay in here and have a whole damn room to myself?

I can set up a makeshift bed on the floor.

It's clean. Immaculate really.

Best yet? There's a whole wall between Gideon and me.

Yep. This is where I'm going to sleep. Right in here. That'll give me the needed distance from him.

*A false sense of security.*

I step outside and find him exactly where I left him. Sitting on the damn bed with a smug-ass look on his face. Too bad he's so handsome. It'd be preferable if he weren't.

Looking straight into his light blue eyes, I stand taller, crossing my arms over my chest. "The closet will do."

He furrows his brow. "Do for what?"

"To sleep in, obviously." I roll my eyes as if his question is ridiculous.

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

I expect him to object, but then he smiles. "Suit yourself, but the door stays open."

My lips thin, and I have to stuff down my growing annoyance. "Why? There's no escaping the damn closet."

“Because I said so, Sasha. Now go to bed.”

Looking back into the closet and then at him, I incline my head. “Can I at least get my pajamas from the other room?”

“No,” he says, turning away from me and climbing into his bed. “Sleep in one of my shirts.”

“What? No way. I don’t want anything of yours touching my body.”

He shakes his head on a huff, lying back and using both hands to fluff his pillow, like he hasn’t a care in the world.

“Sleep naked for all I care, Sasha. Your choice. I’m only providing options like a good host.”

I bark a humorless laugh, spinning on my heels and heading back to the safety of the closet.

Once inside, I pull open every drawer until I find what I’m looking for. If he’s going to be an arrogant ass, I’ll wear his damn T-shirt. No way would I sleep naked in this place.

The simple white T-shirt hangs to my knees and smells like Downy. It covers enough to give me some semblance of comfort.

I step back into his room to grab my pillow, and the moment I do, I stop in my tracks. Gideon is staring at me. His mouth is open, and his eyes have darkened to two pools of something way too close to desire. It makes my stomach flip.

“Firefly. You look...good in my clothes.”

His voice is silky smooth with a hint of decadence; it shouldn’t make my knees go weak.

But it does.

And I hate my reaction.

It’s not okay to be attracted to your captor. That’s called Stockholm syndrome.

Unfortunately, my stupid body isn’t getting the memo.

I try my best to ignore him and instead grab the pillow and make my way back to the closet, but as instructed, I don’t close the door. Doing my best to wipe my memory clean of his husky, sensual voice, I go about making my bed.

It sounds like a stampede of elephants right now, the way I’m ruffling around, but I don’t care.

It’s late, and I’m pissed.

For so many reasons.

Once I'm satisfied with my sleeping arrangements for the night, I lie down and stare at the ceiling.

It's a good thing the door isn't closed because I feel trapped even with it open. I feel like the walls are caving in around me. The light seeping into the dark closet helps a little. I don't feel as suffocated as I would if it were shut.

I'm exhausted, but I lie awake thinking about how just beyond the open door—only a few feet away—Gideon sleeps.

God, I hope he's sleeping.

I know he said he would never take something not offered, but is he waiting for me to get comfortable? Will he go back on his word?

He's too close. I don't trust him.

Closing my eyes, I count my breaths. Inhaling and then exhaling. Finally, I'm able to drift off, but not without my last thought being of him, and worse, what his hands felt like on my skin when he touched me.





## SASHA

I SENSE him even though I don't see him. The woodsy yet floral smell of scotch lingers in the air. Inhaling deeply, the fragrance tickles my nose, bringing a warm feeling to spread across my skin.

I keep my eyes closed so that I can pretend I don't know he's here.

Beside me.

Moving closer and closer.

*Too damn close.*

The sheets are pulled back from my body, and I feel the cold air hit my exposed flesh.

I need to stop whatever's coming. I need to jump up and move far away from him.

I don't.

Soft fingers begin to trail up my thigh, moving painstakingly slowly. The feeling is sensual. He continues his trek up my leg until he reaches the apex of my thighs, tracing the lace of my thong.

I can't help but quiver at his touch. It feels so good. Too right.

A primal moan escapes my mouth as I arch my body toward the friction I need.

In my brain, it's not him. I work to replace him with someone—anyone—else.

I can pretend and enjoy this moment for what it is.

A much-needed release. One I've deprived myself of for too long.

If I open my eyes, the mirage will fade, and I'll have to acknowledge that I hate this man, yet my body craves him.

My hips lift of their own accord, begging for him to touch me...begging for him to sear me with his fingers.

My body throbs with need, and he knows it. His hand works against me, eliciting sounds I didn't know I could make.

I'm desperate for the friction of his touch to bring me over the edge.

Need and desperation fill me to the point of madness.

I push my hips up, wiggling my body, indicating for him to give me more. He doesn't disappoint. His finger pushes aside my panties and finds me hot and ready.

"Please," I beg, sounding needy and desperate.

"Please what, firefly?" His husky voice only makes things worse.

It's so hot. So damn sexy.

My orgasm is building. I'm on the edge of falling.

A throat clears loudly, and my eyes open. That's when it all comes crashing down.

Gideon is standing in the doorway to the closet.

*It was a dream.*

And he had a front-row seat.

His tall, lean body, only a few feet away, doesn't help.

I woke too soon and subsequently missed out on release.

My hand reaches up, and I scrub the sleep from my eyes, trying to pretend nothing happened.

That what he thinks he saw isn't true. It's clear he believes he walked in on something because he's smiling like a damn clown.

"Good dream, firefly?" he asks with that smug face of his.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Only nightmares here. But I didn't dream, so..."

"Right." He bites his lower lip to likely stop his laughter from bubbling over.

Asshat.

"Coffee?" he asks, lifting his hand.

With my dream long gone, I finally notice that Gideon is holding a mug of coffee in his hand. The fragrance fills the closet, and I groan in response. It's an inviting scent of roasted beans and sugar.

Gideon takes a step and reaches the mug out while I move into a sitting position, arms outstretched, like a kid in a candy store waiting for the cashier to hand over the bag of treats.

He holds it just out of reach, earning him a scowl. Lesson number one: do not withhold coffee from me. I will snap. Gideon chuckles but finally gives in, closing the distance so I can grab the porcelain and bring it up to my mouth. The rich flavor is both bold and smooth, awakening my senses as it slides down my throat.

I moan, savoring the taste. It's prepared exactly the way I drink it.

"How?" The word comes out sharp and full of accusation.

He advances, and I scoot back on my butt. When Gideon is hovering over me, his eyes dark and unreadable, he speaks. "I did some research," he continues in a low voice. "I needed to know what made you tick."

"And coffee was the answer?" I lift one eyebrow in response.

"No," he replies, his eyes narrowing. "But it was something that I could use to my advantage."

He moves closer. His eyes flick over my body, and a smirk plays at the corner of his lips. "I know you can't function without it," he responds, as if he can read my thoughts.

"How would you know that, Gideon?" He shrugs, and my eyes narrow. "Have you been watching me?" My voice hitches, knowing full well that the smoke detector in my old room is most likely a camera, but it's one thing to think it and another to confirm it.

The thought of this man, or any, for that matter, watching me in my own home is terrifying. What else could he have seen?

*Everything.*

"I have." He doesn't even pretend to care that he invaded my privacy in the worst way.

"Explain," I demand, placing the mug of coffee on a shelf next to my makeshift bed.

"I wasn't sure if I was going to keep my word to Roman. I didn't even know you existed, so I had to learn about you."

"Why?" I snap.

"To ensure you were even real. He was dying. I didn't know if he was just talking nonsense. Like I said, I didn't know he had a sister." He runs his hand through his hair, tousling it in a way that only heightens his allure. "I found you and realized he'd kept even more secrets from me."

I bite my lower lip, knowing all about the numerous secrets Roman kept. It might be the only thing this man and I have in common. We were both kept in the dark about so much that revolved around my brother.

“By the time I got to know you and ensured you were who I thought, I was running out of time.”

“Because of the ‘unknown threat’?” I air quote.

“Yes.”

“Which is?” My hand rises, twisting in the air for him to start elaborating. These one-word answers aren’t going to work for me.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Roman didn’t elaborate, and so far, I haven’t found any concrete information leading me to a specific organization or person who would want you dead.”

His answer is depressing, and with nothing to say, I grab the mug and take another sip of the coffee. Mostly to keep from saying something that won’t help this situation.

“You can use my bathroom to freshen up.”

“I don’t even have a toothbrush,” I sneer, remembering that he’d brought me here against my own free will.

“I’ve taken the liberty of grabbing some of your stuff from your room. Your toothbrush is among the items.”

My nose scrunches, and my eyes thin to slits. “Yet more invasions of my privacy.”

His head shakes. “How so, firefly? What could I have possibly done now to have you up in arms?”

“You went into *my* room and got *my* things.”

He takes one threatening step forward. “You forget...One: this is *my* house. Two: I bought you those things, Sasha. I’ll do as I please.” He turns around and is just about out of the closet when I yell to his back.

“And I don’t want to be here.”

He glances over his shoulder. “Tough. Get dressed. We’re heading downstairs in five minutes. You need to eat something.”

I don’t understand this man at all.

He’s holding me here like a prisoner, but he’s concerned about me eating. The many sides of this man have my insides twisted, and it’s a feeling I don’t like at all.

I stand, stomping my foot like a child. At this point, my blood is boiling, and the need to smack him in his gorgeous face is intense. He doesn’t so much as pay a single bit of attention to my tantrum. He’s already out of the room, leaving me to do as he’s commanded.

Well...fuck that.

My stomach gurgles loudly, and all the fight bleeds out of me. I have two options. I can stay here all day and whine about my situation, all the while starving, or I can get myself together, get some food, and plead my case about leaving.

Despite my current feelings toward Gideon, I have to admit that while he might not be a good man, he isn't all bad either. It's unsettling, but it's the truth.

Maybe I can help him see reason. It's worth a shot.



## GIDEON

DESPITE IT BEING my plan to keep her close to me, I need to get out of my fucking room. Seeing her in my shirt, verbally sparring with her, watching her squirm in her sleep, as she had a dream I would have loved to be privy to, and then hearing the sounds she made over breakfast, I'm holding on by a thread.

Pushing away from the table, I storm out of the room, instructions in place for the men guarding her.

I can't risk someone taking her away from me. Not with my obsession in place.

Fuck. What is happening to me?

My shoes hit the marble floor as I walk toward the door that leads downstairs to my security team. I've sent texts to my men, but it's time to meet in person. I've been holding it off to stay close to her, but this can't be pushed off anymore.

Other than the guards who are watching Sasha, everyone is downstairs by the time I hit the last step.

They're all standing around waiting for me. Typical as of late. I make my way to the table in the center of the large room in which we hold meetings. The chair screeches as I pull it away, echoing through the room like a freight train. "What do we know?" I ask as I take a seat.

"Still no word on what happened to the shipment of drugs, sir."

Fuck. Of course, my men assume I'm talking about the drugs. They don't know that the only thing I've been able to think about is Sasha.

My dick is leading the show, which is not a good thing.

I shake my head, and Julian lifts a brow.

“Sasha,” I grit out, annoyed I’m going to have to see the look on his face when he realizes that she consumes my every thought.

Just as I suspected, his lip twitches. He wants to laugh. And me? I want to reach across the table and threaten to cut his tongue out of his mouth if he utters a single word.

He knows better.

Julian searches my face and clearly sees the threat because he does the smart thing and schools his features. He doesn’t say anything, simply nods his understanding.

This is why Julian has been one of my most trusted men for years. He knows his place and doesn’t step out of line.

“Do you have anything of substance for me?” My voice booms through the room.

I’m pissed.

The woman has become a liability to me, and I haven’t even fucked her yet. Hell, I haven’t even touched her. Not really.

But I have seen and felt enough to know I want her beneath me. I want her spread open, and then I want to devour her like she’s my own personal banquet.

Once I’ve had her, my head will clear, and I’ll be able to get back to work, tossing her aside like all the rest. She’ll become my ward, as promised, until the dust settles and whoever is after her is dead and no longer a threat.

“Nothing yet, boss.”

“No updates at all?” I repeat through gritted teeth. He shakes his head, and in turn, my fist hits the surface of the wood.

“This is unacceptable. What the fuck do I pay you for?” My words cut through the air.

“We have men all over the city looking into it,” Julian says, meeting my eyes.

“Not fucking good enough,” I snap. “Get answers.”

No one speaks because the truth is, despite the fact that these men are doing everything to uncover who’s behind the threat, they’ve failed at this.

“I need you to find out which family is after her. I can assume it’s one of our competitors, but that doesn’t narrow it down.” My hand sweeps back through my hair. The need to pull at the roots is intense, but I won’t show these guys just how on edge I am. “Find out who Roman was in bed with. He



was getting drugs from someone, and it wasn't me. My bet is that's who's after her. Find out. I don't care how you do it. We can't have this girl living under this roof forever."

Because she's fucking everything up.

Fucking *me* up.

My little firefly won't be okay with staying here. She'll eventually find a way to fly far from me.

The thought does irrational things to me. My heart pounds in my chest, and my hands fist at my sides.

She can't go.

"I need you guys to make sure this place is locked down. I loosened the reins for a few days, but no more. This place needs to be safe for her. For all of us. Understand?"

"Yes," they all say in unison, but I don't miss the looks of confusion and something else...something dangerous.

My men are questioning my actions. Questioning why I care so much about some girl when we have bigger problems on our plate. Namely, the missing cargo. I have to get ahead of it and instill fear in these men. Show them why they follow my orders.

"This woman is important for reasons I don't know. If another family is after her, it could be tied to the missing cargo. It could be bigger than that. Until we know what threat is out there and why, we protect her and this place from our enemies. Do you understand?" I bellow the last part for good measure, giving them a reason to fear me.

It seems to do the trick. Not one man looks at me any other way than with absolute respect when they say, "Yes, sir."

"Good. For now, that's all. Everyone back to work but you." I point at Julian.

The men all get up and go back to their jobs. Some searching for a way to gather info on our Russian competition, and others working on security for the house.

When it's just the two of us at the table, I speak. "Money. Where are we at?"

"We have about a hundred million we need to clean, give or take, from the last two shipments."

"Lorenzo's missing shipment? Anything on that?" I ask.

His head shakes, and he averts his gaze. "Not yet, boss, but I'm on it."

“You better be.” With nothing more to say, I push back from the table and stand. “I want an update.”

Without another word, I make my way out of the room and into the hall, heading toward the stairs. Now that the security is out in the open, I know she won’t try to leave. While I won’t allow her to sleep anywhere but my room, I can loosen the reins on what she can do throughout the day. But before I deal with that, I have one more order of business to attend to.

I slam the door to my office shut and cross the space until I’m at my desk, taking a seat on a huff. The day has only just begun, and I’m already exhausted. The stress of the missing shipment and the unknown threat to Sasha weighs heavily on me. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this out of control, and it’s fucking with me.

I grab my phone and call Trent, needing to get this over with. The phone only rings once before he answers. “Gideon. Where have you been?”

Typical Trent. I don’t speak to him for one week, and he acts like I disappeared. “Busy.”

“That’s a short answer, even for you. Something tells me there’s a story...”

If he only knew how right he is, but I’m not ready to dive into that.

“Not important.” Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on the desk in front of me. “I have money and need a place to clean it.”

“Are you wanting the typical ventures, or would you be interested in hearing some outside-the-box options?”

“I don’t give a fuck. I got one hundred I need to invest. Do what you do and keep me out of the details.”

He whistles. “Something has you extra pissy. Care to share?”

*You have no idea.*

“No,” I snap, earning a chuckle from the bastard.

“I’ll come up with a plan.” He pauses for a minute, and I wonder if the call dropped, but then he coughs before speaking. “Actually, how do you feel about investing in property?”

“Like I said, do what you do. I don’t give a fuck as long as it keeps me off any radars.”

“Okay. Then I do have something for you. Ever heard of The Elysian?”

“Can’t say that I have.” Moving back into an upright position, I place my hands on my keyboard on my desktop and start to type.

He’s piqued my interest. This isn’t his typical suggestion, and I have to

wonder who's behind it.

“The Elysian is a very cool, exclusive compound of sorts in Upstate New York. They're about to expand and need capital. It might be right up your alley.”

“Go on...I'm interested.”

“I'll send the prospective to your email and set up a meeting between you and the lead architect in charge, Cain Archer.”

“Who's Cain Archer?” I've never heard of him, not that it matters. There's always someone new coming into the mix. It's the way business works. Someone shows potential, and they're immediately brought into the network.

“He's...an interesting guy.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Trent chuckles. “You'll see.”

And now I'm intrigued even more.



# SASHA

ANOTHER DAY HAS PASSED. Nighttime always comes too quickly.

Here I am, back in my old room, where I've sequestered myself all day. After lunch, he gave me at least that amount of freedom. I've spent the day moaning and groaning. Sleeping on the floor last night did nothing but hurt my already sore back.

I look up at the smoke detector and snarl at it. "Everything hurts," I tell it as if it will answer. "But I bet you'd have no idea about pain. I do..."

Bending over the cello for hours hasn't been easy on my body, and the floor, as soft as the carpet in the closet is, didn't help.

The memory of him carrying me through the house and demanding I sleep in his room has me livid once more. Well...that and other things.

I have no desire to see this man.

After my dream last night, and the way things played out this morning, the idea of looking at him is overwhelming.

It's mostly the dream that has me on edge.

It's played on a loop all day in my head, and I can't get it to stop.

Even now, thinking about it makes my cheeks burn.

It's ridiculous. He might suspect that he was the star of my dirty dream, but he never said anything to confirm it. Regardless of that fact, I can't be near him.

This is going to be a problem.

When he left me to roam earlier, his parting words were a direct command to be back in his room by nine. It's one minute past nine, and I have no doubt that pisses him off.

Knowing my time is running out before he comes to find me, I decide to head to his room.

Better to face the storm head-on.

As soon as I push open his bedroom door and walk inside, I regret it.

I'm never prepared for him.

Certainly not ready for the way he looks at me, and worse, the way I feel when he does.

His gaze flitters over me, lingering in places it shouldn't.

But this time, he's not looking at me with desire. It's something else.

Gideon strides toward me, and I back away from him as he advances; his eyes seem cold and hard. "Hiding from me." It's a statement, not a question.

"Not that it's any of your business, but no. Hiding from you would imply \_\_\_"

He takes another step closer, and this time when I move, my back hits the door.

"That you're scared of me." Another statement.

Another step.

"I'm not." My head shakes back and forth. "I just don't want to sleep in here."

"Well, unfortunately for you, I don't particularly care." His arms land on the door, on either side of my head, caging me in.

He's too close. Way too close.

I push on his chest, and he staggers backward. I don't pay him attention as I make my way into the center of the large room, heading straight for the closet.

My makeshift bed is gone, and the sheet and blanket are missing as well.

I spin around to find Gideon in the doorway, smirking.

I glower at him. "Where is my bed?"

His face is unreadable. His jaw is tight, and his lips form a straight line.

"Where. Is. My. Bed?" I repeat, biting each word with more menace than the one before.

He shrugs.

The room feels heavy with the silence, but when I follow his gaze to the king-size bed across the room from where we stand, it feels downright suffocating.

"I am not sleeping in that bed with you," I say, pointing at the offending piece of furniture.

“Sasha,” he growls. “You’re being stubborn. I can tell you’re sore. You’ve been stretching and wincing all day.”

“How the hell would you know that?” I snap. “Spying on me again?”

“Just sleep on the bed. I won’t touch you,” he bites out, not bothering to respond to my accusations.

“Like I can believe you,” I mutter as I make my way back to his closet to grab another shirt. I slam the door closed. I might not be able to sleep here, but for the next few minutes, I’ll get the solitude I need.

I can’t sleep in bed with him.

Not just because I hate him, but because no matter how much I don’t want to admit it, I want him.

Or at least my subconscious does.

I work on my breathing and ridding my head of these wayward thoughts. He’s not wrong. My back is messed up, and I’m sure his bed will be better for me physically. Just not mentally and emotionally.

Once I’m dressed, I swing open the door and head toward the bed, refusing to make eye contact with him. It feels like a long trek, even though it’s only a few feet.

My heart hammers in my chest, and my hands shake at my side.

“I won’t touch you,” Gideon says again. “I give you my word.”

I look at him. Really look at him. Can I believe him?

The fight bleeds out of me when I see how sincere he appears.

“Promise?”

“Yes.” He nods once.

With nothing more to say, I pull back the blanket and get under the covers, positioning myself so that I am facing away from where I know he will lie. I close my eyes and take deep breaths. The hope is to calm myself enough so I’ll be able to fall asleep, but just as my plan is working and I’m about to drift off, I feel the bed dip, and Gideon lies down beside me.

I tense up, waiting for him to try to touch me, but he doesn’t. He remains on his side of the bed, breathing softly in the darkness.

This is going to be the longest night of my life.





# GIDEON

LAST NIGHT WAS a test of wills.

Sasha in bed next to me was torture.

I should have let her stay in the damn closet.

Today, I'm paying for it. I'm functioning on very little sleep and thinking about all the sounds she made in her sleep. The way her ass pressed into my cock at some point. I immediately turned around, determined to keep my promise.

I'm a mess, and it's not the frame of mind I should be in when flying Upstate to talk business.

*Get your head in the game, Gideon.*

I can't let this woman distract me any more than she already has. People depend on me, and I can't let them down. I can't let myself down. There are always people waiting in the wings for me to fuck up.

One hour later, I'm pulling up to The Elysian. It's nothing like I expect. The research I did on this place didn't do it justice. Tall, mature trees line the drive, making it feel like it's been here all along when in actuality, it's brand new. At the end of the drive, it opens up to a forest. Or so it appears at first glance. I narrow my eyes, and that's when I realize some of the trees aren't trees at all but rather mirrored houses that capture the essence of nature.

It's incredible.

I GRAB MY PHONE AND PULL UP THE HELL CHAT.

GIDEON

I'm here, @Trent

TRENT

The place is sick.

GIDEON

As long as it's a good investment.

TRENT

Would I steer you wrong?

CYRUS

Yes.

TRENT

Fuck off, @Cyrus

LORENZO

I'm going to have to agree with @Cyrus. Trent's a fucking idiot.

TRENT

And yet you keep giving me your money. Who's the idiot now, @Lorenzo.

TRENT

Let me know what you think.

GIDEON

This better not be a waste of my time.

Despite my last text, I doubt it will be.

From my research on Cain Archer, I gather he's a ruthless businessman. Not a surprise; most men who rise to this level are.

Apparently, he's cold and unemotional, but he gets the job done. At the end of the day, we should get along fine. I'm not looking to make friends.

When my driver pulls up to the large mirrored building a few miles up the road, I step out of the car and am greeted by an attractive woman.

"Hello, Mr. Byrne. I'm Mr. Archer's assistant, Barbara. Please come this way."

I don't bother responding. No need. I follow her toward the building, and when we're a foot away, the doors automatically open into a large floor-to-ceiling mirrored lobby.

She doesn't speak as she leads me into Cain Archer's office.

I expect to find him behind a desk; instead, he's standing by the window, looking out into the forest that surrounds us.

“Mr. Byrne.” Archer turns to face me. “It’s nice to meet you.” Although he says the words, his tone tells me he doesn’t mean any of it. His voice is cold and calculated.

He’s definitely different.

I’ve met some crazy motherfuckers, but this guy is something else entirely. I can’t put my finger on what’s so off about him, but this man makes Lorenzo seem sane. Which is saying a lot because Lorenzo is the craziest motherfucker I know.

There’s a darkness that lingers around him. A darkness I’ve seen in only a few people. The quiet, violent type.

With all the death I’ve seen in my life, I’m no stranger to evil, and this man doesn’t fool me. He’s evil.

I say nothing, though, just walk up to him and extend my hand, like the businessman I am. I’m here to strike a deal, and that requires me to play a part.

“Pleasure to meet you as well,” I finally say. “Now tell me why I’ve been told that this investment is worth making.”

Time passes, and I listen to his business proposal.

“Between the state-of-the-art security and exclusivity of the property, it’s the safest place for any important person to retire and live out a private life,” he says, giving me a look that says he knows exactly the type of people I work for.

He’s sold me. The place is incredible and would, without a doubt, be a profitable investment.

Cain’s face is like a cold slab of marble as he speaks, and I can see the calculations going on behind his eyes. He launches into a detailed explanation of his latest real estate venture on The Elysian property.

When he finally finishes, I say the only thing left unsaid, “I’m in.”

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IT DOESN’T TAKE US LONG TO FLY BACK INTO TETERBORO, THEN WE’RE BACK in the car and driving toward the city. The landscape passes like a blur outside my window as we speed down the highway, through the Holland Tunnel, and then uptown to Sasha’s apartment.

The city is an endless sea of skyscrapers stretching into the horizon as we

drive. Soon, though, we are pulling up to the building.

In the light of day, this place looks even worse than it did last time.

The crusty paint on the door is peeling off, and today there are broken liquor bottles on the stoop. There's no way I'm letting her come back here.

I don't care if the threat has been extinguished; Sasha will never step foot in this place again.

Inside is worse than the outside. As we walk down the hall, the wood creaks, and a musty smell radiates through the air. It's rancid. Like rotten carpet and mildew.

I stop short when I get to Sasha's door.

*It's not closed.* "We should have kept eyes on the apartment." I motion to the broken wood sitting ajar from the hinge.

Someone kicked it open. There's even a shoe print on it.

With the missing drugs, we dropped the ball. Keeping watch here hasn't been a top priority for us.

My men have been spread too thin. And seeing as I've been preoccupied with Sasha... Well, let's just say I've let things fall through the cracks.

*A mistake.*

The upheaval makes sense. Someone came here searching for something. Roman's words crash over me.

*"She has something they want."*

They came here for it. My gaze darts around the room.

The furniture is tipped over, and her bed is disheveled.

Whoever broke in also flung every cabinet open, and then they smashed plates and glasses on the floor.

Taking careful steps through the room, I search for anything of importance.

The glass crunches under my feet as I explore.

Something tells me I'm too late.

Then I see a wood case resting against the wall near the fire escape.

Sasha's cello.

"Grab it." I point. "Let's get the fuck out of here."



# SASHA

GIDEON HAS BEEN GONE all day.

I don't care, obviously, but at the same time, I don't understand what that means for me.

Does he just expect me to sit here all day and do nothing? Since I've given up my attempts at escape, I'm left with no mission.

No purpose.

When I was looking for a way out, I was at least keeping myself busy.

Now I have nothing.

Leaving would be foolish. There is no way I can protect myself or run if someone is really after me. The type of people Roman kept company with won't stop until they have whatever it is they're after. Even if it's pointless because I don't have a damn thing that anyone would want.

As if Gideon can hear my inner ramblings, the door to my old bedroom swings open.

"I thought I told you not to come in here." He grunts as he strides into the room.

*Boundaries would be nice.*

"I thought I told you not to tell me what to do." I can't help but spar with him. Even if I'm stuck here, it doesn't mean I have to allow him to treat me like a prisoner.

When he doesn't respond right away, I let out a sigh and then look up at him. That's when I see that he's holding something. He turns, and the air rushes through my lungs.

My cello.

“When did you get that?” My voice is almost a whisper. For the first time since I’ve been brought here, I’m excited. Truly excited.

He looks at me for a moment. “I went to your house.” He shrugs.

“Breaking and entering is a crime.”

“Are you really going to sit here and scold me?” He smirks, finding something about this exchange amusing.

“Just thought I’d point that out.”

I guess, in comparison to the things this man has done, breaking into someone’s place is a minor infraction. Hardly a blip on his radar.

Anger boils inside me. Anger at myself for forgetting just how dangerous he is.

I force myself to stay calm. I can’t lose my shit while he still holds my cello.

“You can’t just break into my place and take things that don’t belong to you,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Would you rather I take it back?” He turns as if to leave.

“What? No,” I yell out. “Please don’t.”

My eyes fill with unshed tears, and then one slips out, trailing down my cheek. I’m losing my grip and allowing my emotions to get out of whack. I’m like a roller coaster these days. Gideon watches me with furrowed brows.

“That’s quite a reaction for an instrument.”

“It’s not just an instrument.” My hand lifts up as more wetness collects on my cheek. I brush it off. “It’s my life. One that’s been stripped away from me.”

He exhales harshly. “I know you blame me for that, but can I remind you that I’m only helping keep you safe.”

“It doesn’t feel like that when I’m practically a prisoner, Gideon.”

“You have free roam of this place. You’re fed. I brought you your cello.” He lifts his arms. “What more do you want from me?”

A valid question.

“Let me sleep in here,” I say, glancing around the room. “Give me space.”

“No.” It’s all he says, and it manages to piss me off all over again.

“You’re an asshole.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “I’ve been told.” He remains quiet for a minute, seemingly deep in thought. “If you want the cello, you’re going to have to tell me why it’s your life.”

I can tell him that much if, in return, I'll get to keep the cello. I've been missing it so much. I take a deep breath before speaking. Trying my best to keep my voice from shaking.

"For one, it's the one constant I've had my entire life."

"This specific cello?"

"No. I just mean learning, playing, and practicing the cello. It's been my release. The one thing that's grounded me when I've felt the ground was opening up and swallowing me whole." He nods but doesn't say a word, allowing me to continue. "That cello, my brother bought for me." I close my eyes, remembering. "It was one of the first things my brother bought after getting a job." I can't believe I'm telling him this. It feels too personal. I fight back more tears. "I-I was so proud of him. I thought he'd worked so hard."

A choked sob rips from my throat, and I hate that he's seeing me so vulnerable.

I expect to see annoyance or maybe indifference, but there's none of that. He appears genuinely invested, and I'm sure he is, seeing as though it's because of him my brother was able to buy the cello in the first place.

"What you don't understand is that it was just Roman and me. Our parents died when I was fourteen; Roman—he raised me from that point on. We struggled. Playing was the only thing that helped me through the grief, and the cello he gave me pulled me out of my depression. That was, until I found out the truth. The cello had been purchased with drug money, and my brother had been involved in dealing drugs." The words are spat in his direction. The blame directed at the source. "I was devastated. I didn't know what to do."

Angry tears fall as I remember the desperation and sadness I felt when the truth was revealed. "I begged him to stop, but it was like he couldn't, or he didn't want to hear me. And then, well, you know the rest of the story."

The room is silent and still. It's a disquieting feeling as we lock eyes and hold each other's stare. I hope he sees the damage he's caused. Sees that I'm an innocent victim of his actions. It might be circumstantial, but it's the truth. I lost my brother in more ways than one, and it's because of this man.

Gideon crosses the space, coming toward me. I don't move.

He doesn't give me the cello. Instead, he places it beside me on the mattress, flicks the lock, and opens the case.

"It's a beautiful instrument," he says, admiring the craftsmanship while simultaneously ignoring the heaviness of the moment. Refusing to own up to



his part in my agony.

I nod. My tongue feels heavy. I'm not sure what to say. What can I tell him that will make him give it to me and leave me in peace? "It's all I have left of my brother. Of my family."

We stare at each other for a moment, and I see the emotion cross over his features. The guilt that lies just beyond the surface.

Eventually, he looks away, breaking the thick silence lingering in the air. "Why the cello?"

Coward.

I want to call him out on it, but what's the use? I can't force him to own up to his part, and I wouldn't want to, anyway. What good is an apology if it's not sincere?

I shake off the thought, debating what to tell him. I go for the truth. This man sees through me, so there's no point in lying.

"Music has always been a part of my life. As a child, I was always listening to different melodies. As I grew older, I learned to appreciate the beauty of classical music. The delicate harmony of the strings. It was like nothing I had ever heard before."

My cheeks burn from the honesty and reverence in my voice. Music is like a religion to me, and when I get a chance to talk about it, I come alive. At this moment, I feel self-conscious.

"One day, I picked up a cello. Something about the way the bow glides across the strings and how the music flows through me. It was like I had finally found my voice." I shrug like it's no big deal when it's actually everything. "Since then, music has been my passion. It's something that I pour my heart and soul into. Music is always there for me. It's my way of expressing myself, of communicating my feelings without words."

His mouth hangs open slightly, and he just stares.

"What?" I ask, feeling insecure and far too warm under the weight of his stare.

"Can you play for me?"

My head jerks back, not having expected that. "I...I can't."

Gideon's jaw tightens. "Please." It looks like it's hard for him to ask this, but it doesn't matter if he begs; it won't happen.

"No. You don't understand. It's not—I don't play in front of people," I admit on a sigh, feeling my cheeks warm further.

"Why?" He sounds truly puzzled when he asks.

I guess for a man like Gideon Byrne, nothing would be difficult. He couldn't understand.

"Stage fright. I've never been able to." I let out a harsh breath. "I used to be able to play for my brother."

He crosses his arms over his chest, watching me closely. "What happened?"

I look down at the cello, not wanting to see Gideon when I say the next part. "He changed, and then he was gone. I haven't been able to play in front of anyone since."

Sadness hangs in the air like a dense fog. It's oppressive and heavy, making it hard to breathe.

The room is still and silent, but my heart is pounding so loudly in my chest that it feels like it's going to burst. The pain, the emptiness.

It was like a physical weight pressing down on me. I can feel every subtle movement, every tiny breath. It's too much.

The moment is stretched out between us, growing more and more tense with each passing second. I can see the sadness in his eyes, but there's also something else.

A resignation, maybe. Or acceptance. Like he's finally come to terms with something that he's been fighting for a long time. We just stand there, looking at each other, neither of us knowing what to say or do. Finally, he breaks the silence. "I'm sorry."

It's said so quietly I can almost trick myself into believing it was never said. But it was.

Before I can respond, he turns and walks out the door, leaving me alone with my cello.

I sit in silence for several minutes, thinking about what just transpired. A part of me has always needed to hear those words and thought I never would. It doesn't change things, and it won't bring my brother back, but it does offer a small sense of peace.

I pick up my cello and settle into position. My eyes close. I take a deep breath, and then I play.

The music washes over me, and as it does, my mind wanders to Gideon.

What is it about him? Why does he twist me up?

He's always been somewhat of a mystery, but after spending more time with him, I'm quickly learning that there's more to him than meets the eye.

I can't help but be drawn to him, even though I know I shouldn't.

As I play, I find he's all I can think about. The sadness I saw reflected in his blue eyes haunts me, even though it shouldn't. He caused it.

Then my thoughts turn to something else entirely. What would he think if he saw me play?

Would he appreciate it?

Would he be moved?

Why do I care?

My heart seizes in my chest because I don't know when it happened, but I do care what he thinks of me.

This place must be enchanted. Or maybe I'm just cursed.

Because there is no reason that I should fall under his spell...

Closing my eyes, I allow the cello to once again be my voice.

To say all the things I can't say. To feel all the things I can't feel.

The music flows through me, and I am finally home in myself. The cello speaks to my heart in a way that nothing else can. It is a part of me, and I cannot imagine my life without it.

Gideon gave this back to me.

And I'm not sure how I feel about that.

Who is this man?

Is he the criminal? Or my savior?



# GIDEON

THE SMELL of lavender wafts through the air, and I have to admit...it's enticing.

I allow it to take over my senses, enjoying the warmth of the body flush against me. Without another thought, I pull her closer to me, wanting to feel her soft skin against mine. To allow her scent to imprint on me for life.

This might be the best dream I've had in some time.

The woman melts into me, and I nuzzle my nose into her neck.

A sigh escapes her mouth, and my eyes fly open.

Sasha.

It wasn't a dream.

She's in my arms. Curled up against me. Her face is buried into my chest, leg drooped over me. She wiggles against me, her hand creeping up my chest.

I need to stop this.

Not because I haven't dreamed about this very thing, but because Sasha is asleep. When I have her, I want her to be wide awake and more than willing.

She moans softly as she presses against me, and my dick grows hard.

"Sasha," I groan, losing my willpower with every sound she makes.

She goes still in my arms, head lifting, eyes meeting mine. She blinks several times, likely clearing the fog caused by sleep. And that's when things sink in.

"What are you doing?" she shouts as she jumps from the bed as if it's on fire.

Fuck. She's pissed, and something tells me she isn't going to buy that I was trying to stop things.

Her shoulders rise and fall with her breaths, and for the first time in my life, I feel heaviness in my chest for the way she's looking at me.

I know she's angry that I touched her, but it wasn't like she's thinking.

"I'm sorry, firefly. Believe it or not, I was dreaming."

Her arms are crossed over her chest, as if to shield herself from me. "Sure," she snaps. "I'm sure you were dreaming." She air quotes dreaming.

"As ridiculous as it sounds, I was." My head falls back on my shoulders, and I try to calm my racing heart by focusing on breathing. I shouldn't be this anxious about an honest misunderstanding. "I said your name to wake you up. You were touching me."

That was the wrong thing to say. Her eyes practically glow with fury, and something else I can't put my finger on. Embarrassment.

Nah. That can't be it.

"It doesn't matter. You promised not to touch me. You broke it."

I nod, attempting to head this off in a way I typically wouldn't—by listening.

"I did. And for that, I'm sorry," I say without a hint of sarcasm or lying.

"Just stop talking," Sasha says sharply.

"Sasha—"

"No." She turns around and looks at the door. "Am I still a prisoner?"

My hand rakes back through my hair. "You were never a prisoner."

I stand from the bed, allowing my hard-on to stand tall. Might as well. There's no denying I was turned on.

Sasha's eyes trail down my chest, finally landing on the proof of how turned on I am.

"Oh...oh my God," she says, heading straight for the door, never looking back.

I can't help but smirk at her reaction. Typically, I'd call her out. Make things awkward, but I won't this time. Not while she's angry, believing that I went back on my promise.

I walk up behind her, putting just enough space between us while placing my finger on the pad, unlocking it, and throwing the door open.

"Go. Like I said, you're no prisoner."

She turns around, and we're practically chest to chest. Some of the fight has seemed to bleed from her. "What about when I'm ready for bed? Will I be forced to sleep here still?"

"Yes. You'll sleep with me. But until then, I'll leave you alone."

She stares at me for a second before narrowing her eyes. “For how long will I have to sleep in your room?”

“Until I know I can trust you.” I shrug.

*Until you choose to stay.*

A look crosses her face, like she’s waiting for me to say more, but I don’t. With a long sigh, she turns away from me and walks back toward her old room.

It’s the middle of the night, and technically, I could stop her, but I don’t. I just told her she isn’t a prisoner, and I’m determined to prove that.

Instead, I follow her for a few steps, giving her space to make her moves. She halts her pace and turns to look at me over her shoulder. “Why are you following me?”

“I was just making sure you don’t get lost.”

Her lips thin, and she pops her hip out. “I know where I’m going.”

“Okay.” It’s all I say, playing at indifference.

“I want to take a shower. Is that all right with you?”

“Yep.”

Her lips pucker with disgust. “Do you seriously not have anything else to say or do? Must you drive me crazy?”

My hands rise in surrender, but a grin spreads across my face.

There is nothing sexier than Sasha pissed and wearing my T-shirt.

“I’m going,” I say, backing up.

Her eyes narrow in on me, and without another word, I nod before turning around and heading back to my room. Once inside, I slip off my sweats and make my way to the bathroom. I adjust the water and step into the shower. The hot water feels amazing, and I let myself stand there for a few minutes before I scrub my body clean.

As I lather myself in soap, I think about how she felt in my arms.

What it would be like to feel her.

To see every inch of her skin.

The way her body would flush when I touch her.

I close my eyes and stroke my cock from root to tip. The hot water flows from above, coating my hand with moisture.

Closing my eyes, I imagine it’s her hand on my dick. Gripping me tight.

Then she sinks to her knees, taking my length between her lips, her warm, delectable tongue swiping the tip before her mouth opens and takes me in.

Threading my fingers through her hair, I set the pace, plunging inside her,

thrusting deep into her throat. Each moan from her mouth fuels me on.

My pace picks up, my grip tightens, and then I shudder with my release.

*Fuck.*

I am so fucked.





# GIDEON

FROM WHERE I'M sitting at my desk, I give my undivided attention to today's episode of the strange things Sasha tells me while speaking to her smoke detector.

In today's info dump, she's going on about mundane things. "I bet you don't know about me." Her words, not mine.

"I hate all vegetables with a liquid seed," she says with a straight face, looking right at the camera, and it makes me laugh.

The intercom on my desk comes to life, ending my stalking.

"Boss, I need to speak with you," Julian says, and I let out a sigh.

There's always something. The question is just how big this shit show will be.

Leaning forward on my desk, I silence the video of Sasha. "What's this concerning?"

"The girl."

I grit my teeth; she has a name. But truth be told, Julian is smart for referring to her that way. I'm crazy enough to kill him if he treated her like anything other than a huge inconvenience.

"Fine. Five minutes. Control room." I close the monitor on my desk and stand, straightening and flattening my shirt before heading out of the room.

Despite having free rein, Sasha's favorite pastime is telling the hidden camera/me ridiculous facts about herself.

It's become a highlight of my day.

Today I found out her favorite meal is chicken Parmesan, which I already told the chef to make for dinner tonight, and that she doesn't like to drink

alcohol.

She didn't tell me why, but I have to assume it has something to do with her parents' death. That and the fact that her brother was an addict.

It doesn't take me long to get downstairs; the landing for the basement stairs is only a few feet from my office.

Once inside our control room, I find Julian pacing.

Off the bat, I know something is wrong. His posture is rigid, and his jaw is tight. "What's going on?" I ask.

He halts his steps and turns to look at me. "During our search, we found something."

"Go on." I rock from one foot to the other. Ready for him to get to the point. The faster I deal with this shit, the faster I can get back to what I was previously doing.

*Fuck, Gideon. You need a fucking life.*

"More like someone," he says, and my jaw tics with impatience.

"Spit it out."

Julian looks down and then back up. "He had her picture."

I fold my hands in front of my chest. "And I'm just hearing this now?"

"It just happened."

Dropping my arms, my hands clench into fists. "Where is he?"

"East wing cellars."

"Let's go." Before he can say anything else, I'm striding out of the room.

Together, we walk down the long path underneath the manor. Few know of its existence, and those that do need a special clearance to enter.

Stepping inside the cell, I'm met with a draft. The concrete walls keep the room cold and dank. A rotten smell of mildew lingers in the air.

It smells like a mixture of fear and sweat.

Currently, our guest is locked behind the metal bars of one of the cells.

"Put him in the chair. Strap him down." I point to the center of the room where I want him set up.

Once he's naked and tied up, I walk over to the little metal cart we keep down here.

*My tray of tricks.*

I'm a sick fuck when I need to be. But it works in my profession. People fear me, and that's good when you need answers.

I narrow my eyes at the tools in front of me, deciding how I want this to go down.

“There’s this thing my predecessor and I liked to do…” I tell him as I grab the knife. “Tobias Kosta, I’m sure his reputation precedes him; he liked to make margaritas with his guests.”

The man in the chair starts to pull at the ropes. A scream bubbles from his mouth but is caught in the tape.

“The thing is, I’m more of a scotch man myself, and I wouldn’t waste a drop on you.” I step closer to him. The long silver blade glimmers under the overhead light bulb that hangs from the ceiling.

He screams again, but it doesn’t stop me from doing what I need to do.

Leaning forward, I slice at the skin on his left pectoral, then trail the blade down his stomach. Crimson rivulets drip down his chest, collecting on his groin.

He hollers, begs, and pleads. But to me, it only sounds like grunts. “What’s that? You want to talk.” I slice his thigh. Crisscrossing the pattern until a bloody x forms on his skin.

His head bobs up and down rapidly. With my free hand, I rip the tape off his mouth. “Go ahead, talk.”

“I don’t know anything.”

I shake my head in annoyance. “See, that’s where I think you’re lying.”

“I’m only after the bounty,” he cries out.

Probably true. Weasels like him are only here for the easy cash. “How much?”

“Half a million.”

Fuck. Every fucking dreg in the city will be looking for her. “And what’s the bounty for?”

“They don’t want her dead. Taken alive. I wasn’t going to hurt her,” he pleads.

“Do you know why?”

“Didn’t matter. For that kind of money, I don’t ask questions.”

I look over at Julian, who has a knowing look on his face. Then I turn back around and slice the little shit across the throat. His body convulses as he chokes on his own blood.

For a moment, I stand there and watch him die before Julian coughs, and I gesture for him to speak.

“What do you want to do?” he asks.

“Dump the body.”

His face is like stone, with no emotions passing over his features. “And

Sasha?”

“Don’t worry about Sasha. I’ll take care of her.” I drop the knife back onto the cart. “I need you to handle point.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“I’m going to take her away. While we’re gone, I want you to check everything this shit said,” I growl. “I want to know how many people were told of this fucking bounty.”

With nothing more to say, I storm out of the cell and back down the hall until I’m taking the steps two at a time to get the fuck out of here.

It feels like the concrete walls are crumbling in on me.

I anticipated that people would want to find Sasha, but to know there are an unknown number of assailants searching for her has my blood boiling.

I’m so distracted by my rage that I don’t see her at first when I round the corner and stride down the hallway.

“Gideon.” Her soft voice stops me in my tracks. “What’s wrong?”

Her brows pinch, and she takes a step toward me. I step back. I’m wound up too tight to be near her. “Nothing.”

“You-you can tell me.” She approaches me like I’m a caged lion that she needs to be wary of.

A sigh escapes my mouth. I have to tell her. I know I do, but it doesn’t make it any easier.

Moving closer to her, I bring my hand up to touch her cheek.

“Gideon. You’re scaring me.” Her words rush out.

“Fuck.” Lifting my hand, I run my hands through my hair, pulling at the root. “There’s a bounty on your head.”

Her knees buckle.

She’s about to fall to the floor, but before she does, my arms reach out and catch her.

Now encased in my arms, I pick her up and sit us both on the floor.

Sasha shakes in my grasp, but I don’t let go.

Instead, I pull her closer to me until her head is in the crook of my neck. “It’s going to be okay. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“You weren’t lying.” She pulls her head back to look at me. “This whole time—” A sob escapes. “I thought...”

I cup her face in my hands and press my forehead against hers. “Unfortunately, I wasn’t. Trust me, if it were safe, I wouldn’t keep you here.”

The tears come faster now, and I hold her in my arms as she cries. Wet rivulets stream down her face as shudders rack her body with every sob.

She glances up, and her blue eyes lock on to mine. The sadness and fear in her stare are heartbreaking. I never knew I had a heart until I met this girl. “It’s going to be okay, firefly. We’ll get through this together. I’ll protect you. I won’t let anyone hurt you,” I whisper into her hair, and then I hold her.

In silence.

Until her breathing evens out.

And she’s calm.

I’ll keep my promise. I’ll keep her safe.

No matter what.



# SASHA

DAYS HAVE PASSED since Gideon held me, he's managed to stay clear of me since.

Which is kind of crazy to think about since we are still sleeping in the same room and bed. But somehow he's been a ghost.

Marching through the house, I go in search of him. My fists clench and unclench at my side. I have so much pent-up energy that I need to find an outlet for. I'm bored, even though I have my cello now. I can't stay locked in this house forever.

I need to get out.

*You want to see him.*

I'm annoyed by my internal thoughts. Ever since I cried in his arms, I haven't been able to get him off my mind.

The way he held me. The feeling of our bodies pressed together.

And speaking of bodies, let's not forget the massive hard-on he had the other day when he was sleeping.

*Focus, Sasha.* No thinking about his dick. You're on a mission.

Luckily, it doesn't take me too long to find him. He's in his office.

*Surprise. Surprise.*

My footsteps announce my arrival. As I cross over the threshold, he looks up from his desk.

"Sasha."

Heat sweeps across my cheeks as I take him in. What is wrong with me? I shouldn't have such a visceral reaction to this man. All he's said is my name, but I'm already hot and bothered.



It's his voice. Smooth like honey. Decadent like chocolate.

A warning label should be issued when he's around because, despite how my brain feels, my body isn't listening.

The side of Gideon's lip tips up into a smirk. *That sexy-ass smirk.*

He caught me ogling.

In all due respect, it probably wasn't hard to deduce, seeing as I'm practically drooling on the floor.

"Sasha," he repeats.

"Yes," I mutter back, my head tilting down to look at the floor.

Maybe it will swallow me up.

I'd rather take a ferry ride to hell than see the look of triumph in his eyes for catching me gazing at him.

"Was there something you needed?"

A part of me wants to turn around and head back to my old bedroom and sulk, but a larger part of me needs to get out of this damn house.

"I'm bored." Lifting my hand, I rub at my face. I've yet to make eye contact with him. I'm dreading it.

Put your big girl panties on, Sasha.

If you want to ask for something, you're going to have to look at him head-on and play nice.

I place my free hand on my hip, tilt my chin, and meet his stare.

His gaze sweeps over me, and despite my efforts, my cheeks warm.

I'm so damn predictable.

He folds his hands and puts them on top of his desk, leaning toward me.

"And what would make you less bored? I brought you your cello."

I rock back on my feet, feeling far too close and way too hot all of a sudden. "I need to leave this place. I feel like I'm locked up, and I can't breathe."

He nods. The move is slow and deliberate.

Gideon is trying to appear to be listening to me, but the truth is, it doesn't matter what I ask. He will only grant me my wish if he deems me worthy.

The room becomes silent.

I wait for him to respond, but as the second hand from the grandfather clock in the corner of the room ticks, it feels like I'm being marched up to the guillotine.

The silence seems to stretch on for an eternity, and then Gideon clears his throat, and my eyes dart back up to meet his.

“Pack a bag.”

My mouth drops open.

In my mind, I probably resemble a cartoon character, shocked with my eyes bugging out.

“We’re going to go on a little trip.”

It takes me a few seconds for his words to filter into my brain.

“Where are we going?” I finally ask, unable to keep the excitement out of my tone.

His eyes lower back to the paper in front of him, and I can’t help but feel dismissed. “Don’t worry about that.”

“How can I not worry? First, you tell me I can’t leave here because it’s not safe. Now you’re telling me to pack a bag. I don’t understand. Is it now, all of a sudden, safe?”

“You’ll be with me. You’ll be perfectly safe.”

I shake my head. “This makes no sense.”

“You said you were bored. You said you wanted a change of scenery. Are you really going to complain? Because if you are, I’m perfectly fine staying here.”

Knowing Gideon, if I say one more word, he’ll do just that, just to spite me.

*Stop. That’s not true, and you know it.*

No matter how many times I try to argue with myself that he’s treating me unfairly, he’s not.

Sure, he’s controlling, but I know deep down he’s coming from a good place.

He promised my brother he’d protect me, and he’s making good on his word. No matter how much I don’t want to admit it, I am safe with him.

I’m one hundred percent safer than I would be out there on my own, and it’s time I stop pretending otherwise.

Knowing there is nothing more to say, I turn to leave.

“Pack for a few days.”

“Could you tell me where we’re going so I know what to pack?” I ask, realizing I have very few outfits to pick from.

“Take what you’d typically wear through the day. Bring one nice dress.”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t have anything like that, Gideon.”

He doesn’t look up from his desk when he says, “You do. I’ve had options stocked in my closet for you. You’ll find something there.”

“What? You...bought me more clothes?”

He looks up at me, stone-faced. “I did, but we don’t have time to discuss that now. You need to go get packed.” He puts his hands together in a prayer motion. “Please.”

I offer a small smile and do as he’s asked, making my way out of his office with a skip in my step.

He bought me more clothes.

Why?

How long does he anticipate me staying here?

It only takes me a few seconds to climb the stairs up to his room, and when I make it to his closet, I see I’m not alone.

“Mr. Gideon asked me to help you.”

“Um, okay. Do you know where I’m going?”

“I don’t. But if you show me what you want to bring, I’ll fold and pack it.”

“You don’t—” I start to say, but I know she does have to do this. It’s her job, after all, and I wouldn’t want to get her in trouble. So I bite my tongue.

After pointing at a few pieces, items that can transition easily from day to night, I find myself waiting alone.

My hands are fidgety as I wait, and I’m not even sure what I’m waiting for.

*Where are you taking me, Gideon?*

It’s not long before I hear the telltale signs of feet hitting the wood floors outside the bedroom.

“Are you ready?” I hear him before I see him.

“I am. My suitcase has already been brought down.”

He nods. “Come on, we have to go.”

Gideon is already setting off to the stairwell, and I pick up my pace to follow. Before long, both our feet hit the marble floor of the foyer, and then we’re walking out the front door.

The first thing I see is four heavily tinted black cars lined up. The second car’s door is open.

“That’s ours,” he says, pointing at the car with its door open.

I don’t say a word, but fear flutters in my blood. He has a convoy of cars.

The only reason he would do that is if the threat is real.

I feel sick as I step inside the Escalade, my hands bunching into the material of my cardigan to keep busy.

As soon as the doors close, I let out a breath, but I'm on high alert when the other back door flies open, and Gideon takes a seat beside me.

"Is this all necessary?"

"Yes. I told you I'd keep you safe, and someone out there really wants you dead. Until we know who and why, this is all very necessary."

"Where are we going?"

"You've asked that a million times, and each time I've told you, I'm not telling."

"Why?" I throw out another question, growing annoyed with myself for the constant inquisitions. But it can't be helped. I'm on unequal footing, and when I feel off balance, I ask a million questions. It's always been like that.

"It's a surprise."

I turn my head toward him. "For what?"

"Because I want to," he says, eyes never wavering from mine.

"That's not necessary. I don't want surprises from you."

"Too damn bad. I've done a lot of fucked-up shit with you. I've messed up, and this is my apology."

This is his way of asking for forgiveness. Can I forgive him?

Gideon is a strange man; he's such an enigma. One I wonder if I'll ever figure out.

We don't drive very long before we stop. When the door is opened for me, I see where we are.

We're on a tarmac of a private airport, parked right next to a private jet.

Holy hell.

In my life, I have never seen anything like this. The wealth. The glamour. The prestige.

This is some way to live...

I wonder what a life like this would be like, and then it hits me.

Luxury like this comes with a giant cost.

The blood of others.



# SASHA

I'M PRACTICALLY BOUNCING in my seat as we make our descent.

We hardly spoke for the majority of the flight, and if it weren't for the luxurious offerings of the private jet, I might've fallen asleep.

For starters, the meal he had catered was delicious, and I was hungry. I can't help but appreciate that he thought to feed me. One thing I'm coming to learn about Gideon is that he's a wonderful host.

When the wheels hit the tarmac and the plane rolls to a stop, I look toward him to find that he's already looking at me.

How long has he been staring?

I've been so wrapped up in looking out the window, but what about him?

*Have I kept his attention?*

A warmth spreads across my cheeks, and I'm sure I'm blushing again. "Are you ever going to tell me where we are?"

"I figured I'd draw it out a little longer." He smiles, and my heart flutters, but I push the feeling away by rolling my eyes.

"You're insufferable," I huff, and he laughs. A sound I've never heard come out his mouth, and why would I? We aren't friends, but when he smiles at me like he is right now and laughs like that, I feel like we might be.

Which is a strange feeling to have. *I'm so damn confused.*

"Minnesota," he says, and my eyes must go wide because another chuckle escapes his lips. I was not expecting that answer.

"What's in Minnesota?" I ask.

I have to admit I know nothing about Minnesota, and now my curiosity is piqued.

“You’ll see. Be patient.”

He clearly hasn’t picked up on my lack of patience.

The small door out of the private plane opens, and Gideon stands, extending his hand to me.

“Ready?”

I eye his hand, unsure if I should refuse the offer of his help, but ultimately decide not to start this trip off on the wrong foot. Placing my hand in his, I allow him to help me to my feet, trying to tamp down the tingles working their way up my arms.

We make our way to the door and down the small stairs that lead to the ground. Just like on the way here, a fleet of SUVs is parked right next to the plane.

Gideon and I take the middle truck and sit right next to each other, just like last time.

Now that I know what state we are in, my brain runs wild with trying to figure out what we are doing here. That lasts the entirety of the trip.

Thirty minutes is how long it takes for me to find out.

We pull down a long drive and then up to a beautiful rustic log cabin. But this isn’t your normal cabin; this one is massive.

My door is opened by the man who drove us, and his hand is extended to help me out. Gideon follows me, placing a firm hand on my spine.

“You ready?” he asks, and I nod, too in awe to speak.

As he leads me up to the front door, shivers race up and down my spine. The last thing I want to do is analyze the way his touch makes me feel. I already know I’m attracted to him.

But it’s when we step inside, and I take in the staff, security, and luxury of the place, that I realize just how much Gideon has done for me. How far out of his way he’s gone to bring me with him.

In all the time I’ve been with him, I have never seen this many staff members, but something tells me once I step farther in, I won’t see them again. Just like at his home, they’ll remain in the shadows. Watching and protecting, but never interacting.

When they all fall out, leaving the space, I realize they were sweeping it for any threats, and my initial reaction was correct.

“You have free rein of the whole cabin.”

“And outside?” I ask.

“Wherever you want to go, go. You’re safe here.”

I swallow. This is a lot. Spinning in circles, I take it all in. The entire back of the cabin is nothing but windows. I make my way toward them, and my breath hitches. It's magnificent.

He knew I needed air. So he gave me a mountain.

He knew I needed space. So he gave me a larger-than-life cabin.

This is too much.

"What do you think?"

"It's—it's amazing." I can't hide the excitement in my voice. I'm practically gushing all over him about this trip, and when he smiles broadly at my reaction, I realize how beautiful he is.

He doesn't smile often, but when he does, he lights up. Illuminating the room. I have to look away, but I don't want to.

I don't want him to understand what he does to me when he's like this. When he's boyish and charming.

I school my features, biting my upper lip to stop myself from smiling. The moment I do, I see his reaction. His jaw tightens. His forehead furrows. He doesn't like it.

"Be ready at six. Wear the dress that's been laid out on your bed."

My eyes narrow in on him as I contemplate whether to balk at his orders or simply retort with a bit of flirting.

"Fine," I say, batting my eyelashes just a touch. "As long as you don't come into my room." That makes his lips split, and then, just like that, he walks off. Not saying a word, as if he didn't just smirk at me. As if he isn't aware of what that smirk did to me.

My legs feel like jelly, and my stomach is filled with butterflies.

One smile from him has the effect of a tsunami on my system, and if I'm not careful, he could wreck me for good.





## SASHA

JUST AS GIDEON SAID, I find a dress laying on my bed. It's beautiful. White with soft pleats and made out of the finest chiffon. I lift the soft material up and place it against my torso.

It feels like a dream in my hands, and I wonder how it will look on.

Placing the dress back onto the bed, I head into the shower to wash away the lingering filth that always comes with traveling. I won't put on that dress until I'm clean.

I stretch my arms above my head and yawn. Even though we flew private, I'm still exhausted. It's always a process to travel, no matter what mode of transportation you take.

The hot water helps to reinvigorate me, and I take my time luxuriating in it.

When I'm finally done and feeling like myself, I step out of the shower, and that's when I notice that beside my towel is a big fluffy robe.

*This man thought of everything.*

My lips part into a large smile.

Now that I'm alone, and he's not watching me with those keen eyes, unpeeling all my defenses, I allow myself to enjoy the thoughts running through my head.

There is more to Gideon than meets the eye.

Taking me here, giving me my own room, and then the small things...

If he keeps this up, I'm going to be in so much trouble because it will be hard to leave this stuff behind. The reality is I can't stay forever and when I go, so does all of this.

*So does Gideon.*

I'm pleasantly surprised to see that my bag is in my room. I don't remember seeing it before, but I'm sure no one came in when I was showering because I locked the door.

Taking out my toiletry bag, I start my routine, and an hour later, I have a light dusting of makeup, and my hair is blown out soft and wavy.

When I slip into the buttery dress, my breath catches.

I'm a vision.

Not one to normally compliment myself, even I can't deny that I look gorgeous.

The dress falls off my shoulders, showing a little skin—but not too much. It's perfect.

It's delicate and feminine and reminds me of a midsummer's dream.

A knock on my door has me lifting my head up. I expect Gideon to stroll in like he owns the place, but when nothing happens, I walk to the bedroom door and swing it open.

There, standing in front of me, is the man who haunts my waking hours and is the lead character in my dreams.

He looks devastatingly handsome tonight.

His dark brown hair looks freshly tousled, like he just ran his hands through it, and his blue eyes look crisper when he takes me in. He's dressed in a black sport coat, looking dashing. I realize it's the first time I have seen him dressed up.

I like it. A lot.

"You look..." His Adam's apple bobs.

"So do you," I say, my eyes lowering to my feet because I feel too exposed at this moment.

Too raw.

He takes my hand, and I let him, neither of us saying a word the whole way as we walk together to the waiting car.

We're seated and waiting to take off when I realize I haven't thanked him.

"Gideon," I start and then stop, trying to formulate the words before I speak them. "Thank you. For the clothes back at your place. For all this." My eyes latch on to his. "For protecting me. Thank you."

He nods, and I'm just about to command that he say more when he speaks. "You're welcome, firefly. I'm happy to do all of it."

I offer a smile, turning my head to look out the window, watching the sunset as we go. Before long, the car rolls to a stop at wherever he's decided to take me.

"What is this place?"

"We're in St. Paul, and this is the firefly arboretum." He lifts his hand and points into the distance, and that's when I see the arboretum and the garden of trees surrounding it.

As the last bits of sun fade away into the distance, the garden comes alive with the flickering light.

Standing motionless, I watch as the fireflies spiral up into the air, dipping and weaving in an intricate dance.

Their lights flash in unison, and for a moment, time stands still, and all that exists is the magic they create.

It's incredible.

My heart beats faster as I take in the space. We are the only people here. "It's empty..."

It's as if all the air has been sucked out of the room, leaving only a vacuum in its wake. I don't understand how this could happen. My mind races with questions, but they all seem to fade into the background as I focus on the one voice that seems to answer them all.

"Of course it is," he says simply. I can see the truth in his eyes, even if I don't want to believe it. "I bought out the location for the night."

And just like that, everything falls into place. In an instant, I see the beauty in his plan. The perfection of it. And I can't help but be impressed. He leads me toward a table set up in the middle, and on top of it is food and wine. It's lavish and romantic.

I don't know how to feel about it.

Why is he going to so much effort for me?

My hands shake at my sides as I make my approach.

It's mind-blowing the thought he's put into this, and I'm not sure if I love it or if it makes me scared.

Scared to let him do nice things for me because I'm not used to anyone doing anything for me that doesn't come with a price. A price I'm not willing to pay.

But despite all these thoughts, I can't deny that this place is beautiful.

Together, we approach the table, and Gideon steps forward and pulls my chair out for me.

The way he's acting, it's like we're on a date.

A very expensive, very elaborate date. One that typically ends with a question and a yes that's cried out.

*Not this time.*

A large part of me wants to close down, put my walls up, and not enjoy this, but I don't allow myself to do that.

Instead, I give myself this reprieve from hating him.

Oh, who am I kidding? I haven't hated him since he gave me back my cello.

Taking a seat, I sit with my hands in my lap, playing with my fingers as Gideon takes the spot across from me.

It's an intimate setting.

In front of us, the table is set with a beautiful array of food. Plates of cheese and meats. Filets, mini quiches. There's a bit of everything here, and I'm not sure where to begin.

Quietly, I start to eat, and after a few bites, I reach across to the glass of wine that had already been poured for us prior to our arrival. I don't usually drink, but a small sip won't hurt.

"Now that you have me here...why?" The words are out, and I wish I could take them back. They sound so ungrateful. "Not that I don't appreciate it. I do. This is...wonderful."

He nods. "I guess I should explain, but I'm not going to. It's for me to know."

"Why?"

"Because I can."

I bite my cheek, thinking about his non-answer. "That's not really an answer."

"It's the only one I'm willing to give, firefly." He looks at me with a sly smile. I can't help but wonder what he's thinking. "I did this because I wanted to," he says finally. I shake my head, not understanding why he would go through all this trouble just for me. "It's as simple as that, firefly."

"And the name—"

He shakes his head. "What?"

"Why do you call me that?"

"I call you firefly because you're a little light shining bravely in the darkness." He shrugs. "Your light illuminates the darkness."

For a moment, the world turns on its axis.

My heart hammers in my chest, hummingbirds trying to take flight inside me. I close my eyes, trying to halt the feelings running through me.

“But why all this—” I whisper. “It’s so much.”

Something in his demeanor shifts. His back straightens, and his features darken slightly. “After your brother...The way he fell. I owe you—”

I furrow my brow at his words and the change in him. “What do you mean? What do you know about his fall?” Everything inside me feels frozen, but he’s quick to shake his head.

“My career. I might not have brought him into the fold, but I allowed him to continue to spiral downhill, and for that, I’m sorry.”

It’s not the declaration I wanted. Nor is it the answer to what happened to Roman, but I guess his remorse is a start. He wasn’t the one to hurt him, but he feels the loss, and he takes responsibility for his part. It’s time I acknowledge that no one made Roman do what he did.

“Roman’s death isn’t on you, Gideon. Roman’s drug use...” I try to gain composure. Talking about him and that time always pulls me under, but this time, I need to swallow that down and offer an olive branch. “There is only one person to blame for his death, and that’s Roman.”

We both become quiet after that, and that’s when I’m able to appreciate the night sky.

Fireflies flutter around, lighting up the horizon around us.

“This is truly magnificent.”

He smiles. “I thought you might like it.”

I turn to look at him, and I realize he’s watching me. His eyes are filled with an emotion I can’t place. It’s too dark to know what it means, but it feels like something special is happening here.

“Tell me about your favorite score to play,” he says, breaking the heaviness of the moment.

And I do. It’s easy to forget where we started when we talk like this. When he listens. It’s easy being with him, and the scariest part is that falling for him could be just as easy.

It could also be my demise.

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“SASHA,” A VOICE SAYS FROM ACROSS THE ROOM. IT’S HARD TO HEAR, AND A

part of me thinks I might still be sleeping. “Time to wake up.”

“Not yet,” I groan, swatting away the sound, but as my hand lifts into the air, I hear my name again.

Burying my head under the pillow drowns it out, but something tells me Gideon won’t stop annoying me until he gets what he wants, and what he wants is me awake.

“Why are you up? Better question, why are you talking to me at this ungodly hour?”

“It’s nine a.m., hardly ungodly,” he mocks. “Plus, breakfast is ready.”

It’s morning. How the hell did that happen? *It happened because you were so relaxed that you slept like a log, and it’s all because of him.*

Pulling the pillow away from my eyes, I’m met with a familiar pair of cerulean. “I’m not hungry.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re still eating.” Gideon stares at me from across the room, and in his stern gaze, I can tell there is no room for argument. He leans against the wall, arms crossed as if he’s waiting for me to object.

I won’t. I know better than to do that. “Why do you have to be so annoying?” My heart skips a beat as I watch Gideon laugh. It fills me with warmth. A thought I don’t want to read too much into, but it does nonetheless.

I’m pathetic.

“I’m not annoying.” His lips tip up into a grin, and now I’m truly screwed. His smile is dazzling, reminding me of a morning sun rising up over an ocean. Glimmering silver, like little diamonds. “I’m just trying to make sure you eat.”

I roll my eyes at him. “What’s your obsession with me being fed?”

All at once, his smile drops, and he looks away. Something passes over his gaze, but I can’t place it.

Seeing his change of demeanor has my stomach plummeting. He looks serious again, and I don’t like it. “Fine. I give up. I’ll get dressed and eat.”

He nods. “Meet me downstairs in five minutes.”

“Just because you weren’t a complete ass yesterday doesn’t mean you can boss me around today,”

Gideon shakes his head at me before turning to walk out the door. “Just get up, firefly. We go home tomorrow, and I want to take you somewhere.”

“Another surprise?”

He looks back, and his gaze looks mischievous. “You can say that.”

“Fine,” I huff. “Now leave.”

A few minutes later, dressed in tight black yoga pants and a baby blue tank, I head downstairs.

I walk into the kitchen, and I’m immediately hit with a wave of heat from the oven. On the table are eggs, toast, croissants, and fruits. The spread makes my heart flutter. All the breakfast foods I eat at the manor. He pays attention.

The smell of the eggs and the toast fills my nostrils as I take a deep breath in.

Everything is cooked to perfection. The eggs are not too runny and not too dry—just the right amount of fluffiness that makes my mouth water. The toast is lightly browned with an edge of crispness around it—exactly how the chef prepares it at home.

Home?

It’s not your home, Sasha.

I take a bite of the eggs and find Gideon watching me from across the table.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” Placing my fork down, I lift my hand and wipe at my lips.

“Nope,” he answers.

My nose scrunches in confusion. “Then what are you looking at?”

“Just you.”

Feeling uncomfortable, I swivel in my chair. “It’s beautiful,” I say, looking out the window at the property surrounding the cabin.

“It is,” Gideon responds, but when I turn back to face him, he’s not looking outside. He’s looking at me.

Heat pools in my belly.

My cheeks warm at the thought of Gideon thinking I’m beautiful.

I’m treading in dangerous territory with this man.

I can barely think when he’s around, but when he looks at me with heat and want in his eyes, I’m rendered useless.

Needing a distraction from the way this man makes me feel, I tilt my head down toward my food and continue to eat.

Ten minutes later, I place my fork down on the plate. “Welp, now that you’ve fed me, what’s the plan?”

“I figured we could explore.”

“Lead the way.” I stand from the table, and Gideon’s hand lands on the



small of my back as he leads me outside.

As soon as we are back in nature, the scent of early morning dew and damp soil infiltrates my nose.

It's amazing here.

Taking in my surroundings, I can't help but marvel at the beauty of nature: rich, emerald-green trees dappled with sunlight stand tall as far as the eye can see.

The distinct ripple of a nearby stream echoes around me.

I close my eyes and inhale deeply, trying to remember this moment forever.

"Come on. I wanted to take you somewhere." Gideon takes my hand in his.

It feels like the world around us melts away. Our fingers interlock perfectly, like puzzle pieces meant to fit together. His touch is gentle and light, yet strong with assurance as I follow him.

It takes a few minutes to arrive at our destination, and when we do, I look up into his eyes and see him looking down at me. He smiles, and I feel my heart skip a beat.

We stand in silence for a few seconds. A gentle breeze that caresses my face. Finally, he drops my hand, and the moment he does, I miss his warm touch.

*You've got it bad, Sasha.*

"What are we doing here?"

Gideon turns to face me. There is a line between his brows. "I want to teach you how to shoot a gun."

"What? No." I shake my head back and forth.

"Sasha."

"No, Gideon. How can you think I'd—"

"Firefly." His hand reaches out and touches a piece of hair that fell forward. He places it behind my ear. "Someone is looking for you. I need to know you can defend yourself."

"But a gun—"

"Against these types of men, unfortunately, a gun is the only thing that might keep you alive."

"You'll keep me alive," I whisper, and I realize in my heart I believe that.

His gaze drops. "I might not always be there." There is something sad in

the way he says it, and it makes my heart lurch.

“Okay.” I roll my shoulders. “Teach me.”

Gideon reaches his hand behind his back. “This is a Glock.” He lifts it up, the black and metal gleaming up at me.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” My jaw trembles. I can’t shoot a gun. This isn’t who I am.

“It could be the difference between life and death, firefly.”

His words hit me square in the stomach. He’s right. It could be. With the threat looming, it’s highly likely it will be.

Gideon steps behind me, and then his free hands are touching my body. The air is heavy, and my heart beats frantically as he manipulates my arms to be in the correct position.

Once I’m in place, it feels hard to breathe. His body is so close, I can feel the heat radiating off him.

I feel warm and tingly.

“Now I want you to look at the tree. That’s your target.”

“Okay,” I breathe out, and my voice sounds husky with want. He’s too close, and I can’t think straight. I try to push away the thoughts of his touch, of the way he brackets me to him.

The way his breath fans the back of my neck as he places his head in the crook of my neck to make sure I’m perfectly aligned.

I feel like I might faint.

Taking a deep inhale, I try to concentrate.

“You got this, firefly.” He whispers, “Look at the target.”

I do.

“Pull the trigger.”

I do.

The shot rings through the air.

I can barely see where the bullet flies. My pulse accelerates to a breakneck speed clip.

“Beginner’s luck.” He laughs.

And that’s when I see I hit the tree.

*Bull’s-eye.*



# GIDEON

So. About Minnesota... Wining and dining Sasha Lennox among fireflies? Not my finest moment. And not to be repeated now that we've returned.

Seeing as I'm five seconds from entering Joe Goldberg territory, I force myself to avoid Sasha, committing all my waking hours to work. Sure, one could argue watching her on twenty-eight surveillance cameras doesn't constitute avoidance. But it's progress.

Today, I'm back earlier to meet with my men.

When I walk into the meeting room on the lower level, it doesn't surprise me to see Jaxson Price sitting at the table.

"To what do I owe this honor?" I say in greeting.

"For the amount of money you pay, I figured I'd make a social call."

"And here I thought you never left the Batcave." The joke isn't lost on him.

"Typically, I don't, but seeing as you're as bad as I am, I figured one of us had to give."

Taking a seat across from him, I motion for him to talk. "Well, what do you have for me?"

He pulls out a computer. "Over the past few weeks, I've looked into all associates of Roman's. Besides the people he knew through your organization, I picked up on some alarming patterns. I found some images, and I brought them here." My eyebrow rises, and he rolls his eyes in return. "Don't worry, I printed them out for you." He winks.

"You printed out pictures? How 1994 of you."

He chuckles. "I figured it was easier for you, being a boomer and all."

“What exactly is that supposed to mean? I’m thirty-one. I’m younger than you, dick.”

Jaxson’s mouth parts into a smile. “Age isn’t what makes you a boomer. Remember, I know you. Did you forget I set up your surveillance?”

“Point taken.”

It’s not that I’m bad with electronics. I own a computer and use it regularly, but rarely for communication. In my business, nothing should ever be put in writing. As for the rest of the technology around this place, there’s no need for me to do it when there are plenty of people to hire that can do it better and faster.

Time is money, after all.

Jaxson reaches into the bag on the floor and pulls out a thick folder. I expect him to hand them to me, but he opens his computer instead.

“I’ll leave the photos with you, but we’re going to blow them up on here.”

My eyes narrow, and my nose scrunches as I try to work out what the hell he’s saying.

The tapping of his fingers reverberates through the room before it stops, and he turns the computer to face me. He flips through the images until I see a man who looks familiar.

Now everything is starting to make sense.

“By the look on your face, I see you recognize this man.”

“Unfortunately, I do.”

Dima Markov.

He’s the head of a Russian crime syndicate operating in the Brighton Beach area.

*Fuck.*

“Any chance you have any information on what he was doing?”

“I don’t, but now that we’ve identified this man, it won’t be hard to look into it further. Don’t you have someone on the inside?”

I shake my head. “I have someone deep within a different organization, but this one is very tight-knit. Hard to gain access to.”

“I’m sure now that we know which organization Roman was associating with, I can dig up some more dirt,” he says, typing something into his phone.

“I’ll see what I can do, too,” I offer, searching my head for any rats close enough to the Russians to give me information.

“Anything else I should know?”

“Word around town is that Roman stole something from the Russians, and that’s what they’re looking for. There’s also a bounty on Sasha’s head. Alive not dead.”

“What does Sasha have to do with that?” Jax asks as Julian strolls into the room and takes a seat at the table.

“We think they believe she might know where to find whatever is missing. She doesn’t.” I run my hands back through my hair. “She’s clueless about all of this. She wasn’t close to Roman in the end. Not after the drugs.”

Julian shrugs one shoulder. “Doesn’t seem to matter to them. They plan to kill her either way in retaliation. They don’t even care that Roman is dead. Their leader feels a debt is owed.”

“Do you have confirmation that this is the Markov?”

Julian shakes his head. “My contact only heard the rumblings that there’s a bounty on her head. Dead or alive, now.”

Anger builds as I think about anyone touching Sasha. I’d fucking kill them with my bare hands. Slowly. I’d take my time. My anger turns toward Julian. Why am I just hearing that they put a hit on her?

My fist slams down on the table. “How long have you fucking known this?”

“Only got word yesterday, but you were busy—”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. Nothing is more important than—” I almost slip and say Sasha’s name, but I catch myself. “Than finding out what the fuck Roman got himself into.”

I look around the room, daring any of my men to call me out, but the only one who tilts his head to study me is Jax.

“I want more information on what their next moves are and if they know where Sasha is.”

I don’t bother to say another word as I stand from the table.

There are no formalities. There are no goodbyes. I just stroll out of the room.

I need to think. I’m way too invested now, and I need answers.

*Fuck keeping my distance.*

It’s not just about Roman. Now it’s about Sasha.

When I get to the end of the hall, I stop myself from walking, placing my head on the wall.

I think back to that day.

I think back to that night when the shot rang through the air.

I think back to that night and the blood that coated my hands.  
My thoughts are of Roman. How he died. The promises I made.  
With my head against the wall, my heart pounding in my chest, all I hear  
is the shot.

Over and over again.

That night doesn't sit well. A deep hollow feeling settles in my chest. It  
spreads like decay inside me. There once was a time that none of this would  
faze me.

I wouldn't care about the lies or the promises that were made, but that  
was before I saw her on the fire escape, and now, I do care more than I want  
to.

There's something about her that draws me in. Her light threatens to blind  
me.

Fuck the consequences. I don't care. I want her. She's mine.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I make a quick dash to my room, needing  
to see her. Needing to calm this tsunami building inside me.

But she's not there, and instantly, I feel unhinged.

Taking a deep breath, I head toward her old room, and that's when I hear  
it.

Music playing.

The haunting melody breaks something inside me.

It reminds me of the ocean waves crashing against the shore. The deep,  
rich tones of the cello flow over me like a gentle breeze. Peaceful and  
calming, like being in a whole other world.

A world that she has created and I'm ensnared in.

The walls around my heart are collapsing. Like rubble falling, and I fear  
that once every bit collapses, I will never be the same.

She manages to break me down.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be listening when I know it would bother  
her, but I can't help myself.

I have to hear her play.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

When she plays, it's like she's playing just for me. I close my eyes and let  
her music wash over me. I'm lost in her world and don't want to leave.

Eventually, she finishes, and the spell is broken. I can't take another  
minute of the separation. I need to see her.

I reach out and knock on the door. *My door.*

For her, I'll do this right. For her, I'll give her privacy and space.

The hall is bathed in silence as I wait for her to either call out or open the door.

*Or she could simply ignore you.*

My foot taps on the floor, impatience building with every second that goes by. Will she tell me to come in? Or is she waiting for me to give up and leave?

*Never gonna happen, firefly.*

If she thinks I'd do that, she doesn't know me at all.

I knock again, and this time, I hear shuffling before her small voice calls out, "Yes?"

"Can I come in?"

"No." She says it so quickly that I wonder what she's up to on the other side.

"Open up, Sasha."

She groans on the other side of the door. "Fine. Give me a second."

The door finally swings open, and I don't wait to step inside. Sasha is quick to retreat across the room and take a seat on the bed. She looks rattled. But why?

The cello sits beside her on the mattress, and her knees are bent with her arms wrapped around them. Her face is tinged with fear. Pale. What is she afraid of? What lurks in the corners of her mind? The ghosts from her past?

"D-did you h-hear me?" She stammers the words, and my heart breaks a little.

I don't know why she's so afraid of people hearing her play. I want to know what's going on in that head of hers.

"You play beautifully," I say before I can stop myself.

She looks up at me, surprise in her eyes. "You were listening? For how long?"

I nod. "Long enough to know you're very talented."

Her head drops. "I wouldn't have played if I'd known anyone was listening."

"You didn't know I was here? That I was home?"

"No, I didn't, or I wouldn't have been playing. Like I already said," she snaps. It sounds like her fear has turned into anger.

The need to make her feel better is intense. I want her to let go of these fears.



“You not playing would be a tragedy,” I tell her, and her mouth falls open, but no words come out. “Is there any way you could learn to play in front of people?”

“I’ve tried.” She shrugs. “It’s sad, honestly, because all I want to do is play. All I want to do is perform in a theater. Go to Juilliard...” She stops herself, her hand covering her mouth.

“You want to go to Juilliard?”

She sighs, resigning herself to opening up. “That’s my dream.”

“What’s stopping you?”

Her eyes narrow in on me, and her nose scrunches in a move that says *what do you think?*

“Other than the fact that some unknown threat is keeping me hostage in your house?” Her voice is soft, as if she’s joking, but the truth rings out in her tone anyway. “I’m not sure what my dream is anymore. All I know is that it doesn’t involve being stuck here with you.”

My back straightens with the force of her rejection, but she doesn’t see it because she continues.

“I want to be free, to explore, to find out who I am and what I’m capable of.”

My hand reaches up, and I run my fingers through my hair. “Trust me, if I could let you go home, I would,” I admit.

Her lips thin, and she searches my face. “Did something happen?”

I think about whether I should tell her the news of the Russian mob’s involvement. I’ve always been honest about what I know, but at the same time, I don’t want to scare her.

“I have a few leads, and I hope by the end of the week, I’ll be able to tell you more.”

Sasha moves forward on the bed. “What leads? You promised you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“That I did.” I think about how I’m going to word this. The only conclusive lead I have is the picture, so that’s what I start with. “I have a picture of a potential associate of your brother’s.”

“Can I see it?” she asks, eyes widening.

“I don’t have it on me right now, but I’ll show you.”

“Do you promise?” The insecurity in her voice, coupled with the childlike quality she possesses at this moment, has me wondering how many people have let her down in the past.

I nod. “Now, no more stalling. Let’s get back to the topic of your music.”  
She moans, throwing her head back, but it doesn’t stop me.

“Once it’s safe, will you go to Juilliard?”

“If I can get over my fear. Although, who knows. By the time this threat is no longer an issue, it might be too late.”

I close the space between us until I’m standing beside the bed, looking down at her. “It’s never too late to live out a dream. Bravery is going for it even if there’s a chance you’ll fail.”

Her head lifts, and her eyes meet mine with an intensity I haven’t seen from her before. “Have you ever been that kind of brave?”

“Bravery has never been my problem. Knowing when to be vulnerable is where I struggle.”

She jerks back at my words, but I close the distance, leaning forward and placing a kiss on the top of her head. “Play. I’ll close the door. And if it helps, I promise to empty this wing. I’ll clear the house if I need to. No one will hear you.”

“Where are you going...again?”

I smirk at her, loving that she seems to take issue with my absence.

“Will you miss me?” She rolls her eyes, and I laugh. “Bye, firefly.”

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I LEFT SASHA ALONE FOR A FEW HOURS, ALLOWING HER TIME TO PRACTICE. Then I found her asleep in her bed.

That wasn’t going to happen. She doesn’t get to sleep without me. Not anymore.

So, I did what any sane person would do. I picked her up and brought her into my room.

Just because I’m giving her space doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep alone.

The room is dark now, a heavy curtain blocking out the moonlight. I hear something rustling.

Sasha shifts beside me.

I freeze, not wanting to wake her up. She turns over in her sleep and rests her head on my chest. I automatically wrap my arms around her. I’ll take innocent liberties in the name of being asleep. I don’t care if it’s wrong.

She’s still asleep, her breathing soft and even. Peaceful.

Touching her always fills me with a weird feeling. Something otherworldly.

It's an obsession.

I breathe in the scent of her hair and skin, memorizing them.

As I hold her close, I can feel my desire stirring. She's so beautiful and perfect. Every time I look at her, I can't help but want her. She stirs in her sleep, and I know she's dreaming. I wonder what haunts her.

I close my eyes and savor the feel of her against me, her warmth seeping into my skin. I can't help myself and move closer until my lips touch the exposed skin beneath her hair.

I want to kiss her neck softly, tease her with my lips and tongue. She must sense me because she stirs in response, a small moan escaping her lips.

"Gideon," she mutters sleepily, "you're touching me again."

"Mmm," I murmur, continuing to hold her. "I don't want to let you go."

"Gideon..."

"Just pretend you don't hate me for a few seconds longer."

"I don't hate you," she whispers.

"You do, and that's okay." My lips slide against her skin. She takes a deep breath. One that makes me think she's fighting a battle within herself, and then she shifts and moves back to her own side of the bed. Even though she's still close, it feels like a million miles away.

The distance between us is unbearable.



# SASHA

A WEEK HAS PASSED, and still practicing feels like I'm pulling teeth.

"Why doesn't it get easier?" My gaze finds the blue light taunting me from the ceiling. "I can't play."

This is what my life has become: talking to a smoke detector.

"I think it's your fault. I can see the blue light. I know you're watching. It's kind of creepy." I stick my tongue out. "Fine. I'll try again."

Placing my instrument in the correct position, I grab my bow, determined to do this.

But fate has different plans for me as a knock on my door has me looking up.

Placing my cello and bow down, I walk over to the door and am met with blue eyes staring back at me from across the threshold.

"Hello, firefly."

"Hi." I transfer my weight from side to side, unsure of what he's doing here. Normally, he leaves me alone during the day. Maybe he heard me tell the smoke detector how bored I was again.

Or maybe he heard me confess to needing someone to talk to.

"Come on, no more sulking. I have someone I want you to meet," he says, and this piques my interest. I've been alone for so long that I'm shocked he wants me to meet someone.

Especially after the arctic breeze his staff has been giving me.

Yep. It hasn't gone unnoticed that other than the one creepy guard, no one on his staff will talk to me.

"Bring your cello."

Now I'm really confused.

I kick off the bed and grab my instrument. Then I set off to follow Gideon to wherever he plans to lead me. He's already out of the door, his strides eating up the carpet, long and purposeful.

My heart pounds with anticipation. Where are we off to now?

We eventually come to a stop in front of a large mahogany door. The estate is so large, I can't remember what's behind it.

It doesn't matter that I've been here for almost a month; I can never remember everything.

Each wing is immense, and every damn door looks the same.

Gideon pushes it open, and it looks to be that we are now in a formal living room. A parlor, perhaps.

The sunlight streams in through tall windows, glinting across the room like diamonds as I make my way into the center of the room. When I do, I notice Gideon and I are not alone.

Sitting in a chair only a few feet away is a handsome man that looks to be in his late thirties. He's got a short scruff of hair that perfectly dusts his face and perfectly styled black hair. Dressed in a sports coat and a sweater, he looks like a poet off to grab a coffee and recite sonnets to lovesick college students.

His presence doesn't make sense in this place.

The man stands when he sees me and approaches. Gideon takes up residence on my right side, standing too close for comfort.

If he's bothered by this man, why is he here?

"Hello, Ms. Lennox. I'm Emmet." Even his name matches his façade. "I'm here to help you get over your stage fright."

And now the cello makes sense.

I place the instrument down and shake my head. "I know how to play... that's not my problem."

"Oh, I don't teach the cello," he responds. "I teach breathing and meditation techniques."

My gaze dashes to Gideon, who looks not just completely confused by this man but also uncomfortable.

I can't imagine a world where Gideon would ever believe that meditation would help me, but the thought that he went out of his comfort zone to try, regardless of the technique, has my heart fluttering.

"Okay," I mutter. "I'll try anything."

“Good. How about you take a seat in this chair.” He gestures to the one set up by the wall that he just got up from.

“Should I bring my cello?”

“Let’s start with no cello, and once you get the breathing down pat, I’ll bring it over to you.”

I nod and make my way over to the wooden chair. Before I sit down, I notice that Emmet stands behind me. “Before you sit, we’ll work on diaphragm work. That way, you get comfortable breathing correctly.”

“There’s a correct way to breathe?” Gideon grunts a few feet away from us.

The look on his face is almost comical.

His brows are drawn together, and lines etch his face in confusion.

“There is, Mr. Byrne,” Emmet tells him before moving a step closer.

“Now close your eyes, Sasha. I can call you Sasha, right?”

“Yes.”

“Stage fright starts in your mind; there is nothing that stops you from playing but yourself. That kind of fear is powerful and can paralyze us.” I feel the pressure of his hand on my back. “You need to push you forward.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter under my breath.

“No. It’s not. But I have mastered a set of skills that can help, and if you feel comfortable, I’d like to teach you those skills.”

I nod.

“I want you to close your eyes, and once you have them closed, take a deep breath in, feeling the calming air fill your lungs.”

I do as he prompts. Inhaling in and exhaling out.

“Focus on allowing each breath to come out naturally.”

His hands slide across my back, bringing heat to my ribs. “Expand your diaphragm.”

From somewhere in the room, I hear what I can only describe as a growl, and then Emmet’s hands are off my ribs, and his front is no longer touching my back.

“Out!” Gideon’s voice bellows.

My eyes open just in time to see a very angry Gideon grabbing Emmet and practically throwing him into the hallway.

“Gideon,” I say, but he’s not listening to me. He’s already out of the room.

My pulse is beating erratically. What the hell just happened?

Before I can figure it out, Gideon strides back into the room, his face dark and cloudy with emotions.

“How can you send him off? I didn’t learn shit.” I pull my arms tight across my chest, all while glaring at him.

“You don’t need him.” His jaw is tight, and anger strains his voice. “I’ll figure out another way.”

“What the hell, Gideon,” I chide.

“I didn’t like when he touched you.” He strides across the room until he’s standing right in front of me.

“I don’t see what your problem is.”

Gideon’s blue eyes seem almost black right now, the pupils dilated and reflecting his emotions.

He takes a step closer. I take a step back, but I have nowhere to go.

My back hits the wall.

I’m caged in.

His gaze holds me captive as his hand lifts toward my face. Then Gideon’s fingertips trace my jaw, and my skin turns hot beneath his touch.

He steps forward, closing the space between us, his forehead resting against mine. “What am I going to do with you?”

I tilt my head back so that our gazes lock.

Pain.

Restraint.

Fear?

Why does he look at me like that?

I have so many things I want to ask him, but before I can say a word, he slams his mouth on mine.

Taking my breath away.

Gideon bites my bottom lip, and my mouth parts for him.

His tongue sweeps against mine, eliciting a moan from me.

Gideon tastes of scotch, dark and heady. As he kisses me, I grow drunk off him.

Our tongues tangle.

It’s madness.

He devours me like he can’t get enough of my flavor.

It’s pure chaos, and I don’t want it to end.

But it does.

As fast as it starts, it comes to an abrupt halt.



Gideon pulls away. A deep groan rushes past his lips.

The first thing I notice is that his blue eyes are still hazy with want, but also, a fine line is forming between his brows.

I want to ask him why he stopped, why he looks angry, but before I can, he's striding off through the door, out of the room, without a backward glance.

*What the hell?*



# SASHA

WHEN I CRAWLED into Gideon's bed after the Emmet fiasco, he wasn't there.

I've tossed and turned all night. Without him beside me, I couldn't sleep.

Days later, he's still not here, and it bothers me how much that upsets me.

Where is he sleeping?

I've hardly spoken to him since the day he kissed me.

*Four days ago.*

When he practically ran out of the room in an angry huff.

He's totally avoiding me.

After he got angry with Emmet, his emotions were all over the place, but then he was gone.

And now I'm confused.

Every day since he said he would clear the wing, it has been, just like he promised, so that I can play. He had kept his word, and because of that, the music came.

The only problem is he doesn't come to bed anymore. Why?

He might not have known it, but every night, when he held me, I enjoyed it.

Then in the morning, he's gone.

Evaporated like a dream.

A mirage I have imagined.

I climb out of bed and make my way back to my old room. It's become my sanctuary. Familiarity in an unknown place. But I find as I sit here, I feel utterly alone. It's a feeling I know well. One I've dealt with throughout the years, especially in Roman's absence.

When he was battling his addictions, he didn't come around, except when he needed something. It was such a lonely time for me.

I stand and make my way out of my room and head to the kitchen to grab a bite. Really, I'm searching for him.

He's a busy man, running both a legitimate business and an illegal one, and he's probably tied up, but I want to try to find him. I'm still bothered by the fact that it's been radio silence for the past few days.

Four days.

They've been excruciating. Like tiny grains of sand passing through time, it feels like an eternity. Despite the fact that I lay in his bed last night, I haven't been able to speak to him. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed our time together, but it bothers me now that it's gone. Where has he been? I continue to walk through the place, peeking into the kitchen. It's empty, and I decide I'm not hungry.

I came here under the false pretense that he'd be here drinking his morning coffee.

Maybe he's in his office. I head there next, poking my head inside, to find that, once again, he's not here.

Where is he?

I think about all the places I've seen him and check them all. The only place left is the atrium. When I find that deserted, too, I open the door and start to walk down the path.

Nobody is out here. I take the steps leading to the pool deck and don't find anybody anywhere. When I turn to walk down the path that leads to the gardens, I spot one of the guards.

"Do you know where Gideon is?"

"Got a thing for the boss?" the asshole says. A wide, creepy grin spreads across his face.

"No." I shake my head. Probably making myself look like an idiot. "It's just strange that he's not been around."

"He'll be back today. He's been handling some issues."

Is he okay? Is he in danger? Why the hell do I even care? *Because I do.*

That's the truth.

No matter how much I want to pretend otherwise.

I care.

And I miss him.

He's become more than just the annoying man holding me for my own

good.

I'm not sure when it happened, but I've started to consider him a friend.

Who are you kidding? It's more than that. When he's near, I come alive.

I'm not sure why, either.

*What is it about him?*

His fierce loyalty to my brother?

His protective nature?

He could have let me fend for myself.

Yet he has taken my attitude and my escape attempts, and he's never batted an eye. Sure, he moved me into his room to watch me, but even there, I'm not a prisoner.

I never was.

The garden is only a few steps away, the lush flowers beckoning me to relax under the shade of the large trees.

I wish I had my cello.

This is where I should be playing.

Beautiful rose bushes circle a courtyard with a bench in the middle.

That's where I would sit.

I'd play out here for hours, lost in thought, without a care in the world. It would be magical.

Taking a seat, I close my eyes and imagine what it must be like to live here full-time. To live in this luxury with people at your beck and call, yet the privacy I'd desire.

That's when I feel a presence. His presence.

I'd know it anywhere.

My intuition gives me that nudge in the form of light tingles and butterflies. There's nothing ominous about it.

My eyes open, and I see a shadow looming behind me. A flower hangs over my shoulder. It's a pink rose.

My hand reaches out, and I bring it to my nose. The fragrance fills my senses. As I inhale, I can't help running my fingers against the petals. They feel as soft and smooth as a cloud.

Turning over my shoulder, I find Gideon smiling down at me.

"Where have you been?" I practically whisper the words.

"Away."

"That's not an answer." I scoff, wanting to talk about anything.

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?" There's humor in his voice.

“There’s nothing to fight about.”

“Seems to me like you want a check-in every day. Feels like a relationship.”

I spin around on my seat, placing both hands on the sides of me and leaning forward. “We are most certainly not in a relationship.”

He shrugs.

“Could’ve fooled me with all that worry pouring off you.”

“I wasn’t worried. Just curious. You’re supposed to be protecting me, and you’ve been gone.”

He smiles. “I have plenty of people here to protect you. I trust them with my life. Did you not feel safe, firefly?”

Was I scared at any point?

No.

I felt well protected and cared for, even in his absence.

“I felt safe.”

“Well, then, no need to be worried or curious.”

I scowl because no matter what he says, I’m going to worry. I always did when my brother disappeared. Especially with their line of work. It’s dangerous. I never knew if he was in jail or dead. It was horrible.

“I have a surprise for you,” he says, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Be ready at six tonight.”

“What is it?” Now I’m bursting with curiosity, and if his grin is any indicator, he knows it.

“A surprise.”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes at him. “You and your secrets.”

Leaning in, I think he might kiss me again. My eyes close of their own accord, I can feel his soft breath on my mouth, and I wait.

But nothing happens.

Opening my eyes, I see him looking down at me with a smirk on his face. He places a chaste kiss on my cheek, turns, and leaves without another word.

I’m left cold and wanting.

My heart is heavy.

Why didn’t he *kiss* me?



# SASHA

I HAVE no idea where we're going.

Normally, this would scare me, but after the impromptu trip we took, I'm excited and nervous instead. The last surprise was incredible.

My knee bounces up and down where I sit beside Gideon in the back seat of the Escalade.

From across the small space, I can see that Gideon is watching me.

His head is tilted in my direction, and I know that if I turn to face him, his crystal-blue eyes will have me locked in his trance.

On my lap, the tips of my fingers drum frantically.

His hand reaches out across the space, and he shuffles his body until he is right beside me, his hand taking mine in his.

I practically melt into the seat. Even this simple touch unravels me.

"There is no reason to be nervous."

I turn my head to look up at him. "I'm not nervous."

"Doesn't look that way to me." His eyes shine, even in the dim light of the car.

He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles one by one. "Should I be?" I ask, trying to distract myself from what he's doing.

He knows it, and he isn't about to allow it. He stops his small kisses, and the moment our eyes lock again, the breath is knocked out of my lungs.

There is a strange energy that pulses between us.

Thick and charged with want.

I want to erase the small space between us and beg him to wrap his arms around me.



I can tell he wants the same.

Just as I think he might, the car rolls to a stop, and the moment is gone. Feeling disappointed, I move away from Gideon, looking toward the window, and narrow my eyes to look outside the car.

It's dark outside, and it's nearly impossible to see any details.

The door opens a second later, and when I step out into the pitch-black night, I still can't figure out where he's taken me.

Gideon steps out behind me, and then he's taking my hand in his.

"Come on." He gives my hand a little squeeze.

"Where are we?"

"Soon," he responds, giving nothing away.

A few weeks ago, I would have called the move infuriating, but I know whatever the surprise is, Gideon has thought only of my happiness.

My chest feels warm at the thought.

Together we walk to a back door, and I notice it's not locked as one of the men on Gideon's team opens it for us.

It's dark inside, but I allow Gideon to lead me to wherever he wants me to go.

It doesn't take long before we stop, and the lights flicker on.

I'm standing on a stage.

But not just any stage.

It's Lincoln Center. "How..." I mumble out, my eyes wide, my mouth hanging open now.

Swallowing, I try to clear my throat. Words feel thick, and my heart races frantically. "How are we here?"

"We got in a car and—"

"Don't play dumb. You know what I mean." The words are whispered as I take in the opulence of the space.

"I wanted you to play for me."

"You know I can't do that." My excitement has transformed into full-fledged panic.

My hands shake at my side as the blood pounds heavily in my veins.

I lose my footing from how hard I am shivering, but Gideon is quick to hold me steady. "Nobody's here. It's just you and me, firefly," he whispers into my ear, holding me from behind.

"What?" I ask, turning to look at him over my shoulder. "Just us?"

He nods. "I rented out the place. You'll only play for me tonight."

I sigh in relief, but it's only temporary. "I still can't play for you."

"You can and you will, firefly," he says, leaving no room for argument. "Now, take a seat." He taps my ass, and I glare at him in response. His hands fly up in surrender on a chuckle.

Looking back toward the stage, I notice a chair set up a few feet away, and right beside it is my cello.

Tentatively, I walk over. Opening the case slowly, I pull out my instrument. I feel faint as I stare at it.

"Stop stalling, Sasha. You're going to play, and nothing is going to stop that fact."

Can I do this?

Taking a seat, I look toward the vastness of the auditorium.

As a child, my parents would take me here. That was before they died, and life handed me disappointment after disappointment.

The seats are empty, but it doesn't matter. In my mind, they are filled with prying eyes and judgment.

My palms start to sweat, and my legs shake.

Gideon steps up behind me and places a hand on my shoulder.

"Focus on my words, firefly. Only me."

"Okay," I mumble out, determined to at least try.

He went to all this trouble renting the entire space out. The least I can do is try.

Wrong.

Fear isn't something so easily overcome. Especially when it's a fear born from childhood trauma that's lingered like a ghost for years.

"I want you to play—"

"I can't—"

"You promised to try. Now, once you're in position, close your eyes."

"I—"

"Shh," he coos. "You can do this, Sasha. You're brave."

Me? Brave?

I think of all that I've been through. What I've overcome on my own through this life. It hasn't been easy, and I have managed to survive. Maybe I am brave. Or at least, I can play at it for one night.

I fumble with the cello, feeling the familiar strings and curves of the instrument.

His hands trail down my back, down to my waist, his breath on my neck.

“Close your eyes, firefly,” he whispers. “And pretend you’re alone.”

I do as he’s instructed. Closing my eyes tightly, I breathe in deeply, trying desperately to pretend he’s not here.

I want to let the music wash over me.

But I can’t.

“What’s the problem? What can I do to help?”

I let out a long sigh, resting the cello against my chest as I turn to look at him. “I can’t get out of my head.”

“Yes, you can.”

“You don’t understand...I get locked in there. I hear the ridicule. I hear the scorn, my fear...”

“Then we just have to find you something else to think about.”

“What do you mean?” I try to look at him, but he shakes his head.

“Close your eyes.” I do.

“Get in position.” I lift the bow up to the cello.

I don’t need to see anything to play. It’s not the first time I’ve played with my eyes closed, but it’s the first time I’m doing it in front of someone.

I’m about to ask what’s next when I feel his hands trail up and down my back. His strong hands knead my tight muscles.

“Play.”

At his words, I take a deep breath, and the bow strikes the strings, a horrible screech slicing through the air.

“It’s okay. Try again. You’ve got this,” he whispers, his lips finding the shell of my ear.

His encouraging words, mixed with his hands caressing my body, give me the nudge I need to try again.

I shiver at the touch but continue to play.

The next chord rings out better, but not quite there.

“Tell me what you thought about when you lay in bed last night. I know you couldn’t sleep. Did you miss me in bed?” His words are like warm honey, dripping over me and making me crave the sweetness only he can provide.

I don’t speak, just shut my eyes tighter, muscle memory taking over as all the thoughts from the night before run through my brain.

The way I missed his warmth.

The way I wanted him to touch me.

Touch me like he is now.

His hands continue to rub at my muscles, trailing lower to find the tension living in my body as I try to play.

His fingers softly skim the side, touching the swell of my breast. My breath hitches, and I stop playing.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.”

“Then play, Sasha.”

I continue at his command, the song pouring through me. His hand lowers.

Teasing.

Taunting.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asks again, and this time, I shake my head.

His hand is right there, under my dress, skimming my bare thigh, and then his finger is pushing my panties aside. I stop playing again.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“You just asked me that,” I say on a moan.

“Well...you’re not answering, and every time you stop, I stop. So what’s it gonna be, firefly?”

I might die if he doesn’t touch me.

“No. I don’t want you to stop.”

“Then what are you doing, Sasha?”

My eyes dart around the space, and at that moment, more issues filter in.

“What if someone comes in?”

“I rented the whole building. Nobody is coming in.” He strokes a finger up my center. A moan slips from my parted lips. “Now...play.” I slide my fingers along the smooth curves of the cello, feeling every little groove and dip again.

Closing my eyes tightly, I give it my all.

The instrument is an extension of my body, a part of me that sings with each stroke of the bow, and I play, launching into the sweet strains of Bach’s Suite No. 1 in G Major, all the while, I can feel him.

I can’t focus on the music. But I must, or he’ll stop.

His fingers slide between my legs, and I moan as he finds my clit, rubbing it in circles as I play. I’m on the edge. The music pours through me. It’s muscle memory. I’m no longer here—the song has taken on a life of its own; all that matters to me is Gideon’s touch.

He pushes two fingers inside me, and I gasp. He fucks me with them,

pushing them in deep while he rubs my clit with his thumb.

I get lost in movements, and then, in turn, I get lost in the music.

I forget about my fears. I forget I'm playing in front of someone. And as the music hits the crescendo, I, too, fall over the edge. The music swells inside me, pouring out of me, throwing me into the throes of my orgasm.

Once my heart returns to a normal beat, I set down my bow and turn to face him, panting slightly from exertion. He watches me closely, a predator zeroing in on its prey. "You were incredible," he growls, pulling me into his arms and crashing his lips onto mine. "Good girl."

I will never tire of hearing those words.



# GIDEON

SHE'S INCREDIBLE.

Never have I heard anything so magnificent in my life.

The sound of Sasha coming at such a pivotal and powerful moment in her music almost brought me to my knees.

Now, I stand here, hard as a rock, as she tries to regulate her breathing, and instead of wanting to leave like I normally would, I want to bask in her glow forever.

When did I become this man? The kind that wishes to worship at a woman's feet. A man so entranced that nothing else matters.

*The second you saw her.*

The moment your obsession took over your every waking thought.

If she has any misconceived notions that she'll ever get away from me, she better think twice. She might have had a shot before I felt the way she quivered around my fingers...maybe. Now that I've had a taste? Nope. *Never.*

I've had her essence lingering on my lips and crave more. *Need* more. I'll never be done with her.

Still in my arms, Sasha quivers with the last of the aftereffects of her orgasm. Holding her tightly to me, I place my mouth on her pulse point. When the beat of her heart calms to a normal cadence, I slowly let her go.

For a second, Sasha sits perfectly still. Is she okay? Is she going to freak out on me?

Whatever the case, she better not regret it.

But then she turns to look over her shoulder, and I'm met with rosy, red

cheeks and a sated, hazy gaze in her eyes.

What I don't see is any remorse for what she just allowed me to do. No anger or resentment.

Which is good because I'll be doing it again real soon. Not just because the sweet melody she makes while playing would be criminal not to hear again, but because she deserves to one day play at Juilliard, and if riding my hand is what gets her over her fear of playing, I'm a willing servant.

I'll do anything to feel her again.

I don't care if she uses me. I'm hers to use.

She's never leaving me, and that's a fact she'll learn soon enough.

Now, I need to fuck her into submission until I'm able to hammer in that point. Then, when it's safe for her to leave, she won't.

It's a solid plan.

*Sasha will resist.*

I'll have to get her on board.

Her body shuffling as she places her cello back in the case pulls me out of my wayward thoughts.

Moving back, I give her space. Allowing her to do her thing and watching her every move like the stalker I've become. There's something so calming about the process. About this moment here, with her.

Once the cello case is closed, I reach my hand out and thread our fingers together. "Leave the cello," I say, needing to be close to her.

"What do you mean, leave the cello?" Her eyes are wide. It's as if I told her to break the thing.

"One of my men will grab it." I head toward the door, hoping she'll follow.

She doesn't.

I turn around, lifting a brow to signal, *what's the problem?*

"Your men..." she mumbles.

I narrow my eyes and take her in; the confident woman from moments ago has receded back into the girl who was too afraid to play in public. What's going on with her? "What's the problem, firefly?"

She looks around the stage, her gaze lingering over the empty chairs in the audience before looking back to where I'm standing. "Were—were they here the whole time?" Her stuttering has me stopping up short.

"You mean, were they here while you were riding my hand and playing the most beautiful song I've ever heard?"



Her eyes go wide, and her cute as fuck mouth drops open.

“Yes.” She gulps. “Were they?”

I take a step toward her, place my finger under her chin, and tilt her head up. Leaning down, I place my lips on hers, licking the seam. Then I pull away and meet her gaze. “Yes, they were. But they didn’t hear you. They were under strict instructions, and my men obey their orders.”

She swallows again, but this time it looks like she believes me, and she should. I would never let my men hear my girl, let alone see her.

“Okay.” Her voice is low, barely a whisper.

I look down at our entangled hands. Her skin is soft, and her hand is so small in mine. I can feel the pulse in her wrist. The beat is mesmerizing.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks, and I can hear the curiosity in her voice.

“You,” I admit. “I’m thinking about you.”

And it’s true. I can’t stop thinking about her. About how the universe put her in my orbit—albeit in a less than favorable way. But that doesn’t matter. She’s mine now.

Sasha is all I can think about.

I want this woman.

But I don’t say any of that. Instead, I lock my jaw, unwilling to show all my cards at once.

I hate how weak she makes me. I hate my obsession. “Feeding you,” I clarify. “Now let’s go. We have dinner plans.”

“We do?”

I nod, pulling her toward the exit. “Yes.”

She plants her feet, stopping us once more. “Is it safe to go out in the city?”

I pull her in closer, staring into her beautiful round eyes. “Haven’t you realized yet, when you’re with me, you will always be safe? I’ll move heaven and earth to make sure of that.”

She bites her upper lip and nibbles on it before she nods. I place a chaste kiss on her lip, and together we walk toward the back exit of Lincoln Center. I lead her through dark hallways, and never once does she ever seem afraid.

It’s funny. She’s not scared of the dark, only scared of the shadows in her own mind.

Sasha said she used to love to play, but what happened to make her stop for other people?

She mentioned Roman, and my mind is going a mile a minute trying to uncover what he might've done to cause the shift in her.

I know there is a story there.

Will she ever tell me?

Together, we step into the quiet alley. There's no sound but the scuffle of our feet on the ground. It's a little disconcerting for this part of the city. The air is still heavy from the night, and the only light comes from the one lamppost at the end of the alley.

I know my men are nearby, and that's the only reason I'm not picking Sasha up and rushing to the car. I don't give a damn about being confronted on my own, but nobody will get to her.

We are both silent as we get into the waiting car. I wonder what's going through her mind but opt not to ask. I'm too focused on getting to the restaurant I've rented just for us. The anticipation is killing me. Will she like it?

She's turned away from me, staring out the window, and once again, I wonder what's going through her head.

"What are you looking at?" I ask, unable to stave off the curiosity.

"The city." It's all she offers, and it annoys me. I want more from her.

I want *everything*.

"And you're looking at it *because*?"

She takes a deep breath, blowing it out harshly. "No matter how long I live here, I'll never get over it."

My lips smash together, and my nose scrunches up in confusion. "Get over what?"

"It—" She waves her hand around, gesturing to the streets, the lights, the cars. "It's like a tapestry of lights, a constant work of art. Towering buildings, every one of them unique. Each like a fingerprint. It's the same with the people. The people." She sighs. "They're the stars of the show, bright and shining."

For several minutes I sit here, stunned by her account of the city. I've spent my entire life roaming these streets, and never have I taken the time to truly appreciate it the way she has. Seeing it through her eyes is something entirely different. It's clear she loves the city.

And an unknown threat has taken it from her.

"You must miss it."

"I do. But—" She turns to face me, turning her back to her city. "I

understand. I know why I can't be here, and—" She lowers her head, averting her gaze.

I place my fingers under her chin and lift her head so that we're once again staring into each other's eyes. "And?"

"I'm grateful to you."

The car rolls to a stop, and the moment is over. I offer a small smile, and then I'm out of the car and reaching my hand in to help her out. We walk hand in hand, stopping when we've arrived just outside of the restaurant.

Around us, music rings through the air.

"Where's it coming from?" she asks.

I slant my head, taking in the bells chiming. The music comes from a store halfway up the block from where we stand.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Sasha looking at me, her gaze asking me a million questions. Questions I don't want to answer.

*What are you doing? What are you thinking? What are you feeling?*

But she doesn't ask. A barrier blankets the space between us. Sasha would need a wrecking ball and divine intervention to bring it down because I'm not ready to share my past. That would be admitting to her how much I care about her.

Too damn much.

She hums the melody of the bells. "If you pay attention, everything has its own cadence. Its own music. These float between four octaves. D2 through D6. It's breathtaking." She sighs. "I wish I had my cello."

Sasha looks lost in her own world—of bells, whistling notes, and humming—when I wrap my hand around the nape of her neck, curling around her throat.

"Do that again." My voice sounds harsh, but I need to hear it.

Need to relive the past. Need to remind myself why my work is important.

Her eyes fly open, and she's met with me, hovering mere inches in front of her face.

"Do what again?"

"That melody."

She hums the bells' song. The notes vibrate against my palm. My eyes shut, forehead coming down to meet hers. Words tumble from my mouth, and I don't even have the energy to fight it.

"When my dad kicked me out, I struggled to find food."

She doesn't stop humming. The melody seeps between us as I share more than I've ever shared before, and Sasha never once interrupts me. She does as I asked, and later, I'll dissect whether that has something to do with me opening up.

"There was a street with a dozen restaurants, and each week, when the bells started ringing, the owners and staff would congregate in one place for a meeting, leaving the stores unattended. I would take advantage of that fact."

My hand loosens around the column of her neck. "Often, it was the only time I would eat."

Her breath hitches, and I feel a tear drop from her chin onto my hand.

The first true sign Sasha cares. For me.



# SASHA

HIS WORDS PLAY on an endless loop in my mind, and my heart aches at the thought.

The only times he ate was when he would sneak into stores and steal food. Now all the times he was concerned with my eating make sense. He went hungry, and he doesn't want me to.

This is a weak spot. A loose brick in his façade.

The thing is, where in the past I might have wanted to exploit this, I don't want to now.

I've seen brief glimpses of Gideon Byrne, and I know there is more to him than the persona of a ruthless boss.

And I never could have admitted it or imagined it before, but I want to know everything there is about him. And not for my survival, but because I'm interested in him.

Which is a good thing since I just let him finger me in Lincoln Center.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Yep, just peachy," I respond as I follow him toward the door to the restaurant. The smell of the city still lingers in my nose as Gideon swings it open, and we step inside.

It's beautiful. Elegant but quaint. It's dim, the lights low and sensuous. The walls are a deep shade of blue, like the depths of a deep ocean.

Gideon takes my hand, and butterflies take flight at the contact. As we move through the room, shadows of light dance across my face.

"You don't look okay." The desire to tell him I was okay, but now I'm not because I remember his touch filters through me. The way he played my

body as if I were the cello.

“Are you warm?” he asks.

Great, now I’m blushing.

“Just parched,” I answer, placing my hands on my lap and fiddling with the hem of my dress. Gideon nods before raising his hand to signal for the server. “I can’t believe you rented out this whole place for us.”

“I know you were bored...” His voice is playful, and it makes me smile.

I quirk a brow at him. “Well, there’s bored, and then there’s renting out a whole restaurant. And don’t get me started on Lincoln Center.”

“No, please”—he grins—“let’s talk about that.” My cheeks warm as I wait for him to mention the enormous elephant in the room. But he doesn’t. “Why can’t you perform in public? You mentioned your brother, but you never gave a reason.”

I take a deep breath. “I was on stage, and I was searching the crowd. The only person I had was Roman. It was my turn to play. I had the cello between my legs and the bow lifted, but as I searched the crowd, I couldn’t find him. Even after my parents died, I had never felt this alone. I felt naked in front of the crowd. And when I lifted my bow, my shaky hand jerked, and a screech rang through the air. The crowd of my peers, of everyone at the school, they all laughed. I closed my eyes, and then I remember the feeling of tears running down my cheeks.”

“What happened?”

“I ran.”

“And you haven’t tried since?”

I shake my head. “I have, but every time I do, I still hear them...well, until tonight.” Now I’m for sure blushing. My cheeks are on fire. “You said you were hungry,” I say, changing the topic.

“I was.” His answer surprises me. I know he said it, but I didn’t expect him to be okay with me asking him again.

“Me too.” I look down at the table, finger absentmindedly touching the tines of the fork.

The silence between us becomes thick. The moment stretches as I wait for the tension to break.

“I’m sorry.” Gideon’s voice sounds like gravel.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Gideon cocks his head in a mocking gesture. “Only a month ago, you had a different opinion on the matter.”

“I realized Roman was a big boy. He made his own bed.”

“True.”

“How did you survive?”

“Winter was cold in New York, especially when you’re homeless, so I made my way to Florida. Miami, to be exact. That’s when I met my friend Tobias. We were both teens. The only difference was his family was in the business. Tobias got me a job. The rest is history.”

It’s obvious that this is the part where Gideon doesn’t want to tell me more, and to be honest, I’m surprised he told me as much as he did.

I don’t need him to tell me more because the man I know and the man who worked for Tobias and then took over are two separate people to me.

Luckily for me, the server chooses that moment to come over and places two menus in front of us.

After we both order, Gideon leans forward and rests his elbows on the table.

“Tell me one good memory.”

“From my childhood?” I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, nervous energy starting to kick up in my stomach at the thought of talking about this with him.

“No. Tell me about a good memory with your brother.”

His question throws me off balance. I’ve spent so long hating my brother, I can barely remember a time when it was just the two of us when I didn’t.

My mouth opens and shuts.

“It can be anything, firefly. It doesn’t have to be anything elaborate. Just a good memory.” He says it so casually, but he doesn’t know what it was like.

But he does.

His family let him down too.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, allowing the memories to filter through my brain. When it hits me, I smile.

“You found one?” he asks, and I open my eyes to find him staring at me, his own smile lining his face.

“I did.”

“Tell me.”

I slant my head and stare off into space. “After my parents died, I often wondered how things would have been different. Not having a mom around was hard. You don’t realize at first how much a mom does, but then one



winter, I did realize what I was missing. It was so cold. The snow had turned to ice, and we were too poor. I had no gloves, and we couldn't afford anything."

"What happened?"

"Roman found old gloves for me. They weren't the right size, and there were rips everywhere. But he took out mom's old sewing stuff. He had no idea how to sew, let alone how to thread the needle." I can't help but laugh. "But he sewed up every hole. They were the ugliest gloves you'd ever see. But they kept me warm."

"I'm happy you had him. Even if you only had him for a short time."

My eyes fill with tears. "I'm happy I had him too. I just wish I had longer."

"I know. I'm sorry if I upset you."

I shake my head, wiping the tears that fell from my eyes. "Thank you for reminding me. I almost forgot what he was like. What he was really like."

Gideon reaches his hand out and squeezes my hand. "Well, then, I'm happy."

We fall into silence, but it's brief as the waitress returns with our food.

The meal that follows is nothing short of magnificent, and the rest of my evening passes in a blur, filled with light conversations that seem to last forever.

Being with Gideon reminds me of what I imagine holding stardust would be like. Beautiful and surreal, and you know it can't possibly be real.

His eyes never stray from mine the whole time; they're intense. This moment feels different. Like tonight changed everything.

And maybe it did.

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AFTER LAST NIGHT, I DON'T KNOW WHERE WE STAND. I'VE KEPT MY distance, but now I find myself hungry and with nervous energy coursing through me.

I make my way to the kitchen, and when I step inside, I'm immediately enveloped in warmth. The air is thick with the scent of spices and freshly baked bread.

This kitchen is a chef's dream, I'm sure. In my apartment, I barely have a

kitchen. A sink, a stove—so small it’s barely usable—and an oven just hardly allow it to pass as such. I don’t even have a dishwasher, but since it’s just me, it’s not the biggest deal.

This place, however, has everything. It’s something out of a magazine. I love it.

When I was a child, I had a kitchen worth cooking in. It wasn’t quite this big, but it was still impressive. My mom would always bake amazing desserts and homemade bread. I couldn’t wait for the day she’d teach me how to do it.

Then my parents died and there went my chance of learning to bake with my mom.

My eyes sting as I try to stave off the tears welling in my eyes. Losing my parents hurt. Now I’m all alone. I blow out a breath, shoving down those thoughts.

Not today.

Since my cooking skills are lacking, I won’t be whipping up any gourmet meals. Instead, I make my way to the pantry and grab a loaf of bread and some peanut butter. Next, I open the fridge, grab the jelly, and start making my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, feeling like a five-year-old.

It’s when I start to cut the crusts off the sides that I hear the heavy footsteps coming from behind me.

I turn to see Gideon striding over in my direction.

My heart races at the sight of him.

Gideon has been gone for the past two days. I haven’t seen him since the “incident,” as I like to call it. We both opened ourselves up the night at Lincoln Center, and it’s left me feeling confused about where that leaves us. I wrestled with the possibility that our night was why he left and stayed away for days. Was he running? If so, from what? Me? The feelings?

Ugh. Sometimes being me is exhausting. My ability to overthink is something prize-worthy.

I peek up at him again and smile because he’s back...and wow, does he look good.

He must have had a meeting because normally he’s not dressed up, but today he is. He’s wearing a gray suit that’s probably more than my monthly rent payment. It’s tailored to fit him perfectly, and I can’t stop staring.

Jeez, I’m a sucker for a man in a suit. There’s something about the way a man in a suit carries himself, all put together and polished. It’s like he’s walking confidence incarnate. And when he smiles...like he is right now?

Forget it. I'm a goner. Gideon, in a suit, is my kryptonite. And I'm not ashamed to admit it.

It's like he can hear my thoughts because he chuckles, deep and masculine.

Hook.

Line.

And sinker.

My face feels warm. I hope I'm not blushing.

You're so blushing.

Now it feels awkward standing in front of him gawking like a lovesick teenager.

Not lovesick. *Not* lovesick.

I repeat the words over in my head, trying to calm my racing heart and shaky legs.

He deserted you. He left after you opened up to him.

I remind myself of this, hoping to shift gears and pull myself together.

A part of me knows he's busy and runs a business, even if it's a shady one, but another part of me can't help but wonder if I was right and he's been avoiding me.

"Crust cut off. I didn't take you for the type," he says, pulling me from my thoughts.

"And what type would that be?" I lift my brow. "This I've got to hear." He doesn't respond, just continues to stare at me as I lift the knife to cut another side. His gaze tracks my every move, and I have to try my hardest not to melt on the floor from his perusal. "Would you like your own, or are you just going to stare at mine?"

He chuckles. "Obviously, I want one. Exactly like yours."

"Crust cut off and all?" My head dips, my gaze fixing on the sandwich I'm currently putting together, a crooked smile plastered across my face for reasons I don't even want to work out.

No such luck.

Immediately, my mind goes to the other night.

His fingers inside me while I played my cello like it would be the last time. The way he worked my body like he knew exactly what it needed.

My cheeks heat to inferno levels, and now, I'm without a doubt blushing, and I hope to God he doesn't see it. *Wrong again.*

"What?" When he speaks, his voice sounds husky. It's decadent, like

warm chocolate drizzled over strawberries.

“Huh?” I work diligently on the sandwich, anything to keep me busy and my eyes off his.

“Why are you blushing?”

The knife falls out of my hand and clanks onto the plate. I screw my eyes shut. Can this moment get any more awkward? It feels like I’ve just stepped onto the stage ready to play, yet I’ve forgotten the notes. I can hear it now... the sudden hush, a moment of stillness, and then everyone’s eyes are on me.

But instead of a crowd, it’s just Gideon, and still, I want to sink into the floor, to be anywhere but here at this moment of humiliation.

My face burns, and my heart races.

I pivot away from him. But from behind me, I can hear his steps as he approaches. Then he’s right upon me, caging me in against the counter.

My back is to his front, and if I take a step back, I’d feel the hard planes of his chest.

“Turn around, firefly.” I shake my head. “Don’t hide from me. You never have to hide from me.”

Slowly, I do as he’s asked and turn around.

“Good girl.” My knees wobble at his words, and his eyes sparkle at my reaction. “That wasn’t so hard, right?”

“No.” I meet his gaze. “It wasn’t.”

He runs his fingers up the nape of my neck, and then they bracket around me tighter as he pulls me toward him.

Our lips meet, the force brutal. Primal.

It tastes like sin. Of all the things I shouldn’t want but can’t help but crave, it’s his kiss. Yet I do. So much.

I’m enraptured by this man, desperate for him, and as bad as an idea this is, I can’t find it in me to care.

Arms wrap around each other’s bodies, tongues fighting a wicked dance. I’m lost to this man, but that’s when a sound cuts through the lust. A man clears his throat, and I go still.

Gideon breaks the kiss, stepping away and blowing out a harsh breath. “No interruptions.” His voice echoes around the kitchen, angry and impatient.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but it can’t wait,” the man says from the doorway.

“Fine. Two minutes. Lower level.” When the man leaves, Gideon leans

in. I think he's actually going to kiss me again, but he leans around me and grabs the sandwich.

My sandwich, the sandwich he teased me over.

He lifts it to his mouth, smirking.

"Hey, that's mine," I whine.

"And that is the very reason I want it, firefly." He winks before setting off to meet his men.

Leaving me equal measures of hungry and wanting.



# SASHA

HOURS LATER, I'm sitting in Gideon's home theater, doing something I rarely get to do...relaxing. Ever since I've been living in his house, it has reminded me of the little pleasures I've been missing out on in the pursuit of my dream to attend Juilliard. If I'm not playing or sleeping, I'm usually working.

I've missed the luxury of watching movies and lying around.

This room is like every other room in this manor...incredible. It's like nothing I have ever seen before. Despite the many times I've been here, the ambience never gets old.

The walls are painted a dark blue, which just helps me settle in to winding down and relaxing. On the ceiling are twinkling stars that make me feel like I'm sitting under the night sky.

I'm so enthralled with my surroundings that I almost miss it when Gideon walks into the room. He looks over at me, where I'm sitting in the reclining theater chair, and I meet his stare, melting as his big, blue eyes lock with mine.

"Hey," I say as he walks closer to me. Stalking like the predator he likes to play at.

"Watching anything good?" His voice is casual. At this moment, we are two normal people having a mundane conversation. We're boring, and I love it.

Shrugging my shoulders, I turn back to the movie. I'm not really watching it. More like I'm trying to get my breathing to calm down. The moment he walked into the room, the oxygen was snuffed out, and I'm left practically gasping for air.

Gideon sits down in the chair beside me, and for a few seconds, we stay in silence. Then the air goes heavy around us. It reminds me of a rubber band being pulled taut; it's only moments before it will snap. I can feel the tension between us growing with each passing second. It's like there's something he wants to say, or maybe it's me who wants to say something.

"You played beautifully the other night. I don't remember if I ever said anything," he says softly, his eyes searching mine.

I turn my gaze back to the movie. "You did."

"Next time, we might have to fill in those seats." There is a teasing note in his voice now, but my eyes snap back to him.

"Um, no," I retort, making him chuckle.

"I thought your dream was to play at Lincoln Center in front of a crowd?"

"It is, but—" I begin, but stop myself.

"But what?"

I shake my head. "I don't know."

Gideon reaches across the space until his hand touches my cheek. "You know." He doesn't press, and for that, I'm grateful. But he continues with a new line of questioning. "Before Lincoln Center, you had other dreams. What were they?"

"Depends on who you ask. The nine-year-old Sasha. Or the fourteen-year-old. Or maybe the nineteen-year-old. All different dreams."

He grabs my hand, giving it a squeeze. "Tell me all of them."

"Nine-year-old Sasha had sweet dreams." I take a deep breath and close my eyes. "She dreamed of learning to bake. Of traveling the world. Or going to college and playing cello."

"What happened to that dream?"

"My parents died, and it was just Roman and me. Those dreams changed."

"What changed?" His voice is rough, like he's waiting on bated breath for me to speak and has a vested interest in what I'll say.

"Things I thought were important no longer mattered compared to the hell my life became after they died." I open my eyes and look at him. "Like I said before, I was hungry. So fourteen-year-old Sasha only dreamed of enough money for food."

It was something that hit me hard the other day when he was sharing because it wasn't unlike my story.

"When I met him, I didn't realize it was that bad."



“It was. Then it wasn’t. As you know, Roman started making money, and things got better. I didn’t understand what he was doing to provide. I was just thankful.”

From where he sits beside me, I can hear his sharp inhale. He knows he’s the reason for the change and, ultimately, the reason for the downfall too.

I don’t let him sit in that train of thought, moving on to answer more of his question.

“Then I was nineteen and dreamed of hiding from Roman. To make sure that he didn’t steal the money I had saved to satiate his drug addiction.”

He presses his fisted hands against his forehead. “I wish I knew.” When he lowers his arms, I can see the pained expression on his face. He doesn’t say more, but I know he means about the drugs, and I believe him.

“No more talking, okay?” I suggest, wanting to be done and get back to relaxing.

“Okay,” he agrees.

We both settle in to watch the movie, but not long after, the couple on the screen starts to kiss. I try to keep my attention on the movie, but it’s difficult with the heat of him beside me. His chair is too close. From the corner of my eye, I can see him watching me. My breathing accelerates as I take him in.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” My question comes out breathy and full of need.

He leans across the small space that divides my chair from his. “Like you want to be devoured.”

“Maybe I do.” The words come out just barely a whisper, but he doesn’t miss them.

Instead, he does just that. He leans down to capture my lips in a rough kiss. Devouring.

Unspoken words are said. *I want you. I need you.*

The lust hangs heavily in the air. It is nearly suffocating because it’s so potent.

I ache for him.

His warm hands splay across my back, and I moan at the contact. Gideon answers by pulling me over the divide until I’m seated on his lap.

He never stops. He never breaks our kiss.

If anything, his mouth becomes more desperate for me. Electric energy sizzles between us. Like little fireflies finally being let out of a glass jar.

His nickname for me.

The thing about fireflies is, once you let them out, can they ever be caught again?

And more importantly, do I even want to be?



# GIDEON

I NEED HER.

I want to take my time.

I want to worship every inch of her body.

The look in Sasha's eyes makes me feel hungry for whatever she's willing to feed me. The way her pupils are dilated and hazy is addicting. I want to fuck her right here, right now, but I can't. The first time I have her won't be in a theater chair.

Grabbing Sasha tighter, I move to a standing position, with her still secure in my arms as I do.

"What are you doing?" she squeaks as I walk toward my bedroom.

"Don't ask stupid questions." I smack her ass playfully, and she yelps.

There are too many damn stairs, and I consider taking them two at a time, but instead, I take a deep breath to calm the raging inferno building inside me.

I need to take my time with her. Rushing this won't satisfy me.

When we are on the landing, I make the turn toward my room, picking up my pace, eager to get her alone and naked. If she'll allow. Making it to my quarters in record time, I swing the door open with my free hand and kick it shut with my foot.

I don't slow my approach to the bed, throwing her down on it and crouching over her.

"I'm going to kiss you...amongst other things." I smirk down at her, and that's the only warning I give before my lips descend and clash against hers with a brutal force.

My hands run up her bare legs to where she's only wearing a pair of flimsy pajama shorts.

I slip a finger inside the hem on her thigh, tracing circles on her skin. She isn't wearing panties, and I growl in response.

"I need to taste you," I mutter against her lips. She nods. "I need words, firefly."

"Yes." That one word is breathy and sexy as hell.

I trail kisses down her throat, taking my time as I work my way south. When I'm finally between her thighs, I push aside the shorts and flick my tongue across the seam of her pussy, and she moans in response.

"Please," she pleads, and I don't waste time pulling the fabric down her legs and discarding them over my shoulder before diving back in.

I'm ravenous, and she's the feast I've salivated for my entire life.

"You taste fucking amazing." I continue to lick and suck, to tease her with my tongue. When her hips lift, silently begging for more, I bring my hand around and part her with my fingers.

Slipping one in at first, I thrust deep inside her.

Then a second finger.

She rocks her pelvis up. "More," she commands, and I am but her humble servant.

My mouth sucks harder, and a third finger slips in, pressing upward until it hits the perfect sweet spot inside her. Her inside walls pulse around my fingers as her eyes flutter shut, signaling her release.

She spasms and moans through the aftereffects, riding my hand all the while. When she's done, it takes her a few seconds to regulate her breathing.

I don't wait, making quick work of undressing. She doesn't voice any concerns. If anything, her eyes darken with want, giving me all the confirmation I need.

I'm standing stark naked at the foot of the bed, looking down at her.

"This needs to go," I say, stripping her of all her remaining clothes.

I grab my rock-hard cock in my hand, stroking it up and down. I can't wait to feel her wrapped around me. Nothing between us. A primal need to brand her to me, to thrust inside her raw, comes over me. "I've seen your records. I'm fucking you bare." My words come out rough, too far gone to control my need.

"What the fuck? Stalker much?" She purses her lips, and I nibble the swollen flesh into my mouth before letting her go.

“When it comes to you...always. I’ll do anything to protect you, including look at your records.” I practically growl at her. I expect her to object, to tell me to stop, to argue about the invasion of privacy, but I get none of that.

“I guess you could’ve lied. I appreciate that you didn’t.”

“I want nothing between us, firefly. Not now. Not ever.” I mean those words literally and metaphorically.

Right now, I just want my cock inside her.

I spread her legs farther apart and angle the head of my cock against her. I want to plunge inside, but I don’t.

Instead, I tease her with the tip.

“Tell me you want me to fuck you bare, firefly.” She lets out a ragged gasp. “Tell me you want my cock inside you with nothing separating us.” Another moan escapes her mouth. I swirl the tip and collect the wetness. “Tell me to fuck you.”

Sasha tilts her hips up, trying to impale herself on my length, but instead, I pull back. “Not happening. Tell me what I want to hear.” I lean forward and press my lips to her mouth, licking along the bottom. “All you have to do is use your words,” I say.

Her eyes close on a harsh exhale before the words tumble out. “Please, fuck me,” she begs, and I answer her plea with the slamming of my hips upward. Once I’m seated inside her, *I* exhale.

Fuck.

She feels like heaven and fits me like a glove.

My vision goes blurry from the sublime bliss when her walls contract, instantly tightening around me.

For a second, we both catch our breath as she adjusts to my size and I enjoy the feel of her, but it isn’t enough. I need more before I combust.

Pushing her legs farther apart, I slam into her.

Impaling her on my cock repeatedly.

Pulling out, then slamming back in. Fucking her relentlessly.

Reaching my hand between us, I work her toward orgasm, circling her clit. I want to feel her body tighten around me. I want us to come together.

And with the extra pressure of my finger working her over, I feel her body grip me like a vise. I know she’s close.

That thought alone has me ready. My balls tighten, and I know I’m close as well.

“You feel amazing,” I groan. “Come, firefly.”

“Fuck,” she pants. “Oh my fucking God.”

“Come all over my cock,” I command, needing her release.

Her whole body quakes around me. “That’s my good girl, come.” And at my words and praise, she does.

She likes when I praise her. It’s her weakness, and I plan to use it to my advantage.

I fall forward, no longer able to hold my weight as I collapse on top of her.

Coming down from my high, I realize she’s not the only one of us with a weakness.

Sasha herself is mine. This girl has me all wrapped up.

It’s dangerous.

The world I live in is dangerous, and I’m not sure I want to tie her up in it any more than she already is.

I have to remind myself that keeping her close to me will ensure she’s safe.

Not that it matters because I can’t let her go.

When I find the fucker who wants to hurt her, I *will* kill them.

Their demise will be slow and painful.

Excruciating.

I will strip them bare and cut off every piece of their soul.

Death will be too easy for them.

No one threatens my firefly and lives.

Only I can trap her in glass.

She’s mine.

Soon the world will know it.





# SASHA

THE MOONLIGHT SPILLS through the window, casting a pale glow over the room. Outside, the wind howls, and the branches of the trees scratch against the glass; it's the only sound breaking the stillness of the night.

I don't know what time it is, but it has to be sometime after midnight. I'm starving.

Turning to look at Gideon, I find his eyes closed. Quietly, so as not to wake him, I creep out of bed and throw on one of his T-shirts.

It only takes me a few minutes to meander through the dark halls, finding my way to the kitchen. I browse the refrigerator, but I'm not sure what I should eat. It's too late to cook, but I need something.

I glance around the sparsely lit room, and that's when I see a cookie jar sitting on the counter.

Perfection.

A little bit of sugar is exactly what I need.

Walking over to it, I lift the lid and go to grab a cookie when I hear Gideon—or someone—coming down the stairs. My heart beats faster, but I don't have time to process why exactly. I turn around and see him.

Gideon.

He's wearing a tight black T-shirt that shows off his muscles and a pair of jeans that fit him perfectly. He looks at me with those blue eyes that make my knees feel weak, and I'm practically a puddle on the floor.

"Are you stealing a cookie from me?" That small smirk gives away his teasing.

"You caught me," I say with a sheepish grin. "And I wouldn't say that I

was stealing.”

“And what, pray tell, would you call it? Borrowing?”

“Fine, you caught me.” I laugh, throwing my hands up dramatically. “I was stealing your cookies.”

I hand him a cookie from the jar.

“Thanks,” he says, smiling back at me.

I take a bite of the little piece of heaven, marveling at how good it is. His cook is next level. Not that I should be surprised. What can’t this man pay for?

“Next time, I’m going to charge you.” His smile broadens.

Licking my lips, I smirk. “What’s the cost?”

He shrugs one shoulder. “It might be a little steep for you...”

“That’s presumptuous. How do you know I don’t have money stashed away?”

“Do you?” He raises an eyebrow.

“No, but I could’ve.” The whining tone makes him chuckle.

“I wasn’t referring to money, firefly, and I can assure you, my expectations will be outside of your comfort zone.”

“Try me.” It’s a dare I’m not prepared to put out there, but it’s too late.

“I want you to do something for me?”

“Anything,” I say immediately, deciding that if I’m going big, I’m going really big.

“Anything?” He comes up close to me and puts his hand on my ass.

“Anything.” The word is repeated in the sultriest voice I can manage, and based on the way his eyes darken, it worked.

“I want you on your knees.” His voice sounds raw. A shiver goes down my spine at his words. “I want your mouth on me.”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach. Excitement and lust filter through my veins, but I hesitate. “We can’t do this here,” I whisper, glancing around the room to make sure any of his staff have not overheard us.

He gives a wicked grin, his fingers digging into my flesh. “That’s what makes it so hot, firefly. The danger of getting caught.” He pushes me down until I’m kneeling before him, untying his sweatpants and freeing his hard length from the confines of his boxers.

I look up at him and lick my lips nervously as he guides himself toward my waiting mouth, a low moan escaping him as I tentatively wrap my lips around his tip. He threads his fingers through my hair, guiding and

controlling every thrust and suck as I relish in pleasuring him.

His breathing becomes ragged and faster.

His thrusts intensify. His hips move forward as he pushes his cock deeper into my mouth.

The more aggressive he gets, the more turned on I become. Then he grabs me by my hair and fucks my face, and my hand drops to between my parted thighs.

I touch myself, and as soon as I do, he pulls his cock out of my mouth and lifts me up to face him. Pushing me back against the kitchen table, he pulls my pajama pants all the way off. Then he pushes two fingers inside me and starts rubbing my clit with his thumb.

“You’re so wet,” he says in a hoarse voice. I moan in response. “You like getting fucked by me?”

“Yes,” I moan again.

“Tell me how much you love it.”

“I love getting fucked by you,” I say, mewling loudly as he rubs my clit harder.

“You’re going to come for me,” he commands.

“Yes,” I cry out as he rubs faster and harder.

I’m more than prepared to obey his command. My orgasm builds, and my center pulses.

“Now,” he orders, and just like that, I come all over his fingers.

For several minutes, we stay like this as our breathing calms down.

“Damn,” he says as he pulls his fingers out of me. “You’re amazing.” He bends down. “And I want more.”

Gideon picks me up and carries me over to the kitchen counter, laying me down on my back and spreading my legs wide open before lowering himself between them. He licks my pussy, sending shivers of pleasure through my body. Another orgasm rises to the surface, and I wonder how that’s possible. Has that ever happened to me before?

No.

He thrusts his tongue inside me, making me come even harder than before.

His hand tugs on my wrist as he pulls me closer, the heat radiating off his body. His dark eyes are piercing as they fixate on my lips.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard, firefly,” he growls, thrusting deep inside me. “You feel so fucking tight around my cock. Like a glove gripping me.”

He grabs my hair as he continues to fuck me harder and harder. “You belong to me. Say it,” he demands between harsh breaths.

“I belong to you,” I moan, the pleasure making my body shudder.

I feel like I’m going to break in half. This might be the end of me.

“Good girl,” he praises, slipping a hand between us to rub at my clit as he pounds into me relentlessly. I whimper in response, unable to form words at this point. My brain is mush, and my body is oversensitive, but somehow wave after wave of orgasm crash over me until we both come undone in a tangle of sweat and lust.

Holy. Shit.

I won’t survive this man.



# SASHA

THE SUN IS JUST PEEKING over the horizon when I wake up. Streaks of light set the early morning sky ablaze with bright pink and orange, casting a warm glow on everything in the room.

I stretch out and yawn, taking a moment to savor the feeling of the sun's heat on my skin.

It's a beautiful morning. In fact, I don't remember a day more beautiful. Everything feels new and fresh.

*Except my body that's been ravaged for days.*

Standing from the bed, I walk to the window and open the curtains a bit more, letting the sunshine in. The warm light feels good on my skin. I stand there for a moment, just basking in the morning's glow.

Gideon stirs in the bed, and I turn to see him watching me with a sleepy smile on his face.

"Good morning, firefly," he says, reaching out his arms and beckoning for me to join him in the bed.

It's so surreal how normal this all feels. How right.

I walk over and crawl into his arms, snuggling close. "Good morning," I whisper before closing my eyes. We lie quietly together, just enjoying being in each other's arms.

Time passes in peace and comfort until Gideon breaks the silence sometime later. "I don't want to get up."

I laugh softly. "Then don't."

He shrugs sheepishly. "I haven't left this room in three days," he says. "It's hard to get anything done when I know you're in here."

I nod in understanding. “I’ll stop being a distraction, then.” I start to get up, but Gideon stops me.

“Not yet,” he groans. “A few more minutes.”

I smile and settle back into his arms. “Okay,” I whisper. “Just a few more minutes.”

An hour later, we’re still lying in bed.

I can’t stop thinking about how we spent the last few days.

A whirlwind of sex. Followed by cuddling and not much more. It’s funny to think how much has changed.

Only a little over a month ago, I loathed this man. Wanted to see him rot in the deepest part of hell.

When I first met him, I thought he was someone else entirely. I realize that he isn’t the man I thought he was. The truth is, even then, even in the beginning, he was looking out for me.

He’s protective.

He’s given me everything I’ve asked for and more.

And I fought him at every turn.

Things shifted a long time ago, my views of him changing with every little gesture. Every olive branch he extended. But it really changed the night at the theater.

I remember the way I felt playing the cello that night. The music didn’t come to me right away because I was too inside my own head. When it did, it was strained. But then Gideon touched me, and it was beautiful. I felt so connected to it. When I play, it’s like nothing else in the world matters.

It’s just the music and me.

I often lose myself in the music, allowing it to transport me to a place where I feel completely at peace. It’s a piece of heaven that I can always go back to, no matter what is happening in my life.

Gideon is bringing it back to me.

He encourages me. With him beside me, I feel like I might just be able to play in front of a crowd one day.

A laugh bubbles up from my mouth.

Imagine if this man, a man I thought I hated, fixed me.

“What are you thinking about, firefly?”

From where I’m nestled in his chest, I turn my head upward and look at him. “The fact that you got me to play again.”

He huffs. “I did nothing.”

I twist around, bracketing his body with my arms and staring him in the eyes to make him hear my words. “You did, and I appreciate it. You gave me something that night, and I’ll never forget it.”

“I sure did.” He smirks, and I lift my hand and pretend to swat at him.

“Knock it off. I’m being serious.”

Gideon grabs my hand, pressing a kiss to each knuckle. “Anything is possible. You just have to believe in yourself as much as I believe in you.” His words make me feel warm and tingly.

We stare into each other’s eyes for a long pause. “How did we get here?” I ask him, but in truth, I’m asking myself more than anything.

“We were born.” His eyes flick to the ceiling like he’s conjuring up another ridiculous answer. “Grew up.”

I purse my lips. “Is that how we got here? I had no idea.” Rolling my eyes, I settle back into his arms, eyes pointed skyward. “But really, Gideon, after all this time, I don’t know you.”

“What do you want to know?” he asks into my ear, and I shiver at the feeling.

“So much,” I whisper. “I’m just afraid to ask.”

I’m afraid it will ruin everything.

I’m afraid once we leave our bubble, everything will evaporate.

“Let’s start with something easy, then.” He squeezes my side, prompting me to ask my first easy question. Which takes me a second to drum up because, lord, do I have a million filtering through my mind at warp speed at this moment.

“Tell me about your family. How did you grow up?”

“You mean how did I become homeless?”

“Pretty much.”

He groans. “Not pulling any punches, I see.”

“I think it’s a pretty basic question.” I playfully roll my eyes, knowing very well it’s anything but basic.

He chuckles, but it lacks humor. It’s as if he’s mentally agreeing with me that this isn’t a simple question after all.

“It’s funny,” he says, “My father was actually a very religious man. Always preaching to me about right and wrong. He never understood me.” I turn around to find that Gideon’s eyes are intense as he speaks, and I want to reach out to him and hold him in my arms, but I don’t. Instead, I give him the space I know he needs right now.



“What happened to him?”

“He sent me away.” He shrugs.

“What do you mean? He sent you away?”

“Eventually, my father just gave up on me,” he explains. “He said that I was going to hell anyway, so why bother trying to save me? The truth is, he’d given up on me long before I ever had given up on myself.”

His voice is full of pain, and it pricks at my emotions. My eyes well with tears, and I have to fight to keep them at bay. I don’t want him to stop talking.

“Then he kicked me out, and I’ve never been back since.”

I take a deep breath, steadying my voice. “Why did he kick you out?”

“I don’t know. He said he couldn’t handle me anymore.” His eyes narrow and I wonder what he’s thinking, but I don’t have to wait long before he answers. “But I think he was just ashamed of me.”

My breath hitches. Thinking that anyone could be ashamed of this brave man is too much.

*He runs drugs.*

I push that thought down because Gideon is so much more than his job.

“That doesn’t make sense,” I say. “Your father should be proud of you.”

“Even though I’m a criminal?” He smirks.

My lips thin, and I laser him with a *stop it* expression. “You might be a criminal, but there’s more to you.”

“Not much, but thanks.”

“Do you ever think about quitting?”

“No.”

“But it’s dangerous. You could get killed,” I whisper.

“That’s the risk that I’m willing to take.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t have to risk your life like that.”

Gideon smiles at me, but it’s a sad smile. “But that’s the thing about life, Sasha...it’s risky no matter what you do.”

I tilt my head back to look up at the ceiling. What he just told me has opened up a whole bunch of additional questions I want to ask, but I don’t know where to start.

“It looks like you’re thinking real hard down there.”

“How did you meet my brother?” I don’t look at him as I ask the question. Talking about Roman makes me feel cut up inside, like little shards of glass are breaking apart inside me.

Maybe it's my heart breaking?

He sighs heavily. "Do you really want to do this right now?"

"I think we have to."

I don't see him, but I feel his body shake. "I don't know how we met. I can't remember. One day, your brother was hanging around, asking for work. It was when Tobias was still in charge..."

"And?"

"We brought him in. Roman and I became friends." He grunts. "Or I thought we were." He pauses, and I feel his chest rise and fall with deep breaths. My body tenses, worry building for what's to come. "I didn't know. I didn't realize what he was up to. Not until it was too late. Not until the very end. I don't tolerate that."

In the past, Gideon has said this, but now that I know him, I believe him, and I have to let go of the part of me that still lingers on the idea that Gideon is to blame.

If I want to be with him, that's what I have to do.

Being with Gideon is like standing at the edge of a great abyss. A bottomless pit that seems to go on forever. I'm not able to see the other side, and the thought of jumping in is terrifying.

But something inside me tells me that's exactly what I should do.

Jump.



# SASHA

NOW SITTING on the edge of the pool, my feet dangling in the water, I can't help but miss Gideon.

It feels lonely without him.

The sun is setting, and the sky is ablaze with colors like a painting coming to life. It feels like an eternity since we've been together, but really, it's only been hours since our talk this morning.

I shake my hair out, water droplets still clinging to the strands. I only just got out of the pool, but it's already drying.

The summer air is thick with heat, and my hair is proof. It's like the humidity is a blanket, weighing me down.

Standing up from where I'm sitting, I head to a lounge chair and lie back, closing my eyes and letting out a deep breath.

I can still see Gideon in my mind's eye.

His tall frame, his broad shoulders. The way his hair falls just so over his forehead.

And his eyes.

They're what really get me.

The intense blue, just like an ocean. Just like an endless pool. They're mesmerizing. I can hear his voice, too, low and rumbly. The way he says my name like it's the most beautiful word in the world. "Sasha." And when he calls me firefly...

*Stop.*

It's too soon to feel like this. I just saw him this morning, but I can't help it. I want him already.

The thing that sits in my belly, hard like a giant boulder, is, what if something happened to him? What if he's hurt? Or worse?

No, I can't think like that.

Gideon's fine. He's probably just busy. He'll be back.

He has to be.

I'm not sure how long I sit here daydreaming of him—more like worrying—but there are two things I realize. One, I'm fucked because I'm starting to really care for him, and two, it's getting late.

The sky has become dark now, and the pool is lit up with underwater lights. They cast an eerie glow on the water.

That's when I hear a noise coming from a few feet away. The air crackles with something I can't place, and I move to face the direction the sound is coming from. A person steps out from the dark shadows, walking toward me. It's hard to see who it is since my vision hasn't quite adjusted to the dark yet, but for some reason, I'm not frightened.

“Waiting for me?” As soon as I hear him speak, I jump up from the lounge chair and charge toward him.

My arms wrap around his neck. “Where have you been?”

He hugs me close, placing a kiss to my forehead. “I was looking into your brother's murder and the threat against you.”

It feels like cold ice water is thrown over me.

I take a step back, untangling myself from his arms. My mouth opens and then closes. I want to ask so much, but my tongue feels heavy.

Did you find anything?

Who was behind it?

Am I still in trouble?

Gideon watches me, his jaw tight like cut marble. He lets out a sigh, reaching his hand out to take mine in his. He gives me a gentle squeeze. “I don't want to talk business right now.” A part of me wants to object, and I'm about to, but he cuts me off before I can talk. “Please. Give me another night with you before the ugly comes.” Despite the way my heart hammers in my chest with uncertainty, I nod. “Get in the pool.”

“What? You're joking, right? I just finally got dry, and it's getting late.”

“I never joke. Naked. In the pool. Now.” His husky voice, full of want and need, has me springing into action. I slide my bikini bottoms down and untie my top before stepping back into the water.

It's like swimming in a different world at night. The water is cool and

dark, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then when I begin to swim, the world falls away.

All that exists is the sound of my breathing and the feel of the water rushing past me.

The moon casts a mysterious glow over everything. It's peaceful as I tread while I wait for him to get in.

A splash rings through the night, and I feel the ripple from Gideon's body cutting through the water to get to me.

When his arms reach around me and tug me to his body, I can't help but giggle.

In his grasp, he swims us toward the shallow end, where my feet can touch the ground.

"I like you like this."

"Looking like a drowned rat?" I joke. "I'm sure it's everything you wished for."

"Naked and wet," he clarifies. He continues to maneuver me around until he finally stops when my back hits the wall. "And like this."

"Like what?" I question, but before I can, Gideon is lifting my body to sit on the edge of the ledge, tilting me back until I'm resting on my elbows. He spreads my legs, opening me to him.

His hands are on me first, fingers tweaking and twisting my nipples.

Goose bumps break out across my body as he touches me, bringing every part of me to life.

It's not long before I'm panting, desperate for more of him, and he answers my silent pleas by parting my spread legs, stepping between them, and thrusting his cock into me.

The force of his movements takes my breath away.

"You're mine." He leans forward and growls in my ear as he begins to fuck me. The pool water sloshes over the edge from his movements.

I tremble at his words.

Not from fear but from how desperate I am for them to be true.

What would it be like to be Gideon's?

To be consumed by him.

Our gazes lock, and his eyes darken with lust, daring me to object to his words, but that's the thing he doesn't realize—I don't want to.

"Yes. Yours," I answer, and my words urge him on.

Plunging deeper. Harder. Faster.

His hands are on my hips, holding me in place. He leans in closer, his mouth almost touching mine, and then he crosses the small space between us and fuses our lips together. I part for him, allowing his tongue to caress mine, fucking me the same way his cock does.

It's too much.

Yet it's not enough.

With Gideon...it never will be.

I know that now.

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GETTING OUT OF THE POOL, I WALK INSIDE THE LARGE MANOR. IT'S SO BIG that it feels like my footsteps echo for minutes on end. Eventually, I find my way to my old bedroom, and just as Gideon said before I left him there in the water, there's a box on the bed.

Seeing as I'm still wet, I head straight into the bathroom, strip off the towel I have wrapped around me, and step into the shower, letting the hot water wash away all the chlorine and salt. I scrub at my skin, trying to wash away the layer of film that's collected on my body from the impromptu swim.

The scalding water washes over me. It's so hot that it feels like needles prickling my skin, but strangely enough, I welcome the heat. Because as I stand here, I can't help but feel like a princess in a fairy tale.

My heart is racing a hundred miles an hour.

What is this feeling weaving its way inside me?

I can feel the way my lips part, and I realize, for the first time in a long time, I'm truly happy. It reminds me of when I was a little girl. I must have been around six. My mom had told me that happiness was like a butterfly. It flits around, sometimes landing on your shoulder for a moment before soaring away again. It's delicate and beautiful, and you can't help but smile when you feel it.

In my case, happiness is Gideon. I shake my head at the thought.

How did this happen?

Better question, how did I get to this place where my enemy is now more?

*Was he ever your enemy?*

No. Not really.

I don't even realize how long I've been in the shower until the water cools. I reluctantly step out of the shower, knowing I need to hurry. The steam hangs in the air like a cloud, cloaking me in its dense moisture.

A shiver works its way through my body. Thankfully, a fluffy towel hangs right next to the shower door, waiting for me.

Once dry, I make my way to the bed to see what Gideon left for me.

A million things race through my head, and I can't help but smile with excitement. My heart beats so fast that it feels like it's going to burst.

I open the box, pulling out the tissue paper first and placing it on the bed. Then I see what he bought me: a red silk slip dress. It's beautiful and delicate and looks like lingerie. Placing the dress on the bed, I see a note in the box.

**FIREFLY,**

**A GIFT FOR YOU. ONE I HOPE YOU'LL SLIP ON AND WEAR TO  
MY ROOM TONIGHT.**

I DON'T WASTE A MOMENT DOING EXACTLY AS HE'S ASKED. SLIPPING THE dress on, I head back into the bathroom to put on makeup.

Even though I've been staying in Gideon's room for the past few weeks, I have yet to move my stuff in.

Why?

Because that would make this feel real.

*Which it's not.*

It feels like ice-cold water is poured over my head. That inner voice calls up my deepest, growing fear.

This is no fairy tale.

The villain doesn't end up with the girl.

There is no happily ever after for us.

Eventually, the threat will be gone, and so will I.

The thought is sobering, but I push it away, desperate to hold on to the excitement from moments earlier instead. That is something I'll have to truly deliberate on later. For now, I'll happily live in this fairy tale a while longer.



I wonder where we're going that he has me wearing this?

It's beautiful.

I can't wait for Gideon to see me in it.

With that thought at the forefront, I pick up my pace.

Twenty minutes later, with freshly blown hair and a light dusting of makeup, I leave my room and head to Gideon's. I'm practically sprinting down the hallway, my heart racing with each step I take.

Calm down, Sasha.

This thing between Gideon and you is just sex.

Then why does it feel like it's more?

When I see the door, I stop short and stare at it.

What am I doing?

I'm freaking out over a man who will never be mine, yet as my arm lifts and my hand forms a fist to knock, I can't help the butterflies that take flight in my stomach at the thought of seeing him again.

We've only been apart for an hour, but I can still feel him inside me. And despite the fact I just had him, I want him again.

As I'm about to knock, the door flies open, and Gideon is standing inside the door, shirt half-buttoned as if I caught him in the middle of getting dressed. My gaze travels the length of his body, admiring the tan, muscled skin as he buttons the last one.

I want to beg him to take it off, to throw me on the floor and ravish me, but I don't. Instead, I give him a small smile, a shy one, and step into the room.

My heart races as I walk farther into his space.

The moment I do, my eyes go wide, and my heart hammers.

A table for two is set perfectly with a white tablecloth, crystal glasses, and a bottle of champagne chilling in a silver bucket. In the corner, silver domed plates filled with food sit, ready to be presented.

How much time and effort went into this?

Why would he do this all for me?

I furrow my brow as I stare at the beautiful decadence in front of me.

"What?" Gideon steps up beside me, and I turn to face him. "You have a serious look on your face."

"Why did you do this?" My voice is full of awe.

"Because I wanted to take you out, but I couldn't?"

I turn toward him. "Why not?"

“It’s not safe. When I took you the last time, we knew there was a threat, but I had time to plan every detail of the security that night. Tonight, I didn’t.”

“But you still planned this despite everything going on?” I ask tentatively. He nods. “I did.”

Offering a genuine smile, I offer my gratitude. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

Gideon’s hand reaches out and takes mine in his. Then he leads me toward the table.

As we walk into the room, I am enveloped in warmth. The flickering light of the candles casts a soft, golden glow over everything in the room. It’s mesmerizing, like watching a beautiful fire burning in the fireplace on a frosty night.

He pulls out the seat for me, and I’m rendered speechless by the effort he has put forward to give me the date of my dreams. Then he sets off to grab the plates.

Once I’m sitting, I allow my eyes to close and take a deep breath, letting the candle’s scent fill my lungs. Vanilla and lavender—two of my favorite scents. I let out a long sigh and open my eyes.

Gideon is watching me from across the table. When he sat is a mystery to me. I was too wrapped up in the ambience that he arranged.

I look down at my plate, and the dome is no longer covering it. In front of me is probably one of the most beautiful presentations of food I have ever seen. The detail. The time. The effort.

He truly is so thoughtful.

“It’s a Kobe steak served over a bed of black rice with sesame and roasted tomato,” he announces like the server at a fine restaurant.

I smile, taking in a deep breath to enjoy the smells.

The fragrance of the spices filters through the air, making my mouth water.

“Wow.” That’s all I can muster.

Looking down at my plate, I grab my fork and take a bite into my mouth. The sweet, buttery morsel bursts on my tongue. It’s the most delicious thing I have ever tasted. It’s like a symphony of flavors, each note blending together to create a masterpiece of a meal.

I take a few more bites, drinking the freshly poured champagne between nibbles. Before long, half my glass is empty, and my cheeks feel warm.

I don't drink often, and I know the champagne has gone straight to my head. It's obvious when no matter how delicious the food is, all I can think about is Gideon.

How I want him. How I can't stop watching him.

"Firefly...stop looking at me like that, or we won't be eating." Gideon's gaze is heavy and hungry. His presence looming like a dark force ready to devour me whole.

"What if I don't want to eat right now?"

A muscle in his jaw tics. "What do you want, Sasha?"

I lick my lips. "You."

I won't regret what comes next because I know I'm about to become the meal, and it will be my favorite part of an already incredible night.



## GIDEON

“GET ON YOUR KNEES,” I growl, but Sasha shakes her head, standing from the table and making her way over to where I’m sitting.

“Not this time, Gideon,” she says seductively, eyeing me like a tigress.

Cocking my head to the side, I assess her. “Explain.”

She shakes her head again, and my balls tighten in response. Typically, this would not be the reaction I’d get to being told no, but with her, nothing is typical.

“You’re not in charge tonight.” Her voice is assertive.

I narrow my eyes and lick my bottom lip. “That’s not going to happen.”

Sasha leans over and kisses me softly on the mouth before pulling back and meeting my gaze. “Please, Gideon. Let me lead.”

I can see the want in her eyes. It’s a deep, primal desire that’s been simmering just below the surface.

This is more than a request.

She needs this.

My heart beats just a little bit faster.

What she’s asking is something I’ve *never* allowed. Something so out of character I wouldn’t even know who I was if I gave in.

“Please,” she says again, and all my walls crumble and fall to the floor at her feet.

For the first time in my life, I want to give this to someone.

No—I want to give this to *her*. “I don’t give up control,” I tell her, and she nods in understanding.

I need her to know how big this is. How special. This isn’t something I’d

give to anyone but her. Ever.

“I know.”

“But for you...I will.” Her eyes close before reopening. Fire burns in her irises, and I long to be burned.

Standing in front of her, I tower over her small frame. I reach out my hand and take hers, squeezing my consent.

Then I wait.

The ball is in her court.

She watches me carefully for a few moments, probably waiting for me to change my mind or say I was only fucking with her to begin with. Which I would never do. Not about something like this.

No. Tonight, I'm hers.

She must see it on my face because Sasha leads me toward the bed. I'm standing beside it, waiting for her commands, when she reaches out and opens my shirt.

The material drops to the floor, and her small hands find my pants next.

Before long, I'm standing naked before her.

My arms hang at my side, and my jaw is locked. Sasha doesn't notice my tension, though. Instead, her gaze sweeps down my body, taking in my throbbing length. It's taking every last bit of my strength not to grab her into my arms and take control.

But I won't.

She said please, and I'm aiming to deliver.

Sasha needs to feel like I will give myself to her.

The thing I realize, though, is that I would give this woman anything. My body. My heart. My very fucking soul.

The thought has my head spinning.

The moment she said please, there was no hesitation.

I couldn't say no.

What is it about this girl?

Sasha places her hands on my shoulders and leans forward, skating her lips along my neck.

Soft lips.

Small kisses.

She's savoring every moment, and I let her.

I want to grab her hair with my fingers. I want to devour her, to take, take, take.

Instead, I breathe in a ragged breath, forcing my need down and allowing her to lead.

Her teeth graze my skin, making my Adam's apple bob as my chest heaves with my restraint.

I clench my fists at my side. I'm fighting the urge to just take her in my arms and kiss her.

It feels so fucking good, too good, but I can't touch her.

I'm like a moth drawn to the flame. I can feel the heat on my skin and can't help but inch closer. It's like a drug, and I can't resist it. I'm fighting against myself, but I know I can't lose this battle.

Inhaling deeply, I breathe through the moment, letting her hands roam. Allowing her access to my body, but really, I'm giving her more...

I'm giving her my fucking soul.





## SASHA

SLOWLY, I pry open my eyes. It feels like a heavy blanket of fog is draped over my face. Reaching my hand out, I scrub at the remaining sleep lingering inside me.

What time is it?

The early morning sun creeps through the curtains, sending out warm ribbons of light that dance across my face. Something that has become one of my favorite things about this room.

After Gideon, of course.

I close my eyes again, not ready for the new day. Reminiscing about the night before is what I'd prefer to do. The memory playing out behind my lids fills me with a warm, tingly feeling.

Gideon shocked me.

When I made the suggestion, I never thought he'd go for it.

I was half joking, prepared, and willing to do anything for him at that moment. When he agreed, the wind was knocked out of my lungs.

I'm not stupid.

I know it was hard for him. I also know that it meant more than sex. Gideon gave me a gift last night, and I will never forget it.

But now, in the early light of the day, I'm not sure what that means for us.

Are things different now?

Do I want them to be?

He placed his trust in me. I'm falling for him, and even if I didn't want to, I can't stop it. It's a foregone conclusion.

This man has pushed his way into my heart, and I'm not even mad about it.

He's so much more than I could've ever imagined.

Although he comes across as ruthless, and he is, there's a softness inside when he looks at me and touches me.

I know in my heart that I'm not alone in my feelings.

Gideon Byrne is falling for me too.

But is that enough to turn my back on what he does for a living?

Yes. And what that means for the future, I'm not sure.

A part of me wants to come out and ask him, but I also don't want to rock the boat, just in case his feelings aren't enough to warrant an actual future. I'm not sure I could take the rejection.

I'm still going to have to stay here, so it would be smarter to just keep things as is and not read too much into anything.

Turning to face him, I find that his side of the bed is already empty.

For a second, my stomach drops, but then I hear the shower running, and I know he must be getting ready for the day.

Gideon's bed is so warm and cozy that I never want to get up, but I know I have to leave this bubble.

The sound of his footsteps on the floor has me turning in the direction of the bathroom door.

Gideon is standing in the center of the room in a towel. He prowls toward me, and my center pulsates with desire.

My skin tingles as he approaches. The need to be touched by him is all-consuming.

I'm parched for him.

An unquenchable yet ever-present thirst lingers inside me.

Desperate and yearning.

This can't be normal to feel like this.

It's just lust.

No.

Even I don't believe that.

"Morning," he drawls out, crossing the space and leaning forward.

Gideon's alluring aroma draws me in. He smells of fresh citrus. Like an orange grove, but he also reminds me of the lingering smell of burning wood during a campfire.

It's delicious.

I meet him halfway, tipping my head up so our lips meet. Reaching my arms out to run my hand through his damp hair.

He groans into my mouth, deepening the kiss.

His tongue swipes against mine, and I'm lost and never want to be found.

But unfortunately, like most things in life, all good things must come to an end, and as Gideon slowly breaks our kiss, pulling back until his nose nuzzles mine, I deflate.

Opening my eyes, I find he's peering down at me.

I know this private bubble we created for ourselves last night has burst, and the real world needs to be let back in.

"Firefly."

"Mmm," I groan, not wanting him to leave me and wanting to hear what he's about to say even less.

"You have to let me go," he teases, and that's when I realize my arms are still wrapped around his neck, fingers still gripping his hair.

"Oops."

He chuckles. A sound that I don't hear often, but when I do, it warms my soul.

Damn, girl.

I no longer have to fear falling for this man because I already have.

"As much as I want to stay, I can't."

I pout my lower lip out, and he moves fast, sucking it into his mouth. He nibbles for a second before dropping it. "Don't tempt me, firefly."

"But it's so fun." I bat my lashes seductively at him.

"I know, but I'm having some issues on the work front." He pulls back and meets my gaze.

Tiny lines have formed on his face.

Something is bothering him, and my mind goes straight to Roman.

"What's going on? Is there something about my brother that you're not telling me?"

Gideon lets out a sigh, his hand lifting to tug on his now-tousled hair.

"I think you should stay in your old room today and practice."

"Is that an order?" I say, instantly on edge.

He shakes his head. "More of a very pointed request."

I want to argue, but I can tell it's not a good day for that.

"Some unsavory characters will be coming to the house for a big meeting. I tried to move it elsewhere, but I needed the security and all my men. You

need to lie low and stay out of sight.”

My heart starts pounding inside my chest as fear creeps in, like a flock of birds descending from the sky. My mind races with questions.

What’s about to happen?

Am I in danger? Is he?

Will whoever’s looking for me find me?

His hand reaches out, pulling me into his arms and engulfing me in warmth. “I promise you’re safe.” When I don’t speak, he pulls back, his fingers meeting my jaw and tilting my face up. “I always keep my word. You know that, right?” I nod. “As long as you stay out of sight, you’ll be fine. I just need you to listen. Can you do that?”

“I can.”

He offers a tight smile. One that does not reach his eyes. “That’s my good girl.”

And just like Gideon always does, with one word, one praise, all my fears are evaporated, replaced by only something he can give me—peace.



# SASHA

TWO DAYS.

That's how long Gideon has sequestered me in this room.

"Am I ever going to get out of here?" I glare at my only companion.

The blue light mocks me.

Someone's watching.

Hopefully Gideon.

"I feel like a caged bird."

Or a prisoner, but I don't say that. "Are you ever going to let me out?"

I know I'm being dramatic. I'm not being forced to stay here.

But despite the fact that I know staying locked away in my bedroom is for my own good because of the unsavory people in the manor, I'm bored out of my mind.

My mind wanders off to all the places I could be right now—a never-ending stretch of beach with coarse white sand grains between my toes, a bustling city street lined with neon lights, or maybe even an old cobblestone village in Europe where the sun sets in a blaze of oranges and pinks across an endless sky.

Or better yet, I could be sitting on the stage of Lincoln Center, the stage lights blinding my eyes, the roar of the audience clapping in my ears.

The thought of all these amazing adventures and opportunities just out of reach makes me want to scream.

"Ugh." I groan. "This is annoying. If I'm stuck here, I'm going to annoy you, cause I know you're watching." I scrunch my nose. "I'm just going to annoy you with all the random questions I have, and maybe you will get so

annoyed you'll have to put a stop to my nonsense."

Leaning back into the bed, I place my arms above my head and get comfy. This could take a while.

"Question number one: If dinosaurs became extinct before humans existed, who made up dinosaur sounds and how?"

That's a good one. If he's not running in here to shut me up soon, I might have to revert to doing a striptease.

The only problem with that plan is who knows who watches this footage. Something tells me only Gideon.

Gideon is way too much of a crazy, possessive stalker to let anyone else watch me.

"Next question: Why are Wolverine's teeth not made of metal like the rest of his bones? That one has always driven me crazy. Now it can drive you crazy." I sing-song.

I continue this ridiculous mission for what seems like forever.

I'm stuck in an endless loop.

At least when Gideon is around, it's easy to pretend I'm not living in Groundhog Day over and over again, but with this extra time of solitude, I can't help but become frustrated with each passing minute that I'm stuck behind these walls.

I feel a deep longing to break free and roam the hallways.

But Gideon scared me when he told me to stay put. Whoever is here, he seemed frightened of, and that's saying something.

And the fact that I haven't seen him other than when he sneaks into my bed at night has me rattled.

If things were normal in this house, I'd be staying with him, but since he told me he was going to use his key to visit me when he could and not to open the door for anyone, I know things are bad out there.

Seeing as I have no place to go until the manor is deemed safe again, I guess I better make the most of it. Focusing on the present moment, I take a deep breath and am about to take out my cello when the door opens.

There are only two people with the key, Gideon and the maid.

When the door creeps open, and unfortunately, the maid steps in, I deflate.

She brings in a tray of food, and on top of the tray is a long-stemmed red rose and a note. I smile, taking the tray from her.

"Thank you."

“Is there anything else you need?” she asks, her eyes not meeting mine.

“I’m fine. Thanks. You’re free to go.”

She inclines her head down before leaving.

I’m sad that it’s not him, but I don’t want her to see my emotions. Other than the one conversation when she warned me, she’s never spoken to me again. I don’t know her or know if I can trust her.

**FIREFLY,**

**I MISS YOU. BEING AWAY FROM YOU IS TORTURE. ALL I**

**THINK ABOUT IS YOU.**

**I’LL SEE YOU SOON. X-G**

WALKING OVER TO MY BED, I FALL BACK ON IT.

I miss him too, and I know, without a doubt, I’ve fallen for him.

He sparks a light inside me that I didn’t know I had.

Looking over at the cello case in the corner, I consider playing, but something else pops into my mind.

I remember the courage I felt when Gideon was touching me while I played, the way I felt like I could conquer the world.

And, for a moment, I did. I conquered my fears, and I can do that now.

Feeling brave, I look toward the shiny wood side table.

The computer.

Gideon loaned me a computer to keep myself busy, and he also suggested that I apply to Juilliard.

I can almost feel Gideon behind me still, but instead of touching me while I play, he’s cooing in my ear and telling me to be daring.

To go for my dreams.

That’s exactly what needs to be done.

“Big girl panties on, Sasha,” I say to myself out loud, and then a laugh bubbles up through my throat.

I turn my head in the direction of the smoke detector. To *smoke*, I think it deserves a nickname.



“Hey, Smoke. See what I’m doing?”

For all I know, I’m talking to myself, but hey, you never know, he might see me grabbing the computer.

“I’m applying to Juilliard.”

Obviously, he won’t answer, but a smile still spreads across my face as I imagine him sitting back in his office, video footage of me playing.

Granted, he could also be busy and not observing me, but knowing there is a possibility has me opening up the laptop and going to the application page for Juilliard.

I spend the next few minutes checking everything I need to submit.

The truth is, I know what I need. I’ve looked at this website and the requirements more times than I care to count, but I run down the list one more time.

Essay and instructional video are two things I can do from this room.

Next, I run through the questions.

Why have you chosen to become a musician, and what motivates you to continue to pursue music at the collegiate/professional level? Please also elaborate specifically on why you are applying to Juilliard and how conservatory training will support your future goals.

Looking back up to the smoke detector, I shake my head at the camera.

“This would be easier if you were here.” Then I giggle. “Oh, who am I kidding? I wouldn’t be able to get anything done if you were here.”

I grab the computer and take a seat at the desk that overlooks the grounds. The drapes are pulled back now, and as I sit in my chair, gazing out the window at a sunset that dyes the sky in vivid swaths of red and orange, I can feel the ideas swirling around inside me, eager to get out.

My gaze shifts down to the blank screen on the computer.

Still nothing.

I close my eyes. In my head, I can hear music, and with the world shut away, I pretend I’m the one playing the notes.

Ideas form.

They flutter to life the way that fireflies do when you release them from the glass jar.

I can’t seem to catch hold of any of them.

It’s ironic that’s the analogy that came to mind. Gideon, although not here, is always in my mind. I drum my fingers on the desk as I try to focus, but instead, all I can think of is how writing this essay feels like trying to

weave a tapestry out of thin air.

Finally, I take a deep breath and move my fingers over the keyboard.

As soon as I do, the ideas come tumbling out of me.

I feel alive.

Hours pass, and when I look down, I smile; the essay is done.

I skim through it one more time.

It's good. Solid.

Gideon would be proud of me.

Why does it always go back to him?

It shouldn't be about him.

"This essay is about me, about my dreams," I say out loud. "This is about what I want."

I want Gideon.

How did I get to this point?

And now that I have, what does it mean?

Can I have a future with him?

It's the same question, over and over again, and I'm getting sick of harping on it.



## GIDEON

I TAKE a sip of my scotch, and the smooth, smoky liquid slides down my throat. Heat spreads throughout my body, and I savor it. Letting the flavor roll around on my tongue, I close my eyes and let out a sigh.

*This day needs to be done.*

Nothing would make me happier than to walk the fuck out of this room, find Sasha, and sink deep inside her.

But nope, I'm reclined in my chair, sloshing my drink around, waiting for my guest to arrive.

Lifting the glass back up, I take another gulp.

Meeting with a Russian informant is not how I want to spend my night.

The sound of the doorknob turning and then the door creaking open announces his arrival.

He's every bit the slimy motherfucker I knew he was.

"Take a seat." I gesture to the empty chair adjacent to mine.

Nikolai Dobrow strides across the room, his confidence out of place, seeing as if word gets out that he's here, he's a dead man walking.

If what he tells me is good intel, he has nothing to worry about. I'll honor his request. I'll ensure his safety but also make a position for him in my ranks.

He'll be watched closely and given no inside information. Once a snitch, always a snitch. If he's selling out the Russians, he wouldn't hesitate in doing the same to me.

He'd also die slowly.

"You better not be wasting my time." I slam my glass down on the table.

It makes a loud crashing noise that echoes through the room.

Surprisingly, it doesn't shatter, and Nikolai doesn't cower at the show of force.

I respect him more for that.

"I'm not," he answers, voice strong and unwavering.

"Speak." I lift my hand up and look at my watch. If he gets to the point, I can be inside firefly within the hour. "Tell me what's so important that you wanted to talk to me."

He dips his head before looking back up and meeting my stare head-on. "I have information about the men looking for Roman Lennox's sister."

This is what I assumed, but hearing the words still makes my fist clench. Sasha is mine, and knowing anyone wants to hurt her lights a fire inside me.

I want to hurt them. I want to torture the fuckers who would dare to touch what's mine. My jaw clenches. "And why should I believe you? Why should I believe a fucking word you say? You've turned on your own people."

"I was friends—true friends—with Roman Lennox. What they did to him made me realize that I'm just a number in their ranks. We're not family. We're their soldiers, put on the front lines to live and die for them. I'm not willing to die for someone who doesn't give a fuck about me."

Interesting. His passion isn't false. He means what he says. I'm where I am today because I can read people better than anything. This man might not be a waste within my ranks if this checks out.

"And you think it'll be different under me?" I lift the glass to my mouth, watching him as I take a gulp. I observe him with the eyes of a hawk, looking for any weakness I can exploit. Are there cracks in his armor, a place where he's vulnerable? When I don't find anything, I narrow my eyes and lean in. "How did you meet Roman?"

"From our employer," he answers quickly.

"Your employer. Both of yours?"

"Yes." There's no lie in his answer. No fear, either. Nikolai Dobrow meets my gaze steadily, ready to answer my next question.

"And who is your employer?" I knew Roman was buying drugs and knew he was supposedly working for his supplier, but I need it confirmed, and most of all, I need the name.

His shoulders pull back. "Dima Markov." His voice is strong, much stronger than I expected.

Burning hot rage builds inside me. The man is a monster. I would walk

through hell to make sure Sasha never meets the likes of that sadist.

I'm not a good man by any means, but he makes me look like an angel.

Dima Markov has no scruples; he would cut up and torture his own mother if he thought it would make him richer.

From across the space, I continue to assess the Russian traitor.

I thought he'd be a sniveling coward, someone who was in outs with the Russians, running to me as a last-ditch effort to save his miserable life, but that's not what I see in this guy.

For some reason, I believe him. Men in our position are often looking for a family connection, a brotherhood. He wouldn't have gotten that with Dima. His betrayal doesn't surprise me, given his words.

What does surprise me is Nikolai's next question. "How did he die? Was it quick?"

A heavy feeling forms in my gut. This isn't something I want to discuss. Digging up the past, especially something so fresh, is never a good idea. "It was relatively quick for the Russians. He didn't suffer long."

Nikolai nods and leans back in his chair. He looks relieved, and it makes me know my assessment was right about him.

"They say that Roman stole a significant amount of money from the boss, and they believe that he gave it to his sister. That's why they're coming for her," he tells me.

Interesting. Money. That's what Roman was up to. Stealing from the Russians.

What a fool he was. Assuming there's truth to it.

If he weren't already dead, I'd kill him for putting his sister in harm's way. "She doesn't have it. If they'd only seen what condition she was living in, they'd know that isn't the case."

The whole idea is ridiculous. Sasha was living in filth, barely making ends meet. If Roman had given her the money, why would she live like that? None of this makes sense, and I need more time to piece it together. At least now I know what they want. This should help us track Roman's moves better. When it comes to money, there tends to be a paper trail. An idiot like Roman couldn't have done a good job of hiding it.

"Do you think you can get them to back off?"

He shakes his head. "I'm already on the outs, sir. I have some friends on the inside who are trusted. Maybe they could get the message to the right people, but I doubt it. They'll keep coming for her."

That's what I'm most afraid of. Can I keep her safe?  
I'll die trying.





# SASHA

I CAN'T BELIEVE it's morning already.

It's so bright that I have to squint to see anything.

What time is it?

Reaching my hand out to rub at the remaining sleep lingering in my eyes, I feel a heavy weight on my back.

Gideon. He's next to me. Actually, his arm is draped over me, hence the feeling of being cocooned.

Slowly, I pull back a few inches to look at him.

He's still asleep. His chest rises and falls with each breath. A smile spreads across my face as I realize that, once again, he's here with me.

I'm not sure when he snuck into my bed, but I'm happy.

The idea of him leaving again and me being sequestered to this room for another day doesn't sit well with me, but I don't want to think about that now.

I'd rather enjoy this moment a little while longer.

"Good morning, firefly." Gideon's body stirs beside me.

"Hi, when did you sneak in?"

"Late. Come here. You're too far away." He pulls me closer until I'm fully engulfed in his embrace. In his arms, I feel as light as a feather, like a kite soaring high in the sky.

Every worry seems to drift away, and all that's left is a sense of peace and happiness.

Who am I?

What has this man done to me?

When did I become this optimistic sap?  
I'm usually a pessimist through and through.  
But somehow, this man cast a spell on me, and now I'm waxing poetic.  
I need to go back to real life, but when I'm here, like this, I don't want to. "Do you have to leave today?"

"No."

"Your meetings—they went okay?"

"As good as they could." He lets out a sigh. "I have to ask you something. I know the answer, but I still need to ask."

I tense, not having a clue where this is going. "Okay?"

He shuffles around and pulls out a picture. The image on the paper is grainy, but what I do notice is it's of my brother. There is also another man I've never seen before talking to Roman in the image.

As I look at the picture, it feels like my heart is being squeezed in my chest. Roman looks dirty and strung out. This isn't an old picture. "Do you recognize him?"

I narrow my eyes and study it closely. "Not really? Should I?"

Gideon inhales deeply. "Please, firefly, think."

I try to remember if I've ever seen this picture of the older man. He's got dark hair, and he looks older, maybe in his fifties. He's wearing a well-fitted suit.

I take the picture out of his hand and lift it closer to get a better view. There's something familiar about him. But I can't place it. *Think, Sasha.* Where have you seen him?

Closing my eyes, I run through memories in my head. Images flash in my mind.

Then it hits me. My eyes snap open. "Yes."

"Yes, you know him?" Gideon takes the picture back and points to the older man.

"Well, no. But I swear I've seen him..."

"It's important."

I furrow my brow, and another memory pops up in my mind. The image is clear as day.

"What is it?" Gideon asks.

"I think he knew my parents. It's strange, and I'm not sure if it's real, but I remember him. He was yelling at my dad."

"Do you know what he was saying?"

I shake my head. “I saw him outside our apartment building on the street. No one knew I was watching, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying because it was in another language. Who is he, Gideon?”

His fingers grip the picture tighter. “That’s Dima Markov.”

“Should that name mean anything to me?”

Gideon’s shoulders tense, but then he exhales. “He’s a Russian mob boss out of Brighton Beach.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” The air grows stagnant, and I wonder if this is where the conversation ends, but then Gideon sighs. He’s not done with the inquisition. “Did Roman ever give you money?”

I laugh. “You’re kidding, right?” When I look back up at Gideon’s face, I expect him to be smirking at me, but instead, I’m met with a tight jaw and a face like stone.

“No.”

“All Roman ever did was take from me.” I go to move away from him, but he pulls me closer, placing a kiss on my head. I let out a deep breath. “The only thing I ever received from him is my cello. The fact that he ever had enough money to buy that is a modern miracle. Roman bled me dry. Not just financially, but emotionally. Why the questions this morning?”

He takes a deep breath, and I know whatever he’s about to say is going to rock my world.

“The Russian mafia is after you because they believe Roman stole a lot of money from them.”

Holy. Shit.

I know little about mob life, but from what I do know, they’re possibly the worst. Cruel. Violent.

“That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.” I sigh. “Can you—I don’t know, can you speak to the Russians and tell them?”

His body tightens beside me. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

“Why?”

“In this business, well, it’s not like in corporate America. It isn’t possible. I’ll talk to some of my associates, and maybe we can figure out a way to explain the situation, but really, the only way out of this...”

His words trail off, and a cold dread seeps in.

“Is death.”

He nods.

“I don’t want anyone dying for me. It’s bad enough Roman died over something that isn’t true. More than that, it’s absurd.” I reach my hand up and run my fingers through my hair, trying to think. “Call Matt.”

Gideon pushes me down and entraps me with his arms. “Matt,” he growls. “You want me to call Matt?”

“He’s a police officer. He can help.”

He laughs, but it lacks humor. “I know who the fuck Matt is.”

“He’s just a friend, Gideon. I’ve known him for a long time. He’ll help me.”

“Like hell he will,” he seethes.

“You need to calm down,” I say, trying to stuff down the impatience and frustration.

“Calm down? Fuck no. You’re mine, firefly. Mine to protect. Mine to care for. Mine to love. If he ever gets near you again, if he ever touches you, I will kill him.”

My breath hitches, and the world stops spinning for me.

“Say that again.”

“I will kill him.”

I reach my hand out and touch his jaw. “Not that part.”

“If he touches you?” It’s said like a question.

I shake my head. “Not that part either.”

His eyebrows meet in the middle of his forehead. “What part, then?”

I take a deep breath. “The part where you said I’m yours to love. Do you love me, Gideon?”

He gives me a look like I’m an idiot.

“Fuck yes, I do. What the hell do you think we’re doing here? If I didn’t love you, do you think I’d be going to war with the Russians?”

My stomach bottoms out, falling to my feet. “War with the Russian mob. Are you crazy?”

“Crazy barely touches the surface.” He huffs. “I will kill them all for wanting to hurt you, and I will kill the damn cop for even looking at you.”

“You can’t act like this, Gideon.”

“This is me, firefly. I won’t ever change. You’re mine, and nobody touches what belongs to me. No one tries to take you from me or hurt you. I will kill anyone who does.”

I groan, frustration winning out. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

“Wrong.” He kisses me savagely.

I love the feeling.

A part of me wonders if I can deal with this part of him. His blood lust. His possession. But then I realize I love this part of him. I love every part of him, even the crazy. Nothing he could ever do would make me turn my back on him.

“I love you too, Gideon.”

He seals his mouth over mine, kissing me with enough passion and love to light me on fire and make me forget everything else.

No more Russians.

No more Roman.

Just Gideon and me.

I like the sound of that.



# GIDEON

MY WORK HAS BECOME TEDIOUS. Normally, I wouldn't care.

But with Sasha in the house, I can't help but be distracted.

Case in point: she's lying in her bed, on her stomach, feet kicked up behind her, and she's talking to me.

Yep. She's having a full conversation with me. Despite the fact I'm not even there.

Obviously, she's smart enough to realize there's a camera in the room. But she's taken herself to name the camera Smoke and talk to it/me like I'll answer.

The volume is on low, but I can hear her. She's rambling about God knows what.

"How many records do you think I unknowingly hold?" she asks. I eye the camera, waiting for her to answer. "They're not official records, mind you, but when I was growing up, my parents, Roman, and I had competitions. I am the proud winner of many medals. One, I'm able to spin a pillow on my finger for fifteen minutes. Yep. That's right. Also, I once won the family record of the fastest time to eat five entrees. Not four, five. I can hold my breath for only thirty seconds, though. Roman won that one, but I won the spelling contest. I'm a nerd."

I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face.

At least she's entertaining herself.

"Boss." Julian's voice has me pulling my attention away from the monitor in which I'm watching Sasha. When our gaze meets, his eyebrow is lifted.

“She seems to be enjoying herself.”

My hand reaches out, and I silence the footage.

Her words are for me and me alone.

Every time Sasha speaks to the smoke detector, she’s giving me little gifts about herself. Telling me things that I wouldn’t think to ask but want to know about.

I want to know everything about her. She consumes my every thought, and by the way Julian is looking at me, he sees it too.

“What do you need?” I bark, clearly pissed off, and I think he realizes that because he gives me a nod before motioning to the chair.

“Can I sit down?”

“Yep.” The chair screeches as he pulls it away from the desk, and then he’s lowering his frame into it. “Talk.”

“We need to go over some things.

“I’m listening.”

“First things first, Lorenzo ordered more.”

“Good. That should help make up for the loss of money from the missing order. Did you ever find out what the fuck happened to that shipment?”

“Lost at sea, if you can believe it.”

“I can’t. But it doesn’t matter. Lorenzo has his shit, and since we were able to give him the merchandise we had in the warehouse. No harm, no foul on his part. On ours, however, the lost money is definitely going to hit us where it hurts. We can’t have any other fuckups. This new order better go off without a hitch.”

“It will.”

I drum my fingers on the desk. “Okay, what else is going on?” Hopefully nothing else. After discussing Markov with Nikolai and the heads of other Russian families, I’m ready to call it a day.

“Let’s talk logistics.” Julian looks tense, and I can understand why. A lot rides on Sasha being safe. I might not come out and say it, but Julian knows she means a fuck ton to me.

“Okay.”

“We know Dima is involved. We know he wants the money Roman took, but where do you think it is?”

“Sasha doesn’t know.”

“And you believe her.”

My fist hits the desk. “Yes, I believe her.”



“Then we need to find someone who might know.”

“I want to talk to everyone who knew Roman.”

“That’s going to be hard, seeing as he was working for the Russians too.

“There has to be something we’re missing.” I stand from the chair.

“Where’re you off to?”

“I’m going into the city to talk to Jax. Maybe there’s something on the surveillance footage or another Russian we can get to? Maybe he had another friend.”

“And what do you want to do here? Does Sasha need to be locked up still?”

“Nope. All unsavory characters are gone. However, when I’m with Jax, I’ll discuss upping our security. She’s getting restless. I’m going to see about getting a tracking device for her and hiring more men to secure the property, just in case.”

“You don’t think we have enough men?”

“There are definitely points of entry that aren’t secure. I’m not worried the Russians will come here. It would be suicide. But I’d rather be safe.” I let out a sigh. “I’ll get Jax to take care of it when I’m there. Okay, I’m off to tell her the good news myself.”

I stride out of the room and make my way to hers.

When I enter, I find that she’s still in the same position, still talking to me via the smoke detector.

“I hold no world records.” I stop a few feet from her bed.

Her eyes widen, and then she laughs. “You *were* listening.”

“I was.”

She rolls her eyes. “Your obsession with me knows no bounds.”

I chuckle. “You have no idea.”

“To what do I owe this visit? Meetings done?” She stretches her arms out, reaching up and yawning before standing.

“All done.” I close the space between us, bending down to place a kiss on her lips. As soon as I pull away, she groans.

“Sorry, firefly, I have to leave.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to meet with Jaxson Price.”

“The billionaire?” She sounds confused, and it’s cute.

*Fuck, Gideon. You sound like a pussy whipped fool.*

“The one and only.”

She lifts a brow. “Do I even want to know?”

“He handles my security. I want to hire more men.”

“Will I ever be safe?”

“You’re always safe with me. But until we find the money, we won’t be able to get the Russians off your back, not without going to war—”

“I don’t—”

“I know you don’t. I’m going to follow up on a few leads. Now that we know who’s after you, it’s easier. And if worse comes to worst, I’ll just kill them all.”

“Gideon!”

“Just keeping it real. I think you don’t understand just how much you mean to me. I’d burn the world down to the ground to keep you safe.”

“I love you.” She lifts on her tiptoes.

“Love isn’t a strong enough word for how I feel.”

I pull away. “As much as I’d love to continue, I do have to go.”

She nods. “I’m free to go to the pool?”

“You are.”

“Thank you.”

“Be a good girl, and I’ll reward you later.”

Her cheeks flush red. “Promise?”

“Yep.” With that, I turn and leave.

I wasn’t lying to Sasha. I’ll kill everyone if it means protecting her. I will never let her go.



## SASHA

I STEP into the garden and am immediately enveloped by its beauty. The afternoon sun shines on the landscape, giving it an enchanting quality, and drenching me in warmth as I saunter down the path.

The greenery is so fresh, and the flowers are so vibrant that it's like I'm wandering through a painting. Various shades of pink, red, yellow, and purple pop out, and I wonder who maintains this meticulous pruning.

Another member of the household staff that apparently hides from me.

*How is this real?*

Only a few months ago, my life was a canvas filled with nothing but a monotone palette. Now, it's lush and alive.

Gideon brought color to my life.

From the corner of my eye, I spot an ornate bench and decide to stop and sit down for a while. The view is too perfect not to take it in for a moment.

With no plans to leave, I have nothing but time.

Stationed on the bench, I'm able to explore the view without even moving. There's a clear opening to observe the entire backyard from here, and it's absolutely breathtaking.

The lawn is perfectly mowed, and a tree in the corner on the way to the pool provides some shade during the walk.

It's such a perfect day that I can't help but smile. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, letting all of the freshness wash over me. This is exactly what I needed—some peace and quiet to clear my head.

I've gotten so caught up in Gideon that I haven't had time to think. To truly process what's occurred.

I've fallen for someone who most—okay, all—people would call a criminal.

He lives a life so outside of mine that I'm not sure where I'd fit outside of the little bubble. One day, it will pop, and what will I do? How will we manage a relationship outside of these walls?

What if Gideon changes his mind? What if he leaves me like everyone else?

My head lolls back, and I allow the fear and questions to flow through me. I own each one of them...and then...I push them away.

This place is too wonderful for all the negativity, and I intend to enjoy it.

I stay here for a while, just taking in the beauty around me. It's so peaceful and calming that I feel my worries melting away. I guess that's what happens when you step into nature. It has a way of soothing your soul.

The bench might be a good location, but it's not the most comfortable.

Standing, I decide to head to the pool instead. I'm not even a few steps down the path when I hear footsteps.

I halt in place, straining my ears to hear if someone is coming down the path. There are two voices, but I'm having difficulty deciphering if they're both male.

The voices sound like they're coming from a distance, but it's difficult to tell with all the outside noises.

It's not that it's particularly loud out, but the chirping birds are loud enough to drown out the words echoing across the grass.

The voices are clearer the closer I get, so I continue to inch closer. Up ahead is an oak tree. Its large trunk and branches give me a perfect place to hide and see who it is before making my presence known.

I haven't been asked to stay out of sight, but since the meeting Gideon had, I'm more careful about remaining mostly unseen.

Now, hidden from sight, I peek out to see who's talking. The way their bodies are positioned makes my visibility next to none, but I can hear them, and I swear they're talking about me.

"What a shit show," one grunts, and the other makes a sound that I can only imagine is their agreement. "Russians."

I don't hear what about the Russians, but I can't imagine it's good. Especially since I'm involved.

Words continue to float across the distance like tiny petals of a dandelion. I pick up a sentence here and there.

“Fucked.”

“War.”

It takes everything in me to keep quiet as my jaw rattles and my hands shake at my sides.

I can hear two distinct voices, and they’re both men.

I know the one guy, but I can’t recall the name. The other man, I’m not sure of.

Closing my eyes, I inhale and focus on the pitch and tone of the speaker, and that’s when it hits me.

It’s Sean, the guard.

I don’t want to risk being caught, but I move closer, desperate to hear. In my new location, every word is clear.

“It’s ironic that he cares so much about her, seeing as he’s the one who pulled the trigger and killed her brother.”

For a moment, I stand in total bewilderment, replaying the words over in my head.

He pulled the trigger.

He killed my brother.

My knees buckle as tremors rock my body.

Racing heart. Palms sweating.

I can’t seem to calm down. It’s like a hurricane is whirling around inside me, tearing through my intestines.

I can’t breathe.

I’m a deer in headlights, and I can’t move. I can’t think. I’m paralyzed by shock and anger. It’s like a cold hand gripping my chest, squeezing until I can’t breathe.

My heart has been ripped out and stomped on.

Gideon killed my brother.

He pulled the trigger and killed him.

How can that be true? But as my pulse thumps and my vision becomes blurry from my tears, I know it’s true.

Every time I asked him, he was evasive.

His insistence on keeping a promise to a man who betrayed him.

It all makes sense.

Gideon killed Roman.

Everything I thought was a lie. Our whole relationship is based on a lie.

The worst part is I’m in love with him.

I thought he loved me, but now I'm questioning that too. I was probably someone to occupy his time. I feel like such a fool. Or maybe it's more than that? What was he hoping to gain?

The money I supposedly have.

Is that what this was?

Am I a means to an end?

But why the lie?

Why make me fall in love with him?

My heart has broken into a million pieces, and he's to blame.

Bile coats my throat, and before I can stop myself, I keel over and dry heave.

The sound of footsteps gains on me before I can stop the horrible sound that expels from my mouth.

It's too late.

They heard me.

*I need to get out of here.*

Nothing is keeping me in this vile place. I trusted him, and he betrayed me. How do I even know he ever intended to keep me safe? That could have been a lie too.

If he's after the money, I'm in danger here just as much as I am out there.

Maybe more so.

"Go call Gideon." I hear, but I'm already taking off back to the house.

I won't allow the bastard to take anything else from me.





# SASHA

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE.

He's not here, but he will be soon.

This is my chance to get out.

Tremors rock through my body as I storm inside and make a dash to my room. Once there, I slam the door shut, breathing heavily as I lean up against it.

How could he do this to me?

It's the question I've asked myself a million times since the garden, and all I can come up with is money.

Lies rolled off his tongue like honey on sweet tea. They coated his words and stained their meaning. Now, I'm left with the aftermath of the spill. The sticky residue that, no matter how hard you try, will never go away.

Anger builds inside of me like a pressure cooker ready to boil over. The more I try to release it, the more it threatens to bubble up and explode.

There's no coming back from this rage that has wrapped itself around every part of my soul.

It will explode. *I will explode*. It's inevitable. And once I do, it will only take a second for the flames to devour everything in its path.

Staring up at the smoke detector, I seethe. More words flow from my mouth, but my heart pounds so fiercely, and my ears ring loudly, that I enter a trance as I speak.

Once my mouth is purged of all I feel, I look away.

My heart seizes, gaze flicking around the room. That's when I see it. The root of all my problems.

I dash forward, grabbing it and fumbling with the latch.

Gideon gave me back the cello.

Made me believe in myself.

Lies.

All lies.

Without hesitation or even thinking about what I'm doing, an ear-piercing scream tears through me, and my arm pulls back and slams down.

The cello bounces off the wall and crashes onto the floor. Shards of wood and strings fly in every direction.

The tears roll down my face, and I can't stop them, no matter how much I want to. It feels like there's a hurricane inside my chest, tearing through everything I am.

How could he do this to me? How could he make me fall in love with him?

He's a monster.

He's always been a monster.

And I'm the fool who fell in love with him.

There isn't much time. It's likely someone has already called Gideon. The window for escape is closing quickly, and I need to slip through it before it does.

All of this shit can stay. I just need to leave.

Thankfully, I've already done my recon on this place and know where the fence is broken. Without Gideon here to catch me, hopefully, I'll be able to get away.

I try to be quiet. I tiptoe down the back hall stairs, making my way into the servant's wing.

It's a gamble, but one I need to take.

Down the hall and all the way to the back door, the closest exit point to the fence is where I head. If I can get out, I'll get away.

I creep toward my salvation, and when the door is within reach, I turn the knob.

Nothing.

The door is locked.

My heart races, and my hands shake.

"Shit."

What am I going to do?

The sound of footsteps makes me jump and spin around.

Fear wraps itself around me, depleting the oxygen I so desperately need.  
My vision is blurry from the lack of lights, but as it adjusts, my breath  
leaves my body in a burst.

It's not one of the guards.

It's the quiet maid.

The one who warned me.

"I...he..."

She steps forward, and I step aside. I'm not sure what's about to happen,  
but I pray they didn't send her for me. My head lowers, and that's when a  
shiny metal key glitters against the dark.

I blink and miss the whole part when she unlocks the door and steps  
aside.

"Go."

I don't need to be told twice...



# GIDEON

I NAVIGATE through the large foyer and up the stairs leading to Sasha's room.

The manor is shockingly quiet, the calm before the storm. My men know heads will roll over the breach in information.

When I received the call from Tony that Sasha overheard Sean talking about her brother's death, I headed back. The problem is, hours later, she skipped dinner, and no one has spoken to her since she stormed off and headed to her old room.

Sasha was never supposed to know that I fired the shot that killed Roman, and when I fucking find Sean, I will gut him.

No one hurts Sasha.

The irony isn't lost on me that my actions have brought her the most pain, but she's mine.

Mine to hurt.

Mine to love.

*Mine.*

Adrenaline surges through me as I stride down the hall and stand outside her door.

Not bothering with formalities, I swing the door open, ready to deal with the aftermath of Sasha's eavesdropping.

"Firefly—" I stride into the room, my words falling away as I take in the destruction.

Not only is Sasha not here, but it looks like a tornado has torn through the place.

My heart pumps wildly in my chest, red-hot anger filling my veins.

It's like a storm building inside me, preparing to break. I feel it coursing through my veins like wildfire, making my heart race and my head spin. I want to scream and lash out at anyone who gets in my way.

The room is in complete disarray.

Clothes are thrown all over the place, but that's not what has my ears ringing. What sets me on edge is the cello, or what used to be her cello.

Now it's broken, smashed to pieces, the wood splintered and the strings frayed. The one thing in this world that she loved, and because of my actions, it's destroyed.

"Fuck!"

I pick up the cello, its neck cracked like a brittle twig. It slips from my grasp, crashing to the floor.

It's heartbreaking to see such beauty destroyed, not because of the craftsmanship used to make it but because of what it implies. This piece of wood is an extension of Sasha, and she's broken.

I broke her.

From where the other piece of the cello lies, I catch the flash of something white inside the body of the instrument, a white slip of paper fluttering out.

"What is that?" I speak to myself in the empty room.

For a long-drawn-out moment, I stare at it, then reach out and grasp it in my hand.

The first thing I notice is that the piece of paper has a sticky substance on it. Leftover adhesive from whoever attached it?

The second thing is that there are no words on the note. Just a series of numbers.

Is it trash? Something left over from the factory. Or is this something more? I place the paper in my pocket, and with a clenched jaw, I set off.

She couldn't have gotten far.

There's no way off the property without me knowing. By the time I stalk down the hall, my fear has amplified, and I'm unhinged, frantic to find her. A caged beast, desperate and unpredictable.

"Where the fuck is she?" I bellow from the top landing of the stairs.

No one answers me because no one knows. The silence trickles around me, a mist that covers and cloaks until it blinds me.

I doubt they even know she's gone. I want to kill them all.

Maybe I will.

Where the fuck is she? How did this happen?

Sean.

This isn't the first time he's made a mistake regarding my firefly.

But it will be his last.

My footsteps thunder down the steps as I make my way to the control room. Finding Sasha needs to be my first priority. Then I'll deal with Sean.

"Where did she go?" I address the room. Rick swivels in his chair until he's facing me.

"I'll check the monitors."

"Check the one in her room first, from about—" I pull out my phone from my pocket, looking at what time I received the call after she overheard Sean.

"Around four."

"That's not going to happen."

"Why the fuck not?"

"You had me disable the feed from her room."

"Fuck, I'll watch it later." When I'm alone.

Sasha tends to talk to me. On the off chance that she said something today, I don't want my men hearing.

It's bad enough that Sasha makes me weak, but having my men know it will be the nail in my coffin.

"Then bring up all the monitors across the property. How did she get out without anyone seeing her?"

A few seconds later, on the monitor in front of me, Sasha can be seen going in the opposite direction she did the last time she tried to escape. This time the camera switches to the back hall, the one only the servants use.

I let out a breath. She's still in the house.

All the doors are locked in that wing; the only way out is with a key. No one on my staff would be dumb enough to help her.

Together, Rick and I watch as what I knew would happen comes to pass. She struggles with the door, but it's locked. I'm about to tell my men that we have to search the basement when a shadow appears from the corner, making its way to Sasha. The door swings open, and out Sasha goes.

My firefly flies away right before my eyes, and there is nothing I can do.

---

NOW THAT I KNOW SHE'S GONE, I NEED TO COME UP WITH A PLAN.

First things first, the paper. What the hell is so important about the damn paper hidden in her cello?

Snapping a picture, I fire off a text to the Hell chat. The smartest and most ruthless men I know, but more importantly, the only men I can trust right now.

GIDEON

Anyone know what this is?

TOBIAS

Numbers.

LORENZO

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to leave the business to Gideon, bro.

GIDEON

I don't have time for your bullshit right now, dick. I know they're numbers, but to what?

TRENT

Maybe a bank account? Where's Cyrus?

LORENZO

Best bet, fucking his hot wife.

TRENT

Hey, fucker, that's my sister.

CYRUS

Do you have a death wish, Lorenzo?

Dealing with these men is like wrangling cattle, especially when Lorenzo is involved.

GIDEON

I don't have time for your shit, assholes.

GIDEON

Cyrus, do you know what these numbers mean?

CYRUS

Looks like a bank account. I'll look into it.

With that settled, I fire up my computer, open the surveillance app and



look for the video time-stamped around four p.m.

A sinking feeling pits in my stomach as I watch an obviously distraught Sasha storm into the room.

I feel ill as I watch her throw her clothes around, curses firing out of her mouth like a drunk sailor.

Then I see the moment she locks eyes with the cello.

My heart pounds in my chest as she unlatches it, pulls it to her chest, and then, like she's possessed, she throws it across the room.

She sits in silence for a second before tilting her head up.

Turning up the volume, I wait for her to do something. Say something.

"I wish you left me to the Russians. Congratulations, Gideon. You didn't just kill Roman; you killed me too."

Her words are venom.

They hit their mark.

Straight into my heart.



# SASHA

WHAT A STROKE OF LUCK.

But now that I've gotten out, I have to find a way back to the city.

That's going to be the hard part.

I have no idea where I am.

The ride wasn't that long, maybe thirty minutes at most.

If I had to guess, I'd say I'm somewhere in Jersey.

I feel the blades of grass tickling my bare legs as I walk through them. I should have changed into leggings, but I was too angry.

Now, as the twigs from the trees snap back and lash my skin, I realize my mistake.

Gideon said it would be impossible to escape, and while I haven't found that to be accurate yet, I can definitely see how it won't be a cakewalk either.

The trees loom all around me, and although it's not dusk yet, it's dark within the woods. The large branches and tree trunks block out the afternoon sun.

I shiver, but not from cold. My hands tremble at my sides as my earlier adrenaline makes way to fear.

*Calm down.*

Easier said than done. I sound like an elephant stampeding over these damn leaves. The crunching echoes in the silence, rattling my nerves and keeping me on edge.

I need to keep my wits about me, or I'll get caught.

THE ONLY PROBLEM IS I'VE GOT NO CLUE WHERE I AM. OTHER THAN THE FACT that I'm surrounded by enormous trees, and I can't see anything beyond them.

I twist and turn, trying to sidestep the prickly underbrush, but it seems to be everywhere. Every movement sends a shower of needles into my skin.

I stop for a second and take a deep breath.

It can't be long now. This can't go on forever.

But what if it does? What if there's no way out of this mess?

Maybe that's why Gideon bought this property—because it's isolated in the wilderness.

That would be my luck.

On top of being lost, it's hot as hell. The air is thick with humidity. Sweat clings to my brow.

There better be a road soon because I don't want to be out here once it's dark. I continue on my trek, but it's harder this time. My feet keep getting stuck in the mud.

In the distance, I hear a noise.

I stop and hold my breath, trying to figure out where it's coming from, but I can't tell. The sound is so faint that it could be anything...or nothing.

Then there's a break in the tree line, and a road appears.

The breath I'm holding lets out in a puff.

It might not be smart, and it's probably a horrible idea, but I step out onto the road and look for a car.

In the grand scheme of life, how much worse can hitchhiking be from sleeping with a drug dealer that kept me prisoner in his house or the Russian mob wanting to kill me?

Not even a minute later, a truck is rolling to a stop beside me.

The window of the beat-up pickup truck rolls down, and the old man inside looks nice enough. Although, to be fair, Ted Bundy was considered handsome by many, and look at Gideon.

Being a monster didn't diminish how handsome he is.

"Can you take me to the city?"

He narrows his eyes, his gaze looking over me. For a second, by the scowl on his face, I think he might say no and drive off. I think, at this point, I'd cry if that happened.

I'm on the verge of it already. Adrenaline has been fueling me since the bombshell in the garden earlier today. If I stop and think about what I

heard...

“Please.” My voice cracks as he continues to assess me. The man seems reluctant, and to be fair, I look a mess.

There is mud caked on my hands and probably the rest of me.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Yes,” I admit. “But not because of anything I’ve done. Bad people are looking for me. I promise, as long as we get out of here now, it won’t come back on you.”

From where I’m standing, I can see how his jaw tightens. He looks at me and then up at the sky. With a large sigh, he nods. “Only because you remind me of my granddaughter, and I hope nobody would leave her to fend for herself if she were ever in a similar situation.” Reaching across the front seat, he grabs something and tosses it to me. It’s a box of wipes. “You can get in the cab. Stay down until we’re out of these parts.”

“Thanks,” I say as I climb in, and as soon as I’m in the cab, I set about cleaning myself. As I use the wipes on the caked-in dirt, I see a mark on my leg.

Why do I have a bruise here?

It’s already a shade of yellow, so it’s old.

Then I look closer and realize it’s not a bruise, but the ghost of a fingerprint.

A fingerprint mark that Gideon left.

I remember the night he did that. The way he held me down as he licked me all over.

My stomach drops, and tears blur my vision. I try as hard as I can to hold myself together, but the flimsy string is about to break.

I can’t believe I fell for him.

He’s a drug dealer.

A liar.

And now I know a murderer.

The tears I tried to keep at bay fall unbidden down my cheeks in a river of sorrow, and I let them. I cry for my brother. I cry for my parents. I cry for myself and what my life has become.

I mourn it all. Every single shitty hand I’ve been dealt.

“Is there anyone you have to call?” the man asks in a voice that tells he’s feeling sorry for me.

He’s got to witness my break, and any other time I’d be embarrassed, but

today, I'm too tired and sad to care.

I look over to see him reaching his phone out.

And one name rolls in my mind.

If I can get home and grab some stuff, I can get out of the city, but I'll need someone to help me.

One person will be able to help me get away.

Matt.

I only hope this doesn't get us both killed.



## SASHA

WHEN I SEE the familiar buildings of my block, my heart beats rapidly in my chest.

I don't have much time before I meet Matt.

Just enough to grab a few essentials, and then I'll haul ass out of there. Preferably before anyone finds me. This would be the first place they'd look.

The truth is, I should have had the truck driver drop me off where Matt told me—a few blocks from the precinct. But I needed to grab some cash that I have stored in a loose ceiling tile above my bed. It's not much.

Maybe fifteen hundred dollars, give or take.

Lots of long hours on my feet, dealing with cheap patrons to even scratch together that much.

It's been hiding in the spot since before Roman died. My fear of him finding it spurred me to stash it.

When the truck pulls to a stop, my hands are shaking. I know it's a risk, but I have to take it.

"Thank you," I say as I look back at the man who helped me for no reason other than the kindness of his heart.

"Be safe."

"I will." I fling the door open before I can second-guess myself and make my way out onto the street.

The moment I do, I realize how dumb I am. I don't have my keys.

Luckily for me, security is shit in this building. So instead of going through the front door, I head toward the fire escape.



Gideon wasn't wrong. This place is awful, but the good news is it shouldn't be too hard to break into, and I have no intentions of ever coming back.

The walk around the building isn't far, but as I dash toward the fire escape, I swear I feel eyes on me.

It's my own paranoia. It has to be.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I tremble as I pull the stairs down.

The faster I get in, the faster I can get out.

I climb up the corroded stairs, gripping the railing with my hands. The cold bites into my skin. I can feel the rust and the grime on it, but I don't care. I need to get inside. One step at a time until I reach the landing for the first floor, my floor.

The window is locked, but this isn't my first time breaking inside my apartment, and I know the lock is broken.

It's only one of the reasons I hate this place so much.

Normally, at night, I wedge a chair against the window. Without the chair there, the lock doesn't stay in place.

With a deep inhale, I peek inside the window, and just as I suspected, the chair is clear across the room.

My hand reaches out and tries to push the window open, but I know it won't open right away. You have to wiggle the flimsy glass. I shake it back and forth until the lock moves with the vibrations.

Just as I knew it would, the crappy lock that was merely resting in place and never doing its job unlatches.

I push the window open and slide my body through the crack.

A large audible sigh leaves my body once I'm inside, but it's short-lived as I look around the place.

My apartment was never nice, but now it looks like a bomb exploded.

All of my things are thrown around. Cabinets are open. Someone was here, and that someone was searching.

It would be nice if I were able to pretend to be ignorant for a minute because what could anyone hope to find in my apartment? But I know the answer. Gideon's words ricochet in my head.

*The money Roman stole.*

The only problem is I don't have the money.

I never did.

There isn't much to salvage. Grabbing a pair of pants, I quickly pull off

my shorts and slide them on. Then I stand on the bed, pushing the popcorn-stained ceiling tile over.

*Please let it be there.*

My hand rummages around, and then I find it. The small bag filled with all the cash I have in the world.

When I go to count it, I hear a noise.

My front door kicks open, and three large men stride in through the opening as if they own the place.

“Isn’t this interesting.” It’s the man from the picture, and his eyes are locked on the bag in my hand. “Where is my money?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I fire back. He’s still looking at the bag. I’m scared. Every bone in my body feels like it’s shaking, but I try my hardest to keep my voice steady. “This is all I have. It’s not even fifteen hundred dollars. Please, just leave me alone. I don’t know anything about your money.”

Despite my false bravado, it feels like a cold hand wraps around my heart and squeezes. It makes it hard to breathe.

“You’re lying.” The man steps closer, and I feel like a rabbit in headlights, frozen in place. My mind races with what I should do, but I can’t think straight.

“I’m not,” I whimper, trying to shrink away. “Just please leave me alone. I don’t have your money.”

He continues to advance on me. Closer and closer until I can smell his putrid breath. Before I know what’s happening, his hand reaches out and grips my chin, his nails digging into my flesh.

I can’t help but wince, tears running down my face.

“Roman was a spineless man, and he took from me. He had no honor, no loyalty. He deserved what he got. I only wish I was the one to pull the trigger.”

My jaw trembles under his brutal touch.

“Shut up,” I spit. Despite having heard that Gideon killed my brother, it still hurts to have this maniac confirm it.

“I even have the video footage. Caught the whole thing on camera. Very entertaining. Care to see it?” More tears leave my eyes. I don’t want to see that. I never want to see that. “I’ll tell you what, a trade for a trade. You give me the money, and I’ll show you the tape.”

“I don’t know what money you’re talking about. Do you see this place? I

have nothing.” I scream, my hand reaching out and trying to push him away.

The moment I do, I realize my mistake as his eyes darken, and he turns to his two henchmen standing vigil in the corner.

“Take care of her.” He drops his hand, and I try to escape, dashing toward the door, but I don’t make it far before arms are pulling me back. I kick and scream, but it’s no use. They’re too strong.

One grabs ahold of me, and no matter how hard I swing, there’s no pushing him off. My arms are locked behind my back, and I’m rendered immobile.

The other man takes a step forward, his hand reaching out, a cloth lifting to my nose.

The world around me blurs, the room distorting, and then...

Everything goes black.



# GIDEON

I STORM DOWN THE HALL, needing an outlet for my rage. My blood feels like it's on fire.

It's tearing at my chest, tearing through everything I am.

*I can't think straight. I can't breathe.*

There's only one way to relieve this pressure building inside me like an IED ready to explode.

Flinging the door open, I stride toward the outside pool deck. I find him where I expect to, doing his rounds.

He doesn't seem surprised to see me when the pounding of my shoes alerts him of my presence. Before he can react, I throw a punch, my fist slamming into his jaw.

I hear a grunt of pain. He stumbles backward, trying to keep his balance. I advance on him, fists flying. He tries to dodge a punch, but he's too slow, and he's starting to realize he can't keep up his defense forever. "Stop fighting. It will only make your death more painful."

He falls to the ground, spitting up blood.

"I never should have let you live. And that was my mistake, but it won't be a mistake I'll make again."

Sean groans in response, but before he can say another word, I'm pulling him back up to standing.

He wobbles on his feet and falls back onto the floor.

Normally, I would take him to the room in the basement under the east wing, the room where I saw him corner my firefly.

At the time, I gave him a warning and a beating, but I was too easy on

him.

I won't be too easy on him now, seeing as I don't want to drag dead weight all the way across the property and inside the manor. I pull my gun out from behind my back; his eyes go wide with shock and fear.

"No," he says. "Please."

I know he's going to try to rationalize that it was a mistake and he didn't know that Sasha was listening, but it doesn't matter because I'm not rational, and I don't give a fuck.

Sasha is now in danger, helpless by herself, with crazy criminals all looking for her because of this fucker. I can't allow him to breathe another day.

I point the gun at his head and pull the trigger before he can utter another word. Brain fragments scatter across the pavement. He'll never interfere with my life again. Even if it takes my cleaning crew hours to clean up this shit, it's worth it.

With that done, I have one more loose end to clean up. I need to know why *she* opened the door.

Stalking back into the house, I stampede toward the servant's quarters. By the time I make it down the stairs, I'm seething with anger. "Where is she?" I demand, my voice a low, dangerous growl. "Where the hell is she?"

Nobody answers. They all know better than to get in my way when I'm like this.

I'm tearing through the hall, disrupting everything in my path. I feel like a tornado smashing through a building; nothing is safe from my reach.

My pulse races and my breath comes in heaving gasps as I frantically search for her. I fling open the door to her room and then the closet, throwing clothes to the ground in a crumpled heap. The air is thick with rage and desperation as I step back out and cast my gaze around the room.

"Where are you?" I yell out into the stillness, my voice echoing off the walls.

I'll tear this house apart in my search for her.

The furniture is no match for my fury; it's smashed to pieces in seconds.

Behind the curtain, something moves. When I pull back the thick fabric, she's there, cowering and shaking.

I take a deep breath, my heart still pounding against my rib cage.

Nothing bad will happen to her, but she doesn't know that.

I don't hurt women, but I need to know if she's working with the

Russians. If she's a traitor.

"Why?" I ask.

"S-she wanted to leave." A tear slips down her face before she swipes it away.

"And you let her?"

She stands up taller, straightening her back, trying not to look scared. "I did."

"Why would you unlock the door?"

"She didn't deserve to be a prisoner here. She didn't deserve to be hurt." There's a tremble in her voice, and something tells me she's talking about something else.

"Did someone hurt you here?" I ask.

She looks away from me.

I take a step closer, and she flinches. "Someone hurt you here, and you were afraid that Sasha would be hurt, so you let her out?"

"Yes."

A tiny sliver of my anger dissipates with that knowledge. If I'd known, I would've taken care of it. Nobody messes with women and children in my ranks. Not without forfeiting their lives.

"Not that I have to explain anything to you, but Sasha was here for her safety. There are very bad men wanting to hurt her, and now she no longer has protection. If she dies, her blood is on your hands."

"I thought—"

My hand flies up to stop her words. "I don't care what you thought. You were wrong. I love Sasha and would never hurt her." I take a deep breath, seeing the woman cower once more. If I want information from her, I'll need to calm my tone. She's clearly shaken. "Now, tell me who hurt you, and I'll deal with them. You're under my protection too."

She nibbles on her lip before nodding. "Sean."

That fuck. If I hadn't already killed him, I would do it all over again.

"You don't have to worry about him again." Her eyes go wide, and she looks like she may say more, but I'm already out of the room. She can stay, or she can go. She thought she was protecting Sasha, and she won't be punished for that.

Now I need to figure out where she is. My mind is going a million miles per minute. I already sent men over to her place. They should be getting there shortly.

Which basically leaves me standing here holding my dick in my hand like an idiot.

Just as I'm about to leave and head into the city to start my own search, my phone rings.

Cyrus is calling. "Speak to me," I answer.

"It's an offshore account. Set up by Roman Lennox. It's in Sasha's name."

"Fuck. How much?"

"Twenty-eight million."

Fuck. There's an account in Sasha's name with twenty-eight million dollars that Roman stole from the Russian mob. She had the money this whole time; she just didn't know it.

"*They want something.*" That's what Roman had said.

They wanted their money, and Sasha had the numbers inside her cello the whole time.

The cello was a gift from Roman. *When he finally started to make money.*

She assumed he meant when he came to work with Tobias all those years ago, but the whole time, he was referring to the job with the Russians. The money he was slowly funneling out and placing in an account for her.

Fuck.

This is fucking bad.

She's in danger and doesn't even know how big a danger it is.

Just as I'm about to ask Cyrus another question, a text comes through.

JULIAN

She's not here, but someone was.

GIDEON

You sure?

Julian

Her window was open.

"Fuck!" I bellow, forgetting Cyrus is still on the line.

"What's going on?" His voice echoes in my ear.

"My girl's gone." My teeth grind together.

"We'll find her. See you soon." I don't have to ask; I know Cyrus and all the rest of my crazy-ass friends will go to war with me.

I fire off a text back to Julian.



GIDEON

I want everyone meeting in one hour. Bring the Russian informant.

I don't care what I have to do. I will find her. I will tear down the entire city if I have to.



# SASHA

I WAKE UP WITH A JOLT, the back of my head pounding like a jackhammer. I open my eyes to find myself sitting in a chair, my wrists and ankles tied up tightly with rope.

I try to move, but it's no use—the knots are too tight to escape.

Fear courses through my veins as realization slowly sets in—I've been kidnapped.

A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling, casting a dull yellow glow across the empty warehouse. The place is dark, and it's the only source of light, that and a single ray of moonlight coming from a tiny window up high near the ceiling.

With my limited vision, I can make out the walls and a faint outline of an enormous metal shelf.

Sweat runs down my forehead as terror takes hold.

In the dead silence of this place, all I can hear is the sound of my own erratic breathing.

My heart feels like it's beating faster until it feels like it might burst right out of my chest.

I frantically search for any sign or clue that might tell me who brought me here and why.

Then I remember...

The Russians.

The man from the picture that Gideon asked me about.

He was there, in my apartment.

Tightness spreads through my chest. I'm suffocating. The stale and musty

air makes it hard to breathe.

My heart races as fear takes over me. Fear of what could come next, fear of the unknown.

I try to move my legs, but they are tightly bound to the chair, so I can't even struggle properly against them.

Approaching footsteps have me stopping my movements.

"Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?" The voice is low and menacing—sending chills down my spine like icy fingers tapping on glass windows. The man is still shrouded in darkness, and I can't make out his face.

All I can do is sit wide-eyed, his question lingering in the air between us as he stares me down, waiting for an answer.

Words stick in my mouth. "Can I have some water?"

His jaw is taut, and his next words are gritted through his teeth. "Where is the money?"

"I already told you. I don't have the money. I never did. Roman was a liar."

The man stalks closer, and when he bends, I recognize him. It's him. Again. The man from my apartment, the man from the picture.

"You will talk. Pain has a way of loosening even the tightest of lips." He turns around and speaks, but not to me this time. My gaze dashes around the room, and I notice two men in the corner. The burning cherries from their cigarettes glow in the dark.

"Make her talk," he says before stepping back into the hall and leaving me alone with his goons.

My body shivers, but not from the cold.

Another man steps up; he's younger than the last, with dark hair and darker eyes.

"You'll be thirsty unless you give the boss what he wants." His voice is thick with his Russian accent.

"It doesn't matter. She's going to die anyway. Her cooperation will be the difference between a quick death and a painful one," the other voice says.

I feel like my heart is going to beat out of my chest. I can't believe what's happening to me. What can I say that will make them believe me?

*Nothing.*

The air around me is thick with terror, and I can barely breathe from the weight of it all. It feels like a million tiny needles are pricking at my skin.

My stomach lurches in protest as nausea builds up inside me.

Only a few moments later, I can feel it rushing up, bile coating my throat and threatening to expel.

I cough, dry heaving, but nothing comes out. Only tears stream down my face.

My eyes screw shut, tight against the pain tearing through my soul, wishing desperately that this was all just a dream and not reality.

These men will kill me, and it's Gideon's fault.

He lied.

He betrayed me.

If he'd been honest from the beginning about everything, maybe it would be different.

*No.*

It wouldn't have.

The realization hits me in the stomach. Nothing would have been different. He could have told me the truth, and I still would've tried to escape. I'd still be here.

Nothing changes the fact that the outcome has always been the same.

I close my eyes, but the tears still stream down.

*This is where I'm going to die. I'll see Roman.*

The revelation has my breathing starting to regulate.

Death is inevitable, and a new sense of clarity comes with that thought.



# SASHA

HOURS PASS. I have no idea what time it is. But one thing is still the same—I'm still in a warehouse. Still being held as a prisoner.

This isn't my first time being held somewhere I don't want to be, but the difference in the situation is staggering.

I thought Gideon was evil, but I was always treated like a queen.

Even when I was trying to escape.

My heart lurches at the thought of him, but I push it away and try to take stock of my environment.

I'm no longer tied to a chair.

Now, I'm lying on a hard, cold floor. A memory of being untied and thrust to the floor flutters into my mind.

No food or water has been provided, and I'm parched and hungry.

My mouth feels like it's filled with sand.

At least they haven't started the actual torture. Right now, it's all mind games.

I move to sit up, but that's when I realize my hands are still secured together.

That's right.

They allowed me to sleep on the floor but still tied my hands.

A faint noise seems to echo through the air. It's so soft that at first, I think it might be nothing more than a figment of my imagination, but then it grows louder—footsteps brisk and deliberate.

Someone is coming.

My eyes dart around the room as I strain to see anything that could give

me the upper hand. But I can't concentrate over the sound of my thundering heart.

Every minute feels like an eternity, and every second brings with it a new wave of terror.

They didn't hurt me. But that was before; will they hurt me now?

What do I do?

Defend myself in some way.

I scan around desperately for something—anything—that might be used as a weapon but find nothing.

Just then, the door swings open, and someone advances into the room.

The light from the tiny bulb flickers, and as the person turns in my direction, oxygen escapes my mouth.

Matt.

He found me, but how?

When I was taken from my apartment, he must have seen them. I had told him I was going to stop there, and he must have decided to meet me instead of waiting for me to come to him.

In the span of only a few moments, hope blossoms in my chest like a rose unfurling its petals.

"Matt," I whisper out into the darkness.

"Shh," he responds, crossing the space to get to me.

My head shakes back and forth. "The men—"

"The guard stepped out."

"I—you found me." I throw myself into his chest and cry tears of relief. "We have to get out of here."

"I'll get you out of here, Sasha. But I'm not going to lie, your life—" His words stop, and he pushes me back, looking down into my eyes. "You said on the phone that Roman stole money from them. Do you know where his money is?"

"I don't have it. That's the thing that no one understands. I don't have this man's money. I never did. Roman gave me nothing. Trust me, Matt—"

I wasn't awake when they brought me here, but I doubt the Russian Bratva's lair is easy to infiltrate.

"How did you get in here?" The accusation in my tone is tough to hide.

There's no way a place likely well-guarded just allowed a detective to waltz in.

"I'm a detective, Sasha. I do this for a living. We've been watching this



place for some time. I know the schedule.”

What he says makes sense, and I nod in understanding.

“Let’s get you out of here.” He unties my hands, and once they are free, I wiggle them around, trying to get the circulation back into them. “When we’re out—”

The sound of the door flying open has me flinching. Light streams in from the hallway. It’s blinding against the dark room.

Heavy shoes approach, and I realize it’s the man who wants what Roman stole again.

Shit.

He’ll kill Matt for trying to break me out. At that moment, Matt rushes toward him, but he’s too slow. There are too many men, and he can’t possibly fight them all off.

My fear becomes reality as they quickly overpower my friend.

I watch in horror as one punches him in the face, and then he’s thrust onto his knees.

A kick to the ribs.

The sound that emanates from Matt’s mouth makes my body tremble with chills.

“Stop! You’re going to kill him.”

Dima Markov steps forward, gun in hand. “That’s the point.”

He aims the gun at the back of Matt’s head. “Where is my money?”

“I don’t have it,” I cry out.

He cocks the gun. The click echoes inside me like a freight train. “I promise. I don’t know.”

“His death is on your hands.”

“No. Please. I don’t know. I don’t know. Please—”

A deafening boom slices through the air, ripping a sob from my throat. I feel like I’m being torn apart. Sob after sob pours out of me.

“Talk!”

The gun points at me. “I don’t know anything.” Tears stream down my face. Time passes, and my eyes screw shut as I wait to die, but after a minute, nothing happens, and my lids flutter open.

“It was worth a try,” a familiar voice says, and I shake my head in confusion as Matt gets up from where his body was lying on the floor only a few seconds prior. I blink as he stands to his full height, spitting blood onto the floor.

He's not dead. I move toward him, but then, like a vise is locked around my body, I stop myself, his words echoing in my head. *Worth a try.*

What was worth a try?

That's when I take in Matt's body language. The way he stands upright, rolls his shoulders back, and steps toward Dima.

I look back and forth between the two men, "I-I don't—"

"Don't understand," Matt finishes.

"This whole time you were—what is this?"

"Working with the Russians, yep, trying to find the money your idiot of a brother stole. You would have been my prize too, once I found it." He leers at me, and I feel sick.

My mouth is dry, and my head is reeling.

Matt, my friend, is working with them? And I—I was going to be given to him wrapped up in what—a fucking bow!

Anger rises to the surface, snuffing out the fear momentarily.

"I'm no one's prize, and the joke's on you. I have no idea where Roman hid his money. What no one seems to understand is that we weren't close. I froze him out years ago after the millionth time of him coming to me for drug money."

Dima laughs. "Roman was one of my best customers. Once I figured out who he was and that he was trying to steal from me, it wasn't hard."

"What wasn't hard?"

"Making him an addict. It was so easy. Everything was. Especially making him a traitor to Gideon. All I had to do was make him feel like *family*, lean into the fact. Make him see that we had to stick together. Roman thought he was so smart, though. He knew the truth and blamed me."

"Knew what?" I spit.

"That you are my *plemyannitsa*."

"I don't understand Russian."

"And that, dear *plemyannitsa*, is the reason my brother, your father, had to die."

His words knock the wind out of me.

"Oh, you didn't know who your parents were? I am not surprised."

My back straightens, and my fists clench. "My father was not mafia."

"No, he wasn't. But he should have been."

"Stop speaking in riddles and get to the goddamn point," I seethe.

"Your father was supposed to join, but then he met your mother and

dreamed of a different life, and when she became pregnant with Roman, he left. He abandoned us, his family...and for that, he had to die.”

My eyes narrow in on this evil man. Familiarity bleeds into recognition. *He looks like my father.* Different but similar.

“I remember you. You know, I saw you once.”

“I didn’t see you. Had I, I would have caught onto Roman before it was too late.” His eyes trace my body, and I shiver under the weight of it. “You look so much like your mother. The whore my brother abandoned us for. I never would have been fooled by Roman if I saw you with him, but by the time I realized that he was the child of my brother, the money was gone.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I’m about to do. My body springs into motion, lunging toward the man I now know is my uncle. But he must anticipate my move because he easily sidesteps me, laughing.

“You’re a feisty one. It’s too bad I will have to kill you. Without the money, there is no need to keep you alive. I’ll enjoy it. I was robbed of the kill shot on Roman, after all. Do you want to see? Want to watch your brother’s last breath?”

I shake my head.

He laughs again. “I’ll show you.” He turns to speak over his shoulder, but I can’t understand him. “They will get the footage,” he tells me as if he just remembered I can’t speak Russian.

Not even a minute later, an iPad is thrust in front of me. I try to close my eyes, but I feel the barrel of a gun on my head.

“Watch.”

And I do. I can’t look away.

What I see shocks me.

My brother is stabbed, kicked, and punched. Blood seeps from every wound on his body.

He’s being tortured.

And I realize one important fact. It’s not Gideon.

The Russians do things I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

My stomach rolls, and bile rises up my throat. I shove it down, unwilling to allow this man to know how much I’m affected. I won’t give him the satisfaction.

Then they leave him to die.

Not long after, Gideon appears on the camera. He’s angry at first. Taunting him. His back straight and his jaw tight.

But then something changes . . .

Tears fill my eyes as Gideon wraps his arms around him.

He tries to help him, but it's no use. My brother is dying.

My brother speaks, begging Gideon to find me and keep me safe. To protect me.

The man I love promises my dying brother the world, and then he stands up.

Roman's breathing is labored, his chest caves in; his lungs are collapsing.

*"Take it away," he says.*

On the camera, Gideon watches him, and then, with a look of regret that I have seen before on Gideon's face, he takes out his gun.

Gideon might've pulled the trigger, but it was a mercy kill...

My brother was painfully dying, and Gideon gave him peace. I was so wrong about him.

The past month drifts through my memory.

The way he held me.

The way he encouraged me.

The way he loved me.

Everything was real.

We might not have started out that way, and yes, maybe it started off as a lie, but from the moment he tried to save me, it was all true.

Gideon loves me.

And despite it all, I still love him.

He might be a monster.

But he's my monster.



# GIDEON

*MY HEART THUMPS hard in my chest.*

*Roman lies on the cold concrete floor of the warehouse, gasping for breath and clutching his bleeding chest. His face is a pale mask of agony, and his eyes glint with fear as he gazes up at me.*

*The air reeks of dust and sweat, giving it an acrid taste that clings to my tongue like glue.*

*The darkness of the room threatens to swallow us both whole, and I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, teetering between life and death.*

*I go to leave, turning back to my men, when the sound of a cough stops me.*

*"Gideon..." Roman chokes, and I glance back in his direction. "Take it away."*

*I stare at him for a brief second, trying to determine if I understand him.*

*The pain I see is unimaginable. His lungs are collapsing.*

*I nod to him, raising the gun toward my old friend, who lies helplessly before me. He stares at me with pleading eyes, asking for something from beyond life—mercy or forgiveness—but all he gets is a single bullet through the head.*

*The gunshot explodes in my ears like thunder and sends a shock wave through my body that reverberates in my bones until it fades away into nothingness. Roman's body, now on the ground, lifeless as discarded trash.*

*My heart feels heavy in my chest.*

*Such a waste.*

*The smell of gunpowder hangs heavy in the air, its smoky tendrils lingering with regret.*

*I take one last look at Roman before turning away from him forever; his face is still etched with pain.*

*His anguish forever frozen in time.*

*I wish things could have been different, but nothing can erase what has happened today.*

*The girl.*

*His sister.*

*I need to find her.*

*A promise forged in blood.*

THE SOUND OF MY PHONE RINGING HAS ME SHIFTING FROM MY MEMORY BACK into reality.

“Speak,” I answer.

“Nikolai got the information you’re looking for,” Julian tells me.

“Tell me now. There isn’t time,” I snap.

“He will only speak to you, sir.”

“Fucker. Very well, I’m coming down.”

My long strides eat up the space quickly, and before long, I’m throwing open the door to the interrogation room.

Despite the fact that Nikolai is working for us now, I’ve had my men bring him here on the off chance his intel is unreliable.

He needs to prove himself to me; only then will he be granted a job within my organization.

“Tell me what you found out.” No time for formalities. Every moment Sasha is missing is another moment where they can be hurting her.

“I have it from a reliable source that Dima is holding Sasha at a warehouse in Brighton Beach. I have the address.”

“And how reliable is this source?”

“He gave me the answer somewhere between losing his finger and me scooping out his right eyeball.”

My jaw tightens. “Is he still alive?”

“For now.”

“Good.” I stand from the chair and nod to Julian. He’s clear that Nikolai is to stay here, on the property, in this room until his intel checks out.

As I step out of the room, I find Lorenzo Amanté waiting for me.

I lift an eyebrow. “What are you doing here?” My anger is not aimed at him, but it’s hard to switch it off when I’m this enraged.

“Word around town is your firefly flew away.”

“That she did.”

“I’m here to help you get her back.”

I stare at the man who started as a business acquaintance and has long since become like family to me. In this business, you can’t trust many, but Lorenzo, I can trust.

“Thank you,” I grunt, not used to showing emotions to anyone but Sasha.

He nods, no other words spoken, as I pick up my phone and dial Jax.

“Is Lorenzo there yet?” he answers.

“Good to know you’re on top of everyone’s moves.”

“Not always, but when one of our girls is taken by the Russian mafia, yeah, I get involved.”

“Thanks, man.”

“No problem. Lorenzo will ride with you. The rest of the guys will meet you wherever you tell them. I’ll watch from the satellites.”

Once we hang up, I pull up the group chat.

GIDEON

Stay with your wives.

TOBIAS

Bullshit. Skye would kill me if I left you to fend for yourself.

HE HAS A POINT.

GIDEON

But only you.

CYRUS

That’s not going to happen. Tell us when and where.

JAX

I need an address so I can send you the schematics of the building.

GIDEON



Fine, but that's all.

MATTEO

I'll be there. No way am I letting that fucker have all the fun.

HE'S OBVIOUSLY REFERRING TO HIS COUSIN, LORENZO.

LORENZO

We don't need your old ass slowing us down.

MATTEO

We're the same age.

LORENZO

You're old AF.

TRENT

As much as I'd love to be there...

LORENZO

Yeah, we know you're busy. You're a pussy, anyway.

TRENT

Fuck off. You know I'm not even in the country.

GIDEON

While I'm enjoying this—can we all rein this in and rescue my girl? I'm texting you the address in Brighton Beach. Jax, send me what info you can get.

THERE IS A CHANCE SOME OF US WON'T MAKE IT OUT ALIVE, BUT WITH THEM having my back, the chances are less.

I might die, but as long as I get to Sasha and get her to safety, it'll be worth it.

I'm not sure what I believe in, but I believe in her.

She has to still be breathing. Nobody attempts to snuff out her life and lives.

Blood will be on my hands tonight, and I won't regret it for a single

moment.



# SASHA

NO MATTER how hard I try, I can't get the images of the video out of my head.

It's like a record skipping.

Over and over again.

The pain he was in. The way he begged Gideon to protect me.

Even after everything, despite our fractured relationship, Roman's last words were about me.

His love for me never wavered.

For a time, he was lost, but at the moment it counted, he was the brother I loved. The brother who tried his best to raise me, care for me and love me after our parents died.

The truth hit me in the face today; the Russians orchestrated my brother's downfall, not Gideon. They are the reason he's dead. Gideon only helped him in the end.

The guilt feels like a heavy stone resting on my chest, making it impossible to take a deep breath. It creeps up my spine and clings to me. No matter how hard I try to escape its clutches, it won't let go.

I close my eyes, desperate not to see Roman's face, but every time I do, I see Gideon. I never allowed him to explain, and now I'm here, about to die, without telling him that I'm sorry.

Death will come for me, and I'll never make this right with him.

My temper and need to protect myself have cost me everything.

It cost me Roman. I refused to let him in and look what it got me. I lost him, and now my stubbornness cost me Gideon.

Voices drift across the space.

“He’s coming for her,” the person says, and excitement blooms inside me. Despite my leaving him, Gideon is coming to save me, but it’s quickly extinguished when I hear the next words.

“Good. Let him come. I will kill him. Kill them all, and maybe once I take over his territory, I’ll be able to reclaim the money I lost because of Roman.”

My hands shake as a chill runs down my spine. I can hear them plotting an ambush for Gideon, like a pack of predators planning their next attack. Their voices are slick and full of malice. They remind me of a swarm of wasps buzzing through the air, ready to strike out.

Gideon could die. Tears bloom in my eyes. He can die because of me.

I’ve made so many mistakes. The weight of them threatens to kill me.

Another voice grunts in agreement. “He won’t know what hit him,” he says calmly. His tone is almost too calm—as if he’s relishing this moment too much and taking pleasure in Gideon’s inevitable demise.

My stomach twists and turns at their words.

Tears blur my vision.

“Once Gideon is dead, we will go after everyone. One by one, we will take over the whole East Coast. Turns out Roman’s betrayal might have been exactly what we needed to control New York.”

“It will start a war,” another voice says.

“Yep, couldn’t have planned it better myself.”

My heart is pounding in my chest as I frantically try to loosen the knots binding my hands together.

I need to get out of here. I have to warn Gideon. Even if I die in the crossfire, I have to at least try. By the sounds of things, he isn’t very far. My thoughts of escape are cut off when two men stroll into the room I’m being held in.

“Come on.” The taller figure grabs my arm roughly and drags me across the room toward the doorway shrouded in darkness.

I’m not sure where he’s taking me.

Fear coils in my stomach.

I can feel a trickle of perspiration streaming down my back, and my breath comes in short, shallow gasps.

I stumble forward blindly into one unknown room after another.

The hallway feels like an endless tunnel with no source of light;

everything is black and still. We move forward wordlessly through this abyss until we finally reach a door at the end.

It creaks open slowly, revealing a large room bathed in faint moonlight coming through one of its narrow windows.

This is where it will happen.

I can feel the air around me shift as the men ready for battle.

Although I'm in the room, I'm thrust into the corner. Apparently, they don't want me killed in the crossfire, but that doesn't stop them from cutting my rope and securing me with handcuffs to a metal pipe.

I already told them I don't know where the money is, but I guess they want to make good on their threat to torture me to see if I'm telling the truth.

Tucked away, no one will be able to see me here, but I'll be able to watch.

Maybe this is another part of their plan to inflict pain on me? Making me watch Gideon die.

The one man leaves after walking toward the center of the room. Another steps forward. I brace for a smack to the face or cruel words to be flung in my direction but am shocked when something small drops in my hand.

I don't look down, but I can tell it's a key. "I was friends with your brother." That's all he says before leaving me.

I don't waste any time unlocking the chains.

As soon as my hands are free, gunshots erupt, and I brace myself for an attack.

Gideon is smart. He'll know what they're planning.

He has to.

I watched my brother die. I won't watch the man I'm in love with die too.



# GIDEON

ADRENALINE FLOODS my veins as we make our way toward the warehouse.

Some of my men infiltrate the side of the building. Others enter from a hatch in the roof that Jax found during his search.

I plan to walk in through the front fucking door.

My heart pounds with anticipation and excitement, as if it knows what's about to happen. The faint smell of metal and oil hangs in the air like a fog, creating a tense atmosphere.

We lunge forward, my men fanning out, colliding in a flurry of limbs.

*Where is Sasha?*

She's my only concern. Well, that and not dying.

From across the room, I see a man barreling toward me. It takes me a second to place the face, and when I do, it feels like I'm a live wire ready to explode.

It's that fucker. Matt.

The cop.

What the hell is he doing here?

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. He's barreling toward me, not trying to help, which means he's working with the Russians.

The fuck.

Sasha trusted him.

The air around me becomes charged with tension.

With my gun aimed at the meathead, I pull back the trigger. Before it fires, I'm bumped from the side. My gun tumbles from my hands, scattering across the cement. Matt is on me within seconds. Who knew this oaf could



move so fast?

“She was supposed to be mine!” Matt’s voice booms through the cavernous space, full of delusional malice.

“Sasha will never be yours.” My arm pulls back, then my fist flies through the air. The contact ends with a satisfying crunch.

He throws the next punch, and I instinctively block it. “They promised her to me.”

“What promise?” I swing at him again, but this time he dodges it.

“Get the money for him.”

“You don’t deserve to breathe the same air as her.” I grab him again, my fist connecting with his stomach.

Both our muscles strain as he strives to overpower me, hurling punches and succeeding in shaking me off him. The noise from our struggle echoes off the walls.

He lunges again, but I’m too fast. We’re locked in a stalemate, circling each other like caged animals fighting for our lives. Our labored breaths ping-pong between us as we size each other up.

A noise to the side momentarily distracts him, and I use the moment to my advantage. I leap and land a solid punch to his face. When he’s down, I wrap my hands around his neck, digging my nails into his blotchy flesh. My grip tightens around him. The pressure swells until he’s gasping to stay alive. But I’m too strong, too angry, too goddamn out of his league.

He won’t walk away from this.

I see the moment he realizes this too.

His eyes go wide, and then, like a candle being snuffed out, the life fades from his body. He’s dead. Completely lifeless and sprawled across the unforgiving concrete.

Still, I grab my Glock from where it lies on the ground, pick it up, and fire no less than my entire magazine into his limp body. Around us, my men are engaged in their own fights. My friends are also occupied.

Lorenzo is behind a Russian, slicing his neck. Matteo is just as brutal. I haven’t seen him in battle for years, but he’s just as deadly as he ever was. *They all are.*

The fight rages on.

One by one, Russians fall to the ground.

A few of my men are dead, too.

It’s a bloodbath.

And me? I flip Matt's body with a rough kick, reload my Glock, and fire that entire magazine into his back, as well.



# SASHA

EVERYTHING HAPPENS IN SLOW MOTION.

A war wages around me.

Across the room, bodies fall, and the smell of gunpowder lingers in the air.

It's pure pandemonium.

Gideon. *Where is he?*

From the corner of my eye, I find him. He's lifting his gun, but just as he's about to fire at Matt, one of the Russians knocks him out of the way.

A gasp lurches from deep within me as his gun boomerangs across the floor. The chaos removes every man's attention from me, giving me the opportunity to act.

I make a mad dash, trying to get to him, but he's too far away. As they fight, I feel like I'm being suffocated, watching as the man I love can possibly die.

From across the space, something gleams at me. I narrow my eyes and notice it's a gun. It looks different than Gideon's gun, but I'm sure it fires the same. I lunge for it. My slippery fingers, damp from sweat, reach out to grab it. I'm trembling so hard that it slips through my grasp, crashing to the floor.

I try again, and this time, I succeed. When I turn in the direction of Gideon, I see that he has Matt subdued, choking the life out of him.

Shouts ring through the air.

Bodies hit the floor.

When Gideon realizes that Matt is dead, he stands.

"Gideon!" I shout, but I doubt he can hear me. It's so loud in here.

From where I'm standing, I can see one of Gideon's men is about to stab the guard who saved me. "No! Not him," I scream. "He saved me."

Both men look at me like I'm insane, but it works. Instead of death, Roman's friend's hands end up tied together.

Death might still find him, but at least I tried.

I'm about to say more when I see the dark shadow of a man approach Gideon. Gideon still hasn't seen him.

It's Dima.

The man I now know is my uncle.

The man who admitted to killing my parents. To orchestrating the death of my brother. It doesn't matter who pulled the trigger. My brother was dead already. And now Dima is lifting his arm, about to fire at the man I love. I won't let him. Shuffling to my feet, I scurry across the space.

When I'm only a few feet away, I'm able to hear them.

"You made it really easy for me," my uncle says, his gun trained on Gideon. "At first, I only wanted the money, but now I get to take out the competition *and* get the money. It's a shame you killed Matt. The boy worked hard for his prize. But that's okay. I'll just sell her. A pretty little thing like that, I bet she brings in almost as much money as her bastard brother stole."

I can feel my heart racing faster and faster as I move closer.

"That will never happen." Gideon lunges forward and hits my uncle's body so hard that his head snaps back.

A shot rings through the air, but I can't see what's happening. Who was shot? Their bodies are too close together as they grapple for control.

There's blood everywhere. A crimson puddle forms on the cement as they wrestle each other to the ground.

Gideon's fist flies, but it misses its mark. Dima jumps on top of him. His arms reach out to choke the man I love.

No. I won't lose him, too.

I lift the heavy metal in my hands, take aim, and fire.

My body ricochets back from the force.

I don't know if I hit my mark. I don't know anything.

My ears ring, and the smell of smoke bursts through my nostrils.

I blink away, tears dripping down my face, and then my vision comes into focus. My uncle is down on the ground, but so is Gideon.

My heart pounds as I sprint across the small space that separates us. I can

feel the hard concrete press against my feet. A shower of dust swirls up with each step. The moonlight shines through a broken window, casting eerie shadows around me.

When I reach them, I see Gideon lying there. He's still and silent. My mind floods with terror that he's gone. I rush to his side and kneel, my hands shaking as I reach out to touch him. His skin is cold and pale like marble, but I feel a faint heartbeat when I press my hand against his chest.

*He's alive.*

I look at him, his beautiful face illuminated by the sliver of light, and my heart swells with so much emotion it feels like it's going to burst. I take his hand in mine.

"Please, wake up." I trace my fingers along his arm as if I'm trying to will life back into him. "I'm so sorry. I should have trusted you. I should have let you explain. I know everything. I know what you did for Roman. Please, wake up. Please," I cry. "I love you. Please, don't leave me, too. I need you."

He coughs, and I freeze.

"I'm not dead, firefly, only wounded. My ego more than anything. You had to save me, and that's not how I saw this going down."

Looking down at him, I see a small smirk on his face.

"You're alive." I reach forward, pulling him into my arms.

He groans. "Easy there. I was shot."

"Oh my God." I drop my hands away from his body, and he winces again. "Someone come here!"

A few of Gideon's guys come in and haul him to his feet. "We need to get that looked at, boss."

"I'm fine. Take me home."

"We need to take you to the hospital," I argue.

He stops moving and studies me before motioning around. "Look around. How am I supposed to explain how I got shot?"

I bite my lip, and he leans up to kiss me. He groans in pain. The sound of his agony makes me cry. "Call Harris," he says to his men. Then he turns to me, a cocky smile forming. "Oh, and firefly?"

"Yes?"

"I love you, too."



## SASHA

“WHY ARE YOU SO ANTSY?” Gideon’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. I follow his line of sight and see that he’s looking at my leg. It’s bouncing up and down.

“I’m nervous,” I admit on a sigh.

His eyebrow lifts in question. “Why?”

I don’t know how to explain the ball of nerves that has taken root in my stomach. “Well, I don’t know. It’s just...” Biting down on my lower lip, I shrug.

“Firefly. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Easy for you to say. This is my first time in the Cayman Islands. And it’s certainly my first time at a shady bank to retrieve shady Russian mob money.”

It’s been two weeks since my uncle took me hostage.

Two weeks since I killed him.

After everything went down, Gideon took me home and was there for me. Tended to my every need. Forced me to eat when I struggled to get out of bed. Bathed me on more than one occasion.

The stain on my soul might never go away from the violence I’ve seen.

Been a part of.

With Gideon’s help holding the burden, I get lighter every day.

Flying to the Cayman Islands was put off until I was ready, but even after the time that has passed, I’m still not prepared to face this alone.

“Well, when you put it that way.” His hands reach across the space and takes mine in his. “What can I do?”



My head shakes back and forth as I continue to grapple with a lack of words. The bouncing and fidgeting get worse, and Gideon narrows his eyes on my leg.

“I just can’t sit still.”

He offers a small smile that works to calm me some. “Well, that I can help you with.”

I twist my body to face him. “Yeah, what can you do, big guy?”

He chokes on a chuckle. “Big guy?”

I stick out my tongue like a child. “Since today.”

He grins, shaking his head. “I think we can do better.” Gideon stands and reaches his hand out toward me. “Stand up.”

“Gideon,” I warn, not even sure what I’m warning against.

He raises a finger at me, but I don’t miss the way his lip twists up into a smirk. “No questions.”

“Gideon—”

“Nope.” He starts pulling me off the chair.

“Where are we going?”

“To the bathroom.”

I stop short, trying to determine what he could possibly get us up to in the bathroom. The possibilities are endless with this man.

“But we have a meeting in a few minutes.”

“And they will wait.” He chuckles darkly, his eyes glittering with cruel amusement. “You’re mine, firefly. You’re mine to do with as I please.”

My core tightens, and my belly burns with need.

He leads us away from his men and toward the direction I have to assume is where the bathroom is.

I don’t bother with objections because I can’t deny that I love it when Gideon takes charge. Especially when he uses my body. He makes me feel alive when I’m with him, and by the look on his face and the gleam in his eye, that’s exactly what he plans to do.

It’s not even a second later that he’s throwing open the door to the bathroom and pushing me up against the sink. “I’m going to fuck you now, firefly,” he growls.

I moan in response, wanting everything he’s offering.

His hand lifts the material of my dress, and without warning, my underwear is ripped off me.

I can barely catch my breath before he’s thrusting deep inside me. He’s a

man possessed, and I'm reaping the rewards of it. With every drive of his hips, more moaning and mewling escapes my lips. This is euphoria.

"Your pussy was meant for my cock." His deep timbre washes over me, and goose bumps rise all over my skin. I'm addicted to him.

He grabs my hair, pulling back my head to capture my lips with his. Each second that passes, he fucks me harder, the sound of our bodies joining the only noise in the room.

"You belong to me. Say it," he demands between harsh breaths.

"I belong to you." I moan, the pleasure making my body shudder.

"Good girl," he praises, slipping a hand between us to rub at my clit as he keeps pounding into me relentlessly. "You were made for this—for me—weren't you?"

"Yes," I whimper in response.

His thrusts and the rubbing of his fingers become too much, and I can feel the explosive orgasm rushing toward the surface. A few more strokes and my head falls back as I crash. Wave after wave of my orgasm tumbles over me.

It's not long before Gideon jerks inside me, holding me closer as he milks his own release.

It takes us both a minute to catch our breaths. Our bodies are locked together while we work to get our racing hearts to slow. These stolen moments with him will never get old.

Eventually, he slips from my body and places a kiss on the top of my head.

"Still nervous?" he says into my hair.

"No." I giggle, thinking about all the ways he helped me get over that.

His fingers.

His lips.

His cock.

"Good. My job here is done."

He steps away, pulling his pants into place.

"You are such a Neanderthal."

"And you love it." He grins.

I do.

I love everything about this man. Including the fact that he made it his mission to ensure that every member of the Russian organization that was trying to kill me was dead. Then, he found out everything he needed to know about the account Roman set up.

All for me.

After all that was done, we flew on his jet to the Cayman Islands to retrieve the cash.

I don't want it. In my mind, the money is tainted. It's blood money. But after some guidance from Gideon, I've decided to retrieve what was my brother's only legacy. He assured me it's what Roman would have wanted. It's the reason he died.

"Let's go. We're late," he says over his shoulder, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Well, if you didn't run me off to the bathroom..."

"I don't regret it. Come on."

We round a corner and head toward an older gentleman who is waiting for us in the doorway to his office.

"Hello, Ms. Lennox. Welcome to the Cayman Islands." His smile is genuine, and I can't help but return it.

"Thank you."

He nods. "I have a few papers for you to sign. If you could please follow me."

He turns on his heel and leads Gideon and me into his office, where we start the process of signing so many documents, I feel like my hand is going to fall off.

It takes a good twenty minutes before the account is officially mine.

"You're a wealthy woman," the gray-haired man says.

Gideon snorts. "Twenty-eight million dollars isn't worth the headache we went through."

My heart rattles in my chest. The memory of that warehouse. Of Gideon being shot.

Killing my uncle.

I shiver at the nightmare replaying in my head and do my best to stuff it down like I've been working to do.

I hate that my brother did this, and I wish I knew all his reasons for it. More than anything, I wish I answered the phone call the day he died.

I still wonder if that's what he was calling to tell me. I guess I'll never know.

I'll never have closure.

As if the banker is reading my mind, he hands me an envelope.

I narrow my eyes at it, but then I see the familiar handwriting scrawled

across the envelope, and my eyes fill with tears.

“Your brother asked me to give you this if you ever found your way here.” He stands from the chair he’s been sitting on. “I’ll give you a minute.”

I nod and look over at Gideon.

His face is serious. Almost like stone. He watches my every move. Always my protector.

“Maybe I should read it first,” he says gruffly. When I don’t respond, he asks, “Will you be all right? If not, I don’t want you reading that.”

I blow out a harsh breath. “I’ve been struggling with the not knowing, Gideon. If this letter can provide any closure, I want that.”

He takes a deep breath and nods once. I tear open the white envelope and read the last words from my brother.

**DEAR SASHA,**

**I KNOW THIS ALL MUST BE CONFUSING, AND IF YOU FOUND THIS, I'M MOST LIKELY DEAD. I'M SO SORRY. THERE IS SO MUCH I WANT TO TELL YOU, SO MUCH I SHOULD HAVE TOLD YOU. AFTER MOM AND DAD DIED, I WANTED NOTHING MORE THAN TO BE THE BROTHER YOU NEEDED. BUT IT WAS HARD, AND I WASN'T PREPARED.**

**THAT'S WHEN I SAW DIMA.**

**I KNEW RIGHT AWAY WHO HE WAS. MOM AND DAD NEVER TOLD YOU ABOUT WHO DAD'S FAMILY WAS. PROBABLY TO PROTECT YOU. BUT DAD TOLD ME. AT FIRST, I DIDN'T KNOW IF HE HAD ANY HAND IN THEIR DEATH, BUT I HEARD DIMA SAY HE KILLED HIS BROTHER AND WIFE. HE CONFIRMED IT, AND I KNEW WHAT I HAD TO DO. I STARTED TO WORK FOR HIM, SKIMMING MONEY AND PUTTING IT ASIDE FOR YOU. UNFORTUNATELY, THE DEMONS FOUND ME, AND I ENDED UP BEING THE MONSTER YOU NEEDED TO HIDE FROM. I'M SORRY I WASN'T STRONG ENOUGH. EVERYTHING I DID, I DID FOR OUR FAMILY. I LOVE YOU, SASHA.**

## ROMAN

THE TEARS RACE DOWN MY FACE. MY HEART FEELS HEAVY WITH THE WEIGHT of Roman's words.

Everything he did was for me.

He was always trying to protect me.

"He loved you, firefly."

My emotions ricochet off each other like waves crashing against rocks on a shoreline.

I feel sad, but at the same time, I know he wouldn't want that for me.

"I know he did."

Gideon stands, holding out a hand to me. "Come on, let's get you home."

I place my hand in his and allow him to pull me to standing. "I'm already home. Wherever you are is home, Gideon."

He leans in and places a kiss on my lips.

For the first time since my parents died, I can finally let go of the pain I've been harboring all these years.

I'm ready to move on.

Gideon pulls me to the door, and together we move toward a future.

With every step that we take, an idea forms...

I don't want my brother to have died in vain. Every dollar he stole, I'll use to help someone less fortunate.

Gideon and I were both thrust out into the world alone and hungry. We both struggled to find our next meal. We know what it feels like to truly be hungry.

This money will be used to help children who have nothing.

Children who have no family, no home, and no food.

*Children like us.*

# **EPILOGUE**

SASHA

THREE MONTHS LATER...

I'm a knot of anxious energy.

My fingers drum against the arm of the chair, making a sound like rain hitting the roof. I take deep breaths, attempting to steady my racing heart.

It feels as if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, my future depending on what words lie on the screen before me. How can something like a combination of letters hold such immense power?

My acceptance or denial.

My eyes turn to the window, and the sun casts a warm glow over the room. I can almost feel its rays heating me up, or maybe it's just nerves.

"Are you going to turn your computer on? Or do you just plan on staring at it all day?"

I scowl at Gideon, and he laughs, a sound I will always love.

My own lips part, and I shake my head at him. "You're intolerable."

He grins, and I'd melt on the spot if I wasn't so nervous. "You might have mentioned that a few times."

"Just a few times?" I scrunch my nose at him.

"At least once a day."

I shrug. "It's because you are."

"Yet you still love me." He grins wide enough to show his teeth. My heart does melt at that. I love this man so much.

"For some unknown reason, I do."

"Just open the computer, firefly."

"No." I stand from my chair and pace the room. Gideon steps up behind

me.

“Firefly.”

“Don’t firefly me. I’m freaking out.” His warm arms embrace me.

“You need to calm down. No matter what it says, you won’t give up on your dream.” He squeezes me gently. “You’ll find a way. I know it.”

“I can’t.”

“You can do anything you put your heart to.” He places a kiss on the top of my head. “Do I need to remind you I’m only alive because of you? That you saved my life when you sh—”

“Shh. We don’t talk about that.” And we didn’t. Even though I don’t regret killing my uncle, I still killed a man, and for as long as I live, I’d like to pretend I didn’t.

It’s not that I feel my hands are stained with his blood. I don’t. He was an awful man who didn’t deserve to live, but I still don’t like thinking about it. I’m haunted when my eyes close as it is. I don’t need it bleeding into my daylight hours as well.

“Will you do it with me?” I ask, and he takes my hand in his and leads us back to the computer.

“Always. I’ll always be with you.” His lips find mine, and I close my eyes as he kisses the sense out of me. I fall into his tongue tangling with mine. Losing myself in him for reasons beyond avoiding the inevitable. I could kiss this man every day for the rest of my life and still not tire of it. Then he pulls away from me, leaving me to ready myself. He fires up the computer, and the world stops.

In the background, I hear the sound of him typing on the computer behind me, but I pay it no mind, too lost in the moment.

Gideon has a way of calming me. Of knowing just what I need to forget the things that hover over me.

He’s my perfect half, and I like to think I am his.

When he pulls away, I know it’s time.

Together, we turn toward the screen. To the Juilliard application status page. Then together we read it.

Accepted.

A rush of emotions hits me.

Tears well in my eyes. “I did it.”

“You did.”

I narrow my eyes. “You didn’t do anything to help the process, right?”



“What do you think I did, bribe admissions and threaten them with bodily harm?”

I lift an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“Listen. You’re right. I would. Don’t you know by now that I would do anything to make you happy? I would do anything; no matter how extreme the measures seem, I’d do it. But in this case, I didn’t have to.”

I playfully smack his chest. “Stop being a Neanderthal.”

He picks me up and throws me over his shoulder. “I’ll show you a Neanderthal.”

I let out a squeal the entire way out of his office and up the stairs.

A memory flashes before my eyes as I giggle. It’s a memory of the first day I got here so many months ago.

It’s funny how we could be doing the same thing, but how different it is.

No matter his past or his current dealings, I still love him.

Because I’m in love with the man beneath all of that.

The man he doesn’t allow many to see.

When we finally open the door, he places me down. There is a funny look in his eyes that I can’t decipher.

“What’s going on?” I ask, and he smirks.

“I was going to wait, but I can’t think of a better time than now.”

“Wait for what?” He doesn’t answer me right away. Instead, he drops to the floor.

My hand flies to my mouth as I realize what’s happening.

“Firefly. I love you. I’m obsessed with you. You’re my everything.”  
Tears stream down my cheeks. “Marry me.”

“Yes,” I answer. He stands, and I fling myself into his arms. “I love you.”

And I do. I love him. All that he is. All that he was. All that he will ever be.

He’s mine, and I’m his.

*Forever.*

NEED MORE OF SASHA AND GIDEON? READ THE BONUS SCENE! [CLICK HERE](#)

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# **SNEAK PEAK OF BROKEN REIGN**

# PROLOGUE

OFFICER MATTHEWS

It's a perfect day to kill someone.

Half the force is on Waverly Street, crammed inside Chief's rickety Nantucket home for his fiftieth birthday. Response time would be abysmal. Charlie and Rick are dozing at their desks, the only signs of life in a sea of empty chairs.

These days, I pack an extra pair of cuffs on my belt. But when I stare out the window from my cubicle, it's quiet out. Unusually boring.

No calls. No tears. No body bags.

The type of Sunday afternoon we used to take for granted.

The type of Sunday we used to have before things started to change.

Sure, we always had crime. But before this year, the worst criminals stayed on the other side of town. Not my jurisdiction, not my fucking headache. As long as the citizens of Reddington were safe, I was golden.

But that was then, and this is now.

These days, there isn't a single day that passes without an overdose. The drugs are inching closer and closer to the heart of town. And if word on the street is right, the war brewing down by the docks is heading this way, too.

The district attorney ran on a campaign promise that the drugs would never get to our small, quiet community. That he would stop it.

*What a fucking joke.*

I glance at my watch for the fourth time in twenty minutes. Two minutes left on my shift. Just as I'm about to gather my things, my desk phone rings. A blaring sound against the silence of the day.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

Charlie and Rick continue to snore, unbothered by the piercing noise. I reach out to grab the phone, skimming over the mess on my desk—pens, crumbled-up paper, and even an old coffee cup cram the space.

A stack of pictures lies next to the phone. One catches my eye. It's an image of Baros, a new drug dealer in town. For the past year, we've monitored his every move, an order that came down from the top.

I push the stack aside so it doesn't topple over when I pick up the phone and grab the receiver. A booming sound interrupts me. It's the chief, accompanied by dozens of others. They enter the room in plainclothes, speaking chaotically, eyes half-crazed. A Birthday Boy pin is still attached to Chief's shirt, no doubt his wife's idea.

Loud voices echo around me. I abandon the phone, peering around the space, trying to see what's going on. A group of officers are clustered together, heads down, listening to a detective speak. It's Mark. From homicide.

Beside me, Belinda screams for someone to answer her. Across the room, Philip sprints into the hall leading to the exit. I'm not sure what's happening, but I'm instantly on edge.

Without another thought, I push back my chair so hard, the metal legs grate against the floor. The chair bounces back, probably leaving a dent against the wall. I don't care.

"What's happening?" Rick's voice comes with a yawn. He stands, stretching his arms above his head and nudging Charlie awake. His gaze darts around, trying to see if anyone knows what's going on.

I shake my head, adding another pair of cuffs to my belt's collection. "I don't know, but it's got to be something big."

My body finally catches up to my brain and reacts to the chaos. The next thing I know, I'm barreling toward Chief.

Something is wrong. His face looks unnaturally pale, and if that weren't a dead giveaway, his jaw is tight.

"Chief?"

He looks at me.

A vacant stare.

"What's going on?" I prompt.

"There is a situation . . ." he trails off, shaking his head as if he can't

comprehend what he just heard.

“What type of situation?”

But he doesn't answer me. The room is in an uproar. People are shouting about the phone calls coming in.

I expect him to say something, but instead, he straightens. Standing up tall and steeling his spine, he scrubs at his eyes, which start to refocus, and then he walks away from me, making his way to the middle of the room where he stands in front of the crowd that has formed.

The room goes completely silent.

My spine locks.

I'm bracing myself for a shitshow.

“We've received dozens of reports of an explosion and screams being heard from the restaurant. Multiple eyewitnesses say it sounds like there was a hit.”

The chatter begins.

Voices rise again, firing question after question at him.

We all knew this moment was coming.

It was inevitable. But as much as we've been working to rid the city of the dredges of the earth, many of us working overtime to control it before it's too late, it's still different than knowing the first strike has been fired.

My thoughts are going a million miles per hour as I wonder where. What restaurant? Was it by the docks? Maybe the café by the apartment complex that has become overrun by addicts? But then his words come out. It sounds like a hum over the beating of my heart.

*Al's Diner.*

*Massacre.*

“I need everyone to fall out. Matthews, Sterling, Bruno, and Ludlow, I need you at Al's—”

I'm taking off.

The local diner.

*The local diner where people eat. Where families go to celebrate their most precious loved ones. Their friends, their partners . . . their children.*

Bile coats my throat. It's not even half a mile away from the precinct.

*It's not far, I remind myself. If I leave now, maybe I can stop it. Maybe we aren't too late.*

My breath comes out in ragged bursts as I start to sprint. Voices yell at me to stop. To wait. That I need backup.



But before they can stop me, I'm already pushing open the door and am out of the building. From behind me, I hear Tom screaming that he's coming, then the rest of the men follow suit.

The chill hits my face like a vicious slap.

I never grabbed my coat.

But knowing where I'm going and what I will most likely see, I won't turn back. I can't. I don't have time.

Blood courses through my veins as I push harder.

My heart beats frantically.

*Almost there.*

Only a few blocks.

By the time I'm near the building, my chest rises and falls in erratic jerks. My lungs burn as I inhale deeply to calm myself.

Standing on the corner of the street, only a few feet from the entrance to the building, I whip my head around in both directions to look at the other officers who have followed me.

Most are leaning forward, their chests heaving as they try to catch their breaths. Others are on their walkie-talkies, probably trying to get orders from the chief.

I ignore them, assessing the situation. Do I wait for more men? For SWAT from the town over? Or do I go in without eyes in the building?

It's quiet. Eerily so. Like the whole town knows what's going on and decided to stay clear of the devastation.

Normally, you would expect pedestrians to be walking in a town like this. Cars driving by, friends giggling, a man and a woman strolling hand in hand.

But now, there's nothing.

The stillness around me makes my footsteps falter. Despite my reservations, I force myself to move. I press on, unsure of what I'm going to find.

Not sure what sort of horrors hide inside.

I feel like I'm in slow motion. Like I'm stuck in a slasher flick, where the world quiets before shit goes down.

The thing that scares me the most is that there is no gunfire. Not one sound comes from the building.

Tentatively, I open the door, careful when I step inside. My gun is raised, cocked and ready. Once I cross the threshold, a familiar smell of lingering gunpowder hits me.

Then the heat touches my face, infiltrating my nostrils. The shots were just fired, probably with a silencer. It only just ended, which means the threat is still out there. I keep my wits about me as I move farther into the building.

At first, it seems as if there's nothing out of place.

Except for the most important thing.

Signs of life.

Instead, only the soft hum of the jukebox can be heard. The song feels out of place in the backdrop of bright walls and party streamers. A slow, emotional melody. Goose bumps rise on my arms.

Even the lyrics feel like a warning . . .

A warning of something sinister waiting around the bend.

Normally, Al's is loud and boisterous, but now the space is empty. I clock the details. The stained wallpaper. The popped balloons. The copper scent.

As I turn the corner, the illusion lifts.

It's a massacre.

Bullet casings litter the floor like thrown confetti.

I follow them and peek into the first booth.

A bloody handprint is smeared across the bench. I look down to find wide, vacant eyes staring right at me. A bullet lodged between them.

My jaw clenches at the sight, and the muscles in my back tighten.

Gun leveled before me, my trigger finger ready, I walk to the next booth.

A streak of red coats the table. It trails along the wall, bloody handprints on the window.

Someone was trying to escape.

I look for the body . . .

That's when I see her. Tucked under the bench as if she could hide.

But death found her anyway.

I push down the bile in my throat and turn to look at the rest of the dining room.

Bodies are strewn haphazardly across the floor. There is blood. So much blood. The crimson trails across the white linoleum floors like bright-red rivulets of paint running down a pristine canvas. It'll take weeks to process this crime scene. To figure out who each splatter of blood belongs to.

Pressing my lips together, I breathe through my mouth. This is not the time to fall apart.

I push myself to take a step closer, careful not to disrupt the crime scene.

There's another body here. He's pale, wide-eyed, the horror of today

permanently etched inside them. I want to run my hands down his eyelids and close them. To let him rest in peace.

I can't disturb the crime scene.

Fresh tinges of purple and gray dot his cheeks and lips. His skin hasn't become waxen yet, which means this happened sometime within the past twenty minutes.

Whoever did this can't have gotten far. And he must've used a silencer, or we would've heard the shots from the precinct.

I pull out my phone to call the station and tell them where I am and what I've seen. It's empty here, the back door hidden past the kitchen the most likely escape route. Still, I keep my gun drawn as I continue to check for any survivors.

My eyes scan the walls, windows, and tables.

That's when my eyes lock on it. A barely noticeable trail of blood. I follow it. Each step is slow and calculated as I trace where the blood leads.

A door tucked away behind the jukebox.

It's hidden.

Hell, I've lived in this town all my life, visited Al's every week, and never knew it existed.

Tucked behind the jukebox that has entertained this town for years, it's cracked open just a sliver. I move toward it, ready to pull the trigger if I need to. I hope I don't. I hope to God it's a survivor. That someone lived.

Slowly, I reach out and touch the doorknob.

The door creaks amongst the silence, amongst the stillness of the room. As soon as it opens, I dip my head to peer inside, and that's when I see it.

A hand covered in blood.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

TOBIAS

TWENTY YEARS LATER . . .

I HAVE A SINGLE GOAL IN MY LIFE.

One goal that is always in front of me.

It's all-consuming, and it eats at me. But I need to get everything in line before attempting to conquer it.

Which brings me to the present. My right foot hits the pavement as I step out of my car and walk toward the courthouse.

There's no reason to tell my driver anything. He'll wait for me as I do what I need to do—as he always does.

I hate being driven around, but apparently, it's necessary. And today, despite my security's insistence, I am going in alone. The only one who will be here with me is Gideon, my right-hand man.

He's already here, in place and scoping out the scene, assessing any threats to be concerned with.

With fast strides, I move toward my destination.

The large courthouse flanked by pillars greets me as I climb up the massive granite steps toward the entrance.

Of course, when I make it to the top of the stairs, I have to go through security.

Fun occupational hazard is that I'm not carrying today, which puts me at a disadvantage if an enemy decides to come after me.

This is the reason Gideon has gone ahead of me. To make sure nothing

gets past him.

Trained well to see a threat from a mile away, Gideon doesn't need weapons to take anyone out.

He's just as lethal with his hands as he is with a gun.

A good person to have in your pocket.

But Gideon is more than that.

Not only is he my right-hand man, he's also the man who will take over everything when I step away. There is no one else I would trust. Gideon has been my friend since we were both teenagers in Miami, which makes him perfect to hand over my keys to the castle to. Luckily for me, he has no objections, either, but until the transfer is complete, he proves his loyalty time and again.

Like now, putting my full trust in him as I walk through the metal detector with no weapon to protect myself. I'm an open target if my enemies want to kill me.

I still think it's worth it, though. I'm willing to take a calculated risk, as I need to see what I'm dealing with. See him in action.

Felix Bernard is here.

A preliminary hearing to see if probable cause of a criminal offense occurred. In this case, it's determining whether there is enough evidence to tie him to a money laundering scheme. One that would directly connect him to a large drug empire.

There is no question that Felix Bernard will get off. He's not going to jail. That much is clear to me, but I still need to see him. Look straight into the bastard's soul and see what's there. The best way to see the demons that live within is by looking into someone's eyes.

Once past security, cleared, obviously, I head toward the courtroom where Gideon waits for me. The preliminary hearing is open to the public. Probably not a good idea.

It could be a spectacle if the case doesn't get thrown out. If I were the judge, which I am obviously not, I'd shut it down. But his dumbass decision is my gain because I get to see Felix in action. In our line of work, with security in place, Felix and I are rarely in the same building, let alone the same zip code at the same time. Precautions are taken to ensure we aren't.

I hurry my steps as I move down the corridor. The sound of my soles hitting the marble with a faint clapping rhythm marks my approach. As I weave my way through the corridor, it only takes a few seconds before I walk

into the large room.

It's packed.

This is not a courthouse. This is a fucking circus. And Felix, he's the ringleader.

It's a who's who in attendance.

First, I spot the hungry newscaster from channel five. She's a pretty young thing. Perfect shoulder-length blond hair styled to perfection, with a bubble gum smile, and still wet behind the ears. I can practically see her salivating in her seat to get the story.

Little does she know, her boss probably sent her to save himself a headache. There won't be a story today.

Looking across the room, I notice Gideon. He's already waiting right where he told me he'd be.

Dressed in a suit, he acts the part of a legit businessman. But seeing him here still feels wrong. Men like him—men like *me*—spend little time in court. Normally, we are covered in blood while holding some poor bastard's insides in our hands.

Taking the seat beside him, I nod in greeting but don't speak. He probably appreciates it. Gideon is a man of few words, and when he speaks, it's often to scoff or make a snide, sarcastic comment.

A quick glance around has me taking in my surroundings, my gaze finding my target.

Bernard.

He oozes wealth.

He's not an ugly man—quite the contrary. If I were a woman, I could see the appeal. Tanned skin with salt-and-pepper hair.

Always dressed to perfection, he plays the role of a distinguished businessman to a T.

I should know. I play it just as well.

But I also know it's bullshit.

We both walk the line, lurking in the underworld in equal measures.

Felix, too, is glancing around the space as if searching for someone. Once he assesses the crowd, he looks over to where his lawyers are standing, one man and a woman.

I pay the man no mind, but it's the woman who has me curious.

From the way she's angled, I can't see her face, but what I can see, I already like. Long wavy brown hair bounces down her back as she speaks to

her client.

She's dressed for court, but she'd be just as comfortable going out to dinner in her outfit. A fitted blazer over an equally fitted dress adorns her body. She moves to lift her sleeve, and an image peeks back at me. A tattoo?

Interesting. Also, surprising.

*Who is your lawyer, Bernard?*

That's when she turns toward the back of the room, and my actual fucking breath leaves my body.

*Fuuuuck.*

"Everything okay over there?" I hear Gideon say beside me, but his words sound as though he's speaking underwater. I'm transfixed, and I can't pull away.

Soft lips, that's the first thing I see. Not too large, but large enough to get the job done. She's not like the women I'm usually attracted to. She's a natural beauty, as if she doesn't wear a bit of makeup and is just gorgeous without the additional help. My gaze continues its perusal of her.

Until I land on her eyes. Eyes that look haunted. Which I can understand because I'm haunted just the same.

"Tobias." The words filter in, but I still can't break away.

A tap on my arm hits me next, but I still don't sever our connection.

She looks familiar.

Eyes I can't place.

She reminds me of a girl I once met.

Maybe it's her.

I wait to see if she recognizes me. Not only because I believe we met once, but because everyone does eventually. My face has littered many a magazine. Speculation on where my money comes from. On my bachelor status.

But there's nothing there . . .

A blank slate.

My teeth clench. She doesn't know who I am.

Maybe I'm wrong? Maybe it's not her.

*No.*

A flare of anger seeps into my veins as I stare her down. We're locked in a battle of wills. Who will end this first? She does, finally, after long seconds, breaking the connection to turn back to her client.

The muscles in my back tighten. Her dismissal pisses me off even more. I



narrow my eyes and continue to watch her. That's when she does it. She looks back at me.

*Couldn't help herself.*

I wink at her and even from here, I can see her cheeks redden. Her eyes go wide. She didn't think I'd catch her.

Good.

She blinks before her head gives a little shake, and she turns back to her client.

Gideon says something else, but he could tell me the world is about to end, and it would make no difference.

The hearing commences, and I watch her for hours without pulling my gaze away. As time goes on, her arguments become more powerful and heated.

Her voice rising through the air with authority.

She's dynamic as she speaks. A force to be reckoned with.

"The prosecutor has dragged my client into this courtroom as if he is a common criminal—" But it's when her gaze meets mine, and her lip tips up into a smirk followed by a wink do I feel my breath leave my body.

*Fuck.*

There is a strength about her that is admirable. She's a spitfire. Time passes, but it feels as if it flies by.

The next thing I know, I'm being nudged by Gideon, alerting me that it's time to go.

The court has erupted in chatter, and Bernard's lawyers are speaking to him. The case will not proceed to trial. Not that this is a shocker. She's good.

The client can go because of this woman. I watch them shake hands. I watch him smile at her. Felix Bernard looks at her the way I did, the way every man in this room is.

With lust in his snake-like eyes, narrowing and imagining her beneath him.

My fist clenches at the way she smiles back at him. It's professional and reserved. Nevertheless, the look she gives him stirs something primitive inside me.

I'll have her. Snatch her right out from his grasp. Then, when that is said and done, parade her in front of him, all while trying to pilfer information from her on him.

Yes, that's exactly what I'll do. I make my decision. Now to make it

happen.

“What’s going on?” Gideon watches me intently.

“Her,” I respond, inclining my chin in her direction.

“Skye Matthews?”

My curiosity is piqued. Is she the girl I think she is? She sure as fuck reminds me of her. My past batters against my brain, pushing her image into my mind.

Thrust back into the past, I see a girl. The smile she gave me. No, not a smile but a smirk, coupled with a wink . . .

It has to be her. “Details.”

“She’s with Stuarts, Finkel, and Williams.” One of the best firms in New York City. “She’s a junior associate. I’m actually surprised the senior partner is letting her take lead.”

“Interesting.” This could benefit me. Seth Williams is a weasel, a weasel who, for the right price, will sell Felix Bernard out to the highest bidder, and that bidder is me.

“What do you have in mind?”

My lips part into a smile. I want to hire her.

“With me retiring, I will need a lawyer to help me. . .” I trail off. A plan is settling in place. “I want to hire her.”

“And how do you plan on doing that? They aren’t accepting new clients.”

“Let me worry about it.”

“Seeing as I’m involved in your retirement plans, I think I deserve a better answer than that bullshit one.”

He’s right. Whatever the fallout is, he will probably have to clean up the pieces.

I incline my head and proceed to tell him my plan.

The endgame will be the same.

Skye Matthews has wandered into my path again, and this time, that’s where she will stay. No matter what happens. Or what she feels about the matter.

Her future is set.

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xoxo,  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Harrison is a USA Today and Amazon bestselling author. When she's not journaling her life, you can find her window shopping, cooking dinner for her family, or curled up on her couch reading a book.



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