

A man with a dark beard and hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt, looking directly at the camera. The background is a textured blue.

EAST
COAST
DEVILS
BOOK THREE

THE

Devils

OBSESSION

SOMME SKETCHER

Somme Sketcher

The Devil's Obsession

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Contents

ALSO BY SOMME SKETCHER

Prologue

1. Donnacha

2. Romy.

3. Romy.

4. Donnacha

5. Romy.

6. Romy.

7. Romy.

8. Romy.

9. Donnacha

10. Donnacha

11. Romy.

12. Romy.

13. Donnacha

14. Romy.

15. Donnacha

16. Romy.

17. Donnacha

18. Romy.

19. Romy.

20. Donnacha

21. Romy.

22. Romy.

23. Romy.

24. Donnacha

25. Romy.

26. Donnacha

27. Romy.

28. Romy.

29. Donnacha

30. Romy.

31. Donnacha

32. Romy.

33. Donnacha

34. Romy.

35. Donnacha

36. Romy.

37. Epilogue

38. What's Next?

ALSO BY SOMME SKETCHER

East Coast Devils Trilogy

[The Devil's Keepsake](#)

[The Devil's Deal](#)

[The Devil's Obsession](#)

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Prologue

“Hit him.”

It’s not a suggestion. It’s a command. One delivered with such venom it scorches the shell of my ear.

My jaw clenches. So do my fists.

And for a moment, I drag my eyes away from the kid standing across from me and up to the sky. The clouds hang low, their bellies pregnant with the incoming storm.

Oh, how I wish I could sprout wings and fly. I’d rise up and up and up, past the clouds and into the warmth of the sun. I’d leave the muddy courtyard and the *pustosh*’ and all of the poison within it. The children with dirty faces and empty stomachs. The nuns with their spindly fingers and leather whips. The men who visit the dorms way past bedtime.

But the only thing sprouting from my back is pain from where Dima prods me between my shoulder blades again. “I said *hit. Him.*”

I breathe in the dusty, damp air, then search the circle of malnourished kids for a face. The only face I care about. We lock eyes—his bluer than the ocean and mine on the verge of

being just as wet. His chin lowers a fraction. A nod so slight that if I was brave enough to blink right now, I'd miss it.

It's all the encouragement I need.

Arm raised, I draw back my elbow, ready to—

Crack.

White-hot pain. It starts on the bridge of my nose and spreads outward like an inkblot across my face. A blow so hard it knocks me into the dirt. Before I can raise my arms again, this time to protect myself, the boy is looming above me, his shadow darker than the clouds behind him. Another blow, another strike. Raining down on me like my own personal storm. Kicks to the stomach, an uppercut to the chin. All delivered frantically and relentlessly to the backdrop of cheering children.

“Die before you die!”

Another command, but this one isn't from Dima. And it's the only voice speaking English in the sea of Slavic jeers and chants.

Die before you die.

Yes.

I squeeze my eyes shut and force my body to go limp. Force my brain to go above the clouds and pretend the searing pain is nothing but the warm rays of sun on my skin. My breathing shallows. My head rolls on my neck, and my cheek sinks into the mud. I stop flinching under every blow.

“Stoy!” Stop.

Finally.

Dima’s command cuts through the noise, stopping the blows raining down on my body. A few clap. A few circle me. Their bare feet slosh in the mud, their toes nudging my limp thighs and arms.

“Another body. Whose turn to dig?” Somebody cackles.

When the attention turns away from me, I crack a lid, scanning the sea of ankles from under my lashes.

I spot him almost immediately. His shins, peeking out from underneath his ratty cutoffs, are splattered in blood.

My blood.

Now or never.

I clamber to my feet, ribs aching, head pounding. Seeing the color red in both my blood and my fury. He’s too wrapped up in his victory to hear the collective gasp, to see the other kids nudging each other and pointing at me.

“Feniks!” someone yells. *Phoenix.*

I rise from the ashes and stumble toward him. His shoulders hitch up, and he spins around, but this time, I’m quicker than him. It’s me who strikes first. I grab a fistful of his black hair and drag him down to the mud. The first punch is tentative; I cringe when my knuckles buckle against his cheekbone. The second is stronger, striking his jaw, and by the third, *I am the storm.* I rain down on him with all of my

strength, my fists striking like lightning, my roars clapping like thunder.

Only when strong hands snake around my waist and my feet leave the ground do I stop. “Enough,” Mak growls in my ear. “You did enough.”

The crowd isn’t jeering and chanting now. Not like when I was the one on the floor, lifeless. They are in shock. Quiet murmurs ripple like a shock wave through the courtyard.

They aren’t laughing now.

Nobody is fucking laughing now.

My eyes drop to the body, half-sunken into the mud. Rain starts to fall now. Big fat droplets warning us of what’s to come.

Mak wipes a raindrop, or maybe it’s a tear, from my cheek. “You did it,” he whispers, blue eyes at high tide. “You fucking did it.”

I stumble into his hard chest, the realization of what I did settling around me like dust. “Will he survive?” I choke out.

My question is met by a hard stare. “If you care enough to ask, you care too much.” The bells chime, and the kids scatter. Mak glances up at the *pustosh*’ and delivers a shove to my aching ribs. “Go. I’ll sort this.”

Numb, I stagger away from the scene, bare feet sloshing in the mud. Raindrops pelt me like bullets, ricocheting off my bruises and open wounds. God is punishing me for committing the ultimate sin.

I didn't even know his name.

The storm won't force me into the darkness of the *pustosh'* just yet. I can't face the nuns and other children, so I stumble around the perimeter of the courtyard, my fingertips brushing along the iron bars that keep us monsters separated from the real world.

"Malishka."

A hand grabs mine, clamping it to the railing. I gasp, trying to twist myself free, but the grip turns vise-like.

On the other side of the bars is a man with his hand over mine, a ruby ring glinting on his pinky finger. Despite the black umbrella concealing his eyes and the sheet of rain between us, I know exactly who he is. Well, what type of man he is.

A Vulture.

Men like him are always lurking around the gates of the orphanage in the day. Some find their way into our dorms at night. Mak calls them the Vultures because they circle the building for prey.

It seems like he's just caught his.

I never know how to act when I encounter a Vulture. Some boys keep their heads low, their cheeks colored pink with shyness. Some girls lift their skirts, bite down on their pillows, and utter a prayer as they give in to their demands. The nuns always remind us that these men will decide our fate once we turn eighteen, so be nice to them. They'll decide whether we

will live a life with warm clothes and full bellies or spend it in the gutter.

“*Malishka,*” the man repeats. His Russian is regal; he speaks just like I imagine my father does. His suit pants fit like a glove, and his wool jacket looks like it costs thousands upon thousands of rubles. He tilts the umbrella back to reveal his cold black eyes. A smirk tugs on his hard lips, and staccato Russian slips between them. “*I saw what you did.*”

Panic rises up my throat. His smile widens. “*Relax.*” He cocks his head, dragging a coal-like eye over my soaked T-shirt and slacks. “*I am impressed.*”

I force myself to hold his gaze even though I know I shouldn’t. Killing a fellow twelve-year-old has made me feel invincible, but I am no match for a Vulture.

His grip tightens around my hand, pressing my fingers into the cold metal. “*Tell me, Malishka, why are you fighting?*”

When I don’t reply, he squeezes so hard my knuckles pop. I stifle a gasp and say, “To change my fate.”

His eyebrows shoot up. He’s amused. “*You are speaking English? Is that to impress me?*”

I shake my head. He knows as well as I do I am speaking English for the opposite reason. To defy him.

“*And what is the fate of a sirota?*”

My cheeks burn. *Orphan.*

But I square my jaw and answer with the mantra that has been drilled into me for as long as I can remember. “Boys are fighters. Girls are whores.”

He smirks. Eyes dip below my collarbone. *“And you are a girl...”*

“But I can fight like a boy.” My fingers dig half-moons into the palm of my free hand. “I am a fighter.”

Those two coal rocks set deep within his brow bone smolder as if they’ve just been stoked. They stay trained on my chest, on the small swells poking out from beneath my mud-caked T-shirt. Suddenly, his hand frees mine, reaching through the bars to clamp down on my shoulder instead.

“I am not sure, malishka...” he murmurs. *“I have seen that you can fight, but I think you will be a very beautiful whore.”* His eyes finally rise to mine. The smirk melts into a dazzling grin. *“Show me that pretty smile of yours.”*

I scowl instead.

“Show me. It will help me decide whether you will better serve us as a fighter or as a whore.”

A few heavy beats pass. Thunder claps. A bolt of lightning flashes above the New York skyline behind him.

I smile. A big, demonic smile that splits my face in two.

Then I twist my neck and sink my teeth into his hand.

1

Donnacha

“Lorcan?”

“Yes, Don.”

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t slit his throat and toss him in the Hudson.”

Lorcan stops strumming his fingers against his thigh, considering it. Then a puff of air slips through his lips. “Because we’ve sunk over twenty-million into Danny English’s campaign. If his main opposition suddenly winds up dead, it’ll look pretty suspect.”

The Town Car slices through the streets of New York. Sheets of rain slide over the windows, the noise of the storm muted by the bulletproof glass.

“All right, I have another question.” Lorcan waits. “Why the fuck do I have to be there?”

“Because you’ll put the fear of God into him.”

“So will you.”

“Yes, but Leo Belsky knows I won’t slit his throat and toss him in the Hudson.” He glances up at me; adjusts his emerald cuff links. “He knows I’ll have Donnacha Quinn do it. You’re a visual reminder of what our family is capable of.”

I drag a knuckle through my beard. Out of the window, a woman loses a battle with her umbrella, stuffs it in a nearby trashcan, and tucks her chin into the neckline of her raincoat to brave the rest of her journey.

“All this talking, it ain’t for me.”

“You won’t be doing the talking. I will. You just do what you do best.”

“Kill?”

A small smirk. “Not unless this meeting turns into a shit show. No. Assess and intimidate.”

It’s not what I do best, but with over twenty years of being the head henchman in the family, I must admit, I do it pretty fucking well.

“Fill me in, anyway.”

Lorcan’s puff of air evolves into a sigh. “All right, dumbass.” I shoot him a hard stare. Only Lorcan Quinn, my cousin, boss, and head of the Quinn dynasty, can get away with calling me a dumbass unscathed. “I’ll break it down to simple terms so that you can at least pretend you know what’s going on in this meeting. Archibald Dumont is the current governor of New York.”

“I know who Archie is,” I grunt.

“Well then, you’ll know that Archie has been on the Quinn family payroll since we took New York ten years ago. Currently, no state law gets passed or vetoed without being run by our lawyers. But he’s coming up to the end of his third term, and he’ll announce his retirement soon. Before you ask—no, I won’t force him to run again. He’s pushing ninety, so I don’t think he’ll make it through a fourth term. Besides”—he pops his knuckles—“we need fresh blood.”

“And now we’re backing Danny English as the next Democratic nomination for governor.”

The corners of his lips turn upward. “You’re not as politically ignorant as you claim, Don. Yes, we’re backing English’s ticket.” He rubs two fingers over his chin, looking out to Manhattan passing by. “English needs to win. He *will* win.”

“So why the fuck are we meeting with the Republican nomination?”

Cue Lorcan’s signature snarl. The one that makes grown men shit their pants. “He’s been talking shit all over the news. Promising to tackle organized crime in the city if he’s voted in even though he hasn’t made his official announcement for candidacy yet. Then a few days ago, he called my office and requested a meeting with me. I have a feeling he’s not after an alliance.”

I snort. “So, I’ll ask again, why aren’t we tossing him in the Hudson?”

“It’s not off the cards. We’ll find out what he wants first.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, we're pulling up outside *L'Hotel Versailles* on 57th. It's a palatial building that sticks out like a diamond among coal in the heart of Manhattan. Lorcan commissioned it almost a decade ago to celebrate taking over New York from the Bratnovs. It looks like Lorcan's wet dream, stuffed full of all the shiny and rare things Poppy won't allow at the estate.

Karl, my driver, steps out onto the curb to scan the sidewalk with his hand on his holster. He opens the door, but Lorcan shakes his head. Karl mutters something of an apology and gently clicks it shut. Left alone in the car, Lorcan turns back to me, amber eyes burning.

"Talk strategy to me, Don."

Stroking my beard, I look past his broad shoulders and out of his window. Past the sheet of rain and into the hotel's lobby, lit up by the massive chandelier hanging from the domed ceiling. Then I glance out of the rear view. My men are in the sedan behind, waiting for my instructions.

"I want two men stationed out front, another two in the security office watching the surveillance cameras. Karl will call when Belsky turns up and let us know who he's with." I pause, rubbing my hands together. "Let's get the valet to put a tracker under his car, too. It'll be useful later on."

Admiration flashes across Lorcan's face. He claps me on the shoulder and says, "And that's why you're my right-hand man."

"You say it like you had a choice."

We exchange a look. Lorcan never had a choice in having me as his right-hand man, just like I never had a choice in heading up the henchmen, our family's army. Our roles within the family were decided long before we were born, written by decades of tradition and legacy. Our fate is entwined into our DNA—as a direct descendant on the main bloodline, Lorcan was always going to become the boss of the Quinn empire, and as the eldest first cousin, I was always going to be the head henchman. Just like our fathers were before us, and their fathers before them.

Fate carved out the roads we would take in this life, but she didn't make them straight and smooth. Lorcan should never have become the boss so young, if at all. His father and two older brothers were killed almost thirteen years ago by the Italian's makeshift bomb. There should also be three of us: Antoin, our other cousin, was the head of the family business and logistics. But he decided fate hadn't dealt him the right cards and tried to overthrow Lorcan. No surprise there that the slimy bastard is now chilling six feet under.

The moment we step into the lobby, the staff is on us like flies on shit. Holding out warm towels to dry off with, they also have a silver tray with our usual drinks. Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee for Lorcan and *Smugglers Club* whiskey on

the rocks for me. I slam it in one go, enjoying the warm hit to the back of my throat. Lorcan glares at me through the steam rising off his coffee.

“Lucky bastard,” he mutters. “I could do with ten of them right now.”

I grin. Lorc’s been sober for ten years. “Sorry, cuz. Poppy would have my balls in a vise.”

His lips tilt upward at the imagery. Or, more likely, at the thought of his wife.

“Yeah, she would,” he says proudly. He dabs a towel against his neck, then tosses it toward a waiting blonde in a cheap suit. After rearranging his floral pocket square, he hardens the lines of his face. “Is the drawing room set up?” He barks it out into existence to no one in particular. But one thing about being a Quinn is that somebody always gives you an answer.

“Yes, boss,” the hotel manager says, stepping out from behind the desk. He bows his head, extending his arm toward the back of the lobby. “Please, follow me.”

We slice through the busy lobby like a hot knife through butter, through the sea of well-heeled tourists and businessmen marveling at the Sistine Chapel–inspired ceiling and Calacatta marble pillars.

The drawing room is a quiet, private space that feels like an extension of the Quinn estate. Deep-seated armchairs, a

wall of books that have never had their spines cracked, and an onyx wet bar snaking around one of the corners.

Lorcan hitches up his slacks and settles into an armchair. He takes in my stance—looming in the doorway with my fist curled around the Glock in my waistband—and shakes his head. “Don, sit the fuck down. You look like you’re about to start World War III.”

“I might have to. How long have we got?”

He glances at his Rolex. “Three minutes.”

I lift my burner to my ear and call Ronan. He answers on the first ring.

“Yes, boss.”

“Have the joint surrounded. And put two men in the hotel’s security office while you’re at it. I want eyes on the cameras at all times.”

“On it.”

“And let us know as soon as Belsky arrives and with how many men.”

As I stab the end call button, Lorcan grunts something that doesn’t make it past his tongue.

“What?”

He grazes me with a weary look. “You’re being overcautious. Belsky is a nobody. A green politician who couldn’t run for a fucking bus let alone the governor’s seat. I’m willing to bet he’s just an optimistic prick who thinks he

can change the world.” He steepled his hands together and rests his elbows on his knees. When he looks at me again, his expression is smug. “He’ll learn who runs things on the East Coast real quick. Believe me.”

I strum my fingers against the armrest. You don’t spend your days balls deep in other people’s blood without developing some sort of instinct. For me, it always creeps up from my shoulder blades and wraps a firm grip around my neck. Something isn’t right. I pop the top button of my shirt and mutter, “Better safe than sorry.”

“Quite right.”

My cell buzzes, slicing through the heavy silence. I glance down at the screen and let out a bitter laugh. “Buckle up, boss.”

Lorcan’s frown deepens over his coffee.

Still grinning, I slip the burner into my breast pocket and settle into the armchair. I stare into the flames of the roaring fireplace. “What *green politicians* do you know who show up in an armored Merc with four bodyguards?”

A low rumble comes from deep within Lorcan’s chest. “Motherfucker,” he snarls. He watches me for a beat, then adds, “Easy, tiger.”

Only when he says that do I realize my grin is now splitting my face in half. I can feel it in my cheeks. Feel the adrenaline trickling through my veins like a virus.

You see, killing has become my routine. As boring and as mundane as a normal civilian finds brushing their teeth or going grocery shopping. A part of my everyday identity. Anything that makes bloodshed a little more interesting is always welcome.

“I’m easy,” I muse, rubbing a finger over my bottom lip. “Easy like a Sunday morning.”

On cue, there’s a polite knock on the door. Lorcan rises to his feet, straightens his cuff links, and barks, “Enter.”

I stay seated, still staring at the flames licking the inside of the marble fireplace.

The hotel manager pops his balding head around the door. “Your guest has arrived, sir.”

“Send him in.”

Lorcan and I lock eyes for a beat. His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. He twists the emerald ring around his finger. A reminder of who the fuck he is.

I don’t see Belsky until he steps between the armchairs and offers Lorcan his hand. “Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Quinn,” he says, then he jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “I hope you don’t mind. I brought a few friends.”

Lorcan pins him with a blistering stare. The type that could bring the Devil himself to his knees. “That’s quite all right,” he says, tilting his head in my direction, but his hard eyes never leave Belsky. “I brought a friend of my own.”

Belsky hadn't realized I was there. I can tell by the way his eyes dart down to me and how his body recoils in response.

“Donnacha Quinn.”

Click-click.

I'd recognize that sound in my sleep. The safety catches of four Remington R51's being released over my head. Slowly, I twist around and peer up at the suits lurking by the door. Hard-faced men glare at me over their weapons. A chuckle slips from my lips, loose and easy. “It is clear that your men know who I am.” I cock my head, teasing Belsky with a smug smirk. “Question is, do you?”

He's an odd-looking man. A network of extremes—eyes too dark, hair too blond, and frame too small to be standing next to Lorcan Quinn. It's like comparing a man to a mountain. He swallows. “I have heard your name before, yes.” Heard my name? His first reaction betrayed him.

“Then you might want to consider telling your men to stand down,” Lorcan snarls, gesturing down to the rug in the middle of the room. “You're standing on a seventeenth-century Persian. Pretty hard to get bloodstains out of it.”

Lorcan is as cool as ice. Why? 'Cause when you're the head of the East Coast's most powerful family, you know nobody is going to kill you on a whim.

The consequences are too great.

Belsky's eyes drop to the floor, then rise back up to his men. He nods. They shuffle, tucking their weapons back into

their waistbands and suit pockets.

“Sit,” Lorcan demands, his professional façade already melting from him. As Belsky lowers himself into an armchair opposite us, two of his men flank him and the other two stand by the door. Lorcan flashes me a grim look. I flash him one back—*I told you so*.

“I apologize,” Belsky says, smoothing down the front of his suit jacket in an attempt to regain his composure. “I hope this little... *incident* doesn’t set the tone for the meeting.”

“Not at all,” Lorcan says dryly. I know my cousin like the back of my hand. Mentally, he’s already chucked this asshole in the Hudson. Me? I’m imagining what I’d do to him down in the tunnels. “Something to drink?”

“Coffee, black.”

Lorcan strides to the intercom on the wall and barks an order into the speaker.

“Thank you,” Belsky says, locking his fingers together and placing them on his lap. “I know you’re a busy man, so I’ll cut right to the chase.”

He sucks in a lungful of Quinn-owned air and releases it along with the reason he’s here. “Next year, I’ll be running for governor of New York.” He pauses as if he’s going to get a reaction out of us. What do you want, asshole? A fucking round of applause? A *Jerry Springer*-style gasp? Fuck off. “I have it on good authority that you’re donating a large amount of money to Danny English’s campaign.”

Silence swirls between us. Lorcan lifts his coffee to his lips, then pauses, cup hovering in midair. “Is that a question or a statement?”

Belsky doesn’t fluster. He’s found his footing. “A statement. I know it to be true.”

He shuffles in the chair, then crosses his legs.

Lorcan takes his time setting down his coffee cup, dabbing the corners of his mouth with his floral pocket square before painstakingly rearranging it in his top pocket. I hide my smirk. Since meeting his wife, Poppy, his anger management has been in top form. Now, his favorite brand of torture is making people wait.

Eventually—

“I’m a man who puts all of his eggs in one basket, Mr. Belsky. Because I’m very certain the basket won’t break.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve confused you. I’m not here to ask you to donate to my campaign. I’m here to warn you.”

A low whistle escapes my lips. “Big mistake,” I mutter, shaking my head.

Lorcan inhales through his nose, then breathes out through his mouth. Bosses have to be levelheaded—a personality trait that doesn’t come naturally to my cousin.

He taps his bottom lip thoughtfully, then says, “You’ve come here today to send the Quinn family a warning? If I were you, I’d think very carefully about the next sentence out of your mouth.”

But neither Belsky nor his men flinch at the thinly veiled threat from the most powerful man on the East Coast.

Interesting.

I turn my full attention to Leo Belsky and look at him more closely. Studying the parts that make him whole will help me understand why the fuck he has the balls to send the Quinn family a warning.

Rigid posture, bespoke suit. Ruby ring glinting on his pinky. A heavy, gold chain that disappears behind the collar of his shirt. The staccato words that slip between his thin lips are meticulously pronounced. There's something about him... something I can't put my finger on...

Something's not right.

"Prepare an exit strategy."

"I'm not sure I'm following," Lorcan draws.

"From New York, Mr. Quinn. Because when I become governor, I won't tolerate any form of organized crime."

The air swirls, hot and heavy, with the weight of his words.

It's me who breaks the silence with a low chuckle.

"You've gotta be shitting us." I glance at Lorcan. "He's shitting us, right? Or have I stepped into the fucking twilight zone?"

Belsky's eyes dart to me, still cautious. "I'm afraid I'm not. I intend to take the seat with the highest integrity. My office and I won't be privy to any bribes or strong-arming." He

clasps his hands together in his lap and bows his head. “My suggestion would be that you get your affairs in order and retreat back to Boston. I have no interest in what happens outside of New York State.”

It’s Lorcan’s turn to chuckle. A deep, filthy noise that makes Belsky’s armchair guards twitch their fingers toward their holsters.

“And what happens if we choose to stay?” His eyes twinkle in the same way they do when his kids ask him a dumb question over Sunday breakfast. And I don’t blame him—this asshole can’t be serious.

“Well...” Belsky’s hand dips into his suit jacket. “Whoa—” He startles when he finds himself looking down the barrel of my gun. Instantly, his guards draw theirs and point them at me. Belsky holds out his palms, eyebrows raised. “It’s just paper,” he says, eyes never leaving me as he slowly pulls out a brown envelope. “See? No weapon.”

I lower my strap, but I don’t put it away, resting it on the arm of the chair instead. One of his men hand Lorcan the papers, which he begins to lazily flick through, and I can tell by the smirk on his lips that he’s still not taking this asshole seriously. It’s only a matter of time before he’s finished playing games and will order me to drag his ass down to the Tunnels and punish him for wasting our time.

But me? I’m not sitting so easy anymore. My back is up, and I just gotta figure out why.

A knock on the door interrupts the silence.

“Coffee?” A bubbly blond server appears in the doorway, rolling a trolley across the plush carpet. She anxiously eyes Belsky’s guards as she lowers the tray to the coffee table in front of him. “Allow me,” she mutters, reaching for the coffee pot.

“Thank you, but I’ll manage.”

“I insist—”

They both reach for the coffee pot at the same time, causing the hot brown liquid to slosh out of the spout and over Belsky’s gold Rolex.

He flinches, then growls something too quiet to hear. *Was that another language?*

“Oh my god, I’m-I’m *so* sorry, I—”

But one of the guards pushes her to the side, snatching up napkins and dabbing at Belsky’s wrist.

The blonde, whose mouth is still opening and closing like a goldfish, shuffles from foot to foot. She turns to Lorcan, eyes wide and pleading. *Don’t fire me. Or worse.* He simply shakes his head and nods in the direction of the door, motioning for her to leave.

I watch the scene unfold with something unsettling brewing under my skin. Bringing protection to a meeting with the Quinns is an understandable precaution, but the armored Merc and the guards that would wipe your ass for you...

It’s a sign of power. One that a *green politician* doesn’t have.

Belsky's façade is slipping. He's irritated, shooing his guards away and unbuttoning his cuff links to roll up his sodden shirt sleeve.

It's then I see it. A tattoo on the back of his wrist. Four letters, separated like coordinates on a compass.

O. M. Y. T.

Motherfucker.

I shift my stare to Lorcan. He's still watching the chaos unfold in amusement. He hasn't seen what I've seen, but he feels my eyes boring into the side of his face, and he looks over.

I strum a finger against the arm of my chair. Two deliberate taps.

Something's wrong.

The confusion doesn't last long, hardening into a deep scowl within seconds.

Two taps. It's just one of many codes we use to communicate when we can't talk freely. Two taps mean something about the situation isn't right. A wire poking out from a client's collar. A gun-shaped bulge in a new housekeeper's apron.

Or, in this case, a Bratva tattoo on the wrist of New York's next potential governor.

Wearing my best uninterested expression, I rise to my feet, straightening the lapel of my jacket. "Excuse me," I say dryly.

“If you’re about to talk politics, I better leave before I fall asleep.” I turn to Lorcan and add, “Call me if you need...” My eyes graze over Belsky, pinning him with a blistering stare. “*Assistance.*”

With a parting snarl to the guards flanking the door, I enter the lobby, my easy saunter morphing into a quick stride the moment I turn the corner. I locate the security office behind the reception desk and burst in.

“Stand down,” I bark at Jon and Aiden, the two henchmen I sent to keep an eye on the security cameras. They part like a curtain, revealing a wall of computer monitors, each showing a different corner of the hotel.

“How do I work this fucking thing?”

“Here, boss.” Aiden stoops over and taps on a keyboard. The middle screen cuts to a drop-down menu, detailing every camera name and a short description of what they display.

“You”—I jab a finger to Jon—“radio Ronan and have him station four men outside the drawing room.” I lean across the desk, rapping a knuckle on the screen that shows the room from a bird’s-eye view. Lorcan’s still flicking through the wedge of papers Belsky pulled out of his ass. “You see anything remotely dodgy, you let Ronan know.”

“Copy that, boss.”

“You”—I clap my hand on Aiden’s shoulder—“show me the parking lot.”

He flicks through a few streams of the enormous parking lot from different angles before—

“Stop.” There’s the armored Merc. A burly man in a suit leans against the driver’s door with a cell phone to his ear. “Parked in the disabled space,” I tut, shaking my head. “I knew he was an asshole. Zoom in.” When he zeros in on the car’s plates, I snap my fingers. “Write that down.” Aiden scribbles the digits down on the side of his hand. “These cameras got mics?”

“Good question,” Aiden mutters as he *tap, tap, taps* on the keyboard again, bringing up a settings page. Suddenly, a voice floods over the speakers.

I rest my weight on my palms against the desk and lean forward, ears straining to listen to the man on the phone.

Jon flinches when I thump my fist against the desk. “I fucking knew it. The bastards are Russian.”

Aiden mutters something under his breath, dragging a hand over his face. I need a moment to get a handle on my adrenaline spike and figure out our next move. Moving to prop myself against the cold wall behind me, I cross my arms and close my eyes.

My instinct was right. Leo Belsky is anything but a meek politician trying to make the world a better place. A fucking Bratva tattoo... I haven’t seen one of them since we annihilated the Bratnov family a decade ago. As far as we’re concerned, not a drop of Bratva blood is left on the East Coast.

My eyes pop open, and I look at the stream of the drawing room. I look past Lorcan and stare at Belsky. How relaxed he looks in the presence of the East Coast's biggest mob boss.

“Who are you, you little fucker?” I mutter to myself.

Neither of my men answers me, letting the silence swirl around the stuffy room instead. Until—

“Wait. What the...?”

I turn to see a pale Aiden squinting at the top left corner of the wall, where a dozen monitors show the corridors of each floor. Each monitor has four identical streams of long, red-carpeted corridors lined with hotel room doors.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

“What?” I bark, taking a step toward the wall.

Aiden opens his mouth, then closes it again. Silently, he lifts a finger to one of the screens and stabs the lower-right section. With his other hand, he taps the keyboard, filling the screen with this stream only.

“Her.”

A woman stumbles out of Room 386. She looks up and down the corridor, then up at the camera. Quickly, she bows her head and staggers back into the room, the door slamming shut behind her.

A beat passes.

“Seal off the thirtieth floor.”

Aiden glances up at me, confusion clouding his eyes. Maybe it's because my voice is quiet. Maybe it's because whatever is happening in Room 386 is a lot less pressing than what's happening in the drawing room.

But there's that feeling again. That instinct. The one that creeps up over my shoulders and wraps a hand around my throat.

Why?

It might have something to do with the fact she's stark naked and dripping in blood.

2

Romy

My hands are covered in blood. I've been staring at them so long that it's starting to congeal under my broken fingernails. Red rivers trickle down the lines of my palms, drip off the heel of my hand, and land on the marble floor with a *plink*.

Plink, plink, plink.

It's a lot of blood.

It's also not mine.

Numbness flows through my veins like a sedative. It keeps me rooted to the bottom of the bed, staring at my hands. Listening to the *plinks*. But my brain, it's neurotic. It doesn't stay calm for long, even at the best of times.

Eventually, it speaks to me.

Do something, goddammit.

A jolt of adrenaline zaps through me, forcing me to feel the panic I should have felt twenty minutes ago. Like I've been held underwater too long, and I'm seconds from running

out of air. My heart slams against my rib cage, my lungs constrict.

Mak. I need Mak. My eyes dart to the rotary phone on the desk. No, there are a million reasons calling him would be a bad idea—the list starts with the police being able to trace phone calls and ends with the fact I'd have to explain to him that I'd killed a client with my bare hands.

I have to deal with this myself.

Think, Romy, think.

Right.

Grinding my back molars, I force myself to look at the body. Because that's what he is now: a body. Not a man with a heartbeat and a lifetime's worth of memories and a family that will miss him. He's a lump of flesh staining the Egyptian cotton sheets with his blood.

I'm five-foot-three and weigh one-hundred-and-twenty pounds soaking wet. I can't remove his body from the room, so I'll have to remove myself. Yes, I'll get out of here and skip town. Run away before anyone knows what to look for.

Without thinking twice, I'm crossing the space between the body and the door. Then I fling it open and step outside. I look up and down the hall. Empty. Something glints out of the top-right corner of my eye. A camera, its red eye blinking at me.

“Fuck!”

I stumble back into the suite and slam the door behind me, pressing my back against the cold oak panels.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Forgetting my hands are bloodied, I wind them into my hair, tugging at the strands, hoping the stabbing pain will bring me back to reality. I'm finding it very fucking hard to think straight. What the hell was I doing, exposing myself—naked and covered in blood—to a network of cameras that covers this entire hotel? What did I think I was going to do? Stroll down to the lobby, past the doorman, and hop into a yellow cab, leaving a path of red footprints in my wake?

“Come on, you're better than this,” I growl to myself, pushing off the door and stomping back into the bedroom.

I'm pacing along the foot of the bed—up, down, up, down—creating a crimson ravine laced with the outline of my feet.

Footprints. Fingerprints. Jesus Christ, my DNA is everywhere. Panic tightens its grip around my throat, clutching my airways so tight that my lips are tingling.

I have to disappear in every way. That starts with removing any trace that I was here in the first place. With a half-formed plan lingering in the air, I fling open every oak-clad cupboard, drawer, and dresser, looking for cleaning supplies. Under the sink. In the clothes closet. There's nothing but fancy toiletries and extra bedding. Of course they don't have industrial-grade bleach just lying around. We're in the most prestigious hotel in New York, not a *Motel 6*.

Come on, Romy. New plan.

As I continue to scan the room, my eyes land on the bedside table. The one with the half-smoked Cuban resting in an ashtray next to a bottle of rum. The light bulb above my head burns brighter than the fire I'm about to create.

Of course. I'll burn this room down, let the body and the blood and my sins go up in flames. Then I'll rise from the ashes, crying and confused, and most importantly, innocent.

Feniks!

The way out is in sight. Giving my victim a wide berth, I creep around the side of the bed and snatch the lighter from the bedside table. Then I grab the rum bottle, giving it a small shake. There's not much left—no surprise, this dude was slugging it straight from the bottle—and I wonder if there's enough to even start a fire destructive enough to erase my mistake.

Where should I start it? How? I need to make it look like an accident. My eyes graze over the body on the bed. Thankfully, he landed facedown after our struggle, meaning I don't have to deal with his glassy eyes judging me, following me around the room while I decide how I'm going to—

Rap, tap, tap.

An abrupt knock on the door slices through the room like a hot steak knife. The bottle slips from my trembling hands, exploding on the floor in a pool of sharp, sticky liquid.

Another knock. Louder this time.

Oh, my god.

I have to get out of here. Away from the door and whoever is on the other side of it. I stagger to the windows, my bare feet crunching over the glass. The skyline of New York City cries in front of me as the streets bear the brunt of the storm. They look a million miles away. The window cracks open just an inch, and even if I could somehow pry it open enough to squeeze through, I'd be nothing more than a pancake on 57th Street.

When the third knock comes, my blood turns to ice. An old cautionary tale the nuns at the *pustosh*' used to chant seeps out of the locked box at the back of my brain.

If you commit a sin,

The Devil will knock thrice.

If you let him in,

He'll make you his wife.

A stupid nursery rhyme, one made to scare little girls into acting like ladies. It's not true. Of course it's not true. Is it?

I—

“I know there's a body in there.”

The voice floats through the room like a helium balloon, a cocktail of velvet and nails.

My heart skips a beat.

So this is it. This is how it ends. After everything I've been through, this is what will finally kill me.

“And I know you're panicking. I know you're trying to figure out how to get rid of it.”

The voice again. It's deep, alluring. Eerily calm.

Then—

“Luckily for you, I'm very good at getting rid of bodies. Now let me in.”

3

Romy

What choice do I have but to let the Devil in?

I do it with caution. Hand curled around the brass knob, safety chain still on, I crack open the door a couple of inches, leaving me just enough room to assess what's on the other side.

The sight makes me recoil, and in my fear-fueled haze, I can't immediately put my finger on why.

A man. A very large man with a black beard and wolf-like eyes. Those eyes graze over me scorchingly slow. And it's under the heat of his gaze that I realize what's off about him.

It's his grin.

A demonic grin that splits his face in two with a row of Hollywood-worthy whites. It doesn't belong here in my own personal hell.

It's him who slices the silence.

“Cleanup in Room 368?” he says with an easy drawl. Eyes never leaving mine, he props his elbow against the doorframe and leans his weight into it.

“No, everything’s fine.” My voice is small, pathetic. My words unconvincing. “We’re fine.”

He raises an eyebrow. “We?”

“Y-Yes,” I say, confidence edging its way back into my voice. Maybe I can make him go away. “My friend and I. We’re fine.” I follow his eyes to my fingers, curled around the edge of the door. They are stained with blood, smearing the oak panel. “Oh, that. Yeah. Just a small accident. It looks worse than it is.”

The speed at which his grin melts into a thunderous scowl snatches my breath away. He stoops, nose almost brushing mine. “The one thing I hate more than a liar is a bad liar,” he growls, low and dangerous. “Now, let me in.”

Shock, more than anything, makes me slide off the safety chain and step aside, letting the Devil in.

If you let him in...

His eyes linger heavy on mine for a few more seconds before he strides past me and into the center of the suite. I slam the door shut and press my back against it, watching him slowly pivot his body, silently absorbing the mess I’ve made for myself.

I hate that, even with blood dripping from my hands and my future hanging in the balance, I can’t help but think how

gorgeous the Devil is. He's a mountain in both stature and presence, and despite the chaos that surrounds him, I can't take my eyes off him. His expensive-looking suit clings to each angle of his enormous frame, just like his beard hugs the sharp lines of his jaw. His hair, only a fraction lighter, hangs in thick waves, and as he studies the body on the bed, he rakes his large fingers through it. The way he moves, the way he holds himself. You don't see men like him on the streets of New York City, hailing a cab or waiting in line at Starbucks.

He takes his time, plucking out the red silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. Then he swipes it over the desk before perching on the edge of it.

Clasping his hands in his lap, he eventually tilts his head up to me. We lock eyes.

“You're naked.”

Fuck. It's a knee-jerk reaction to fling my arms over my chest and lower stomach. My cheeks burn with shame. I scan the suite for something to shove on.

The mystery man picks up a pen from the pot on the desk and uses it to lift a towel slung over the armchair. With a smirk, he dangles it in front of me. I snatch it from him and turn away to wrap it around my trembling body.

When I turn back around, he's studying the man on the bed again.

“Bite marks on his neck. Scratch marks down his arms and back.” He pauses for effect, dragging a knuckle through his

beard. “Either you fuck like an animal, or he really pissed you off. Which one is it?” I don’t reply. He cocks his head, eyes tracing my face as his lip curls into a smirk. “Who is he?”

I pause. “A client.”

His smirk hardens. “A client?” he repeats. I’m not sure if he believes me or if he even cares.

“Why are you here?” I croak.

He drags his attention away from the bloodied body and back to me. “What if I told you I could make this all go away?”

I release the stale air in my lungs and turn to face the window, clutching the cotton fabric of the towel close to my body. The storm shows no sign of letting up, the black clouds snaking between the skyscrapers, releasing their wrath on the streets below us. *Breathe, Romy. Breathe.*

I’ve weathered worse storms, and I’ve weathered them alone. I don’t rely on anybody, especially not strange, handsome men who find my predicament amusing.

As with ninety-nine percent of the population, I don’t trust him.

Having regained some semblance of composure, I turn back around and fix the Devil with a hard stare.

“Why would you want to help me?”

“Do I need a reason to help a beautiful woman in distress?”

“No thanks,” I say icily. “I can handle it.”

Surprise flashes across his face, then it breaks into that easy smile again. He leans back against his palms, revealing a tight-fitting shirt under his jacket. The fabric stretches over a hard stomach.

Jesus. Stop looking.

Why does he act like he has all the time in the world? Like this crime scene isn't a ticking time bomb, waiting to explode and destroy my life. And now that he's inserted himself into it, it could destroy his, too. “You can handle it,” he repeats, amber eyes twinkling. “Okay. What are you going to do?”

“Uh, well, first, I'll move him—”

“You'll move him.” His eyes mock me. “Okay. Let's pretend that he's not twice your height and weight. The shade of the blood on his back shows he's been dead about an hour. You have another thirty minutes before he starts to go stiff. Ever tried to move a stiff body?” He chuckles. “It's like trying to move a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound ironing board.” Strumming his fingers against his thigh, he says, “Next idea?”

Annoyance prickles at my skin. The contrast between us is fire and ice.

My eyes fly to the lighter I dropped on the floor when he knocked, and I bend to snatch it up. “I'll start a fire. See that cigar? I'll light it, then drop it onto that puddle of rum there. It'll look like we fell asleep drunk and accidentally set the room alight.” *Yes.* The idea slides into my head, almost fully

formed. I pace the marble with newfound energy. “I wake up to the heat of the flames and the smell of smoke. I try to wake him up, but he’s out cold. Maybe he’s already inhaled too much smoke. Anyway, he’s too heavy for me to move. I run out into the corridor and—”

The man lifts his hand, cutting me off. I hate how quickly I stop talking.

“The average temperature of a common fire is a notch over six-hundred degrees. It takes double that heat to effectively cremate a body.” He pushes himself off the desk and swaggers over to the bed. Using the same pen he picked up the towel with, he pokes the man’s arm, sticking the tip into an open scratch mark. I can’t help but look away. “It’s not like the movies, sweetheart. You won’t be left with a pile of ashes and get off scot-free. It’ll burn a little flesh, but all of the evidence will still be there.” There’s that smirk again. “Even NYPD’s dumbest officer would suspect foul play.”

Sweetheart. That and the patronizing tone he uses to make my blood boil. Another penny drops.

“Then I’ll blame you, *sweetheart,*” I say, sickly sweet. For the first time, I stride around the bed with confidence, drinking in the chaos I caused. “Picture this: Innocent woman—”

“Whore,” he interrupts, amusement dancing on his lips.

I swallow my retort, refusing to rise to it. “Okay, innocent whore, then. I was in bed with my...” My eyes flick over to the bed. “Client. You burst in, tell him to give you all of his money. He refuses, there’s a... fight, and then you kill him.” I

drop a hip, satisfied with my new alibi. I make my bottom lip quiver and widen my eyes. “*Oh, I was so scared, officer!*”

“Hmm.” He pops his knuckles as he considers this. “Quite the little actress. You almost had me convinced. You’re overlooking one key factor, though.”

“And that is?”

He closes the gap between us, and I stop breathing. His scent snakes up my nostrils, a mix of leather and expensive cologne. I have the strange urge to melt into it. Instead, I curl my fingernails into my palms and force myself to hold my ground. He lowers his lips to the shell of my ear, his beard bristling my bloodstained cheek. “Do I look like a man who bites and scratches?”

His syrupy voice ripples through my nervous system. *Ugh, Romy. Not the time, place, nor person.*

But no, he doesn’t. He looks like a man who has never had to fight to survive because nobody would be brave enough to test him.

I swallow the ever-present lump in my throat and drag my eyes up to his citrine whirlpools, punctuated with the blackest pupils I’ve ever seen.

He whispers, “Do you hear that?” Straining my ears, all I can hear is the rushing of blood in my temples and the rain hammering against the floor-to-ceiling windows. I shake my head. “Close your eyes and try harder.”

I narrow them instead. But when his glare darkens, I do as I'm told. This time, I can pick apart more noises. The wind whips around the building. Cars honk their horns in the streets below.

Sirens.

My eyes pop open in panic, and I'm greeted by that dazzling grin. "We're in New York, for Christ's sake," I hiss, stepping out of his reach. "Sirens are practically white noise."

"You think I'm the only person who saw you walk out into the corridor, dripping in blood? In a hotel this size, there'll be cameras everywhere. Maybe the front desk saw you on their monitors. Maybe they've already called the police." I didn't think he could get closer to me, but he does. He tucks a stray hair behind my ear, the cold metal strap of his watch grazing my cheek. "Maybe, they are already coming for you."

My heartbeat stutters. When my mouth opens and closes again just as quick, the Devil's handsome face breaks into a satisfied smirk.

He knows what I've known all along. I can't clean up a mess this size on my own.

"Tick tock sweetheart," he says, chuckling softly. His eyes are like fire, in both color and intensity. Flames dancing merrily in his irises.

The lump in my throat swells, threatening to block off my air supply.

I'm a stubborn woman. Always have been. But I'm sure as hell not a stupid woman.

“Okay.”

The flames dance harder. “Okay, what?”

My nostrils flare. “I need you to make this all go away.”

He licks his lips. *Oh, god.* “You want me to help you?”

“Yes,” I snap, biting off the end of his question.

Slowly, he retreats, mocking eyes never leaving me. That smirk, it's hardened now, and I see it for what it really is. A cruel, thin line. He leans back against the desk, drinking me in.

“Then beg me.”

“E-Excuse me?”

“You heard me, sweetheart. Get on your knees and beg me for help.”

I absorb his words. Blink. Then a cocktail of anger and humiliation bubbles under the surface of my skin. Like hell am I playing this asshole's game. “Fuck off,” I hiss, stomping toward the door. “I'll take my chances.”

His laugh is deliciously cold. “A pretty girl like you wouldn't last ten minutes in Bedford Hills Correctional.”

With my hand already on the doorknob, I pause. It's my turn to laugh. “You know nothing about me. Believe me when I say I'm more than a pretty face. I'm more than capable of defending myself.” I jerk my head toward the body on the bed.

“Case in point.”

He's silent. Still smirking with his perfect teeth stretched over his bottom lip.

“You're wrong about not knowing anything about you. I know *one* thing.”

He pauses dramatically, waiting for me to take the bait. Somewhere in the distance, sirens whir again. They are louder this time, like an alarm clock, telling me to wake up and get the hell out of here. But my feet are rooted to the spot.

“And what's that?”

“When you get angry, you can't think straight.”

With a snort, I whip back around and twist the doorknob. “You're wrong.”

“I'm right,” he says breezily from behind me. The desk groans as he heaves himself up from it, then his heavy footsteps slap against the marble as he approaches the bed. “Case in point,” he mocks me. “You didn't plan this attack. You lost it. You clawed at every inch of his skin with your fingernails. Then”—he stoops by the headboard, observing the blood splatter against the oak like a crime scene investigator—“you smacked his head against this headboard, again and again. If I was to guess, the second blow knocked him unconscious. But you kept going.” He looks up at me, satisfied with his conclusion. “Because you got angry and lost it.”

“He attacked me first. It was self-defense.”

Kind of.

He taps his bottom lip. “Any judge worth their salt would throw the book at you. Here’s another example, sweetheart.” He gestures toward me. “I told you to beg for my help, and that made you angry.”

“I won’t get on my knees for a man,” I growl back.

He ignores me. “You got so angry that you tried to flee. But you’re not thinking straight.”

“I’m thinking as straight as a fucking ruler.”

“So tell me, sweetheart, why would you leave here, in nothing but a tiny towel, covered in your victim’s blood?”

I freeze. He folds his arms across his chest, his smug expression practically screaming *check and mate*.

It feels like the wind has been knocked out of my sails, and the reality of the situation is growing heavier on my shoulders, forcing my head under the water.

Oh, god.

I stagger into the center of the room, blood rushing around my ears. *What the hell am I doing?*

What the hell have I done?

I don’t realize I’m falling until the Devil steps forward to catch me. “There, there, sweetheart,” he murmurs into the crown of my hair. His hard chest stops me from plowing face-first into the marble. “You’re a young girl, early twenties, I suppose? With good behavior, you’ll be out in your fifties. You’ll still have some life to live.”

“No,” I croak.

His voice lowers into a syrupy drawl. “What’s that, sweetheart?”

This wasn’t how it was meant to go. Any of it. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. The police... they’ll dig. They’ll find out what really happened. Who I am and who...

This is bigger than me. Bigger than my ego and my stubbornness and my temper.

But *goddammit*, the last thing I want to do is ask for help from the Devil, especially not while on my knees.

What choice do I have?

“Help. Me,” I say through gritted teeth. My nose brushes against the luxurious fabric of his shirt.

He winds his fingers into the strands of my matted hair and tugs, forcing me to look at him. From this angle, I can see how truly haunting he is. How his high cheekbones cast shadows over his jawline. How his strong Roman nose splits his perfectly symmetrical face. Those lips... pillowy and plump. A delicious curve shaping his Cupid’s bow.

His nose barely connects with mine, but it scorches my skin like a flame. His eyes grow darker, his voice drops deeper. Behind him, the sirens scream.

“Then *beg*.”

He untangles his hand from my hair and steps back. I suck in a lungful of thick air and exhale my dignity.

Let's get this over with.

I sink to my knees and clasp my bloodied hands in my lap. No doubt my cheeks are just as red. When I look up, I fluster even more, realizing that I'm at eye level with his crotch. *Jesus Christ.* A thick imprint bulges against the fabric of his suit, and I lose what I'm about to say. *Are my eyes deceiving me, or did I just see it twitch?*

The Devil interrupts my fucked-up thoughts by placing two fingers under my chin and tilting my head up. His eyes are brimming with amusement and something else I can't quite put my finger on. Something darker. Something that would rattle the bones of a normal person. But I am anything but normal.

My throat is dry, but I swallow anyway. "Help me."

He arches an eyebrow.

"Please."

The word lingers on my lips. But he wipes it off by slowly running his thumb pad along my bottom lip. It's unexpected, and so is the jolt of electricity it sends between my thighs. In any other circumstance—*if it was anybody else*—I'd clamp my teeth down and bite that fucking finger off. But instead, I let out a hiss of air and drop my gaze back to his crotch.

I'm not imagining that it's grown twice in size, straining against the zipper of his slacks. I'm so close, I could reach out and—

“Very well.” The Devil snatches his hand away from me and claps. “Let’s get this show on the road, shall we?”

From my position on the floor, I watch, dazed, as he strides across the room toward the telephone and plucks up the receiver.

“Bill?” he says calmly into the mouthpiece. “I’ve asked my men to seal off the thirtieth floor. Get in touch with every guest on this floor and tell them they can’t leave their room until they hear otherwise. If the guests are out, then stop them in the lobby.” There’s a pause. Then he scowls. “I don’t fucking know what to tell them, Bill. You’re the manager, so think of something. Now, send up...” His eyes sweep the chaos. “Five of your best cleaners. But not before having them sign nondisclosure agreements. My own cleaning team will be joining them in”—he glances at his watch—“precisely twelve minutes. They’ll enter through the back door.” He pauses. His eyes graze over me, then he cups his hand to his mouth and lowers his voice. “Is Lorcan and his guest still here?” He waits for a reply. “No? Good. In that case, have Jon and Aiden turn off all cameras on the thirtieth floor, in elevator two, and in the parking lot. Understood?” Thunder flashes across his face. “Safety risk?” He growls down the line with venom that makes my clit tingle. “I’ll be a risk to your safety if you don’t do what’s asked of you.”

He slots the receiver back on its cradle and turns to me. His laid-back swagger returns, punctuated with a ruffle of his hair and that *fucking* smirk.

“You’re catching flies.”

“H-Huh?”

“With your mouth open like that, sweetheart.”

I blink, then rearrange my jaw. I think I’m in a state of shock.

“Do you... *own* the hotel?” I ask incredulously.

He releases a velvety laugh, shaking his head. Then he closes the gap between us, offering me his hand. Too numb to refuse it, I let him pull me up and guide me to the sheet of glass that frames New York’s skyline. He presses a firm hand into the base of my spine so I’m flush against the cold window. The sudden movement parts the towel wrapped around me, exposing my thighs and hipbones to the city below. From behind, he grabs my wrist, pulls out my stained index finger, and drags it across the glass, cutting the raindrops with a horizontal smear of blood. My heart beats a little faster when he shifts closer, pinning me to the glass with his imposing body.

In what sick, fucked-up brain do I inhabit that this makes my nipples stiffen?

His throat vibrates against the crown of my head when he speaks.

“The hotel? Oh, sweetheart. I own the whole city.”

4

Donnacha

Even in the darkness of the Tunnels, my babies gleam back up at me. A few pieces from my collection—sharpened, buffed, and polished—are all lined up and ready for showtime.

Ignoring the whimpering coming from the shadows, I make a show of snapping on rubber gloves and crouching over my tools.

“*Ip, dip, dog, shit,*” I chime, pointing at each of my tools in turn. “*You are not it.*” My finger stops over my pliers. With a dramatic sigh, I glance up at the balding man tied to the chair in front of me. He’s sweating buckets. “That’s a shame. I’m sure that gold tooth of yours is worth a fair bit of cash.” I kick the pliers with my boot, sending them flying across the concrete. They disappear into the darkness and crash against the wall, making the man jump.

“You don’t have to do this,” he begs, straining his wrists against the rope. He rocks back and forth on the chair he’s

bound to, testing the strength of my knots. Testing my fucking patience. “If you let me go, I promise, I’ll—”

“Rest your voice, lad. You’ll need those vocal cords to scream nice and loudly for me.” I raise an eyebrow, grinning. “I like a screamer.”

He pauses. His eyes graze over the hammer, shotgun, hacksaw, and Samurai sword laid out neatly between us. Then he pins me with a hopeful stare. “If I scream, will you let me go?” he whispers.

I laugh. A big laugh that echoes off the concrete and makes him recoil.

“You’re funny. Someone out there will miss that about you, buddy. Hell, they might even write it on your gravestone. Now, where were we?” I strum a gloved finger against my bottom lip, pretending to think, before diving right back into my game. “Ip, dip, dog—”

“I’ll double my investment!” he yells. “Triple it, even, if you *just let me go, please—*”

I hold up a hand to silence him.

“Save the negotiations. You’re talking to the wrong Quinn.”

“Bring me to the right one then!”

“Too late, buddy,” I say, booting away the hacksaw, simply because I prefer the idea of the hammer or the sword for this one. My game of chance is nothing but an illusion. “Like most

people who end up in the Tunnels, I'll be the last Quinn you'll see."

I don't even know this fucker's name. All I know is that he's a creepy bastard. Some angel investor Poppy had secured funding from to build a new housing project over in Bay Village. Last night, they'd met for business dinner, and he'd squeezed her thigh under the table and slipped her his spare room key over the top of it. Yeah, getting handsy with Lorcan Quinn's wife will secure you a date with me down in the Tunnels, the disused sewage network that runs under the streets of Boston. Down here, you're in my world. We play my games, by my rules, and there's only ever one winner.

A knock on the door interrupts round three of our game.

"Yeah?" I bark over my shoulder.

"Lorc's on the phone."

Ronan's footsteps echo across the concrete as he crosses the room and presses the burner into my palm. I flash my victim a smirk. "Just the Quinn you were after. Perhaps he'll grant you a presidential pardon?"

The hope that lights up his bloodied face is hilarious.

I bring the cell to my ear. "Ah, my favorite cousin. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Meet me at *Gatsby's* in half an hour. We have a lot to discuss."

"Such as?"

“Where the fuck you disappeared to yesterday during our meeting with Belsky.”

The girl with the silver hair pops into my head, blood and all. Fuck, she was hot.

“It’s a date.”

I flash my victim an apologetic grin. “No such luck, I’m afraid. Ronan?”

“Yes, boss?”

“End this waste of space for me. I’m going out for lunch and won’t have time to wipe the blood splatter from my shoes.”

“On it, boss.”

Walking out of the room, I hear three loud shots ring out, then the familiar thud of a body hitting the concrete. Ronan is a ruthless son of a bitch, and I’m lucky to have him as my second enforcer. Loyal as fuck, too, despite not being born into the correct bloodline. It used to be an ironclad tradition that we kept every role in the organization within the family. If you weren’t a Quinn, then you were an enemy. But after Antoin betrayed us during the war with the Bratnovs ten years ago, I learned that sharing DNA doesn’t breed unwavering loyalty. In fact, those closest to you will fuck you over the most because they are well out of the way of suspicion. I weeded out the snakes in the grass and looked outside of the bloodline and found Ronan. Well, we’re technically still related. He’s a very, *very* distant cousin who came over from Limerick, Ireland, to

help the cause. He's a scary-looking bastard, and his accent is so thick he's near impossible to understand, which poses a problem, sometimes, because he never shuts up.

He follows me into the hallway, polishing the grip of his gun with the hem of his T-shirt. "Need me to come with you, boss?"

"Nah. Stay and clean up," I say, striding toward the exit. I wave to him over my shoulder and add, "If you're lucky, I'll bring you back a doggy bag."

* * *

Gatsby's. A glitzy, Quinn-owned joint stuffed with all of the Art Deco pieces Lorcan could get his hands on. At night, it's a restaurant with a waiting list as long as my dick, known for serving rare—and usually illegal—delicacies from all over the world. Japanese pufferfish, blood clams, all washed down with the finest Swiss absinthe or gold-infused vodka. I try to avoid the place in the cold light of day because you'll usually find Lorcan here with a face like a slapped ass. Today is no different.

He's sitting in one of the green velvet booths with his arms folded across his chest. Poppy is next to him, glaring at me over the rim of her wineglass.

"What is this, a family day out? I didn't get the memo." I ignore Lorcan's death glare and head straight to Poppy, who

rises to give me a peck on the cheek. “You could have at least brought my favorite sprogs.”

Poppy forces a smile, then dabs at her wine-stained lips. “Gus and Valentina are with Cillian and Lottie today, I’m afraid.” She lowers her voice as if there’s anyone but us in the restaurant. “How’d it go? With Cooke?”

I lean over and steal a truffle fry from her plate. “Who?”

“Jesus, Don. How many people do you kill in a day that you can’t keep track of names?”

“You mean the pervert investor guy? Yeah, he’s handled.” I pretend I don’t see the alarm creeping up her face or how she scans my hands for signs of blood. Instead, I jerk my chin up at Lorcan. “Who’s pissed in your Cheerios, then?”

His top lip curls. “Where the fuck did you disappear to yesterday? I needed you.”

“Chill,” I say, reaching for another fry. This time, Poppy goes to swat my hand away, but I’m too quick. “There was another incident at the hotel I had to take care of. Some hooker had killed her John.”

Poppy gasps. “A murder?”

“A fucked-up fantasy gone wrong is my bet.” I lick truffle oil off my fingertips, feeling a smirk creep onto my face. Damn, yesterday was fun. That whore... *whew*. As a hard rule, I don’t deal with hookers anymore, but I’m regretting that I never had anyone like her in my little black book. Eyes like ice

and an attitude just as cold. And when she reluctantly sank to her knees to beg...

Fuck. The memory sends a shiver along the length of my cock. A feeling that reminds me *exactly* why I don't pay to fuck anymore. It's a dangerous game when you're a sick, twisted cunt with unlimited cash, like me.

"Don?" Poppy's voice pulls me back from the dark place I only allow myself to visit when I'm drunk and alone. "You all right? You suddenly look like you've seen a ghost. Maybe you should eat something more substantial than my fries."

I cough, grab Lorcan's sparkling water, and down it in one, slamming the bottle on the table to bring me back to the conversation. "Nah, I'm all good. Anyway." I nod at Lorc, who's now eyeing me suspiciously. "Your hotel, it's a five-star joint. I thought it'd be best to sort that shit out quickly and discreetly before any of the guests got wind of it. Don't want to be known as the next *Hotel Cecil*, do you?"

Lorcan pauses, then slowly nods. "True," he grunts. "That would have been a publicity nightmare. But still, you left me with that asshole and his heavily armed men."

"Relax, cuz. I had eyes on you from every angle and men outside the drawing room ready to start World War III if needed. Oh, and we put that tracker on his vehicle. Traced him back to an address at the Hamptons. We'll keep an eye on his movements."

He resets his jaw and thaws a little. "Good, because we have bigger problems than a killer hooker to worry about."

I glance at Poppy. Concern clouds her big blue eyes.

“Hit me with it.”

Lorcan pulls out a file from his breast pocket and slides it across the table.

I wipe my greasy fingers on a napkin, then flick it open. “All I see is text and a lot of it. Are you really going to make me read this, or can you just give me the CliffsNotes version?”

Poppy sighs. “It’s Belsky’s proposed manifesto for if he becomes governor of New York. Some of it focuses on tax breaks, healthcare, education... all the usual garbage. But he’s also included something more relevant to us.” When she leans over to flick through the file, I get a whiff of her vanilla perfume. “Here.” She taps a new page with her red fingernail. “Read this.”

I groan. “Don’t make me read. Just fucking tell me—”

“He’s proposing a new immigration law,” Lorcan snarls. “Any green card holder suspected of a crime of moral turpitude will be considered for deportation without the right to appeal.”

My eyes flick back and forth between him and Poppy wearily. “And again in English?”

Poppy rests her elbows on the table and leans in. Her brows are knitted, lips drawn in a tight line. She’s wearing an expression I can’t read. “A crime of moral turpitude. It’s a purposely vague term lawmakers use to fuck people over. It can cover anything, really. Fraud, theft, intent to hurt another

person...anything that normal people would consider bad can be classed as a crime of moral turpitude.”

“Call us guilty on all charges then.” I chuckle, throwing an arm over the booth’s backrest. “So, what’s the big deal? We’ve got every law enforcement agency and courtroom on the East Coast under our thumb.”

“You’re not understanding, Don. New York law already dictates that permanent citizens can be deported if they are *convicted* of a crime. That’s a given. The big deal is in the word *suspected*. If you are *suspected* of being a criminal, then you can be kicked out of the country long before they haul your ass in front of a judge or jury on our payroll,” Poppy says. She glances at Lorcan, who’s staring somewhere above my head, jaw set in stone. “It’s his way of nipping organized crime in the bud without any of the legal legwork.”

The penny finally fucking drops. “Motherfucker,” I muse, dragging a knuckle over my jaw. “He’s a clever son of a bitch.”

Poppy nods. “Our lawyers have spent the morning looking over his proposed legal draft. It’s ironclad and definitely designed with the sole purpose to kick the Quinns out of New York.” She side-eyes Lorcan again. He’s still refusing to look at me.

My eyes narrow. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not telling me something?”

Poppy shuffles in her seat and draws a deep breath. “Our lawyers also spent some time looking over technicalities in

immigration law. I'm a US citizen by birthright." She chews on her bottom lip. "And...Lorcan is married to me. We have two kids together."

"Point being?"

Finally, Lorcan drags his eyes away from the fucking wallpaper and locks them on mine. They burn with anger. "It means Belsky's bullshit laws wouldn't touch me. There's too much red tape around marriage and parental rights to deport me because of a *suspicion*. You, on the other hand..." He trails off, letting his unfinished sentence dangle over the table.

I finish it for him. "I'm single with no ties to the United States."

Lorcan looks tired. "Exactly, and that bastard knows it. He doesn't want to get me deported. He wants to dismantle my army by getting *you* deported."

Silently, I soak it all in. Poppy pours another glass of wine and takes a large gulp. Lorcan twists his emerald ring around his beefy finger.

"Fuck," I groan.

"What? What is it?" Poppy asks too quickly.

I can't fucking believe I forgot about this. I was too caught up in hot hookers and crime scenes. I take a deep breath and turn to Lorcan. "In the drawing room yesterday, I had a feeling something was off about him. You called him nothing but a green politician, but I wasn't so sure. My suspicions were confirmed when that server spilled coffee on him, and he

rolled up his sleeves. I saw a tattoo.” Dragging my hand through my hair, I mutter a curse under my breath. “Fuck, man.”

“A tattoo of what?” Lorcan snarls, fists clenched again.

“O. M. Y. T.”

I’m only halfway through spelling out the letters when Lorcan thumps a fist on the table so hard that Poppy’s wineglass tumbles over and smashes. The blood-red liquid soaks the white tablecloth, snaking between the fine china. But Lorcan doesn’t take his eyes off me.

“What does it mean?” Poppy whispers, wide-eyed, a hand on her husband’s bicep.

“It means the bastard is Bratva.”

“The *omut* tattoo is used as a warning sign within the Russian mafia,” I explain to Poppy, ignoring Lorcan snarling next to her like a fucking bull. “It means *you can never escape me.*”

Her jaw drops.

“I left the drawing room to look at the security cameras. I managed to catch one of his men in the parking lot talking on the phone in Russian.”

Lorcan rubs his face, muttering something venomous under his tongue. Eventually, he turns back to me, eyes blazing. “You think he’s a Bratnov?”

“I doubt it. We obliterated those fuckers ten years ago and haven’t heard a peep from them since. Why would they wait a decade to climb out of the woodworks?” I stretch my arms across the width of the booth. “Nah. It’s New York City, baby. One of the most lucrative places in the world. It’s about time one of these other dudes tried to take it from us.”

Lorcan sneers at my deranged grin. He knows exactly what I’m thinking: *Bring it on.*

It’s Poppy who attempts to slice through the tension. “Okay, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’re forgetting one very important thing.” She wraps her arms around Lorcan, and his shoulders relax a fraction. Nothing the untrained eye would pick up. “Leo Belsky isn’t getting near the governor’s seat. We’re backing Danny English’s campaign, remember? And here’s a fun fact—nobody running for governor in the history of New York City has ever had so much funding behind them. English will win by a landslide. Belsky will be forced to retreat back to whatever dark, stinky hole he’s crawled out of, and everything will go back to normal.”

I watch Lorcan mull this over, working his jaw. Eventually, he says, “You’re right. He won’t win the election, but that doesn’t mean he’s not a threat. This”—he leans over the wine-stained table and picks up the file—“shows he’s not just a delusional brute throwing his weight around. He’s calculated, and losing out on the governor’s seat won’t make him go away.” He strokes his beard and adds, “There’s also no way he’s working solo, so we need to figure out where the fuck

he's come from and who's behind him. This isn't a kill-and-forget type issue."

"Agreed. I'll get my men on the case," I say, rubbing my hands together, unable to hide my shit-eating grin. This is the shit I live for.

Just then, Lorcan's cell buzzes in his pocket. He sighs, fishes it out, and presses it to his ear.

"Speak."

With every passing second, the lines on his forehead deepen.

"Lorcan?" Poppy asks, gripping his forearm tighter. "What's wrong?"

He lets out a long hiss, a vicious curse tangled up in there somewhere. "Appreciate the info," he grunts down the line before hanging up.

Hot, heavy tension swirls around the table, thick enough to make me instinctively reach for the Glock tucked into my waistband. Nostrils flaring, he taps the cell against his chin, once, twice, three times. Then he hurls it like a football at the wall behind me with enough force to make Poppy yelp in surprise.

I let out a low whistle. "Hit me with it, boss."

He pins me with an ice-cold glare. "That was the mortician," he says, frost covering every word that leaves his lips. "Calling about that body you dumped off at his office last night."

A slow, syrup-like unease trickles down the collar of my shirt. Jaw locked, I wait for him to finish his sentence even though I'm pretty sure I know what's coming.

“It was Danny English.”

5

Romy

The cracks creep along the bathroom ceiling like spider veins, crawling between the flaking paint and the heavy water bubbles waiting for the worst possible moment to burst.

Gripping the edge of the bathtub, I heave myself into a sitting position and inspect my body. Through the lukewarm water, I trace the purple and yellow bruises on my thighs. The blood blisters clustered on my knuckles. Then I lift a hand to my throat and gingerly touch the bite marks I know are decorating my neck.

It wasn't meant to end like that.

And it wouldn't have if he hadn't touched me while I was sleeping. When he makes me visit these men, I know how to take my mind elsewhere. Detach my brain from my body withering on the bed and let it fly free, high above the storm clouds, where the sun still shines bright.

But I was asleep. I wasn't ready for his hand to slide up my leg, for his hot breath to sizzle against the shell of my ear.

Call it instinct. Call it habit. But growing up in the *pustosh*, I learned that when a man touches you while you're sleeping, you fight.

Taking a large gulp of air, I slide down the bathtub and submerge myself. The cracks on the ceiling wobble, distorted by the water.

It's been two days since I killed a man with my bare hands.

Two days since I let the Devil in.

Every time I blink, I see him behind my fucking eyelids. That blistering amber stare. That demonic grin. The thought of him sends an ice-cold shiver down my spine and a scorching heat between my thighs.

Lungs burning, I slide my hands to the rim of the bathtub to pull myself up when a shadow in the doorway catches my eye.

I lunge forward, but it's too late. A hand is around my neck, pinning me to the bottom of the bath.

Fuck.

I thrash my arms and legs, clawing at the strong forearm holding me down. But the grip on my throat tightens, unrelenting. My lungs are screaming, and the wobbly, distorted ceiling begins to fade behind a veil of black spots...

Die before you die.

The voice that slices through the chaos in my head is my own. Serene and sensible. *Die before you die.*

Fighting against the instinct to thrash and gargle and beat against the weight on my chest, I force my muscles to relax. Not fighting for my life feels like the most unnatural thing in the world to me because it's all I've ever done.

I'm fading. Even the sun rays above the clouds are dimming.

Suddenly, the hand on my throat moves to my head, yanking me upright by a fistful of my hair.

Sweet, sweet oxygen. I greedily suck it between gasping and choking and spluttering into the dirty bathwater.

Perched on the edge of the bathtub is Mak. Calmly rolling down his shirt sleeve, wiping his hand on my towel. He tuts, shaking his head. "Too slow, *feniks*. What do you always need to remember?"

I gulp in the humid air, bringing my knees up to my burning chest. "That you're a bastard," I choke out, my voice hoarse.

"No, the other thing."

He pins me with a glare, blue eyes shimmering with annoyance.

"Die before you die," I spit out, massaging the soft spot under my chin. "But I was too slow."

He nods. "Way too slow. I could have killed you."

"But you wouldn't have."

A smirk lingers on his pillowy lips. We both know I'm right.

Heart rate finally beginning to slow, I rest my head against the back of the tub and close my eyes. *Die before you die.* It's the best thing Mak ever taught me. If you learn to convincingly play dead, whoever is attacking you will stop, believing they have killed you. Then you strike when they least expect it. You rise from the ashes like a phoenix and exact revenge.

Mak's lucky I didn't exact my revenge on him. If he wasn't my best friend—well, my only friend—then I'd have grabbed him by the scruff of his hoodie and dragged him into the bathtub.

I pop an eye open, and it lands on the small suitcase in the hallway. "You're finally home."

"Yeah," he grunts, rubbing the scar on his forehead.

"Until when?"

"Until the fridge is empty, and they cut the lights off again."

"So, about a week?"

His smile doesn't reach his bloodshot eyes. He looks tired, even more so than usual. His blond hair is lank, his alabaster skin erring on the side of sickly. Despite the jet lag and the stress carved into his face, there's no denying how handsome he is. When he was fifteen, he suddenly shot up and filled out, and all the girls at the group home would go googly-eyed over

him. Even the nuns would squeeze his broad shoulders and tell him he'll be a Hollywood actor someday. But they knew as much as we did that *pustosh*' kids didn't grow up to be anything but fighters or whores.

Even after the fall.

"Come," he says, standing up and holding out my towel. He stares at a water bubble on the ceiling as I rise unsteadily to my feet, take the towel, and wrap it around myself. He holds my hand and helps me out of the tub before disappearing into the main room. I slip into the box I call my bedroom, tug out a pair of sweats from the broken chest of drawers, and fling them on, not caring that my battered and bruised body is still damp. Dragging a brush through my hair, I pad into the main room, where Mak is sprawled out on the sofa, staring into space.

I sink next to him, tapping his thigh gently with the back of my brush. "Where did you go this time?"

"St. Petersburg to Pretoria, Pretoria to London, then London back to New York," he says wearily. He rubs at the scruff along his jawline. "These long-haul flights will be the death of me."

A lump forms in my throat. I avert my gaze to the small television propped up on a stack of books in the corner and dig around in the cracks of the sofa for the remote. The screen comes to life, flooding the dingy apartment with obnoxious canned laughter. Another rerun of *Friends*. As Ross screams at

Rachel—something about a break—I can feel Mak’s glare boring into the side of my face.

“What is it?”

I let out a hiss of air through my nostrils. “It won’t be the flights that will be the death of you. It’ll be your goddamn employers.”

The sofa dips as he pulls away from me, a scowl creasing his forehead. “Don’t start, Romy. It’s been a long day.”

We watch the sitcom for a few minutes, the tension heavy between us. Everything I want to yell at him bubbles up like bile in my bruised throat until I can’t hold it in any longer.

“You’ve been smuggling for the Saint Petersburg Bratva since you were eighteen,” I snap, anger releasing into my veins. “It’s been ten fucking years. If they haven’t promoted you from six to *patsan* yet, then they never will.”

Mak jumps up, muttering something in Russian under his breath. He storms over to the fridge, grabs a beer, and pops the top with his teeth. After a long swig, he leans his palms against the breakfast bar, chest heaving. “Tell me, Romy,” he growls, low and dangerous. “What other choice do I have?”

I twist away from him, staring at the moldy wall on the other side of the room so he doesn’t see the hot tears brimming in my eyes.

He’s right. Just like every newborn dumped off at the St. Nicholas Orphanage, he never had a choice in which path his life would take. We were the illegitimate children. The

bastards of the Bratva. Kids born because the *pakhan* right down to the *brodyaga* couldn't keep their dick in their pants or within their marriage. The home got its nickname *pustosh'*—trashcan—because that's exactly what it was. A disgusting, dirty hole where you threw unwanted kids away and left them to rot. As a boy, there was only one way you make it out of the *pustosh'* alive. Learn to fight and hope that one of the Vultures recruited you as a six, an errand boy, once you turn eighteen.

But after the fall of the Bratnovs, Mak had to look further afield for work.

I press my tongue against my teeth. Mak is the only person in the world who can make me feel any emotion. “You're better than that,” I croak, nibbling on my thumbnail. I wince at the sound of his fist slamming against the countertop.

“And you're better than being a whore,” he snarls. “What happened to you, Romy? What happened to the little girl determined to change her fate? I spent *years* training you. All of those fights in the courtyard, all for what? You still grew up to sell your pussy for money.” I hear the *glug, glug, glug* of his beer. “And don't think I haven't seen those bruises,” he says, quieter now. “I hope you at least charge extra for the men who like it rough—”

“Enough!” I scream, ripping around to face him. I dig my fingernails into my palm to keep from lunging at him and clawing his fucking eyes out. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

And he doesn't. I hate lying to Mak more than anything. But one glance at the angry scar across his forehead reminds me to keep my mouth shut.

His head dips below his shoulder blades, and he lets out a loud sigh. "I'm sorry, Romy. I'm being an asshole."

The rage fizzles in my chest. "Me too," I say softly. "I just hate seeing you so run down."

He steps out from behind the counter, arms outstretched. I cross the room and rest my head against his chest, breathing in his familiar scent as he wraps himself around me. He rests his chin on my head and says, "But you're okay, right? Honestly, those bruises look nasty." His stomach tightens. "Just tell me who he is, and I'll—"

"No," I say firmly, squeezing my eyes shut. "Forget about it. I'm fine."

I have no issue keeping secrets from him. He's the last person in the world I'd want to hurt, so it's for the best. He doesn't need to know I earned every scratch, bruise, and bite mark decorating my body. That they are a result of my own sins, not a client's sick fantasy.

He also doesn't need to know about the Devil that helped me.

He pushes me out of his embrace and wipes a stale tear from my cheek. "This will all be a fever dream one day," he murmurs, eyes twinkling. "When I'm *Pakhan*, and you are my *Sovietnik*, we'll look back at this shitty apartment in the

projects and laugh about the time when I was nothing but an errand boy and you were a prostitute.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Laugh? What part of this hellhole is funny?”

He chuckles. “Okay, maybe not laugh. But when we run the streets of New York, you dripping in diamonds and me with all of the super cars I can fit in the garage of our mansion, we’ll find the humor in it somewhere.”

I punch his shoulder and flop back onto the couch. “I don’t need diamonds. I need healthcare insurance and a boiler that doesn’t break down at the first hint of snow.”

Mak lays across me, flinging his muscular legs on my lap and reaching for the remote to put on a soccer game. “I’ll give you twenty boilers, my darling. And I’ll perform any operation you need myself.” He yawns, nestling his nose into the neck of his hoodie.

“Sounds like a fast way to die.”

I watch him as his eyes dart among the players, lids growing heavier by the second. Within minutes, his lips are slightly parted, and his breathing heavy. I gently slip the remote out of his hand and mute the game, flooding the apartment with an eerie silence.

Staring at my best friend, I study his features. The sharp angle of his cheekbone, the light freckles dusting his nose. The red scar interrupting the smooth skin on his forehead. Every line and curve of him is so familiar. They are all I’ve ever

known. Guilt washes over me in waves, peppered with a feeling of unease.

Taking a deep breath, I pick my cell up from the coffee table and turn it on for the first time in two days. The screen bursts to life, followed by a barrage of missed call notifications from my boss.

Like him being a bottom-rung smuggler for the St. Petersburg Bratva, my job was only meant to be temporary. A small skeleton in my closet, not a whole fucking graveyard.

I need out.

* * *

I wake up with a jolt, a bright light shining in my eyes. I must have fallen asleep on the sofa too because I'm now tangled around Mak's long limbs, tucked between his side and the back cushions.

"Relax," Mak croaks, rubbing my forearm and pulling my head back onto his chest. "It's just me."

The bright light is his cell phone screen. Through bleary eyes, I can make out a jumbled wall of text. It takes me a few moments to realize it's in Russian. "What's wrong?"

"I gotta go."

I groan into the fabric of his hoodie. "Again?"

"Sorry, Romy. You know how it is." He lands a small peck on my forehead and slides himself from underneath me before

tucking the edges of the tatty blanket around my body. “Go back to sleep. I’ll see you soon.”

The wheels of the suitcase he never got to unpack roll across the floorboards. The front door clicks shut. I stare up at the ceiling, unblinking, until the *drip, drip, dripping* of the leaky kitchen sink lulls me back to sleep.

6

Romy

The sofa dips, groaning under a weight.

In the darkness, I bolt upright, clutching at my chest. “Fucking hell, Mak,” I gasp, “You scared the shit out of me. I had a dream you’d left for another job.”

My heart rate begins to slow. Then it stops entirely.

The shadow perched on the end of the sofa... it’s too big to be Mak. And why hasn’t he said anything?

My instinct is to kick out, but a strong hand grabs my ankle and yanks it hard until I’m flat on my back.

Before I can lurch upright and use my other limbs to attack, another hand grabs me. This time, it’s around my throat.

“I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I promise you, I’ll make it very difficult for you to get it.” With the hand squeezing my vocal cords, my threat leaves my lips with a rasp.

A deep chuckle slices through the darkness. And that's when I smell it—the cocktail of leather and expensive aftershave.

My heart skips a couple of beats. The sofa dips again, and this time, the man I now know to be the Devil pins me underneath him, his beard grazing my cheek.

What the fuck is he doing here?

“Is that how you greet all guests?” he says coldly, shifting his grip from my throat to my jaw. God, his body is ridiculously heavy against mine. An impenetrable steel wall I couldn't fight off, even if I suddenly developed superhuman strength.

I take a few deep, calm breaths. *Stay in control of the situation, Romy. And more importantly, tell your fucking ovaries to stop quaking.*

“If by guests, you mean assholes who break into my apartment while I'm sleeping, then no. You'd usually be dead by now.”

The way he laughs so breezily makes my cheeks burn.

“Why are you here?”

“I came here to kill you.”

My body stiffens under his. I know he feels it because he presses his hips harder against mine. *That wasn't all of your weight already?!*

Calm. Stay calm.

“And that couldn’t have waited until morning? Killing me in the darkness is a cowardly move. You can’t even see my face. Or does not seeing your victims die help you sleep at night?”

Silence crackles between us. No noise except wind lashing the windowpanes and rain hammering against the roof. Then with the speed of a panther going for its prey, he lunges over my head and snaps on the lamp standing next to the sofa. As the amber glow floods the apartment, I wince before forcing my features to harden. Forcing myself to meet the Devil’s gaze.

Holy shit. My heart slams against my rib cage, even harder than it did when he told me he was going to kill me. *Yeah, I’m on that level of sick and twisted.* He’s closer than I thought he was, giving me a front-row view of the citrine whirlpools swirling in his eyes. His bushy brows knit over the top of them, creating an expression I can’t place. How old is he? Early forties? Older than my twenty-four years, for sure. All I know is that his blistering stare makes me feel...exposed. Like I’m lying here, stark naked, with all of my darkest secrets written all over my flesh. It makes me want to cower, to wither from underneath him and crawl into the shadows to hide.

But I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

“There,” I say firmly, yanking my chin out of his grip. To my surprise, his hand falls away from my jaw, and he lets me. “Now, you can look me in the eyes and kill me.”

The rational part of my brain is screaming at me to *shut the fuck up*. To stop calling his bluff because he really doesn't seem like a man who bluffs. But like always, pride takes over. I gave him the satisfaction of bowing to him once. I refuse to do it again.

“You haven't even asked why,” he murmurs, more to himself than to me. Fascination lingers around his words as those amber eyes scorch every inch of my face. They land on my mouth, and instinctively, I lick my lips.

“I guess I learned a long time ago that monsters never need a reason to do the bad things they do.”

He cocks his head, studying me. He rubs his pillowy lips together then swallows, causing his tree-trunk throat to bob. I can't tear my eyes away from the movement.

“You know that I'm a monster, but you aren't scared of me.”

You know. Not think, but know. Finally, fear starts creeping out of its little hiding space in the corner of my brain. I try to shoo it back into the shadows.

Fear is always useless to me.

“Should I be?”

A huff escapes his lips. For some reason, I want him to do it again.

“Sweetheart, I'm in your apartment. On your sofa. On *you*,” he adds, voice lowering to a deliciously deep tone. Like he's telling me a secret for my ears only. “I have two men

outside your front door, another six outside of the building, and a cleanup team on speed-dial good enough to make even the highest-ranking FBI agent scratch their head.”

He lets his words linger between us. Then he moves his hands to mine, which are clasped protectively on my chest. He untangles my fingers with a surprisingly soft touch, slips his own thick digits between them, then raises my arms above my head. He’s found a new way to pin me down, but what’s more surprising than his gentle touch is that I don’t even put up a fight.

“So what are you waiting for?” I whisper.

Even the most stubborn part of my brain is telling me to *shut the fuck up* now. But I can’t, and I know I won’t. I know I’m dancing with the Devil. Teasing him like I don’t value my life.

He creates more distance between us. Drinking in more of me. “How did you know Danny English?”

I blink. But my hardened exterior falters for a nanosecond before I recover.

“I don’t.”

There’s that chuckle again. How he makes what’s supposed to be a happy noise sound so sinister, I don’t know. He dips his head, closing the space between us, and glides his nose down the side of my throat. It’s intrusive and unexpected and *so goddamn hot*. But I stop the mini gasp from leaving my

lips. Instead, I stay still and slow my breathing. “You let men you don’t know fuck you?”

I grind my back molars together. “Sometimes.”

When he lifts his head to look at me, his eyes are glowing, dancing with devilish intentions. “I don’t know what I want to ask you first,” he murmurs, bending again to slide the hard line of his nose over my bottom lip this time. His growl vibrates against my chin. “Why you fucked him, or why you killed him.”

My heart lurches. He’s too close to the truth. He looks up at me through thick lashes, challenging me. I decide the first question is easier to answer.

“You already know why I fucked him. I’m a whore, remember? You called me that yourself. Is that what you want to hear?”

Being abrupt usually throws people off, but not the Devil. Instead, he slides his hands out of mine, taking his time to rake his fingers along the inside of my forearms before leaning back on his heels. As he drinks in his surroundings, I allow my eyes to dip lower. To the gold chain disappearing beneath his open shirt collar. To his broad shoulders stretching against his well-cut jacket. He looks as comfortable in that suit as I usually am in sweats.

He drags his fingers through the waves of his hair, top lip curled. I follow his eye line, and a prickle of shame hits me as I imagine how it’d be to see this apartment for the first time. The damp creeping up the walls. The missing floorboard you

have to jump over if you want to get something from the yellowing fridge.

“A whore?” he asks, tone dripped with skepticism.

“Yes,” I hiss back.

He pins me with a smirk, his head jerking toward the bucket in the corner catching the leaking water coming in from the window. “Not a very good one. Or if you are, you might want to up your fee.”

My cheeks burn, and I can only hope the room is dark enough for him not to notice.

Before I can think of a witty retort, his dramatic sigh slices through the air. “You’ve put us in a bit of a predicament, sweetheart. You see, we needed Danny English alive.”

We?

“Yeah, well, that’s not my problem.”

With a predatory grin, he lowers himself back onto me, pinning me between the lumpy sofa cushions and his rock-solid torso again. I don’t dare breathe. I don’t even flinch as he cups my cheeks and runs his thumb over my bottom lip, leaving a blazing trail in its wake. “Tell me, what did he do to you?” He whispers so quietly that I almost don’t hear him over the blood pounding in my ears. “What did he do that caused you to claw him to death with those tiny hands of yours?”

I open my mouth to respond, but he moves his thumb up, pressing both my lips together. “Lie to me, and I’ll make this very slow and painful,” he growls. There it is, that switch I

saw in the hotel room. It's not the menace in his tone or the threat of his thumb against my lips that makes the truth slip off my tongue like warm butter. It's what they *do* to me. It's how they send a ripple of excitement flooding through my veins, pooling at the bundle of nerves in my clit. It's the *what-if* crackling in the tiny space between us.

“He touched me.”

He raises an eyebrow. “A whore that doesn't like being touched?” His confusion melts into a devious grin. “But I'm touching you now,” he drawls, tucking his head into the crook of my neck. He feels how I freeze. I know because his throaty chuckle vibrates against my skin. “I wonder, how much would I have to touch you before you try to kill *me*?”

He shifts his body lower so that he can look up at me with those taunting eyes while he grazes his lips along my collarbone. With an almost cheeky smile, he pokes his tongue out, flicking it over the dip in the middle. “You haven't tried to kill me yet,” he muses. “I wonder...” He allows his tongue to travel farther south, sliding between the crease of my breasts. *Ugh, holy fuck.* “Is that because you like *me* touching you?”

The moisture spreads in my panties as my nipples stiffen against the thin fabric of my T-shirt. My body is already betraying me before my mind can go elsewhere. For a moment, I tear my eyes away from the Devil's to look up at the cracks on the ceiling.

The Devil is in my apartment, terrorizing me. Just because he did me a favor doesn't mean I owe him shit.

I bowed to the Devil once. I won't give him the satisfaction of doing it again, especially if he's here to kill me.

The beauty of learning to *die before you die* is that you can die mentally, too.

Resetting my jaw, I look down at him. At the Devil who wiped away my sin. The mysterious monster who owns the New York skyline. He needs to know that I am stronger than he thinks.

I make that decision to die.

“You make me feel nothing.”

His grin widens. The flames in his eyes flicker and spit. Slowly, he peels himself off me, reaching up to push his glitzy watch farther up his wrist. “Silly girl,” he tuts, placing his hands on my bare legs. “Did you never learn not to test a monster?”

His hands glide north, moving from the outside of my thighs to the inside the higher they travel up my legs. At the hemline of my shorts, he pauses to look up at me. I stare back, unwavering. If he wants a reaction, he won't find one here.

“If you want me to stop, silly girl, then you better tell me now. Because once my hands are inside your panties, I can't guarantee I'll be able to stop when you beg me to.”

I don't move a fucking muscle. In fact, I don't even blink. He devours my silence like it's a delicious challenge. “Such a stubborn girl,” he tuts. “You were stubborn even when I found you hovering over Danny English's dead body, blood on your

hands and panic in your eyes. You would have rather gone to prison than get on your knees and beg me for help,” he says softly. As he talks, his knuckles dip into the crotch of my shorts, lightly brushing against the fabric of my panties. My fingernails carve half-moons into my palms. *I’m going up into the clouds.* “And now, you would rather shut down than admit you like me touching you. So…” He drags his knuckle over the thin strip covering my lips. *Please don’t notice how wet I am. I am above the clouds. I’m in the fucking sun, goddammit.* “One last chance, sweetheart. One last opportunity to tell me to stop.”

Instinctively, my mouth opens, but I clamp it shut just as quick. The Devil chuckles into the seam of my thigh. The tickling sensation from his beard raises goose bumps. With all of the strength I can muster, I pin him with a hard stare and say, “I don’t hate you touching me. I don’t like it either. You make me feel absolutely nothing.” For good measure, I pretend to stifle a yawn.

For some reason, I know this will make him angry. From the moment he crashed into the hotel room, I knew he liked to play games. He feasted off my discomfort, devoured the taste of my dilemma, and would have spat me out if I hadn’t got on my knees for him. I have no doubt he’d get off on my reaction, whether it be disgust or lust.

So, I will show him nothing.

His lips tighten. Without breaking eye contact, he hooks one hand around both the gussets of my shorts and panties and

yanks them to the side, exposing my most sensitive area. He arches an eyebrow. As his nostrils flare, his cool breath ripples across my bare pussy, creating a hard knot in my throat. I bite down on the inside of my cheek, determined to *give this fucker nothing*. With the other hand, he takes one thick finger and swirls it around my entrance.

The hard, dark lines of his face break into a shit-eating grin. “Your pussy betrays your scowl, sweetheart.” Slowly, he pushes that finger inside me, stretching my walls. *No, no, no. Ignore the ache ripping through your pussy. Don’t you dare arch your hips. I swear, if you dare moan—*

He slides his finger out and holds it up. Even in the low lighting, I can see it glistens with my juices. I grind my teeth, keeping my features impossibly blank. “I’ve barely touched you, and you’re this wet already.” I can’t believe my eyes when he slips that finger into his mouth, sucking it clean from knuckle to nail. “You don’t taste stubborn, silly girl.”

I’m meant to be above the clouds. Somewhere way above the storm hammering down on the roof, somewhere the sun constantly shines, warming my skin. But *I can’t do it*. Instead, I’m down here, in the pits of hell, melting in the Devil’s sick hands. The question slips from my lips before I can stop it. “What do I taste like then?”

He smiles, satisfied, and gives his finger another lick. “You taste like you want me,” he says huskily. “You taste like you like me touching you.” Eyes twinkling, he uses his nose to part my lips, breathing in my sex. He groans, sending a shock wave

of pleasure through my clit. My toes curl, and my heart rate would probably break a Fitbit right now. “You taste like you want me to *lick* you.” He draws his head back, tongue dancing behind his Hollywood smile. “Tell me it’s not true.”

The heat of his mouth and the harshness of his words are making me squirm. I know squeezing my eyes shut is a sign of weakness, but I have no choice. It’s the only hope I have of blocking him out. *Goddammit, why can’t I do it? Why can’t I switch off my mind?*

“It’s not true,” I rasp, the lie getting stuck in my throat. How the fuck did this happen? How did my reality turn from the Devil breaking into my apartment and announcing he’s about to kill me to me being on my back, legs spread, quivering with unwanted pleasure under his venomous tongue?

This is a new level of fucked up, even for a *pustosh*’ kid.

“It’s not true?” he taunts, sliding his tongue from beneath his teeth. He spreads my pussy with his thumbs, unfolding my lips and stretching my entrance. White-hot heat burns in my cheeks as I feel what he undoubtedly can see—my juices trickling down the inside of my thigh. I’m so exposed to him, and it’s making me feel delirious. “So then, you won’t mind if I test my theory?”

“What’s your theory?” I manage.

His eyes flash with anger. “That you’re a fucking liar,” he growls.

I can't stop the moan from slipping between my lips. I can only hope he didn't hear it because he's too busy planting venomous little kisses along the length of my pussy. He starts at my hole, quickly dipping the tip of his tongue into my entrance as if he just wants to taste me. Then he trails them upward, along the delicate path to my clit. When he reaches the bundle of nerves in my nub, he pauses. I realize the fucker is teasing me. Then I realize *I shouldn't fucking care.*

Come on, Romy, die.

But I can't because my body is too alive. It's on fire, and each slow, wet kiss that the Devil delivers to my body stokes that fire, making the flames burn bigger and brighter.

I suck in a lungful of air and let it out in a long hiss.

“Something to say, sweetheart?” he taunts before quickly flicking my clit with the tip of his tongue. Lust ripples through my body like a sonic boom, and the moan that escapes my lips is involuntary.

“What was that? I didn't quite hear you.”

Just tell him to stop, goddammit.

But I'm not the type of girl who admits defeat easily. Especially not twice in the same week, and especially not to this cocky bastard. He runs his tongue over my clit again, slowly this time. Like an orchestra conductor, he demands a slow and steady rhythm, and my body is lost in the music, building up to a crescendo.

No.

“Stop.”

I hate the way my voice sounds. An unhinged, desperate rasp filled with defeat. The Devil pauses, grazing an amused eye over my heaving chest and the puckered nipples sitting atop of it. He scans my frantic eyes, my clenched fists. “You don’t look like you want me to stop.”

“I want you to stop.” *Jesus Christ. Do. Not. Stop.*

He lets out a throaty chuckle, and with all the ease in the world, he draws away from me, plucks up the black silk pocket square from his suit pocket, and dabs at my wetness on his lips. I push myself upright and yank my knees to my chest, trying to grasp at whatever modesty I might have left. Trying to ignore the unbearable throbbing in my pussy.

The Devil glances down to the damp spot between my legs, where his face was just a few moments before. “Interesting,” he says with a smirk.

I can’t help but bite. “What is?”

“My theory is proven correct. You like me touching you.”

His smirk melts into a lazy grin, and he stretches his arm across the back of the sofa. As he crosses one leg over the other, I catch sight of the large bulge straining against his pants. *Oh, god.* He catches me staring—as if my face couldn’t get any redder—and he lets out a chuckle. “I think you’d like to touch me too, sweetheart.”

Fueled by a cocktail of anger and embarrassment, I leap to my feet. “I won’t play your sick games any longer. If you’re

going to kill me, just fucking do it. If you're not, then get the hell out!"

He looks at me. *Really* looks at me. Drags a fiery eye over the messy silver bun on top of my bed, down to my aching breasts, then finally lands on the still-quivering space between my thighs, then grins like he's reliving the recent memory of being down there. Just like when I was pinned under him, I have the urge to crawl into the shadows to get away from the intensity of his gaze. The sofa groans as he leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees, and steeples his fingers together. "You're confused, sweetheart. I said I *came* here to kill you. I've changed my mind."

Rage bubbles in the pit of my stomach.

"You've changed your mind?" I say through gritted teeth. Hoping that if I repeat it back to him, he'll realize how ridiculous it sounds.

"Yes. Instead of killing you, I'll marry you instead," he says simply.

I blink. "Marry me?"

He nods, deadpan. Like he's confirming his order at Chipotle.

An ugly snort leaves me. "Did you hit your head on the way here, asshole?"

For a moment, he looks confused, but the expression is quickly replaced with a thunderous scowl. He rises to his feet, and when he does, his looming body dominates the entire

space, making my dingy apartment feel even smaller than it is. He crosses the floorboards with the grace of a gazelle and the menace of a lion, stooping to meet my glare when he reaches me.

The sudden change in temperature raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” he says quietly, breath tickling my nose. I concentrate on the vein popping in his forehead, forcing myself not to cower from his imposing presence. His voice lowers to a growl. “Answer me.”

I shake my head.

He nods, pursing his lips. “You must be the only person in New York who doesn’t.” His warm, rough hand cups my cheeks, his fingers interlocking with the strands of my hair. He holds my face tight. “There is something you should know about me, sweetheart. You may see me crack a joke, even laugh every now and again, but you’d be a fool to take my smile as a sign of weakness. I’ll smile as I put a bullet in your head. Laugh as I tie a brick to your ankle and drop you in the Hudson. Is that understood?”

My heart skips a couple of beats. I’m no stranger to monsters. While most kids feared them living under their beds or hiding in their closets, I spent my childhood seeing them in the cold light of day. But this monster, he feels bigger, scarier.

Pathetically, I nod. A move I’ll no doubt kick myself for later.

“Good,” he drawls. Taking a step back, he adjusts his watch and smooths down the front of his suit jacket, like he’s shifting into business mode. “Now, I’ll give you the courtesy to explain a little further. By killing English, you’ve created a big problem for my family and me. Now, you have to fix it.”

“By marrying you,” I say, feeling dazed. God, I’m tired, in both mind and body, and feeling strangely shaken up by his presence.

“Correct,” he says, the hint of a smirk returning to his lips.

“A-And if I say no?”

His jaw hardens, eyes flashing the darkest shade of black. “Not an option.”

And by the venom in his voice, I know he’s not lying.

“I—”

He cuts me off by holding his hand up. “Notice that I didn’t ask you a question, so I don’t expect an answer.” Looking down at me over his sharp Roman nose, he pops his knuckles and softens his voice to add, “I’m not asking you, sweetheart. I’m telling you. We are getting married.”

My feet are rooted to the floorboards, a numbness trickling through my body like syrup. For once, my mind is blank, and I’m unable to form any cohesive sentence or argument to stop whatever this monster has just put in motion.

All I can do is stare as he glances at his watch and lets out a dramatic sigh. As if he has anywhere else to be in the dark hours of the morning. “Must dash, sweetheart. Here.” He slips

a small card out of his pocket. It's gold with a green emblem in the center. "Meet me at this address on Friday, noon sharp."

I open my mouth. Close it again.

He arches an eyebrow and shoots me a challenging glare. "Problem?"

Seems like my vocal cords don't want to work. So I shake my head for what feels like the millionth time tonight.

"Perfect." He drinks me in with one last lingering stare, licking his lips. Like he's committed my cowering body to memory and likes what his brain has conjured up. Then he turns and strides toward the door. "Oh," he says, pausing with his hand on the knob. "And don't think about running. As much as I enjoy a delicious game of cat and mouse, I don't really have the time at the moment."

And with that, he's gone.

Alone in the apartment, the wind whips louder, and the rain pelts down on the roof like bullets. The past thirty minutes feel like a fever dream, and I'm half expecting to wake up any moment, screaming, with Mak comforting me.

An icy hand grips at my throat with a hold stronger than the Devil's.

If you commit a sin,

The Devil will knock thrice.

If you let him in,

He'll make you his wife.

It was true. It was really true.

With trembling hands, I scramble for the card he gave me. I dropped it the second he slammed the door shut behind him, and it's now tucked between the floorboards. I tug it out, running my sweaty fingers over the shiny gold surface and the raised diamond and crown emblem in the middle. On the reverse, there's a name and an address in fancy cursive.

Donnacha Quinn.

So, the Devil has a name.

I stare at it until the letters blur into one. Only when the rain dies down and the first rays of sun seep through the smeared windows do I look up from the floor.

Friday is three days away.

I have a lot to do before then.

Romy

NoHo, Manhattan.

The rain is relentless. Fat droplets land on the business card in my hand, drowning the letters until the name and address are no longer legible. It doesn't matter; both are carved into my brain forever, just like how lovers etch their name into a tree.

Donnacha Quinn, resident of One Diabhal Square. A big, blocky skyscraper with black glass windows and a spire that disappears into the fog.

The wind lashes my cheeks, forcing its way down the neck of my puffer jacket, but I don't cower from it. Because today, I'm not cowering from anything. Anybody.

Drawing a deep breath and straightening my spine, I march up the three stone steps that separate the building from the street. Someone inside must have been watching me because the glass door swings open, revealing a hard-faced man in a

black suit. Dark eyes, shaved head, and a scowl to match the weather. But today, I refuse to be intimidated.

I slither past him into the warmth of the lobby. “I’m here to see Donnacha Quinn,” I announce, dusting the rain off my jacket. The man’s gaze drops to the water pooling at my Chelsea boots, disdain curling his top lip.

“I’ll let him know you’ve arrived.”

He strides into the mouth of the building, disappearing down a hallway. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I take the chance to look around. Jesus, it looks like the waiting room of a high-end spa. Black marble walls melt into matching floors, with only thin rivers of gold running through the veins to break up the darkness. In the center, a gray semi-circle slab with a MacBook and a telephone on top of it acts as a desk.

Creepy. Instinctively, my fingers brush over the small lump tucked into the waistband of my panties.

Footsteps echo. The sour-faced man reappears as a silhouette at the end of the corridor. “Come.”

Annoyance prickles up my arms and chest at being summoned like a naughty dog that’s escaped its leash, but I bite my tongue and *click-clack* down the hall, falling into step with him. We turn into another hallway, where a bank of elevators is cut into the marble wall. The one at the end is slightly different from the rest. Instead of a gold call button, it has an iPad-sized screen and a gold plaque above it. Sour-faced man takes a step toward it before turning to me and deepening his scowl.

I glance between him and the tablet, then roll my eyes as I turn my head. “Jeez, all you had to do was ask,” I mutter under my tongue. There’s the sound of beefy fingers hitting glass, then the hiss of hydraulics. A few moments pass before the elevator door pings open. The man steps aside, and as I enter the small, velvet-clad box, a familiar feeling zaps through me. A cocktail of adrenaline and nerves and determination. It floods through my veins like I’m being fed it through an IV drip.

Breathe, Romy. Just fucking breathe. This is no different from any other job you’ve had.

Except I feel like I’m entering the lion’s den with a rubber sword.

The elevator climbs to dizzying heights, eventually coming to a gentle stop. Just before the doors open, I hear something over the thumping of my heartbeat. My attention slashes to the sour-faced man. He’s staring right at me, wearing a ghost of a smirk on his lips.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said good luck.”

I snort, but it comes out as more of a whimper. Luck? I’ve never had a single stroke of luck in my life, so why would I rely on it now?

No, the only thing I can rely on is myself.

Stepping out of the elevator disorients me for a second. The atmosphere is a complete contrast to the lobby. The room

is dazzlingly bright instead of dark, and there's constant chatter instead of silence. That chatter stops as soon as I'm noticed.

A few people in suits are dotted around the room. They look down their noses and flash me polite and professional smiles. Clinging to the walls are lines of men in all black, looking alert and scary. Suddenly, it dawns on me that they are security guards. I spin back to the elevator, but the doors are already sliding closed. With a sigh, I turn my attention back to the room, drinking it all in. It's a soccer field-sized space where every monochromatic shade on the Pantone color chart seems to exist in harmony. Overstuffed cream sofas, white marble walls, and a black spiral staircase leading off to parts unknown. Past the abstract statues and glossy tabletops, the entire New York skyline is framed by a sheet of uninterrupted glass. I'd find it incredibly impressive, if, you know, I wasn't here to marry a man who wanted to kill me less than seventy-two hours ago.

“Romy?”

A gentle voice makes me jolt, and I turn around to find a woman with features as soft as her tone. She's short and curvy, with long black hair disappearing into the darkness of her turtleneck sweater. Her warm smile instantly takes the edge off. “I'm Aisling,” she says, sticking out a hand. “Can I take your jacket?”

Something about her is real familiar, something I can't place. I clutch at the hem of my jacket and shake my head.

“No, thank you. I won’t be staying for long.”

She laughs politely as if I’ve told a joke she didn’t find very funny and holds out her hand. Begrudgingly, I slip off my jacket and hand it to her. “Whew, it’s chucking buckets out there!” she chimes, giving my puffer a good shake and letting water droplets slosh on the floor. “I’ll get this dry for you, then I’ll hang it in the cloakroom, okay?”

Cloakroom? Gee, how the other half lives.

“I—”

But somebody on the other side of the room has caught her eye. She mouths something, then nods before touching my elbow and leading me across the marble floor to a table in the corner. “Romy, please meet Abe Cooper. He’ll ask you a few questions and get all the paperwork in order.” I lock eyes with the old man with the half-moon spectacles and liver-spotted forehead. “Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee? Oh, hell, I’ll bring both,” she breezes before striding out of the room in her heeled boots.

My eyes land back on the man at the table. He flashes me an apologetic grin and says, “Romy, hi. Please take a seat.”

Chewing on the inside of my lip, I sink into the chair opposite him. He slides a stack of papers in front of me, then clasps his hands together, peering at me over the rim of his glasses. “First things first, I’ll need to get a few details from you, okay?”

There's a sudden shift in the room, and I'm immediately drawn to it. Turning, I see the Devil himself.

His presence enters the room before he does, and it's magnetic. He descends a set of spiral steps, two at a time, cell phone pressed to his ear. As he strides past the suit-clad men stationed around the perimeter of the room, they stop whatever they are doing and give him a curt nod even though he's not looking in their direction. I can't hear his words, but I can feel his voice. It resonates off the marble, vibrating with authority as he comes to a stop in front of the glass wall with his back to the room. My eyes are glued to him. To his shoulder blades contracting under his tight black T-shirt as he runs a hand through his tousled waves. To the emerald ring on his finger, winking at me when it catches the glow of the recessed lights.

Donnacha Quinn.

I spent the three days learning more than just his name. He wasn't exaggerating when he said he owned the whole city. From the window of his penthouse in One Diabhal Square, Donnacha Quinn is casting a shadow over every business and building in New York, smug with the knowledge that it's his to make or break. It's not surprising that he believes he has the power to do the same to me.

Why he wants to is a whole different mystery.

“Romy?”

Before I can reluctantly drag my attention back to Abe Cooper—whoever the hell he is—Donnacha turns. It's like he could feel my eyes burning into his back because his gaze fits

perfectly on mine like a key in a lock. He pauses midsentence and drops his gaze slightly to drink more of me in before stupefying me again with the most intense eye contact.

Oh, Lord. If you exist, now would be a good time to save me.

It's my stubbornness that forces me to hold his gaze. That's what I'm telling myself, anyway. I allow myself to swallow the knot in my throat but refuse to look away. He licks his lips slowly and seductively, then slips his tongue between his teeth.

It's a move that's so quick it's almost over before it began, but that doesn't stop the blood from rushing to my face. I know exactly what he's doing. He's taunting me. Reminding me of how I almost broke for him because of that deliciously venomous tongue of his. *Almost, but didn't.*

Something forbidden swirls in the pit of my stomach, and I break eye contact. It's only for a nanosecond, but it's long enough to let him know he's won.

Fuck.

When I look up, it's like he never noticed me in the first place. He continues his conversation with one hand tucked into his jean pocket and disappears into another room.

When I turn back around to Abe Cooper, he's giving me the courtesy of pretending he hadn't noticed the interaction.

"So, details," he says softly, wearing a polite and professional smile on his wrinkly old lips. "First, I'll need your passport."

Now he has all of my attention. An icy hand grips at my throat. I drag my top teeth over my bottom lip and force myself to sound nonchalant. “Passport? Why?”

He lets out a tinkering chuckle. “Just a formality, that’s all. We need to double-check that you are indeed an American citizen.”

The hand grips tighter. “Why does that matter?”

“Uh...” His eyes slash across the room. Then he lowers his voice so I have to lean in to hear him. “Well, this...*union* would be useless if you aren’t.”

Suddenly, the seat is too hard, and I shift my weight, seeking comfort that doesn’t come. Yeah, maybe I should have asked a few questions about the logistics of this whole thing.

My passport burns a hole in my jean pocket. I brought it because I was told to. Reluctantly, I tug it out and slide it across the table. Cooper picks it up, dragging his glasses down to the tip of his nose to read its contents. Time seems to stretch out forever as I watch his eyeballs flick from left to right and back again.

“Romy Daniels.”

I nod at the name that isn’t mine.

After what feels like forever, he breaks the tension with an awkward cough. “Perfect,” he says, scribbling something down on one of the forms in front of him. “Right, just a few more questions, and I’ll let you get on with your day.” Relief seeps into the corners of my being, but I know I’m not out of

the woods yet. “Finances,” he murmurs, reading the headline of the form. “How much money would you say you have in your bank account right now?”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“Cash available to you,” he deadpans like he’s asked me for my coffee order. “How much?”

“Uh, let me think about that,” I snap, annoyed by the intrusiveness of his question. I tap on my bottom lip as if I’m pondering it. As if the forty-three dollars crumpled up in the bottom of my purse isn’t all I have to my name. “Zilch. I don’t have a bank account.”

Pen hovering above the document, he pauses. “You don’t have a bank account?”

“No. Is that a problem?”

No bank account, no social security number, no health insurance. Apart from the fake passport on the table between us, there is no trace of my existence. But by the way his throat bobs and he adjusts his tie, I realize I’m brewing suspicion I can’t afford to have.

“My job pays cash,” I garble, twisting the sleeves of my sweater around my wrists. “I just pay everything into my roommate’s bank account, and he uses that to pay our rent, bills, and groceries.” Fluttering my eyelashes, I flash him an apologetic smile. I have a lot riding on this. “I know, I know. So childish of me. I’ve just never got around to setting one up, you know?”

His stare is blank for a few beats, but to my relief, he eventually nods. “You’ll need to get one,” he says seriously. “Everybody needs a bank account.”

My cheeks are aching from all this goddamn smiling. “Sure thing.”

He clears his throat in a way that tells me he’s going to ask something more difficult. “Now. You mentioned your job pays cash... will you, uh, stop working?”

“As a hooker, you mean?” I say with a smile so sweet it’ll give him a cavity.

“Y-Yes.”

“Hmm...” I look around the room, strumming my fingers on the table. “Why should I? Will it embarrass my darling husband?”

To my surprise, his features harden, and he injects a sliver of ice into his tone. “You know as well as I do, this marriage is a sham. If it becomes public knowledge that Donnacha Quinn’s wife is a prostitute, it’ll look like he’s hired you to jump through a loophole. I guarantee you we’ll be able to erase any trace of your... *past employment*,” he all but spits, “but it’ll be a lot harder to conceal if you’re still...*practicing*. Do you understand me?”

Damn. Not such a sweet old man, after all. I guess that’s why Donnacha Quinn keeps him around.

I rearrange my face, making sure he can’t tell I’m thrown off by his sudden change of attitude. Over his head, Donnacha

appears in the doorway. He leans against the frame, staring at me. “I understand,” I say loudly, “but if my soon-to-be husband wants me to stop being a whore, then he’ll have to compensate me.”

I’m sure I see the flash of anger across Donnacha’s face. I’m sure his nostrils flared, and his eyes darkened just for a second. But it all happens so quick, and he’s gone by the time I blink.

“Of course,” Cooper says breezily, “You’ll have an allowance of thirty-five thousand dollars a week. Negotiable, of course.”

I tear my gaze from the now-empty doorway and back down to the lawyer, or whatever he is. “I will?”

His bushy brows knit in confusion. “Of course.”

Hell, that’s more per week than I make in five years. This falls into my plan perfectly...maybe being married to the Devil won’t be the worst thing, after all.

He leans over the table, assaulting my nostrils with eau de mothballs and tobacco. “Here, here, and here,” he says, punctuating his words with messy circles around several dotted lines.

I take the pen from his hand and scribble my name and the date wherever he’s marked.

Get me the fuck out of here.

The pocketknife in the waistband of my panties digs into my hip as I rise to my feet. “Are we done?”

He pulls all of the papers together, then taps the stack against the table for good measure. “We are indeed, Mrs. Quinn.” He sticks out his hand and smiles a toothy smile. *Mrs. Quinn? Jesus, talk about jumping the gun a bit.* Still, I hate how the name gives me a little jolt of pleasure down my spine. It’s gone as quickly as it arrived. I offer him a limp handshake and scan the room, searching for the dark-haired girl who took my jacket. It’s the most expensive thing I own, and I’m sure as hell not leaving here without it, even if I have just signed on to a hefty payday.

Cooper slides out of his seat and disappears through one of the many doorways leading out of the room. Hopefully, he’s not already on the phone to the FBI, snitching about my fake passport. I shrug the paranoia off my shoulders. It’s made by the best in the business—it’s authentic to the naked eye. Hell, it might even get me on a flight when all of this shit is over. Then I can truly fly above the clouds, up into the warmth of the sun, and escape with the help of all this cash I’m coming into.

I tap my boot against the marble floor, growing impatient. *Where is she?* Or anyone who can locate my jacket, for that matter. I’ll even settle for my soon-to-be husband. But all I can see are men with earpieces and carbon copies of Abe Cooper clustered around other tables.

Fuck it, I’ll find it myself. I stalk in the direction of the elevator and take the door to the right of it. Logically, the room closest to the entrance will be where the cloakroom—

“Ouch!”

As I round the corner, I crash into something hard and stagger backward. Strong hands dip around my waist, righting me.

“Easy there, *wifey*,” the voice drawls. I look up from the chest muscles in front of me and lock eyes with Donnacha Quinn. His signature shit-eating grin is smeared across his perfect face.

I grit my teeth, trying to regain my composure. “Not quite your *wifey* yet,” I snap back, folding my arms across my chest. There’s that feeling again...the one that makes me want to crawl out of my itching skin and hide in the shadows, as far away from his blistering amber gaze as possible.

He looks confused. Then delighted. An expression backed up by a gruff laugh that echoes down the empty hallway. “Wedding? That *was* the wedding, sweetheart.”

His words swirl around me like a fog. I’m unable to see through them. “I don’t understand,” I say blankly.

Donnacha cocks his head, brows knitting above his darkening eyes. “Abe just brought me the marriage papers with your signature all over them. I signed them too, and now they are already on their way to the courthouse. Express delivery,” he adds with a wink. “What did you think you just signed? A recording contract?”

“N-No, but I—”

He tuts, cutting me off. “You should always read what you sign, darling.” He stoops lower, a black wave falling over his forehead. “You *can* read, right?”

White-hot heat blisters my skin. “That should have been made more clear,” I snap, digging my nails into my palms. “That goddamn lawyer didn’t warn me I was signing my life away. I thought there’d at least be a ceremony. Or a fucking ring. My best friend doesn’t even know I’m—”

He’s scarily quick, wrapping a strong hand around my forearm and dragging me into the nearest bedroom like I’m weightless. The slam of the door behind us makes me flinch.

In here, I can’t hear the low chatter that fills the other room. In here, there’s no escape from the excruciating silence that dances between the Devil and me.

Fuck, he’s scary. I want to crawl into the corner and curl up like an injured spider waiting to die.

But I made a promise to myself. This monster won’t even *come close* to breaking me again.

So I press my back against the door and force myself to meet the fiery blaze in his eyes. Now, I truly understand his parting words to me about not taking his laughter or smile for weakness. The lines etched around his eyes paint a story of laughter, but I have no doubt they have been deepened by pure, unadulterated rage.

“I don’t care whether you’re my husband or my enemy or both,” I say simply. “If you grab me like that again, I’ll kick

your balls into your stomach.”

He doesn't show any sign that he's heard me. Instead, he closes the gap between us, wrapping his hand around the nape of my neck and pulling me forward until our foreheads are touching. I can't help the way I briefly close my eyes, breathing in that now-familiar scent of leather and expensive spice. But I push the flutters deep down into the depths of my stomach and hold his gaze.

“I'm going to tell you this once, *wifey*,” he says, the words oozing from his soft lips like syrup. Intrusive thoughts, like if those lips would feel as good against my own as they did on my clit, penetrate my skull. They are almost impossible to push away. “And I'll need you to tell me that you understand.”

He waits. Eventually, I nod.

He breathes out through his nostrils and speaks slowly. “This is not the start of a love story. There will be no happily ever afters. No riding off into the sunset. I am not the Richard Gere to your Julia Roberts. In fact, within the walls of this building, I will be anything but your Prince Charming.” The hand on the nape of my neck snakes upward, winding itself into the base of my ponytail. I grit my teeth as a million nerve endings scream across my scalp. “Quite the opposite, sweetheart. You made this mess for my family, and I have to clean it up. Marrying me is not your punishment. But believe me, your punishment will come.”

His tone drips with the venom that would make a grown man piss himself. So why do I feel a different type of wetness

between my thighs? The lust building up in my throat is almost impossible to swallow. But I take a deep breath, mentally scolding my fucked-up brain, and turn my attention back to *my husband*.

“What are you going to do to me?”

I know, whether I like it or not, I’m not asking that out of self-preservation. To assess whether this is a fight-or-flight situation. The question comes from the wrong organ.

His chuckle, muddy with sinful thoughts, grazes my nose. “My beautiful wife, I will break you.”

A sick sense of glee bubbles through me. *My chance to show him he’s messing with the wrong bitch.*

“I can’t wait to see you try,” I say huskily. “I’m impossible to break.”

He pauses. Stops breathing hot, delicious air against my nose. I can’t read the expression that lights up his eyes, but it makes me feel uneasy. He pushes himself closer to me, pinning my body between the door and the bulge in his pants. *Oh, god. I can feel every inch of his excitement.*

“And why’s that?” he whispers.

The truth? I’d never give him the truth. Instead, I jerk my chin up and harden my jaw.

“Because I’d rather die than break for you.”

His chest rises and falls, the soft fabric of his T-shirt grazing against my nipples. But to my surprise, he takes a step

back and clamps down on his bottom lip. I watch as he drinks me in, then closes his eyes and tilts his head to the ceiling. He mutters something inaudible under his breath, then sucks in a lungful of air. When he looks at me again, his glare is hot enough to start a fire in the Arctic.

“You silly girl,” he murmurs, sounding like he’s at war with each syllable. “You have no idea how much I love a challenge.”

He charges toward me with such speed that I leap out of the way. He grabs the door handle and storms back into the corridor. I step into it too, locking eyes with the sour-faced man from the elevator. “This is Ronan,” Donnacha growls, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward him as he passes. “Your guard. Make yourself at home because you won’t be able to leave for a while.”

“I-I’m sorry?” *Did I just hear that right?*

He turns on his black sneakers, throwing me a look of disdain. “What, did you really think my wife was going to be allowed to roam free?” He jerks his chin to Ronan, who’s staring intently at a speck on the white wall. “Ro, educate this silly girl in my absence.” He picks up a pair of Ray-Bans from the table by the elevator and slips them on. He stabs at the button and waits, hands crossed in front of his crotch.

“Wait,” I say, just as the doors slide open. I go to follow him, but this dumbass Ronan blocks my way. I duck under the crook of his arm just in time to see Donnacha slip into the elevator. “Where are you going?”

I can only hear his voice.

“Don’t be clingy, sweetheart. It’s not a trait I like in a wife.”

8

Romy

The elevator rumbles faintly, taking my new husband to fuck knows where.

Now it's just me and the sour-faced beefcake in the hallway. Ronan. Arms folded across his chest, he glares down at me, blue eyes daring me to make a move. I don't. I *can't*. I'm frozen to the spot, dumbfounded. But it's only a few seconds before the panic creeps in.

Maybe it's the way my breathing stutters or how every muscle in my body constricts, but Ronan senses something brewing inside me and hisses, "Don't you dare."

I'm not listening to his threat or the polite and professional chatter floating down the hall. All I can hear is the voice in my head and what it's screaming.

Run.

Get the hell out of here.

Don't let them cage you.

Clawing at my throat, I take a step back, drinking in the white walls. They're closing in. The hallway in front of me grows narrower while Ronan grows bigger, blocking any gap that I might be able to slip through.

"You need to calm down," Ronan says sternly. His voice sounds a million miles away. With one last dubious glance at me, he lifts his radio to his mouth and mutters into it, tone low and serious.

"Get everybody out of here. *Now.*"

A crackle from the speaker. Then a very faint, "You need help, boss?"

His eyes flicker over me, then he shakes his head in disbelief. "Nah. You can all go on break."

"Copy."

The activity behind Ronan grows louder. The scraping of chairs, the rumble of deep, authoritative voices. Over Ronan's shoulder, a sea of suits pours toward the elevator, surrounded by the guards in black. They do a great job of pretending I don't exist, but the suits struggle a bit more. Their eyes dart toward me, then back down to their shiny heels or Starbuck's cups. But when I lock eyes with Abe Cooper, it's like a dam breaks.

"Help!" I scream at him, "They won't let me leave!"

The ghost of an apologetic smile passes his thin lips before he steps into the elevator with everybody else.

That bastard. He knew.

Heart slamming against my rib cage, my attention slashes back to Ronan. “Let me go,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “Or so help me God.”

He laughs. Yeah, the prick actually laughs. An acidic chuckle that bubbles at the back of his throat. “Don’t make threats you can’t make good on, little girl.”

The air is thick, and I’m choking on it every time I take a drag through my nostrils.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. It *can’t* happen. There’s too much going on outside of One Diabhal Square for me to be caged here. I have a life, I have a job—*oh, god, I have Mak.*

He’ll get back from his trip and wonder what the fuck happened to me.

Staying here isn’t an option.

I don’t know why, but I’m suddenly reminded of what the Devil said he knew about me in the hotel room.

You get angry and can’t think straight.

I’ll show that bastard how straight I can think.

I turn my back to the brute and steady my breathing. Force synthetic calmness to trickle into every muscle, nerve, and vein around my body.

Looking over my shoulder, I give Ronan my best defeated expression. “What am I supposed to do until Donnacha comes back?”

His brows knit together. “I don’t know, lass. Take a nap? Call your therapist?” He grunts.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I pretend to ponder his answer, all while one hand is sliding over the cell-shaped bulge in my jeans pocket and the other is slowly digging under my waistband. “You’re right. About the nap thing, I mean. Maybe I’ll wake up and feel better.”

Relief flashes across his face for just a moment before his features harden again. He takes a step toward me as if to force me farther down the hall. “Boss has set you up in the second door to the left.”

“Thanks,” I mutter. I drag my feet across the marble floor, and with every step I take, Ronan takes one too, escorting me. I slow down, closing the gap between us until I can almost feel his heavy breathing on my back.

And that’s when I strike.

Spinning around, I flick out my pocket knife and plunge the blade into his stomach. He doubles over, groaning, but I know men like him, and I know their reflexes are scarily quick, especially in the face of sudden violence.

Men like him, though, never bank on me being quick too. They don’t know I grew up fighting. I dodge his arm as he swings for me and tilt my head up to connect my forehead to his. There’s a sickening crack, and I’m not sure if it’s from my bones or his.

“You fucking bitch!” he roars, staggering backward, one hand alternating between the wound on his stomach and the trickle of blood on his forehead, the other reaching for the holster on his slacks.

Despite the dizziness and the searing pain around my skull, logic tells me he won't shoot me. His boss needs me alive. But still, I don't take the chance, and I lift my boot to connect my heel with his groin. As he sinks to his knees, gargling something incoherent, I kick the gun out of his hand, chasing after it down the hall and snatching it up. A brief glance tells me it's a gold-clad Heckler and Koch. Nice. If I sold this thing, it'd stock Mak's and my fridge for over a year.

Ronan is scrambling to his knees, fumbling for his radio, so I have to be quick. I dart to the elevator doors and stab at the iPad-sized screen next to it. Nothing. I tap it harder, trying different corners of the glass.

“Motherfucker,” I mutter. That synthetic calmness is slowly dissolving, making room for that panic again. As I frantically sprint around the apartment, flinging open every door and drawer looking for something, *anything*, that will get me out of here, that panic taunts me. It slowly increases the weight on my chest and makes my hands grow sweatier and shakier by the second.

At the sound of heavy, uneven footsteps, I turn around to see Ronan staggering down the hall. Face like thunder and a glare like lightning. With a trembling hand, I point his gun at him.

“Don’t come any closer,” I rasp.

Wheezing, he lifts a finger to catch the blood trickling into his eye and glances down at the small puncture wound soaking his knitted sweater. He looks back up at me with disbelief.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot, lass,” he says growls. “What do you think is going to happen if you shoot me?”

“You’d die, hopefully,” I spit.

He half rasps, half chuckles. Then he gingerly lifts his blood-soaked sweater, revealing his carved torso. Surrounding the disappointingly small stab wound are knots of scar tissue. Bullet wounds. “Hasn’t happened yet. Then what?” He leans into the wall with newfound ease. The actions of someone who genuinely thinks they aren’t about to be shot. “That elevator is retina, fingerprint, and voice-activated.” As I open my mouth, he lifts his hand to silence me. “Before you say you’ll carve my eyeball out and chop my finger off, there’s also a twenty-four-digit code. Even if they are my dying words, you won’t remember them, will you?”

A hiss escapes my nostrils. I glance back at the elevator doors, willing them to open. Like he can read my mind, Ronan says, “Those men I sent on break will be here in twenty seconds flat at the press of one button.” He holds up the radio. “All twelve of them, heavily armed and lethally trained.”

“So am I,” I say, stabbing the barrel of the gun in his direction to emphasize my point. “I took you down quick enough, didn’t I?”

He pauses, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, you did. Fair play. You don’t look like you’d have the guts.”

“I’m not just a pretty face,” I snarl back.

He raises an eyebrow. “Clearly not. Now, why don’t you give me back my bloody gun, and we’ll forget this happened?”

After a few tense seconds, I sigh. My panic is subsiding, and logic is seeping back into my brain. “I’m really not getting out of here today, am I?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, lass. No point in wasting your energy.”

He’s right. I’m stubborn, but I’m not stupid. With a streak of anger coursing through my veins, I scan the large room in front of us, taking in all the shades of white. Every countertop, coffee table, and couch gleams back at me smugly. So much fucking wealth it makes me sick. My eyes land on a sculpture standing proud in the corner. A silhouette of a woman, each soft curve, from the swell of her breasts to the dip of her hips, carved from glossy marble.

I turn my attention back to Ronan. “Fine,” I say simply. “I’ll stay.” *Like I had a choice.* “But if that monster wants to keep me here, then I’ll make it very difficult for him.”

“Don’t—”

But it’s too late. I’ve already pulled the trigger. The bullet has already left the chamber and is whizzing across the room.

It pierces the statue's skull, creating an explosion of shards and dust.

Ronan groans. "Now why the fuck did you go and do that for?"

"Target practice."

But a cocktail of satisfaction and glee brews within me. I'll show my darling husband why keeping a girl like me locked in his cage is a bad idea. Next, I stride over to the couch, tugging the pocketknife from my jeans. Without wiping off Ronan's blood, I slash through the cream leather seats in long, deep strokes until the goose feathers fly out and float down onto the plush rug. Feeling borderline deranged, I hungrily scan the room, looking for what else I can fuck up. When I lock eyes with Ronan, he just shakes his head slowly.

"Boss is going to be big mad, lass."

I ignore the lump in my throat. The shiver of anticipation down my spine. "Good."

He runs his hand over his shaved head, smearing the blood into his hairline, and sighs. "Fuck it, I'm not a babysitter," he says, pushing himself off the wall with a wince. "But boy, I can't wait until the boss gets home and sees what you did. I'm gunning for a front-row seat. Have fun, lass."

And with that, he stomps down the hall, disappearing into a room on the far end with a loud slam of the door.

I smash every plate in the kitchen cupboards.

Carve an enormous dick into the glass coffee table with my penknife.

Then I pour out every bottle from the liquor cabinet, bar one, onto the plush rugs, staining them a murky brown. When I'm satisfied with the level of destruction, I take the one remaining bottle of whiskey and sink down on the ruined sofa. Taking a big glug, I enjoy the delicious burning at the back of my throat, then look out at the skyline, feeling a demonic grin stretch across my face.

He wants to break me, so I'll break everything he owns.

He'll learn soon enough that you don't fuck with a *pustosh*' kid.

Donnacha

“Your wife is psychotic.”

I look up, a deep groan already brewing under my rib cage.

“Right. The elevator doors have just pinged open. I haven’t even stepped inside my house yet. It’s been a long fucking night in the Tunnels, and all I want to do is sit on the sofa with a glass of whiskey in one hand, my balls in the other, and watch the soccer game highlights. Why do I have a feeling you’re about to ruin that for me?”

Ronan looks over his shoulder, a cut on his forehead catching the low light as he turns. “You don’t really have a sofa to touch your balls on anymore, boss.”

Grinding my back molars, I push past him and step into my penthouse. Former penthouse, I should say. Now, it looks like a squat den in a Harlem walk-up. Sofas slashed. Fine china smashed. I’m almost waiting for a crackhead to round the corner with a needle hanging out of their arm.

“What happened here?” I ask each syllable leaving my lips with poison.

“Your wife happened,” he grunts. “Where did you pick her up from again? The feral mutt center?”

My eyes slash to him, flashing him a warning sign.

“Romy did this?”

“And this.” He points at the cut on his head. “This too,” he adds, tugging up his shirt to reveal a homemade wound dressing. “I’m telling you, boss. She’s nuts.”

I stare at his wounds in disbelief. Something stinks. Ronan is my second in command. He’s got the speed of a panther, the accuracy of an American eagle, and the ruthlessness of a black mamba. Yet this hooker who can’t weigh more than a hundred pounds soaking wet managed to hit him twice?

“I told you to watch her.”

He snorts. “That girl can watch herself.”

“Where is she?”

He jerks his head in the direction of the living room area. Over the top of my ruined couch, I make out the outline of a head.

I clench my fists. Harden my jaw. “Go take the night watch in the lobby,” I say icily. “I’ll deal with you tomorrow.”

He nods silently, knowing better than to push my buttons, and disappears behind the elevator doors.

My glare roasts the back of her head as I gather my thoughts and weigh my options.

I could take the easy route and throw my weight around, show her that in my city, I'm the boss. But years of scaring people for a living have taught me a few things about fear. Storming in with your guns blazing is scary, but being calm?

It's terrifying.

I pop my knuckles and crack my neck, releasing all of the anger I was going to direct toward my new wife. I slowly slide off my jacket, taking my time to fold it and lay it over an armchair. Then I stride into the living area and perch on the arm of the sofa at the opposite end of Romy. Her feet are tucked up underneath her, and she's staring at the television. It's on mute, and I know she's not watching whatever shit is playing because her knuckles whiten around the whiskey bottle she's holding.

I'm the first to slice through the heavy silence.

"Have a good day, wifey?"

Her jaw locks. Without taking her eyes off the screen, she brings the bottle to her lips and slugs. *Damn*. Drinking whiskey straight from the bottle without so much as a wince. I'm beginning to think that Ronan is right.

My wife is nuts.

As if finding her in a hotel room with a dead Danny English wasn't enough of a clue.

But she also happens to be smoking hot.

Her silver hair shimmers under the recessed lights, the dark roots running along her part the only clue she's not a fucking unicorn. Porcelain skin ready to be broken and a little button nose that the monster in me wants to bite.

I'm sure I'll get the chance.

I pull my feet up onto the couch, my shoes sinking into the large rips, and lean my elbows on my thighs. "What did you do? Anything fun?"

Silence. Another slug.

"So you don't want to talk about your day," I muse, tapping my bottom lip. "What do you want to talk about then? Music? Films? Star signs? You look like the type of girl who believes in star signs. I'm a Leo. What about you?"

She whips her head to face me so fast that my heart stutters on its next beat. I meet her navy-blue eyes and then turn my attention to the cut on her forehead. It's fresh and in the same place as Ronan's. Something instinctive stirs inside me, and I reach out to touch it. I stop myself at the last second, playing it off by leaning down and taking the whiskey bottle from her hand instead. "That cut looks nasty," I say, taking a swig and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "You should get that checked."

"And you should go to hell," she replies simply.

I laugh. "There she is. I was beginning to think you'd lost your voice."

"No, just my sanity."

“And why is that, sweetheart?”

Her glare is fascinating. The way it bores into me with such venom, it’s a look that even my enemies wouldn’t be brave enough to give me. *Where does this unwavering fearlessness come from, girl?*

“Because I thought I heard you say that I have to stay here, so I must be going crazy.”

“Is it such a crazy thing to want to live with my wife?”

“In this scenario, yes.”

My eyes graze the room, landing on the fourteenth-century sculpture that no longer has a head. It’s a weird feeling, being impressed, furious, and curious all at the same time. My body doesn’t know how to channel it. But it’s not about the furniture, dishes, or rugs, or even the priceless sculpture she decapitated. I’m not like Lorcan. I’m not attached to things. I take another drink, enjoying the burn making its way down my throat. “You should be thanking me. Your apartment was a dive.”

Her nostrils flare. Cute. “Right now, your place isn’t much better.”

I shrug, a smirk creeping onto my face. “Sure, it could do with a bit of tidying.”

Finally, she snaps, letting out a hiss of frustration. “Why aren’t you mad?” she barks. “I’ve trashed the place!”

Finally. Satisfaction trickles over me, and I revel in its glory.

Her eyes follow me cautiously as I slip from the arm of the sofa to the seat, closing the gap between my defiant wife and me. With every inch I cover, she freezes a little more, pushing herself into the back of the couch until she has nowhere left to go.

I can't help the smile that creeps across my lips. It stretches wider when she notices it, and a look of horror flashes across her pretty little features.

Reactions like this are what get me off these days. As I spend most of my time in the Tunnels with our enemies at our mercy, physical torture gets old. Boring, even. Only so many tools can snap fingers and slit throats, and only so many octaves a man can scream in. And the outcome is always the same: death.

But psychological torture is a different kind of game. It's like a game of chess. Both players don't know what the other is thinking. But it'd be a mistake if she assumed I was anything but the grand master.

Her features harden when I reach out to drag the back of my finger along her cheekbone. Her skin is deliciously soft and pale, the touch of it making my cock throb in my pants. When my finger falls off the cliff of her cheekbone and makes its way to her neck, her throat bobs.

"Of course I'm mad," I say quietly, uncurling the rest of my fingers to wrap my hand around her throat. I barely apply any pressure, but a hiss of air still escapes her parted lips. "I'm

fucking furious. But it's just another act you'll be punished for in due time, sweetheart."

Her eyes narrow, still wary. "If you want to punish me, just get it over with." A scowl creases her forehead, causing the cut to glow angrier. "Trust me, I can handle it."

I let out a low, slow whistle. "Don't tempt me, sweetheart."

"So, I killed your little friend, and I trashed your apartment. Punish me, then let me go," she growls, pushing her neck against the crook of my hand. *Holy fuck*. She's practically asking me to choke her, and the hammering pulse under my thumb tells me she might even enjoy it. I swallow the little moan that threatens to escape me. "You got what you wanted—my signature. Why do you need me too?"

My eyes slash to her lips, the bottom one in particular. So plump and pillowy and a perfect place to sink my teeth into. I set my jaw and force my attention back to her blistering gaze.

She's right. I should let her go. And I planned on it, even right up until I broke into her apartment and pinned her under my weight, smelling the ghost of her sweet perfume. But that plan changed the second she refused to buckle under the touch of my tongue against her clit. Something about her is fascinating. Something that speaks to the darkest, most depraved part of my being. It's a part of me that I promised I'd never indulge in again, not after Emelia.

But I won't push her *that* far. To the edge, but not off it. It won't hurt to have her as my little plaything for a while. And once she's served her purpose as my wife and Belsky is off our

back, and once I've broken her into a thousand pieces, I'll let her go.

But I don't tell her that. Instead, I lift my other hand to the cut on her forehead, running a fingertip along the length of it. Her eyes flutter shut, but not in pain. From under her lashes, she looks up at me, challenging me. My sweet wife, what a silly thing to do. She will learn that in due course.

I push down onto her cut, the newly formed scab breaking under my pad. A trickle of red blood runs a small river toward her eyebrow. I catch it, then bring my finger to my lips. She watches, expressionless, as I taste her wound.

I'm looking for a reaction. Of course, I am. But she doesn't even flinch.

Fascinating.

Instead, she clears her throat and says firmly, "I should get that cut checked out."

"I just checked it. You're fine."

"I meant by a doctor, not a psychopath."

I chuckle. "You want to go to the hospital?"

She nods.

"Nice try," I drawl, extinguishing the hope that flickers in her eyes. I lean back on the sofa, the exposed springs digging into my shoulder blades, and drink her in. She tugs on the sleeve of her oversized hoodie and drags it across her forehead. "You know," I say, moving my hand to her thigh. It

stiffens under my touch. “If you want to leave so badly, maybe you should beg.”

Her face instantly darkens, a reaction that fills me up with glee. The memory of her sinking to her knees so begrudgingly interrupts my thoughts at least once an hour. Fuck, I can’t wait for her to do it again.

The muscle in her jaw tightens. “You still wouldn’t let me go.”

I lean in. “Maybe, maybe not,” I rasp. “Why don’t you try and see?”

She leans in too, and it almost catches me off guard. The fury in her eyes is delicious, unwavering, and hot enough to burn the entire building down. I drink in every single drop. I’ve never had a man stand up to me so bravely, let alone a woman. It lights all of my nerve endings on fire.

She’s so close I can see the tiny freckles splattered across her nose. Smell the liquor on her breath. Feel the vibrations of her voice box when she speaks.

“I’ll never beg you for anything ever again, Donnacha Quinn,” she says acidly. “Not for my freedom and not for my life.”

I stoop a fraction to run the tip of my nose down the bridge of hers. I stop just millimeters away from the curve of her lip. It’d be so easy to claim them.

“Then perhaps you’ll die here, a caged little bird.”

Her laugh is so bitter I can almost taste it. “I promise you one thing. One day, I’ll walk right out of here, and nobody will stop me.” Cold air whips me as she withdraws, rising unsteadily to her feet. She staggers a few steps, her bare feet sloshing on my soiled rug. When she turns, her eyes are as dark and dangerous as a storm at sea.

And my cock is painfully hard.

“And once I walk out of here, I’ll come right back.” She sweeps in the direction of the window, her fingers brushing over the New York skyline. “And I’ll bring your pathetic little empire to the ground.”

And with that, she turns on her heels and stomps out of the room. A few seconds later, a door slams.

I chuckle into the silence, taking a swig of *The Smugglers Club*.

“Romy Daniels,” I mutter to myself, shaking my head. “What the fuck am I going to do with you?”

Donnacha

As I weave through the streets of Boston in my Lotus Emira, Romy's little threat dances in my mind. At first, it was cute. Funny, even, like Little Red Riding Hood standing up to the Big Bad Wolf. *Is she truly naïve enough to think I won't eat her alive?*

I chew on the inside of my cheek and strum my fingers on the velvet steering wheel as I slow to meet a red light.

My instinct says there's more to her angelic face and bratty attitude. That there's something darker, more sinister about her, and it's hiding deep within that iron fortress she's put up around herself. Whatever it is, it's the reason she'd rather die than bow to me.

It makes the idea of breaking her all the more tantalizing.

Who knew having a wife would be this fun?

As I turn onto the guarded road, the Quinn estate slides into view. A sprawling country manor carved from Bath stone

and surrounded by enough soldiers to overthrow a small country. I nod at one of my men at the security booth, and he opens the wrought-iron gates. I park out front of the manor, tossing my keys to another henchman, and take the steps two at a time up to the door.

It opens as I approach, but instead of seeing Fiona or any of the other housekeepers, I'm greeted by someone a lot smaller.

Valentina grins up at me. "Uncle Donnie!"

"There's my favorite little niece," I chime, stooping to ruffle her curls. She's technically my second cousin, but try explaining the family tree to a six-year-old and watch how quickly you want to burn the world down. She stretches out her arms, and I scoop her up, balancing her on my hip. "How's it going, baby?"

She flashes me a goofy grin and reaches for the aviators perched on top of my head. With clumsy hands, she pushes them up her tiny nose. They look comically large against her chubby face. "Mine now," she announces, pouting.

I laugh. She's got the sass of her mom, that's for sure. She's also got me wrapped around her tiny pinky and knows it. Whether it's wanting my three-thousand-dollar glasses or demanding that I'm her guest of honor at one of her princess tea parties, she knows that 'no' isn't in my vocabulary when it comes to her.

"I have a present for you too," she says, her sticky fingers all over the lenses as she holds them to her face. "Here."

She fishes around in the pocket of her dungaree dress and tugs out a piece of paper. It's dog-eared around the edges, and a suspicious-looking stain marks the corner, but my face splits into a grin regardless.

Three stick figures, one with bright orange curls, who could only be Valentina, and a smaller figure with a giant head, who I'm guessing is her younger brother, Gus. Then in the middle is a looming figure, complete with a manic grin. Above our heads reads 'I love you' in shaky letters.

"Another one for my collection!" I squeeze her tight and plant a kiss on the crown of her head. "I love it, thank you."

Distracted by the sudden appearance of Poppy, Valentina wriggles out of my grasp, climbs down my leg, and runs headfirst into her mom's lap.

"All right, Pops?"

Rubbing her daughter's shoulder, she flashes me a weary look.

"Never better," she retorts sarcastically, beckoning me into the dining room.

Tucking the picture carefully into my back pocket, I follow Poppy's lead.

"Jesus Christ."

The dining table is littered with papers and files, some with big red crosses scrawled on them, others with frantic rows of question marks dotted along the top. At the head of the table, Declan stares intently at his MacBook, typing furiously, the

screen reflecting white in the lenses of his glasses. He lifts a slow hand to acknowledge me but never tears his gaze from whatever he's doing. That kind of disrespect usually wouldn't fly, especially not from a cousin so young, but I have a feeling the chaos I've just stepped into is bigger than hierarchy. My suspicion is confirmed with a quick glance at Lorcan. He's sitting halfway up the table, fists clenched and nostrils flaring.

“Are we prepping for war? If so, don't you think you should have let me know a little earlier?”

Lorcan swivels his head to me, amber eyes burning with rage. “We're fucked,” he announces.

“Language,” Poppy hisses, covering Valentina's ears. She's too busy bending the arms of my glasses to notice her father's profanity, but Pop isn't taking any chances. “Sweetie, go and play with your brother for a bit, okay?” She begins to whine, but Poppy shushes her, ushering her into the arms of Fiona, the head housekeeper, who swiftly guides her out of the room. Then she turns to me, a sour expression on her face. “Declan and I have been looking for a new governor candidate to back, but our options are running out.”

Declan Quinn, a lanky, gaunt kid. As a second cousin of legal age, he should be going through his henchmen training, but he burst into tears the second I pushed a gun into his hand. It turns out, he's more at home in front of a computer than down in the Tunnels. So Lorcan sent him to Mexico for a year to learn the ropes from Miguel Rodriguez of the Tex-Mex cartel, our usual go-to when it comes to finding intel on

people. Now, Declan serves as our in-house hacker, and apparently, he can find out anything on anyone, even when they last took a shit.

I stride over to where Poppy's sitting and pick up the files in front of her. A long list of names, some I recognize from the New York corporate scene, others I don't. Each name has been crossed out, some twice. "What's wrong with these guys?"

"Either too God-fearing to be bribed or more skeletons in their closet than clothes," Declan pipes up, hands still flying across his keyboard. He sighs, picks up the red pen next to him, and slashes at a name. "Gordon Olofuson's out," he says, glancing at Poppy. "Has a penchant for school girls."

Poppy groans, dropping her head to the table.

I plop the stack of papers back on the desk. "Why don't we just force Archibald Dumont to run again?"

"Because he's already halfway to a nursing home," Lorcan growls. "He'll be dead a year in."

Crossing my arms, I turn to face him. "All right, what about his lieutenant governor, or even the lieutenant governor who was going to run on Danny English's ticket?"

Lorcan grumbles, muttering something incoherent under his breath. "I'm shocked you know so much about politics, Don," he drawls. "You don't think we've already scoped them out? All no-gos. Danny English was perfect. Why did he have to have a thing for murderous whores?" He twists the ring on his finger, still grumbling venomous shit. "What happened to

that little bitch, anyway? Bring her into the Tunnels and let me use her as target practice. Might cheer me up a little bit.”

What happened to her?

Uh, I kinda married her.

But I don't drop that atomic bomb just yet. Instead, I lean over him and pick up the single sheet of paper in front of him. “What's this?”

“Well, I'm glad you asked,” he grunts, dragging his hands through his hair. “Declan found it in the inbox of Belsky's secretary. It's a list of signatures. All the CEOs in New York who will back Belsky's organized crime bill if he gets into power.”

I scan the list, my blood running cold. “Motherfuckers,” I murmur, recognizing almost all of the names as business owners that Quinn Capital has invested in. “I'll take this,” I say darkly, folding the paper and sliding it into my back pocket along with Valentina's drawing. “I'll pay each one of them a visit personally.”

Lorcan grunts something of a thanks.

A heavy tension fills the dining room, broken only by Declan's frantic *tap, tap, tapping*. I look at Lorcan, then at Poppy, and back again. They both look defeated.

A familiar sense of fury fills up my veins.

My fist landing on the table makes everyone whip their heads to me. “Snap the fuck out of it,” I bark, breathing heavy. “Have you forgotten who we are? *We are the fucking Quinns.*”

We rule the entire East Coast with an iron fist, and no Bratva bastard is going to touch down on our side of the Atlantic and keep their life. Fuck the elections, fuck the governor seat. I'll blow his goddamn head off and end all this right now."

"While I'd usually agree, Don," Lorcan says, "A lot of powerful names are on that list. The last thing we need is an uprising in the city. It'd look very suspicious, now more than ever, if Belsky suddenly went missing."

I nod slowly. "My men have been stationed outside his address at the Hamptons for three days. They can't get too close because his security detail is insane, but I'll keep you updated." I jerk my chin to Declan. "You hacked his secretary's email. You don't have any intel on Belsky himself?"

For the first time since I swept into the room, Declan looks up at me, his eyes bloodshot. "His personal email and cell phones are heavily encrypted. FBI-level of encrypted."

I lean on my palms, creating a shadow over the kid. "Too encrypted even for you, *Inspector Gadget?*"

He smiles awkwardly. "All I have is a few bank statements from one of his shell companies. There are several large transactions to a business in Moscow, but it doesn't appear to exist."

Lorcan's booming voice cuts over the table. "At this rate, Belsky is going to win the seat, and if that bill goes through, we're fucked."

Fuck it. Now is a good of a time as ever.

I clear my throat. “Good thing his new law won’t affect me then.”

Both Poppy’s and Lorcan’s eyes slash to me. “I beg your pardon?” Poppy says quietly. But I can see in her expression that she already knows what I’m about to say.

I drag a knuckle through my beard and focus on the twelfth-century tapestry spanning the length of one of the walls. I can’t even eat a fucking sandwich in this dining room without Lorcan going on about it. “I got married.”

Poppy whimpers. Lorcan mutters an oath. Declan finally stops typing.

My gaze settles on Poppy first. Despite Lorc’s reputation, I know she’s going to be the one who gives me the most shit, so I guess I better get her wrath over with. I watch as she curls her red fingernails into her braided hair like she wants to rip it out. But then she takes a few deep breaths and shifts in her seat. “You have a wife.”

It’s not a question, but I answer it anyway. “Uh-huh.”

“And do I dare ask you where you picked her up from?” she replies, tone dripping with acid.

Yeah, I’m not going to drop that many bombshells on the family at once. Maybe when this is all over with, the fact she’s the whore who killed Danny English will be a funny dinner party anecdote. But right now, it’ll probably go down like a led balloon. “Around.”

“Around,” Poppy repeats. She steeples her hands together and tucks her fingertips under her chin. “Donnacha.” Fucking hell, I know she’s pissed when she calls me by my full name. “What the hell do you know about having a wife?”

I lean back in the chair and swing my feet up on the table, trampling piles of sheets. “What’s there to know? As long as you keep them fed and watered, they’ll survive.”

She blinks once, twice, unsure if I’m being sarcastic or not. “In the ten years since I’ve known you, I’ve never even seen you with a girlfriend, and now you have a *fucking wife*,” she hisses, voice growing louder with every syllable. Lorcan puts his hand on her arm in an attempt to calm her down, but she shrugs him off. “And let me guess, you’ve locked her in your little dungeon under the city, chained to a mattress, with a loaf of bread and a bottle of water. Because she’s gotta be *fed and watered*, right?” she snaps. Her pale face has turned beetroot as blood and fury rushing to the surface of her skin.

I raise an eyebrow at Lorcan. “Is that what you did to her? Because it sounds like she’s got a bit of PTSD.” Then I turn back to Poppy’s wrath. “If it makes you feel better, my darling sister-in-law, she’s having the time of her life in my penthouse apartment in New York.” *Not exactly true*. After trashing every square inch of the joint, she locked herself in one of the guest suites, and I haven’t seen her since. Married life, amiright? “Anyway, I’m a little offended you think I kidnapped her. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were suggesting no one would marry me simply because they want to.”

She snatches up a folder and spins it toward my head like a Frisbee. I only have to move my head a couple of inches to stop it from slicing into my neck. The smirk on my face only seems to make her more mad. “Of course I’m suggesting that, Don. Despite all of your Hollywood good looks and a grin that the Cheshire cat would be jealous of, you’re a goddamn monster,” she spits. “You spend your days in the dark, torturing and killing and whatever other sick shit you do. So forgive me if I find it hard to believe that a nice young lady just *happened* to find the best in you, just at the time you needed a wife most.” Now, annoyance prickles at my skin. I lean on my elbows, nostrils flaring. “I’m sorry, darling, are you under the impression that your *husband* is a fucking saint? Hate to break it to you, but all of the torturing and killing and sick shit that you seem to think I do, I do for this family.”

“And that’s exactly my point. You do it for the family. You’re the head henchman, just like your father was, and his father before that. Being a monster is in your DNA. Cruelty floods through your veins, and your brain is hardwired to kill. Being a ruthless bastard is in my husband’s job description. But you? It makes up the fabric of your being.”

Despite Lorcan tugging at her elbow, she rises to her feet, stabbing a shaky finger in my face. “You don’t have a heart, Don. God didn’t give you one.”

“Stop talking,” Lorcan growls, tightening his grip on Poppy’s elbow.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she hisses, flashing her husband a death glare. “The damage is already done. I know there’s nothing I can say or do now that will convince you to let her go, so now we’ll have to make the best out of the situation.” She picks up her cell from the table, along with a stack of documents. A quick jerk of her head toward Declan, and he scrambles to his feet. “We’ll incorporate her into our plan because if Belsky *does* get into power, then we need to make your sham marriage look like the real deal.” After pinning me with a lingering side-eye, she stalks toward the door. She pauses, then spins on her heel to deliver one final blow. “You’re going to tell me where she is, and I’m going to visit her tomorrow. Call it a welfare check,” she spits, loaded with sarcasm. “And if any of your men dare to stop me, I’ll chop their dicks off.”

And with that, she *clip-clops* down the hall with Declan scurrying after her. Lorcan and I sit, not speaking until the sound of her stilettos dissolves into nothing.

Eventually, Lorc lets out a loud hiss, reclining in his chair. “What the fuck, Don?”

But I let the silence stretch out between us for a few moments more. I’m still basking in the storm Poppy just unleashed on me, rage simmering underneath the surface of my skin. Not because her words sliced through me like a knife, but because she’s right.

Being a monster is in my DNA.

I know destruction and nothing else.

The locked box in the darkest corner of my brain is rattling. The one I welded shut and put a padlock on for good measure just under ten years ago. When I stuffed Emilia in there, I promised myself it'd never happen again. And it hasn't. These days, my sex life begins and ends at leaning into the ears of senator's wives at charity functions, taking the hotel key card they slip me, and following them up to their room when their fat husbands aren't looking. I fuck them from behind, staring at the headboard and blocking out their pathetic moans. I ignore my fist twitching to grab their throat, my palm burning to meet the curve of their ass. I chase my pathetic release and am already heading for the exit when they tell me we should do it again sometime.

And then Romy fell into my life.

Beautiful and cold, clad in an exterior more impenetrable than Fort Knox.

Her hidden secrets and feisty attitude all come together and beg me to break her. But by breaking her, I break the promise I made to myself.

“Don?” I'm beckoned back to the room by Lorcan's softer tone. We lock eyes, his shimmering with concern. “Look, man, don't worry about Poppy. You know she takes a few hours to calm down.”

Cracking my knuckles, I mutter, “It's not Poppy I'm worried about.”

“What?”

I rap my ring against the dining table and rise to my feet. “Nothing. I have work to do.” I pat the back pocket of my jeans, where his list lays folded next to his daughter’s drawing. “Businessmen to shut up. I’ll keep you updated with any intel on Belsky.”

He doesn’t say anything, eye line still tracing me as I stride across the room. When my hand is on the doorknob, his voice slices through the tension, stopping me in my tracks. “Donnacha.”

He never uses my full name when it’s just us two.

I lock my jaw and turn to face him. His hands are clasped over his torso, nostrils flaring. “Don’t let her distract you,” he says softly. “We need you.”

Something rushes through my veins. A cocktail of pride and determination. I straighten the length of my spine, curl my fingers into my palms, and clear my throat. “I live and breathe for protecting this family. I’ll die for it too. Hell will freeze over before I let a woman get in the way of that.”

My statement needs no response, and I don’t wait for one. Instead, I turn on my heel and storm down the hall, a newly lit fire spitting in the pit of my stomach.

Fuck my promise to Romy Daniels. I won’t distract myself with my desire to break her. She’s nothing but a pawn in a bigger game. Once Belsky is off the East Coast, she can go back to the whorehouse she came from.

Romy

Before my lids even open, I decide the day is the day I'm getting out of here.

Because if I don't, I'm going to die. And not at the hands of the Devil.

I prop myself up on my elbows and attempt to blink away the throbbing in my head. Once the world stops spinning, I take a moment to drink in my immediate surroundings. A guest bedroom, the one Donnacha pulled me into and announced that I'd signed my life away. It's a simple space, all-white everything, seasoned with the occasional pop of color, which stops it from looking like an expensive insane asylum.

Well, I've been in this apartment for less than twenty-four hours, and I'm already losing my mind. My emotions are warped, and my instincts are out of whack. Insanity is the only thing that explains why I promised Donnacha Quinn, one of

the scariest, most powerful men in the United States, that I'll bring his family's empire to the ground.

And why I felt dizzy with excitement and giddy with lust when saying it.

Well, I should make good on that promise.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, letting my bare feet sink into the plush cream carpet. *Gah, that feels nice.* When I usually get out of bed, I'm greeted by splinters in my toes and the next-door neighbors having a meth-fueled brawl on the other side of the thin walls.

Although my own apartment is a shithole, I need to get back there, stat.

I tug on the jeans and hoodie sprawled on the floor. They are the same ones I got married in, and two of the very few possessions I have. When I pat down all my pockets, I realize now, they are the *only* possessions I have.

My phone and my pocket knife are gone.

Fuck.

I sink to my knees, checking under the bed. My cell isn't that important—I practically swung from the fucking ceiling yesterday but still couldn't get signal in this goddamn penthouse—but my knife? It's more than just a much-needed weapon.

It was a present from Mak.

It's not even nine o'clock, and I'm raging. Muttering venom under my breath, I yank on my Chelsea boots and storm out of the bedroom, down the hall, and into the main room.

"I'm going to kill him my own bare hands," I hiss to myself. *Where is he?*

But as I reach the main room, I skid to a stop.

What? How?

Everything is perfect. There's not a single hint that I ripped through the entire apartment yesterday, destroying everything I could get my shaking hands on.

The sofas are cloud-soft and untarnished. The rug is clean and fluffy. Every surface gleams white. Taunting me. Even the fucking sun has decided to make an appearance, splitting through the clouds and streaming through the glass, giving the living area God's golden touch.

I swallow hard. Try to calm my ever-increasing heartbeat.

So, what? The Devil has fast-acting cleaners. It's no surprise that a man like Donnacha Quinn has people on his payroll to make shit like this happen overnight.

I can't let the shock deter me from my mission. First, I need my pocket knife, then I need an escape plan. Before any of that, though, I need to figure out exactly where I'm escaping from.

Turning on my heel, I stomp back down the way I came, stopping at every door that lines the hall. My body quivers

with the knowledge that the Devil could be lurking behind any one of them. Apart from a large bathroom, each door is locked, including those within the room I slept in last night.

My rage is beginning to turn into frustration, and my fingernails are digging half-moons into my palms as I head back to the main room. I cross through the open-plan living area and into the kitchen space and begin tugging open every drawer and cupboard.

Empty.

Every knife, every plate. Every goddamn spoon and glass. Gone.

Anything I can use as a weapon.

The laughter that rips from my lips doesn't sound like mine. It's manic, melting into hysteria. "Where are you?" I rasp into the silence. My words echo back to me. I know he's here, and if he's not, at least that big dumb brute, Ronan, is.

I practically run across the room toward the elevator, leaving a wildfire in my wake. I remember Ronan saying it won't work without a million passcodes, your retina scan, and the blood of your firstborn, or something like that. But I slip off my boot and slam the heel into the screen because it's quite surprising how often brute force overrides even the most complex technology.

But nothing happens. Not even a crack.

Maybe I just need something harder. Screaming, I race over to the cabinet next to the elevator bank and grab the lamp.

“Ow!”

My wrist bone contorts in a way it shouldn't. The lamp is stuck. I grab the base and pull, but to no avail. It's glued down. My hands fly to the vase next to it, but it's just as stubborn.

Stumbling back in shock, I hit the elevator doors with my back and slide down the length of them until I'm nothing more than a numb puddle on the marble floor.

What the fuck?

Something moves in my peripheral vision, and I jerk my head upward to meet it.

It's a camera. My eyes trail away from it to the next one just a few feet along. They are in every goddamn corner, in every room, their red lights winking down at me, like the Devil's third eye.

Is this what he meant when he said he was going to break me? He meant mentally? Psychological warfare, instead of...

Blood rushes to my cheeks when I think about what I thought he meant.

What the sick, twisted part of me hoped he meant.

Sucking in a lungful of air, I scramble to my feet and look up at the camera closest to me. Forcing a wide grin to stretch across my face, I flip it off with my middle finger. “*Fuck you,*” I mouth.

I don't care how deranged I must look, in crumpled clothes, with a bruised head, giving an inanimate object the

bird. Donnacha Quinn has got me confused. Locking me in an apartment with nothing but my thoughts to play with won't mess me up.

In fact, the lack of distraction gives me room to think.

The idea pops into my head almost immediately.

Giving the camera a lingering smug smirk, I saunter back down the hall and into one of the two rooms that aren't off-limits to me—the bathroom. It takes almost ten minutes to check for cameras. I scan the grouting of every mosaic tile, run my hands over every marble surface, even the bathroom taps. But it seems like this is the only place in the apartment free from scrutiny. I could be wrong, but I'll take the risk.

I turn my attention to the cabinet mirror, avoiding looking at my fucked-up reflection. Instead, I slide my fingers over each side, stopping at all four corners and pushing lightly. Corners are always the weakest part of a mirror.

When I find the corner with the most give, I rip off my hoodie and wrap it around my fist. Then I push it against the corner, slowly leaning my weight into it because I want it to break, not shatter. Eventually, I hear a triumphant crack.

This time, my laugh is more composed now that I have a bit of grip on the situation. Gently, I claw the small shard out of the mirror and hold it up. It glints, sharp and promising, under the bathroom's recessed spotlights.

But if the Devil wants to play games, I can play them too. I slip the shard back into place, leaving nothing but a small

hairline fracture in the glass, one that even the most meticulous cleaner would miss.

Riding on the high of my defiance, I stroll out of the bathroom and back into the living area. Passing the tide of locked doors, I absorb and accept that I might not escape today, but with the help of my makeshift weapon, I will escape.

Now, all that's left to do is play the waiting game until the Devil or one of his minions decides to grace me with his appearance. I stick my head under the kitchen tap and gulp greedily—lack of glasses won't stop me from hydrating—and then flop down on the sofa facing the television. I don't know where the controls are, but I'm sure there's a way to turn it on from the unit itself—

As I stand, something else catches my eye, suddenly sticking out like a sore thumb. The spiral staircase. It sits in the middle of the entire main space, snaking up to God knows where. It's where I first saw Donnacha yesterday, coming down those steps with his cell to his ear. I can't believe I didn't check up there. I know it's more than likely that I'll be met by another locked door, but something about it calls to me.

I take the stairs two at a time, leaving a sweaty palm print trailing up the handrail. At the top is a door that doesn't fit in with the aesthetic of the rest of the apartment. Instead of white and sleek, it's imposing, crafted from mahogany wood, and punctuated with a gold door handle, carved into the shape of a serpent.

I swallow the sudden knot in my throat, the particles of my recent high settling around me like dust. Curling my hand around the body of the snake, I push. And somehow, I just know it's going to be open.

I'm right.

It's the smell I notice first. A cocktail of leather and expensive aftershave. The scent of the Devil. Of power. It creeps around the cracks of the door and up my nostrils, luring me into the darkness of the room. In here, there's no floor-to-ceiling window to flood the space with light. I run my hand over quilted wallpaper until I find a switch, filling the room with low amber lighting.

I blink. It's an office. A desk made from the same oak as the door takes center stage, a chocolate brown leather armchair behind it. On one wall, a window is covered with a thick velvet drape, and on the other, there's a wet bar, complete with a towering liquor cabinet.

The hairs on the back of my neck tell me I shouldn't be in here. Instinct claws at my throat, that small voice of reason in the back of my head waking up, quietly begging me to run.

I suck in a lungful of the thick air and force my feet to step inside. I trail a finger across the silk-like surface of the desk and sink into the well-worn grooves of the armchair.

So this is how it feels to be the Devil. The right arm of the East Coast's most powerful family. I can't stop the shiver of pleasure that ripples between my thighs, and before I question why it's there, my eyes land on the wall opposite. Every inch

of the gilded wallpaper is covered with drawings. Some with creases down their center, others bent and torn at the edges, but all drawn with crayon and a wonky hand.

Children's drawings.

My nostrils flare; I can feel them. My hands clench around the arms of the chair—and is that the feeling of my heart sinking?

He has a kid.

Of course he has a fucking kid. Look at him, he's a god among mortals. Carved from stone and clad in marble. He'd get you pregnant just by looking at you the right—or wrong, depending on how you see it—way.

So where's his wife?

I scan the contents of the desk, starting with the surface. There's nothing but a globe, an empty, leather-bound diary, and a Montblanc pen. As I tug open every drawer, my mind trips into overdrive. *Maybe she's died, and that's why he needs me? Maybe the kid's a result of a one-night stand? That'd make sense because I haven't seen any evidence of a child living here. Unless it's locked behind one of those goddamn—*

As I open the bottom drawer, I see something. It's small, but it's not hard to miss, considering it's the only thing in the drawer. A Polaroid. Tucked into the corner seam. With a cursory glance toward the door, I pick it up with trembling hands and hold it up to the glow of the chandelier above me.

A woman stares back up at me. She's lying on a bed, strands of her dark hair splayed on a pillow, her heavy breasts spilling out of a lacy bra. Green eyes. Ski-jump nose. Olive skin.

It knocks the breath out of my lungs.

Whoever she is, she's gorgeous. But that's not what's making my head spin or making me want to smash open the window and dive headfirst onto the street, hundreds of feet below.

No. It's her smile.

I know it too well. It stretches across her tanned face, but her eyes tell a different story.

It's the smile of a woman who's broken inside.

I know because that smile is the same as my own.

Oh, god. Whoever he is. He broke her, just like he promised he'd do to me.

"You shouldn't be in here."

The voice slices through my thoughts like a steak knife. In a panic, I drop the Polaroid, and it flutters to the floor, disappearing into the pile of carpet. My head whips around to follow the icy tone, and I spot a woman in the doorway.

Slowly, I nudge the drawer with my knee until it clicks shut. "S-Sorry," I manage to choke out. Her sudden appearance doesn't give my brain enough time to assess whether she's a threat or not.

She sighs, breezes into the room, and perches on the edge of the desk. Despite my instincts taking their time to catch up, I grab the closest thing to me that could be used as a weapon, the expensive-looking pen on the desk.

Her eyes lower to my hand, then she returns her gaze to mine.

Wow, she's striking. Long, auburn hair cascades down her back, a stark contrast to the turquoise dress she's poured her curves into. When she reaches up to tuck a strand behind her ear, the diamonds in her watch dazzle me. She smells as good as she looks, a blend of vanilla and something sweeter.

But judging by the blistering expression on her face, she's anything but sweet. "Poppy," she announces, sticking out her slender hand. I glance down at it, my lip curling into a snarl.

Finally, my self-preservation seems to be up and running again. "What do you want?"

Her emerald eyes flash. "First of all, don't be so fucking feral. I'm here to help you," she snaps back.

Despite the abruptness, something about her is warm, something that sucks me in and stops me from plunging this pen into the carotid artery in her neck. But I'm not done assessing her, so I make a fist around my makeshift weapon and lower it into my lap.

"Second of all, this is Aisling." She points at the doorway, and I almost flinch when I see another figure standing there. I immediately recognize her as the woman who took my coat.

Yeah, where the fuck have you been for the past twenty-four hours, love? “She’s your go-to contact here at One Diabhal Square.” Aisling flashes me somewhat of an apologetic wave. *Ah, so that’s where she’s been. Cleaning up my rage.* I feel a flicker of guilt, then remember she’s done nothing to stop this from happening to me. “Stand, please.”

I turn back to Poppy. “What?”

“Stand,” she commands again, looking at me like I’m the dumbest kid in class.

“Yeah, I’ll pass on that.”

Her gaze burns into my retinas. She turns her attention to the chandelier above our heads, muttering something under her breath. Leaning her weight on her palms, she looms over me and says, “It’s Romy, isn’t it?” She doesn’t wait for a reply. “Listen, Romy. This whole situation has pissed me off enough. I’m in no mood for games. Now, unless you want to wear the same panties every day for a year, *stand* so I can get a gauge of your size.”

Every day for a year. Am I really going to be here for a year?

“I’m a size six.”

Poppy nods to Aisling, who taps something into her cell.

“Bra and shoe size?” Poppy continues, tone brisk.

Satisfied by my answers, she dismisses Aisling. Now that it’s just us two, her features soften a fraction. “Thank you,” she says quietly. “Aisling will get you a new wardrobe. She’ll

also stock the fridge weekly, so do be sure to let her know if you have any dietary requirements.” Eyes grazing over me, she adds, “Aisling—get extra fruit and vegetables.”

My cheeks burn. “I can’t tell if you’re being nice or nasty to me.”

She lets out a tinkering laugh, absentmindedly spinning the globe with a manicured finger. “I told you, I’m here to help you. Now tell me, how did you two meet?”

I search her gaze, trying to see if she’s joking or not, but she gives nothing away.

“Tinder,” I snap.

There’s that laughter again. It’s hypnotic. “I see.”

“Who are you?”

She smiles faintly like she’s softened around the edges. “I’m just a girl who was in a very similar situation to you once.”

“Kidnapped by a psychotic mafia don?”

Without missing a beat, she says, “Exactly. And I’m going to tell you everything I would have wanted to know when it happened to me.”

She’s graceful, sliding her ass off the desk and gliding across the room on impossibly high heels. As she passes the wall of drawings, she gingerly reaches out to touch them, a small smile on her lips. “I’ll start with the reason you’re here. The Quinn family is very powerful, Romy, and power creates

enemies. One of them being Leo Belsky, the Republican nomination for the next governor of New York.”

If she notices how hard I grip the desk, she doesn't show it.

“The Quinns were...*heavily invested* in the Democratic front-running candidate. However, he has sadly...*passed*.” She pops the ‘P’ as though his death is the biggest inconvenience to her. “Belsky is determined to pass legislation that would have the Quinns deported back to Ireland, which of course, would be quite the inconvenience.”

I've received more information from this woman in five minutes than I have from my supposed husband our entire marriage. Which, granted, hasn't been much longer.

Poppy is feeding me information I already know, but I straighten my spine and play the role of a dumb captive. “So why have I been dragged into it?”

Her smile is dazzling but forced. “Because should Belsky win the seat, he won't have the power to deport residents who are married to an American citizen. At the state level, anyway.” She rolls her big green eyes. “Politics, hey? Hate them as much as I love them.”

“So Donnacha needed a wife so he doesn't get deported.”

“I knew you were a smart cookie.”

I lower my gaze, running my fingers over the grains of the leather chair. “Hell will freeze over before I agree to stay here.”

Poppy reacts to something in my tone. In my peripheral, I see her tense. Then she returns to her seat on the edge of the desk. “You’ll learn quickly that these Quinn men do whatever they want. But Donnacha also gets bored easily. I know you hate the idea of being stuck here, but it won’t be forever. You’ll have everything you want, I promise you that. Whatever your weekly allowance is, I’ll have it tripled.” She glances at Aisling, still hovering in the doorway. “Set Romy up with a card, please.” Then to me, she adds, “You’ll be treated like a queen for the time that you’re here.”

I scoff. She clearly doesn’t know about Donnacha’s promise to break me. But she continues talking, like the noise that escaped my lips is nothing but a flutter in the wind.

“Think of it as an extended vacation. One you’re being paid to take.”

“You can usually leave your hotel room on vacation,” I say sourly.

Poppy winces. “As I said, power creates enemies, and the Quinns have lots of them. Believe it or not, as Donnacha Quinn’s wife, it’s much safer for you to be kept out of the public eye right now.”

Her ignorance upgrades my scoff to a snort. “Yeah, right.”

“I’ll see what I can do to get you some day trips out, but I can’t make any promises.” Glancing at her watch, she pushes herself off the desk. “In the meantime, I’ll get Donnacha to grant you access to the rest of the building.”

“The fire escapes, I hope?”

That amuses her. “No, there’s a hell of a lot more to One Diabhal Square than this charming penthouse.” With a little wink, she adds, “I think you’ll find a few ways to keep yourself entertained here.”

A few beats of calm roll between us. This day just gets weirder and weirder. It’s Poppy who breaks the silence. “Anyway, I have to go. Aisling will be around from now on, so anything you need, let her know. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again real soon.” She brushes her fingers over the table and walks toward the door.

“Wait.” She turns back to me, her smile expectant. “And what about you?”

“What about me, darling?”

“You said you were in a similar situation to me. How did you escape?”

She laughs, only this time, it isn’t a cute, girly noise. It’s loud and abrupt, every decibel adding another acre of goose bumps to my skin.

When she lifts up her hand, something white and bright glints in the low lighting. A huge diamond ring.

“I didn’t.”

And with that, she’s gone.

Romy

Just as Poppy promised, the fridge is fully stocked, and bags upon bags of clothes are sitting pretty on my new bed. Aisling is nowhere to be seen, and I suspect she's hiding from me in case I unleash the same rage on her as I did on the sofa last night. Maybe that's why everything she brought me is black—not that I'm complaining, it's my favorite color—but perhaps she thought I should have a wardrobe that matched my mood. Or my soul. Both would be correct.

I peek inside the bags, reeling at the price tags and marveling at how clothes that aren't made from polyester feel against my skin.

As I change clothes, I change my plan too.

Seven hours later, I'm leaning against the kitchen island in a black silk cami dress, plastic wineglass in hand. The pot of water on the stove hisses and bubbles, spilling over the sides and flooding over the marble counter.

I take another sip.

“You don’t strike me as the type of woman who cooks.”

My pussy clenches at the drawl behind me long before my brain recognizes it as dangerous. I didn’t even hear him come in. I was too lost in my thoughts.

In my plan.

Staring at the chrome extractor hood, I suck in a lungful of air and release it in a small hiss.

“I’m not. But I don’t have anything better to do.” I place the wineglass on the counter beside me. “Do you eat food, or are you a vampire?”

“What makes you think I’m a vampire?”

The ghost of his touch burns on my forehead. “I’ve only ever seen you drink blood.”

His throaty chuckle is so sinister that it makes me squeeze my eyes shut. Swallow the dryness in my throat.

“Are you going to greet me, wifey? Or am I to look at the back of your head for the entire evening?”

Slowly, I turn, guarding my heart as I do so. It’s a pointless exercise because it feels like God himself has snatched the air from my lungs when I see him.

There’s not a person on this planet who could deny the Devil’s handsomeness. He’s otherworldly gorgeous. His bespoke suit looks painted onto his muscular frame, the three undone buttons of his shirt a nod to his ever-present rebellious

streak. It exposes the thick, tanned trunk of his neck, and I have the sudden urge to sink my teeth into it.

Perhaps *I'm* the vampire.

“Jesus Christ,” he groans, pushing himself off the island and dragging a knuckle over his jaw. It’s only as his greedy eyes wash over my flesh do I remember what I’m wearing.

“What’s the occasion?”

“Your funeral,” I reply without missing a beat.

“If that’s your funeral attire, sweetheart, I’ll kill somebody for you every day.”

His words shouldn’t send my mind in a spin, but they do. “Are you hungry?”

He opens his mouth. Closes it again. Suddenly, his eyes flash dark as they regard me. “What are you planning, silly girl? After yesterday, do you really expect me to believe you’ve decided to take on the role of doting housewife, just like *that*?” He emphasizes “that” with a click so loud it echoes off the cavernous ceiling.

The silence swirls around us, nothing but the pot hissing behind me. I take my time, picking up the plastic decanter—Aisling really went to great lengths to protect herself—and pour myself another glass of blood-red wine. “A lady named Poppy visited me today.”

Something clicks. I can tell because a knowing smirk flattens his Cupid’s bow. “And so she did. Tell me, how did you find my sister-in-law?”

Sister-in-law? I falter for a nanosecond, composing myself before Donnacha notices. “Very pleasant, actually.”

“And is she the reason behind this sudden change of heart?”

I pin him with a serious stare. “She told me that as long as I play your little game, you’ll give me the world.”

He watches me for a moment, searching my eyes before his gaze drops to my lips. Without looking up, he takes the glass from my hand, lifts it to his mouth, and drains it in one.

Gah. Why is that so fucking sexy?

“My darling sister-in-law doesn’t know why you’re here in the first place.” *Neither do you.* “She thinks you’re an innocent little bird that I’ve captured for my gilded cage.” Smirking, he pours out another glass and slides it across the countertop. “She doesn’t know what you’ve done and that you’re here to be punished.”

Punished. The word triggers a ripple down my spine. I trace my finger along a vein in the marble, simply to avoid the intensity of his gaze. I feel like I’ll catch on fire if I meet it. It doesn’t stop the question from tumbling from my lips, though. “About that punishment,” I croak, “when can I expect that to be dealt?”

My question is met by a heavy silence. When I glance up, Donnacha’s expression has completely changed. His features have hardened, his eyes glazed over. It feels like I’ve angered him more than usual, and I have no idea why. “Forget about

it,” he growls with such quiet venom that I almost drop my wineglass. Features softening, he nods over my shoulder. “What’s for dinner? Water and air?”

His reaction puts a crack in my cool demeanor, and I struggle to claw it back.

Feeling like I’m wading through syrup, I turn back to the stove, where there’s now more water on the countertop than there is in the pot. I grab the handle and take it to the sink, filling it up again.

“Pasta. Spaghetti Bolognese, to be exact.”

Stealing a glance at him, I see him pick up the jar of sauce I’d left on the island and frown. “Very Martha Stewart.”

The sarcasm brings heat into my cheeks. “If you wanted a wife who can cook, darling, then perhaps you should have asked for my resume before kidnapping me. Besides, I can’t make a sauce because you’ve taken away every sharp object in the entire building.” To prove my point, I tug open the cutlery drawer and brandish a plastic knife. The type usually accompanied by paper plates and a funky-colored napkin at birthday parties and cookouts. “See? This thing wouldn’t even cut through soup, let alone a tomato.”

He works his jaw in amusement like he’s trying not to laugh. He has very nice eyes, and I can’t help but like the way they glitter when he’s amused by something. With a smirk, he slips his hand into the breast pocket of his suit and pulls out an object.

My heart beats double-time against my rib cage. *My knife.*

Then he pulls out a Zippo lighter from the pocket of his slacks, ignites the flame with a sharp flick of his wrist, and slowly runs the length of the blade along it. “What vegetables would you like me to cut?”

After a beat or so, I disappear into the pantry, coming back with the first vegetables my hands touch, and drop them in front of him on the counter. His eyes dart between the broccoli and the avocado, but he draws his lips into a hard line as if that’ll stop him from making a smart-ass comment about my ingredient choices.

Over the rim of my wineglass, I watch as he slips off his jacket and drapes it carefully over one of the barstools. He rolls up his sleeves. Adjusts his watch. Then he pulls a cutting board across the counter and begins to slice. Slowly, methodically. Each chop creating another note in a hypnotic song.

It’s probably the wine overflowing in my veins, but watching the Devil doing something so...*human* makes my mouth water. All of the nerve endings between my thighs tremble. It’s only when he pauses and raises an eyebrow at me, do I realize I’m practically drooling.

“The pot is overflowing again.”

“Shit,” I mutter, snapping out of my Devil-induced trance and lowering the heat of the stove. I wipe down the soaked countertops and bury my pink face in the pantry again, searching for pasta.

It takes a few flustered minutes to realize the methodical chopping has stopped. With a sense of unease creeping up my neck, I turn around.

The Devil is pinning me with a hard stare. One with several impenetrable layers, each more complex than the last. It freezes me in place, hand outstretched toward the wineglass, spaghetti noodles in hand.

“You’re nervous.”

The Devil has a habit of choosing statements over questions.

I find myself looking at the very tip of my own penknife as he points it over the island. It glints under the recessed spotlight, mirroring the sharpness of his tone. “You’re up to something.”

His growing suspicions fill the lines of his face like a spiderweb, and I can feel that familiar sense of panic scratching its way up my throat. Steadying myself, I sip my wine and pin him with a stare of my own.

“Of course I’m nervous,” I say seriously. “In the space of a week, I’ve killed a man, been forced to marry another, and now I’m destined to roam the halls of this godforsaken apartment like a ghost for the foreseeable future. So, forgive me if I’m not quite myself right now.”

In the silence, I can hear my heartbeat thumping against my ears. The tick-tock of a clock somewhere in the room. It

feels like forever until Donnacha stops assaulting me with his eyeballs and returns to chopping vegetables.

When he speaks, it's so quiet that at first, I think I imagined it.

"It won't be forever," he murmurs darkly. "It won't be long at all."

His words burn hot in my heart, but I ignore them.

"All done," he drawls, plucking a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping it along the length of my blade. My fingers twitch to reach out and grab it. Wrestle him for it. Curl my fucking hands around his throat and choke the life out of him for it. But it disappears into his slacks in a flash, accompanied by a smug wink. "Anything else you need from me, sweetheart?"

"No, unless I'm not to be trusted around boiling water and fire," I reply, as sweet as I can muster.

With a chuckle, he drapes his jacket over his arm. "We'll eat in the dining room."

And with that, he raps his ring against the counter and saunters off through the living space, disappearing under an arched doorway on the other side of the room.

My knees threaten to give way the second he disappears. It's like they were holding out, and like the rest of me, too stubborn to collapse in his presence. I clutch the counter and take a few deep breaths, steadying my hands and my heart.

Woman up, Romy. That's another Mak saying. I couldn't count how many times he'd barked that in my face in the courtyard of the *pustosh'*. It became a ritual before any lunchtime fight. As I glanced through the dusty air of the playground to look at my opponent, he'd clamp his huge hands on the bones of my shoulders and force me to look at him instead. *Woman up,* he'd hiss, eyes as bright as the scar on his forehead. Not man up. I wasn't a boy, let alone a man. But I *was* a girl, trying to be given the same opportunity as a man. A girl who wasn't forced into prostitution by the ring-clad hand of a Vulture.

The lump swelling in my throat brings me back to reality. To the kitchen, with the pot hissing away behind me. I come back to it with a newfound determination and strength, Mak's encouragement dancing at the forefront of my mind.

Time to cook. Hell, in my world, cooking constituted pouring boiling water into an instant ramen cup and slurping the half-cooked, powdery noodles over the kitchen sink. But logic outweighs my culinary skills, so I fry up the vegetables, dump the entire bag of pasta into the water, and then, with a cursory glance in the direction of the dining room, I pour the jar sauce over everything, hoping it'll at least soften the blow of my horrible cooking.

I wrap the empty jar in a wad of tissue and bury it at the bottom of the trashcan.

With trembling hands, I carry two paper plates to the dining room. As I grow closer, I can hear the soft sound of

music. Hauntingly slow jazz, each note oozing from the room like caramel dripping off a spoon.

Like all of the communal spaces in the apartment, the dining area is open plan, separated from the living space by a change of ceiling. It curves into a sweeping dome, like the nave of the church, with the sleek white dining table running the length of it. On the back wall, symmetrical arch windows give glimpses of the New York skyline.

It's raining again.

My husband is sitting in the seat most befitting to him at the head of the table. His back is facing me, but he tilts his head when he hears me coming. I drop the plate in front of him, a little too heavy-handedly, causing the blood-red sauce to splash-splash onto the tablecloth.

“Oops,” I mutter breathlessly, then make my way to the opposite end of the table.

I manage two steps before his hand shoots out and forms a tight grip on my wrist. “Where are you going?”

Sauce from my own plate sloshes onto the marble floor. I try to ignore the sensation of his ice-cold skin against mine. It makes me feel something I don't want to name. “To sit over there,” I hiss.

The way he tugs on my wrist is gentle, but it serves as a warning. “You'll sit here,” he purrs, tearing his eyes from mine just long enough to nod at the seat next to him. He's laid

my place and his like we're in a fine-dining restaurant, only, the wineglasses and plates are plastic.

The butter-soft leather against the silk of my dress makes me feel frictionless. I stare at the soup-like pasta in front of me in an attempt to avoid his gaze when I notice that there's no silverware. I rise, but his hand shoots out again, this time landing high on my thigh. His thumb disappears into the side split of my dress. "Going somewhere, sweetheart?"

There's a hardness to his tone that contrasts the softness of his touch. Both make my pussy ache. "We need cutlery," I rasp, each word strangled and pathetic. "Unless you prefer to eat with your hands."

His push is subtle, but I melt back into the chair like putty.

He unrolls the napkin next to him, revealing a knife, spoon, and fork. Plunging the fork into the spaghetti, he twirls a perfect little nest and brings it up to my lips. "You first," he says huskily, a challenge swirling around his pupils. "I need to make sure you haven't poisoned me."

A chunk of carrot drops onto the tablecloth.

Anger flares in my chest. "I can feed myself, *thanks*," I snap, pulling away from his outstretched fork. "And poisoning you...I wish I'd thought of that, actually."

His hand is still on my thigh. My skin underneath it is hot enough to ignite a forest fire.

"I didn't ask if you can feed yourself." His eyes scorch my lips. "Now open that pretty little mouth of yours."

My mouth parts before my brain can spit venom through it. Before I correct my mistake, he slides the fork into my mouth. “Good girl,” he murmurs, more to himself than me.

Those two words should make me want to snatch the fork from his hand and jab it in his eyes. But they don’t. They do something disgusting to me instead. They bend my defiance, stroke my ego, and fill up my lower stomach with warmth.

I’m stupefied by my own actions, as well as his. That’s how he gets away with slipping another forkful of pasta between my lips. This time, he times out a little puff of air as I swallow, eyes never leaving my mouth. *Am I imagining it, or has his hand on my thigh inched north?*

I feel delirious, floating in a dark gray bubble, fueled by wine and surrounded by the trickle of jazz music. My fingers claw around the tablecloth. The fabric bunches, dragging the plastic plate and wineglasses toward me. Another mouthful. Another bolt of electricity zapping my clit. I rock on it, and I don’t know whether it’s to try to squash the feeling or make it grow.

“Romy?”

“Huh?”

Donnacha sets down the fork and leans his forearms on the table to narrow the gap between us. He picks up a napkin and dabs at the corner of my mouth.

Oh, god.

“I asked you, how’s the food?”

My dark gray bubble bursts, and I come crashing back down to reality.

“Uh, awful,” I mutter, my taste buds finally deciding to communicate with my brain. Sourness fills my throat, and I grab a cup of water and swig from it. “Really fucking awful.”

His hand feels heavy now, like an iron bar clamping me to the table. It’s hot in here, too fucking hot, and his chuckle is filling my ears so much that it fills like I’m drowning in it. “I have to go to the bathroom,” I croak, yanking my leg out of his grip. His hand lingers, but eventually, he lets it fall, watching me wordlessly as I stagger past him.

Breathe, Romy. Just fucking breathe.

What in the hell is happening to me? My legs are weightless as I float through the living space and into the bathroom at the bottom of the hall.

Within the four walls and away from the Devil, my heart rate begins to slow. I lean my palms against the sink and stare bleary-eyed at myself in the mirror.

Remember who you are.

My eyes drop to the hairline crack in the glass.

Remember the plan.

I throw my head back, staring at the ceiling tiles. *Am I really going to do this?* It seemed like such a good idea—the *only* idea—just a few hours ago. I conjured it up with a cackle and a smirk, excitement brewing in my bones.

But the imprint of his hand is branded into my thigh, like the mark of a show horse. And now...

“Fuck,” I hiss to myself, curling my hands into sweaty fists.

I needed to escape to make contact with the outside world.

Now, I need to escape before I slip under the Devil’s spell.

Switching my brain onto autopilot, I push against the corner of the glass. An edge pops out just enough for me to scrape my nails underneath it and pry it out. I hold it up to the light like it’s the Holy Grail, and in return, it taunts me as if to ask, *are you really going to go through with this?*

Yes.

And it’ll all be over sooner than I hoped.

Leaving the bathroom, I’m buzzing off newfound adrenaline.

It vibrates through my body, powering my feet forward.

Maybe it’s the desperate *thud, thud, thud* of my steps. Maybe it’s because men like Donnacha Quinn have a fine-tuned instinct for danger, but the moment I round into the dining area, he stiffens.

I’m quick, lifting my shank and aiming for his neck.

But I’m not quick enough.

The dining room spins in shades of white, and when it slows to a stop, my cheek is pressed against the tablecloth, my body pinned between it and the Devil’s heavy mass.

“I should have known you weren’t the type of girl to play happy families,” he hisses, his venomous breath dancing on my neck. My arm is splayed awkwardly against the table. He squeezes my wrist, forcing me to drop my weapon with a pathetic clunk.

“You know nothing about me,” I rasp.

“I know that you were trying to kill me,” he snarls. His voice is an octave lower than usual, his chest vibrating against my shoulder blades. I feel him pause and shift his weight so that his steel-like thigh parts my legs. “But I also know you don’t do well when faced with a dead body,” he muses, grazing his lips over the flesh of my neck. The goose bumps this creates are nothing but a bodily instinct. Not a reflection of how I feel. At all. *Gah*. “So, were you really trying to kill me, sweetheart, or were you trying to get this reaction out of me?”

“Let me take a free shot at your jugular, and then you can ask me that question again,” I spit, wriggling under his weight. He presses his hip bones harder into my ass. His chuckle is a million degrees colder than before. Out of my peripheral vision, I can see his thick hand creep across the tablecloth and pick up my shank. It glints as he slides it past me and out of view.

Suddenly, the point presses into my neck.

“Who would miss you, sweetheart,” he murmurs, “if I were to end your life right now?”

Mak's big blue eyes and Hollywood grin flash in the forefront of my brain. If it wasn't for him, I'd tell the Devil to put me out of my fucking misery. Instead, I squeeze my eyes shut, zoning in on the prick on my neck. It feels like a burn, spreading out across my flesh like an ink drop in water.

"You would," I choke out. "You need me, remember? *Husband?*"

The pressure against my neck increases. I tense, waiting for the puncture. "I need you like a nun needs a condom, *wifey.*"

The glass is cold like an ice cube as he trails it down my neck, stopping at my collarbone. "No," he murmurs, "I'm right. You didn't want to kill me. You wanted *this* reaction. Don't think I haven't noticed, silly girl, how you thrive off testing me. If I didn't know better—" I let out a raggedy gasp as the shank slides under the thin strap of my dress and slices right through it. "I'd say you've been desperate to receive your punishments." He cuts the other strap, and the fabric around my chest pools into my cleavage. "The thought of me punishing you has made your tight little cunt wet, hasn't it? Well, now you have what you want."

He's right about me being wet, and I detest him for it almost as much as I despise myself... Not just for being wet but also for not being quick enough with my attack and for the small moan that just escaped my lips.

"You've racked up three punishments," he says thickly, the shank kissing the length of my spine, not hard enough to split

the silk fabric. “One for killing English, one for wrecking my apartment like a spoiled little brat—” His hand grabs a fistful of my ass to emphasize *brat*, and another lustful hiss from my lips flutters onto the tablecloth. “And one for trying to kill me. Quite the resume, sweetheart. You know, I’m starting to think there’s something more to you than just being a whore.” Without warning, his hand moves from my ass to my hair, and he winds his fingers tightly into the base of my skull, jerking my head back. The shank is back at my throat. “Did you kill Danny English on purpose?”

The question is unexpected, and it rolls down my body like an avalanche. “You know I didn’t. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have needed your help. I would have been prepared to dispose of his body.”

There’s a growl behind me, long and strong. The Devil mutters something under his breath while I hold mine. “True,” he eventually murmurs. There’s no time to sag with relief; he flattens his body against my back, pushing his lips against my ear. The sharp tip of the shank grazes the top of my thigh. “You know, I had vowed to forget about breaking you. I was ready to show you leniency, something I don’t do very often. But oh, how that has changed. You’ve made it so tempting that I can’t wait any longer to have you at my mercy.” He punctuates his words with a nip on my earlobe, sending an electric shock zapping down my spine. I can feel his impatience growing in his pants, pressing into my ass. *Holy shit, it has its own fucking pulse.* “What will break you, hmm? I wonder, will it be pleasure or pain?”

I don't know if the question is rhetorical or not, but I'm in no state to reply. The air swirling around us is hot, heavy, and silent, like the eerie moment before a thunderstorm unleashes its wrath.

“Tell me, do you believe in fate?” *Yes, because I worked so hard to change mine, but I couldn't.* But under his hand, I shake my head. He chuckles. “I do.”

Something glints from the corner of my eye. Something new. A coin. He tilts my head so I can get a better view. Balancing it on the crook of his forefinger, he says, “Head for pleasure, tails for pain. So, what will it be, sweetheart?”

The pulse in my throat quickens. The tablecloth dampens under my sweaty palms. Death feels like it's less than a stone's throw away—*so why do I feel so fucking alive?*

Pain. It's the only option my warped brain considers. It's all I've ever known. Hell, I've built a whole defense mechanism around dealing with it. Pleasure...it's a dark, unknown abyss. One that I'm not sure I'm strong enough to crawl out of.

“Tails never fails,” I say through gritted teeth.

There's that syrup-like chuckle. “You're fucking crazy, you know that?” His emerald ring flashes as he flicks his thumb against the backside of the coin. It launches in the air, spinning in slow motion, before rolling to a lazy stop between the plastic wineglasses.

Agonizing silence stretches out in front of me, and the Devil plays into my discomfort. Slowly, he curls his hand and brings his knuckles to my face. As he unfurls it, he lets out an animalistic groan, which starts deep within his chest.

It's not George Washington that stares back at me.

Thank fuck.

For a moment, it feels like the ball is edging toward my court. I choke out a laugh, my lips splitting into a manic grin. "Fate is on my side today." I almost add, *so do your worst*, but even I'm not that crazy to tempt the Devil in that way. Especially when the shard of glass is snaking up my thigh, getting dangerously close to my panty line.

"Wrong. You'll find out very shortly that it is, in fact, on mine," Donnacha says huskily. He sounds possessed. Drunk on power.

Die before you die. Mak's words drift through the chaos of my mind, cooling my nerve endings. A smug sense of satisfaction pools in my lower stomach, extinguishing the flames there. I'm ready for him to see me for who I am. A hardened *pustosh'* kid who won't bend, let alone break, under his cruel touch. He can turn my body into a pile of ashes for all I care. *I am a phoenix*, and I will rise above the storm clouds of the city. Bask under the sun's calming rays.

I start with my toes. I always do. Releasing every tightened tendon and muscle, I let that relaxed sensation creep up my thighs, over my hip bones, and spread across my chest. Each

knot of tension in my back dissolves, and lastly, I focus on my breathing.

In, hold. Out, hold. In—

“What—?” I pop a lid, the shock of his hands sliding up my dress and yanking my panties down to my knees undoing all of my hard work.

“Save your voice, sweetheart,” Donnacha rasps, lighting trailing the shank over the curve of my ass. “You’ll need it when I make you scream.”

All of my muscles recoil, my mind back on high alert. He bundles the silk fabric of my dress into a fist against the middle of my back and uses it to hold me in place against the table. Pressing my now exposed breasts into the cloth. I close my eyes, clench my jaw. *Die, Romy. Die before it’s too late.*

But I can’t. *I fucking can’t.* Anticipation swirls in my bones, wrecking me, *awakening me*, and all I can think about is what he’s seeing: me, bent over with my ass in the air.

I’m not ready for the first slap. It echoes off the cavernous ceiling, the noise as angry as the burning mark it leaves on my cheek. I wince but catch myself before more than a puff of air can escape me. *I will not scream. I will not scream. I—*

The second slap is harder, throwing me forward across the table. The burning spreads across my ass like a wildfire, over the curve of my cheeks and between my thighs, where the sensation morphs into something different. Something I don’t dare give a name. I hiss into the fabric of the tablecloth, then

pull my lips together, forming a physical barrier in an attempt to stop me from making a sound.

“Sing for me, little bird,” he growls behind me, trailing his knuckles over the raw skin he just claimed. “Sing for me, and I’ll stop.”

A new heat bubbles under my skin, one fueled by my stubbornness. I clamp down on my lip so hard my skin breaks. He won’t get the satisfaction of breaking me, even if I can’t separate my mind from the wrath of his hand.

Even if...

Fuck. I dig my teeth into my bottom lip even harder, and I don’t even stop when I taste metal. Not only can’t I seem to take my mind above the clouds but I can’t even get it out of the fucking gutter. I’m more aware than ever. Aware of my nipples stiffening against the cloth. Of the dull ache in my pussy every time his hand departs my skin. I want to give him what he wants: my scream. But not because the pain is unbearable, but because of what the pain is morphing me into.

By the sixth slap, I’m more at war with myself than I am with him. My inner thighs are sticky, tingling with the anticipation of each slap.

I brace myself for a seventh, but it doesn’t come. All movement ceases behind me, my labored, strangled panting the only noise filling the air. After a few beats, I tilt my head, catching the Devil’s glittery eyes. His pupils are enlarged, the darkest shade of black. Mouth taut in a hard line. He’s thinking

dark, dangerous thoughts. I can practically see them swirling above his head like his own personal storm cloud.

I know, just by that manic stare, that I haven't won this battle.

I'm not even close.

Without warning, he lunges over me, pinning me to the table once more. His mouth grazes the shell of my ear while his finger swipes over my bottom lip. He brings my blood to my eye line. "You'd rather make yourself bleed than break for me, silly girl. I wonder, is your resolve so high because..." He finishes his sentence by sliding two of his fingers over my sensitive folds. It's instinctive for my legs to buckle. He brings his other hand to my hip to steady me, letting out a malicious laugh. "As I thought. This is why you didn't want me to stop," he whispers in my ear. "You like being punished."

"No," I croak, emphasizing my point with a frantic headshake.

"Liar." He spits the word out like a dragon spits fire and punctuates it by sinking his teeth into my neck. The warm pain sends a sonic boom through my body, and a moan finally pushes through my mouth.

"There it is," he murmurs to himself, "I knew it. You're a depraved little slut." As his teeth graze over my throbbing pulse, he continues to stroke my pussy lips. "Like husband, like wife."

I use all of my might to block out his words, making a last-ditch attempt at reaching the sky. But I can't ignore the heat that builds in my lower stomach with every stroke. How the ghost of his slaps burns hotter than before, adding to my torture. "You said pain," I wheeze, biting on my bloodied lip again, smashing my nose into the cloth.

"No, fate said pain, sweetheart. But fate isn't the boss here. *I am.*"

He flicks my clit just like he flipped the coin. My back arches, my toes curling underneath my feet. "Sing, baby," he taunts me. "Sing like a broken little bird."

"No," I stammer. "*I won't.*" I don't know who I'm trying to convince, him or me. But when he flicks my clit again, then rolls it between his thumb and forefinger, I can't control the explosion that lights up my core, exploding outward throughout my body.

My release is chasing me, and there's nowhere to run. My only defiance is that I continue biting my lip, refusing to let out even a whisper of pleasure. Even when my body shakes violently, even when my knees buckle underneath me, I clamp down on my flesh, like I'm hunkering down in a storm.

I come down off my high like it's a sickening fairground ride. I'm queasy, dizzy, conflicted about what my buzz is.

His hands pushed me off the cliff, and I fell into the abyss. *But I didn't break.* In the pregnant silence, I can't resist turning, getting a glimpse of the Devil I defeated. I want to

etch his expression into my memory, so I can pull it up whenever I need to remember my own strength.

But he's not disappointed, nor is he angry. His expression is frighteningly calm as if he's detached himself from the situation. Suddenly, he grips my hips and flips me onto my back, like I weigh less than a helium balloon. My breasts fully escape my torn dress, leaving another private part of me exposed to him.

He looms over me like a venomous thought. His beard tickles my chest, lighting the nerves in my nipples on fire. "Fight all you like, but you're only delaying the inevitable. And when I make you break, it'll taste even sweeter."

With one last lingering look, he strides past me and out of the dining area, leaving me exposed. "And Romy?"

I don't move.

"You were right. Your dinner tasted fucking awful."

Donnacha

I don't stop fucking my fist until the sun comes up. After a few stolen hours of shut-eye, I roll out of bed, post-nut clarity lingering around like a bad smell.

Fuck, I shouldn't have done that. I made a vow to myself that I wasn't going to indulge in my sick fantasies anymore, no matter what dark promise I made to my new wife.

All she had to do was sit down at the dinner table, make polite conversation while I twirled her god-awful pasta around a fork and slipped it into her plump little mouth. All she had to do was swallow, look like a fucking angel, and then leave me to retire to my office, where I'd have beat my meat to the thought of fucking her in that ridiculous black dress.

All she had to do was be good. Instead, she brought a homemade shank to my throat, something even the Quinns' brashiest enemies wouldn't be brave enough to do.

I should have shown restraint, but it turns out, I have none. Now that I know the feeling of her soft ass under my palm,

I'm desperate to know what her pain sounds like. What her pleasure sounds like. I wish I never knew that she'd rather spill her own blood than utter a single sound.

Every fiber of my being needs to know what it feels like to break her.

I wash last night's sins away in the shower, slip on my hardened exterior along with my Armani suit, and comb away the thoughts of Romy as I drag wax through my hair.

Drinking my espresso overlooking the gloomy New York skyline, I mutter another vow under my tongue. One I'm determined to keep.

I'll throw myself into work and avoid her. Family first.

But that'll only work if I appease her enough to prevent another outburst.

I grab my cell from the kitchen island and call Aisling. A few moments later, the elevator dings, and my sister strides into the penthouse.

Her first words aren't good morning or even hello. Instead, she balances her textbooks against her hip, swings her dark hair over her shoulder, and snaps, "What?"

I pin her with a dangerous glare, but I don't have time for my usual lecture. The one I give her every time she runs her smart mouth, the one about being lucky that being my housekeeper isn't her full-time job, her only career prospect, and actually, her entire reason for existing. Up until ten years ago, Quinn women were always staff. Maids, cooks, cleaners,

secretaries at Quinn Capital. But after the Bratnov war, it was one of the many traditions Lorcan changed. Thank god, because I couldn't deal with my bratty sister storming around my apartment all day, face like a slapped ass cheek. Instead of washing my Calvin Kleins, I allow her to live in the apartment below while she studies in the city. All I ask is that she keeps on top of the building and its staff while I'm in Boston.

"I need you to keep an eye on my new wife."

She flashes me a look, one I know like the back of my hand. Slamming her textbooks on the counter and dropping her hip, she barks, "Not a chance on this God's green earth."

I suppress my chuckle. Because while she might not work for me anymore, she sure as hell doesn't have a choice in doing what I say. "Yes, Aisling. It's not up for debate."

When she throws her head back and stomps a sneaker on the ground, she appears a lot younger than her twenty-one years. "Look, Don. I'm so fucking tired. I've been up all night studying, and the night before that, I was up all night cleaning up after your psychotic wife. Did you see she *shot the head off* that ugly-ass statue you had over there?" She stabs a finger to the corner of the room. "Did you see the *huge scar* on Ronan's head? That was all her! I've done my bit, going grocery shopping and picking out a wardrobe for her, so *please* don't make me do any more."

"You don't think you can handle her?" I say with a mocking smile. "You're a Quinn, remember? You're tough."

Her brows knit together. “Sure, you’ve taught me to throw a mean punch, and I take judo once a week, but I’m not equipped to fight off crazy.”

“Twice a day,” I say, draining my espresso and dropping the mug in the sink. “That’s all I ask for.”

She grumbles something under her breath. Then looks out the window like she’s reminding herself that the views from her apartment could be worth keeping me happy to avoid getting kicked out.

“Fine,” she pouts, picking up her textbooks and striding back to the elevator. “But if she harms a hair on my head, I’m telling Poppy.” She turns to wiggle a finger at me. “She’s really pissed at you.”

“So I’ve heard.”

As the elevator doors slide open, she pauses. Opens her mouth, shuts it again. Then says, “Don, I don’t know what little scheme you’ve got going on. You know I stay out of family politics. But...” She blows a strand of hair out of her eyes, pins me with a soft look. “I wish you would have told me.”

There’s a small knot in my throat. I cough to get rid of it. “Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

As the doors shut behind her, I busy myself with another phone call. Less than a minute later, Ronan strides into the apartment, adjusting his earpiece.

“Morning, boss.”

His tone is confident. His eyes tell a different story. They are shifting, looking for something. Someone.

I grind my back molars as I slip my wallet into my blazer and stride past him. “Walk with me,” I say, clapping him on the shoulder and getting in the elevator.

He stands in the corner, hands behind his back, as we descend. We pass the thirtieth floor. Twentieth. Somewhere between twelve and eleven, I slam my fist against the emergency stop button.

The alarm sounds. Ronan’s radio crackles. One look from me, and he brings it to his lips, tells my men in the lobby to stand down, then reluctantly turns off the frequency dial.

“I haven’t seen you since you let my new wife beat you up.”

The scar on his forehead stretches as he grimaces. He runs a hand over his shaved hair and grunts, “I don’t know what to tell you, boss.”

“Try.”

Thick silence swirls between the four walls. Ronan lets it stretch out for a few beats before meeting my hard gaze.

“You know what I always say, boss? Drag anyone down to the Tunnels, tie ’em to a chair and brandish a pair of pliers in front of their face, and you’ll see their true character in an instant. Most people react in one of two ways. They piss their pants and beg for their life, or they fight till the death.”

I drag a knuckle through my beard. He's right. "And which one of those categories does Romy fall in?"

His Adam's apple bobs. "I said *most* people, boss. That lass—your wife, I mean, she's...different."

I cock a brow. Wait.

He swallows again. "The second you left, I saw something in her eyes. Something manic. I've only ever seen it a few times in my life."

"Are you saying my wife is crazy, Ro?"

The sharpness in my question should give him pause for thought.

But his answer bounces back without hesitation. "I'm saying that if you tied her to a chair and brandished a pair of pliers in front of her face, she wouldn't cry. She wouldn't fight, either. She'd open her mouth wide and invite you to extract every damn tooth in her head."

I stare at the velvet wall above Ronan's shoulder, drinking his analogy in. He's my most trusted man, my confidant. When he talks, I listen.

"Can I be frank with you, boss?"

I offer a curt nod.

"I have a feeling there's something more to her. Tell me, what twenty-something woman do you know that carries a pocket knife in their panties? Who can shoot through the fucking eye of a needle with a gun they've never used

before?” His beefy hand brushes over his stomach. Over his latest wound. “She was too quick and too...*prepared.*” He licks his lips, then shakes his head. “And let’s not forget how you met.”

Yeah. We locked eyes for the first time over Danny English’s dead fucking body.

Silently, I punch the emergency button again, and the elevator whirs to life. Not another word is uttered until we step out into the rain, and my driver, Karl, opens the door to my Town Car.

Before I duck into it, I turn back to Ronan, who’s standing on the building steps. Droplets land on the planes of my shoulders with a dull thud, and some trickle down the back of my shirt collar.

“I had my lawyers do an extensive background check on her using the details on her passport. She’s Romy Daniels, twenty-four years old. Born in Ohio to a butcher and a nurse. Moved to New York to work in films, but it never panned out that way. Found herself short on rent, turned to Craigslist in desperation, and well, we both know what happened next.” There’s a knot in my throat. It tastes of unease and unanswered questions. “You’re my best man, Ro. Don’t get tangled up in the conspiracy of my wife just because you’re a little butt-hurt. Send up someone who can handle her instead. I need you on Belsky. We need to up our game and get some serious intel.”

Hardening his features, he nods. “On it, boss.”

I rake back my hair and slide into the car. Through the tinted window, my eyes never leave Ronan as we drive away.

If he'd been anyone else, I know my fist would have been around his throat the second he uttered Romy's name, and I'd have choked the rest of his sentence out of his empty lungs. I don't know why I feel so protective over her, but I fucking hate it. It's a feeling that bubbles under my skin, hot and uncomfortable, and it makes me want to claw at my flesh for relief. I loosen my tie and pop my top button like I do after a long day.

It's not even eight o'clock in the morning.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the wet window.

Even with her squeaky-clean background check, I know my wife has secrets. Dark ones that draw me to her like they are magnetic.

So why am I defending her?

And why is she such a goddamn savage?

Romy

A knock slices through the darkness. It's loud and weighty and makes me bolt upright in bed even though I'd been in a deep sleep.

I stare into the abyss. Blink.

“No.”

I don't think I've ever heard such desperation from my own lips.

My hands curl over the edge of the bed sheet, my nails almost piercing the fabric.

When the second knock comes, I want to die.

Lying back down, I bury my head in the gap between the pillows and squeeze my eyes shut.

Another knock. *The third.* Under my sweat-dotted skin, an ice-cold river seeps through my veins, freezing me to the bed.

Don't let him in. Don't let him in. Don't let him in.

I don't, but I've learned by now that the Devil doesn't need an invitation. It's his home, his kingdom. I'm just a pathetic pawn existing within it.

The door creaks open, and light floods in.

Heavy, dangerous footsteps grow closer. The mind is a powerful thing, just not powerful enough to carve a hole in the mattress, climb among the memory foam and the springs, and hide.

"I know you're awake."

His voice is that of nightmares. I bury my head further, bundling the sheets around my ears to block it out. "Leave me alone."

His hand finds my thigh so easily as though he's committed every inch of my body to memory. "You don't want me to leave, Romy."

Even through the thick bedding, my skin shivers under the trail of his fingertips as they navigate north. And that's when I realize I'm not afraid of his actions. I'm afraid of my *reaction* to his actions.

Self-preservation wraps its arms around me, and I kick out with my free leg. The heel of my foot connects with the iron wall of his stomach, but he doesn't even flinch. Doesn't punish me. When the silence becomes too suffocating, I chug in a deep breath and peek out from my hiding place.

The Devil is standing at the foot of the bed in all of his glory. Stark fucking naked. *Holy shit*. Under those Armani

suits, he's even more impressive. The thick trunk of his neck leads down to bulging traps above his broad shoulders. Then there are biceps, triceps, abdominal muscles... it's like looking at an ancient Greek anatomy book describing the perfect athletic form.

His voice cuts through the thick air, soft and pillowy this time.

“You try to hurt others more powerful than yourself, *Romashka*, in the hope that they'll hurt you back.”

I gasp at the sound of my name. My *real name*. The one my mom hastily scrawled on my birth certificate before dumping me on the steps of the *pustosh'*.

My shoulders snap into a rigid line, and a bead of sweat drips from my forehead onto my eyelashes. “How do you know?” I rasp. Before the fear creeps in, he rips the bed sheets off me in one swift motion. It's so quick that my nails tear from where I was clutching the fabric so hard. “What are you doing?” Panic edges its way into my question, something I never usually allow to happen.

“What you've wanted since the day you met me.”

He wraps his hands around the straps of my cami and violently tugs them from my shoulders. The thin fabric rips, freeing my breasts. It's instinctive to fling my arms around myself, but he catches my wrists and pins them on either side of me against the pillows.

“No,” I whisper as something wet rolls down my cheek. I don’t know if it’s the sweat bead or a tear. “I don’t want this.”

He growls into the curve of my neck, then carves a path with his nose from my collarbone down to my cleavage. I squeeze my eyes shut, and the droplets that escape them are unmistakably tears. “You do, *malishka*.” I wince at the childhood memory that word evokes, then wonder how the fuck he knows that word. “Your body betrays you.”

I let out a whimper as he shifts his weight suddenly, pinning both my wrists with one hand, using his free hand to yank my panties down my legs. He pushes my thighs open with his knee, then settles his hips between them. His rock-solid cock, which has been the center of my imagination in the hours since he spanked me, rests against my inner seam.

My fingers itch to touch it. My mouth salivates at the thought of its taste. “No—”

My lips curl over the scream ripping up my throat as he plunges his cock into me, muting it. “Break for me, silly girl,” he growls on top of me, picking up into a frantic rhythm. My pussy burns, spreading a white-hot heat through my walls and up to my lower stomach. “Let me hear you scream.”

Halting a sob in its tracks, I twist my head and bite down on the pillow next to me. “Fuck, you’re so wet, *Romashka*. I can feel your clit throbbing against my shaft. Will you come for me? Will you scream as I make you come?”

I shake my head violently even though the burning between my thighs melts into something else. Something

harder to detach myself from. Friction crackles between his pelvic bone and my clit, and I can't help the way I arch my back to increase the pressure. "Good girl." He cackles against the shell of my ear. His hard body flattens against mine, deepening his strokes. When he lets go of my wrists to wind his hand into my hair, I don't fight him. I don't slap his face or lunge for his throat.

I sink my nails into his back and draw him closer.

He rips the pillow from my teeth and grabs my jaw, pressing his nose against mine. "Look at me when I break you," he commands, quickening his long, hard strokes. Starbursts of pleasure fight their way around their body, my soul cracking under every unwanted firework. "I want to look into your eyes and feel your scream on my face when I shatter you."

My body tightens, the muscles in my thighs clenching as I fight against the tsunami of pleasure rolling through me. "No," I whimper before clamping back down on my bottom lip.

"Don't fight it, sweetheart. You're only delaying the inevitable." The Devil's eyes darken to match his tone. "*Now, come.*"

I do. Violently. Unwillingly. It rolls through my core like an avalanche, shaking all of the foundations that keep me strong and silent. It rips up through my chest and out through my mouth.

I scream until my throat burns. I scream until the Devil's laughter sounds like it's in a different dimension.

I scream until I wake myself up.

I bolt upright in bed, dripping in sweat and tangled within the sheets. The first sun of the season pours through the gaps in the blinds, flooding the room with a soft amber glow.

It was a dream.

My heart beats against my rib cage, threatening to escape. I sink back against the damp pillows for a moment, catching my breath. *How can a dream feel so real?* I know I'm awake this time because as soon as I shift my weight, my ass cheeks sting.

The memory adds to the wetness between my thighs. Biting my lip, I dip my hand down there and slide my fingers between my folds, stopping at my clit. It's swollen and sensitive, and the realization dawns on me like a new day.

My dream about being raped by the Devil brought me to orgasm?

With a defiant groan, I haul myself out of bed and stagger to the en suite bathroom, which Aisling must have opened for me.

I made a vow to myself to keep busy today. I can't sit around and do nothing because the demons in my brain talk too loud.

Under the strong jets of water, I attempt to wash all of my sick thoughts down the drain, along with my sweat and stickiness. I'm mindful of the sensitive skin on my ass as I pull

on a pair of black sweats, then I drag a brush through my hair and pad down the hall.

After my failed assassination attempt last night, I'm nervous about what I'll find. I'm half expecting padded walls, ten guards, and a straitjacket waiting for me, but to my surprise, everything looks the same. I pause in the entryway, eyes narrowing as they sweep over the space. It's as silent as it always is. But the lack of noise feels even more unsettling today.

Walking into the kitchen area, I peek inside drawers and tug open cupboards. The same plastic cutlery and cups greet me. I rack my brain to understand what game the Devil is playing when it suddenly dawns on me.

He hasn't taken anything else from me because he believes I won't do it again.

He believes his punishment was enough.

I swallow the lump in my throat, trying to ignore the heat in my cheeks.

My eyes land on the half-finished coffee cup in the sink. That, and the ghost of his aftershave lingering in the air, tells me he's come and gone already. Something that resembles disappointment prickles under my breastbone, and I flush it out of my system immediately.

Yeah, today, of all days, I need a distraction. I pour a cup of water and switch on the television mounted to the wall, then flick through the channels until I find a cooking show. It's

hosted by a plump blond woman, the type you wouldn't dare ask her age. She's baking. Blueberry muffins, by the looks of things. Great, because I feel like fewer sharp objects are involved in baking than in cooking, so I might actually be able to pull this off.

I busy myself by darting around the pantry, tugging out ingredients as the chirpy woman on the screen calls them out. I'm pouring out a gloopy, lumpy mixture the color of hangover sick, wondering what kind of drugs this woman is snorting to bake so quickly when I hear the elevator ding.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention, and my heart stutters. I grip the rubber spatula as ideas of how to use it tumble around my head.

Footsteps. Lighter ones than I'd expected. Then—

“You should know that I take judo classes every Thursday, and if you consider attacking me, I'll have no choice but to break your arm.”

I whip round to see a petite brunette standing behind the couch, arms crossed and eyes not matching the threat on her lips.

Aisling.

The laughter that rises up my throat and spills over the kitchen island surprises both of us. Especially me. I can't remember the last time I laughed.

“Why do I feel like you've really geared yourself up to come in here?”

With a pout, Aisling drops her book bag on the couch and steps out from behind it. “I have. I saw what you did to Ronan. I also saw what you did to the apartment. I’m the one who cleaned it up,” she adds, rolling her eyes.

As I take my time wiping my sticky hands on a cloth, I drink her in out of the corner of my eye. I’ve met her twice now, both briefly, but I haven’t ever properly *looked* at her. She’s striking. Long, dark hair, heart-shaped face, and gemstone eyes the color of Donnacha’s. They make him look otherworldly, but they make her look like a model.

“I’m sorry about the mess.” When she glances at the flour-dusted counter, I add, “Not this. I mean the other night. I was...*angry*.” I settle on a weak adjective because nothing near suitable comes to mind.

She pauses, pursing her lips. Then her face splits into a gorgeous smile that makes me warm to her as much as I resent her. “Yeah, I think I’d react the same if I was ever taken hostage. Well, maybe. Your balls are twenty times bigger than mine.”

I find myself smiling back. She braves the journey across the room and slides onto one of the stools opposite me.

“Are you the housekeeper? Assistant?”

She grimaces. “Try sister. I’m studying at NYU, and in return for staying in the sick-ass apartment downstairs, I help out around the building. Let the housekeeper in, water the plants. All that jazz.”

I look at her in a new light. Donnacha Quinn's sister. But she's so...*human*. "Sounds like a sweet deal."

"It was until my darling brother decided to get married and make me check in on his unwilling bride twice a day." Her abrupt honesty makes me splutter. She winks. "Call a spade a spade, right?" Then she nods to the gloop in front of me. "What are you making?"

"Muffins. Well, maybe." I jab my finger toward the woman on the television screen. Her perfect blond curls bounce as she frantically whisks something around a bowl. Hopefully that's not a step I've skipped. "I'm trying to keep up with a woman who bakes like she's snorted three lines of coke ten minutes ago."

Aisling laughs, eyes twinkling. But when she catches sight of the plastic knife on the counter, her brows knit together. "Fuck," she mutters, guilt clouding her face. "You have a fridge full of food and nothing but blunt plastic to cook it with. You must think I was taunting you." She waves a dismissive hand in the direction of the pantry. "Listen, there's a private chef on the fourth floor. Before I head out, I'll swing by and make sure he brings up three meals a day."

I blink. *Chef? Fourth floor?* Jesus, what is this place?

"I'll take that. Oh—and thanks for the clothes, by the way. I appreciate that."

Her attention dips to my hoodie and sweatpants. "Yet you're wearing the ugliest things I bought you." She sighs dramatically, punctuating her insult with a wink. "Honestly,

that was no problem. I love shopping. If I wasn't studying to be a teacher, I would have studied fashion. And besides, I charged a few things for myself to Don's Amex for the trouble," she chimes, lovingly brushing her hands down the arm of her black cashmere sweater. It looks expensive. I'm happy for her. Then she raps her knuckle against the counter, just like Donnacha does, and hops off her seat. "That reminds me, here's your card." She slides a black Amex across the island. "I've gotta get to class." Pausing as she picks up her book bag, she adds, "I'll check in later tonight. Do you need anything before I go?"

"A key to the front door and a restraining order against your brother would be nice."

She recoils like I've slapped her in the face. "Listen, I hate this as much as you do. I stay out of the family drama, and I swear to you that I had no idea why you were here when you first walked into the apartment. Don asked me to greet everyone and told me to make sure that when a Romy Daniels arrived, to bring her straight to the family lawyer." She rubs a hand over her features. "I didn't know it was to get married." She groans.

There's a sour taste in my mouth. Seems like I wasn't the only one deceived by the Devil. It feels bad enough being married to him. I can't imagine being tied to him by blood.

"I better get going," she says, flashing me a soft smile. "See you tonight."

Adrenaline. That's what hums through my veins as she bounds toward the elevator.

Triggered by the sudden realization that she's *leaving the building*.

She's unarmed, and despite all her judo bullshit, there's not a doubt in my mind that I could take her. A plan begins spinning around my brain, and when it slows, it's fully formed. It'd be so easy—I'd attack from behind just as the elevator doors slide open. Bundle her in with my hand over her mouth to muffle her screams. Who'd stop me? Not the guards. They couldn't risk their boss's sister getting hurt.

A plan so perfect I can already taste the New York winter on my tongue. Feel the breeze rippling through my hair as I run through NoHo.

My feet are onboard before my brain is. I'm moving out from behind the island and stalking Aisling to the entryway. Ten feet behind, creeping slowly, like a lion honing in on its prey.

The doors ding, and now is my chance. She steps into the elevator, and I raise my arms, ready to attack.

Before my hands find her throat, she turns, flinching in surprise to see me so close, and breaks into a grin.

"You know, Romy, I'm pleasantly surprised that you're so nice." She hitches the strap of her book bag higher up her shoulder and stabs a button on the panel. "I can see why my brother is so infatuated with you."

My arms fall limp to my sides. With one last glowing smile, she's gone.

And I'm still here, rooted to the spot. My head's thumping, wondering why the fuck I didn't snap her neck and escape.

I'm too numb to know if I walk, float, or crawl back to the kitchen.

I stand there, staring at the extractor hood. The woman on the television won't stop chirping.

Then I slide the muffin mix into the oven and head into the pantry to get ingredients for her next recipe.

Donnacha

It's been a long day sitting in various glass-clad offices in New York City, burying sinister threats under small talk and *accidentally* flashing the Glock tucked under my jacket every time I crossed my legs. Psychological warfare was enough, and I only had to snap three fingers to secure the word of every CEO on my list that they'd retract their support for Belsky's manifesto. Those three fingers belonged to the same egotistical cunt—James Broad, the director of a boutique investment bank down on Wall Street. New to the city and new to how things work around here.

It's been a long day but a good one. Less blood, more quivering lips.

Refreshing.

As I ride the elevator up to the penthouse, my heartbeat quickens with every floor I pass. I haven't seen Romy since our *delightful* dinner date last night. When she tried to stab me

with my own bathroom mirror, and I had no choice but to teach her a lesson.

I'm not a man who gets flustered. Hell, I don't think I have it in my DNA to blush. But I can feel the heat creeping up my shirt collar the closer I get to the apartment.

Professional. Polite. Think of the family.

My cock tingles in my slacks.

At the very least, Don, no more fucking spankings.

The elevator doors ping open.

“Are you seriously going to stand there all day, every day, like a lobotomized oaf?”

Romy's shrill voice echoes through the apartment, reaching my ears long before I clap eyes on her.

Ah, home.

Rounding the corner, I find her in the kitchen, hands on her hips and rage on her face. In front of her is a row of wire racks and baking trays filled with sweet treats. Behind her, thick black soot coats the backsplash above the oven. To her right, there's Paddy. Indeed, standing there like a lobotomized oaf.

I chuckle to myself. Romy's eyes slash to me. “What's funny?”

What's funny, is that Ronan truly sent one of our men who can handle her. Paddy is one of my oldest, most loyal men. We call him The Shield, not just because he's six-foot-ten and just

as wide, but because you can throw anything at him, and he'll take it without flexing a muscle.

I don't say that to Romy, though. Instead, I stroll over and place my palms on the island, extinguishing her angry gaze with my ice-cold one.

"Is it really necessary?" she mutters. "He just appeared out of nowhere around three hours ago and hasn't fucked off since. He even follows me to the bathroom when I go for a piss."

Up close, I notice the flour dusting the bridge of her nose, like edible freckles. I push my tongue behind my teeth to stop myself from licking them off.

"Did you learn your lesson yesterday, Romy?"

My wife falters. She must have thought we'd sweep the memory under the rug and move on. She shifts, glances at the lobotomized oaf, then back to me. My glare is unwavering. Challenging.

She nods.

A hiss escapes between the gaps in my teeth, her small act of obedience stirring up a storm in my stomach. But I clench my jaw, keep my features neutral, and nod.

"Paddy, you can leave for the evening."

He grunts something along the lines of "yes, boss," and a few heated moments later, the elevator whirs down the shaft, taking my man with it.

The loudest silence swirls around us, packed full with all of the questions I want to ask but won't.

Is my mark still decorating your tight ass?

Do you think of me every time it stings?

Can you defy me, just one more time, so I can convince myself I have to do it again?

Instead, I look at the muffins. "These any good?"

She wipes her hands on a dish cloth and shrugs. "You tell me."

I pluck a still-warm muffin from its casing and take a bite. Little clumps of baking soda burst against my tongue, and the undercooked batter sticks to the back of my throat.

Coughing, I reach for her glass of water and down it. Over the rim of the cup, she stares at me, wide-eyed. Hopeful. Brimming with a vulnerability I've never seen in her before.

"Well?" she demands, bottom lip sticking out.

"Incredible."

The lie fights its way past the sour taste on my tongue, and I don't know why I let it. I also don't know why I'm trying to protect her feelings over a bit of fucking cake mix. But her face lights up like Times Square at Christmas.

"Really? You think?" She spins and opens the oven door, waving a hand to part the billow of smoke, and pulls out another tray. This time, cookies. Or rolls. Maybe cupcakes? Hard to tell under the layer of charcoal. "I discovered this

cooking channel,” she says, jerking her head toward the television in the kitchen. “It’s on twenty-four seven, and the host walks you through two recipes an hour. I mean, she’s an annoying bitch, and if I saw her on the street, I’d probably kick her shins for my own gratification, but it works! It really works!”

She claps her hands together, bouncing up and down like a kid. There’s a silly grin on my face, and it feels foreign to me. I harden my expression and take a step back from the island, like putting physical distance between us will help settle the conflicting feelings in my chest that bounce around like balls in a pinball machine.

It’s not far enough. So I take a trip to the liquor cabinet, pour two plastic glasses of whiskey, and set one on the island for Romy.

She glances up at me in surprise, then looks back down at the liquid. “Is it poisoned?”

Wordlessly, I swap our glasses. This seems to be good enough for her, and she takes a sip, leaning against the counter. She looks girlish with the sleeves of her hoodie pulled up over her palms, cupping the liquor like it’s a cup of hot cocoa. This is the girl on paper. The one on the background check. Not the distressed hooker covered in Danny English’s blood who was one bad decision away from jumping out the window.

Ronan’s words tumble around my head. *I have a feeling there’s something more to her.*

“Where did you learn to fight?”

Her body flinches in surprise as if I'd just woken her up from a blissful nap on the sofa on a Sunday afternoon.

But she draws in a deep breath and says, "When you sell your body for money, you have to learn to protect yourself."

"And that's what you did with Danny English? Protect yourself?"

Her navy eyes turn black. "I already told you. I didn't mean to kill him."

"That wasn't my question."

Her jaw works, no doubt reflecting the chaos in her brain. Eventually, her shoulders sag, and she licks her lips. "When I was younger, there were these men..." She grips her throat as if encouraging her vocal cords to carry on. "Sometimes, they'd visit me while I was sleeping, and they'd..."

For some reason, I can't bear seeing her so uncomfortable when I'm not the cause of her discomfort. I feel the urge to end it.

"Touch you," I finished for her.

A jerk of her chin confirms this. It makes white-hot anger pool in my stomach. I slug some liquor in an attempt to extinguish it.

"Give me their names, and I'll kill them."

She laughs a bitter laugh.

"What's funny?" I growl.

Her mouth parts on instinct, ripening for a witty retort. But then she shakes her head and swaps it for another sentence. “I don’t remember who they were.”

“Every man who has ever paid you for sex.”

“What about them?”

“I want their names, too.”

She pins me with a blistering gaze. Those blue eyes swirl like lagoons during a storm. “Are you jealous?” she whispers.

Electricity zaps back and forth over the island.

I am, and I don’t fucking like it.

Downing my drink, I slam the tumbler against the surface so hard that, if it wasn’t made from plastic, it’d smash.

“I might hate you, Romy, but you’re still my wife, even if only temporarily. While you are mine, I have every right to be jealous.”

When her gaze drops to my lips, I fight the urge to smash through this fucking island, wind my fist into her hair, and claim her with them. I don’t know what this feeling is in my chest, but I know better than to give it a name.

So I do the sensible thing. I turn on my heel and head to the staircase that leads to my office.

“I’ll be away for a while.”

“Where are you going?”

I grind my molars together. “Home. Boston. I have work to do.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know.”

I get halfway up the stairs when a faint, “Wait,” stops my feet from working.

“Please.” Her whisper floats across the room. I shouldn’t have looked down at her, chewing on that plump bottom lip where my teeth want to be and twirling the hair that my fingers itch to be entwined in. “I’m going stir-crazy in here. There are only so many muffins I can make.”

It takes a few moments to mull this over. When she’s bored, she’s more likely to conjure up more creative ways to kill me. Idle hands and all. I don’t have time for the distraction. “Fine, I’ll have Aisling grant you access to a few more floors. But if you misbehave, I’ll take it all away.”

Just before I reach the door to my office, there’s another chirp from below. “Donnacha?”

“What, Romy?” I growl back.

“Thank you.”

Goddammit.

Without replying, I push into my office and sink into the armchair by the window. It’s been a long day, and I’m fucking tired. Too tired to figure out what this ache in my chest is. Whether I like it or not.

I feel like a schoolkid all over again, taking my first drag of a cigarette under the bleachers at lunchtime. That first pull

fills you up with darkness and makes you feel like you're choking.

But then when your lungs settle and your head stops spinning, all you can think about is that next drag.

Romy

The next morning, Aisling bustles into the apartment, brandishing a small square object and an excuse as to why she didn't visit last night like she promised. She jumps when she sees Paddy lurking in the corner. I roll my eyes, but I've learned to ignore him.

“I got caught up on an assignment, took a three-hour nap at my desk, then by the time I woke up, I saw Don was home. And well, you know”—she wiggles her eyebrows—“I didn't want to get caught up in the middle of that shit show.”

I'm sitting at a table by the window, holding a plastic fork loaded with eggs Benedict en route to my mouth. *Shit show*. When Donnacha came home last night...shit show isn't the first term that pops into my mind. I shovel the food in my face to stop myself from thinking about it.

Aisling's eyes drop to my plate. “You liking Franco's meals?”

Too busy chewing, I throw up an *okay* sign and nod vigorously. Since yesterday lunchtime, I've had three Michelin star-worthy meals appear in the elevator on a silver tray. Like Pavlov's dog, I'm starting to salivate every time I hear the damned ding of the elevator doors. I swallow and say, "It knocks gas station ramen out of the park. What's that you're holding?"

She grins, holding the card up against the gloomy New York skyline like it's the Holy Grail. I can practically hear the angels singing and the birds chirping. "This, my friend, is your ticket to freedom." My heart stops, and it must show on my face because she winces apologetically. "Uh, okay, not freedom. But your ticket to a few more floors of this building, at least." She hops from one heeled boot to the other, making the thin fabric of her skirt swish like one of those dashboard hula dolls. "Hurry up."

Stabbing my fork in the direction of the island, I say, "Try my culinary delights while you wait."

Peeling back the foil on the plates, she peers down her nose at my baking efforts. "What's that supposed to be?"

I crane my neck to see what she's pointing at. "Carrot cake."

Her lips purse, but she keeps them shut until she chomps down on a slice. Immediately, she splutters, chest heaving, and dives for the sink.

"Fucking hell," she rasps, cupping water in her hands and slurping from them. "I think I've been pretty nice to you! Why

are you trying to poison me?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. “I thought they were good,” I mutter, stabbing at a yolk.

She looks at me like I’ve gone insane. “You’ve tried these and came to that conclusion? Really? Do you have a single working taste bud?”

I blink, then mutter, “I haven’t tried them, but Donnacha said they were good.”

“Jesus Christ,” she hisses, dabbing at her red lipstick. “I’ve always thought Mom dropped him on his head when he was a baby.”

Two things seep into my brain. The first—*why did Donnacha pretend to like my baking?*—doesn’t warrant mentioning. The second stems from curiosity.

“Where does your mom live?”

Aisling looks up from the trash can and shrugs. “No idea. A brothel over in Harlem, if I had to guess.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” she says dismissively, dropping a whole plate of cake into the trash can. I bite my tongue. “Don’s my half brother. His mom died just after he was born. Robbery gone wrong by a drugged-up gutter sloth who spotted the diamond in her wedding ring from the other side of the street. So the story goes, anyway. Twenty-some years later, Pops got his bed-warmer pregnant. Paid her off and kept me.” She dusts off her hands and smiles a sunny smile. “Our family tree is fun.”

“And your dad?”

“Dead.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She picks up another tray, tosses it in the bin. This time, with more vigor. “Don’t be. You didn’t kill him.”

“Who did?”

“Your husband.”

The plastic fork hits my paper plate, making nothing more than a dull thud. “Donnacha killed his own father?”

Aisling’s lips twist. “Welcome to the family.”

My mouth opens and closes like a goldfish, but before I can muster up a single syllable, Aisling claps her hands, ridding the room of her heavy family history.

“Let’s go,” she whines. “I gotta be at school in an hour, and because I’m not allowed to take public transportation, I’m going to be stuck in the worst rush-hour traffic. My driver is too much of a chickenshit to go above the speed limit, too.”

Dangling the silver card above her head, she coaxes me to my feet. I follow her blindly, still recoiling from her bombshell.

Donnacha Quinn is so ruthless that he killed his own father?

Just before Aisling taps the card against the screen, she points a glittery fingernail at me and drops her tone. “Now, listen. This card has been especially programmed for you. It

won't work on any door that leads to and from the building, which is why it won't also need your fingerprint and retina scan. It gives you access to three more floors, each now with extra security." Her eyebrows shoot up into her dark hairline. "The boys in the lobby have been flapping all morning about it. Oh, and remember"—she stabs the middle of my breastbone—"I do judo, yeah?"

I'm barely listening to her, let alone thinking of an escape plan. I give her the nod she's waiting for, and we step into the elevator.

"First stop, the gym," she announces, pressing one of the hundreds of buttons on the panel.

A few moments later, the doors open to reveal a wide, white space. Treadmills, rowing machines, and weight racks all line up against the back glass wall like soldiers waiting to be called to battle. Two guards pace up and down the mats like they are on patrol.

"I've seen public gyms smaller than this," I murmur.

"Yeah." Aisling scoffs, looking down at her nails. "Wouldn't catch me dead in here, though, unless I'm making a phone call. It's the only place I can get a signal using my own iPhone, not one of those coded thingies Don always wants me to use." I whip around so fast to face her that she startles. Her eyes grow wide, and she retreats back into the elevator.

"Your phone works?"

"Let's pretend I didn't say that. Come on."

As we descend, I file her offhanded comment in a special folder in my mind, labeled “escape plan.”

The elevator slows. “And now here’s my favorite floor.” She grins, rubbing her hands together. “Ta-da!”

I follow her jazz hands and step out into a library. A stark contrast to the all-white worlds above us. Old books run along the length of each wall, and one of those ladder things that slide across rails at the top waits patiently to help you explore. Oak cladding, gold trims. Paneled windows that frame the leafy views of Central Park. In the corner, a guard sits in an armchair, reading a hardback.

Aisling inhales deeply as though she’s trying to commit the smell of dust and old paper to memory. She sinks into a red velvet armchair that seems to mold around her curves perfectly. “Heaven on earth, in my opinion. I study here, read here, nap here. And you?”

“Me?”

“What do you read?”

A flush creeps up my neck. “Um...” I scan a few shelves for something I recognize, then realize that it’s fruitless. “*Harry Potter*,” I decide on, albeit weakly. Before Aisling’s brows crease even further, I add, “But I prefer movies.”

“Mmm.”

“Uh, what else, then?” I wipe my sweaty palms on my thighs and back into the elevator, refusing to meet Aisling’s suspicious gaze.

She's quiet as she gets in next to me, and we both stare at the tufted velvet walls on the descent.

Floors tick by rapidly, numbers growing smaller and smaller by the half-second. "What's on all of these?"

"Don's New York-based men live here, including a few trainees, depending on what stage of their training they're in. The training pit is like, over five floors."

"Training pit?"

"Mm." She sticks out her hand, tapping on each finger as she lists the floors. "Fighting gym, gun range...and then the creepy floor," she finishes with a visible shiver.

"The creepy floor?" I laugh. "Sounds legit."

Her face turns serious. "It is. It's the final stage of the henchman initiation. You stay there for one night, and if you survive, then you're in."

I pause for thought. "What, gangsters can't be afraid of the dark?"

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. "You don't stay there alone, Romy. You go in with another trainee. In total darkness, both fighting for one spot. When the lights come on at dawn, whoever is alive wins. Obviously."

A sickly feeling works its way down my digestive tract and into my stomach. One thing I'd been told about the Quinns in the three days before I got here was that they keep the army within the family. "But I heard the henchmen only ever hire their own," I croak.

“Used to be like that. Couldn’t be a henchman unless you were born into one of the Quinn bloodlines. It was one of the things Don changed after the war.” I remember her talking about the war yesterday when she said she would have been forced to be a housekeeper. “But yes,” she adds softly, “the creepy place is for family, too.”

We descend in silence, but my mind is twelve floors up, thinking about the creepy place. I’m imagining what it must be like to be plunged into total darkness with a man you need to kill. A man who also needs to kill you. Every creak running your blood cold. Every footstep making your head spin.

“I think you’ll like the basement.”

The air changes long before the elevator stops. It’s warm, spiced with chlorine and essential oils. The doors open to a shimmering pool, set into a mosaic tile floor and finished with gold ladders on either end. Quiet jazz floats through the humidity. Distorted yellow light wobbles through the water.

“You’re smiling.”

And so I am. “It’s lovely. So calming.”

“Yeah.” Aisling sighs. “As soon as I’m finished with my exams, I’m going to come down here and float, for like, a week.”

When she claps her hands, something she has a habit of doing, the noise echoes off the low ceilings, creating a polite applause. “Look, I really gotta get to class.” She kisses the silver card, then hands it to me. “Any questions?”

“Am I the first?”

I surprise myself by asking it.

“First to be kidnapped?” Aisling whistles, raking her hair back. “I have no idea. Probably not? That’d be my guess. Honestly, I must be the only Quinn who would swap all of the riches and the reputation of having the family name for a normal life. I keep my head down and ignore all the... *darkness* that comes with being a Quinn.”

“No,” I say weakly. “Am I his first...wife?”

She cackles, looking relieved. “Oh, yeah. Of course!”

Of course?

Her abruptness makes me recoil. I think of the child’s doodles on the wall of Donnacha’s office. The girl in the Polaroid, the corners of the photo curling in to protect her.

“First woman he’s ever let into his home too, I’d guess.” She slashes her eyes to me and smiles. “Yeah, I know what you’re thinking, and you’d be right, up until ten years ago.” With a flick of her head, she beckons me toward the elevator. “He was a total manwhore with women dripping off every limb, or so the story goes.”

Heat prickles at my chest like a rash. *It’s not jealousy. It’s just very hot by the pool.*

“So what happened?”

She twirls her watch around her slender wrist, looking up at the ceiling of the elevator as if it’ll make us travel faster. We

don't go far, just one floor up, where the doors open and reveal the lobby. It's hard to believe it was only three days ago when I stood in this elevator bank with no idea how different this whole situation would turn out from what I expected. "After the war, Don went away for a while. I was young, but I remember it quite well. He went away for just under a year. When he came back, he wasn't the same." Three guards round the corner on a mission and create a barricade in front of the doors. "Back up you go, Mrs. Quinn," the blond one snarls. I scowl back at him, then turn to Aisling. "Wasn't the same?"

"Chill, Aiden, I was just showing her the pool. Back up a little, will you? You're making us claustrophobic over here." She gives me a *what-are-they-like?* kind of eye roll, then goes to shove past the burly bodies.

"Wait." I grab her arm.

She halts in her tracks, her bicep tensing under my grip. "Judo, remember?" The way she lifts her free hand like she's going to chop me tells me she's not very good.

"You said he wasn't the same." My eyes slash to the henchmen. They all look away. "He went traveling."

"Oh. Uh-huh. He was..."

"He was what?"

Aisling pulls her arm out of my grip slowly like a snail escaping its shell.

"My brother...he's always been so laid-back. It's one of the things I think makes him so terrifying, you know? Some

people don't take life seriously, but he doesn't take death seriously, either. But when he came back after his travels, it was like a darkness followed him off the plane. Like he was haunted."

She turns to the door, about to brace the storm.

"Wait. You said he was a manwhore before?"

She shrugs. "Yeah. And after, I never saw him with a woman again."

She slips away, parting the sea of henchmen. I'm frozen in my spot, stupefied by so much new information at once. Eventually, the blond man grunts, taps something on the elevator screen, and sends me back up to the Devil's lair.

Donnacha

The drive from Boston to New York—I could do it in my sleep. The tires of my Emira must have carved permanent lines down the length of Highway One because I take the trip so often.

It's been a busy week, bouncing between Boston and New York. Avoiding my sister-in-law in one city and avoiding my wife in the other. It's been easy to fold Romy up and stuff her into the dark corner of my brain where things get forgotten about because I'm balls deep in business.

Mornings in the Tunnels with the few CEOs on Belsky's list who need a little more convincing. (Let's just say, James Broad doesn't have a single veneer left in his bullshit-spewing mouth). After I dump the businessmen back into their natural habitat of Manhattan, shells of the suit-wearing pricks they were before, evenings have been spent doing some digging on our front-running candidates. Lorcan and Poppy narrowed it down to three squeaky-clean yet easily corruptible candidates,

and with a few...*visits* to their family and friends, I narrowed it down further to just one.

That's not the only breakthrough we've had. Ronan's managed to bribe one of the cleaners at Belsky's mansion in the Hamptons. For the small price of putting all three of her kids through college—Ivy League, naturally—she's popped our listening device under the desk in his home office. Now Declan is working with a Russian translator around the clock, transcribing every conversation.

Life's good.

When I'm busy.

When I'm not, I feel that itch again. The one that creeps under my skin and across my chest and tries to drag me into the darkness. It's the reason I have Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* album on blast every time I'm alone in the car. It's the reason I broke James Broad's jaw, long after he conceded.

Distraction doesn't work all the time. I give in, more often than not, to watching the cameras at One Diabhal Square. I watch her bake her god-awful muffins and almost set fire to the kitchen. Watch her run on the treadmill for three minutes before doubling over, wheezing, and shuffling back into the elevator.

And in the early hours of the morning, I watch her tangle herself up in the sheets in her bedroom and scream my name.

My knuckles whiten around the steering wheel at the memory. My cock stiffens against my slacks. I've beat my

meat to the sound more times than I can count in the past week. But it's not the same. *I need to hear it in person.*

Another welcome distraction comes just as I'm pulling off the highway. A call comes through the car speaker, interrupting the trumpet solo in "*Freddie Freeloader*." I glance at the caller ID and grin.

"What's up, kiddo?"

Cillian's signature grunt comes down the line. "Fuck, Don. I'm thirty years old, the head of the Philly and South Jersey outfit, and I'm about to be a dad in a couple of months. When are you gonna drop the nickname *kiddo*?"

My laugh is loud, spilling all over the dashboard. "You'll always be a kiddo to me, kiddo."

And he will. Cill was my first ever henchman recruited from outside of the bloodline. Youngest and most deadly, too. I trained him up from a teenager, and he was one of my most ruthless men until he was nineteen. He earned his freedom by saving Lorcan's life, moved on to become the world's most in-demand hitman, and did us a solid two years ago by taking over Philly from the Abruzzos when they tried to revolt against us. He's right, though. He's anything but a kid. He's proven himself to be an excellent leader and a solid businessman too. He turned his obsession with gardening and exotic poisonous plants into what he calls an *alternative weaponry* business.

Another crackly grunt comes through my speaker, then—

“Lottie’s heard you’ve taken a wife. This is the only time ever that I won’t break your nose if you call my wife a liar.”

Wonder what redheaded firecracker Lottie heard that from?

“Sorry, kiddo. Lottie’s telling the truth.”

He groans. “Don, what do you know about looking after a woman? I gave you a cactus, and you couldn’t keep that alive for longer than a week.”

“I think you gave me a dud.” I cut across lanes, the Manhattan skyline rising on the horizon. “Anyway, it’s all politics, my friend. She’ll be gone by the summer.”

Cillian snorts. “Yeah, I’ve heard that one before. Listen, Lorc told me about the *problem* in New York. Let me know how I can help.”

We both know better than to discuss shop over the phone. “You know I will.”

“I gotta go. I’ll see you this weekend.”

“You will?”

“Of course, fucker. At the winter ball. Make sure you bring your mail-order bride. Lottie needs someone new to chew the ear off.”

It takes a moment to realize what he means. Just like every family in The Network, Cillian and Lottie host a ball every season. Their winter one is this weekend. I’m about to tell him that my wife is far too fucking feral to allow her out of the

building, but I stop myself. Lottie knows how to throw a mean party, so mean, in fact, they've garnered the attention of the mainstream media. Every paparazzi and reporter on the East Coast will be there, and it's the perfect opportunity to get papped with Romy on my arm and show Belsky our hand. *Your move, asshole.*

We say our goodbyes, and Miles Davis pierces my eardrums again until I slide up to the front of One Diabhal Square. My men pull up behind me in the armored sedan, and Aiden takes my keys to park the Emira.

"Where's my wife?" I demand, strolling into the lobby. Despite knowing I should keep my distance, especially after what I've witnessed on her cameras after midnight, arriving home has given me the sudden urge to see her. The throbbing in my slacks dominates my decision—God gave me two heads but just not enough blood to work both at the same time.

"Swimming, boss," Paddy grunts back, calling the elevator for me. I stop and glare at him. He raises an eyebrow and says, "I didn't think you want me down there while she's... *swimming.*"

I clap him on the shoulder. Smart man.

The pool room is dark and humid. Jazz floats through the thick air at the volume it should be played when you're not trying to drown out dark thoughts of your wife.

My wife.

There she is, slicing through the center of the pool with long, easy strokes. When she gets to the edge, she curls into a perfect little ball, rolls, and kicks off the mosaic wall, swimming half of the next lap underwater until she bobs up to sip some air. She does this for several more lengths, unaware of my presence. I watch her, mesmerized by the power in her slender arms as they propel her forward and the peace with which she swims. My eyes fall to the curve of her ass. The cut of the black swimsuit rising high on her cheeks, where only faint yellow bruises remain.

Licking my lips, I loosen my tie.

My wife looks like a bad decision.

Just then, there's a flicker in an alcove that catches my attention. Like someone has stepped in front of one of the wall lamps, interrupting the amber glow. Hand on my holster, I storm toward the shadows, footsteps echoing off the ceiling like thunder. A silhouette comes into view, and I lunge forward, grabbing whatever fabric or flesh my fist comes into contact with first to drag the intruder into the light.

There's a whimper, then a face appears, spotty and young. Riley, one of my newest recruits, cowers up at me, a deer caught in headlights. I tear my eyes from his to glance south.

A half-opened zipper. A half-mast cock.

“B-Boss, I—”

Rage blinds me, zapping white and hot across my vision. I grab the nape of his neck and drag him to the edge of the pool.

He's splayed on his stomach, head in the water, long before he can finish his excuse.

And I'm going to make him fucking choke on it.

His throat gurgles under my palm, his fists slam against the tiles. As his breathing labors, I grab his hair and drag his head back. Something cracks.

"Jerking off to my wife will be the biggest mistake of your very short life," I hiss in his ear. He manages to take in half a lung's worth of air before I dunk him back in.

Looking up, I lock eyes with Romy. I didn't notice that she'd stopped swimming, but now she's leaning against the pool wall opposite me, her silver hair slick and shimmering, tucked behind her ears. She stares at me, unblinking. Like we're the only people in the room. In the whole fucking world. Finally, I might hear something tumble from her lips.

She can handle her own pain, but can she handle watching someone else suffer?

I grip Riley's neck tighter, shoving him another inch under the surface.

My wife's eyes never leave mine. She doesn't flinch. In fact, she's still as a statue, barely moving at all. Just watching, waiting. Expressionless.

When are you going to tell me to stop, sweetheart?

Ronan's words float through my head.

She'll open wide and invite you to pluck out every tooth.

She won't.

The realization crashes through me at the same time the emergency exit doors crash open. My men pour through them, bringing a sea of crackling radios and heavy footsteps.

A soft hand on my shoulder. A voice in my ear. "Boss, *please.*"

But none of it fucking matters except my wife. My hand drifts away from Riley's neck, limp, my knuckles dragging across the surface of the water. My men take him away, and a few seconds later, we're plunged back into peaceful silence.

Romy's the first to break it.

"Will he survive?"

"Do you care?"

She looks me dead in the eye. "No."

Her elbows slide behind her, pulling the top half of her body out of the water. It's instinctive to drop my gaze below her collarbone. Her nipples are puckered against the thin fabric of her swimsuit.

It's not cold in here.

Giving in to my wife's magnetic pull, I remove my suit like a serpent shedding its skin and dive into the water. With just a few strokes, I'm close enough to pin her to the tiles.

Up close, I notice her chest is heaving, her hot breath puffing against my nose faster than my heart can beat. I reach

up and tuck a wet, loose strand back behind her ear. She leans her cheek against my wrist, briefly closing her eyes.

“I’ve never seen you so angry.”

“I’ve never seen another man ogle my wife.”

The soft moan that escapes her parted lips fascinates me. I want to catch it, magnify it, and play it louder than the *Kind of Blue* album in my car. I settle for rubbing my thumb across her plump lower lip. Still scarred and torn from trying to resist my spanking.

“You like seeing me this angry.” My hand lowers to the swell of her tits, catching her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. Another soft moan. *Fuck. I hate how my resolve falters every time I see her.* “It turns you on.”

“I—” She starts, arching her back to close the gap between us.

I squeeze her nipple harder. “Say it.”

With a hiss of air, she says, “Nobody’s ever done that for me before.”

“Drowned a man for creeping on you?”

There’s something she wants to say; the air is thick with whatever it is. Instead, she crushes her lips against mine, snaking her hands around my shoulder blades and pulling herself onto my lap.

Her actions stupefy me for half a second before the longing tumbles out of my core and floods into the rest of my

body. I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her impossibly close, and cup the back of her head in my palm in case she changes her mind. Our tongues fight for dominance, swishing and swirling with one another until the desire to taste other parts of her becomes too strong. I want to crawl inside her and sample the darkness that lives there. Instead, my lips find the curve of her neck, salty from the chlorine, then graze along her chest until they reach her nipples. A groan rattles in her chest, vibrating against my cheek, and it makes me suck harder, flick my tongue faster. Her fingernails carve trails over my back, marking me as hers.

I need to mark her as mine, too. I pull away and wrap my hand around her throat. She leans into it, pinning me with a challenging gaze, just like she did the night she tore my apartment to shreds, and it makes me just as wild as it did them. I drop my hand from her tit and dip under the surface, pulling the thin fabric of her swimsuit aside to find the folds of her pussy. Against my hand, her throat bobs, and she trembles a little. I run a gentle finger through her wetness, trailing the path to her entrance before thrusting my digit into it.

She stops breathing. Her eyes flicker like a starry night but never leave mine. I fight through her tightness to find the front wall of her cave and curl my finger forward against it like I'm beckoning her pleasure out of her.

Coaxing the scream I demand from her.

She squeezes her eyes shut and throws her head against my fingers around the base of her neck. Grinding against my hand,

harder, faster, with every furious pump against her G-spot. My lips graze the shell of her ear. “Let me hear you, songbird.”

My nose navigates across the shelf of her cheekbone, down to her lips.

They are clamped shut.

I tilt my head up, drinking her in. Assessing the crazed desperation in her eyes and the pursed mouth that’s trying to fight against it.

The blood in my veins turns to ice.

It takes every block of self-control I’ve built over my forty-one years on this planet to pull away from her.

“Wait,” she pants, voice strangled. But I’m already on the other side of the pool, climbing the ladder. “Where are you going?”

My jaw grinds, and curling my hands into fists makes my knuckles pop. I stride to the elevator, painfully aware of my throbbing boner leading the way.

“Donnacha,” she cries from behind me.

I turn around, just long enough to pin her with a dark, angry stare. “If I don’t get to hear your voice, you don’t get to come.”

As the doors close, I slam my fist against the button panel.

What I said was a half-truth. I’m not leaving her there because she won’t give me what I want.

I'm leaving her there because I know how far I'd go to get it.

Romy

A whole day has come and gone since Donnacha left me panting in the pool, a throbbing pulse between my thighs and fresh fissures etched on my heart. The ghost of his lips haunts my neck, and in the quietest corners of the penthouse, I can still hear his dangerous whisper in my ear.

You like seeing me this angry.

Time passes excruciatingly slow. Minutes roll into hours, stretching lazily like a snoozing kitten, not giving a flying fuck that I'm on the edge of exploding. Baking keeps the demons at bay. I forgo the untouched cookbooks that Aisling left on the coffee table a few days ago—along with a sticky note begging me to study every recipe like it's a holy scripture before I even think about turning on the oven—in favor of Bessie Banks, the yellow-haired host from the Cooking Channel. She's become a permanent fixture in the penthouse, her shrill but sunny tones filling the void even when I'm not baking. When her segments finish, I immediately switch to a *TIVO* recording of a previous

show, and she'll walk me through another sugary treat, step by step, all over again, even if I'm curled up under a blanket on the sofa.

On the second night, Donnacha appears.

His presence enters the penthouse before he does, charging the air with electricity that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. The elevator shaft whirs, the doors ding, and heavy footsteps echo closer. Even when his imposing frame casts a shadow over the kitchen island, I don't take my eyes off Bessie Banks, watching her intensely as she kneads gingerbread dough with her chubby fists.

“What's on the menu today?”

I steal a glance at him and immediately wish I hadn't. He's wet, unapologetically so. His damp navy suit looks black, the shirt underneath now translucent enough to reveal the carvings of his abs. His thick curls have been raked back, little droplets gathering around his hairline. I wonder why a man who has the world at his feet would ever need to be caught in a storm.

I nod to the baking tray on the marble between us.
“Banana bread.”

He picks up a plastic fork and dives right into the doughy loaf. Lifting a bit up to his lips, it barely tongues his tongue before he declares, “Delicious.”

“Donnacha.” He cocks an eyebrow in response, running the flat of his tongue over the blunt prongs of the fork. My thighs clench together in an attempt to lower the heat rising

between them. “I know it tastes like a kindergarten science experiment. All of my baking does.” My voice drops to a whisper like I don’t want the answer to what I’m about to ask. “So, why are you lying to me?”

He works my question around his jaw, then plunges the fork in the middle of the loaf, making it stick up like King Arthur’s sword. He leans his palms against the island, clears his throat, and says, “Sometimes, the smaller lies are just smoke and mirrors to conceal a bigger lie.”

We stare at each other.

“What’s the bigger lie?”

He runs his tongue over his teeth, his gaze tracing every line of my face. It starts by flickering from one of my eyes to the other, then down to my mouth. Like he’s trying to figure out if all of the components that make me whole are strong enough to handle the answer.

Something has shifted between us, and I can feel it. Like the world has tilted on its axis a few degrees south, and it’s changed the climate and charged the air.

Wordlessly, he picks up the banana bread and tosses it in the garbage can next to him. Then he saunters around the island until he’s just a mere inch away from me.

I wasn’t expecting to smell liquor on his breath.

His warm hand cups my cheek. My heart quickens, then comes to a complete stop.

“That I really fucking hate you, Romy.” His grip tightens, his fingers curling into my flesh possessively. “I can’t stand your stubbornness or the way you’re so good at concealing the darkness you harbor within you.” His hand snakes around to the nape of my neck. When he tilts my head back, I’m forced to stare into his eyes. They look different, darker, pupils so black that I could dive in and disappear forever. *This is it*, I realize. *The darkness Aisling was talking about*. “Do you want to know my biggest lie of all?” he whispers harshly. I don’t move as a storm washes over the planes of his face. “I wish I’d never fucking met you.”

He’s gone as quickly as he arrived, trailing out of the kitchen like an unfinished sentence.

* * *

The next morning, the angry fissures running along my heart show no signs of healing. War wounds from the world’s smallest battle. I’m running on a few stolen hours of sleep, my throat hoarse from my nightmares.

Even Bessie Bank’s chirpy tone sounds sinister today, so I’m definitely not prepared for Aisling to bound into the apartment, spilling her excitement all over my morning coffee.

“Today is the day! Ball day!” As she claps her hands, the Cartier bangles on her wrists clash together like the world’s worst marching band. She towers over me on the sofa, the miserable charcoal sky not a fitting backdrop for the sunshine she radiates. But noticing my lack of enthusiasm, her smile

soon melts into a scowl more suited to the storm. “Why aren’t you excited?”

I take a sip of scalding coffee. It burns the tender wounds on my lip. “Because I have no idea what I’m supposed to be excited about. And because you’re one decibel away from bursting my eardrum,” I add into my plastic beaker.

“Don didn’t tell you?”

The last thing Don told me was a lie. One that’s been playing around my mind like a broken record. I shake my head.

Her eyes fling up to the ceiling as she mutters an oath. Flopping down on the sofa next to me, she says, “You know Cillian and Lottie Black?” She’s met with another of my blank stares. She sighs. “Of course you don’t. Cill used to be one of Don’s henchmen, but now he runs Philly and South Jersey. Long story short, they host a ball every season, and they *are the fucking best*. Even better than Poppy’s balls—” She leans in, gripping my forearm. “But Jesus Christ, *please* don’t tell her I told you that. Lottie, Cill’s wife, goes all out. Always the best venues and the most elaborate themes. This summer, the invite was a life buoy, inscribed with the question—*what were you wearing when the ship sunk?*” The way her eyebrows wiggle, I realize I’m supposed to be way more impressed than this. “It was on an old warship in the middle of the Hudson, and you could only reach it in these charming little fishing boats. Of course, all the men went as captains, and waiters, a few boiler suits thrown in for engineers.” She sinks into her

seat, throwing her head back for extra dramatics. “But the *women*. Beautiful corsets and petticoats. Tits up to their chins. Tulle for days. Ah, it was *magical*.”

“It sounds it.”

“The theme for the winter ball is Enchanted Forest.” She sighs wistfully, picking at the seam of a cushion. “I’m gutted I can’t make it.”

“You’re not going?”

Her eyes roll into the back of their sockets. “I have a really important exam on Monday. I’ll be in the library all weekend.” Poking me with a bony finger, she adds, “You’ll pick me up a goodie bag, yeah?”

My heart quickens. “It’ll be just your brother and me?”

She laughs. “Your *husband*, you mean. Yes, and like two hundred other guests, plus just as many journalists.”

Her words and their implication sink in around me. “I’m not going.”

The look she tosses me suggests I’m insane. “First of all, I doubt you have a choice, and second of all, I’d bite the hand off Hitler to change the day of my exam and get to go.” She leaps off the sofa and sticks her arm out to help me up. “Come on, girl. Last week, all you’d talk about was how you wanted to get out of here. I’m giving you a golden ticket out the front door, and you’re deciding you’d rather hang out on this sofa, listening to *that* annoying bitch”—she jabs a finger toward the

kitchen television, where Bessie is melting butter on her shiny studio stove—“drone on all day.”

Reluctantly, I set my coffee cup down, plunge Bessie into darkness, and trail after Aisling. She doesn't head to my bedroom like I thought she would; instead, she takes a sharp left to the elevator bank and taps away on the screen. “Where are we going?”

“My place. I had a dress made before I realized I couldn't go.” Her gaze trails south, judging my black hoodie and sweatpants combo. “Let's hope it fits.”

She steps into the waiting elevator and looks up at me expectantly. My eyes narrow. “You got real knives down there?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you're not worried I'll stab you?”

Flattening her hands and swishing them around like *The Karate Kid*, she says merrily, “I'll break your neck before you get that far. Come on!”

I find myself laughing, oddly pleased that she trusts me.

Her apartment is half the size of the penthouse and twice as messy. It's what I imagine a college dorm to look like: yesterday's pants strewn over the arm of the sofa, browning plants standing meekly in corners, looking like an impulsive Whole Foods purchase. Her bedroom walls are cheery with Polaroids of her and grinning friends stuck to corkboards and quirky quotes like *Namaste in bed* hanging in large frames.

A tinge of envy seeps into my chest. This carefree student life, where your only worry is what bar you're drinking at that night and when your next essay is due, was never an option for me.

Aisling distracts me by tugging out a dress from an overstuffed wardrobe. A slinky, strappy camisole, crafted from green velvet fabric the color of moss and finished with pink embroidered flowers snaking around the deep thigh slit.

“Okay, here me out. These ball bitches are so predictable. They'll all go as Helena from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Floaty pastel gowns, flower crowns, rose gold jewels. So, I thought I'd go as a tree instead.” She blinks when I splutter out a laugh. “What's so funny?”

“Nothing.” I take the dress, letting the delicate fabric fall through my fingers. “This is beautiful, nothing like a tree at all.”

“Try it on.”

I do, and despite Aisling whining that it makes my boobs look much bigger than it does hers, it fits like a glove. As she fills me in on these women she calls the “ball bitches,” she curls my hair and pins it back with an emerald-encrusted clasp, paints my face with a chocolate-y smoky eye, and adorns my neck and wrists with jewels that probably cost more than a decade's rent for Mak's and my apartment. I find myself tuning out, not listening to the story about a woman called Vittoria, and how she's on the arm of a different aging Mafia boss at every ball. Instead, I can't help but think—*is this what*

it's like to have a girlfriend? A real one. The only girls I've ever been close with are the ones from the *pustosh*'. Crammed into the same room and faced with the same career path of opening your legs for the Vultures, we were friends by default. I knew they weren't real friends because the last time I saw any of them was when the nuns were shoving us out onto the street with our paltry belongings in trash bags.

“Romy?”

“Huh?” I glance up at Aisling, who's looking at me expectantly down the length of her makeup brush as she dusts highlighter on my nose.

“I said, you look amazing. My brother will be drooling.”

The thought of Donnacha drooling raises a flush on my chest that isn't part of my outfit.

We move to the living room, where Aisling keeps the wine and anecdotes flowing until the burner cell phone on the coffee table vibrates. “God, I hate it when this cell goes off. It's a special one that gets past the signal block in the building, but of course, the only person who has my number is my brother,” she mutters, glancing at the screen. “And he's ready to go.”

We stand, me a little wobbly on my borrowed stilettos after three glasses of Whispering Angel, and Aisling folds me in the elevator with a peck on my cheek.

My heart thumps against my chest on the way up, my gut brewing with the unknown. When the doors slide open a few

moments later, Donnacha is leaning against the wall of the elevator bank with his hands stuffed into his pockets.

He's wearing a suit jacket the same fabric and color as my dress. A bow tie that echoes the pattern of the embroidered flowers on my thigh and a chocolate silk handkerchief elaborately folded into his top pocket, the exact shade of my eye makeup. His dark curls rebel against the sharp cut of his suit, roaming wild and thick around his ears.

Those fissures in my heart, they grow a little wider. Like the Devil has worked his fingernails into the cracks, prying them open.

He clears his throat and rakes his thick fingers down his neck. Discomfort doesn't suit him.

"We match," I say, simply to disrupt the suffocating tension. I dig my fingers into my palms to stop from reaching out and stroking his thick beard.

"Blame my sister," he says, the intensity in his gaze rooting me to the spot. "I don't do themes."

In two steps, he's in the elevator with me, standing by my side. Tonight, his signature scent of spiced aftershave and leather smells deeper, richer. More hypnotic. We both look ahead as we travel south in silence, our eyes trained on the display screen, watching the numbers counting down like a ticking bomb.

Again, I have the urge to speak as if it'll stop me from drowning in whatever *this* is. "Well, how do I look?"

Aside from his Adam's apple bobbing in the trunk of his neck, he's perfectly still.

"Want a truth or a lie?"

I'm glad I'm not the only one who's been thinking about it.

I decide to stick with what I know best: sin.

"Lie."

The elevator slows, clicking into the bank and opening to reveal the lobby.

"You are the ugliest woman I've ever seen in my life."

"You know how to make a woman blush."

And I *am* blushing. Maybe it's because the wine has softened my sharp edges, but I'm grinning like a maniac. I fall into step behind Donnacha so that he doesn't see it.

When we step into the rain, I taste the fresh air on my tongue for the first time in weeks. Feel the cold breeze rippling my curls and the alcohol-fueled heat cooling on my skin. It doesn't last long, though; one of the guards circling holds an umbrella over my head and folds me into a waiting car, way before a single raindrop can dampen my hair.

Donnacha seems oblivious to the bad weather as he saunters to the van behind. I peer out the back window and watch as he talks to the driver, an expression darker than the night etched onto his face.

The car dips under his weight as he slides in beside me, bringing a swirl of heavy tension in with him. I struggle to

wade through it, a sense of unease nipping at me as the driver pulls out into traffic. I steal a glance over at him, but the passing streets of Manhattan hold all of his attention.

It dawns on me like a new day. I haven't seen him smile or heard that sinister chuckle in over a week. No sarcastic retort, no threats to break me as his eyes glint.

What's changed?

I itch with all of the questions I know will never leave my lips. Instead, I rest my head against the window, watching the world I'm no longer a part of slip by. I remind myself that what's going on inside my husband's head is none of my business and convince myself there's no rhyme or reason for the disappointment weighing on my chest.

None of this will matter soon, anyway.

New York City melts away in the rearview mirror, and in just over an hour, we're driving through flat fields and narrow country lanes, leaves and branches dragging along the outside of the car like long fingernails on a chalkboard. Somewhere between the highway and the countryside, Donnacha's possessive hand clamped down on my thigh, wordless and warm. I do my best to ignore him, his electric touch, and the tiny starbursts shooting off in my stomach in all directions.

Yet I don't pull away.

Some time later, a soft glow appears on the horizon, distorted by the sheet of rain. As we grow closer, I can make out the shape against the black sky—a dome. It's built into a

hill, the front made of glass, the back melting into a grassy knoll, like nature is trying to reclaim it. We turn down a tree-lined road, lanterns and fairy lights and other glitzy objects giving bramble, branches, and bushes a majestic glow.

Aisling wasn't joking about them going all out with the theme.

Even through the rain, I'm lost in the magic of the enchanted forest, but I'm soon brought back to earth with a firm squeeze of my thigh.

“Romy.”

Swallowing the knot in my throat, I turn to face Donnacha. His eyes are dark, and for the first time, I notice the gray circles that underline them. “I don't need to tell you to behave,” he drawls, staring somewhere above my head. “Be a good girl. Speak when spoken to, smile when you're not.” His lips tighten into a hard line. “In other words, pretend you're my wife through choice, not because I took all other choices away from you.”

Staring at his lifeless expression, I find that in my sick and twisted way, I mourn for his spark. It's in the danger that drips from his tone. In his cruel smirk that raises goose bumps along my arms. In the threats he whispers in my ears.

I crave it.

So I stick my chest out, cock my head, and say huskily, “And what if I'm not? What are you going to do to me?”

I can hear the desperation in my voice, but I can't bring myself to correct it. Instead, I unfurl myself in front of him, laying bare and vulnerable to the potential of his punishments.

There's a vein that ticks in his temple. He takes back his hand from my thigh, which is punishment in and of itself. "Romy." The way he mutters my name sounds like a chore, and I don't fucking like it. "There will be no more punishments. If you act out, I'll just kill you."

Are we still playing truth or lie? The voice in my brain is hopeful, but I know in my heart that we're not. I can tell because his threat is devoid of all emotion and challenge.

I suddenly realize I've been enjoying his sick games.

Tears well behind my eyes, and I don't know why I'm being so goddamn stupid. Is this Stockholm syndrome?

My self-preservation kicks in, forming an iron wall around my dignity. This time taller and thicker and galvanized. I suck in air through my nostrils and wish that the heat in my cheeks would fuck off. At the very least, I hope he can't see it in the darkness of the car.

Remember the plan, Romy. You've forgotten about the plan. And being a butt-hurt little bitch wasn't a part of it.

Straightening my spine, I look him dead in the eyes. "Then let's go, *hubs*."

I don't wait for one of the henchmen lurking outside to open the door before I lunge for the handle myself. A strong grip on my forearm stops me.

“Romy, wait.” When I look around, there’s a small velvet box under my nose. My eyes dart between it and Donnacha, who’s looking incredibly uncomfortable again. His jaw works, like he’s grinding every tooth in his head. “Put this on.” He snaps open the box to reveal a diamond ring. Even in the gloomy night, the gem finds light to refract, sparkling proudly. “Don’t read into it,” he grunts, stuffing it onto my finger roughly. It fits like a second skin. “It’s just to fit the illusion.”

And with that, he jumps out of the car, rounding it and opening my door with newfound vigor. Icy air and spitting rain assault me, but I’m frozen to the seat, staring at the ring on my finger.

For the first time ever, I feel choked with emotion.

In the *pustosh*, there were no broken dreams because dreams were nonexistent. But I had one: One day, somebody would love me. It was nothing but a single flame in my empty stomach. I had no reason to believe in love—I was never shown any—and that flame dwindled down to an ember when the *pustosh* shut down, and I was plunged into the real world. There, darkness was so consuming that it left no room for hope.

But despite my stubbornness and hardness, somewhere, somewhere really deep inside me, that ember has always flickered. A small hope that somebody will crack my tough exterior. Not to break me like Donnacha wanted to do, but to love me.

To crawl inside my soul, where the pieces of me are most shattered, and love me there.

This ring was part of that dream, but being arm candy in a game of make-believe was not.

Donnacha props his hands against the doorframe and leans in to peer down at me. His eyes search mine, concerned. “Are you coming?”

I clamp my emotion under my tongue—I’ve become really good at that—and nod. I’ll play with the Devil because he’s my only ticket to escape this life and find that love for real.

Romy

As we approach the crowd lingering in front of the glass dome, my heart quickens, and anticipation makes my mouth water.

Donnacha's arm snakes around my hips and pulls me into his hard chest. "You okay?" he says, stooping to meet the shell of my ear.

I nod, but the sight of all these people makes me nervous. I was born in the shadows and have lived there ever since. I'm not used to being around so many people at once.

Suddenly, white lights flash, blinding me through the rain, and I bury my face into Donnacha's chest on instinct. "Reporters," he mutters, moving his hand from my waist to the space between my shoulder blades. "Smile and wave."

I don't. Instead, I clutch onto Donnacha's shirt and let him propel me forward, past the wall of guards, who part like the Red Sea for us, and into the dome.

The air changes instantly, like we've breezed into a tropical summer. I blink, steadying myself, and look around. "Welcome to the Garden of Eden," Donnacha says, brushing my hair from my shoulder.

"Whoa," I murmur. My senses are assaulted by a kaleidoscope of colors that extend beyond the fairy lights. Rich reds, yellows, and blues burst out from exotic plants lining a dimly lit cobbled pathway. "What is this place?"

As he answers, Donnacha guides me forward down the path. "Cillian Black is a plant fanatic. I'm sure there's a more sophisticated word for it, but that just about sums him up. This whole joint"—he gestures with the hand that isn't around me—"is a glorified greenhouse. A microclimate that allows him to grow the rarest and most exotic flowers from all around the world." He lowers his mouth to my ear again, tickling the sensitive skin there. "For the love of god, please don't touch anything."

The path opens up to the main dome, a cavernous structure crafted almost entirely from glass. Against the back wall is a rocky cliff face, shimmering water fighting its way down the cracks and bursting into a gushing waterfall. In turn, it leads into a river that winds through endless flower beds and disappears out of sight. Guests on either side of the bank are laughing and joking in intimate circles, their noise just loud enough to drown out the gushing of the waterfall.

"I forgot how fucking humid this place is," Donnacha grunts, plucking out the handkerchief from his top pocket and

mopping his brow. Then he steers me left, where two men are standing by a wooden bar.

One of the men immediately catches my attention. He has that gravitational pull that some men in power simply ooze. He's tall, tanned, and when he looks up from his glass to glare at me, I notice his eyes are the same color as Donnacha's

Immediately, I recognize him as Lorcan Quinn.

"Lorc, Cill," Donnacha grunts, hand on my lower back. "Meet my wife, Romy."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. The rock on my finger feels heavy. Despite the rushing water and the laughter and the violin playing softly somewhere in the distance, our little corner of the garden is uncomfortably silent. But I refuse to look away, pinning Lorcan Quinn with a blistering stare of my own. Eyes still trained on me, he holds his hand out to his side. A server immediately puts a flute of champagne in it. He hands it to me and drawls, "Welcome to the family."

His tone is anything but welcoming. In fact, his hostility toward me can probably be seen from space. "Thank you," I say thickly, feeling my back go up. I look over at the man next to him, Cillian. He's tall, broad, and dark. Cheekbones that could cut glass. "Thank you for inviting me, Cillian."

He nods in response, then takes a sip of his liquor.

Geez, tough crowd.

"Donnacha! Romy!"

Poppy emerges from a bush, waving at us. For a woman I've met just once, she's a welcome interruption right now. When she reaches us, she plants a flowery kiss on my cheek and slashes a glare to Donnacha.

"You look beautiful," she says warmly, taking both my hands in hers. "Love the dress."

She looks beautiful too. Like an ethereal being in a floating pastel pink dress, a flower crown woven into the thick red braid cascading down her back. "Helena from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, right?"

Her face cracks into a dazzling smile. "I'm impressed." She links her arm in mine and steers me away from the men. I steal a glance back at Donnacha, mainly because I can feel his laser-like glare burning into the back of my head. A warning, no doubt. "Come, meet Lottie. She's also Helena," she mutters, dropping her tone as we pass gaggles of partygoers who stare at us unashamedly. "But I couldn't kick up a fuss because it's her party, and she's also like, a million weeks pregnant."

Lottie is hard to miss. I spot her on the other side of the riverbank, clutching a large bump through the pink tulle fabric of her dress.

"Lottie, this is Romy." When Poppy introduces us, Lottie's eyes widen with a mix of surprise and delight. Her plump mouth opens, then closes again. Like she was just about to blurt out something she shouldn't. Instead, she smooths her silky black hair and looks up at me through her thick lashes.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so glad you’re here. I mean, if you’re happy you’re here? Obviously, you’re probably not here because you want to be, but uh, I hope that you can enjoy yourself anyway. Sorry, Poppy told me what happened, uh, I’m not prying but—”

Poppy slips her hand into Lottie’s and squeezes. “You’re rambling, darling.”

Lottie lets out an easy laugh, one that makes her sea-glass eyes sparkle. “I’m sorry. This whole Mafia don kidnaps unwilling bride is all quite new to me.” She rubs her bump absentmindedly and adds, “Don’t know how I ended up getting knocked up by one.”

“Join the club,” Poppy grumbles half-jokingly, eyes scanning the crowd. They light up when she spots someone she knows. “Sorry, ladies, Nova just walked in. I’ll be right back.”

When it’s just us, Lottie flashes me a girlish look. “Donnacha is treating you good, though, right? Blink once for no, twice for yes.”

I force out a laugh, but I’m desperate to change the subject. “This place is incredible,” I say, twirling the stem of the champagne flute between my fingers. “Aisling says you always host the best balls.”

“She does?” She beams. “Oh, I just love her. Well, the garden is such a magical place, but it’s taken me *eight balls* to convince Cill to let us hold one here. He’s so precious of all his...” She waves wildly. “Plants and stuff. But I just think,

why not? Gotta share the magic! The only other action this place gets is my monthly therapy retreats.” Her hand finds my forearm as she lowers her voice. “I’m a therapist if you didn’t know. Just in case you ever want to...” She shakes her head, like ridding herself of her rambles. “Ah, ignore me. Getting ahead of myself. But yes, in fact, some of my patients are here tonight. I know, I know, not very professional of me.” Her eyes leave me and land on someone just over my right shoulder. “Oh look—there’s one of my patients now.”

Taking a sip, I turn to follow her gaze. There’s a woman, waif-like and blond, floating between the clouds on her own.

“Oh, bless her,” she mutters, tugging at my hand. “She probably doesn’t know a soul. Let’s go say hi—”

But as the woman turns, I freeze. Pulling my arm from Lottie’s grip, I feel the garden spin around me like a shimmering typhoon.

“Romy? Are you okay?”

Lottie’s voice sounds a million miles away. I’m distracted by the sheer horror creeping up over my body, transfixed on the woman with the blond hair and alabaster skin.

Inessa Volkov.

One of the girls from the *pustosh*.

She’s older now, sure. And the last time I saw her was the day the orphanage closed. She was being dragged through the courtyard by a Vulture, kicking and screaming. But I’d recognize the sharp cut of her jaw and ice-blue eyes anywhere.

“S-Sorry,” I mutter, “I need the bathroom.”

I don’t wait for directions. I just turn on my heel and stagger through the crowds. Heads turn and mouths whisper—*is that Donnacha Quinn’s wife? I didn’t even know he was dating*—but I’m too focused on finding a dark corner I can hide in and collect my thoughts to care. I pass a large dining table, set up for dinner. I grab a steak knife and slip it into my bag. Then I find a path, and I follow it away from the crowds to an oak-paneled door. Inside, there’s a vast condo. The lights are off, no one’s home, and the silence tells me I shouldn’t be here.

I don’t care. I press against doors until I find the bathroom. But when I slam the door behind me, it won’t close.

There’s a red leather brogue wedged between the door and the frame. And just like I’d recognize Inessa anywhere, I’d recognize that shoe, too.

I stagger backward until my ass meets the lip of the tub. The door swings open, and a familiar figure darkens the doorway.

A Vulture.

My Vulture.

“Leonid,” I whisper.

His chuckle is thick, syrup-like. Trickling into the air between us. “*Malishka*, please. I go by Leo in the presence of these Yanks.” He takes a step forward, inching closer to me. “Which is why we shall speak in English instead of the mother

tongue.” Another step. My fingers curl around the rim of the bathtub. I wish I could dive into it and disappear into another dimension. “Because you never know who’s lurking in the shadows, do you, *Romashka*?”

Fear grips me. “What are you doing here?”

“Hoping to see you,” he quips back, smoothing down the breast of his jacket. He’s made no effort to indulge in the enchanted forest theme, instead choosing his signature woolen suit, complete with ruby silk tie and matching cuff links. I’m not surprised. In the lifetime that I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him in anything else. “How is married life treating you? You must be enjoying it because you went to his house and never came back to me.”

His eyes are, and have always been, the darkest shade of black. Like an eagle, they constantly flicker as if he’s always on the lookout for new prey.

As if I’m not enough.

“He didn’t allow me to leave. I had no way of keeping in contact with you. Leonid, I—”

The flick of his hand is enough to cut me off. It always has been. “I’m Leo tonight,” he says smoothly, “just like you are Romy, no doubt, and my...*wife*,” he says the word with a small chuckle as if he’s just told a funny joke, “is Isabella, not Inessa. Remember her? Tell me, will you ruin this assignment like you did your last one?”

My mouth is too dry to swallow. My words stick to my throat, sounding desperate and forced. *I hate how he does this to me.* “Danny English was an accident, I already told you.” *Already paid the price for that fuckup.* “I had the pills in my purse ready to go...but it didn’t work out like that.”

“No kidding.”

A sudden wave of anger floods me. “Shit, why didn’t you tell me who he was?” I hiss. “If I knew he was so well-known—running for the governor seat, for Christ’s sake—perhaps I would have been more careful—”

His slap comes hard and fast across my face, punctuated by the coldness of his ring. Then he’s on top of me, fist in my hair. The smell of his breath—coffee and those disgusting orange candies he sucks—assaults my nostrils. I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut.

I do what I always do.

I take it.

“Since when do I tell you what your assignments are, *Romy*? You just *do* them.” His bitter laughter scorches my nose. “This is what you wanted, no? What you trained in that orphanage for. To become a six instead of a whore? I gave you that opportunity, the only man of my standing who would.”

It’s my turn to laugh. It comes out even more sour than his. I stare him right in the black pits of his eyes and realize I’m not afraid of him. Maybe it’s the champagne and the wine and the surroundings. Or maybe it’s because now I dance with a

Devil far more dangerous than Leonid Belsky. “Yeah, I wanted to become a six instead of a whore. Instead, you made me both.”

He squeezes my cheeks so hard my teeth ache. “You’re nobody’s whore but mine.”

“Not if I do this, though, right?”

His smirk makes panic spread across my chest like a rash.

“Leo—no. You *promised*. The night I came to you after Donnacha visited my apartment. *You made me a promise*. You gave me that passport and a whole background story, and you swore that if I pulled this off, I would be free from you.”

His glare is ice-cold and unwavering. “But it’d be such a shame to let you go, wouldn’t it, my love? You’ve been with me for the entire journey.” His thumb grazes my cheek. Unlike when Donnacha does it, it makes my stomach churn. “Ever since you were fourteen. Ten whole years—can you believe how quick time flies? Ten years, sowing our roots in the city and chipping away at the establishment that took down the Bratnovs. It’s been a long game, but now I’m so close to being on top.” His eyes drop to my clenched fist. To the ring on my wedding finger. He lets out an ugly snort and entwines his bony fingers in mine, twisting the band around my flesh until it burns. “Everything is falling into place, and soon, the Russians will rule New York once more. And you, my love, could be right by my side.”

My heart thumps so hard it bruises my rib cage. “I don’t want that,” I choke out. “I want to be free.”

The acidic smile dissolves from his face and is replaced by a scowl I know all too well. “Very well,” he snaps. “Then do your job. Destroy him, and I’ll let you go. What’s one more murder, hmm? On your already long list? Just one more kill that stands between you and your freedom.” My mind flashes back to the shard of glass in the mirror. The journey from the bathroom to the dining room, that haunting jazz serving as background noise to my murder attempt. “But if you fail, my love, there will be consequences.”

“Consequences?” My eye twitches. “What consequences?”

He taps the diamond on my wedding ring. Once, twice, taunting me. “You’ll become my wife instead.” With a lasting glare, he turns toward the door. Then he pauses in the shadows to add, “Oh, and your little friend who pines after you so much?” He lifts his ruby ring in the air so it glints in the single beam of moonlight stretching through the window. Bringing it to his lips, he kisses it. “I’ll finish what I started with him.”

I push all of my weight back onto the bathtub before my knees give way.

Mak. He’ll kill Mak.

When I was twelve, shortly after meeting Leonid for the first time on the other side of the courtyard bars, he snuck into the girls’ dorms. Creeping through the darkness, he’d made a beeline for my cot. “*Let me see if you’ll serve me better as a fighter or a whore,*” he’d rasped as his weight dipped my mattress and his hand slithered under the covers to find my thigh.

Perhaps he didn't know Vultures had come before him, all with the same excuse and same sick intentions. What he definitely didn't know was that Mak slept in my bed every night to stop it from ever happening again. He emerged from the covers and punched Belsky straight in the jaw. Belsky, twice his size and weight, punched him back, the faceted surface of his ruby ring slicing open his young flesh and leaving a permanent scar.

Leonid despises Mak. But nowhere near as much as Mak despises Leonid.

Which is why I'd much prefer my best friend to believe I'm a whore than know the truth. I've been working with this Vulture since I was fourteen.

The bathroom walls close in on me. If anything happens to Mak, I don't know how I'd live with myself.

"I'll do it."

The promise slips from my lips like melted butter.

Belsky's chuckle echoes through the darkness. "Good girl. Your father would have been so proud of you, *malishka*."

And with that, he's gone.

White-hot heat engulfs me, and I want nothing more than to dive into the shower and scrub all traces of Belsky from my skin. But I can't. And I can't stay in the bathroom much longer because Donnacha will become suspicious.

Instead, I press my palms into the cold marble sink, sucking in as much humid air as my lungs allow, before

wobbling back into the party.

I see Donnacha immediately; he stands over a foot taller than most of the crowd, his amber eyes darting around the room. They lock onto mine, and something unexpected flashes across his face. *Relief?*

Whatever it is, it's cushioned by a softness I didn't know either of our blackened hearts were capable of. The partygoers split like hairs as he strides toward me and wraps his strong arms around me.

“We're leaving.”

His tone is deeper than the ocean and just as dangerous. It sends panic zapping down my spine.

He knows.

“Why?” I croak, “What's going on?”

But Donnacha is stealth-like and silent as he pulls me through the crowd so fast that I'm skating on my stilettos. When I glance up at him, his eyes are trained straight ahead, a vein I've never noticed before bulging from his temple.

We turn down one of the cobbled paths and spill out of a door different from the one we arrived through. It's quiet out here and cold. The rain falls heavy, every icy slosh on my bare skin reminding me the tropical paradise of the garden was only an illusion.

Donnacha's grip is vise-like until a car comes to a skidding halt in front of us, its tires kicking up mud and dust. The back

door flies open, and he bundles me inside like he's tossing sweaty gym clothes in a laundry hamper.

“What’s happening?” I shriek, “What’s going on?”

“I’ll see you at home.”

Home.

That’s not a good enough answer for me. As he goes to slam the door, I kick out, wedging my foot between the gap. He pauses, an animalistic growl vibrating somewhere deep in his chest, then sticks his head in the car.

His hands grab my shoulders and pin me to the seat. The rage contorting the hard lines of his face makes my heart stutter. “There’s somebody here who shouldn’t be, and I don’t want you around them,” he growls.

As he releases me, I grip onto the lapel of his shirt, dragging him back into the car. “Get in the car, Donnacha,” I whimper. “Get in the car with me.”

Confusion flashes across his brows, and he jerks his chin to the seat next to me. I turn. I hadn’t realized Ronan was in the car, his black tux melting into the dark leather seats. “Ro will get you home safely, don’t worry.”

I tighten my grip.

“Romy, what’s gotten into you—?”

“*Please, Donnacha.* It’s not safe. Get in the car with me, I’m begging you—”

He silences me with his lips, crushing them against mine with the force and speed of a bullet. His hand winds into my hair, fusing us together. He tastes bittersweet, liquor mixed with lemonade. After a beat, I kiss him back, hungrily and desperately.

It's not enough for him to change his mind.

"I'll be *fine*, Romy," he rasps as he eventually pulls away, raking his fingers through his hair, sending raindrops flying into my lap. "I'll be home tonight. Okay?" Cupping my face, he flicks his eyes around my features as though he's trying to make sense of my sudden outburst. "I promise. Now, *go*."

He slips from my grasp and slams the door shut. A sudden *click-click* tells me the driver's locked me in, too. Donnacha thumps on the roof, and the car peels off into the rain, leaving the glow of the garden behind us. I twist in my seat, watching Donnacha through the rearview mirror until he becomes a pinprick in the distance.

As I turn around, panting and shaking, I catch Ronan's eye. He's glaring at me suspiciously, unspoken words hardening his lips.

"What?" I snap, trying to keep my voice steady.

He drags his eyes from me, turning to the dark road ahead.

"I don't know, *Romy*," he spits out my name like it's a dirty word, "it just seems like you know something we don't."

I bite back my retort, instead choosing to melt into the seat and rest my head against the cold window.

I do know something they don't. I know what Belsky is truly capable of.

What I don't know is why I fucking care.

Donnacha

The rain hammers down on my shoulders as I stand in the mud, watching the car disappear from view. The ghost of Romy's kiss still on my lips.

What was that?

And why does it feel like half my heart is in the car heading back to New York?

“Boss.” Aiden's voice is low and urgent behind me. “We're ready for you.”

I tear my gaze from the horizon, rake back my wet hair, and force all questions surrounding my wife out of my brain.

Aiden, Jon, and Conor fall in step behind me as I round the dome, making a beeline for the Blacks' private quarters. My men are everywhere, all on high alert after the Belsky sighting. Some are muttering into radios, their hands cupped to their mouths to shelter their commands from the wind. Others are

stalking the perimeter, looking for any other suspicious behavior.

Fucking Belsky. I was scanning for Romy when I saw him, champagne in one hand, whore in the other. Smiling and joking like he has every right in the goddamn world to be here.

I curl my fists as we get closer to the entrance of the condo, my knuckles popping deliciously. Poppy and Lottie are hovering in the doorway, flanked by three of Cillian's men and three of mine.

Lottie's hand shoots through the circle of men and grabs me as I pass. "Don," she whines, eyes watering. "I had no idea who she was, I swear."

I pause to look down at her. "Who?"

"Isabella. She's one of my clients. I had no idea she was this Belsky's wife. I invited her. That's why he's here." Her bottom lip trembles before letting out a sob. Next to her, Poppy's fiercely silent, rubbing her friend's arm protectively. "It's all my fault, and now the night's *ruined*."

A tiny part of me softens. My men part as I stoop to kiss her wet cheek. "Don't worry about it, Lottie. It's not your fault." I flash her the best grin I can muster. "You just throw the most awesome parties that even our number-one enemy couldn't keep away." Then I slide off my watch and hand it to Aiden, who pockets it diligently. "Now, we're going to remove this gatecrasher so you can go back to being the belle of the ball, all right?"

She smiles shyly and tilts her head into a nod. I chuck her under the chin and continue into the condo, the anger under my skin intensifying with every step.

This asshole isn't going to infiltrate my family and get away with it.

I start shedding clothes, like peeling away the most composed parts of me to unleash the beast underneath. My bow tie. My jacket. I even pop my cuff links out, letting them roll across the floor, so I can get the best reach possible when I swing for his jaw.

As I stride into Cillian's living room, Belsky is lounging on the sofa like he owns the joint. Tie loosened, top button popped. Cigar dangling from the crook of his smirking lips.

Cillian sits opposite, legs wide and fingers steepled. That stone-cold expression on his face reminds me why he was always one of my best men. Lorcan stands by his side, hand on his shoulder.

My men lurk in the shadows, guns loaded and cocked, ready for my command.

Cracking my neck, I wade through the furniture and loom over Belsky. My men might be ready to pull the trigger, but I'm not letting this fucker take the easy way out.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I growl.

He looks up at me with uncertainty, then holds his hands up in mock surrender and slowly dips into his blazer pocket. *Click-click* goes several of my men's safety catches. But he

pulls out a lighter and kisses the flame to the end of his cigar. “Relax,” he drawls, puff-puffing until the tip glows red. “I was invited.”

There’s a flurry behind me. Heavy footsteps, then Lorcan is by my side, snatching the cigar from Belsky’s mouth. He snaps it in two and tosses it over his shoulder.

I can’t help but think the sudden burst of anger isn’t over Belsky’s cockiness. It’s because he bought Cillian this sofa and armchair set as a wedding present.

It belonged to JFK.

“Is this a no-smoking area?” he asks, trying to keep the ice in his voice. But I can tell by the way he runs his palms over his slacks that my cousin has him rattled. “I didn’t see the sign.”

“Start talking, Belsky,” Lorcan snarls, towering over him like a skyscraper. “What’s your game? You really think you’ll take New York from me?” He lunges, pinning him to the seat by his shoulders. “Over my cold, dead body.”

“Then so be it.”

I grip Lorcan’s arm and yank him back before he can curl his hand into a fist and connect it to Belsky’s smart-ass mouth. Not because I wouldn’t love to see him get sucker punched, but because it’s not Lorcan’s job. It’s mine.

With a huff, Lorcan takes a few steps back into the shadows. No doubt doing those fucking breathing techniques.

“Give me one reason I shouldn’t kill you right now?” I say quietly, my biceps clenching at the thought.

He chuckles. “You *could* kill me right now. After all, I came here alone. My men are miles away, and I am on your territory, at your mercy.” He wipes his lips with the back of his hand and shrugs. “But you won’t. Why? Because you know I’m a part of something bigger. You won’t be killing me. You’ll simply be chopping the head off the snake. Another will grow back, bigger and stronger.” Leaning his elbows on his knees, he looks up at me. Almost angelic, if it wasn’t for his dark and dangerous glare. “Think of me as the tip of the iceberg. You have no idea how big it runs under the water.”

Drawing in a lungful of air through my nostrils, I turn to Lorcan. He knows the look—*give me the word, and I’ll end his life. Give me something, anything, and I’ll cut off every fucking limb with the bluntest knife in my arsenal.*

Lorcan tugs at his tie and shakes his head.

“I hear you have a candidate,” Belsky says, more confidence edging into his voice. “Paul Polansky.” He pops out the P’s for dramatic effect. “Nice guy, isn’t he? A real man of the people. A human rights lawyer who’s lived in a Queen’s walk-up his entire life. Dedicates the last Sunday of every month to helping out at a soup kitchen. And perfectly corruptible,” he muses, rubbing the shadow on his jaw. “Gets American citizens out of prisons throughout the Middle East, then takes back-hand bribes from their tourism boards in

exchange for telling international media how cooperative their government has been. A perfect balance of good and bad.”

“I see you’ve done as much research as we have,” Lorcan growls, stepping out of the shadows. “I’m glad. Then you’ll also know how easy it’ll be to beat you with him on our side.”

But Belsky isn’t listening. He’s turned his attention to me, eyes sparkling. “I’ve done a lot of research on all of you actually. Especially you, Donnacha. I see you’ve taken a new wife.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I refuse to give this asshole the satisfaction of knowing it. “You’ll do well to keep my wife’s name out of your mouth, my man.”

“She’s very beautiful...” He taps his lip as if he’s pondering. As if he has more than one fucking brain cell to ponder with. “In fact, she looks familiar. Is there a reason I might recognize her? Perhaps she offers some sort of *service* that I might have hired her for—”

He doesn’t get to finish that sentence because I smash my hand into his throat, then get a good grip on it. At first, he tries to be a man by not whimpering or attempting to claw himself out of my grasp, but it doesn’t take him long to realize I’m not letting up. There’s a hand on my shoulder, and when I turn around, Cillian is by my side. We lock eyes, and he nods. I know exactly what he’s saying. *You might not be my boss anymore, and this might not be my battle to fight, but I’ll always have your back.*

Just when Belsky's face is turning the color of a nasty bruise and his blood vessels burst across his face in veiny spiderwebs, Lorcan clears his throat.

“Enough.”

A beat passes. I give his vocal cords one last squeeze for good measure, then send him flying backward into the sofa.

Lorcan comes between us, placing a firm hand on my chest. “We won't kill you, Belsky. Not today, at least. No, we'll fight you fair and square in the political arena. We have nothing to hide, and if you don't either, then the best man will win.”

Belsky rubs at his throat, and there's a rattle in his chest every time he breathes. He eyes Lorcan with caution. I eye him in disbelief. *Are you fucking kidding me?* But Lorcan doesn't even look up at me. Instead, he sticks his hand out and pulls him to his feet.

“Fair and square?” he repeats monotonously.

A few raspy seconds pass, but Belsky eventually nods.

Lorcan tilts his chin toward the shadows, and my men come pouring out of it like spiders hiding under the floorboards. “Our men will escort you out.” And they do, dragging him by his lapel before he can utter another strangled sound. “Cillian? Would you give us a moment, please?”

Wordlessly, Cillian leaves the room.

The second the door clicks shut, I explode.

“Fair and square?” I spit at my cousin, dragging a knuckle through my beard. “You gotta be shitting me, Lorc. We had him *right there*. I could feel his pulse weakening under my thumb, for fuck’s sake.” I stop pacing the carpet long enough to jab a finger in his direction. “Ten years ago, you’d have burned this fucker alive.”

Lorcan sinks into an armchair and tucks his hands under his chin. “Ten years ago, we were nothing but thugs. Now we’re a fully formed dynasty with more than just gun and drug shipments to worry about. We have businesses—legit ones—and investments up and down the East Coast. He’s announcing his candidacy to the public next week, and so is Polansky. And when they do, their faces will be everywhere. Give it a few months, and Polansky will shit all over this guy. And when he fades into the background, that’s when we’ll kill him. When the world isn’t watching, and nobody remembers his goddamn name.”

Venom pools under my tongue. I stuff my hands in my pockets and spit out some curse words.

“What’s gotten into you, Don?” The softness in Lorc’s tone sounds like a foreign language. It makes me whip my head around to face him. “You came in here at full speed, ready to take that motherfucker out. That isn’t you. It’s *never* been you. Since when do you start leading with your emotions instead of being chillingly cold?”

I turn away from him before he sees my expression.

He's right. I'm coming undone like a cheap suit. "There's only one other time I've seen you like this, and it was ten years ago when you came back from traveling."

The knife in my chest twists. He's never known what happened when I was out in the wild. Never asked, and I'll never tell him.

"Your wife," he murmurs, rising to his feet. "Look at what she's doing to you. She's boiling your blood." He closes the gap between us and grips my jaw, resting his forehead against mine. "Remember," he whispers, "family before everything else."

My blood is about to boil over, so I shove him away and stride across the room. "Don't ever question my loyalty to this family, Lorcan," I snarl, slashing him with a death glare. "And don't ever forget what I've sacrificed to keep this family safe."

My sanity.

"I'm going home." I snatch up my jacket from where it's strewn across a chair and pluck my bow tie from the carpet. "Got work to do."

Without another word, I stride out of Cillian's condo, a horrible desire crawling under my skin.

I need to see my wife.

Outside One Diabhal Square, Ronan is hunched over in the rain, puffing on a cigarette.

He stubs it out as I stride up the steps. “You’re home early. Belsky dead already?”

“I wish. Where’s my wife?”

“Upstairs in the fine care of Paddy.” He reaches into his jacket, tugs out a soaked cigarette pack, and slides another between his lips. “She had quite the reaction in there.”

I pause in the doorway. ““What do you mean?””

He takes a drag, the tip of his cigarette glowing angrily. “At the ball. Seemed like she knew exactly what the danger was and who it was coming from.” Through the billow of smoke, he adds, “And she sure didn’t want you hanging around.”

I turn, facing my right-hand man head-on. “You gonna get to the point, or are you going to keep me standing in the fucking rain?”

“All I’m saying is that last week, she tried to stab you in the goddamn neck. This week, she’s begging you not to get hurt. What’s changed?”

“Maybe she’s warmed to me.”

“Maybe she has a guilty conscience.”

Grinding my jaw, I leave him there to chain-smoke, and get in the elevator. As it takes me up to the penthouse, my own words reverberate around my head.

Maybe she's warmed to me.

Maybe I'm not imagining it. While I've been trying so goddamn hard to avoid her for the past week, she seems to have softened. The stolen glances in the car. The watery eyes when I slipped that ring on her finger.

That kiss.

Things change. Feelings shift.

More fucked-up events have happened in this world.

I find her on the sofa, curled up in a ball with the television remote clenched in her fist. On the screen, that obnoxious chef she's been taking cooking lessons from squawks about a risotto. *Does she ever take a fucking break?*

I nod over at Paddy in the corner, letting him know he can leave. He does so with a little grunt, trotting to the elevator and disappearing.

She doesn't wake as I pry the remote from her hand, but when I turn the television off, plunging us into silence, her eyes ping open, frantic and confused. They land on me, coming into focus.

"You're here."

"I told you I would be. You made quite the scene."

"I was scared."

I study her bloodshot eyes, looking for a hint of a lie. "You're not the type of woman who gets scared, Romy."

There's a flicker of panic. It doesn't last long, but I catch it before she replaces it with a hardened glare. "Drunk, then." She swallows. "Did I embarrass you?" She glances at my lips. "Are you going to punish me?"

I take my time, running my thumb over her mascara-stained cheeks. Feeling her soft flesh under my pad. "I already told you. I'm not going to punish you anymore."

There's no missing the disappointment that creases her brow. It makes my cock tingle violently. She arches her back, the other strap of her dress sliding off her shoulders, and pulls something from underneath her.

A knife.

Serrated, gold handle. Gleaming like a treasure between us.

"What about this?" she rasps, chest rising and falling. "I stole it from the table setting. Is that enough for punishment?"

A low, animalistic growl rumbles in my chest. Romy appeals to the darkest, most depraved part of me. I'd given her an out, so why does she continue to poke me there?

In half a second, I'm on top of her with the knife in my hand, and the sharpest point pressed to her throat. A little hiss escapes her lips, a sound so beautiful I want to claw inside her mouth and turn up the volume. She arches her neck, pushing into the blade.

"Why do you want me to punish you so badly, sweetheart?" I murmur, watching her in fascination.

“Maybe I like being hurt.” Her hip bones push into mine. My boner fits perfectly between her thighs. “Maybe I deserve it.”

A low chuckle seeps out of me, one she doesn't like. She twists her head, sulking, but I grab her jaw and pull her back to face me. “Wanna know the biggest difference between you and me?” I push down on the knife, feeling the tension against the surface of her skin. Feeling how her throat vibrates with a moan. *Fuck*. “You're hurt, so you want to hurt more. When I'm hurt, I want to hurt other people.”

She laughs bitterly. “I've hurt other people too.”

Is this what's consuming her? Killing Danny English?

I trace the knife down the length of her neck, leaving nothing more than a faint red line. When I reach the neckline of her dress, I dip the cold blade underneath the fabric, running it over the curve of her breast.

“Please, don't tempt me, sweetheart. I've done a good job of staying out of the way of temptation this week.”

“That's why you've been avoiding me?”

I know the blade meets her nipple because her fingers dig into my bicep. Her perfect mouth parts, and she briefly closes her eyes. Instead of answering her question, my lips find her other nipple, hardened against the velvet fabric of her dress. I clamp my teeth on it, enjoying how she bucks against me. God, she's so fucking hard to resist. With every muffled gasp,

every fingernail that pierces my flesh, I just want to rip her open and break her into a million sharp pieces.

But I can't. I *fucking can't*. Emelia rattles in the locked box somewhere in the shadows of my brain. And for a moment, I can hear her cries in my ear. Feel her wet tears dripping onto my chest. Guilt winds around my neck like the noose she put around her own.

Two heads. Not enough blood for both.

I look up at Romy through my lashes with an idea fully formed in my mind. "You want me to punish you, Romy?"

Her body stiffens, and wordlessly, she fuses her lips together, her eyes dancing. Ready for battle.

Without warning, I toss the knife across the room and curl my arms around her, scooping her up in one swift motion, blanket and all.

"Where are we going?" she gasps as her legs latch around my waist.

I ignore her, and instead, I stride down the hall, bursting through the door at the end. Gripping her tighter, I take the spiral stairs up to my bedroom suite and drop her on the bed like she weighs nothing.

My eyes follow her, hot and hungry, as she lands on the silk sheets, breasts bouncing against the fabric of her dress.

Taking a step back, I look up at the skylight above my bed and mutter a few curses under my breath. Having her spread out like a goddamn buffet, panting and willing, puts a slight

damper on my plan. I'm dizzy with how much I want her. Drunk on the thought of sinking my teeth into her flesh and peeling away her layers. Exposing the darkness within her.

But I draw a deep breath and climb on top of her, clamping her hips between my thighs. Sliding her arms out of her dress, I yank it down, freeing her beautiful tits.

She squirms underneath me as I expose her, still biting down on that goddamn lip. Navy eyes heating up, expectantly. For her, it's a sick game of chess. She's the novice, begging for the chance to lose to the grand master. And I'm the grand master, only I'm torn between wanting to win the game and not wanting to break this novice's spirit.

I have to tear my eyes away from her gaze before I put my fist through the headboard. Instead, I turn my attention to her chest, dipping my tongue between her cleavage and up to one of her nipples, clamping down on it. *Fuck, it feels even better than it does over her dress.* Her fingers entwine themselves in my hair as she drags me closer to her and arches her back so she's closer to me. Until not one single inch of thick air is between my mouth and her sweet, hardened nub.

Pulling back, I trace a delicate finger over the teeth marks now circling her nipple. They are red and angry and won't be the only way I mark her tonight.

I crave more.

Dipping my hand between her thighs, I lie flat against her and suck on her throat. Hard and slow, my mouth pulls at her delicate flesh where the knife was just minutes earlier. Romy's

nails claw against my scalp, a tiny, pathetic whimper somehow managing to escape her stubborn lips. Her fingers flex in my hair, and she pulls my head up.

I search her face cautiously, but the desperation coloring her cheeks pink tells me she wants this as much as I do. Her eyes drop to my lips, then she fuses them against hers. Her hands slide from my hair to my jaw, holding me with the dominance I've never felt from a woman.

She might be fighting the noise of her lust, but I'm not. I have no qualms about forcing her mouth open with my tongue and groaning into the silence that lives there. I can taste every unformed moan, every unspoken secret, yet still not feel any closer to knowing the real her.

But I'm not worried about what's in her pretty little head tonight. I just need her flesh under my tongue and her pussy around my cock. Sitting back on my knees, I tear at my zipper and yank off my slacks and boxers. Her eyes pop as they drop to my dick, thick and swollen and glistening, all for her.

Taking her by the hips, I pull her onto my lap and wipe a bead of sweat off her brow. "Sorry to interrupt the fun. Are you protected?"

She shakes her head.

I lunge over to the bedside drawer, grab a condom, and rip the wrapper open with my teeth. More gently than I intend, I lower her back to the bed, and I almost come right then and there when she parts her legs for me, revealing the slick, pink folds nestled between them.

Grazing over every inch of her exposed flesh, I feel my chest tighten. *I'm getting into dangerous territory here.* She watches, trance-like, as I pump my cock in my fist, dragging the tip along her juices.

Her fingers dig into the bed sheets, eyes growing wide. They chase me, something that looks like concern clouding the edges. Maybe she's worried that once I enter her, she won't be able to control what comes from her mouth.

Maybe she's worried I'll take what she wants away to spite her stubbornness.

"Relax," I drawl into the shell of her ear, sliding one hand around her throat as I guide my cock inside her with the other. It probes into her wetness, carving its way through the walls of her tunnel.

Her pulse thumps harder against my thumb. Her body buckles under every stroke I deliver to her. Slow but certain, delving into her sex with every thrust until I fit like the missing piece of her puzzle. I force eye contact, lowering my face until our noses touch. Whatever she'll give me, even if nothing more than a hiss or a whimper, I'll fucking take.

"What do you want, sweetheart?" I murmur against her lips, my heart stuttering as my balls grow tighter every time her pussy consumes the length of me. "Tell me what you want from me."

She goes to bite her lip, but I beat her to it, sinking my teeth into the raw flesh there. "If you won't speak, then *show me.*"

Hot, frustrated air from her nostrils skitters across my top lip as her hands drag down the length of my back. They dig into the muscle around my hip and pull me harder into her. Again and again, cruel, punishing thrusts that make her whole body convulse underneath my weight.

“You like that, sweetheart?” I growl. “You like being fucked this hard?” Wordlessly, she nods, and it’s enough to send a shiver up my spine.

I rip her hands from my hips and pin them above her head, fucking her just how she wants. Every fucked-up fiber in my being wants to fuck her until she gives in. Until she breaks underneath me and sings like a canary bird.

But although I’m the one pinning her to the bed, coaxing an orgasm out of her, I’m not foolish enough to think I’m the one in control.

Romy Daniels has me wrapped around her tiny fucking pinky, and I hate to love every second of it.

Her eyes flutter open, a deep flush coloring her perfect chest. Every breath becomes more labored, and when I stoop down to kiss her, I can taste the struggle on her bloodied lip.

I hear something.

“What was that?” My question comes out as a harsh whisper.

“I said, *fuck me harder,*” she rasps, voice tiny and strangled.

It's enough to send me flying off a cliff. My hands ball into fists on the pillow on either side of her head as the walls of her pussy quiver. Like a sonic boom, her orgasm ripples from her cunt and up her stomach, down her legs. Making every limb tremble like a building collapsing.

I follow her into pleasure, shooting hot loads against the rubber.

A low groan vibrates deep inside me, my muscles weakening as our collective high settles around us like dust. I lay against her chest, listening to her heartbeat tell me what her mouth won't. When I'm worried I'm crushing her, I roll onto my back, but her legs lock themselves around my ass, so she turns with me until she's curled up on my chest, silver hair splayed over my breastbone like moonbeams.

Eventually, she looks up through the silence, pinning me with glittery eyes. "Maybe next time," she pants, lowering her mouth to mine in an attempt to give me a consolation kiss.

When the penny drops, I laugh. Loud enough to make her recoil. I dig my fingers into her hair and tilt her chin up to mine. "That wasn't your punishment, sweetheart."

Relishing in her confused state, I roll her onto her side and tuck her into the bed. I snake my hand around her bare stomach and pull her into my body, slotting my knees and hips behind hers.

"It wasn't?" she whispers.

Sweeping her hair from her damp neck, I kiss the purplish bruises I gave her only moments earlier. “Your punishment is to sleep in the same bed as me, sweetheart.”

Her back tenses against my abdomen. “But why?”

“Because I’ve heard you scream my name at night. Now, you’ll scream it while I’m right next to you.” Another kiss. “And there’ll be no amount of lip biting that will stop it.” I click off the bedside light and nestle into the crown of her head. I can practically hear her brain working overtime underneath it.

“Good night, sweetheart.” I chuckle. “Hope you dream of me.”

Romy

I fight sleep, but it soon pulls me under its spell.

The next morning, I wake up tangled in the silk sheets, nothing but the imprint of Donnacha's head on his pillow.

Disappointment flickers in my stomach, but it's only ember that can't catch alight. Instead, I give in to the ache between my thighs, the soreness around my neck and breasts, and nestle into Donnacha's pillow.

I'm in his bedroom. In a home full of locked doors, it feels like a sin to be in here. It sits on a whole different floor I didn't know existed, and like his office, it betrays the monochrome color scheme of the rest of the penthouse in favor of decadent oaks and dark carpet. When I swing over the side of the bed and plunge my feet into it, my toes disappear entirely.

Knowing Aisling won't be around today because of her exam, I slip on the shirt Donnacha left on the floor last night and pad into the kitchen, not caring about what state my hair is in or what bruises and marks peek out from under the fabric.

The main living space is empty. Even Paddy, the big oaf that seems to be lurking in a corner every time I turn around, is nowhere to be seen. So I head into the kitchen, wondering what Bessie Banks is cooking up today when I notice something on the island.

A set of knives.

Real ones. Made from stainless steel and finished with smooth wooden handles. I slide my fingers over them, feeling a cheesy grin stretch across my face. Tucked underneath one of the blades is a small handwritten note.

*How about cooking for me instead of trying to kill me?
Let's see what you've got tonight.*

P.S. Please use the cookbooks.

I laugh. Please is underlined twice and circled, and I can feel Donnacha's dry humor seeping through the paper. Plucking out the largest knife from the holder, I hold it up to the light, watching it glint.

Something about last night must have shown him that I can be trusted.

How ironic because now I know I have to kill him more than ever.

As the venomous thought drips into my brain, the giddiness in my chest fades to black. I drop the knife, like I'm worried about what I'll do with it, and sink to my knees.

Belsky.

When the *pustosh*' suddenly closed, and we were hastily ushered out of the only home we'd ever known, he was waiting for me. Lurking by the gates in full-predator mode. Through the sea of crying children carrying all their belongings in trash bags, he made a beeline for me and dragged me into the shadows.

"Come with me, and you'll be a fighter," he'd said. Then he nodded to the chain-smoking men in suits across the street. The ones I'd seen slinking into the girls' dorms more times than I could count. They were surrounded by girls I grew up with, chucking them under their chins, stroking their hair. *"Go with them, and you'll never be anything but a whore."*

I hadn't spent years learning to fight to just lie on my back and open my legs.

I'd scanned the crowds for Mak, eventually spotting him down the road, talking to a heavily tattooed man I'd never seen before.

Belsky's wiry fingers brushed my hair over my shoulder as he followed my gaze. *"I won't tell him if you don't, hmm? It can be our little secret."*

Mak had no idea that Belsky co-signed and paid the rent on our crumbling apartment for the first year. Like me, he had no knowledge of the world outside the *pustosh*' gates; no way of knowing that landlords don't rent to an eighteen and a fourteen-year-old with no legal means of paying the bills.

He ripped that crumbly apartment to shreds when he heard I'd taken a pimp. He'd screamed at me, told me that I was no

better than the other girls in the home, and that I'd done nothing to escape my fate.

If he knew the truth, his reaction would have been worse.

It didn't take me long to realize that Belsky was no different from the pimps I'd fought to avoid. He'd fuck me like he'd paid for me. And I had clients, too; the only difference being that I killed them once I delivered my services. Businessmen, politicians, senators. Anyone that Belsky needed dead, anyone who was standing in the way of him climbing up the ladder to power, he'd have me take off my panties, then end their life.

They go quietly; that's the way I always do it. Arsenic in their whiskey or pills in their morning coffee. Less mess and easier to slip away unnoticed.

Ten years. That's how long I've been trying to claw myself out of his clutches. But he's mastered the art of keeping me attached to him: all of my secrets he holds in the palm of his hand. The paltry money he drip-feeds me—it's just enough to pay my bills but not enough to help me escape and start a new life somewhere he'll never find me.

I survive because of him, but I'll never live until I'm free of him.

Grasping for semblance, I clamber to my feet and pick up one of the knives again.

He promised this would be my last assignment. He's reached the final rung of his ladder, and the only thing

standing between him and New York City is the Quinns.

If I kill the head of their army, then their entire empire will fall. Mak and I will take all this money Donnacha's been paying me into that bank account, and we'll run. We'll *fly*. He can leave his smuggling job, and we'll soar high together, up, up, up above the clouds to where it's always sunny.

And if I don't...

A cold sweat dots on my skin.

If I don't, then Belsky will kill Mak and force me to be his wife.

My heart palpitates to an off-beat rhythm, stuttering my movements.

Breathe, Romy. Breathe.

I listen to the calm voice in the corner of my brain even though it's nothing more than a whisper. Embracing the numbness that comes with self-preservation, I pick up the television remote and scan through TIVO until I find a suitable dinner recipe.

Steak and potato pie.

I pull out the ingredients as Bessie lists them off in her usual chirp. It's like she's never had a dark thought in her life—unlike me. My mind is a bottomless black abyss.

Putting a potato on the cutting board, I bring a knife down on its rubbery flesh, slicing it in half.

Just like clawing Danny English to death, attempting to plunge a shard of mirror into my husband's neck was an act of desperation.

No. There'll be no bloodshed. I'll simply treat him like I do all of Belsky's assignments.

I've already fucked him. Now there are just two stages of the assignment left:

Gain his trust.

Kill him quietly.

Romy

The elevator dings, and I look up from the sofa to see Donnacha already halfway across the room, making a beeline for me. His eyes are dark and focused, and before I can recoil, he takes my face in his hands and presses his lips on mine. They taste like a sweet treat I didn't know I was craving, and my body instantly betrays my plan, melting like chocolate at a summer picnic.

“I've been dying to do that all day,” he groans into my mouth.

My eyes nearly roll back in my skull from pleasure. Gathering as much self-control as I can muster, I slip out from under his grasp and stagger to the kitchen. He follows me, slipping off his jacket and yanking off his tie.

“What's for dinner?” he asks, eyeing the oven door suspiciously like a gremlin might jump out at any moment.

“Pie, vegetables, and mashed potatoes,” I announce, slipping on an oven glove and pulling the masterpiece from

the oven. The tray clatters against the island between us, and we both lower our gaze to it.

“Doesn’t look poisoned,” he mutters with a small nod of approval. Then he turns his attention to the knife set farther down the island. “And it doesn’t look like any knives are missing. Unless”—his eyes glint as he snakes around the table—“you have a secret blade hiding in your panties. It’d be foolish of me not to check.”

Laughing, I stumble backward. My ass meeting the countertop reminds me that there’s nowhere else to go. When his broad frame closes in around me like a cage, I realize there’s nowhere I’d rather be, anyway.

His hands roam up the sides of my skinny jeans, curving around my ass and pulling me against the bulge in his slacks. We lock eyes, and a ripple of pleasure washes over me when I notice how his amber gaze flickers around my features with fascination. His attention is like a heat lamp, warming up the parts of me I want to conceal from him.

His gaze eventually drops from my lips to my neck. He swallows hard and traces his fingers around the purplish mark his mouth left on me last night. “I love seeing my marks on you,” he whispers, eyes half-lidded. “Must be the psychopath in me.”

Something that resembles a wheeze leaves my lips. And before I can stop myself, I say, “The psychopath in me loves seeing your marks on me too.”

His moan is primal, and he crushes his lips against mine again, colonizing my tongue. “Why do you tease me so much, sweetheart? When all I want to do is hear your voice?”

Despite my trance-like state, his words from last night drift into my mind. I tear myself away, lick my tender lips, and say, “Last night.” *Gulp*. “Did I...?”

A smirk lingers on his lips along with my lip gloss. “No, you didn’t.”

I chuckle, feeling triumphant. Slapping my hand on the hard space between his unbuttoned shirt, I say, “Your punishment didn’t work.”

His eyes darken, and I can practically see the dirty thoughts swirling in his irises. “There’s time. You’ll sleep in my bed every night until you sing.”

The oven timer saves me. “The vegetables,” I mutter, slipping out from under him and sliding the mitt back onto my trembling hand. “Why don’t you head to the dining room? I’ll bring it in.”

When I walk into the dining room a few minutes later, Donnacha is pouring out two glasses of wine. I drop the oven dish in the middle of the table and return shortly after with two plates full of lumpy mashed potatoes and blackened vegetables.

“Here goes nothing,” he mutters, half-jokingly, heaping a slice of pie onto his plate. Before he lifts his forks to his lips, I reach out and grip his bulging forearm.

“No white lies.”

He holds eye contact as he tentatively slides the fork between his lips. Before his taste buds even realize they are being assaulted, the lines in his face crease and not with laughter.

“Jesus Christ and all of his disciples,” he hisses, ripping the napkin from his lap and spitting the pie into it. “Did you even open a cookbook to make this?”

My fork clatters to the tablecloth. “Great.”

“I’ll take that as a big fat no.” Catching the disappointment tugging on my bottom lip, he says, “It’s not that bad, actually. Maybe if I take another bite—”

“What happened to *no white lies*?”

“You want honesty?”

I nod.

He pushes the plate away from him, then reclines in the chair in a way that reveals the tanned, sculpted flesh just above his waistband. “It tastes like a rat’s asshole. Tell me, sweetheart. Why don’t you ever follow a written recipe? And why do you never try your own cooking before forcing it on others?”

I choose to ignore his first question. “Because if I try it myself, I’ll stop cooking.” I fiddle with the hem of the tablecloth. “And I guess I’ve started to enjoy it.”

He leans over and puts his big paw on my hand. “You don’t have to be good at something to enjoy it,” he says, voice soft around the edges. “So if you enjoy it, cook anything you want, sweetheart, and I’ll eat it.” His eyes drop to his plate, and his lips curl in disgust. “Except this.” Suddenly, he scrapes back his chair and lifts me to my feet. “Come on, get dressed in something fancy. I’m taking you to dinner.”

“Really? Outside?”

“Romy,” he says seriously. “I’d rather risk you pushing me in front of a speeding car than eat that shit again.”

* * *

An hour later, I’m click-clacking down the hall in a pair of Louboutins, a backless Saint Laurent dress, and a leather jacket. It doesn’t go unnoticed that Donnacha is cutting a more casual figure in a fitted black sweater and jeans. Before I can question it, he drags me into the waiting elevator and pins me against the velvet wall. “You look amazing,” he growls against my bruised throat, sparking fireworks in my lower stomach. His thumb finds my nipple like he’s committed every curve of my body to memory. It instantly stiffens under the thin satin fabric. “It’s freezing out there, though. These will be hard in no time.”

My lips brush against his cheek. “Better keep me warm then,” I say huskily.

This is part of my plan. I'm gaining his trust.

But the hypnotic state this man puts me in makes my plan sound like a lie.

As we reach the lobby, all of his men stand to attention, straightening their spines and tilting their heads when we pass. One of them grabs an umbrella and follows us out. Donnacha takes it from him, and says, "We won't be needing backup tonight, Jon. Tell the others to stand down."

The guard nods diligently and disappears inside.

Donnacha shields me from the never-ending storm with the umbrella, holding me to his body as we descend the stairs. When we reach the sidewalk, I dig my heels in and turn to him. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" My eyes flick up and down the street, like Belsky is going to come around the corner at any moment. "You know, with everything that's going on?"

Annoyance lights his face for a beat before he stoops low, placing two fingers under my chin. "You don't think I can protect my wife?" he asks, his blistering gaze daring me to challenge him.

I don't doubt that he can. The question is, would he want to if he knew the truth?

We're outside. Not a guard in sight. Tonight presents the perfect opportunity to do what Belsky wants me to do.

But it's easy to ignore the swell in my chest when his big paw rubs over my shoulder in an attempt to keep me warm,

and when he tightens his grip and lifts me over puddles so I don't get my feet wet.

The silence feels natural, but I have to break it in order to interrupt my intrusive thoughts. I might as well ask him something I've been dying to know since he folded me into the car outside the ball.

“So, uh. What happened last night? With Belsky, I mean. Did you sort it?”

His eyes slash sideways to me. He purses his lips as if he's about to tell me to mind my business, but then his shoulders sag. “We shook him up a little, sure. But he's still breathing, *unfortunately.*”

I can't ignore the disappointment sinking in my chest. “Is he a threat?”

Briefly, he looks weary. “Honestly? Yes. He's not just some low-level gangster with delusions of grandeur.”

“You can't just kill him?” I whisper, unable to keep the hopefulness out of my voice.

With a wry smile, he says, “If it was up to me, his bones would be rattling through a meat grinder right now, sweetheart. But Lorc wants him alive until we dig up more info on who he's working for or with. He's the boss. I'm just the trigger finger.”

I can't shake the feeling of wanting to help him. A five-minute monologue from me is all it'd take for Donnacha and his family to defeat Belsky.

But where would that leave me?

With just a bullet in my head, if I'm lucky.

Instead, I chew on the inside of my lip as we round a corner until a question I can't keep down any longer works its way up my throat. "Do you like killing?"

He glances at me with caution, strumming his beefy fingers against my hip. A few moments pass, then—

"Yes, Romy. I do. Does that make me a bad person?"

A clap of lighting illuminates the sidewalk. A few seconds later, thunder rolls above our heads.

"I think it depends on your reasoning."

"Wrong answer," he drawls. Suddenly, we come to a stop, and he turns to face me head-on, bringing the umbrella down closer around us. Rain hammers on its thin fabric, but underneath, we are dry and warm, living in our own little world, like figurines in a snow globe.

The planes of his face harden with no trace of that cocky smile or syrupy laugh. "I *am* a bad person, Romy. Because I kill? No. Killing is so entwined into my DNA that I can't imagine life without it." He ducks lower, brushing his nose against mine. He's so close now that I can feel the vibration in his voice. "I'm a bad person because I enjoy hurting people. Even those who don't deserve it." Briefly, he looks up at the metal frame of the umbrella and rakes a hand through his hair. "It's a sick part of my brain that needs constant feeding," he adds quietly.

Shielding myself from the intensity of his gaze, I turn my attention to his chest, rubbing my fingers over the ribbing of his sweater. Underneath, his heart thumps slow and steady. When I'm brave enough to ask the question tumbling around in my brain, I force myself to meet his eye.

“Last night, you said that when you hurt, you hurt others. Just like when I hurt, I want to be hurt harder. What is it that makes you hurt?”

My mind goes to the girl in the Polaroid. To his dead father. What I really want to know is what goes on behind that cruel smile and easy laugh.

The answer doesn't come. Instead, that smile lights up his gorgeous face. “What makes me hurt? Eating your fucking cooking.”

Without another word, he collapses the umbrella and tugs me through a door before a drop of rain can fall on my head. I blink under the harsh white light and scan my surroundings.

Plastic red chairs are tucked under sticky tables. Black and white photos of plump, olive-skinned men grinning line the walls.

My eyes land on a guy in the corner, shoveling a slice of pizza in his mouth. I look at his gray sweatpants and Hilfiger hoodie, then down at my bare legs and ridiculously high heels. I feel like Rachel in the first episode of *Friends*, when she bursts into *Central Perk* in her wedding dress.

“This is where we’re eating?” I hiss out the side of my mouth as a man who looks like a carbon copy of the dudes in the photographs practically falls over his feet to shake Donnacha’s hand. “You told me we’re going somewhere fancy.”

“No,” Donnacha replies with a mischievous grin, “I told you to *dress* fancy.” He steals a lustful glance at my chest. “What can I say? I like it when you try to impress me.”

Heat rises in my cheeks as he peels off my leather jacket and hands it to the guy who’s leading us to a table. “Your favorite seat, Mr. Quinn,” he booms in an Italian accent, “always reserved for you.”

We slide into a plastic booth at the back, and I glare at the laminated menu, ignoring the amusement dancing on Donnacha’s features.

“What is this place, anyway?”

“Best pizza joint in town, that’s what it is.” I arch an eyebrow as a woman two tables over slurps on a plastic straw.

Donnacha cocks his head. “Aw, come on. I didn’t have you down as a snob.”

I straighten my spine, almost laughing at the irony of anyone thinking a girl dragged up in the *pustosh*’ can be anything near snobby.

“I’m not! This place looks great. But I would have come in my sweats if you’d have given me any warning.”

He laughs, watching me closely as I pretend to study the menu. When the server hustles to our table, he claps Donnacha on the back and says, “I know what you’re getting, Mr. Quinn. And for this precious lady?”

“Uh...” I let the menu flutter to the table and wave my hand around, a little too manically. “Whatever you suggest.”

“Very well,” he murmurs, scribbling something on his notepad. “I’ll put you down for today’s special—”

Donnacha cuts him off. “Wait,” he says, eyes trained on me like lasers. “Give us a few moments, Sergio.”

He dissolves from the conversation, leaving me to endure Donnacha’s scrutiny on my own.

“Romy.” He slides the menu toward me and points at the top dish. “What does that say?”

A sickly feeling climbs up my neck like creeping ivy. “Um...” The letters bend and sway, nothing more than edges and curves made from blank ink. Hieroglyphics would make more sense.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, eyes widening as he scrubs his beard. He leans over the table so the slurping woman won’t hear his revelation. “*You can’t read.*”

“I—”

“It makes so much sense,” he garbles to himself. “You didn’t realize you’d signed marriage papers because you didn’t have a fucking clue what they said. You watch that annoying bitch on that Cooking Channel because you can’t read any of

the recipes Aisling gave you.” He turns his attention back to me, incredulous. “You’re twenty-four, Romy. Why can’t you read?”

I can feel the heat radiating from my face. It’s impossible to feel any semblance of cool. “I can read...”

I trail off when I realize I can’t finish my sentence without opening myself up to a barrage of questioning.

I can read; I just can’t read English.

At the *pustosh*, I learned Russian in the classroom and English outside of it. It started with a few curse words; they rippled around the courtyard like Chinese whispers. Then there was this Vulture, when he heard some of the girls screeching “fuck” and “shit” with glee, he pushed his sloping face through the bars, promising an English dictionary in exchange for a few sloppy kisses.

One girl took the bait, and from that pocket-sized Merriam-Webster dictionary, we taught ourselves the language.

“Hey.” Only when Donnacha grabs my forearm do I realize I’m digging my nails into my neck. “We don’t have to discuss it now,” he says, voice heartbreakingly soft. Then he slides into my side of the booth and lists each menu option in my ear, his muscular thigh pressing against mine reassuringly.

Sergio comes back. I order the pepperoni deep dish and slip my hand into Donnacha’s paw, giving it a thankful squeeze.

After devouring two kick-ass pizzas, Donnacha drops a wedge of cash on the table and carves a path for me back out of the restaurant, stopping only to shake hands with a couple of old-timers propping up the bar.

“You act like you own the place.” I laugh as we stagger out onto the street.

“I do.” He arches an eyebrow quizzically, “Why do you think it’s the best pizza joint in town?” Glancing up at the navy sky, he adds, “It’s stopped raining. Come.” He tugs at my hand. I *click-clack* along the concrete, trying to keep up with him.

“Where are we going?”

“For a walk, sweetheart. Let me show you the city from a Quinn’s point of view.” He lowers his voice to add, “Wanna see where I drop off dead bodies?”

It’s so ridiculous that I can’t help but laugh. The grin that stretches across his face tells me he’s joking, too.

“I’d love the Quinn walking murder tour, but my feet are killing me,” I groan, stopping to give my blistered ankle a rub.

Donnacha sighs, shaking his head dramatically. The next thing I know, he’s scooping me up, pulling me to his chest like he’s rescued me from a burning building. “Jesus Christ in a crib,” he tuts. “You can’t cook, you can’t read, and now you can’t walk. I sure know how to pick a wife, hey?”

Our laughter entwines, echoing off the high-rises to create a symphony. I lock my arms around his tree-trunk neck,

bouncing against his forearms as he dodges the oncoming pedestrians and honking taxis. My head finds a comforting nook just under his collarbone. I close my eyes, listening to his reassuring heartbeat.

My plan be damned, even if only for one night. I've never experienced this feeling before, and I know I won't ever again.

I want to get lost in the storm that is my husband as if nothing else matters.

As if I don't have to kill him to set myself free.

Romy

It's crazy how easily you can slip into a routine when you can convince yourself that all the cogs and locks and intricate mechanisms that make up your life are running smoothly.

I allowed myself to get lost in Donnacha's storm for one night, only I never found my way out.

I don't think I want to, either.

For the next two weeks, we work like a well-oiled machine. Each day ticks over into the next, as reliable as clockwork.

My mornings are spent with Aisling in the library now that she's on winter break. Donnacha told her I can't read, and when she brought out a stack of elementary school workbooks, I had to confess that I can't write, either. At first, I was mortified, tracing a pencil on top of oversized letters and coughing out the syllables in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. But Aisling never judged, and thankfully, not once did she ask why I have the reading and writing skills of a very young toddler.

In the evenings, Donnacha leans against the kitchen island, reading out the step-by-step instructions to different recipes. Then he watches me like a hawk over the rim of his whiskey to make sure I get the measurements right.

Sometimes, the meals come out delicious. Lasagnas, meatloafs, pasta bakes. Other times, not so much. When a rancid smell seeps out from the hinges of the oven, interrupting our teenage-style makeout session against the counter, Donnacha will graze a soft kiss over my nose, rub my back, and tell me to go set the table.

I haven't told him I've spotted him at the mouth of the elevator, taking containers from Franco with one hand while slipping a roll of hundreds into the pocket of his chef whites with the other. Instead, I sit and grin at the dining table as he spoons an upgraded version of my risotto or *coq au vin* into his mouth, proclaiming I'm the best chef he's ever met.

As the evening melts into the early hours of the morning, that's when I pay for my sins. I crave—and *deserve*—every bite mark and every bruise that my husband decorates my skin with.

The blood I draw from my lip tastes sweet; the hot whip of his belt on my ass even sweeter.

It's under the cloak of darkness, tangled in Donnacha's silk sheets, that I atone for every cruel thing I've ever done.

For every kid I killed in the courtyard.

For every man I poisoned.

For lying to my best friend for over ten years.

For plotting to kill my husband.

And when the harsh winter sun streams through the skylight, I collapse into the mattress, feeling lighter and happier, like I could walk into heaven with a fast pass.

Donnacha becomes a different man too—morphing from the beast begging to hear my voice to a caring, doting husband. Before he showers and slips on his suit, he bathes me. Rubbing ointments and creams into my most sensitive spots, he massages the tension out of my neck from where I've been clenching my jaw so hard.

And when he steps into the elevator and becomes that man who spreads terror across the East Coast, I've noticed it feels like half of my heart steps in with him.

As I drink my morning coffee in the silence of the penthouse, I wonder:

How the fuck am I going to kill the man who makes me feel so alive?

Donnacha

I've been in my corner office at the Quinn Capital building for approximately three seconds when I hear the pitter-patter of chubby feet coming down the hall.

Grinning, I crouch behind the glass door and shoot my arms out at just the right time to catch Gus. I drag him into my lap, tickling his pot belly and making him gurgle until I fear he'll be sick.

"Don Don," he chimes, throwing his pudgy arms around my neck.

"Hey, kiddo." I pluck the handkerchief from my top pocket and wipe off the melted chocolate from his cheeks. While his older sister, Valentina, inherited her mom's pale skin and red hair, Fergus looks exactly like a Quinn, and especially like his namesake, Donnacha's father. Tanned skin, shock of black hair, and of course, those amber eyes, which are now darting around my face curiously. "Where's your mama?" I ask,

letting him swing on my neck like a monkey as we head down the hall to Poppy's office.

She's standing behind a pile of mail on her desk, brandishing a letter opener.

Immediately, her eyes drop to her son, and her face splits into a grin as cooing noises bubble from her mouth. When they land on me, however, she grips the letter opener a little tighter.

"Aw, come on, Pops," I moan, catching Gus just before he attempts to leap from my chest like an Olympic diver. "You gonna stay mad at me forever?"

"I'm considering it," she mutters, pretending the letter in her hands has all of her attention. "Although, I can't say I'm not surprised."

"About what, my darling sister-in-law?"

She steals a glance at me. "That you're in such a good mood today. The last few times I've seen you, you've had a face like thunder." Dropping a hip, she points the sharp tip of the letter opener in my direction. "What's changed? What have you done?"

Gus plops his padded butt on the floor and scoots across the carpet like a dog wiping shit from its ass. Kids are weird.

"You really think the worst of me."

"Wanna know what I think?"

"No, but when has that ever made you hold your tongue?"

Ignoring my snipe, she rounds the desk and makes a beeline for me, scooping her son up en route.

“I think your fake wife is getting under your skin.” Plucking her cell from her purse, she thrusts it under my nose. A photo of Romy and me gleams back up at me. It takes a moment but then I recognize where it’s from: The Blacks’ winter ball. As the storm blusters around us, I have her pulled tight to my tux, her silver hair billowing in the wind. Her hand is on my chest, the ring on her finger gleaming like a shooting star. I know she was just shielding herself from the camera, but the photographer has captured a split second in time when it looks like she’s laughing.

I take the phone from Poppy’s hands and zoom in with my thumb and forefinger.

We look happy in the way that smug-ass, loved-up couples do. Like the umbrella is not only shielding us from the rain but also the real world. And everything that happens underneath it belongs to us. Private jokes, secret promises. Memories that only the two of us share.

We look normal.

“I knew it,” Poppy hisses, snatching her phone from my hands and giving it absentmindedly to Gus, who proceeds to gnaw at its corners. “You’re in love.”

Love.

I let out a bitter laugh at the thought. Love? The word is so fucking foreign to me that it might as well be a different

language.

I've never felt it. Never wanted it. Never needed it.

I'm in...fascination.

Yeah, I'm fascinated by her. By what she does to every fucking organ in my body. She makes my brain spin, my heart beat, and my cock pulsate. Every moment spent in Boston, either down in the Tunnels or up in the clouds at Quinn Capital is a moment I'm itching to peel down Highway One to get back to her.

I crave the taste of her sweet juices on my tongue. The burn of her nails as they rake across my shoulder blades. I'm addicted to her as much as I'm addicted to the sick games we play. Every time she breaks instead of bends, I become even more fascinated with her.

"Mrs. Quinn?"

We both look around at the sound of a voice by the door. A dowdy girl clutches a package with a stack of letters balancing on top. She looks like she'd rather catapult herself out the window than interrupt our conversation.

"Hi, sweetie. Just stick them in the corner, please."

She does as she's told, slipping in her too-big heels as she drops the box to the floor. It lands with a thud, followed by a dull rattle. I train my gaze on it, and a feeling I know too well creeps up my shoulders and claws at my neck.

Gus whines. Poppy jiggles him on her hip.

“What’s brought you in today anyway? Unlike you to be up here, where people use their brains instead of brawn.”

But I’m not listening to my sister-in-law’s weak banter. I’m staring at the box. Large, perfectly square. Dog-eared in the corners and darker at the bottom.

Either it’s been sitting in a puddle or something wet is inside.

“Poppy,” I say quietly, “Were you expecting a delivery?”

“Hmm?” She lazily follows my gaze, then shrugs. “Don, I’m the CEO of Boston’s largest capital venture company. I’m always expecting a delivery.”

“I need you to leave the room.”

“What?”

“Leave the room, Pops. Take Gus with you and get Lorcan in here.”

When I pull the leather gloves from my pocket and snap them on, Poppy’s voice wobbles. “What’s going on?”

But as I stride toward the parcel, she lets out a whimper, pulls a whining Gus closer to her chest, and *click-clacks* down the hall. I pluck the pocketknife I confiscated from Romy out of my pocket and drag the blade across the tape holding the seam together.

I’d recognize the smell blindfolded. It’s one that when you smell it for the first time, you never forget it. I slide the flat

side of the knife under the seam and rip it up, and a tuft of brown hair bursts through the cracks.

Swallowing the thick lump in my throat, I wipe down the knife on the back of my glove and take a step back.

I don't need to look to know whose head is in that box.

Because I'd bet my ball sack that it's Paul Polansky's.

Romy

Only when the burning in my shoulder blades and glutes becomes too much do I stop doing the front crawl. I pull myself out of the water, legs wobbly and chest tight, and sit on the ledge to catch my breath.

Between reading, writing, and cooking, I've added another verb to my daily routine: swimming. Something about gliding through water gives me a sense of peace, even if it's a false one.

Exhausted, I wrap a towel around me and step into the waiting elevator, *drip, drip, dripping* chlorine-filled water onto the plush velvet floor.

In the penthouse, I find Donnacha in the kitchen, shaking a sizzling pan.

“Cooking without me?” I pout, creeping up behind him and resting my wet head on his back. “Were last night's tacos really that bad?”

It's the way his muscles tense. That's how I know something's wrong. Before I can ask him, he turns around, pulling my head into his chest like he couldn't give a flying fuck that I'm wetter than a seal. He rests his chin on my hair and says, "I can see why you like doing this. It's relaxing, I suppose."

I pull my head away to study his face. Dark circles underline his eyes, and the lines around them are deeper. "You're stressed. What's happened?"

His sigh comes out as a grunt, and he rubs his thumb over my cheekbone. "Business shit. Nothing you need to worry your pretty little head about. Have you heard of a hairdryer, by the way?"

But my heart does a double-beat. "Business shit? What's happened? Is it Belsky?"

He purses his lips, then his shoulders sag. "Yeah," he says reluctantly. With another groan, he twists around and pulls something from the back pocket of his jeans. A note. He holds it up, then chunks it on the island behind me.

I wriggle out of his embrace to pick it up with trembling hands.

"Our candidate is dead," he says quietly, snaking his arms around me from behind and leaning his chin on my shoulder.

My blood turns to ice. "A-Are you sure?"

"Unless he's like a chicken and can survive without his head." He plants small kisses up my damp neck—something

that'd usually make my knees weaken but not tonight. "It's currently in a box in Poppy's office."

I look down at the note in my hands. Thick card and folded in half with a crisp line.

"It won't make good reading practice, I'm afraid. It's in Russian."

Cyrillic symbols in Belsky's staccato handwriting glare up at me, the words easier to read than any of Aisling's children's books.

Let the war begin.

A fat droplet falls from my brow onto the paper, making the ink run like blood down the page.

"We've had it translated. He's declaring war, Romy," he says quietly, peeling the towel from my body and letting it drop to the floor. "This...*arrangement* of ours, it's going to last a little longer than expected."

His hand dips under the neckline of my swimsuit and massages my breast. For a moment, my eyes flutter closed as my nipple stiffens against his palm. But no matter how good it feels, lust gives way to panic, and I step out of Donnacha's grasp and turn my attention back to the note.

"Was this it?" I croak. "This note and the...*head*?"

He huffs behind me. "What, were you expecting more? A finger or two, perhaps?"

"I—"

“There’s also a drawing on the back that’s freaked Poppy out to no end. Lorcan, too.”

I flip it over, greeted immediately by more Russian.

And to your wife:

Underneath, there’s a sketch of a spider tangled up in its own web.

“He’s not exactly Picasso, is he?” Donnacha grunts from behind me.

But I can barely hear him; the blood thumping around my temples is too loud. Before my legs give way, I fall backward into his hard chest, and he claps his strong arms around me like all I wanted was a damn hug.

“Why would he send this to Poppy?”

Donnacha’s chuckle sounds more sinister than ever. “I’d have to give you a whole family history lesson to explain that to you. Long story short? Years ago, her father teamed up with the Bratnovs to try to overthrow us. Clearly, that didn’t fucking work. Maybe they think she’s disloyal to her father by marrying a Quinn.”

The kitchen spins as the realization hits me like a freight train.

This spider, it’s usually facing upright toward your head. Symbolizing that you’re an active fighter, loyal to the people.

But when its head faces down, it signifies that you have left the Bratva. That you are disloyal.

That you are a traitor.

This message isn't for Lorcan's wife.

It's for Donnacha's.

“Hey.” Donnacha's voice comes soft and syrupy over my shoulder; his lips trace the curve of my ear. “What's got you so rattled? You know I'll handle it.” His hand slides over my hips, disappearing under the fabric stretched over my pubic bone. As he cups my sex possessively, he growls, “I always fucking handle it.”

I wade through shock waves of pleasure as he nips my neck. As his fingers dig deeper into my folds, swirling around my wetness. I can't enjoy it because my mind is sinking down to the hottest pit of hell, where the flames burn brightest, and the punishments are the cruelest.

Belsky's message is loud and clear.

If you don't kill your husband soon, you're a traitor.

He'll kill me. *He'll kill Mak.*

An involuntary gasp escapes my lips as Donnacha's thick finger penetrates me, carving a trail through my tunnel. “I've had a long, stressful day, sweetheart,” he rasps in my ear. I hear the clink of his belt buckle. The *thwap* as he slides the leather out of the loops of his jeans. “Now bend over and bite your lip because I'm going to take it out on you.”

The battle between panic and lust rages on through my body, dueling around my blood.

If I kill him, I'll be taking away the one thing that makes me feel alive.

I'll also be jumping off a cliff into the abyss and trusting that I'll be caught by the promises Belsky made me.

And then what happens if he does catch me?

There's no doubt in my mind that I'd rather be in Donnacha's hands than his.

Terror rises up my throat; another noise I have to suppress. As he slides the swimsuit off my limp body and flattens his palm against my lower back, I bend over the counter, feeling the ice-cold marble pressing into my curves.

He drags the folded belt down my spine, teasing me. "You're so fucking perfect, Romy. For all of your sins and all of your flaws and your secrets." The belt meets the curve of my ass, and he makes it taut against my flesh, hinting at what's to come. "Even if I never get to hear you sing for me in this lifetime, know that you're still perfect to me."

Breezes flutter over my flesh as he brings the belt back.

"Wait," I rasp.

In the silence, the belt falls lax against my ass.

"Protect me."

His thighs stiffen against mine. "What?"

I push my face harder into the marble, wishing it'd open up and let me crawl in. "Protect me," I whimper again.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Romy?” At first, his voice is soft, then it hardens when he adds, “Protect you from what?”

“Belsky. He won’t stop. He’ll never stop. Not until he destroys everything and everyone closest to your family. That includes me now too.”

“I told you I’ll handle it, sweetheart. There’s no need to—”

“Mak too.” My pleas slip easily from my tongue now, every word loaded with desperation.

“Your *roommate*?” he spits, incredulous.

“He’s my best friend, and he’ll kill him too.”

“Fucking hell, Romy. Your little friend isn’t what I want to be thinking about when I have you bent over with your ass in the—”

“*Please, Donnacha.*” The tears leak from my lids now, pooling in the puddle made by my wet hair. “I am *begging you*. Protect us.”

My sobs punctuate the silence. My husband makes no attempt to comfort me, making an uneasy feeling trickle down my back. Trying to claw back my secrets, I garble, “The head in the box, all those threats. He’s a dangerous man, and I need to know that once all of this is done—*once our marriage is over and you have no use for me anymore*—you’ll protect us from him.”

Behind me, there’s a sharp hiss of air. Then the belt snakes around my neck, jerking my head upward. Donnacha’s body

presses flat against mine, his throbbing cock splitting my ass cheeks. I can feel every curve of his abs as he leans over me, lips finding my ears. “Leo Belsky is nowhere near as dangerous as I can be, Romy.” His tone drips with venom, making me feel sick. “Especially to those I suspect have betrayed my family or me.”

If it wasn't for the belt propping me up, I'd collapse to the floor. Instead, I push against my throat against it, begging for it to choke me harder. “I'll scream,” I rasp. “I'll give you every fucking noise you've ever wanted to hear.”

After a long, haunting beat, Donnacha removes the belt from my neck slides it into my mouth.

Gagging me. Forcing me to be silent when I don't have the willpower to be silent myself.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I sink my teeth into the tangy leather and brace myself. Wordlessly, Donnacha's hands rake down my back, stopping at my ass cheeks and roughly parting them. Without warning, he thrusts his length into me, hard and fast. Hot, violent fireworks rip through my canal, opening me up to pleasure I don't deserve.

He tightens his grip on the belt so it cuts into the corners of my mouth.

Life isn't fucking fair. I can't destroy myself, so I want Donnacha to do it. I want him to push me down to the bottom of the abyss, where I can curl up into a ball and stay there. Where the shards of my brokenness cut me; where the pain has teeth.

I want to commit every frantic, painful thrust to memory. Etch each of his slaps on my ass like a permanent tattoo.

I hate how the pressure mounts in my lower stomach; I am not worthy of the release.

But it comes, as hard and as fast as Donnacha's strokes, racing round my body like a virus. I clamp my molars on the belt, feeling the soft fabric tear underneath them. Donnacha's orgasm chases mine, shooting hot, sticky ropes deep inside me.

Aside from his heavy breathing, he hasn't said a word. Like the roles have reversed, and now he's the one who's desperate not to break.

Still silent, he withdraws from me, gently sliding the belt out of my mouth.

The rustle of his jeans.

The clink of his belt fastening.

The heavy footsteps growing quieter, then the *ding-dong* of the elevator doors opening.

And he leaves me here, without a word, let alone his promise of protection.

Donnacha

There's that instinct again.

The one that's kept my family and me alive for all this time. Only, I wished it'd kicked in a hell of a lot sooner.

Fuck the speed limit, fuck the red lights. I drive the Bentley like I stole it, weaving in and out of the late-night traffic heading out of the city.

On the highway, I really put the pedal to the metal and roll down the windows, welcoming the harsh lashes that the storm brings.

Protect me.

At that moment, I didn't need to look in my wife's eyes to uncover the secret she's been keeping from me. It was painted all over her voice. Sheer terror wrecked her vocal cords, and now, there was not a doubt in my fucking mind.

She knows Belsky.

My fist thumps the dashboard, and I roar louder than the thunder in the sky.

As the desperate words stuttered from her lips, everything slotted into place like a puzzle. Her killing Danny English at the exact time Belsky requested a meeting with us. That wasn't coincidence; that was an alibi. Belsky mentioning knowing my wife at the Blacks' ball. That wasn't shit talk; he was leaving breadcrumbs he wanted me to find.'

And her face when she saw the note... how her eyes darted left to right, as if she was reading it. How her expression immediately contorted as she digested it. She knew exactly what that spider meant.

Protect me.

Because she knows she's the traitor, not Poppy.

The wind snatches away my manic laugh. If there's no doubt in my mind, then why didn't I kill her? Why didn't I wind that belt around her neck and choke the life from her lying mouth?

Because I so badly don't want it to be true.

Boston rises up from the horizon in record time, and not long after, I'm cutting long strides through the tunnel, making a beeline for my office.

Ronan's on the night shift; I can tell by the sound of the gargled screams that echo through the pipes. He always goes for the teeth. A few moments later, he strolls into the office and halts in surprise when he sees me.

“Everything okay, boss?” He jerks a bloodied glove over his shoulder. “Just dealing with the asshole who owns the bookies on Rosenberg Street. Hasn’t paid for protection in three months.”

I don’t give a fuck, and it doesn’t take Ro long to notice. Leaning my palms flat against the desk, I look up at him and say, “I think you were right about my wife.”

He pauses. Sucks on the insides of his cheeks. Then he clicks the door shut behind him and starts to peel off his soiled outerwear.

“You’ll never hear me say I told you so, boss. What do you need from me?”

“Bring me Declan.”

I sink into my chair and reach for the bottle of *Smugglers Club*. This joint is nowhere near as fancy as my offices in New York or the Quinn Capital building. The desk is only a slight upgrade from a decorating table, and there’s a tangy iron smell from all the dried blood seeping through the walls. But it’s where I belong. It’s *home*.

I’m half a bottle down when Declan appears, bleary-eyed and ready to piss his pants, laptop tucked under his arm.

“Declan, sit.”

His gaze darts around the room. He’s probably got PTSD from when I made him train down here for a month just before he had his nervous breakdown. “A-Am I in trouble?”

“Will be if you don’t help me out.” Underneath the desk, I kick out a cardboard box for him to sit on. He perches on it gingerly. I pour him out a drink in a dusty tumbler and slide it in front of him. “I need all of the transcripts of Belsky’s conversations from the wire tap. Can you do that for me?”

Declan’s shoulders sag like he’s relieved we’ve moved into familiar territory. “Of course.” He opens up his MacBook and *click-clacks* on the keys. “It’ll take a while. There are a lot.”

My fingers strum a frantic rhythm against my desk. “I don’t have a while. Give me the highlights. Have you found out anything that you think I’d need to know?”

Guilt washes over his pasty face. “I-I already told Lorcan, so—”

He flinches as the door flies open, and Aiden walks in, covered in blood. He freezes when he sees me, alarmed. But I beckon him in, not taking my eyes off Declan.

“I don’t need a fucking disclaimer, kid. Spill it.”

He swallows. “Belsky definitely killed Paul Polansky. We overheard him bragging to one of his security guards. He was saying awful things. Like how they dragged him from his bed —”

When Declan flinches again, it’s because I slam my fist against the table, frustrated.

“My *wife*, kid,” I growl, popping all my knuckles in an attempt to find even the tiniest bit of release. “Has Belsky said anything about Romy?”

“Uh, I haven’t seen anything,” he says, bottom lip wobbling. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he darts his eyes back to his screen, scanning frantically. “I’ll check right now.”

At the cleaning station in the corner, the tap stops running. When I glance up at Aiden, we lock eyes.

“What?”

“May I talk freely, boss?”

I arch an eyebrow and wait.

He clears his throat. “I always thought it a little strange that Romy killed English when you were in a meeting with Belsky. Same hotel, same time...it all just seemed a bit *off*.”

Great. One of my men who’s been punched in the head so many times he has permanent concussion came to that conclusion long before I did.

“Get to the point, Aiden.”

He drops his bloodied rubber gloves in the trash. “Remember in the security room, when we could see Belsky’s driver on the phone? Talking in Russian? Well, you asked me to find a way to record it...”

My heart skips a beat. “And did you?”

With a wince, he says, “Yeah, but not very professionally, I’m afraid. I just recorded the screen with my phone.”

I snap my fingers for his cell and toss it to Declan. “Get your translator on this immediately.”

Leaping to my feet, I storm out of the office and into the heart of the Tunnels, following the screams that sound like they come from the deepest part of the soul. Whoever is being punished, I'll finish the job myself. No gloves, no weapons; I need the distraction of feeling warm flesh tear under my cold knuckles.

Romy

“Everyone’s staring at me,” I mutter, tugging the neck of my jacket up over my chin.

Aisling glances up from a laminated copy of *Charlotte’s Web*, pinning me with a look that suggests I’m mad.

“First of all”—she jerks her chin toward the play mat in the corner—“those kids are literally, like five. Somehow, I don’t think they have the cognitive maturity to be judging you for browsing the children’s section.” Her dark hair whips around her shoulders as she spins to glare at the three henchmen lingering behind us. “Secondly, if anybody *is* staring, it’s because we’re being followed by the *three musketeers*. Guys, can you back off a little?” she hisses at them. “This is a public library, not the Wild West.”

I can’t help but smirk at how uncomfortable they look. One nudges the others, then they shuffle off to relocate behind the historical fiction shelves.

“Thank you.”

Aisling flashes me a grin. “No, *thank you*. You’ve been such a good student, honestly. Can you believe you’ve read every single children’s book in our library? You’ll be reading *War and Peace* in no time.”

“I have no idea what that is, but if it doesn’t have size twenty font and plenty of colorful drawings, I’ll probably struggle.”

Laughing, Aisling cracks open *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, buries her nose between the pages, and inhales deeply. “God, I love books,” she mutters drunkenly. “And I’m so jealous of you. You get to experience all of the classics for the first time. What I’d pay to erase my memory and reread the books that changed my life.”

In the silence, I run my fingers along the colorful spines before I can’t hold my tongue any longer.

“Aisling?”

“Mmm?”

“Has your brother said anything to you about us recently?”

The way her eyes light up raises a flush to my skin’s surface. I haven’t seen him in three days, not since he fucked me over the kitchen counter in silence, ignoring my pleas for him to protect Mak and me. I’ve been on edge ever since, skittering between wanting to throw myself out the goddamn window, simply to escape my own racing thoughts, and convincing myself that he’s just busy.

“I don’t know what you’ve done to him, but I’ve never seen him so happy.”

My heart stutters. “So you’ve seen him?”

“Not in about a week. He’s so busy with all this...” She waves a battered *Enid Blyton* novel around. “Mafia politics. Want my advice? Stay the heck out of it. Put your feet up, watch a movie. Take a few shopping trips into SoHo. And then when it all blows over, enjoy the tiny slice of normalcy until the next drama comes along.”

My eyes start to water, so I turn away from her before she notices. *When it all blows over*. It’s not a passing storm, and I can’t hunker down and pretend it’s not happening. It’s literally life or death, and it involves the people I love.

Love.

Oh, god. The word appeared, fully formed in my mind, before I could stop it.

As if a girl like me would know what love is.

Aisling’s dramatic sigh is far too loud for a library, and it brings me back to reality. “You guys are like the characters in my favorite romance novels. Except, you’re not a small-town single mom with dreams of opening her own cake shop, and my brother isn’t an out-of-town hotshot who wants to steamroll your dead father’s land and build a high-rise apartment building.”

I blink. “What?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Never mind. I’m heading over to the romance section. See you in a bit.”

As she saunters off, I turn my attention back to the shelf in front of me and actually read the spines for the first time. *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Witches*...I’m ashamed to admit they look a little *thick* for my current reading level. So I catch the attention of a passing librarian, and she points me in the direction of a younger reading group.

I delve deeper into the library, rounding calf-high furniture and narrowly avoiding squeaky toys strewn on activity mats. I’m flicking through the pages of *Where the Wild Things Are* when the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

Before I can turn around, spindly fingers dig into my ribs, forcing me into the aisle over.

“What are you doing here, *Romashka?*” says a familiar voice. A voice that, even when I’m expecting to hear it, makes me sick to my stomach.

I look up into the black coal pits of Belsky’s eyes. His woolen jacket is pulled high up his neck, his red cashmere scarf concealing the lower part of his face.

He could have the best disguise in the world, but I’d recognize this man anywhere.

“What are *you* doing here?” I hiss.

His eyes slash right. Then left. *Where the fuck are the henchmen who were on my ass five minutes ago?* When he confirms we’re alone, he grips me by the jaw and pushes me

deeper into the shadows until my back slams against a row of books. “I’m checking up on my favorite *malishka*,” he snarls, baring his yellowing teeth. “Can you imagine my surprise when I find her *reading books* with the sister of the man I expected her to kill a month ago?”

My jaw muscles flex against his fingertips. I want more than anything to scream in his face. Tell him to *go fuck yourself*. But I don’t, and it’s not because I care about breaking library etiquette. It’s because then he’ll know that I’ve made up my mind to defy him. And I can’t risk him getting to Mak before I do.

“I’m working on it,” I croak.

But Belsky doesn’t like the look of something in my eyes. Maybe it’s the flicker of defiance or the gaze of pure, unadulterated hatred toward him. He squeezes my jaw harder, threatening to crack my molars. “Don’t bail on me now, *Romashka*, because you won’t like the way I’ll destroy you.”

There’s a sudden movement in the shadows, and Belsky drops me like a hot potato. He staggers back, hand flying to his neck, and before I can make sense of what’s going on, somebody grabs my hand and yanks me from underneath him.

Aisling.

“Help!” she roars, dragging us out into the middle aisle. Then under her breath, she mutters, “Where are those fucking idiots when you need them?”

Right on cue, they rip around the corner, pushing the confused librarian out of the way. One dives past us while the other two grab Aisling and me by the shoulders and drag us out of the building so fast that my boots barely scrape the carpet.

Aisling's voice seeps out from under a guard's armpit. "I told you I do judo!" she squeals, "Did you see the chop I delivered to his neck? Did you see it?"

While she's riding high on adrenaline, I'm drowning in dread.

We burst through the doors and into the low winter sun, where the guards lift us down the steps and pile us into a waiting van.

"Wait!"

When I look up at the sound of Aisling's voice, I realize she's being folded into a car in front. Before I can protest, there's a hard shove in my back, and I stumble through the open car door, jeans skidding against the leather seat.

Disorientated, I struggle to sit upright before the van peels off, tires squealing against the slick roads.

"What the fuck is going on?" I grumble to myself, rubbing my cheeks.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

My head shoots up, and I immediately lock eyes with Donnacha. He's sitting opposite me, flanked by Ronan and Paddy.

Surprise washes over me, followed by a burst of relief at seeing him. Neither lasts long because it quickly becomes obvious from the darkness clouding his face that he's not relieved to see me too. His jaw is set in stone, and each line carved into his scowl is deeper than the Grand Canyon.

“Don—”

Something glints in my peripheral vision, slicing off the rest of the sentence.

A syringe in Ronan's hands. He flicks his beefy finger against the barrel, bursting a bubble that bobs in the clear liquid.

Survival instinct consumes me, and I lunge toward the door.

But Ronan is quicker. His hands shoot out and grab me, and the last thing I remember before the world goes black is the sharp prick against my neck and the haunting look of betrayal swirling in my husband's eyes.

Romy

I emerge from darkness and wake up somewhere even darker. A black void, so damp and dirty that I can taste the dust on my tongue.

My stuttering heartbeat tells me I'm in trouble before my foggy brain can catch up.

Where the hell am I?

Limbs heavy, I stagger to my feet, tripping further into the abyss. The echo of footsteps makes the hairs on the back of my neck prickle, and I immediately curl my hands into sweaty, weak fists.

Wherever I am, I'm not alone.

“Who’s there?” My throat is dry; my desperate question nothing more than a croak.

More footsteps, closer this time. When a light breeze flutters across my shoulder, I shiver.

“Donnacha? Is that you?”

“Oh, it’s me all right.” His strangled voice tickles my ear, but when I whip around and shoot my hands out, he’s gone.

“What’s going on? Where am I?”

His voice comes from the other side of me this time, ice-cold calmness running through it. “You’re on the fourteenth floor of my building, where henchmen-in-training take their final test before they can be initiated into the army. You know, two people come in here, but only one ever leaves. So who’s going to get out of here today? Me or you?”

I’m going to be sick. I take a few steps to nowhere, disorientating myself even more.

“Please, Donnacha, I—”

“Come on, sweetheart.” His voice is close again, so close that it creeps down the back of my top. But when I whip around and stumble toward the direction of the noise, my hands clutch at air. “You came here to kill me, so let’s fucking dance.”

I feel like I’ve been punched in the chest. “I can explain.”

A thunderous clap reverberates around the cavernous space. It’s followed by Donnacha’s signature laugh, and I can’t help but taunt myself by closing my eyes and remembering all the times I felt that noise on my cheek as I laid my head on his chest.

“A dying declaration? How delightful. I should have brought some popcorn.”

Sucking in a lungful of damp air, I dig my nails into my palms, and say, “My name isn’t Romy Daniels. It’s Romashka Bratnov.”

Donnacha’s strong arm anchors around my neck from behind, pulling me into his hard chest. I can smell liquor on his breath as he whispers coldly, “Bratnov?”

I stare up into the darkness above me. No point in lying anymore. “Yes. My father is Igor Bratnov. I was a product of an affair and—”

Something cold and sharp presses against my neck. “Your father was the head of the Russian Mafia. I should kill you for that alone. I killed your father. Did you know that, sweetheart? And it felt fucking good.”

Gritting my teeth, I press into the blade, feeling the tension on the surface of my skin. “I don’t care. I had never met the man, let alone had any loyalty to him. He dumped me on the steps of an orphanage and never thought about me again.” Feeling dangerous, I lick my lips and add, “And your own father? How did it feel to kill him?”

He hisses out a laugh of disbelief. “I suppose we are spilling all the secrets today.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

He tightens his forearm around my neck. “It felt like the right thing to do. He’d been shot in a drive-by. I arrived on the scene, and I’d seen enough bullet wounds in my life to know it

wasn't one he'd bounce back from. Instead of letting him bleed out undignified, I put a bullet in his head."

Emotion chokes in his throat, and I have the sudden urge to spin around and hug him. But I don't dare move.

"I am not the only one with secrets."

"But yours are far deadlier than mine. They could have killed my family." The blade presses harder into my skin. Against the crown of my head, I feel Donnacha's Adam's apple bob. "So, tell me all of your secrets, sweetheart, or I'll slit your throat and let them bleed out of you."

I swallow. "You've found out everything you need to know."

"For a while there, Romy, you had me believing that we weren't so different. Two scarred souls cut from the same black cloth. I didn't question your secrets because I didn't want you to question mine. I know I should have broken you when I had the chance."

The woman in the Polaroid, her face flashes in front of my eyes, appearing against the sheet of darkness like an old film roll. "I wouldn't be the first woman you've broken, would I?" I choke out.

"How'd you—?"

"The woman in the picture. The one in your office." My whole body tenses, but I'm alive with courage I shouldn't have. "What did you do to her?"

A few beats pass, then he lets me go. Dissolves into the darkness. I should feel relief, but the fear of the unknown makes panic rise up my throat.

When he speaks again, he sounds a million miles away. “Her name is Emilia.” I surprise myself when I scoff. “You almost sound jealous.”

And that’s when a bitter laugh escapes me. It’s manic and fueled by delirium. “I am jealous, Donnacha. Jealous that you could love a woman so much that you have her picture tucked away in your desk. How fucked-up is that?”

“Don’t be; she’s dead.”

Through the blood pounding against my ears, I can hear his footsteps snaking large circles around me. Giving me a wide berth, he’s staying way out of my reach.

“Wanna know the truth?” he rasps.

I stay silent.

“After we destroyed your father’s empire, I left for a little while. I needed a break, so I decided to travel. Clear my head. The problem was my head was so fucked-up, that I couldn’t go half a year without killing. I didn’t know how to do anything else. Still don’t.” His voice is devoid of emotion like he’s detached himself from the memory. “I drank, did drugs. Drove the fastest cars I could buy. The adrenaline didn’t come close to what I felt down in the Tunnels. And then I met Emilia in Paris. She was a prostitute who let me take all of my dark desires out on her. I was surprised that giving in to my

darkest sexual desires gave me that same hit. We traveled Europe, then Southeast Asia, and the whole time, she'd let me break her in any way that I wanted."

"And then you killed her."

A pause. "No, she killed herself."

My heart drops. "Did you love her?" I whisper into the darkness.

He pauses. "No. But she was so innocent. She didn't deserve what I did to her. When I got back to the States, I threw my little black book in the trash and never fucked a broken woman again." He lets out a strangled laugh. "Then you came along. A beautiful, hardened shell full of all your little secrets. So many of them that you'd probably rattle if I shook you. You presented the perfect challenge, and *my god*, how I wanted to ruin you. That night I broke into your apartment, I knew that, despite the guilt, I hadn't learned my lesson with Emilia. I knew I had to have you in the same way, break you in the same way. I also knew that I shouldn't, especially as I got to know you because I knew I wouldn't know how I'd cope if you ended your own life like Emilia did." His groan slices the darkness. "But my god, you made it so tempting."

"I'm not her."

"And I never wanted you to be." I hear his heavy breathing. "You said you were impossible to break. I was a bastard for even trying."

“I lied.” His breathing stops. Gulping in the damp air, I add, “About why I’m impossible to break. It’s not because I’d rather die than let you break me. It’s because you can’t break what’s already broken.”

Footsteps again, this time, they’re heading farther away from me. *He’s leaving.* Sweat dots my skin, and I find myself breaking into a run, chasing the echoing thuds. “Donnacha—wait!” I garble, “I love you. I fucking love you and all of your sickness. I love every psychotic bone in your body and every lick of pain you inflict on me.”

I crash into something hard. Donnacha’s hands fly to my cheeks, and he grips me there. “Remember what I said, Romy?” he hisses viciously. “This was never going to be a love story. I was never your knight in shining armor. People like us don’t get the happy endings like they do in the fairy tales.” His fingers drop off my chin. There’s a breeze as he storms away. “I just hate that I was never proven wrong.”

Bright white light floods the space as a door in the distance opens. Donnacha’s shadow cuts an imposing silhouette against it. Then it slams, plunging me back into darkness.

Alone.

I sink to the dusty floor and let out a sob.

I was wrong. It turns out, there are parts of me left to break.

Donnacha

The moment I stagger into the penthouse, I find the first object that isn't nailed down—a cookbook—and hurl it at the glass wall. It bounces off and lands on the carpet, opening up to reveal a risotto recipe that Romy had annotated in wobbly writing, highlighting the words she didn't know.

I lean my head against the window and close my eyes, listening to the rain destroy the city below.

How could I have been so fucking stupid?

Before I can find something else to smash, the elevator dings behind me.

“Boss?”

Ronan. I roll my forehead against the glass just enough to look at him. He's wearing plastic overalls and an angry scowl with my toolbox tucked under his arm. Sliding it onto the

coffee table, he *click-clicks* the catches open to reveal all of my gleaming babies.

“Do we have Belsky?”

His nostrils flare as he shakes his head. “No. Our boys are slow as snails.” Popping his knuckles, he adds, “Permission to punish them?”

I nod, but I couldn’t give a flying fuck about my men’s speed times right now.

Aiden’s idea was solid; we had the Belsky’s driver’s call translated.

Romashka is in room 386 with English. Am I to pick her up once she’s done, or should we send another car?

It was all I needed to hear. All I needed to know that I was a fucking idiot. She’d played me good, and I was dumb enough to allow it. She never owed me anything. I was the one who forced her hand in marriage, but the betrayal runs through my blood like poison.

“If we don’t have Belsky, why’d you bring my tools?”

Confusion flickers in his eyes. “I thought you’d need them to take care of Romy. Unless you already have?” His gaze darts around my suit, looking for any sign of blood.

“I’m not killing her.”

Only when the statement leaves my lips do I know I mean it. Fuck, I must be insane. I’m running on zero hours sleep and three bottles of *Smugglers Club*.

“No dramas. I’ll do it for you, boss.”

I whip around, stabbing a finger in his direction. “Nobody’s going to kill her,” I snarl.

I stuff my hands in my pockets and pace the apartment. Fuck, *our apartment*. Like a dog that pisses to mark its territory, her scent is fucking everywhere. Fluffy black slippers tucked under the coffee table. A hoodie strewn over the armchair. A goddamn necklace pooled on the kitchen island, like she took it off at the last minute because she suddenly decided it didn’t match her outfit.

A hangover is kicking in, and the way it thumps on the walls of my skull is making me feel like I’m going insane.

Ro asks the same question.

“Are you insane?” he hisses. “She’s working with Belsky, Donnacha, and has been this whole fucking time. Who knows what she knows about us? What you’ve unwittingly told her while you were playing happy families—?”

His defiance melts into a gargle as I grab him by the throat. I slam him into the glass wall with such force that if it wasn’t bulletproof, it’d shatter. “Talk to me like that again, and I’ll march you up to the roof and throw you off it,” I growl, my nose nearly touching his.

The vein in his temple ticks. He releases hot air through his lips, then nods. It’s enough for me to let him go—this time, anyway. Even in my fucked-up mind, I know he’s right.

I can't let her get away with this. I'm a goddamn Quinn, and nobody fucks over me or my family. I have to do *something*, but I know I can't bring myself to hurt a hair on her head.

Taking a deep breath, I lay my palms on the kitchen island as if the coldness of the marble will give me back an ounce of my common sense.

I square my jaw and say, "Find her best friend and bring him to me."

I'll break her by making her watch me take away the person she loves most.

Romy

Minutes, hours, days. How long does it take to lose your mind?

I don't know how long I've been in the dark, but I know it's consuming me. I'm drowning in black, and for the life of me, I can't force my mind to escape. My body won't relax; my imagination won't penetrate the ceiling and lift me up through the clouds. I've lost the skill, and I know soon I'll also lose the person who taught it to me.

The silence is worse than the darkness. It leaves a wide, cavernous space for thoughts to race around in. And every creak sounds like footsteps, every passing breeze sounds like a whispered question:

Is Donnacha going to kill me?

Will Belsky then kill Mak?

Is it possible to love somebody, even though your entire relationship is built on doing cruel things to each other?

The paranoia builds up and up and up until I can't take it, and I scream into the void. The darkness screams back at me. When my throat is hoarse and my lungs are burning, I fumble to a corner, curl up into a ball, and lie there.

Rinse and repeat for god knows how long.

I have my head between my knees when a bright light suddenly floods the room. It scorches my retinas and makes me recoil, and when the red and purple spots finally fade from my vision, I'm horrified by what the light has revealed.

Mak.

Two guards I don't recognize drag him through the door. He's writhing against a chair with a bloodied gag in his mouth. When he sees me, he lets out a muffled moan, eyes growing wider.

I don't know if it's my mind playing tricks on me, but I don't wait to find out. Stumbling to my feet, I rush over and fling my arms around him before those assholes can stop me. Despite the sweat and the dirt caking his hair and skin, the ghost of his familiar scent fills my nostrils. *He smells like home.*

For the first time since I've been locked in here, I want to cry.

"Mak!" I rasp, squeezing his neck like I have no intention of ever letting go. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

The air in the room changes. I can feel it charge my skin and see it in the way the guards suddenly straighten their spines.

Looking up, I lock eyes with the Devil in the doorway.

He saunters in, drags a knuckle through his beard, and says wearily, “How much would you scream for me if I killed your best friend, Romy?”

Ice trickles through my veins. *“Please.”*

It’s crazy; a month ago, I’d have rather slit my goddamn throat than beg. Now look at me, melting to my knees, like the Devil always wanted.

He didn’t break me. He chiseled away at me, piece by piece, until nothing of substance remained.

He strolls over, yanks me to my feet, and holds me there. My tears distort the hard lines of his face, but there’s no mistaking the fire licking the walls of his irises.

Without warning, he rips himself from me like a Band-Aid as if he can’t bear to be near me for a second longer.

I don’t blame him.

He yanks the gag from Mak’s mouth and turns to roast me with his glare.

“I’ll give you a few moments to catch up before we start the show.”

As he walks away, I drop to my knees and bury my face in Mak’s lap.

“Mak, I’m so sorry, I—”

“Romy, what the fuck have you done?” he hisses, terror cladding his words. “Tell me why *Donnacha fucking Quinn’s* men dragged me off a plane at JFK and brought me here to see you? What mess have you got yourself in?”

The secret I’ve been hiding from him for a decade tumbles from my lips, thick and fast. “I-I’ve been working with Belsky.”

A beat. Then he digs his heels into the dirt-caked floor, scraping his chair backward and out of my reach. “Please, let this be some sort of sick joke.”

“I wish it was, Mak.”

Bracing myself, I lift my gaze to his. His bloodied lip is curled back in a snarl. In all the years we’ve known each other, I’ve never seen him so angry. He spits a mouthful of blood and venom onto the floor next to me, then pins me with the coldest stare I’ve ever been subjected to. “*How. Could. You?*”

Donnacha emerges from the shadows, making me flinch. He makes a beeline for Mak, and I leap back on my feet to try to block whatever blow the Devil is about to deal to my best friend.

It doesn’t come. Instead, he comes to a stop a few feet away and slips his hands into his pockets. “It sounds like you hate Belsky more than I do.”

Without tearing his glare from me, Mak jerks his chin up. “Look at my fucking scar, man. Nobody hates Belsky as much

as I do.” His anger seeps from every pore, flowing faster and hotter the more he looks at me. “I have this scar because of *you*, Romy. Because I protected you. And when the *pustosh*’ closed down, he made sure that not a single Vulture in the entire city would take me on as a six.” He yanks at his cuffs, making the chains scrape against the metal of the chair. “Tell me—why did I risk my life and any chance of a career to protect you, when you let him get to you anyway?” His jaw hardens, and he takes a deep breath. When he speaks again, his voice is losing its fight against his fury. “Did he get what he wanted from you? What he came for that night?”

I grit my teeth, tears splattering on the concrete floor from shaking my head so violently. “Stop, please—”

He interrupts me with a bitter laugh. “He did. I know because you’ve never been able to lie to me. Or so I thought.” Dragging his rage from me, he glares up at Donnacha, who’s been so quiet that for a moment, I forgot he was even in the room. “Kill me, I don’t care. I’m tired of living this shit life, anyway.” Tugging his forearms against his cuffs, he adds, “All I ask is that you let me kill Belsky first.”

Mak’s heavy breathing and my labored sobs are the only sounds in the thick, dusty silence between us. Eventually, Donnacha cuts through it.

“Enough. Boys, take him upstairs.”

With all that I have left, I race after them. I might not have my pocketknife or a gun or even anything remotely sharp, but nothing will stop me from fighting for my best friend. But

before I reach them, Donnacha steps in my path, wrapping his arms around me. Not in the way that he used to—hell, that seems so long ago now—but to restrain me.

“Please,” I sob, beating on his chest. Despite everything he’s taking from me, I have to fight the urge to melt into his shirt and beg him to wind his fingers into my hair like he usually does. I hate what he’s doing, but I hate what I’ve done to him more.

When he looks down at me, the hurt is smeared over his handsome face like a haunting oil painting. He lets me go. His fingers twitch toward my face like he’s going to graze his thumb pad over my bottom lip or trace his knuckles along my jaw.

Instead, the lines in his brow deepen, and he mutters, “Wanna know the most fucked-up part about all of this? You were in the position to take down the entire Quinn empire. Kill me, drive my family out of town. Yet I still don’t know whether I want to kill you or kiss you.”

He steals a glance at my lips, shakes his head, and plunges me back into the darkness.

Where I belong.

Donnacha

Aisling's on me like a seagull on fries when the doors slide open to the penthouse. "Don! What the hell happened? Where have you been? Where's Romy? Every time I come up here, she's not here and—"

My men dragging Mak out from behind me makes her stop in her tracks. Her jaw swings open, eyes popping out of her head. "Oh, no. No, no, no," she whispers, walking backward until she trips over an armchair. "I don't need to see any of this. Oh, god."

"Relax." I clip over my shoulder, and my men get to work unlocking Mak from the chair. They drag him by the elbows and dump him on the sofa. "I'm not going to hurt him."

Mak's eyes slash up at me in disbelief. "You're not?"

"Aisling, get this kid a glass of water, then get the hell out of here."

She stutters for a moment, then scurries away. She drops a cup of water on the coffee table, giving the glaring blond kid a wide berth. With a shake of her head in my direction, she disappears into the elevator.

I jerk my chin toward the kid. “If I take those cuffs off, you gonna try to swing at me?”

“Won’t know unless you try.”

Despite everything, his shit-talking makes me smirk. I can see why he and Romy are friends. I rub my hand across my jaw to hide it and sink into the armchair opposite him. While my men unlock the handcuffs weighing down his arms, I take the chance to really assess him. My wife’s best friend and former roommate. Sandy blond hair, pale skin. Would be boy band-worthy if it wasn’t for that angry scar interrupting his eyebrow and the bags under his eyes. They look too heavy for a kid his age.

“Tell me what you know about Belsky.”

“Already told you,” he quips back, rolling his wrists. “He’s an asshole.”

“Yeah, kid. Gonna need a bit more than that.”

He studies me, lips pursed. Then he greedily gulps on his water like he’s never had a drink in his life.

“You ever heard of the St. Nicholas Orphanage?” I shake my head. He huffs. “Didn’t think so. When the Bratnovs ruled this city, it’s where they’d dump all the kids produced from their sordid affairs. The idea was that they’d leave you to rot

there until you were eighteen. But there were always these... *recruiters* hanging about. Associates of the Bratnovs—we called them Vultures 'cause that's what they were. They picked the prettiest girls to be whores, and the strongest boys to become sixes." He glances up at me. "That's the lowest ranking position in the Bratva."

"For some crazy reason, I know how the Mafia works," I say dryly.

He flashes me a cheeky grin. "Just checking." *The nerve of this kid.* "Anyway, Romy learned to fight 'cause she didn't want to become a whore." His whole face darkens at the mention of her name. "One of the best fighters I've ever seen."

A hiss escapes my teeth, and I grind my molars to stop a wry smile from stretching across my face. "That'd explain a lot," I mutter. "Carry on."

"Belsky was one of those Vultures. Had his eye on her since she was twelve. Every time he'd see her in the courtyard, he'd promise her the position of a fighter." He laughs bitterly, then bites his bottom lip. "The lying bastard. One night, he came into the dorms looking for her. Tried to get into her cot and do things that no grown-ass man should even think about doing to a young girl."

Suddenly, her words swim around my head. *I don't like being touched.* The memory slashes an angry wound across my heart, and the thought of that *slimy cunt* touching her makes me want to burn this entire city down. But I clench my fists to keep my emotions in check.

Mak continues. “He didn’t realize I was in the cot next to her. Always was, ever since the other Vultures started slipping into the dorms at night too. Long story short, that’s how I got this.” He points a swollen finger at the scar on his forehead. “He beat the shit out of me.” He shrugs. “I was only sixteen. But if I had a crack at him now...” His nostrils flare. “Fuck, man. I can’t believe she’s been working with him all this time behind my back.”

I’m beginning to see why. Although rage swells in my chest like a helium balloon, I keep my composure, knowing I need to get as much information out of this kid as possible.

He takes a deep breath and carries on. “When you guys killed the Bratnovs, the orphanage got shut down real quick. They chucked all the kids out on their asses, and it was a mad scramble to find work. I’d just turned eighteen, so I was preparing to leave anyway, but Belsky made sure none of the associates still knocking around after the fall would touch me.” He scowls and adds, “I managed to meet a *patsan* from the St. Petersburg Bratva while he was on business over here. He promised me I’d be a six for a year, tops. Yet here I am, still smuggling diamonds and weapons in backpacks on red-eye flights.”

I twist my ring around my finger, mulling this over. The St. Petersburg crew is no joke. “Do they know about Belsky’s plans to take over the city?”

“Course. They talk about it all the time. News travels fast around the families, and they’ve been keeping a close eye on

him from the motherland. He's been doing this for a decade, you know? That's what my *pakhan* is so fascinated by. On the continent, those guys see what they want, and they take it. Belsky is a new breed. He wasn't born into a family. Instead, he bankrolled a lot of the Bratnov's businesses, and that's how he was connected to them. Paid for drug shipments from the Vargases, diamond shipments from the Van der Boors. They were fascinated by how he's playing the long con."

When he stops talking, I let the room fall into silence. Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I watch him as he drains the water, then looks around expectantly. One of my men glances at me from the corner, and I nod to him. *Get him another.*

"Why are you telling me all this, kid? Do you have no loyalty to your Russian brothers?"

He snorts. "Why are you *asking* me all of this?" A fresh cup of water lands in his hands. Over the rim, he adds, "None of this shit is relevant to you." *Gulp, gulp.* "Seems like you're interrogating me as a way to put off what you know you need to do but won't, which is kill Romy."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard." Realizing he's overstepped the line, he shifts in his seat and lowers his tone. "I saw how you looked at her down there. She's worked her way under your skin, and now you don't know how you're going to dispose of her without hurting yourself." He leans forward, peering at me. "I'm well aware of who you are, Mr. Quinn. If your men hadn't bundled

me into a car so viciously, talking about how you've married my best friend, I would probably let you know that I kinda admire you. You're ruthless. And I know a man like you wouldn't keep this traitor alive unless you loved her."

I pause, refusing to show my hand.

"If you were in my shoes, kid, what would you do?"

"If I was in your shoes, I'd sell them." He glances down at my brogues. "They look fucking expensive."

Despite myself, I laugh. He's a little fucker, but this kid has my sense of humor, even if nothing in this goddamn world seems funny anymore.

"Nah, but seriously," he says, getting rid of the boyish grin. "If I was a Quinn and my territory was being compromised, I wouldn't kill the mole. I'd get them to speak and use them to my advantage." Glancing up at me hopefully, he adds, "And then I'd let them go because they were so helpful."

Swallowing his answer for a few moments, I rise to my feet. "Good talk, kid," I say softly, clapping him on his back as I pass.

"Hey, where are you going?" he calls after me. "You're not gonna hurt her, are you?"

I ignore him and call the elevator.

The doors slide open immediately to reveal Aisling folded into the corner. She looks up at me, eyes watering and bottom lip trembling.

“Poor Romy,” she whispers, “how can life be so fucking cruel?”

I pull her into my chest, catching her next sob in my shirt.

Romy

Some time after they dragged Mak away, the lights come back on, and a guard cracks open the door just enough to slip through a pitcher of water and a plate of Franco's lasagna.

I don't know why the change of heart, but I take it, wolfing down the food and gulping glass after glass. I'm not stupid enough to think Donnacha will care if I go on a hunger strike, and I know I'll need my energy to even have a chance of getting out of here alive.

With food and water swirling in my system, I really can't hold my bladder any longer. I take my chance, hammering on the door, and a sour-faced guard cuffs me and escorts me to a dingy water closet next to the elevator before tossing me back into the concrete block.

I'm curled up in the corner when the door opens again. *Jesus, time's flying if I'm due another meal already.* But when I look up, I'm surprised to see Aisling in the doorway.

She runs toward me, and I stagger to my feet. As she draws closer, I realize she's been crying. *Of course she has. I've betrayed her just as much as I have her brother.*

I'm bracing for whatever judo move she wants to throw at me. I won't even fight back. But she flings her arms around me and sobs into my shoulder. "Jesus Christ, Romy. I'm so happy to see you."

I pull away, confused. "Did Donnacha not tell you what happened?"

Dragging her sleeve over her mascara-stained cheek, she says, "I overheard your friend telling my brother everything. I had no idea..."

"Mak," I mutter, cutting her off. "Where is he? Is he—"

"No! No. He's upstairs, and he's fine."

Relief floods through me. *Fuck.* In the silence of this room, I've been going out of my mind wondering what's happened to him. The skid marks from the chair they dragged him in on have been taunting me, as have the blood splatter pooled on the concrete.

Aisling brings me back with a squeeze on my shoulder. "Romy? Are you okay?" She doesn't wait for an answer. Instead, she pulls me into another desperate hug again. "God, I can't believe all the awful stuff that has happened to you."

I shake my head frantically. There's no way she knows the entire story. Otherwise, she'd have me in a headlock rather than an embrace.

“Aisling, I don’t think you understand. My intentions were to kill your brother while I was here. You should hate me right now.”

She snorts, lip curling in disgust. “Girl, do you understand what grooming is? ’Cause that’s what has happened to you.” Her eyes darken mischievously as she adds, “Besides, it serves my brute of a brother right. He forced you into being his wife, and now he’s pissed off he chose the wrong bitch.”

I stare at her like she’s lost her damn mind. For a girl so deeply woven into the fabric of the East Coast’s most powerful Mafia, she sure as hell has a simplified outlook on it all. Grabbing me by the elbow, she says, “Come on, let’s get out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

We cling to each other as she takes me up to her apartment. “You stink.” She sniffs. “I’m dunking you straight in the bath.”

As the doors to her apartment open, I dig in my heels in and scan the space with suspicion. “And Donnacha? Is he okay?”

She looks at me wearily. “After I teach you about grooming, I’ll fill you in on Stockholm Syndrome.” She pauses, chewing on her lip. “You’ve had a change of heart, though, right? Like, you don’t want to kill him anymore?”

My laugh is manic. “I haven’t wanted to kill your brother in quite a while now. Although, I’m sure he wouldn’t say the same about me.”

Nodding slowly, she fishes a towel out of her laundry pile and lays it across the sofa, then beckons me to take a seat. “So, will you help him take down Belsky?”

“What?”

She disappears into her bedroom and comes back with a camera. “He wants you to do something.”

* * *

It’s dark outside by the time we’re finished, but I know the night has only just begun.

“How are you feeling?” Aisling asks timidly, leaning against the doorframe of her bedroom.

Like I’ve peeled away all the layers of my skin, and the makeup and the jewelry and the tight dress I’m wearing are the only things holding me together.

That’s not what leaves my lips, though. Instead, I glance at her in the vanity mirror and force a smile. “Fine.”

I mustn’t look fine because she comes back a few moments later with a large glass of wine. “We can break out the shots if you need them, too,” she mutters, sinking on the edge of her bed.

I busy myself with braiding the front of my hair, then pulling it back into an elegant bun. I’ve spent my entire life in the shadows, but if I have to bare myself to the world to set me and those I love free, then so be it.

I'll repent my sins on the world stage.

“If you apply that lipstick anymore, you won't have any lips left,” Aisling says softly.

I sigh. I'm procrastinating, and I know it. “Let's get this over with,” I mutter, rising to my feet. Aisling walks me wordlessly to the elevator doors, and as they slide open, she pulls me in for another hug.

Her hair smells like bubblegum and innocence, and I wish I could stay down here with her forever. Live in her oblivious world, going to school and partying on the weekends, with the only reminders that she's attached to this life being her last name and the guards in her peripheral vision.

“If I don't see you again, then know that I appreciate everything you've done for me. You've been a better friend to me than I've deserved, so thank you.”

When she tugs herself out of my grasp, she scowling, but her watery eyes betray her. “Oh, I'll see you again, all right. If not”—she *chop-chops* her hands around like she's Jackie Chan—“Donnacha will have to answer to me.”

Despite myself, I can't help but laugh. Just before the doors close entirely, she blows me a kiss, and then I'm heading up to the penthouse.

When the doors open, there's a strange feeling in my chest. Even though my palms are sweaty and my stomach is heavy with dread, stepping into this place feels...*nostalgic*.

Like I've arrived home.

Taking one step into the entrance hall, I notice a face pops up over the back of an armchair in the living area.

“Mak!” I gasp.

I don't care if he wants to kill me. I run over and wrap my arms around him, clinging on to the one thing that has gotten me through this shitty life up until this point.

He freezes for a few moments, then squeezes me back. “Just because I'm happy to see you doesn't mean I don't still hate you,” he says into my hair, voice choked with emotion. Tearing himself away to look at me, he adds, “But you're more than a best friend. You're my sister. It's going to take me a while to get over the betrayal, but I understand why you did it, and I'll always love you.”

Gnawing on the inside of my cheek to stop myself from bursting into tears, I nod. “Tonight, I'll make it right.”

Mak's face hardens. “Yeah, I can't say I'm too happy with this plan, but who am I to argue with Donnacha fuckin' Quinn?” He gestures his arms wildly, sweeping the penthouse. “How the other half live, right? You're a crafty bitch, you know that? I've been slaving away on shitty flights all month. Meanwhile, you've been here living a life of luxury.”

I'm just so glad that Mak is talking to me that I laugh. Looking past his shoulder, I notice he's got the armchair reclined, a soccer game on the television, and a large plate of fried chicken on the coffee table. When I look back at him, it hits me that he's in one of Donnacha's T-shirts.

What the hell is happening?

I yank on the fabric and say, “Seems like you’re not doing too badly for yourself right now either.” I want to add, *why the hell aren’t you dead?* But decide it’s best to keep my mouth shut.

Chuckling, he reaches for a chicken drumstick and rips off the skin with his teeth, like he hasn’t eaten this good in months. “Yeah, if you’d told me a week ago that I’d be chilling in Donnacha Quinn’s penthouse instead of being killed in his basement, then I’d say you were shitting me.” He holds out the chicken like I’m going to take a bite of it myself. “You tried Franco’s cooking? Fuck me, I never wanna leave.”

“She’s not a bad chef herself, these days.”

The drawl behind us makes me jump. I turn and lock eyes with Donnacha. He’s standing at the foot of the spiral staircase wearing a sharp tuxedo. The intensity of his gaze snatches my breath away.

Mak snorts. “Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it. Romy could burn water.”

But I’m not listening. I’m too busy staring at the man technically known as my husband. The Devil in black. He looks heartbreakingly handsome, even more so now that I know I will never get to touch him again like I used to.

His gaze never leaves mine, even while Mak is shit-talking. “Ready to go?”

All I can manage is a faint nod. Mak pulls me in for another hug but doesn't say a word. Sometimes, goodbyes are best left unspoken.

Donnacha holds the elevator for me, and I step in beside him. As we both watch the floors pass by in suffocating silence, I feel the urge to break it.

“Thank you for not killing Mak.”

“His smart-ass mouth makes it tempting.” I hear his throat bob, then he adds, “But I had no reason to. You betrayed him as much as you did me.”

I feel like I've been stung when we arrive in the lobby, but I know I deserve every jab. I smooth down my dress, fall in step with him, and remind myself this is purely business.

The entrance to the building is crowded with more henchmen than I've ever seen, and they're strapping on bulletproof vests and loading AK-47s. It feels like we're in the trenches, and they're getting ready to go over the top. Outside, the Town Car is flanked by two security vans instead of the usual one. Even Karl, the driver, has a bulletproof vest on today. He holds the door open for me, but before I get in, Donnacha stops me.

“I need the USB stick, Romy.”

Fumbling in my clutch, I pull it out and place it in his outstretched paw. He curls his hands around it, then taps it against his chin. His eyes search mine, conflicted and angry, and for one heart-lifting moment, I think he's going to hurl it

across the road like a football. Instead, he hands it to a waiting henchman. I watch as he stalks off with it and gets into a different car.

Then he peels off into the heart of the city with all of my darkest secrets.

“Get in.”

In the back of the car, the air feels hot and heavy. Donnacha barely moves a muscle, staring out at the passing city with his hands folded into his lap.

My skin itches with everything I want to say, but nothing I can think of seems big enough. Instead, I dive into my clutch again and pull out the notepad.

“I have something for you.”

Slowly, Donnacha turns his head, dropping his eyes to my hand. “What is it? All your brainstorming of how you were going to kill me?”

I toss it into his lap and turn my attention back to the window. “It’s the names of everyone I know who is connected to Belsky and what role they’ve played in his plan.”

Silence.

In the reflection of the window, I see him flick through the pages.

“You wrote this yourself?”

The softness of his voice takes me off guard, and I turn to face him. “Yes.”

“I’m impressed.”

For the rest of the journey, neither of us utters another word, giving my nerves the space to bubble up out of my stomach and spread through my veins like a virus. Sweat dots my skin, and there’s a new pulse in my neck.

As the car slows to round a corner, Donnacha clears his throat.

“There’s something I have to give you too. Two things, actually.”

The first, he digs out of the pocket of his slacks. It’s a velvet box, one I recognize. And I know inside will be the ring I didn’t have on my finger when I woke up in that dark room.

“It’s just to—”

“Fit the illusion, I know.”

I refuse to show my heartbreak. Instead, I slip it on my finger with all of the nonchalance I can muster.

The second thing comes from his breast pocket. He places it in my hand, and immediately, the weight and shape of it feel like I’ve been given back a missing limb.

My pocketknife.

“Just in case,” he mutters.

My shoulders sag with relief, and I press the cold metal to my lips. “Thank you,” I whisper, closing my eyes briefly. When I open them again, his gaze is penetrating my soul.

The air shifts a degree. *Maybe I'm imagining it.* But then his knee presses against mine, confirming it. Flames of hope lick the walls of my stomach, then—

He grips my head and pulls me into his orbit, crushing his lips against mine.

His kiss is hot and frantic; his fingers find their way home to the base of my scalp. All night, a million thoughts have been tumbling around my brain, among them, a vow to myself. *Don't forget what you're doing. Don't forget why you're still alive. Don't get swept up in the illusion.*

But as his delicious tongue claims mine, all of those thoughts and vows and even my darkest sins fall silent. I can only hear my heart beat in my temples. Only the tick of his Rolex as his hands clamp my ears. To hell with reality—it's a dark, frightening place, and I want to stay in this stolen piece of make-believe for a little while longer.

When he pulls away, it feels like a rug has been tugged out from underneath me.

Through labored breaths, I manage to stutter, “You're supposed to hate me.”

Donnacha flicks his features back to neutral, but the pulse thumping against his neck betrays his ice-cold wall.

“Since when has that meant anything?”

He wipes my blood-red lipstick from his jaw, removing the last traces of my fucked-up fantasy, then returns to glaring out

the window, like he wants to start a fight with every pedestrian and streetlamp we pass.

Donnacha

The car comes to a stop outside the Three Pines Hotel. It's a big brown slab of a building, and how it's got five stars above the door will always remain a mystery to me. Tonight, it's like a turd rolled in glitter; fairy lights applied with a spray-and-pray approach and spotlights giving it a favorable glow. A red carpet rolls out from the entrance like a tongue.

I draw in a deep breath and pop my knuckles. We've just rocked up to Belsky's governor candidacy announcement party.

First step of the plan: Get in.

Ronan twists in the front passenger seat, pinning me with a dubious glare. "I'm gonna ask you again, boss. You sure you want to do this? 'Cause once you're inside that building, it'll take us at least forty seconds to get to you." He jerks his chin out the window toward Belsky's men stalking the shadows, giving the once-over to every guest. "And that's only if these bastards go down like dominoes."

“You know how much I enjoy a little risk, Ronan,” I drawl, tightening my cuff links. “It makes my cock hard.”

Romy shifts next to me, a reminder that I’m bullshitting. If she wasn’t here, I’d be drunk on adrenaline and ready to fuck some shit up. But now there’s this lump in my throat and sweat gathering in the creases of my palms. My heart is screaming to protect her. Asking me *why the fuck did you bring her here in the first place?* My heart, it beats with the need to bundle her into my henchmen’s security van behind us and demand they whisk her back to the safety of the penthouse.

But my head is telling me to throw her to the wolves.

Sometimes, the voices are so loud that I want to rip out all my organs and not have to deal with any of these emotions at all.

“Let’s go.”

“Good luck,” Ronan mutters. He slashes Romy a furious glare, then busies himself with loading his gun.

We step out into the cold, and I play the role of the doting husband. I could win an Oscar with how I white-knuckle her hips, pulling her close and grinning down the lenses of the flashing cameras as we walk the red carpet.

At the entrance, a bored woman scans her clipboard. “Name?”

I almost laugh. It isn’t often somebody asks me that in this city. *Ask the men who make a beeline for me from every*

corner. I tighten my grip on Romy and say, “Donnacha Quinn.”

Before her jaw can swing open, Belsky’s little bitches are surrounding us.

“Get out of here, Quinn,” one snarls with unconvincing menace.

“I don’t think you have the authority to address me, kiddo,” I say, faking a yawn. “Get me someone on my level or move aside.”

He startles, then with a blistering glare, he cups the mouthpiece of his radio and mutters something in Russian. Romy stiffens against my hands. You don’t have to be Einstein to know who he’s summoning.

It doesn’t take long for Belsky to emerge from the hotel lobby at all, flanked by more men. To the untrained eye, they look like other partygoers, but I’d recognize that outline in their waistband anywhere.

Belsky’s eyes dart from me to Romy and back again, like he can’t believe his lackey was telling the truth. With a glance at the photographer just a few feet away, he switches on a winning smile and hisses, “You have some nerve showing up here. I’ll give you three seconds to crawl back into your car and drive off before I instruct my men to spray you with bullets.”

“So intimidating,” I drawl in a voice that suggests he’s anything but. The journalists and paparazzi are starting to

circle now, their ears pricking up and their cameras ready at the whiff of potential drama. I flash them a megawatt smile of my own and say, “Gee, all these journalists from all the big newspapers. No doubt your party will be on the front of every page tomorrow morning. It’d be a shame, wouldn’t it, if we were to make a scene out here? All those column inches would be filled with this drama instead of your charming manifestos.”

I love seeing Belsky squirm. “What are you planning?” he says, bringing his head closer to mine, that smile still frozen on his face.

“Nothing. I’m simply keeping up appearances, Belsky. It’d be strange if at least one member of the city’s most powerful family wasn’t here to show their support.”

His nostrils flare, then he turns his back on us, whispering with his men in Russian. When he turns back around, he’s back to being the cool and composed asshole that I recognize. “Very well,” he says as politely as he can muster. “Please, come on in.”

He and his men tail us into the lobby, where Belsky tiptoes to meet my ear. “You’re in here because I refuse to let this hit the headlines, but be warned, Quinn, my men will have all eyes trained on you.”

I force eye contact as we pass through the scanners. Nothing beeps. To drive my point into his thick skull, I open my jacket, flashing him the bespoke silk lining. “Unarmed,

see? Just here for a good time,” I say with a wink, picking up two champagne flutes from a passing waiter.

His ears tinge a girlish pink, and muttering something Slavic under his breath, he scurries off.

I allow the rage to refill my blood, my fingers twitching to stride after him, drag him into a dark corner, and feel every inch of his flesh tear under my ring. Instead, I look down at Romy and remember why we’re here. She looks ghostly pale, fiddling with the gems on her necklace.

“You okay?”

She swallows and straightens her spine. “Y-Yeah, I am. I thought he’d have an inkling that you know who I really am... but there’s no way he’d react like that if he did.”

“Then let’s keep up the illusion, baby,” I mutter, chinking my glass against hers.

In the ballroom, classical music plays, champagne flows, and crammed between the four gilded walls is every type of asshole I hate. Fat-bellied businessmen in penguin suits with their wives—all too young and too skinny—dangling on their arms. They smile and nod in all the right places, but behind their big hair and false lashes, I can see them mentally totting up how many years they’ve got left until their husband kicks the bucket and they can enjoy his inheritance with their tennis coach.

“His men are everywhere,” Romy hisses, curling herself closer to me.

I graze over the men in the shadows, too brutish and too sour-faced to convince anyone they are here by invitation.

“So let’s give them a show.”

When I pull her onto the dance floor, she comes willingly, but her back stiffens under my palm, and her hand is damp when she slides it into mine. Her beautiful features remain unbothered, though, like she’s trying so hard to act the part.

Fuck, she feels good against my body; looks good too. I know every man in this room would trade places with me in a heartbeat, and I also know they’d soar to the top of my hit list if they tried.

As the song melts into a slower tempo, Romy rests her head on my chest, and I hate what it does to me. It fills me with rage, knowing that things could never be like this. It could never be different because of who I am and what she’s done.

“Walk me through the plan,” I murmur into her soft, silver hair, briefly closing my eyes when the scent of her shampoo drifts up my nose.

“In half an hour, Belsky will take the stage to make his official announcement.” She lifts her head from my chest to subtly locate the journalists clinging onto the perimeters of the room. In scruffy jeans and sporting lanyards, they are as easy to spot as Belsky’s men. “He’ll introduce himself, then he’ll premier his campaign video. And that’s when you’ll send a text to—”

“Declan,” I finish for her.

“Yes. He’ll hack his computer and show my video instead.”

Her chest heaves against mine. At first, I think she’s scared, so I rub my thumb against the curve of her back to calm her down. But when she looks up at me through those thick lashes, I recognize the adrenaline vibrating through her. It’s like looking in a mirror.

“Then we’ll leave, get in the waiting cars, and peel off into the sunset.” Her eyes darken, challenging me. “But like you said, there’ll be no happy ever after. Instead, you’ll decide whether you want to let me live or if you want to kill me.”

I hold my tongue.

“You nervous?”

“No,” she mutters, confirming what I already knew. “Not anymore. Now, I’m excited to finally ruin this man.” Her chin jerks upward so her perfectly plump lips are in line with mine. “Whatever it takes.”

I have to tear away from her gaze before I have another moment of weakness and claim those lips with my own. So I scan the room, locking eyes with one of Belsky’s men. Even from here, I can see him salivating like a hungry dog. My world is full of cunts like him—the type who’d be bragging forever if they managed to kill Donnacha Quinn.

Romy twirls like a ballerina under my hand. When she completes a full circle, I pull her in tighter than before, my

semi-hard cock resting against her hipbone. The proximity of her body and the danger that's engulfing are like a drug.

“We might not make it out alive.”

Her eyes dance at the idea of a challenge. “I don't fear death. I fear living a life without the only man I've ever loved.”

The iron cladding around my heart quivers like an earthquake some hundred miles away is shaking its foundation.

“So you meant it, what you said the other day?”

I shouldn't ask because what good will the answer do? But the sound of her screaming that she loves me as I left her in the darkness has been playing through my mind like a broken record all week.

Her gaze hardens. “You want the truth or a lie?”

The corners of my lips threaten to tilt upward. “Lie.”

“Well, tough shit,” she whispers, closing the gap between our faces and brushing the tip of her nose over mine like a silk cloth. “You'll get the truth. The lie is easier to swallow, but the truth is what everyone has to face in the end. I meant every goddamn word of it, whether you like it or not.”

My cock tingles, and a shiver skates up my spine. How is it possible to wish you've never met someone and wish you'd met them earlier at the same time?

In a different lifetime, on a different planet...

With Romy in my arms, the next thirty minutes slip through my fingers like sand. My head jerks up the moment I hear the *chink, chink, chink*, of a fork tapping a champagne flute. The crowd stops dancing, and Romy fits into the crook of my arm as we turn to face the stage.

There's that rage again, this time prickling up my arms like a thousand needles, the moment I clap eyes on Belsky striding along the stage. I hated this asshole by default, because of what he was planning to do to my family, but now, the hatred runs deeper, darker, led by pure emotion.

I skate my fingers down Romy's bare arm as the lights dim, and Belsky taps the mic, reminding her that I'm here. Tugging my cell out of my slacks, I tap out a text to Declan:

Tune in.

"New York," he booms into the microphone like he's addressing Times Square on New Year's Eve. "First and foremost, I want to thank every one of you for joining me tonight." Drawing in a deep breath, he puffs out his chest and says, "Because tonight, I am announcing my candidacy for the governor of New York!" He leaves a dramatic pause, and a polite ripple of applause fills it. I glance down at Romy, considering muttering a sarcastic retort in her ear, but she's standing as still as a statue and staring straight ahead.

She's ready to ruin him. I don't want to take this moment away from her.

"Throughout this country's history, the great State of New York has always represented the American Dream. It is a state

that has always welcomed everyone with open arms, offering new opportunities, freedom, and sanctuary for anyone who dares to believe in it.” Belsky’s eyes slash to me, his perfect politician smile faltering for a nanosecond. “It was built on the foundations of democracy and expanded with the notion of hard work. In the past decade, however, New York seems to have lost its way, with democracy giving way to dictatorship.” His nostrils flare. “Not from our great government, of course, but to organized crime.” There’s a shift in the room, and partygoers glance over the rims of their drinks toward me.

The expression *water off a duck’s back* has never been truer, baby.

“Those of you in this room will be well aware of my main adjective, but tackling organized crime is not all I have to offer. So, without further ado, I present to you a short video that summarizes my manifesto.”

Belsky steps to the side as a screen rolls down from the ceiling, and beside me, Romy’s breath skitters.

Belsky for New York appears on the screen against a panoramic shot of Manhattan. It quickly cuts to his gaunt face. “My name is Leo Belsky,” he begins, looking intently into the camera, “and this is me announcing my candidacy for the governor of New York. New York is—”

The screen goes black, and Belsky’s awkward laughter flutters through the room. He mutters something about technical problems, flashing the IT guy at the side of the stage

a death glare, who, in return, taps a few buttons on the keyboard and shrugs.

Suddenly, Romy's face appears with Aisling's living room behind her. Her eyes flick up to somewhere above the camera, then she draws in a deep breath and stares down the lens.

“My name is Romashka Bratnov, and this is my story of how Leonid Belsky groomed me from the age of twelve.”

I thought I was prepared for this, but staring into her stormy eyes as she bravely unravels her story makes it feel like someone's taken a sledgehammer to my chest with the intent to kill.

I drop my gaze to her, the real her, the one I'm holding protectively in the crook of my arm. I want to shatter every bad memory, every horror she's witnessed, and every goddamn person on this planet who has broken her before. And then I want to pick up all of her bittersweet pieces and mend them.

I want to love her.

Fuck. I think I already do.

Despite getting lost in her own confession, she feels my laser-like stare boring into her temple. She drags her eyes away from the screen, and for a split second, the stupefied crowd and the armed guards coming from all four corners of the room melt away. It's just us, in our tangled web of darkness, two fucked-up people with fucked-up minds. Two of a kind.

I've never met another woman like Romy. I never will and never want to.

"I'm ready to go down with this ship," she whispers, danger dancing in her eyes.

And I know that without a doubt, I'll hold her hand and sink into the abyss with her.

Romy

It feels like I'm having an out-of-body experience, watching myself. A fascinated spectator among the sea of confused partygoers, watching all the horrors that live in my mind seep through my mouth and flood the room.

“Leonid Belsky promised me a job and a stable income, the ultimate dream for an orphan with no formal education. I did not realize that his idea of a job was prostitution, and it wasn't long before he was pimping me out to his colleagues...”

I watch myself talk, rattling off the reason behind every scar Belsky left on my blackened heart. Of course, I don't mention anything that would incriminate me. Belsky might be a monster, but I'm no saint, either. I've concealed a lot because that's what I've always done. My life has always been a string of half-truths because I'm constantly keeping some parts of myself hidden in the shadows. Whether it be my sorry

childhood, or my real name, or even my intentions, I choose what I show the world.

Feeling Donnacha's gaze scorching the side of my face, I turn, basking under the rays of his admiration. The crowd's collective hysteria builds up around us like a symphony, and in the middle of it, I find myself laughing, then laughing even harder when concern clouds my husband's beautiful features. It dawns on me that he's the only person who's seen me in all of my glory, in the cold light of day. I have nothing to hide, and now, if we don't make it out alive, then at least I can say I died free.

That I rose from the ashes of my sins.

Feniks!

"I don't even know her," Belsky bellows to the crowd, now that his microphone has been cut off. "I've never seen this woman in my life."

His men are closing in, shuffling through the bodies to get to us. People turn, their cogs whirring and clicking into place when they see me. The silver-haired girl on the screen telling her truth.

Cameras flash. Women gasp. And as Donnacha grips my hand and pulls me toward the back of the room, I've never felt so fucking alive.

"Let's get out of here," he growls on the back of my neck. I can practically feel the adrenaline on his breath.

The crowds part like the Red Sea, and I kick off my heels to run through it faster, dodging Belsky's men. Swinging jaws and stuttered conversations pass by in a blur. We spill out to the lobby, the street just a few feet away.

We are so close. We're going to make it. We're going to be free.

Donnacha's grip on my hand tightens, and as we push through the doors and our car screeches into view, he turns to pin me with that dazzling grin. The one that lights up the darkest places of my soul. "We're almost there, sweetheart. We're—"

Bang.

I hear the bullet before I see it. It whistles past my ear, and as I duck, I feel Donnacha fold on top of me.

"No!"

One bullet, followed by a barrage of others, and I'm too disorientated to see where they're coming from. White flashes, a pool of red, the dusty smell of gun powder, then suddenly my bare feet are no longer touching the ground. Donnacha's fingers tear out of mine, and when I look up, I see his men swarming him, carrying him into the car. I'm bundled in after him, falling on top of him on the floorboard.

"Donnacha!" I scream, rolling him onto his back and ripping open his blazer to reveal the red puddle seeping through his shirt. "Fuck!"

His eyes graze over my face and body with panic I've never seen before clouding his features. "Are you—?"

"I'm fine!" I yell, gently pushing down his shoulders to stop him from moving. "You've been shot."

He touches his wound and winces, then stares at his bloodied hand in disbelief.

"And so I have."

"We're getting you to the hospital right away, boss," Ronan growls from the front seat before yelling at Carl to step on it.

I curl my hand in his and bring it to my lips. "You're going to be okay. Just hold on."

His chuckle doesn't sound like his. It comes out in a little wheeze, followed by another wince. "You know," he murmurs, turning his attention to the car ceiling, "I've seen a lot of blood in my time, but funnily enough, I'm not very good at seeing my own."

I laugh skittishly. "You're a fucking idiot."

"And you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he mutters, eyes twinkling.

Without thinking twice, I put one hand over the other and push against his wound, stemming the blood flow. Then I press my lips against his, absorbing every hiss and wince.

I have just freed myself from Belsky, but some things will never change.

Like the fact I'm a stubborn bitch by nature, and I'm never letting go.

Donnacha

Lorcan's waiting for me in my office in the Tunnels, face like a slapped ass.

It feels like a thousand knives are stabbing my stomach as I sink into my chair, but I grin and bear it, then pin my cousin with a scowl that matches his own.

"I got shot, and you didn't send me so much as a fucking fruit basket."

He stops pacing the tatty carpet and looks at me like I'm insane. "First of all, you were in the hospital for less than an hour before you ripped your IV out and insisted you got back to work."

"Sounds like I deserve employee of the month."

"Sounds like I should put you six feet under," he hisses back, amber eyes glowing with fury. "What the fuck, Don?"

There's so much to unpack here that I don't know where to start."

Rubbing my jaw, I consider everything he must have discovered during my very short hospital stay. He would have seen the news, seen what went down at Belsky's announcement party, and put two and two together.

Clutching at my side and ignoring the little fireworks that flash in front of my eyes every time I breathe, I say, "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"How about you just give me all the fucking news."

"I'll start with the good," I quip back. My cousin is going to need some serious buttering up before I drop my bombshell on him. "You've seen that Belsky's fall from grace has hit every major news outlet in the country already." He opens his mouth to protest, but I hold up my hand—with great fucking difficulty— and make sure I finish. "There was a shoot-out between my men and his; no casualties on our side, four fatalities on his. I know what your next question will be, and no—you won't see a single news article about the bloodshed. Ronan took the initiative to pay off every reporter and bystander, and the only way in which we'll be mentioned will be in relation to me, Donnacha Quinn the local investor and philanthropist, being the supportive husband of Belsky's victim. We've hemorrhaged enough cash to bankrupt a small country to pull it off, but it had to be done. Now, wanna know the best news of all?" At Lorcan's snarl, I jerk my chin over

his shoulder. “We got to Belsky long before the police did. He’s on his way from New York to Boston right now.”

Lorcan regards me with suspicion, his eye twitching. Then he thumps his hands on my desk, his head dipping between his shoulder blades. “And that would be an excellent outcome, Don, if you hadn’t failed to mention the biggest plot hole in your story: the fact your *brave, darling wife* is a fucking Russian rat.”

My fingers twitch at the venom in his voice. It’s become an instinct when it comes to Romy. When anyone calls her a mole or a traitor, it makes me want to wrap my goddamn fingers around their throat and ask them to repeat their opinion. But Lorcan’s my boss, my cousin, my best fucking friend.

If I can’t guarantee him my loyalty, I owe him my honesty at least.

I suck in all the air my wound will allow and pin my cousin with a blistering glare.

“And that leads me to the bad news. If you force me to choose between my wife and our family...” I grind my jaw, unable to believe what I’m about to say. “Then I choose Romy.”

Lorcan’s eyes damn near pop out of his head. His lips curl over his teeth to form a snarl. “You’d choose the woman Belsky hired to *kill you* over your own flesh and blood?”

His fist lands on my desk with a sickening crack, but I don't even flinch. "First of all, she was forced, not hired. Second of all..." I shake my head in disbelief. "I'm in love with her, Lorc. I'm so fucking in love with her that just the *mere thought* of anyone hurting a silver hair on her head makes me want to start a war." I swallow the knot in my throat. "She makes me want to do bad things to good people and good things for bad reasons." A bitter laugh escapes my lips, pained and defeated. "So I'm pleading with you: *don't make me choose.*"

The office falls into a pregnant silence. Lorcan turns to the door, the muscles in his back working as he rakes his hand through his hair. After what feels like forever, he mutters, "I've never seen you like this."

"I never thought I'd *be* like this. It turns out, I'm human after all, despite all the evil entwined in my DNA." He takes his time turning back to face me, and when he does, his gaze is weary. "She's not who you think she is," I say quietly, picking up a pen and twirling it between my thumb and forefinger. "She wants Belsky dead more than you and me combined. She wrote a whole damn list of everyone she knows who's working with Belsky, and I have my men working through them right now." I run my tongue over my teeth and add, "Because of her, we can cut the head off the serpent and keep it from growing back. And that's exactly what I intend to do."

He mutters an oath under his tongue, the vein in his temple clocking in overtime. "I can't fucking think straight. But all I can think of is Poppy."

I arch an eyebrow. “At a time like this? Jesus, you really are whipped, even after a decade of marriage.”

He slashes an angry glare in my direction. “I mean, all I can think about is what she’d say right now if I made you choose between family and the woman you love. She was in tears, watching the news.” He swallows, like he’s trying to rid himself of the image of his wife crying. “Couldn’t believe all the shit that girl had been through. Said she was so brave telling her story like that, all because it’d help us.” He purses his lips. “She also called you a few choice words for adding to her pain when you forced her to marry you in the first place, but that’s a story for another day.”

He’s thawing around the edges, and that’s good enough for me. I flash him a grin, feeling a weight lift off my bruised chest. “Wouldn’t want to upset Poppy now, would you? I heard it’s cold in the doghouse.”

He rolls his eyes and mutters another curse word, but I know I have him. I also know it won’t be smooth sailing from here. Romy will have to earn my family’s trust like she’s earned mine.

My cell vibrates in my slacks, and I glance at the screen.

But she can earn that trust another day. Right now, there are more pressing matters to attend to.

“Hope you’ve warmed up, cuz,” I say, slipping my cell back in my pockets and staggering to my feet, “’cause Belsky’s arriving at any minute.”

Romy

I take one step into the darkness, and my boot lands directly in a murky puddle. It could be rainwater, but by the smell that assaults my nose, it's more likely to be shit. I turn around, regarding Ronan with suspicion.

“Look, if this is some kind of revenge for stabbing you that one time, then we can work through your embarrassment another way.”

He rolls his eyes, takes the flashlight from his holster, and lights up the tunnel ahead with its yellow glow. “I should have stabbed you back when I got the chance. Now that you're Donnacha's official missus, I'll never get away with hurting a hair on your head.”

My laughter bounces off the curved concrete walls. “You couldn't restrain me if I was standing still, let alone stab me.”

We glance at each other, grinning. An unspoken fondness for each other is starting to brew under the surface. He falls in step behind me until we reach a door on the right, which he

kicks open with his steel-capped boot. It opens up to reveal a tunnel just as damp and dingy as this one, the only difference being the white strip lighting lining the ceiling. “Second door on the left,” Ronan grunts.

I freeze, dragging my heels against the concrete. There’s a bloodcurdling scream skating down the corridor, punctuated with staccato Russian curse words.

You bastard. You filthy fucking bastard.

It’s a voice I’m used to hearing sound more calm and collected, but even with the panic and fear strangling it, I’d recognize it anywhere.

Ronan marches past me, pausing when he can’t hear my footsteps. He turns around, and his scowl softens at the edges. “It’s all right, lass.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and force my feet forward until I step into the concrete block of a room.

It’s dark in here: low ceilings, no windows, and a horrible iron-like smell I recognize only from being in the same room as Danny English’s bloodied dead body. My eyes immediately fall to Leonid Belsky.

He’s center stage in this sick setup, tied to a chair and stripped from the waist up. Big, angry lashes decorate his torso, and when he rips his head back to let out another bloodcurdling scream, I notice half his teeth are missing.

Glancing down at his shackled ankles, I find them at his feet.

We lock eyes, his darker than ever and brimming with sheer loathing, then a strong arm grabs me from behind.

“You sure you want to be here?” Donnacha murmurs, branding me with soft kisses along my neck. A move so sweet and sensual that it doesn’t belong on his lips, not in a place like this.

I spin around in his forearms, meeting his gaze. It flickers with concern, searching my features for any sign of discomfort. But there’s something dark and delicious trickling through my veins, something that lights all my nerve endings on fire and makes my heart pump a little harder. A grin stretches across my face, triggering one of his own, too.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

He chuckles, that low, syrupy chuckle that I have come to love, then crushes his lips against mine, knocking the breath from my lungs. It’s over quicker than I’d like, ending with him pulling away and brandishing a pair of pliers.

“Want to see what your hubby does as a day job?”

I steal a glance at Belsky, writhing like a bloodied slug. *Yes.* But then my eyes drop to Donnacha’s abdomen, to the fresh pool of blood seeping through his T-shirt.

“You need to take it easy. You shouldn’t even be out of the hospital, let alone...” I gesture in Belsky’s direction, letting his screams finish my sentence.

When we had arrived at the hospital, a team of doctors and nurses were already waiting for us at a back entrance. They

rushed Donnacha to a private wing, where they removed the bullet, cleaned the wound, and fed him a cocktail of drugs through an IV drip. We watched the drama unfold on the television at the bottom of the bed, him half-lidded, me clutching his bloodied hands under the bed sheets. When he was on the cusp of a medicated sleep, and I was sick of the sight of my face being replayed over and over on the news, I picked up the remote and flicked on the Cooking Channel, Bessie Bank's Southern twang an antidote to Belsky's poison.

Donnacha's fingers twitched under mine, and his lids fluttered open. His eyes glowed soft as they tried to focus on me. "I fucking love you too," he slurred. "I also love you and all of your sins. I love every psychotic bone in your body."

Overwhelmed with emotion, I pressed my lips against his clammy cheek and whispered in his ear, "Don't say anything you won't remember in the morning." *Don't get my hopes up.*

I'm brought back to the damp tunnel by a heavy clunk. The sound of Donnacha slapping the pliers against his palm.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," he says, "I have someone else on their way who wants to do some of the heavy lifting."

Lorcan Quinn. My heartbeat skitters at the thought of the East Coast's most powerful mob boss strolling through the door. He must despise me with every fiber of my being, and who could blame him? I tried to take down his family, kill his right-hand man, and ruin his career.

But to my surprise, it's not Lorcan who walks through the door.

“Mak?” I ask incredulously, squinting as I have to be seeing things in the low lighting. But when he steps out of the shadows, wringing his hands with glee, there’s no mistaking it’s my best friend. “What the hell are you doing here?”

His eyes drift from mine to Belsky, and his jaw hardens. “Your husband was kind enough to invite me to witness this great event.” He bows his head in the direction of Donnacha. “And it’d be an honor to see the great Donnacha Quinn in action.”

“You’re going to do more than just watch, kid,” Donnacha says, kicking a large silver box across the floor. It comes to a skidding stop by Mak’s feet. He pins him with a challenging smirk. “If you’re up for it, that is?”

Mak startles. “Really?”

“You said you wanted to kill him.”

“I do,” he murmurs, face dancing with excitement. “I really fucking do.” He crouches to pop open the box, revealing an arsenal of sharp objects designed to do some serious damage. In the background, Belsky’s scream melts into a gargle.

“Wait.” All eyes land on me. I tear myself away from Donnacha’s intense gaze and take a few steps toward Belsky. I stare into the cold, dark pits of his eyes. I never thought this day would come. Not when I was a frightened fourteen-year-old girl with no hope of a normal future. Hell, not even a month ago when I was in his office, his fist wound into my hair, his coffee and candy breath burning my cheek as he told

me I was to take advantage of Donnacha Quinn making me his wife and kill him.

I can feel Donnacha behind me. Hear his heavy breathing. See his shadow on Belsky's bloodied features.

"Your father would be so disappointed in you," Belsky rasps, curling his lips back in disgust, revealing the gashes along his gumline where his perfect teeth used to be. "You're the final nail in the Bratnov coffin."

For a moment, I do nothing but stare at him. Donnacha takes this as fear and puts a protective hand on my shoulder, but I give him a small, reassuring nod and turn back to Leonid Belsky. I drink in his sharp cheekbones and his cruel eyes. I used to think he was the most powerful man in the world, and I'd never escape his clutches. But now I see him for who he truly is.

He's the Devil, not my husband.

Fuck the cautionary tale. The nuns were wrong all along. I wasn't a sinner. I was a young, naïve girl. He didn't knock once—let alone thrice—instead, he booted the door down and wed me to him for over a decade.

I lean over him, seeing every bead of sweat dotted on his forehead. Donnacha's grip tightens on my shoulder.

"I hope it's hot in hell, Belsky." I punctuate my parting words with a hard, sharp kick to his groin. The piercing scream that rips from his bloodied mouth sounds like the sweetest song I've ever heard.

Without another look back, I turn on my heels and head for the door. As I pass Mak, I stop and slip my hand in his. “Enjoy it. You’ve been waiting a long time.”

He stoops down and kisses my cheek. “And now I realize, so have you,” he replies softly.

Back in the tunnel, I lean my forehead against the damp wall, using it to center myself. There’s a click of the door, a few heavy footsteps, then Donnacha’s arms are around me.

To the backdrop of Belsky’s shrieks, he trails small kisses down the nape of my neck, and when he reaches my shoulder blades, he turns me around and presses me into the wall.

“You okay?” he whispers, searching my eyes for the answer to his question.

I reply by snaking my hands in his hair and pulling his lips against mine. I kiss him deeply, hungrily, tasting his sweet tongue and committing it to memory. Lifting his face from mine, he traces his thumb across my tender bottom lip, where his kiss just was. “It’s ironic, isn’t it?”

“What is?” I pant, unable to reclaim the breath he stole from me.

The sharp angles of his face soften into an easy smile. “That I vowed to break you, yet you’re the one who broke me.”

I laugh into his mouth, devouring the raspy chuckle I receive in return. “And I promise I’m going to love you so hard that all your broken pieces will fit back together.”

Epilogue

SIX MONTHS LATER

DONNACHA

“Fuck,” I moan into my wife’s ear, pressing my erection into her stomach. “You know how wild it sends me when you’re angry.” I gently swipe her silver locks away from her neck and replace them with my hand. “Scream for me again, sweetheart.”

Romy does this thing when I touch her all the right ways at the wrong time. She lets out this little puff of air through her parted lips, and for a split second, her eyes roll into the back of her skull. Sometimes, I’ll be up in Boston, beating the shit out of someone in the Tunnels, and I’ll remember it.

And it’ll make my cock rock-hard every time.

But this morning, she’s in no mood for my games. She jabs me in the ribs and escapes from my clutches by ducking under my arm. “Trust me, if anything happens to my best friend, I’ll treat you to a lot more than my screams.”

Muttering something under her breath, she picks up the remote and un-mutes the television. That god-awful cooking show host floods the penthouse, describing the melt-in-your-mouth texture of her meringue nests in a sing-song voice that couldn't contrast more with Romy's scowl.

She stands there, glaring at the screen with her arms folded across her chest. Settling into an armchair, I take the chance to admire my wife in her black silk dressing gown. The fabric hugs the curve of her ass like she had it custom-made for my pleasure.

Fuck. I can't wait until this is all over so I can take her back to bed. It's been six months since I first heard her moan my name, and every time since has been like smoking a goddamn crack pipe.

I'm an addict, baby. And Romy is my only drug of choice.

With my cock pressing against my zipper and unable to get the thought of my wife tied to our headboard out of my mind, I'm growing restless. I glance down at my Rolex and see it's 7:00 a.m. Mak should be strolling out of that elevator any minute.

Romy whips around, nostrils flaring. "I've been up all night worried sick. How could I sleep, hmm? Knowing my best friend is fifteen floors below me, fighting for his life?" Her eyes slash to the clock on the wall. "He could be lying in a puddle of his own blood right now. You, on the other hand, slept like a fucking log."

I stifle a yawn. “Because I know there’s nothing to worry about. Mak is one of the best fighters I’ve ever trained. Have a little faith.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my damned mind. “Have a little *faith*? How about you show a little mercy? If he’s one of the best fighters you’ve ever trained, then why does he have to do this final test? It’s cruel. It’s barbaric.” She cusses some more under her breath, flexing her fingers like she’s toying between punching me in the throat and ripping the television off the wall and hurling it at me.

“When I agreed to give him the chance to join my men, I told both of you that he won’t get any preferential treatment just because he’s your best friend. This is purely business, baby.” I lick my lips. “Now, why don’t you come sit on my lap, and I’ll calm you down?”

Nostrils flaring, she dips her eyes to the bulge in my slacks. There’s that little puff of air again. Then she swallows and shakes her head. “No. I’m angry with you and not in the fun way.”

The whirring of the elevator shaft catches her attention. Her big, blue eyes light up, and she hurls herself across the penthouse and into the entrance hall long before the doors can slide open. When they do, she barks, “Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

Aisling blinks. “Uh, good morning to you too.” She steps into the penthouse, sweeping the space nervously. “Is he back?”

“No,” Romy groans, punching a wall. “And I’m about to lose my damn mind. Is it too early to crack open the whiskey?”

My sister stares at me, panic creeping across her features. “He’s going to be okay, though, right? Don?”

“He’s going to be fine, sis. Go to school. He’ll be right here when you get back.”

Her puny fist lands on my chest. “How can I concentrate on my studies at a time like this?” she cries.

I frown, glancing up at Romy, whose eyes are also narrowed. “Aisling, if I didn’t know any better, I’d—”

Ding.

Everyone freezes, turning to the elevator doors. They slide open to reveal a crumpled figure.

“Oh my god, Mak!” Romy goes to throw her arms around him, but my sister gets there first, diving into his chest and sobbing. Mak wraps his arms around her and lightly kisses the top of her head.

“Uh, is there something you two aren’t telling us?” Romy snaps, eyes darting back and forth between the two of them. They exchange shifty looks, then Mak steals a glance at me.

“No,” Aisling mutters, retreating to the sofa, face redder than usual. “We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, we’re going to deep-dive into this later, so don’t think I’ll forget.” Her voice softens as she turns to her best

friend, scanning him for injuries. “But you’re okay, right? You’re not hurt or anything?”

Mak frowns. “Yeah, I’m...fine? I had a shitty night’s sleep, but—”

“Sleep? You *slept*? How the fuck could you sleep when there’s...”

Her line of interrogation trails off. It’s a wonderful thing, watching Romy’s brain work. I can practically hear the gears tick over, click into place, then the gush of realization flooding into her brain.

Without another word, she crosses the penthouse, wraps her arms around my neck, and presses her lips against mine. “Thank you,” she murmurs into my mouth, “thank you, thank you, thank you.”

I told Romy I had to send Mak into the dark room as his final initiation.

I didn’t tell her I wouldn’t send anyone else in with him.

Mak strides across the marble floor, none the wiser, a triumphant grin on his face. “So, is that it? Am I in?”

I let him squirm a little, just because he’s a smack-talking asshole who can always benefit from being brought down a peg or two. Who would have ever fucking thought I’d have a Russian in my ranks? But as my wife impatiently taps her foot next to me, I realize I never thought I’d have a Russian in my bed, either.

I guess things change.

Mak's a good kid. Sharp aim, strong right hook, and despite his mouth, he understands the importance of hierarchy. In fact, he reminds me of a young Cillian Black. I stick my hand out for him to shake.

“Welcome to the army, kiddo.” Somewhere behind the sofa, Aisling draws a deep breath. I grip Mak's hand harder, feeling his knuckles pop. “You'll be stationed in Boston. As far away from my sister as possible.”

His lips twitch, then break into a grin. “It's cool,” he says, winking at a red-faced Aisling, “Now that I'm making a decent salary, I can afford an *Amtrak* pass, and I'll be down every weekend.”

“Don't push your luck,” I growl.

Romy slips between us, rubbing Mak's shoulder. “You should probably go. I'll see you tonight.”

As Mak slips out of the apartment, Aisling is hot on his heels.

“Don't,” Romy says softly, putting a firm hand on my chest. “One drama at a time.”

But the second we're alone, I couldn't give a flying fuck about any of the drama inside or outside of this building. I scoop her up and stride to the bedroom with her in my arms.

“Where are we going?” Romy giggles into my chest, looking up at me from under those thick lashes.

“You owe me a *thank you* for putting your friend in the dark room alone.”

“I already thanked you.”

I stoop, raking my teeth along her bottom lip. It’s soft and smooth, not a single scar left.

“Yeah, you said it. Now, I’m going to need to hear you scream it at the top of your lungs.”

* * *

ONE YEAR LATER

ROMY

I slump forward over the vanity, gasping as another leg-trembling orgasm races through my body.

Behind me, my husband lets out a low chuckle and gently slides his belt off my neck, replacing the taut leather with soft kisses.

“You never fail to amaze me, sweetheart,” he says huskily, pulling his cock out of my ass and tucking himself back into his slacks. “How long do we have to be here for, you think?” Meeting my eyes in the mirror, he licks his lips. “Cause I don’t know how long I can go without fucking you again.”

Laughing, I pull my dress down over the fresh welts on my ass, reapply my lipstick, and smooth down my hair, concealing any trace of our bathroom antics. “We’re celebrating, baby. We’ll stay for as long as we’re needed.”

Donnacha groans into the crook of my neck. “She won the governor’s seat *three weeks ago*. We’ve celebrated in New York. Celebrated at the chalet in Martha’s Vineyard, and now we’re here at the estate? Where’s the next party? The fucking moon?”

I smack him in the chest with my clutch, then land a hungry kiss on his lips. “Fine. Work the room and meet me back here in”—I slide my hand into his big paw, lifting it to check the time on his Rolex—“an hour.”

A mischievous smile splits his face. “Don’t be late,” he growls, slapping my sore ass and groaning with lust when I wince. “I don’t take kindly to tardiness.”

As we slip out of the bathroom and head down the hall, I’m already setting an alarm on my phone for five minutes later than planned. At the top of the stairs, he squeezes my hand, and we descend back into the party.

A man with tattoos covering every visible part of his body raises his glass toward us. Donnacha picks up two flutes of champagne from a passing tray, hands one to me, and raises the other in the man’s direction. I recognize him as Miguel Rodriguez, the head of the El Paso-Juarez cartel and a loyal member of the Quinns’ network. “Do you think anyone here knows you’ve got my jizz dripping out of your ass?”

Donnacha mutters into the shell of my ear. “No? ’Cause the thought is turning me on again.”

I tut and roll my eyes, but I can’t hide the cheesy grin splitting my face in two. Seems to be a permanent fixture these days. My husband grazes his lips against my cheek. “Better go work the room.” With a wink, he adds, “See you in fifty-eight minutes.”

With another parting kiss, he breaks away into the crowd, making a beeline for Rodriguez and Cillian. I scan the sea of friendly faces and lock eyes with the new governor of New York herself. Poppy. She waves me over excitedly, then falls back into conversation with the dark-haired girl next to her.

“I can’t fucking believe it,” Poppy’s friend is saying as I approach. “You won! You actually won! Now, tell me how many laws you had to break to make that happen.”

Poppy’s eyes light up, and she brings me in for a hug. “Romy, this is Nova Rodriguez, Miguel Rodriguez’s sister. And Nova, this is Romy, my sister-in-law.” She raises an eyebrow and adds, “Technically, anyway.”

I turn to Nova and smile. She’s *gorgeous*. Her hazel eyes glow against her smooth, olive skin, and the way she’s paired a black silk dress with kick-ass boots makes me take an instant liking to her. Balancing a beer in one hand, she gives me a hug with the other. “Hi! What do you mean by technically?”

“Romy signed the papers with a false name,” Poppy announces, raising her champagne flute to my sins.

Nova gazes at me in admiration. “I think I love you already. When’s the real wedding?”

I can feel both their eyes on me, heavy with expectation. But when I look through the sea of partygoers and locate my husband, my heart couldn’t feel more full. His eyes are dark, features hardened, and it’s clear he’s discussing some serious business with Nova’s brother and Cillian. When Miguel starts talking, he’s listening intently, a frown creasing his brow. But it’s like he can feel my gaze lingering on him because he suddenly looks up and makes eye contact. He flashes me a dazzling smile, setting off a firework display in my chest. Then he subtly slides his tongue between his teeth. Flicks it.

I loved my fucked-up husband, and I love our fucked-up wedding story. I don’t need to wear white because I’m not an angel, and he doesn’t need to declare his love for me at the end of an aisle because he does it every night under cover of darkness.

Not all love stories have the perfect ending. Donnacha Quinn isn’t my knight in shining armor. He’s a ruthless killer in an Armani suit, and I wouldn’t change him for the goddamn world.

And besides, we’d both probably catch fire if we stepped inside a church.

“We’re good for now,” I say, brushing off the question. Turning the attention back to Poppy, I say, “I too am interested in how you managed to pull this off.”

She laughs, rubbing the diamonds around her neck. “No laws broken here. The rules state that you have to be over thirty and be a resident of New York City for at least five years.”

“You live in Boston!” Nova quips, slugging at her beer.

“Technicalities, darling,” Poppy retorts with a little smirk. “*Technically*, I spend over one hundred and eighty-four days of the year in the Big Apple.” Her eyes glitter. “I live at One Diabhal Square, don’t you know? At least, that’s what my landlord says,” she titters, jerking her thumb over her shoulder toward my husband.

With Belsky six feet under and the police brushing off his murder as an *anonymous vigilante attack*, and with the public’s general consensus being that it was well-deserved, the Republicans pumped their money into their next best candidate. He had the personality and charm of dish soap; so riveting, in fact, that I can’t even remember his name. When Donnacha first suggested that Poppy run against him, she refused to entertain the idea for even a second. But it made sense. She has charm by the buckets, not to mention an education that makes Albert Einstein look like a dunce. Her mind changed when she realized that, from her governor seat, she could do a lot of good things for the city to offset her husband’s bad.

It was a win-win.

Speaking of her husband, Lorcan emerges behind his wife, planting a gentle kiss on her shoulder. “The Honorable Poppy

Quinn, Governor of New York,” he murmurs into her skin, eyes glinting up at me. “It has a ring to it, don’t you think, Romy?”

I raise my glass in response. Not only does Poppy have all the qualities to be a great governor, but she looks like one too, with her emerald ball gown and diamonds dripping from her pale skin.

Lorcan tears himself away from her and chinks his glass of sparkling water against my outstretched champagne flute. “I believe we’re also celebrating something else tonight.”

Heat floods my face, and I struggle not to roll my eyes. “Your cousin can’t keep his mouth shut for longer than two seconds,” I huff.

“Why? What’s going on?” Poppy and Nova chime in unison.

All eyes fall on me.

“I’ve just signed a three-book deal with a small publisher in the city. Recipe books, nothing fancy,” I say sheepishly.

Hugs and kisses and coos come from the women while Lorcan stands stoically, smirking. “That’s fantastic, Romy! Why the hell didn’t you tell us?”

“Because I’m a crap cook, and Donnacha probably knocked a few heads together to get them to agree.”

“I’ve heard that’s a very persuasive technique.” Nova laughs. “Hey, you gotta do what you gotta do to make it in this world.”

I chuckle into the bubbles of my champagne. *Yeah, I know that more than most.*

“Regardless of how you got the deal, I’m proud of you for getting it,” Lorcan says quietly. “So well done.”

We smile at each other, and I thank him. Unsurprisingly, Lorcan barely acknowledged my existence for the first few weeks of Donnacha and me making it official, but I think I’ve started to win him over—with a sharp elbow or two from Poppy, no doubt.

My cell vibrates in my purse. “Sorry, guys,” I mutter, fishing it out while I sweep the room. I’m assuming it’s Mak—I know he’s working the party, so he probably wants to catch up in a dark corner somewhere and chew my ear off about how much he’s obsessed with Aisling.

Glancing down at my screen, I realize it’s my alarm already. I look up, but Donnacha’s gone.

A wave of adrenaline rolls through my veins.

“Exciting text?” Nova asks, smirking as she reads my expression.

“Uh, nothing interesting,” I retort, chewing on my bottom lip. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to use the restroom.”

I glide through the party and reach the staircase, my heartbeat doubling with every step I take.

Heat pools between my thighs, and my ass stings as a beautiful warning of what’s to come.

I *rap, tap, tap* on the bathroom door.

It creaks open, and I'm met by my husband's dark and dangerous gaze.

He licks his lips and lets out a low growl.

“You're late.”

THE END

38

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