



TEMPTING

APOLLO

UNGOVERNED SPACES BOOK 4

MOLLY BRIAR

Tempting Apollo

Molly Briar

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About the Author

Hello reader!

As this is book 4 in the series, I will assume that you already understand that graphic sex and violence is depicted on the page. However, there are a few things that are unique to this book that I wanted to discuss before anyone dove in.

The country depicted, Donostria, is fictional. While the challenge of street children is inspired, partially, by real challenges in a part of Sub-Saharan Africa, it was altered to suit the story. Any resemblance, at this point, would be coincidental. A romance book would be unable to ever fully encapsulate the nuances that children in poverty might experience, so I did not try to. This book depicts the off-page injuring of children and discussing trafficking. If these are things you find triggering, then I'd suggest skipping this one.

Chloe was kidnapped for ransom, and severely threatened earlier in the series. Part of the book deals with her healing journey, and the comfort she finds in Leo. If one has trauma, the expectation that a partner will miraculously heal mental scars is something that belongs in the world of fiction. Nothing will ever replace the help and guidance of a true mental health professional.

If this is triggering for anyone, I strongly suggest that people skip this book.

Thank You

Editing by the lovely Caiti Croke at CrokeEdits.com

To content creator Lanii Robb, the Bookish Girls and everyone else who has helped me get the word out on my books, past and present. I wouldn't have been able to do it without you.

And, of course, for my real life book husband, who is ALL the tropes: the silver fox, alpha military man, business degree, cinammon roll who makes it all possible.

Prologue

Chloe

Kemet, Months earlier

The room was dark. A murky, stuffy black. It was so thick, it sucked the air right out of my lungs, pushing on my chest like I was being held in a vice. Sweat dripped down my forehead and I could feel every grain of dirt on my skin. My light cotton shirt had once been soft, but now it was so scratchy against my flesh that it made my skin crawl.

My hands were bound behind me, so tight that the wires cut into my soft flesh. Each time I moved, even if I simply breathed too hard, my wrists would come apart just enough for my flesh to dig into the wires they used to tie me. I felt blood drip down my wrist, pooling at my palm then drying into a sticky, cracked mess.

The opaque canvas tent was not that dissimilar from the one that had made up my clinic. Except, instead of white UN relief tents, these were black and olive drab. A faux approximation

of a military, but the men inside it were nothing of the sort. Far less disciplined, and more cruel, in a mix of Army Surplus supply gear that were cannibalized from flea markets and discount bins.

Militants. Self-proclaimed rebels. In reality, all they were ... were brutes. Hired muscle, with little going on between their ears. Surely, I could survive them.

The chief brute had his AK-47 across his lap, the wooden top facing me, parallel to the leg he had crossed over his other knee. A film camera was on a tripod near his free hand. He reached out and pressed the button to turn it on, and a light blinked red over the circular lens.

Below the camera was a white cardboard, with chicken scratch written on it.

“Read it,” he ordered in a French voice. How dare he be French like me? What was he doing here? Why was he on the side of these insane nationalists? The self-proclaimed Kemet National Front? What a fucking joke. What is a nationalist doing outside of his own country if he was, in his own ideology, a patriot?

I squinted, trying to make out the writing on the large cardboard. I knew I had to comply. I had to live long enough for help to come... *if* help would come.

Though, maybe it wouldn't. Maybe I truly was alone in the world.

I was so thirsty. My hunger had died a day ago, my body giving up on the possibility of food. But thirst? That was constant. You die of thirst before you die of starvation. The body intuitively knows that, and communicates it your senses.

I'd read the Brute's stupid sign. I just wouldn't read it verbatim. The verbiage was too stupid. It was all about foreign intervention, corruption, nationalism and a little bit about blaming media outlets for their propaganda. The irony of making me read *their* propaganda was probably lost on the oaf.

Did they know that I was related to the owner of the biggest news media outlet in the world? I'm not sure. They probably weren't that smart.

I paraphrased the words on the paper, skipping all the proselytizing.

“They say that if my ransom is not paid in forty-eight hours, they will chop off my

head and deliver it to Alexander Baas... *Putain! C'est quoi cette connerie?*“ *What is*

this bullshit?

Past the preaching manifesto were scratches that were completely illegible. A child could have done better.

I defaulted to French when I was angry. It was a place where my anger could thrive in words. It was one thing to tie me up and force me to postulate myself in front of a camera. It was

another to do so and force me to be on the news while spewing poorly spelled threats.

“How am I supposed to read that? Are you kidnappers because you failed out of school, *tu gros con?*” *You big asshole!*

The Brute knocked over the camera as he lunged for me, his black boot high, turning into a silhouette in the light as it crashed down on me. My head whiplashed with the impact, hitting the pole they had tied me to, and sending pain shooting up the side of my skull.

Blood trickled down my forehead, over my eyebrow, and into my eye, turning my vision red.

As I slipped from consciousness, I had a vision. It was like a dream or a prophesy. I knew it was not real.

The Brute lay on his side, his head limp, mouth open. He always wore a black mask, and balaclava so I only saw his dull, brown eyes. But without it, I bet he had a weak chin. Probably a splotchy beard over his rounded cheeks. A poor attempt to look more manly.

In my dream, his throat was slit. A bright red gash across his throat. The blood red that tainted my vision was on the floor below him, blossoming like arose on the muddy tent floor. Above him was another man, a blade in his hand. He wore the face that I thought belonged on an angel. But he was different. Instead of a sweet smile, the angel's face wore an angry grimace, covered in the Brute's blood.

Chapter 1

Chloe

December, Saint Julian, Donostria

The Donostria heat was terrible for my hair. I tamed my wild curls into tight braids just to prevent it from turning into a halo of frizz. Tying it back and off my neck also gave me the illusion that it kept my neck cooler. But nothing could cool a person down from the infernal heat.

I kept a lightweight scarf around my hair for modesty's sake. Sub-Saharan Donostria, though French-speaking, with old French architecture that looked like it belonged in the bayous of Louisiana, was still a traditional Muslim country. Modesty was expected, from head to toe. I tried to respect that. Imposing my western views wasn't something that would help anything but my ego. And I was doing enough to disrupt the place with my presence.

"Combien?" How much? I asked the terse man who loudly chewed and sucked on a toothpick. He looked at the boy at my

side with a look of complete disdain. *Was he mad the boy was caught begging by a westerner? Or was he angry at the possibility of losing a source of income?*

Who knew what could go through the mind of a man who abused children for a living, all sanctioned by the abuse of religious piety.

It was a tale as old as time. Every religion, in every country, corrupt men will claim that they are sanctioned by a deity to do work that leads them to harm the vulnerable. Men like Ousmane Seydi knew no borders, no culture, no country they would not exploit.

The way he looked at Asa, the boy hiding behind my legs, made my stomach turn. How could a man of God or Allah ever look at a baby with such hatred and disgust?

I pushed Asa further behind me, shielding him with my body. I glared at Seydi, my nose wrinkled in hatred as I snapped my fingers in front of his face to focus him back to me. The movement pulled up my long sleeved white shirt, the horizontal scars that ran along my wrists flashed before my eyes for just a moment – just enough to remind myself that I should be dead.

It fueled me. My life wasn't mine. It was owed. And if I died now, it didn't matter. I should have died already.

Seydi scowled, his lips curling in unmasked hatred for me. I am not good at understanding the subtleties of expression, but this was unmistakable.

“*Combien?*” I asked again, with greater force, my hand wavering near my pocket.

Legally speaking, I didn't need to pay him a fucking thing. I could expose this *Mu'desseur*, Ousmane Seydi, for what he truly was. *Mu'desseur* was a cognate of the Arabic and French words for *teacher*; though Seydi should have never had a claim on such a title.

I could bring the attention of the western world with a single phone call to Laurent Media, as a large shareholder, and *force* them to run an exposé. They would jump if I called. At least... I think so.

Mu'desseurs run Qur'anic schools, taking in young boys under the guise of removing the burden of their education from their parents who might not be able to afford to raise them. That, or they took in orphans.

Some did that. They provided an environment for boys to live and learn. But many did something else. Like St. Joseph's orphanage in Burlington, Vermont, or the Irish religious homes that shamed and abused unmarried mothers and their children in Ireland, they first appear to serve a need. Then the abusers worm their way into power.

Men like Seydi forced young boys to beg in the streets, commit crimes, or worse – allowed them to be used for carnal pleasures for a coin. They would threaten these boys with beatings, starvation, and death if they came empty handed, creating a generation of hardened souls that would never recover.

He was Fagin from the Oliver Twist novel. A villain of the worst kind because they destroyed the most precious thing in human existence: children.

I hated men like Seydi.

I am a doctor, and I do not have a violent bone in my body. Yet sometimes I wished that I could use my mind to cause harm. I wished that I could make the earth open and swallow them whole and send them into the fiery pits of death where they belonged.

But what was the point? Another corrupt Mu'desseur would come and take his place. That's what happens with power vacuums. And I also suspected that Seydi was protected, somehow, by someone of influence.

I did what I could, in small increments, to support the *good*, who want to do better. I support those who hate men like Seydi as much as I do. I treat their wounds, and render aid, and try to do no harm with my presence. It's the line one walks as a foreign volunteer. Aid workers can so easily do more harm than good with their presence, and I just try to keep my head down. Small sustainable changes are more important than grand sweeping, temporary, gestures. I knew that. I knew that it was not my place but...

But something snapped in me today when I saw Asa, the poor child begging on the side of the road with a broken arm. There was something special in his eyes. Something that hadn't been crushed, but could be, if a man like Seydi had their way. A

beautiful, intelligent willfulness that could, given the right nurturing, save the world.

In my heart, I knew that if his broken arm got him money and sympathy today, then tomorrow, it would be a broken leg. Then his other arm. Then worse...

I had to step in. I *had* to intervene.

Seydi said something to me in a language I didn't quite understand. It was a combination of French and whatever dialect he might speak. All of it was unflattering to me, I was sure. I just didn't care.

I *had* to be able to purchase Asa. Or at least to get him out of there. If I waited, then it would be too late.

"*Combien?*" I asked again, shouting. I pulled out my wallet from the large pocket at my hip and started counting out the bills. The man's eyes bulged, his lips curling back into a grin, his yellow stained teeth bared in a snarl. I could tell by his stance, he was barely holding himself back from snatching the money and beating me on the street.

Asa cowered. I could feel him shaking, his sobs coming through despite his brave attempt to keep them in. The boy must have been three years old at most, and he had already learned to keep his pain inside. A lesson he was too young for.

"Leave the foreigner alone!" A woman bellowed from across the street. She came out with her brightly colored dress, her hands on her hips.

The women of these villages are their saviors. Beside her came another woman, who wagged a finger at Seydi, admonishing him in their dialect. I didn't understand, but her *tone* needed no translation.

Seydi stepped back. He had no fear of me, a foreign woman. But he feared his neighbors. They might not stone him for his evil, but they would only let him get away with so much.

He yelled at me in French, "Look at what you have done! You are upsetting everyone!"

I yelled at him, swearing in my most vulgar Parisian French, telling him that I did nothing, and that those people were angry at *him*. Not me.

If they could, they would run this man out of their town, and he knew it. He was only there by the grace of bribes and corruption. Someone, somewhere, in power was protecting him. I didn't know who, or *what* kept this man from being ripped apart by the locals, but whatever it was had real influence behind it. Far too much for me to fight by myself.

But in this one instance, for Asa, I could do something.

This man had no idea what lengths I would go to protect this child from him. Nothing in the world was more important at that moment than keeping this boy out of his hands. There was no before, no after. Just *this* battle. Right now.

If Seydi had the capacity to turn red with shame, he would have. But instead, he puffed his chest, screaming back at me, his fist waving in the air at my audacity.

Rusted taxis slowed down on the busy street, and vendors poked their heads out looking at the strange foreign woman arguing with one of their local patrons. The women kept yelling, wagging their admonishing fingers, and shaking their heads.

I screamed. He screamed back. He was so unaccustomed to being questioned, having cloaked himself in the garbs of a *religious teacher*. But religion could be corrupted anywhere and everywhere, and I was so tired of these systems existing that a fire burned in my chest.

“Fais chier!” I finally screamed in absolute anger. *YOU MAKE ME SHIT!*

It was a chef’s kiss type of french cussing that didn’t exist in English. It was for the specific feeling of disgust and hate that caused indigestion in the bowels. But it was said in French, so it sounded sophisticated to an English-speaking ear.

But in a Francophonic country like Donostria, everyone understood me. There was a collective gasp, and the women who had been on my side suddenly turned their disapproval towards me for my language.

I was losing the high ground. My ugly, profane mouth was going to be the death of me one day. My stupid mouth would finish what my kidnappers had failed to accomplish all those months ago.

You catch more flies with honey. That was what my friend, Pippa, had always taught me. But I wasn’t made of honey. I

was mugwort. Bitter, but with some effective medicinal benefits.

Seydi went back into the building that passed as his religious school. It was a white-painted mud square building with inadequate air flow, bars on the windows, and no drainage to speak of. There was an outhouse on the side with no running water that reeked of flies and human waste. The man was a health hazard and needed to be in jail.

Seydi returned, wielding a fucking machete. He raised it high over his head, acting as though to strike me down.

I didn't move. I couldn't. Not even for my own good, because I felt the child bury his head into the back of my thigh as he clung to my pants, trying to disappear into me as he held his whimpers back.

A year ago, I would have laughed; but a sudden pit grew in my stomach, sucking the air from my lungs. Memories flashed through my mind: The image of a darkened tent. A black gloved hand on the handle of a blade. A voice that laughed low and cruel, Gascon french, *"I hope they don't pay your ransom, sweetheart. Then I can have some fun with you..."*

I shook off the image, digging my nail into the palm of my hand. There was no past. No future. Just this battle, right now.

With a waving fist, Seydi made slashing motions towards me, threatening to cut me where I stood.

He growled at Asa, bending down at the waist. "If you don't come here, I will kill her and break your other arm."

He drew his thumb across his neck in a slashing motion. Asa started weeping, clutching his broken arm.

I placed my hands on my hips, and loudly proclaimed, “Really? You’re going to kill a Frenchwoman right on your doorstep for trying to defend a child? I’m sure the hell that would reign on your head would scorch not just your shitty excuse for a school, but everyone in the fucking vicinity!”

I waved my fist, and the growing crowd around us gossiped in hushed whispers. Phones came out, but that was no threat to me. If people saw that I tried to save an injured child from his cruel, corrupt Mu’desseur, then who cares?

The United Nations, International Organizations and Non-Government Organizations had tried to address the problem of abandoned children for decades, but fallen short because of lack of funds, lack of public support and no possible way of creating public pressure.

My death would certainly fix all of that.

“I say,” a distinctly British voice called from behind me. “What is happening here?”

I turned, keeping a hand on the boy standing behind me, ensuring that no one could rip him from my grasp.

There stood what was easily the handsomest man I had ever seen in my life.

He had hair so black, it shone blue. It was straight, and smooth, hanging over a high brow. His almond shaped eyes were just as dark, and his olive, tanned skin was smooth as

marble. His top lip was thin, which gave the full bottom lip an almost pouted appearance.

With impassive eyes, he surveyed the scene before him.

Then, after gazing at me and the child, he raised one brow and turned to Seydi.

“Mais qu’est-ce qui se passe ici?” He asked his question again in perfect French.

The stranger wore a white button-down shirt, folded up at the sleeves to show thick, muscular forearms. His casual trousers were brown, with large pockets at the thighs, coming to rest atop coyote-colored military boots. Slung over one shoulder was a camera bag. One of the big kinds professional photographers kept. Maybe he worked for National Geographic?

He seemed familiar to me, as though I had seen him somewhere before. Maybe he was famous.

As he stepped between me and Seydi, his shoulders seemed to broaden with the action. Then he said something to the Mu’desseur. They exchanged words in the local dialect.

I tried to listen for familiar words but came up completely empty.

I looked down at Asa, whose black curls had turned brown with the dust and mud of the streets. His wide eyes looked at me with a mixture of fear and hope.

Don’t worry child, I tried to say with my eyes as I ran a finger through his rough hair. *I’ll take care of you. I promise.*

After a moment, the new stranger turned to me, and Seydi walked away.

“You can take the child,” the stranger said to me. “He won’t give you any trouble.”

“What have you promised him?” I asked, narrowing my own eyes, because *nothing* was ever free. Not in Donostria. Not in Kemet. Not in the streets of New York or London. Everything given had a price. “And what do I owe you?”

He smiled, placing a light hand on my shoulder. Not hard enough to be threatening, but enough to turn me around.

I reached down and grabbed Asa’s good wrist, before I knelt and pulled off my scarf. I tied it around his shoulder, to sling his arm against his body. I should have done that *before* I had confronted Seydi. How thoughtless of me. But even as his arm jostled while I tightened the sling, the boy did not make a sound.

When I stood, he freely put his good hand in mine. The boy had no idea where he was going, but seemed certain that wherever I led him would be better than where he had come from.

“I promised I wouldn’t bring an international investigation down on him,” he said casually, as if he was leading me and Asa on a stroll. “And you owe me nothing, mademoiselle.”

The crowd seemed to groan as the drama had concluded. Like they were disappointed that we hadn’t resorted to any

bloodshed. The camera phones disappeared, and they'd have to wait for another disaster to go viral on social media.

I kept a hand on Asa's shoulder, and he leaned into my thigh, as if afraid he'd be snatched from me.

"Nonsense," I told the tall man, tilting my shoulders away to create distance between us. He was too handsome for his own good, and probably assumed I'd just be fawning and grateful for him. I wasn't. I'd rather conclude this as a business transaction and go on my way. "What do I owe you? And how are you able to make those threats against that man?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss," he said, a smile tilting up his thin lips. "I'm Everest Landry, I'm a photojournalist."

I hated him already. Journalists were the vultures of humankind, circling over disaster areas, waiting for blood to spill so that they could descend with their cameras and capture the pain of humanity and sell it to the highest bidder.

Maybe that's how I knew him. He was probably associated with my devil of a sister.

There was something bizarre about his accent. It wasn't quite British. Not like my friend, Pippa Fox. It was, of course, not American. I could almost hear the extra letters in his words. But I suspected that he wasn't from the London-born set. Maybe he was like me. A boarding school expat.

"I'm Doctor Chloe Laurent." I wondered if I should shoot out my hand for a shake. That's what normal people would do, right? But I thought better of it. Better to keep my hands on

Asa, to make sure he didn't run away, and no one tried to snatch him.

"I know who you are, Doctor Laurent," he said, tipping his head, that crooked smile on full display. "I admire your work."

Something about his eyes unsettled me. There were no wrinkles around them, despite his deep tan. He was weather worn, in a rugged and roguish way. But none of that created any expression around his eyes.

"I've been following your work here," he said, casually, tilting his head up so that his nose rose into the air as he stared up into the sky. "And in Kemet."

I almost stumbled, his words caught me by surprise.

Another person who knew I had been kidnapped. Who knew I had worked in a refugee camp and been subjected to the public humiliation of a ransom that went unpaid.

My childhood friend mounted a rescue operation to retrieve me. All the while, my family stayed absent. Silent. As I was tied up, thinking that each breath could be my last.

"Dreadful what happened to Alexander Baas," the man said, casually observing a blue painted wall as we walked down the street towards the compound where my own charity was based. A half-wall lined the street; bright graffiti showed the proud faces of local leaders and poets. It would be painted over eventually, but for now, the colors matched the vibrant landscape as we walked beside the murky waters of the Donostria River.

“Yes. Dreadful,” I said, a lump forming in my throat. “Suicide, they say.”

The man looked sideways at me, as if wondering if I would tell him more. But I knew nothing else. All I knew was that there were no signs that Alex would have wanted to take his life. Not when Kemet fell, not when I was rescued. He seemed perfectly himself. The suicide screamed of foul play, but I...

I was afraid that the players of that game were too precious for me to lose.

My only real friend, Pippa, might be a spy. I had long harbored those suspicions. It was in little tells, and small glances, as she lied to me without really lying to me. The way she moved, and changed her expressions, and how she only seemed her genuine self when we were alone in a room together. Then there were her trips, the secret room in the back of her closet, and so many other things... She didn't think I knew. And I never wanted to tell her.

What had happened to Alex? I didn't know. Whatever it was, it was dark and complicated, and in the annals of human corruption that I refused to touch.

Being Pippa's friend was as close as I wanted to be. If I lost Pippa, then I would be truly alone.

“Mr. Landry,” I cleared my throat, squeezing Asa's shoulder as we came to a busy street, and I looked up and down.

The fact that this boy had only met me but was now following me home with complete trust and obedience made me

uncomfortable. How badly was he treated that an almost complete stranger could lure him from his life? That he didn't seem to care what danger I might pose? Why was the unknown so easy for him to accept? The poor boy. "I appreciate your involvement, but if you don't require some kind of reciprocal payment from me, then..."

"Well, I might have lied on that front." Of course, he had.

As we walked down a narrow sidewalk, he strode around me so that he was on the outside. Presumably, it was another show of chivalry.

"I've been a big fan of yours, and I've been curious to meet you for quite some time. This situation was just good luck on my part."

Shit. He was going to require a favor from my foundation. One I probably wouldn't want to do. How can I politely get out of this?

I physically braced for what might come next.

"I have zero expectations, but it would be a great pleasure for me if you would consider having drinks, so that I could pick your massive brain." He smiled, shrugging. "There aren't many people in the world who are able to establish foundations that are as sustainable and long lasting as yours. I would just like to understand how you mentally accomplish these things." He made a little cross over his heart. "I swear, nothing inappropriate has crossed my mind in the last minute."

"The last minute?" I said, surprised.

He tilted his head from one side to the other, and though to express chagrin. It all felt a little too contrived.

“You’re an attractive woman, and I’m only human. But I swear, my interest is strictly professional.” He ran his fingers through his soft black hair. “Well... mostly, at least.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Did these lines work on women? They must, because I felt a slight blush creep up my cheeks.

They were partially working on me, after all.

So why did my mind conjure an image of a man that I hadn’t seen in months? Why did I suddenly think of *him*, Leo, when I turned the man down?

Chapter 2

Leo

Strathlachlan, Scotland

Choice is a myth. From the moment we are born, we are set on a path not of our own making, and it will lead us places we never wanted to go. When you're born as one half of a whole, it's much, much worse.

That's how I ended up in a Scottish castle, sitting with Baron Callum MacLachlan as he ran his fingers over my twin sister's obnoxiously large wedding rings.

Rings that *he* had placed there.

I don't mean to imply that I don't like my sister. I love her. She's my best friend. But there are times that I wish I had strangled her with my umbilical cord. Just saying...

"Who cleans the dishes?" Nanay, what we called our mother in our native Tagalog, looked at the amazing display of forks and spoons that lined either side of her place setting. "So many forks for a meal!"

I snorted into my whiskey, realizing that my mother probably thought that Lea actually had to clean and dust every nook and cranny of this Scottish manor. Next, she'd probably start cutting out coupons for maid services and handing them to my sister as presents.

"For special occasions like this we'll call in some extra help," Callum said from his place at the head of the long table. Long enough to seat twenty.

This was very different from the middle-class dinner he had crashed at my parents' house in suburban California. The grand room had a ceiling that was twenty feet high, the wood paneling was *definitely* older than the state of California, and the acres of mountains and fields that made up the estate was probably something my parents would never be able to wrap their heads around.

"We can use the same fork for everything." Our mother insisted, trying *really hard* not to gather all the forks and put them back in the downstairs kitchen where she thought they belonged. "If we were in a restaurant, I would not care, but this is your home. You don't need to do anything special."

Callum smiled, his red beard tilting up, as he reached down and took my sister's hand in his.

"Well, it is *our* home," he said with a smirk, his thumb rubbing on the ridiculously large pearl and diamond ring on my sister's finger, before he brought it to his lips for a kiss. "And it's only natural that I want to impress my wife's family."

Gag me.

Baron Callum MacLachlan of Strathlachlan, Scotland was the owner of the estate, which was as grandiose as his pompous name. He was the founder of the illustrious Caledonia Security Firm. He had fallen in love and married my sister, Lea, who, at the time they met, still lived with our parents.

Our distinctly middle-class family had been turned on its head when the internationally recognized bachelor thrust our immigrant parents into a sphere of wasteful indulgence. Don't get me wrong, he was doing a swell job of hiding them from paparazzi, and fighting for their privacy, but it wasn't going to last for long. My sister would have to eventually do some Baroness-y things at some point, and she had to quit being an assassin, an occupation that had suited her so well that it was kinda scary.

Callum could light a bonfire worth of pound sterling every day for a week and not make a dent on his wealth. Strangers *knew* him. They recognized him walking down the street.

People would notice if his wife kept dropping bodies.

Ah, the rich have very different lives from you and me.

“Of all the people whose good opinion I care about, her family tops the list,” he lifted a tumbler of Macallan, then took a sip.

“The King himself wouldn't be worth this lavish affair.”

Nanay softened, smiling at Callum, her mouth open in wonder.

“You know the King?”

“Aye, I do.” Callum casually lifted my sister's hand to his mouth... *again*. Gross. “Though I'm more acquainted with

Harry. Knew him in the service. Probably the most normal of that whole Germanic lot.”

Of all the things he could have said to impress my parents, that was definitely way up there. If he sprouted a medical degree in the next few minutes, my mother would declare him the next savior, and start a religion in his name.

Dinner was a large, fancy affair. I gutted through it by drinking his Macallan whiskey. But what I would do for a good bottle of rum. This fancy-shmancy highlander shit was all good, but I preferred the warm indulgence of a small-batch tropical rum.

Still, if you wanna get drunk, whiskey’s just as good as anything else...

“If I could cook as well as you, Ligaya...” My brother-in-law had the privilege of calling our parents by their Christian names. Mainly because his Scottish mouth couldn’t wrap around the words Nanay and Tatay. “I would have. Since I can’t, I have to pay for other people to make it special.”

My mother slapped him on the arm, laughing as if he had just made a *really* funny joke.

“Oh, I hope Lea is cooking you Filipino food.” She smiled, though her eyes seemed a little more pointed, as her eyes turned to my twin sister. “I taught her to cook myself. It’ll be important when you have kids.”

“And there it is,” I said, bringing my own Macallan to my lips. Where Callum drank his neat, I drank mine with a healthy ice cube sloshing around the middle. He gave me a dirty look the

first time I did it, but he stopped caring after a while. I kinda wanted to get some crushed ice and put it in there like it was a gas station slushy, just to see how mad I could make him.

But I actually like the guy, so I refrained.

That was pretty mature of me, if I do say so myself.

“That didn’t take long,” my sister grumbled as uniformed servers came through the butler doors with silver trays, placing our entrees in front of us.

“What?” My mother asked, bringing her hand to her chest, looking at us confused.

“Straight to the grandkids,” I said, lifting my drink in a mock toast.

“She got through the appetizers before talking about it,” Lea snorted. “That’s practically restrained.”

“What?” Nanay interjected, offended at being talked around.

The plate covers were removed in a single unified gesture as the white-gloved servers turned, as if on a silent cue, and filed back out.

Our father, who we called Tatay, took a knife, and with a harsh voice pointed the tip at me and my sister. “Don’t disrespect your mother like that.”

We both grumbled, “Sorry Nanay,” at the same time.

This was all just a pantomime. A routine that we had settled into. She’d nag us about grandkids, we’d crack wise, Tatay

would chastise us, and we'd apologize. Lather, rinse and repeat.

It was a common routine that played out in hundreds of thousands of Filipino households around the globe.

"Well," Callum brought a fist to his lips as he coughed. "While I adore having you up in my beloved Highlands for the Christmas Season," Callum said, his eyes on my sister, who looked at him with dread in her eyes. He took his hand to her cheek, and she leaned into his palm. "We did have other reasons for bringing you here."

Shit. Well, after thirty-one years of being the favorite twin, I was about to be deposed by functioning reproductive organs. Damn it. I already knew what they going to say before they said it.

Apparently, so did Nanay.

"*Susmaryosep!*" Our mother exclaimed, using the Filipino curse that smooshed Jesus, Mary and Joseph into a single word. "You're pregnant?"

It's kind of annoying that she so easily kicked me out of my spot as the favorite kid.

For decades I had whined about the responsibility of being the older brother. Being born two minutes earlier was a burden no one should ever have to endure. Every time my little sister got in trouble, I was chastised for not watching her. If she decided to set fire to a classmate's hair, I was asked why I didn't take away her lighter.

How did she get a lighter at eight years old? I don't fucking know! My sister was certifiably insane! And now she was married and would drop mini maniacs all over the place.

"*Oo, Nanay,*" my sister said with a small smile, as if she didn't know how to handle this sudden change of events. The sudden repositioning of our station in our parent's eyes.

Now our mother would shower her with love and adoration. She'd get into her business and call her incessantly.

Good luck, little sister.

"I hope this place is insured," I said, looking at the expensive tapestries, velvet, woven curtains, and antique paintings. "It's gonna get real expensive when Lea gets in a knife-throwing, pyromaniac fit."

"Leo!" Our parents chastised.

"What?" I said, taking another sip of my drink.

"I set fire to *one* person's hair, *one time!*" Lea protested. "She was mean."

"You doused her hair in mousse, which is highly flammable," I said, recalling the incident. "Then lit it on fire. You almost took half her head off."

"She deserved it." Lea crossed her arms, and raised a brow, as if daring me to contradict her.

And, of course, I would do exactly that. "Really? What was her crime?"

“She was telling the entire class that Filipinos eat dog,” she said, hunching into her seat. “I told her that we didn’t. She didn’t believe me and tried to make fun of me. So, I lit her hair on fire.”

“Sticks and stones may break your bones,” I sang, “But words will get you scalped.”

“She still has to wear a wig to this day.” Lea smiled with that devilish glint in her eye.

Lea had zero remorse. To be honest, I didn’t feel bad at all for Ashley-bald-head either. She was incredibly racist, not just against Filipinos. But still... my parents had scolded me for a week for not watching my little sister close enough. Apparently, I *let her* get in trouble.

As if anyone could ever stop my sister from doing whatever the hell she wanted, no matter how destructive and dangerous it was!

I picked up a fork and pierced it into the pastry-covered beef. Beef Wellington? Is that what we were eating? I guess I should be grateful it wasn’t that sheep stomach thing. Haggis. Callum had said that it was an underrated food. I took one taste of *that* Scottish delicacy, and now all I ever had to say to him, and his people’s food, was “*Hard Pass*”.

This entire island had the culinary aptitude of a human dung beetle. I shuddered, remembering the Haggis, but still hungry enough to dig into the Beef Wellington. It didn’t suck. Which is about as good as food got in this part of the world.

“How many?” Tatay asked. He was asking how many babies there would be.

Our father had been a twin, who had given birth to twins. While the jury was still out on which genetic mutation was responsible for multiple births, there was no denying the genetic component that existed within the Bonifacio family.

“*Isa lang,*” my sister was blushing. *Only one.* “As far as we’ve seen...”

Well, that sounded ominous. Though, something in my gut made me think she was going to end up with twins. Call it a brother’s intuition. She was in for double trouble.

Our mother let out a sigh of relief. “Good, because after having you two, I never wanted to have kids again. One is easy.”

I shuddered. I had been on the catching end of birth multiple times in my work as a nurse. It was disgusting, violent, and disturbing every single time. There was no exception. Horror porn. The worst time a straight man will ever spend on that side of a woman.

“That’s why you’re not coloring your hair,” I said, bringing the drink to my lips.

When we went into assassination business, we had bleached our hair and cut it a similar length so that we could confuse face-recognition technology, dye our hair any color quickly, and give ourselves a more harmless appearance.

During my mission to rescue a certain pretty doctor with Callum, I had dyed my hair back to its natural color and kept it that way.

“Not being able to bleach your hair might be an old wive’s tale,” my sister said, defensively, “but I don’t want to take the risk.”

So, she hadn’t grown out her bleached blond hair to our natural black because she was following my lead. Something similar to relief washed through me. She wasn’t following my example. She was doing something for her baby. For her family. One that didn’t include me.

My shoulders suddenly felt... lighter.

“What’s your excuse for that?” She gestured with her fork to my mouth.

I touched the patch of hair that was growing above my lip.

“Never heard of a mustache?”

“More like a *pedo*-stache,” she scoffed.

“Lea!” Our parents both chided.

She nodded her head in supplication, but her smirk showed no regret.

“I’m trying it out. Probably gonna add a soul patch to it.” I ran my thumb and index finger around my lips.

My sister wrinkled her nose in disgust. I didn’t care. I suddenly felt unburdened. Like I had been wearing body

armor 24/7, and gotten used to the weight and pain of it. Now, I finally got to take it off.

“I like your hair,” Callum said, tucking her bob behind her ear. “Whatever color it might be.”

Nanay had stars in her eyes. She was a romantic. And now she was being granted the grandchild - probably grandchildren - she had been pestering us about for the past ten years. She was having the time of her life.

As Callum leaned down to kiss Lea’s cheek, his elbow nudged a white napkin, and knocked a single, golden fork off the table. My sister stared down at it in complete, open-mouthed horror and tried to lean down to catch it. Her jerky movements knocked her spoon to the ground and the two utensils clattered and bounced loudly on the marble floor.

Lea stared at it; her eyes completely wide. I wish I didn’t know exactly why she was so upset. But we knew that things were about to get interesting. The start of another adventure? Or another shit-fest? I wasn’t sure.

“What’s wrong?” Callum said, grabbing her face. “Are you alright? Is it the baby?”

I let out a sigh, downing my tumbler of whiskey as I got up, swaying a little.

“Where are you going?” Callum asked, watching me as I pushed my way through the butler’s door.

“To get two more place settings,” I called over my shoulder, as I started opening and closing drawers looking for the plates

and an obnoxious number of golden utensils.

An older woman looked terrified, then angry as she tried to shoo me back into the dining room.

“Sir, you should go back upstairs,” she said with a strong Scottish accent.

“I’ve got it,” I grumbled, as I tried to balance the utensils that loudly scraped over the plate.

“Sir, you’re in the way of our staff, please step aside.” Her high, white-streaked bun shook in restrained agitation as she shook her head.

“Okay, okay!” I said, lifting my hands in surrender as I took the place settings upstairs.

Callum was still holding Lea as if she was about to keel over and welp a Strathlachlan puppy right there, on the wooden dining chair that probably saw the Jacobite Rebellions.

“What’s happening?” Callum was frantic, looking to me for an answer. Probably because he knew I was the sane twin.

If he didn’t get an answer soon, he was liable to develop a hernia, so I put the man out of his misery.

“You’re about to receive two guests,” I leaned over the table to the decanter of whiskey and refilled my glass. “A man and a woman.”

“What?” He narrowed his eyes at me, then looked at Lea in confusion.

“She dropped a spoon and a fork,” I shrugged as if it was the most *obvious* thing in the world. I knew it wasn’t, but there was something about this guy being *so* rich, and *so* titled, and *so* perfect that gave me an attitude problem. Worse yet, he didn’t seem to mind it even though he was technically now my boss.

“You’re joking,” he said, with a little chuckle.

If he was about to become a permanent member of the family, he should know how insane our Filipino superstitions were. Might as well show him the crazy now.

“A dropped spoon means you’re about to get a woman guest. A fork, it’ll be a man. You two,” I pointed between him and Lea, “have just dropped both.” I gave them a toast with my charged glass. “I don’t make the rules, I just live by them.”

Callum’s brows knitted together and he stared at me like I had a dick growing out of my forehead.

“It’s true,” Nanay said, and his head swung to regard her, then Tatay, then back to his wife as if he was only now realizing that he had married into a madhouse. I almost felt sorry for him, because it was way too late for him to get rid of us now. “Especially when Lea does it. It always happens.”

Lea placed a hand on Callum’s bicep. “I’m so sorry.”

“What for?” Callum was losing the threads of reality.

“For the insanity that you married into.” I don’t think I’ve ever seen my sister look simultaneously embarrassed and

apologetic. I wasn't even sure she was capable of those emotions.

My sister had a crush on her husband. *How cute...* maybe she'd let him live.

"What?" I said with a smirk. "Speak for yourself."

"If I speak for myself, I'm speaking for you, dear *twin*." She shot me an accusing glance. "We're the same."

"Not anymore," I said with a bitter laugh, as I drank my whiskey.

In the past few months, she and I had ceased to be yin and yang, two sides of the same murdering coin. She married Callum who had, somehow, manufactured all of our murders into something sanctioned by one government or another. The Ferryman was gone and dead, now on the other side of the river Styx, and we were both under the employ of Caledonia Security.

We had sold out and gone legit. Like an indie band turning its back on its roots and signing up with a label.

I still hadn't quite wrapped my mind around that. We didn't need to hide ourselves anymore. Problem was, I wasn't completely sure who I was when I wasn't my fake self.

"Callum, we need to talk." The dining room entrance opened with a clatter, as a leggy, strawberry blond walked in, sporting a cream-colored suit and four-inch heels. There was a phone to her ear, and a male voice sounded through it.

“You could have knocked, Pippa,” Callum complained, pulling his napkin off his lap, and placing it on the table. He pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. “Or maybe called ahead?”

“I could, but this is too urgent.” She was a MI6 operative, suddenly promoted to a higher position that I didn’t understand after the untimely suicide of her predecessor. A man who had also been her father until she disowned him. Or he disowned her. I didn’t fucking know. I’m drunk.

And I very much planned to stay that way.

“Take a seat.” I gestured to one of two empty place settings. Was it arrogant of me to offer a seat at the table when it wasn’t *my* house? Maybe. But who the fuck cared. What belongs to my sister belongs to me. “There’s your first guest.”

My sister’s face cringed. “Ugh, that means the next one is...”

She placed her elbows on the table, and dropped her face into her hands, shutting her eyes.

Oh, we both knew who it was going to be...

An American voice bellowed from the far-off foyer, getting nearer with every syllable, while also echoing from the speaker on Pippa’s phone.

“You can’t possibly get involved, it’s out of your jurisdiction!”

Brett Bradley, the American CIA contractor had a phone to his ear, pulled it away and hung up, which made Pippa’s phone cut out with those three distinctive beeps of a dropped call. They had been literally talking on the phone to each other *while* barging in here.

I was too drunk to decipher all the weird relationships that existed with everyone in the room. I wished I had popcorn though.

“I *have* to get involved,” the woman took a seat at Callum’s table, pulling a white napkin onto her lap and gesturing with a finger to a server for an entrée.

“Make yourself at home,” Callum said sarcastically, baffled at the intrusion, and resigned to it all the same.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Brett took the last vacant place setting, and followed Pippa’s example, shamelessly inviting himself to the family meal. “And you can’t possibly send an MI6 agent to protect your *little friend*...”

“It’s amazing how Brett crashes dinner even out here...” Lea grumbled under her breath, crossing her arms.

“Children, you will not be inhospitable to guests,” Tatay chastised us. No one dared to point out that this wasn’t his home and that Brett wasn’t his guest. We simply nodded and mumbled a barely audible apology, which made Brett smile like the Cheshire Cat.

“Thank you, Leonard,” Brett said, in a smarmy way. “Lovely to see you again Ligaya.”

My mother reciprocated the greeting. There were mumbles of *hellos*, and *how are yous*.

“She’s not my little friend,” Pippa scowled at Brett, responding to a statement that he made ages ago. “She’s important to me, and everyone else as well.”

Her ruby lips curled with scorn as if Brett was failing to understand the significance of a single person.

“Be that as it may, it’s not something *we*,” Brett gestured between the two of them, probably meaning his and her respective agencies, “can get involved with.”

“And that’s why we’re here,” Pippa said in exasperation. She turned, her strawberry blonde hair cascading softly over her pale, slim shoulder. “We need security on someone.”

Callum shrugged. “And you couldn’t call me during business hours because...”

“Off books,” Pippa said, her back ramrod straight. Her posture was so perfect that it made me want to slouch even more, just to spite her perfection. She had that effect on people. You admire her great qualities, while also kinda hating her at the same time. Couldn’t she have lipstick on her teeth, or a price tag on her shoe once in a while?

“I don’t like doing things off book,” Callum said.

Nanay and Tatay were looking back and forth, probably losing thread of the conversation. I’m sure they had figured out that Callum worked security and wasn’t, as they originally thought, a priest. He did reassure them that he was a devout Catholic, which had been true, from what I could tell. They may have even figured out that Brett was more than what he had presented when he used to crash our family dinners in California. And they all took it in stride like the supporting fucking champion parents that they were.

“He’ll do it,” Pippa said, her blue-green eyes suddenly landing on me. “Won’t you, Leo?”

“I’ll do what?” I straightened, feeling the effects of the however-many-drinks I’d had to get through this would-have-been family dinner.

“Go off books.” She tilted her head and smiled.

I’ve never really wanted to punch a woman in the face, but I was kinda feeling it right now. She just looked so damn smug. As if she knew my answer before she had even uttered the question.

“Why?” I asked slowly and deliberately.

“Because it involves your one true love.” Her hand fluttered to her chest.

I straightened. Her taunt filled me with dread. The familiar ache in my thigh made itself known, as the memory of a bullet slicing through the muscle and lightly grazing the bone came to the forefront of my mind.

My leg would always hurt. From now, until the day I die, the ache would be ever present. I could ignore it most of the time. It got harder if I walked or ran for too long. I’d never be a good rock climber again, and I hadn’t even bothered trying to go surfing since it healed, because I was too scared of what a disaster it could be.

I could take drugs to dull the pain, but I didn’t want to. The pain gave me a reason to think about her. And I didn’t hate the reminder.

What trouble had my Sunflower gotten herself into now? What did I have to do to get her out of it? Whatever it was, I had better not end up strapped to Callum during a skydive. I'd do anything other than recreate that embarrassing fucking experience.

"I don't know what you mean," I managed to say with a straight face.

If you ever get questioned, and you have no clue what you're up against, you should always play dumb. I had learned that from my sister who was a master of it. Make them explain things to you in a condescending, but complete way.

"You're in love?" Nanay's voice came out in an annoyed sigh. "You have a girlfriend?"

She acted like I was withholding something important from her. Like I was doing it to annoy her. I wasn't a kid trying to sneak out at night. I was over thirty years old. But in a Filipino family, there's no such thing as adulthood privacy. Keeping a love life secret is the equivalent of stealing joy from your own family.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to massage away the tension.

I was drunk, and now I had a headache. *Lovely.*

My mother would never let this bit of information go. Pippa knew exactly what she was doing. I don't know *how* she knew. Chloe and I had kept it under wraps. Sure, it wasn't hard to figure out that my insistence on rescuing her hinted at some

deep feelings... but she had been wrongfully kidnapped for fuck's sake.

"No, I don't," I said to try and placate my mother, though that would be a miracle. "I don't know what she's talking about."

"Oh?" The corner of Pippa's mouth lifted in a smirk. "I'm sorry, have you been keeping your *relationship* with Doctor Chloe Laurent a secret?"

I glared at the blonde spy sitting across from me. She flashed a charming, triumphant grin back. I looked over at my sister, and silently asked with my eyes, "Can I kill her?"

She scrunched her nose, gave me a shrug, then shook her head, which I interpreted as, "You probably shouldn't."

If Pippa had been my sister, I would have kicked out her kneecap under the table. Alas, assaulting random women who *act* like your sister is a crime. If it wasn't though...

"A doctor?" My mother exclaimed her hand on her heart, a delighted smile on her lips. "You're dating a doctor?"

Did I think I lost my standing as the favorite child? Looks like I got it back. I raised a brow at my sister, who sarcastically scowled back.

"Chloe is lovely, Nanay. You'd like her." And my sister turned her back on me, taking her new friend, Pippa's, side.

"I thought we were best friends," I hissed at my sister.

She shrugged. "Oops?"

I looked incredulously at my twin, put my hand over my heart like someone had stabbed a knife in it, and I was pulling it out.
“*Et tu, Lea?*”

My traitorous sister looked at anything but me. She was inspecting the crown molding, the color of her bare nails, a water stain on her fork. Then she and Pippa exchanged a sly smile. A conspiratorial smile. An evil, scheming, terrifying look of devilish joy.

When she did look back at me, I mouthed, “You’re dead to me.”

She smirked in response. “And you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Takes one to know one,” I snorted, taking a drink.

“Children!” Our father chastised.

“Sorry, Tatay,” we responded in unison.

A strange little silence came over the table, as we all took sideways glances at one another.

“I hope I’m having a son,” Callum said, his single brow raised.

“I feel like I’ve just witnessed these women conduct a coordinated attack.”

That was a fucking understatement.

“You’re dating a doctor,” my mother’s voice was wistful and dreamy, as if nothing else had been said.

Chapter 3

Chloe

Saint Julian, Donostria

Sometimes, I wished I were a man. The men of Donostria could sleep on the rooftops under the stars. They didn't have to swelter indoors like the women, as we were cloistered and kept out of view. I would love to sleep under the stars at night, gazing up at the constellations.

The night air wasn't cool, by any means. At best, it was twenty-one degrees Celsius. But indoors, it was easily several degrees hotter. Just one's breath could heat the air, and even an open window couldn't circulate it out.

But women couldn't sleep on the rooftops. That was also where they often kept goats for the slaughter. They had to sleep indoors, where it was safe. Women were a different species from men out here.

I wished that I could touch myself, to fall asleep to an orgasm. But it was too hot. Even then, it was often difficult for me to

not relive certain... threats. They had never touched me. They didn't have a chance. Those men. The ones who had held me hostage. But every chance they got, they threatened to take the last of my pride before they took my life.

Every time I closed my eyes, I heard it. I *felt* those words on my skin, like it was under my flesh, and I needed to claw it out.

I shouldn't have stayed here. Not in this building, where there were people down the hall. Where they might see my nightly insanity. I got up and started pacing the small room. It resembled a monk's cell.

The Hélios House wasn't made for luxuries. It was made to be a sustainable home for the street children to get an education and to be safe from those who took advantage of them. Someone who was born and raised in this town ran the place, and I only came and visited to give the children medical check-ups, and to look through the books.

Asa was now in one of the dormitories below.

I don't know why I was so drawn to him. Hundreds of children beg in the streets of Saint Julian. But that little rugrat had walked beside my taxi for a mile, clutching his arm when he wasn't knocking on the window. He had a look of fierce determination in those big black eyes, and I had to stop.

The break did not come from an accident. I looked at it and knew that. I was asking the boy questions when Seydi confronted me.

“Eh! Americaine! Englaise!” He kept yelling, wrongly guessing that I was English or American. He was shaking his fist, telling me to leave the boy alone and mind my own business.

But I could not resist a child with determined, intelligent eyes. I knew what a cruel world could do to a child like that. I knew what humanity would lose if these precious flowers were not cultivated. I refused to allow it to happen if I could help it.

Thankfully, Rabia agreed.

Hélios House wasn't mine. I just funded it.

After Kemet, I felt like I was lost at sea, and had no purpose. I stayed in Pippa's LA penthouse for a bit, then felt the itch for a life less artificial, less air conditioned, and more... immediate. A simpler existence like I had in Kemet.

Rabia had sent an email telling me to come to Donostria. She said she had a solution for the children of Saint Julian.

She had signed off her email with: “I have a solution. You have the funds. Let's work together.”

I wasn't ready to go back to work. But my trust fund had been lazy and dormant for too long. So, with a little due diligence, and a quick visit to Saint Julian, I met her. And we became fast friends.

She was clear that she'd only accept my money if I did not come with too much Western interference. Local problems needed local minds and local solutions to navigate the complicated cultural problems. She was right. I had seen

Western charities do great harm, paving the road to hell with their good intentions.

One installed a water well system so complicated that the locals couldn't maintain it themselves. Another gave them incubators for premature babies that had no transport to the hospital, and their technology required constant money to maintain and repair in areas where the locals had barely had enough for basic necessities. Things that Westerns would never understand, including myself.

Tomorrow, I would leave this place. I would leave Asa in Rabia's care. I knew she would mother him, as she did all the children in the Hélios House. I longed to stay, but I had to ultimately do the best I could in a place like this - leave.

I'd raise funds, give them what little wealth remained in my trust, or cajole donors so that they could take in these children, educate them, and prepare them for the world. In a situation like this, they needed therapists, educators, counselors, and one teacher for every ten students, because the education they'd require to claw out of their circumstances had to be more intense, more thorough than their peers who had parents.

I hated this part. The part where I became useless and had to leave while the real work was done. Maybe this was where we had gone wrong in Kemet. Our permanent presence as outsiders, never giving locals authority over their own destiny. Maybe Alex Baas had been wrong there...

I paced up and down the room.

Sleep would not come.

I remembered Alex as a boy in St. Michael's Boarding School. Though, at the time, he seemed like a man to me. He was seven years older, gangly, bullied for being one of the South Africans whose family lost everything during the fall of Apartheid.

When you go to school with Lords and Ladies, with people who are a few heart beats to crowns of their home nations, your status in school was often related to your family's standing. Alex had lost it all and was there on scholarship and a legacy. A mercy, if anything, for his family's generations of alumni.

Despite the bullying, he had always been kind to me. As if he and I shared some hardship that bonded us; and maybe it did. Neither of us had families to speak of.

Did that mean that I would suffer his fate? A bullet to the head? Sometimes it felt that way.

It had almost happened.

In a few days, my birthday would be here. Thirty-one years old.

I already knew what would happen. There'd be a crate of my favorite wine waiting for me in my Donaville apartment, courtesy of Pippa. There might even be a card, a text message, or an email from the few people who still remembered that I existed.

My phone, of course, would stay mostly silent. Absent of the one unsaved number that I still hoped would flash across the

screen. The one number that never did, and never would.

Chapter 4

Leo

Strathlachlan, Scotland

My sister had completely derailed the conversation about me and Chloe. Finally, she remembered she was supposed to be on *my* side when she chirped, “We were discussing baby names!”

If it was a girl, she’d be named after our mother, Ligaya. If Callum had ever had a son, he had promised to call him George, after his best friend. This promise was made long before he ever laid eyes on my sister. It was a strange childhood pact.

But that was before George Campbell was about to wife-up Pippa Fox, Callum’s ex.

There seemed to be absolutely no animosity there. Even Lea had no issue with his former fiancée just barging into their house unannounced and making herself at home.

“Lea,” Pippa said with a saccharine smile. Was she reading my thoughts? Was I drunk enough that I was talking out loud? I looked at the faces around me. Nope. Just a weird coincidence. “I can’t wait for you to try on your bridesmaid’s dress!”

My sister was gonna be a bridesmaid? I hadn’t been read on to that one. What a weird dynamic. Must be a rich people thing. Of which *she* was now one.

I should go sharpen the guillotine, I thought while sipping Callum’s overpriced whiskey.

“Come on,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “We both know you’d name a boy Leopold.”

My sister paused, placing her hand on her perfectly flat belly. She said the name on a wistful sigh, then looked up at Callum. The man was a complete sucker for my sister. He nodded in approval, and that was that. Fuck you, George Campbell.

My sister loved our uncle as much as she loved our father. Tito Leopold had gotten us into “the life”. He had taken my psychopath sister under his wing. On the one hand, that was a good thing for her. But on the other hand, he turned me into a killer. She and I would never look at him with the same eyes.

“I’m sure that’d be fine by Geo,” Pippa said with a smug raise of that perfectly plucked eyebrow. “We were going to name a girl Georgiana anyway.”

As the sun set, my parents went to sleep. Jet lag was kicking their ass. Callum had everyone hustled into his personal library, where he passed around whiskey tumblers, and he and

Pippa started a game of chess. The chess board itself had to be an antique, probably worth more than our ancient Audi at home.

“So,” Callum said, swirling the glass in his hand. “Cabbage is in trouble again? Would anyone care to enlighten me, before you start taking my men out?”

His eyes bored straight into Pippa’s skull, then into Brett’s. The latter leaned his hip on a large table in the middle of the room, strewn with ancient maps that predated World War I.

“We’re uncovering more about the people who turned Alexander Baas,” Brett casually ran a finger over the intricate, hand painted globe, turning it until it halted with his finger over Ireland, lingering there a moment before moving on. “How much do you know about Richard Davenport?”

“Not as much as I should,” Callum scratched his temple. “I’ve had some contact with his wife though, since...” Callum’s eyes turned to me and he shrugged. “Since Leo and I did our mission in Kemet.”

Something told me he wasn’t just using our little rescue mission in Kemet as a marker of time. It wasn’t a coincidence, but two related events.

“Who’s the wife?” When you feel like you don’t have all the pieces, you shouldn’t ask for everything all at once. You ask for the information one piece at a time, so that bit by bit, you form the picture in your mind. My recruit division commander, or RDC, the Navy equivalent of a drill sergeant, liked to say, “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”

I sure as hell felt like I was about to eat a whole elephant, ass first.

“Calissandra Davenport,” Callum’s answer made me let out a low whistle.

“The News Anchor?” my sister asked as she came to her husband and sat on the armrest of his chair. He wrapped an arm around her waist until she landed on his lap.

My sister had always hated people with wealth, so I wondered how she could possibly be settling in these surroundings, with generations of hoarded antiques worth millions staring down at her all the time.

Maybe that was true love. Or maybe she’d realized how good the rich life actually was and switched sides.

Nah... she was in love.

As a consequence, she was behaving. She hadn’t killed anyone in months, *and* managed to keep from causing any property damage at the same time. I was like a retiree, finding that I had way too much time on my hands, now that she wasn’t breaking shit.

Maybe when her kids were out and walking, I’d find myself with new hellions to manage.

“Calling her a news anchor would be like saying that Ang Lee works in film,” Pippa scoffed, “Or that Isaac Newton wrote a few scientific papers.”

How many whiskeys had I had? Jesus, the Macallan was a strong-as-fuck whiskey that was so smooth going down that it

never burned. Was this my third one since dinner? Why the hell was I drinking so much?

“But there’s more,” Pippa was talking to me. Or *at* me, depending on how I looked at it. “We have intel that Davenport—“

“The guy, not the wife,” Brett clarified.

“—is involved in the triangle trade,” Pippa spoke right over him, not acknowledging his input, “and is using Laurent Media as a way of covering his tracks.”

Laurent media was one of the biggest umbrella companies that existed. Founded by Loïc Laurent, it was mostly involved in television broadcasts and newspapers before later delving into reality TV.

“Which part of the triangle?” I was pulling at threads to try and unravel the mystery of what everyone was talking about. The triangle trade had three interlocking corners: humans, drugs and guns. Most big criminals operated on two out of three.

“Humans and guns,” Pippa didn’t miss a beat. “He’s been supplying slave labor in exchange for weapons. He would have been the one supplying them to Alex in Kemet to arm the militants that they hoped would control the oil fields.”

Pippa was still staring at me. Studying me. Her eyes darted all over my face. I don’t know what she was looking for. But that didn’t stop me from schooling my features so that I gave away

nothing. Whatever she was looking for, she wouldn't find it until I knew what she wanted to find, and why.

"How is he manipulating Laurent Media to cover that up?" I wondered out loud, getting up to refill my umpteenth glass of whiskey. I deserved accolades for how cogent I was, considering how buzzed I felt.

"Anytime they come close to investigating him, another scandal needs investigating. Another outrage. Or the person investigating will come under fire for something, causing them to have to step down." Pippa almost seemed impressed as she stated their routine. "He came to control Laurent Media because of his marriage."

Pippa spoke with heavy subtext, and I didn't have my subtitles on. It wasn't like a streaming device where I could just rewind - it was old school cable where if you missed it, you were fucked until the re-run. She kept on *looking* at me as if I was supposed to be clicking the puzzle pieces into place. I wasn't.

But, in my defense, that was probably because I was drunk.

"He married Calissandra... who was a Laurent. The eldest of Loïc's two daughters." Pippa was saying it like she was trying to lead me to an answer, like a tutor prodding their very stupid student.

"Oh shit!" I snapped my fingers as it dawned on me. "Like Chloe Laurent? They're related?"

Pippa almost looked relieved that I was picking up what she was putting down. Like she was happy to know I wasn't a total

idiot.

“Yes, they are. They’re sisters,” she said with a relieved sigh.

“Shit, I had no idea Chloe had a sister,” I said bringing the glass to my lips and resting it against my mouth, not quite taking a sip.

“She doesn’t like to talk about it,” Pippa’s voice softened.

“They’re not in touch.”

There was a lot behind that statement. If I had to guess, this was Pippa’s characteristically British tendency towards *understatement*. A trait I was learning about all too well, now that I was working for Caledonia Security.

I was about to draw a circle around this whole thing. I was close to completing the picture. I just needed a few more pieces.

“Why does Dr. Laurent require security?” I asked, opting to use her title and last name. I needed to be more formal because our last interaction was less than affectionate.

See? I’m learning British understatement already.

She slapped me in the face. Probably my fault. In my defense, I had been shot in the leg during her rescue operation, and I did not take the healing process, and immobility, very well. She didn’t take my being an assassin well either. She called me a liar and a brute and told me that I disgusted her.

I reminded her that she wasn’t very disgusted when I had my face buried between her legs. So... I guess the slap was warranted.

But Pippa didn't know that. Did she? Did girlfriends talk about stuff like that? My only source was my sister, and she never had gal pals.

I looked at Pippa, searching her face. No, I bet she wouldn't like me so much if she knew I had said something like *that* to Chloe.

I needed to stay far, far away from that intoxicating doctor-woman. Whatever fantasies I had of wrapping her lush, thick curls around my fingers and getting her to arch her back in submission were just that - fantasies. Very *nice* fantasies. But fantasies, nonetheless.

Chloe hated killers, soldiers and "brutes". She hated anyone who made a living endangering, or taking, life. It was against that rigid moral code of hers.

I wanted to show her exactly how much of a brute I could be. Straight up fucking caveman.

Brett and Pippa exchanged a glance that I couldn't decipher.

"She's disrupting the triangle trade," Pippa said with almost a hint of pride. "She's been rescuing children and ruining the supply. It's hurting their bottom line. It's painted a target on her back."

"Good girl," I said, finally sipping the Macallan, and making a mental note to slow the fuck down. If I kept going, they'd need to pour me out of here in a wheelbarrow.

"I suspect that since she was rescued from her kidnappers, she's been a sore subject for some people," Brett mumbled.

“She’s becoming public enemy number one for those scumbags.”

I smirked with pride. I was glad I was part of that rescue. And I was doubly glad that she was a thorn in their side. Chloe has always been a white knight, and that was admirable. She’s a pretty girl, but her Lady Justice routine knocked her into the stratosphere of beautiful and unbelievably sexy.

“She stayed because she was in the middle of delivering a baby.” They all knew this, but I needed to mention it anyway. I needed to tell them how dedicated she was to her job and her patients. “I’ve checked, and that family survived, and is doing just fine.”

Another life saved. Another notch on her unending list of good deeds.

Pippa smiled wistfully, her eyes growing a little distant. “Cabbage is an amazing person.”

Cabbage. They all called her Cabbage. Something about a French term of endearment, *mon petit chou*, which meant “my little cabbage”. I guess they called her that in their fancy-shmancy boarding school, and the nickname stuck.

I hated it. It didn’t suit her. She wasn’t a cabbage. She was a sunflower, with a wide, honest face, and a tall, strong stalk, that always tilted towards the sun. Not a common, dirt-dwelling cabbage. She floated above all that.

Or maybe I was drunk and waxing poetic about a chick that clearly didn’t want me.

“There’s chatter,” Brett said, interrupting our little moment of awe, “that she’s made someone angry and now she has a target on her back.” He tipped his head to the side, putting down his whiskey. “It could be nothing, but it’s enough that we want someone on her. But we can’t put our agents on it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I’m American, and she’s not,” Brett said, with a shrug. “I can’t possibly justify those funds. She’s way out of my jurisdiction.”

“And my department is still being gutted, since the untimely demise of my predecessor,” Pippa said. The predecessor was her father, who had been implicated in participating in the triangle trade himself before, and I’m strictly speculating here, *she killed him*. “And I think I might have a mole problem.” She shook her head. “I can’t trust anyone just yet.”

Callum nodded, finally understanding why he was being brought into the mix.

“I will’nae be leaving my pregnant wife anytime soon,” Callum said, “But I can spare Hugo and Leo, if they’re amenable. I’ll cover the costs—”

“I’ll cover the costs—” Pippa interrupted.

“Or no one can cover the cost and I’ll do it for a klondike bar,” I slurred.

Hell, it’d be my first time trying to keep someone alive, instead of trying to snuff the life out of them. Even Chloe’s rescue mission had turned into a fun little kill-fest. Callum

might be a jolly red giant, but he was pulling that trigger right alongside me.

This would be the most honest job I'd done since I was in the Navy. If all went well, I'd be having too much fun to care about money.

"Take Hugo," Callum said, taking a drink of his whiskey. "I think his expertise may end up quite useful."

"Brilliant." Pippa responded to Cal, and they exchanged a look that made me uneasy.

"I can go solo," I said, taking another sip of whiskey, despite my early promise to slow down. Whoops.

"No one in Caledonia works alone," said Callum, his tone firm like a scolding father.

Then he looked at Pippa, and they communicated something with their eyes. Something secret. Something implied. Something I wasn't privy to, and it was starting to grate my last nerve. It wasn't about me... I was pretty sure.

"What aren't you telling me?" I narrowed my eyes on those pricks.

"Hugo will be adequate," Pippa backed him up. "He is uniquely qualified for this mission, since he has so much knowledge on the players." "He does?" I asked. I rarely heard Hugo speak. How did he know so much about the "players"?

"Oh, yes," Callum chuckled.

"Care to elaborate?" I pried.

“No.” Pippa, Brett and Callum all said in unison.

If I wasn't uneasy before, I sure as fuck was now.

Chapter 5

Chloe

Saint Julian, Donostria

Rabia came to my Saint Julian hotel with me. That, and she wanted to sample some of the metropolitan nightlife. Rural Saint Julian might be where her heart lay, but she had been a cosmo girl, with the best education and had a worldliness that made her uniquely suited for her position as the head of Hélios House.

The Hôtel Le Soleil, where I kept a room when I wasn't at Hélios, sported one of the few places that served good alcohol, and mostly catered to a foreign clientele.

The architecture was inspired by the Ritz in Morocco with blue and turquoise tiles stacked to make peacock feathers on the drywall. Fake gold leaves made up the overhead chandelier and it had that strange, uncanny feeling when someone surrounded themselves with fake imitations of luxury brands.

You don't know why it's off; it just is. But the close approximation was good enough.

A band with metal drums, percussion instruments played an easy, waving rhythm they sang familiar western classics.

Rabia raised her long, slender finger to a passing waiter.

"Where will you go next?" She asked after the waiter nodded to acknowledge her.

"Venice," I responded. "My friend is getting married. I am the maid of honor."

Rabia grinned, resting her chin on her palm as if she was ready to gossip. "Are the bridesmaids dresses hideous?"

Rabia loved American romcoms. She thought they were the worst, and best, things to ever stream into Donostria along with Filipino *teleserye*. They were so melodramatic and unbelievable that she said it allowed her to turn off her big brain and get lost in stupidity.

"No," I rolled my eyes. "She's not that kind of bride."

The waiter, with a white napkin over his forearm, asked Rabia what she wanted. She requested a bottle of Merlot and some appetizers for the table.

"I bet you'll have fun," Rabia said. "And it'll take your mind off of leaving us, because I know how much that brain of yours worries."

I wanted nothing more than to lay claim to Hélios House and get my hands dirty. I wanted to stay, and micromanage every

inch of Rabia's work, despite having complete faith in her. But I had learned enough from the Kemet Refugee Camps. When Alex Baas came in with his legion of doctors, soldiers, and teachers, he had done a good thing. Mostly. The refugee camp turned into a town, with schools and farms. Cooperation increased.

But still, that presence and reliance on outsiders kept the ungoverned space in foreign hands. That's why the oil was fought over.

"I know you'll do great things," I said, as the waiter poured two glasses of the Merlot. He didn't offer to have us taste it, or inspect the cork, or anything of the sort. But that's okay. "And the best I can do is get out of your way."

"Not a lesson most Westerners learn," she agreed. Though, somewhere deep inside, I wish she didn't agree as *hard* as she did. "And despite you having some of Africa in your blood, you are still European."

She was right. I was Parisian if anything, and local problems needed local leaders. I'd do more harm than good by staying. Both to them, and to me.

I wonder if I could have helped Alex. Or was his death, whether it was accidental or foul play, inevitable?

We weren't close. He wasn't going to braid my hair and tell me about his inner demons. But surely I would have seen *some* sign that he was going to take his own life, if that was what happened. He had been there when I was rescued. He had

welcomed me home with open arms. He had apologized for letting the evacuation efforts leave me behind...

I forgave him with an open heart. Of course, it wasn't his fault. It was mine. My nightmares were my punishment for stupidity. A consequence of my own making.

"Hello? Chloe?" Rabia snapped her fingers in front of my face.

My head popped up, as if I was shocked out of sleep. "Sorry, my mind was far away."

It was happening more and more. My mind kept drifting to Alex, to Kemet... to the tent where they held me hostage and forced me to read in front of a camera, announcing their threats of delivering me piece by piece to my only living relative.

"You need a vacation," Rabia said in that voice of hers - all at once youthful, forceful, wise, and kind. I wondered if that was contrived. Was that something that was learned? Could I learn it too? Maybe if I did, all my friends would stop calling me Cabbage.

Emotions, and the subtlety of them, never came easily to me. I had to practice. I stood in front of a mirror practicing expressions until I felt like I could copy what others around me knew intuitively: To smile when they were happy. To cry when they were sad. To yell when they were angry.

At the first sign of emotion, my instinct was to freeze. To do nothing. It took a long time to find out that I wasn't normal.

And even now, I have to think very hard when I speak to someone to be able to keep up with the information I should be gleaning from their expressions and tone. Rabia, like so many, were able to read it as naturally as breathing.

“You need to rest, Chloe,” Rabia said leaning forward, her brows coming down to show concern. “You look tired.”

I instinctively touched the growing bags under my eyes. She was right. But sleep was not a luxury I had anymore.

The music changed from the local flare to something older. “You Belong to Me”, a ballad that conjured images of Middle Eastern marketplaces, and silver planes, and a lover cooing to their sweetheart to remember where their heart belongs.

I always liked this song. It was such a lovely tune. Like someone reminding a loved one to remember them. Was there a way to do that outside of a song? Was there an email or form letter I could use? Rather than a string of calls and texts to a phone number that never answered.

I found myself swaying to the music, listening in rapt attention as a woman in a gold dress crooned into the microphone, her lips in a sensual smile.

“Look!” Rabia’s voice had turned equally sensual as her eyes followed someone walking across the bar. “Look at that specimen.”

Her eyes glanced up and down in appreciation. I followed her eyes to a stranger in a steel gray suit. He held a glass of something amber in his hand as he watched the singer on the

stage. There were several men there, but only two facing towards us. One was rather thin, save for a belly. He wasn't attractive and had a goatee and a black mole on the side of his neck, so that wasn't who Rabia was looking at.

My eyes darted to the other man and familiar almond-shaped eyes blinked at me. With a sly wink, he smiled. He arched a brow and looked bemused when I froze in place.

I had been caught staring. *Merde!*

I glanced away, taking a drink of my Merlot, and suffering Rabia's scrutiny.

"Do you know him?" Her voice was teasing.

I blushed. "He helped me with Asa yesterday."

"What's his name?" Rabia leaned forward as if we were gossiping again. I wish she wouldn't do that. He'd think we were talking about him. And we *were* talking about him, but I didn't want him to know that.

Merde. I couldn't remember. Something very English, but it had been so plain that I hadn't committed it to memory.

"Oh, he's coming over," Rabia said, tapping my forearm. Had she been sitting beside me, she would have been sticking her elbow into my ribs.

"Stop it," I hissed under my breath trying to get her to stop fawning like a schoolgirl.

"He's very fine," she smirked. I knew that she was thinking about taking him home. She may have been born in Donostria,

but she had spent much of her time in Europe and had adopted those customs and norms. If she hooked those gorgeous chestnut eyes on a man, they would be defenseless against her siren charms. “Are you claiming him or is he fair game?”

“I have no interest,” I said with a laugh.

Why did Leo’s name pop in my head at that exact moment?

I tried not to look as I heard the squish of leather against the laminate floors. When it came to a stop by our table, I *had* to look up at him. There was no way to pretend he wasn’t there. Even someone as socially dense as me knew that.

“Dr. Laurent,” he said with a smile. There was something sharp about his teeth, as though they were all just a little bit crooked, giving the impression of a wolfish grin. It was visually stunning. “Pleasure to see you again.”

I gawked at him. In the evening light, he was, as Rabia said, “a specimen”. A classically handsome man with just a bit of an edge. Not enough to seem threatening. Just... interesting. So why did he make me feel so uncomfortable? Or was that how handsome men always made women feel?

“This is Rabia,” I said, pointing to my friend. He looked at her and gave a nodding bow in acknowledgment. They smiled at one another in mutual attraction.

“I’m Everest Landry,” he said with a smooth smile as he bent down and kissed the back of her hand.

So that was his game? He was here for Rabia. Of course! That made sense to me. She was stunning.

The singer changed her song and started crooning about a Tennessee waltz.

“May I have this dance?” he asked.

I ran a finger over the top of my glass, expecting to see Rabia gracefully rise from her seat. But she didn't move. Instead, she was staring daggers at me. I looked up at Everest and noticed that his hand was outstretched towards me.

He was asking *me* to dance.

I stared at his palm as if it was going to jump off his wrist and bite me like Cousin It from *The Addams Family*.

“Come on,” he said with a sheepish grin, “Am I so hideous you wouldn't consider a quick waltz?”

Rabia kicked me under the table, and it was as if she brought me back to life.

I flinched, took his hand and he led me to the dance floor. He swung me around. Out of habit, and years of boarding school etiquette lessons, I followed his lead up and down the dance floor, matching his rhythm and his particular style.

He was incredibly smooth. Far too smooth for my liking.

“How long have you been in Donostria?” I asked him when the silence went on a little too long.

Talking while dancing a waltz was compulsory, considered rude if it wasn't done. Pippa had taught me that when I was young. She said that the long silence could be awkward, so it

was important to discuss easy topics like the weather, the surroundings, and hobbies.

“A few months, working on a long-form photo essay addressing poverty in Saint Julian. Particularly the affected children.” His smile never faltered, plastered on as if he could have been discussing the weather. He probably didn’t give a shit about the impoverished. Another one of those rich people who did it for the accolades or the career move. “I’m a big admirer of your work.”

“Oh?” Maybe he was like me. The kind of person who had to practice their expressions in a mirror to get it right? Though I doubted it since he was just a little too smooth.

“Yes, it was a pleasure to see your advocacy in person.” That plastic smile was becoming disturbing. “Very impressive.”

“There’s nothing impressive about trying to do the right thing for a child,” I said, turning my face away from him as he twirled us clockwise across the floor. “Anyone who would harm children is not a person worth knowing.”

His smile almost got wider as he responded, “Indeed.”

That strange man with a mole was looking at us again. He had moved from the bar and was closer to the exit, holding an unlit cigar in his hand. Was he looking at us? Or just at me?

“Do you know him?” Landry quietly asked me.

Maybe I had been staring too long. Was I being rude? I hoped not.

“No, he just... looks intense.” I hoped he wouldn’t pry too much. I’d sound insane if I tried to explain that he made my skin crawl because of his *je ne sais quoi*...

“His name is Alfred Crawley,” he said, spinning me so that I had to turn my back to the man. “He works for Laurent Media.”

Laurent Media. I wondered if he’d connected the name of the media company to my own. Or did he think that it was such a common last name that it couldn’t possibly be related? I hadn’t had anything to do with my birthright since I was dumped into St. Michael’s School.

“How do you know him?” I turned the question around on him.

“Oh, I don’t,” he said with a light chuckle. “I know him from drinking here.”

We twirled for a moment, his strong arms expertly guiding me along the slightly porous floor. They were using the wrong kind of cleaner for it, so elaborate twirls would make the bottoms of my shoes stick to the laminate. Thankfully, Landry didn’t push me to do any complicated dance steps.

Dancing is inherently very sexist. The man leads, but the woman has the more difficult steps. As is life, I suppose.

“Are you in Donostria often?” I asked at the same time he blurted, “You were kidnapped.”

He pulled back, putting a bit of distance between our chests as I caught my breath, surprised by the sudden change of topic.

This was rude, right? He was being a little rude?

“I’m sorry if that seemed a little insensitive,” his face scrunched like he was puzzled by why his words might seem odd. “But I recall seeing you on the news. Or am I mistaken?”

“No,” I whispered, looking away. “You’re not mistaken.”

He mercifully slowed down the dancing to an easy sway, instead of twirling and stepping all over the place. I was starting to think he was a bit of a showoff.

“What happened there?” He asked.

Ugh, journalists. They always get off on the most gruesome things. Vultures, the lot of them.

“I wasn’t able to evacuate because I was in the middle of delivering a child when the sirens blared,” I recited this tale so often, I could say it in my sleep. I didn’t even have to taste the words anymore. “The delivery was complicated. The baby was breech. When all was said and done, the helicopters had left, and I was quite alone. I was taken, and they attempted to ransom me before the members of Caledonia Security were able to come to my rescue.”

“And you apparently gave your captors such a tongue lashing that they lost their temper on live television,” he said with a chuckle. “Well done on your recitation of events. Very thorough. I’m sure you’ve worked that out with a PR firm? Or did one of your *friends* help you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” my brows came down as I tried to puzzle together what he was trying to say.

His smile was making me uncomfortable. I couldn't figure out why. Maybe because it looked so plastic.

“Well, your statement seems well-crafted, rehearsed, and not open for questions.” He tilted his head ever so slightly, that chestnut hair curling over his brow in a roguish way. “So, it's almost like it was designed on purpose to stop people from asking more questions.”

“I still don't understand what you mean.” This is an old trick I use on anglophiles. If I don't want to speak to them, I thicken my French accent, and pretend I have no command of English. Sure, I speak it well enough to have gone through Cambridge Medical School, but it was easy to pretend stupidity.

He lifted his arm and twirled me under it, right as the song hit its final fade.

“You are a force to reckon with, Dr. Laurent,” he said with a smirk. “I'm proud to have introduced myself to you.”

Proud. How very strange that this simple word could make me feel so warm inside. I couldn't help but smile. My friends, who I considered family, all called me Cabbage. But this man called me Doctor, and didn't dismiss my work as naïve or idealistic. I blushed, not just at his compliments, but also at how infantile my own feelings were. I shouldn't need approval. My work should stand for itself, but...

I felt seen by this stranger, even if his empty eyes reminded me of the placidness of a shark.

Chapter 6

Leo

I leaned on the pillar; its uneven blue and turquoise tiles were smooth and cool against the bare skin of my arm. The earpiece lodged into my ear canal was full of Hugo's annoying commentary as he sat at a distant table.

"Ugh, they are calling this pig swill a Cabernet Sauvignon?" He lightly gestured to the glass in front of him.

I watched as Dr. Chloe Laurent, her dark skin glowing against the bright fabric of her little red dress, twirled around the dance floor. I didn't know the man she was dancing with. He didn't work at Hélios House, that's for sure.

My eyes briefly turned to Hugo who casually surveyed the scene as he wrinkled his nose and grumbled, "Ugh, they should not allow these people to make wine and call it anything but rotten grape juice."

I chuckled, knowing that he was too quiet to be overheard, but I couldn't help mentioning, "You look like you're talking to

yourself like a crazy person.”

Hugo didn't spare me a glance, but I saw the smallest lift of his lip as he shrugged, not rising to defend himself. The man was impervious to insults.

The earpieces were a custom piece of Caledonia technology. It was lodged in the ear canal, and used the reverberation of bone to recreate one's voice, instead of relying on something that can be distorted like sound. They work just as well when in a crowded room, like we were in now, or when falling at 220 MPH when jumping off a plane. The latter I hadn't tried, and never would, if I could help it.

Chloe and her dance partner glided across the floor. I was pissed that the guy was a decent dancer. I never wanted to watch someone stumble quite as much in my life. Was it too much to hope that he fell and broke his leg?

Were they dating? I wonder how he felt about the fact that I'd be showing up to her apartment, and parking my ass outside her room.

The Asian ken doll in a suit guided her easily over the imitation parquet floor.

I was gratified to see that she didn't seem comfortable with him. She was tense, her nose doing that cute little pinchy thing it did, causing wrinkles on the bridge when she was agitated. So they probably weren't dating, then. If they were, then they'd be on the brink of a breakup.

Well, she'd be on the brink of dumping *him*. He seemed clueless to her discomfort, so there was really no hope there. Tough luck, pretty boy.

"You should look away once in a while," Hugo's voice whispered in my ear. "You look crazy just staring them down. I'm surprised they haven't felt your glare."

"I'm being subtle," I protested, speaking from the corner of my mouth. "You only notice because you're watching me."

I did follow his advice and pushed off the pillar, walking over to the bar. With a finger wave, I got the bartender's attention long enough to order a whiskey sour.

"You should be watching them," I said as I brought the drink to my lips to cover it from anyone who might be lip reading. Not that anyone was. I just wanted to be sure.

"What for? Your eyes are on them enough for the both of us."

I was starting to hate the French. Between my last interaction with Chloe, and my new interactions with Hugo, the entire country was about to be on my shit list. They shared such a similar accent that it bothered me. I knew that there were 2.1 million Parisians who sound like these two, but it didn't matter.

I was well past reasoning.

"*You're nothing but a liar and a killer!*" Chloe had said in that husky, accented voice. Her voice was like gold. Her accusation were a dagger. And she plunged it straight into my ribs when I

was bedridden with a leg injury I had sustained from rescuing her. “*You betrayed us.*”

She had cried when she said it. She claimed that I had betrayed her confidence, and she would never have let me near her if she had known.

Oh, she had meant every single word. I tried to get up and hold her as she wept, but I took one step and collapsed as she ran out of the room.

Now here I was insinuating myself into her life again. But this time, by more honest means.

The heart, and cock, wants what it wants. And I was sick of not having what I wanted.

When the song ended, she briefly glanced up at her dance partner before he said something that made her cheeks flush. Her lips curled into a shy smile and my heart fell to the floor.

“I can see the steam coming out of your ears.” From the corner of my eye, I saw Hugo’s shoulders shake with light, silent laughter.

I should have gotten up and made myself known to her right then and there. I should have told her what was going on, and let her know I was going to be her shadow. But I didn’t.

I was enjoying my villain era.

“Let’s hang back for a moment before we make ourselves known to her,” I said quietly.

I waited and watched with rapt fascination as she sat down in front of a black woman in a similar red dress and painted ruby lips. They splashed merlot on the table as they cheered, leaning into each other like best friends whispering secrets.

“Stalker,” Hugo chuckled.

“Takes one to know one.”

I wasn't totally read on to whatever weird Hugo was into. What I did know was that he spent all his free time watching the news or using Caledonia tech to watch someone on CCTV and other cameras. He had spent huge chunks of his salary on guards to surveille that woman when she traveled, and as a result, had no savings despite the huge Caledonia Security paycheck. Not to mention his 25% stake in the company.

And somehow, everyone was totally okay with this. Like this was totally normal.

I'd get to the bottom of it, someday. Just not now, when I had better things to look into.

I scanned the bar, looking for any faces that stood out. In an international crew like this one, it was harder to see if someone didn't belong.

Her dance partner was at the bar, his back to it as he scanned the room, same as me. *What was he up to?*

Someone scanning the room was almost always up to no good. Except for me, of course. I was up to the best intentions.

He had slicked black hair, and almond-shaped eyes. His bronze skin was smooth, and I had to admit that he wasn't a

bad looking man. A camera bag was draped over his shoulder, and one hand was doodling something on a napkin with a black fountain pen.

As he sketched whatever he was doing, he was elbow to elbow with a portly man with thin arms, and a goatee. They both had cigars in their hands. The goatee lit up. He had a loud, booming voice, obviously very confident with a sense of self-importance.

“The loud one is Alfred Crawley,” I heard Hugo’s voice in my ear. “He works for Laurent media.”

Everyone was speaking a different language. I caught a few words here and there - law, the United Nations, the World Health Organization. They were discussing something about all the Non-Government Organizations, or NGOs, in the area. Then they’d flit back to football - or soccer - or rugby.

“How do you know him?” I asked. I had looked up every person who worked at Hélios House, but I had not bothered to look at every big industry and their international staff. That would have taken ages. Maybe I should have, since Chloe was related to the late CEO of Laurent Media, it was somewhat related.

“I looked into them as part of my due diligence.” He said it so casually, but I couldn’t help feeling like there was a little bit of deception in his words.

“Due diligence, huh?” I said, hoping he’d add a little something into the conversation. Give me a hint of what his

true intentions were. But he said nothing more. That secretive Frenchman...

My eyes returned to the men huddled at the bar, and the occasional glances they threw to the female patrons. I was certain they were doing the mental calculations to see if there was a chance they'd get lucky tonight.

There was something odd about Chloe's dance partner that put me off. He fit in too well, despite wearing cargo pants and a keffiyeh around his neck, and having the casualness of an Indiana Jones, he looked so... normal... beside the men in their best business casual.

How was he blending in so well?

Then it hit me. He mirrored their movements the way I did. The way multilingual people might mirror the accents and verbal patterns. He was a chameleon. And you should never trust men like that. I would know. I *am* a man like that.

My eyes wandered back to Chloe and her golden eyes and wild black curls. A small smile curved her thick, burgundy lips. She looked at the Asian, scarf-wearing douche bag, and he smiled at her, toasting his glass.

I fought the urge to go up and punch him right in the throat.

My sister would do that. She had zero impulse control. Thankfully, I knew better. Though my thigh ached from where I had taken a bullet while rescuing Chloe. The pain was almost blinding, telling me that I had *earned* her. That she was mine. And this motherfucker was stepping on *my* woman.

I didn't care how insane that was. Maybe I needed to be more like my sister. Insane, unreasonable, demanding...

I could have sworn that he caught a glimpse of me noticing him. It was a strange moment, his eyes seemed to lazily drift over the room, and they looked like they slowed on me for just a second. But then he pulled a pen from his pocket and grabbed a napkin, and to my surprise, started to doodle something. I couldn't quite see it. Maybe it was a face?

I looked at Chloe who leaned over the table and smiled with her companion. Rabia. That was her name. She was the head of Hélios House. The two were acting like old companions. Comrades. Friends. Though there was nothing to indicate that they had known each other prior to the kidnapping...

I had never seen her be buddy-buddy with anyone. I felt like a voyeur, watching her for my own excitement. Maybe that made me a creep. But a guard gets to watch who they're protecting, right? That was part of the job description.

So, I would watch the curve of her cheek when she smiled, and the slight sway as she became happy drunk. I'd look at her slender ankles as she crossed them beneath her seat, and how her chest heaved as she laughed.

She was smiling. A thing she rarely did in Kemet. I wanted to drink those smiles in. I wanted to wake up to it and fall asleep beside it. I wanted to be the recipient of it.

"That way madness lies," said the ominous French prick into the piece I had buried in my ear canal. It felt like he stuck his

fingernail into my skull and was tickling my brain with that insipid little warning.

“Ugh, takes one to know one,” I complained, knowing that what I said didn’t quite make sense, but I was busy and distracted, and I didn’t care.

I had heard him say that before when his friends were getting obsessed with their women. But that was different. Those guys were stalking their ladies. Me? I was guarding Chloe. More importantly, she wasn’t mine, regardless of whatever we may have shared on her last birthday. Even if I had marked her body with my bites and had her whispering my name with every orgasm, she *wasn’t* mine.

Though the ache in my leg said otherwise. It told me that I had earned her. I needed her. I belonged to her.

There was a rancid taste on my tongue when Chloe and her companion got up, ready to make their way out. The Indiana Jones wannabe strode over, and planted a kiss on the back of her hand with a theatric bow. She blushed again, fluttering her eyelashes as she pulled her hand away, giving a timid finger wave as they left.

The guy - whoever he was, I’d find out soon - watched as they left. If he didn’t have impassive eyes, I’d think that he had hearts in them.

“We’re going to just sit back and watch. I’ll approach her when we get to Donaville,” I said, making the choice. I was the lead in this mission after all. So, it shouldn’t matter that Hugo was technically my boss...

“Oui, chef,” he said. *Yes, boss.* “I’ll book myself a single room in the hotel across from her apartment and watch the street. I trust you’ll find your own accommodations.”

He took a smug sip of his wine. When he tasted it, he winced, as if he’d forgotten how bad it was and put it down on the table.

Serves him right. Dick.

Chapter 7

Chloe

Asa hugged me around the legs before I left, his cheek resting against my thigh. His arm, now securely in a cast, was rough against my loose, cotton trousers.

I wasn't sure what to do. I don't think any child had ever really hugged me before. Adults? Sure. But a child? No. Not as freely as this, at least. I patted his back for a minute, before bending down, and lifting him from under his armpits. His arms wrapped around my neck, legs about my waist and I supported his bony little rump with my forearms.

Asa didn't say anything. He just held on, with his face buried in my neck.

Rabia stood with her arms crossed, a small smile on her lightly glossed lips.

"He's very happy to be here," she said, reaching out to pry the boy from my arms.

I jerked him away from her, not quite ready to let him go. “I’m glad he’s here.”

Rabia smiled, patiently, standing with her arms clasped in front of her, allowing me to enjoy the moment.

One should not try to volunteer for the accolades. One should not get into medicine for the recognition. But sometimes, a simple hug from a child can regenerate a broken heart. I so rarely held anyone that I just wanted another second. Just one more squeeze.

I always knew that I was unlikely to have children of my own. Some blessings are better for people who have a nice home, and gentle manners. So, I savored this moment. The freely given affection of a child.

When the boy loosened his grip, I let Rabia take him from me. They stood at the Hélios House steps, her holding his hand. I finally noticed how dashing he looked in his uniform - cotton red shorts, and an off-white button-down shirt with the house logo embroidered on the front. They even found him new tennis shoes.

He was leagues different from the unwashed little thing that had run alongside my taxi a day ago.

Once he was truly fed, washed, and given a sense of belonging and security, the sky would be the limit for him. I just knew it. Eyes like that don’t lie. Every other expression might be created to deceive, and can be contrived and forced ... but intelligent eyes? No. He was born with great potential, and now he had a chance to achieve it.

Surely, that was a good deed that could never be tainted.

“Be good,” I told him in French. *“You’re safe now.”*

I stood and looked at Rabia, who blew me a kiss.

“Don’t forget to take care of yourself,” she said, by way of a farewell.

She wasn’t the kind of woman who would get mopey and emotional with a goodbye. It was a trait that I really appreciated about her. I’d never been great with emotional displays, and she respected and preferred the same.

“I’ll come back to give the children check-ups in a few months,” I said, turning towards the black and yellow taxi.

There’s a strange feeling that always weighed me down during goodbyes. The dread that I would never see these people again. Intellectually, I understand that I never got to say a last farewell to my sister before she chose to abandon me. I spent *years* reliving memories of how she’d let me make her flower crowns, and how she’d sneak into my room on my birthday, and smother me with cuddles and kisses, and tell me that I was the best Christmas present she ever got, since I came home from the hospital on Christmas Eve.

She used to make the day special. We would spend the day in the park, or a museum, or anywhere I wanted to go. It started from my first birthday, which was after mum died. And ended on my sixth, when she disappeared from my life.

I still don’t know what I did. What offense I had committed. So, I lived with the constant fear that I would do something

wrong in my other relationships, especially with those I loved dearly. That I might inadvertently cause someone to pull away from me or disregard me in some way...

But goodbyes are unavoidable.

I felt the stomach of my shirt. I kept a small pouch strapped to my stomach. It was a plastic satchel that would hold my documents and money. Someone could steal my bags, but the essentials were kept safe, right next to my skin.

I got into the back seat of the taxi, and we drove off into the country roads that led to Donaville.

Rabia was right. I was very, *very* tired.

As soon as we were out of the traffic and on the paved country road that straightened between the large farm fields, I dozed with my head against the window. I'd occasionally open my eyes to see the passing Baobab trees that grew from the orange, and red clay dirt.

I was jolted by the occasional bump, and my sleep was light. So light that I mercifully did not dream.

I sometimes caught a glimpse of the dice hanging from the rearview window as it swung from side to side. I saw the back of the taxi driver's ear, his black hair cropped short, his long fingers lightly gripping the steering wheel as he tilted it back and forth to make small corrections.

It was a four-hour ride to the capital city, so I crossed my arms and adjusted my shoulders, turning my knees to one side so I could better lean against the window.

A loud crash jolted me upright. My head pivoted from side to side as I looked for the source.

The driver was swearing as he white knuckled the steering wheel.

“Qu’est-ce que se passe?” *What’s happening?* I frantically checked that my seatbelt was buckled. A green car came from the rear, switching into the wrong lane. Were they trying to pass us?

As if to answer me, the green car tilted its wheels towards us. Their front hit our back bumper. My head was almost knocked off my shoulders with the impact as we began to spin. The taxi driver managed to stop the car from spinning, and we found ourselves perpendicular to the road, the headlights pointing at the asphalt.

Thankfully there was no ditch for us to plummet down or we would have rolled to our deaths.

A motorcycle took a spot in front of us, his headlights pointed right at the driver’s side. The man smirked, his hair covered by a black mask that obscured his nose and mouth. Like a black balaclava that had haunted me from a different life.

My pulse roared in my ears, rhythmically reminding me that it could stop beating at any point.

The motorcyclist revved his engine, and screamed for us to get out of the car. He waved his fist in the air, then made a slashing motion in front of his throat.

I didn’t move. I couldn’t. Not even if I wanted to.

“Hold on,” the taxi driver said, a command in his voice.

“What are you doing?” I wasn’t sure he could hear me over the sound of crashing in my ears. My pulse, my mind, my fear was screaming *not again, not again, not again!*

“We don’t get out of the car.” The taxi driver was calm. How was he able to be so calm?

Still, I couldn’t agree with him more. I lunged for the door beside me, smacking down the lock. Then I reached for the other side to do the same, and the driver’s door, and the passenger’s. I had attached such importance to those locks, as though they could stop whatever these men were doing.

I could feel the engine idling as the driver waited for a good time. His breathing was steady, unlike my own.

The green car was still on the road. The motorcyclist waiting for us to respond to his orders. We were at a standoff.

The passenger door of the green car opened, and out came a man with an AK-47 slung across his chest. He had a similar face covering that obscured him from the nose down.

“*Merde,*” I say under my breathe. *Shit.*

We were trapped.

The wind picked up, and the leaves on the Baobab trees swayed lazily to one side. The man lifted his AK-47, so that the barrel pointed right at us.

No. Not us. At me.

They were here because of me. I was more certain of that than I was of my own name.

He stalked towards us, and just as he was within reach of the hood of the taxi, another car came barreling from where we had just been.

It was an SUV. Black, huge and angry. It ploughed into the green sedan, pushing it out of the way. Then, as if on purpose, it barreled into the motorcyclist. The rider and the bike flew twenty feet down the road, rolling against the cement as the man screamed in surprise, which turned to agony. Then silenced. The SUV halted, it's tires screeching.

“Hold on!” The taxi driver said as he stomped down on the gas. The wheels spun on the dirt until they finally caught a grip and we swayed, bobbing back on the road. He accelerated, weaving around the bike, the man, and away from the crash behind us.

I tried to breathe but couldn't. I was shaking. I needed air.

I could feel a whine coming from my throat as I swayed forward and backwards. I took off the seatbelt because it was too much. That little bit of pressure was on my chest cut off my air, and I couldn't expand my lungs. It was holding me down.

I brought my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs as I rocked back and forth willing everything to just stop for a second. For the world to pause, for everything to just freeze for a moment until I caught up with all the thoughts that hadn't finished processing.

They were going to kidnap me. Again. They were there for me. They were going to hurt me. At least one of them was not dead.

We had fled a crime scene ...

I buried my face in my knees, rhythmically whining.

“*Ça va?*” The driver kept asking if I was okayt, but I couldn’t answer him.

I couldn’t tell him that I was just certifiably insane and that he had a madwoman in his car. That I was responsible for possible damage to his livelihood.

I don’t know how long we were on the road. But it must have been a while before he turned off the road into a little village. The driver got out, went to a nearby stand, and spoke to the woman behind it. He came back with a bottle of water and a local fruit called *weda*, which had a hard husk and juicy meat inside. This one was already opened, the top of it revealing the edible insides.

He knocked on the window of my door. Realizing it was still locked, I opened it for him. He silently handed me the bottle of water. Then he handed me the fruit.

“Are you okay?” he asked me in French.

I nodded, taking his offering and unscrewing the cap.

“You should come out, and stand up for a moment,” he advised.

I complied, turning my body to get out, planting my feet and coming to a stand on wobbly legs. I almost collapsed, but he caught me by the elbow and helped me regain my balance. He took his hands off of me as soon as he could, clearly uncomfortable with touching me. I wasn't sure why that was, but it did bring me comfort.

“Do you know who those men were?” he asked, gently.

“No idea,” I looked at the back of his car where a new dent had crashed into his trunk. “I’m so, so sorry, this is probably all my fault.”

“*C’est n’est pas grave,*” he said with a shrug. *It’s not that dire.* “The car was banged up before this. It’s no Mercedes-Benz, eh?”

I laughed. Surprised that I was able to. “God, I’m still so sorry.”

“We had a lucky break, thanks to Allah,” he said with a wry smile.

“You act like this is normal!”

“I had a foreign woman in my car,” he shrugged. “It’s always more dangerous when that happens. But you pay better.”

I tried to laugh again, as I pierced the weda with my fingers, scooping out the fruit.

“Sometimes people try to kidnap pretty ladies for ransom,” he said. “I am sorry for it, but not everyone can have an honest living. Times can make people desperate. But they are not

normal, and we do not approve. I would like you to know that.”

I wasn't naïve to the dangers. I also understood the long, embroiled history that my own country had here, and how it contributed to the desperation that he spoke of.

“You were my hero back there,” I said, feeling the air return to my lungs. “You could have kicked me out of your car. You would have had a right to.”

He shrugged but didn't disagree with me. “My wife would not forgive me if I did.”

I smiled at that. There was always something nice about couples. Weddings. Marriage. Two people who lift one another up and make each other better. It was the nicest thing he could have said.

“She must be a good woman.”

He nodded in agreement, before looking at my face and hands.

“If you are okay, we can keep going,” he said with a flip of his hand. He stood outside my door as I sat back down in the seat. He closed the door before resuming his driver position. The rest of the ride to Donaville was uneventful, but I couldn't go back to sleep. Once he got me to my hotel, I grabbed him cash from the satchel I kept under my shirt. Enough for the ride here, the equivalent fair to get him home, and then I doubled both for the inconvenience I had caused him.

He looked at me, shook his head, trying to give me back my change.

“Please keep it,” I said. “I will feel better if you do. I promise.
Give it to your wife and thank her for me.”

Chapter 8

Leo

“Gun it!” I commanded Hugo, pointing past the windshield of our SUV to the scene in front of us.

The green sedan had tried a pit maneuver on Chloe’s taxi, swerving them off the road. *Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*

The road had been so desolate that we had to stay a large distance behind the taxi so that we didn’t look like we were riding their ass. Maybe we should have risked it. If we had, then the green sedan would not have had time to pull out in front of us. A little bit outside of Saint Julian, a motorcycle pulled out in front of the green car, widening the distance even further between us and Chloe. None of us wanted to ride too close together - which should have been my first clue that something was going down.

Our intervals were too spaced. No one was riding each other’s ass. Everyone was matching the taxi’s speed. When the green sedan pulled out to pass, I was almost relieved. Finally, some

normalcy. They were going to speed past, and then we'd only have the motorcycle to contend with.

It wouldn't have had time to bang into the taxi if we hadn't been so far back. It took a few minutes for the taxi to do a total 180 onto the dirt, facing the road like it was at a t-intersection.

A masked face and an AK-47 got out of the green sedan, walking towards their car.

"Run them down," I growled. Hugo complied. He put his foot down hard on the gas until we were at top speed. He plowed into the front of the sedan, sending them on their own little spin out. He tilted the steering wheel right into the motorcyclist, side swiping him and the rider who landed on the windshield. Hugo slammed the break, and the bike and rider skidded several feet down the road.

Hope the asshole got a serious case of road rash. Since he was wearing nothing but light shorts and a t-shirt, it'd probably be less of a rash, and more of a skinning.

Chloe's taxi sped off, taking our interruption as a getaway.

I knew the man's license plate. If she got to her destination safely, I'd be sure he received some very nice hush money, courtesy of Caledonia Security.

I got out of the passenger seat, grabbing a Glock from the glove compartment, checking the magazine.

"Follow Chloe," I ordered Hugo.

He nodded with a grunt of acknowledgment as I climbed out of the SUV.

“How will you get to Donaville?” He asked me.

“By car, by bike, or by foot,” I said, slamming the door. “I’ll figure it out. I have a few options.”

I pointed at where the taxi had driven away.

“Protect her!” I yelled loud enough so that he could hear me on the other side of the closed window.

He put his two fingers up to his eyebrow in a quick salute before he sped away.

I looked at the scene in front of me. The man with the AK-47 was on the pavement, scrambling for his rifle. I slowly raised the Glock and shot him in the head.

His face cracked with a satisfying crunch. His face ripped open, and blood sprayed around him in a pink mist, before he fell to the ground, lifeless. It was a gorgeous sight.

I didn’t need to check for a pulse to know that he was dead.

The driver of the green sedan got out, his hands up, surrendering. His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched.

Without taking my eyes off the driver, I turned the Glock to the motorcyclist on the ground. He was writhing in agony, his arm skinned down to the bone. It was probably broken or dislocated. He was a bloody mess. His face was scraped off. When a soft object, like human flesh, meets a hard object like a road, this is what happens.

He should have worn protective gear. But he didn’t. Play stupid games, win my bullet in your head.

I didn't need to look to aim. My bullet careened through the air, through his skull, right between the eyes.

I pointed the Glock at the driver's head and walked towards him. He stepped back, his movements jagged and short like a crab.

I lunged at him, and he yelped. I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, twisting it in my fist as I placed the gun to his temple.

He whimpered a pathetic "please!" in French, English, then the local dialect.

I marched him off the road, and into a nearby thicket of trees. The orange dirt kicked up under my shoes as I half dragged the terrified man into the wood line.

He probably knew what was coming, but he still had hope that I might give him mercy. He thought he had a chance of getting out of this alive. It was cute.

Honestly, that hope was incredibly helpful. It's impossible to interrogate someone who has lost hope. You *want* them to think that they might still live. That way, they'll have something to gain by spilling their guts.

In my best French, I asked, "Who paid you?"

"The one with the rifle!" He answered immediately.

He wouldn't even let me beat him, would he? He'd just let it all hang out before I'd get a chance to even pistol whip him. Such a pity.

I kicked the back of his legs. His knees buckled, and he fell on all fours. I grabbed him by the hair and lifted his head so he was kneeling in front of me.

“And who hired him?” I was disappointed that he wasn’t going to give me trouble.

When I saw him spin out Chloe’s taxi, I was filled with a rage that I hadn’t felt in a long time. Not since Callum barged his way into our family home, threatening our parents if Lea didn’t meet him alone. While that particular incident might have had a happy ending, the tempest of emotions that swirled in me when he threatened my family was only a drop in the ocean compared to what I felt now.

This bastard didn’t understand that I had saved Chloe. Her life was *mine*. And he threatened that. So, he was going to die. It was only a matter of time.

The man shook his head. “I don’t have his name. I only saw him for a short time.”

“What did he look like?” It was kind of annoying that he didn’t just give me the description right off, but a terrified brain isn’t a smart brain. Too many electric signals firing off at once for them to make heads or tails over what they should be doing. A terrified brain was just on hyperdrive trying to survive.

“He had a goatee, and... and...” he blinked, trying to think of *something* to tell me. “A mole on his neck. He was British! Yes!”

“What else?” I asked, pointing the Glock at his forehead.

I had seen that man before. What had Hugo called him? He was a member of Laurent Media.

“The little finger on his hand was crooked! That’s all I know! I swear!” He had his hands up, palm out.

He squinted his eyes, trying to cry, obviously attempting to play on my sympathies. The problem was that I had none. Not for a man who could have harmed my little Sunflower.

“What else?” I asked, slowly, deliberately, ensuring that he understood that this was his last chance to impress me with *something*.

“He... he...” my little victim came up empty. “Please,” he whined. “Have mercy...”

“Did you have mercy when you hit her with your car?”

“I didn’t even know who was in the car,” he blurted out. “I’m just a driver!”

I tsked, trying not to scold the terrified little animal.

“That’s no excuse,” I said flatly as my index finger lightly caressed the trigger.

The recoil. The flash. The loud bang. Then the tiny bullet traveled the short distance between us, and lodged itself between his eyes. The force of it cracked bone, and flesh, opening his face the way a person might open a succulent fruit with their thumbs, peeling it apart until the wet, juicy insides emerged.

He collapsed backwards, his knees awkwardly bent, his legs flailed to the side. The orange dirt was stained a deep mahogany red as his blood sank into the soil.

I didn't always get a sense of satisfaction from a kill. Some made me feel downright lousy. But there was something satisfying about killing someone who tried to harm others. Especially those you love.

It's hardly okay by the standards of the Hippocratic Oath, but Hippocrates lived in a much simpler time.

I looked around me, surveying the messy scene. We were so far out, that it would be a while before anyone came upon us. I'd be long gone before then.

Maybe I should clean up the scene. That would be the ethical thing to do. But as if I was getting a signal from above, thunder boomed, and gray clouds rolled overhead. Rain loomed in the distance, as if it was shooing me from the spot.

I looked at the motorcycle, pulled a knife from my pocket, and pulled off the license plate and tossed other identifying marks. I'd scrap the thing once I got to Donaville, but for the moment, it'd be my banged-up, scraped-out ride on this lonely highway.

I wish I had a helmet.

Chapter 9

Chloe

I love being drunk. It quiets the voices in my head. But tonight, it didn't. It made it louder, and louder and it swirled around my mind. The visions fluttered angrier, like the frantic beating of a sparrow's injured wing as it flailed along an asphalt road.

The voices always followed, after the flap-flap of a canvas tent in the wind.

"No one is going to come for you," the Brute had said, his face covered with the black balaclava, his eyes cruel and menacing. "Your own sister didn't even offer the ransom."

No one hates quite like a mediocre man with delusions of grandeur. And that's what that little boy with a gun was. But just because they were middling doesn't mean that they couldn't be harmful. The angriest mobs are filled with packs of rejected men.

I didn't need to see his face to know the perverted look that crossed his features as his eyes raked my body. It was the most disgusting caress. It made me want to tear off my skin, and even now, when I knew the Brute was dead, I could still *feel* it.

“We'll have some fun before we dump your body.”

My hands trembled as that voice swirled in my mind making itself known like a relentless drum. Each beat brought an image back. A black gloved hand. A balaclava-covered face. Pain in my wrists from where they'd tied me. Then the relief of seeing metal dragged across a blackened throat, leaving a red line that grew and melted into a pool as different hands reached for me, calling my name.

A killer's hands that held me like I was an injured sparrow, needing care. Hands that caressed away pain and tenderly touched bruised skin. Calloused fingers that pushed away my curls, and cupped my face, or pushed my thighs apart as a warm wet tongue delved in and turned pain into pleasure.

I couldn't breathe. It was all too much. The memories were like the dark smoke that surrounded me, following me as I moved around a bonfire, filling my lungs until I couldn't breathe.

I put my hand over my wounded heart, trying to calm the fluttering that wouldn't stop. I paced until the slap of my bare feet on the floor matched the thudding in my chest, and the sounds in my ears went from an overwhelming roar to a dull, subdued hum.

It was a panic attack. That was all. The body's predictable, biological response after it had gone through a heightened moment of trauma. Millions of people get them at least once in their life. Millions more will in the future. Many get them over and over again.

I am not special. I am not different. This is *normal!*

25,000 people are kidnapped for ransom every year. I am just one of many. I am just one ... I am not alone.

Even if I am alone on my birthday, I am not the only one.

Happy Birthday to me.

I sat down on the couch and turned on the television, cranking up the volume up to drown out the sounds that existed only in my frontal lobe. It only exists as electricity between axons and neurons, and nothing more. The television was a mistake though.

That bitch was on. Callisandra Davenport.

She tried to hide her roots, but she was French like me. Born in Paris. As French as they come, but she wanted to be British. Ever since she got her fancy husband, she hasn't had a need for anything French, including her own family.

She had spent her entire life trying to place distance between us, and now the chasm was as wide as the channel that split our two nationalities.

“Lord Victor Fox was interred in his family estates...” She held the microphone low, in front of her chest. Always sure to show her best asset - her face - to the world. Sure, she wanted

to sound intelligent and worldly, but I knew her. Even that lack of makeup was a façade. She wore makeup. She was just subtle about it.

“T’es une salope de menteuse.” I knew that she couldn’t hear me, but it still felt good to say. *You’re a lying bitch.*

The phone on the nightstand hummed to life. Hope filled my chest. Had she heard me, somehow? Did she finally hear the silent prayer?

But just like the thousands of times before, I looked down, knowing my wish was unanswered.

Pippa’s face beamed out at me from the screen. I had crafted daisy crowns just for her as we grew up. I thought it made her look like a princess. Growing up, she had never failed to wear it with pride. Even on her graduation, she accepted my offering of a flowery tiara and adorned herself with it as she walked across the stage.

“Hello, beautiful!” I said cheerfully, as I muted the vile woman on the screen. “How are you feeling? The ribs? Are they okay?”

“Yes, darling.” I could tell that she was smiling on the other end. “I’ve just seen the bridesmaids’ dresses, and they are *divine.*”

When Cal married that nurse, Lea Bonifacio, I wept for days. Callum and Pippa’s engagement was the first time I had the chance at feeling like I was a part of a family. The three of us could have lived together somewhere. I could have helped her

give birth, taken care of her children, and worked as a family doctor up in Scotland. That would have been a beautiful life.

But Cal threw it away. He threw away the best woman in the world, for some little unknown nurse with an infuriating brother. He brought the two of them into his security company, and they were now to be a permanent fixture in our lives.

No, that wasn't right. They'd be a permanent fixture in *their* lives. I had no place in it.

"Yes?" I prompted, when she stopped speaking.

"You'll be wearing gold." As if there needed clarification, she added, "And I can't wait to see you in it. Geordie agrees that you're going to look fabulous."

Dresses. Geordie. Her new life was so different now.

"*Félicitations!*" I tried to smile as I congratulated her, but couldn't. "I'm happy for you."

I did not have the heart to fake my feelings. It was hard enough to display what I felt when I meant it. It was a completely different struggle to pretend I felt one way when I didn't. And I was just so tired. All the time.

"I should go..." I needed to end this before she heard something in my voice that would raise her concerns.

"Chloe," she stopped me as my thumb lingered over the red disconnect button. "We're moving to Fox House, now that it's vacant." Now that her father was dead. "And we've got a guest apartment for you, whenever you want to be near London. You

could stay as long as you like. You could even live there, if you wished.”

“Was that your idea?” I smiled pessimistically, knowing that she was trying to butter me up.

“No, it was Geordie’s actually,” she gave a small giggle, as if she was a schoolgirl thinking about her crush. “He says that you needed your own apartments, in case you ever had a man in.”

“What man?” I laughed. “Like I have time for one.”

I hadn’t had time for a man since med school. I couldn’t remember anything but a one-night stand, and a quick, groping fumble here and there.

“Well,” she crooned, letting the word hang in the air. “Leo is quite handsome.”

Leo. The brother of Cal’s new wife. A man who had pretended to be so kind, so gentle, and nurturing. He had worked in my clinic in Kemet.

It turned out he was just another brute, just like the rest of them. In fact, he was worse. They never said it outright, but it was implied several times that he was a ruthless killer. An assassin for hire. Though, I suppose he’s quit that now that he’s in Caledonia Security.

I had allowed a man to touch me that had blood on his hands. For that, I could not forgive him.

“In fact,” Pippa was smiling. I could hear it from across the phone. “We’ve decided that you need security. So, we’re

sending him over to be your bodyguard, of sorts.”

“You will absolutely not send that man here!” I said, sitting up, and shouting into the phone. “No!”

“Chloe, hear me out!” she said, in that sisterly tone that made me sound like I was the unreasonable one. “We’ve been in the news a lot lately, and with all the turmoil in our circle, we should have an abundance of caution...”

“Send me *anyone* else!” I demanded. “Send me Hugo. At least he’s French.”

“Hugo will be there as the second man. The backup,” she sang, as if she had gotten me on the back foot. “Leo is the best one for the job. And you two used to be friends!”

“Used to be, before...”

“Before he rescued you?”

When she put it that way, I sounded unreasonable. But he had lied about who he was. He had lied about his true nature. He had presented himself as a kind nurse, when he was just a killer.

I do not have that ridiculous admiration for soldiers. I do not admire men who make the destruction of life their soul mission. It is easy to kill. Two pounds of strategically placed pressure can end a life. But to preserve it? That is the true challenge. That is where miracles occur.

“Hire someone else. Anyone but him.”

“It’s too late, Chloe,” she said with a sigh. “We’ve already sent him. He’ll be there soon.”

As if damning me to my fate, there was a sturdy knock on my door. I knew it was him. I felt it in my spine. The tanned, muscular man with the deep brown eyes, and straight black hair that shone under sunlight like he was some sort of God among men. His smooth, hairless cheeks made him seem young, and cavalier, and perfect.

I had thought he was small. Even feminine. Until I was captured, and he came as my rescuer. He was suddenly ten feet tall, broad shouldered and with hands so strong that he lifted me up and carried me like I weighed no more than a dried leaf.

He was two different men. I didn’t know which one was real.

“That should be him!” Pippa sang.

“Of course, it is,” I grumbled, coming to my feet.

“Are you going to let him in?”

“Must I?” I asked, wondering if I could just keep him out in the hallway.

“If you don’t let him, it’s protocol to assume something is wrong and he’ll kick the door in,” Pippa said as if that was a joke. My landlord already didn’t like that I was here, a woman living alone without a husband, or male relative. It was deemed improper. Now I was letting a man come in? A man I was clearly not related to? Unbelievable.

“Dr. Laurent?” His voice sent a shiver down my spine, and a warmth coursed through my breast. “Open up, or I’ll kick the

door in.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Did they coordinate their statements?

“I told you so,” Pippa said. “I’ll let you get to it. And don’t be too harsh on him. He was only doing his job. Remember... he *volunteered* to save you. He was insistent on it. He should get credit for that.”

“Is that supposed to make him my hero?”

“No, my love,” Pippa chastised. “*You* are your own hero. But it should make you appreciate him, at least a little. He genuinely cares about you. That should mean something.”

She hung up on me, the phone beeping before it fell silent.

The threat of kicking the door open wasn’t an idle one. It never was with these types of men. So, I got up and went to the front door, opening it with my angriest scowl.

He had his hands in his pocket and leaned a muscular shoulder on the door frame. His eyes landed on me, and he smiled. One side of his lips lifted, and I didn’t know what that meant, exactly. What was he thinking? How did seeing me make him feel?

“Hey, Doc.” He pushed off the door and waltzed in without invitation. I caught a glimpse of his tight *derrière* in his dark-washed jeans. His white, cotton shirt hid none of his taut muscles. He was built like a swimmer. Had he gotten broader in the time we were apart? “Nice digs. Got a couch I can crash on?”

Why had I never noticed how muscular he was? Had he hidden it the whole time I had thought he was *just* a nurse, and not a hitman? Is he standing taller now?

“You can sleep on the floor like a dog, for all I care,” I turned on my heel and walked back to the bedroom.

I heard him follow me, so I swung around, and he nearly ran over me.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Well, if it’s all the same to you, the bed looks more comfortable than the floor.”

“You can’t do that!” I sputtered.

“Why not?” He reached over his back and pulled his shirt off, revealing lean, tanned shoulders, square, defined pecs and a long, tapered, narrow waist. My mouth watered at the sight of it. His skin was perfectly smooth and flawless. The memory of his salty skin on my tongue invaded my brain and I felt the heat crawling up my neck.

He had kissed me on my last birthday. He kissed me with a passion I had never felt before. Then he had disappeared, and never returned to Kemet. Not until the incident that changed my life forever.

I looked away, closing my eyes, fighting the base urges that threatened to consume me.

I felt his warm, hard fingers pinching my chin as he turned my head, and eyes, back to his glorious, naked torso.

“Are you scared you won’t be able to keep your hands off of me?” he asked, with a little wink.

I slapped his chest, then recoiled as if his skin had burned me. It hadn’t. Quite the opposite, in fact. His hard, taut skin made me want to curl into him and never leave.

“If something were to happen,” he teased, that terrible glint in his dark eyes tempted and mocked me in equal measure. “It wouldn’t matter. It’s not like I haven’t tasted every inch of you before.”

He stepped into my space, until we were almost nose to nose. I wanted to step away, but I refused to back down.

“Or are you afraid I’d keep you up all night, birthday girl?”

Chapter 10

Leo

I'm a dick. That's the only explanation for it. This new persona fit me like an old pair of well-worn jeans. I surrounded myself in this new villain persona, and shrugged off the docile, meek, little Leo that I was when I had a cover. I had to hide that I was an assassin in the cloak of being a passive, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly little dude. Even my body had to change and contort to be the Leo she used to know.

It felt good to pull back my shoulders and stand tall in front of Dr. Chloe Laurent. It felt so good, and she got so flustered, that I couldn't help laughing.

"You got taller," she said, her eyes cold as she regarded me.

"I'm the same height I always was," I said, "I haven't had a growth spurt in a couple decades now."

"I mean from how you were before, when you were pretending to be..."

Ah, so she was still hurt about that.

She kept saying it was because I was a killer, but I think the lie hurt her feelings more than my occupation. At least that's what I'm choosing to believe.

"Changing my posture was a part of the act." I pushed my hands into my jeans pocket.

"You're a consummate liar." Her words came out as an accusation.

"Maybe." I walked toward her, and she stepped back, like we were in a waltz. I moved, and she countered until her back was flush against a wall just on the inside of the bedroom door. I reached out and slammed it shut, then locked the door. "But I never lied to you."

"A lie by omission is still a lie." I wasn't a tall man. But I could still tower over her. I could still lean over her small frame as she pressed herself flat on the wall, trying to avoid my touch.

"I omitted the truth to protect you."

"Is that what you call it? Protection?" That little scoff was so cute. She rolled her eyes, turning her face to the side. I took her chin in my hand, turning her to face me again.

"Rescuing you." I leaned in so my nose lightly grazed her cheek. "Protecting you."

I did something I would never have done in my old life. I darted my tongue out, tasting her cheek. She was as sweet as honey. Just like I remembered her.

"It seems to be the only thing I do nowadays," I teased.

She shivered as my breath caressed over her cheek. Was she remembering the past like I was? The way I'd come to her tent that night... I had come to tell her goodbye. I'd been recalled home early because Lea and I had a job getting rid of a corporate poacher in Thailand. But she had been crying, all alone. And I couldn't leave her like that. No man should be able to look at a woman with glistening tears and not be moved to fix it.

So, I stayed with her, and tried to make her laugh.

She had a bottle of wine, and we drank them from paper cups.

I don't know who kissed who first. I just knew that we edged closer and closer to each other. There was a touch of an arm, the nudge of a shoulder, the small touch of foreheads as we laughed.

Then a kiss led to everything else. A taste of heaven that I never should have had.

But I would have it again. You can't give a mortal man a sample of ambrosia and not expect them to gorge themselves. You can't expect them to not seek it with every single fiber of their being.

"You should unburden yourself of me," her defiance was cute, as she tried to look strong. And she'd almost looked like she meant it if there wasn't a softness to her eyes, and a slight quiver of fear on her lips. Who had abandoned her when she needed them? Who had left this wound in her? And how do I hunt them down and kill them? "I'd hate to inconvenience you."

I touched her cheek with one single finger, running it down the ridge of her cheekbone, to the curve of her jaw, down to the slightly pointed chin that gave her face the shape of a sweet, little heart.

“I no longer do things I don’t want to do,” I took a deep inhale. Honey, almonds, and... a sudden musk of arousal. She enjoyed my touch. Maybe even as much as I enjoyed touching her. “I’d take on an entire army with my bare hands to keep you safe.”

Her eyes looked up, the big brown orbs glowing with fire around the pupil. So perfect and bright, and as faceted as she was.

“No one says things like that and means it.” She tried to put that scoff back into her lips, and failed.

“I do,” I said, my voice coming down to a whisper as I leaned down even further, my lips by her ear. “Just test me, and I’ll prove it.”

She shivered, her legs suddenly gave way, but I caught her by the waist, lifting her up again. I wanted to make a crack about how I could really make her weak in the knees, but I refrained. It would wreck the moment. And I very badly wanted to savor this.

I still wouldn’t push her so far that she’d do something that she might regret.

If she gave in to me now, she’d hate herself. I’d wait until she begged...

“That’s a nice bed.” I said, flicking my thumb over my shoulder to point at the jewel-toned, king-sized four poster she had.

“No!” She shook herself out of her lustful stupor and came after me. “You can sleep on the couch.”

“I’m going to sleep wherever you sleep.” Sure, I *did* say I could sleep on the couch. But I changed my mind. Now I was going to be in whatever room she was in. Let her bluster and protest. I knew she’d be okay with it in the end. I reached out and smacked her cheek playfully, “I gotta protect the precious Cabbage, right?”

She snapped her head away. “Don’t call me that!”

“Everyone else does.”

“You’re not everyone.”

A stellar point. I wasn’t everyone. The idea of calling her the same nickname her friends did irked me. Like it somehow devalued what was between us.

“You’re right, Sunflower.”

“Sunflower?”

“You always have your face to the sun,” I said, remembering her in Kemet, coming out from under the opaque UN relief tents. She’d shut her eyes and always faced the hot sun for a few minutes, like she was a sunflower tilting towards those rays.

“Why do you say things like this?”

“I’m just saying what I’ve noticed.” I shrugged, stepping towards the bed.

“You can’t stay in here!” She yelled.

“Who was the guy you were dancing with?” I asked her, ignoring her demands.

“What guy?” She came in after me, her arms crossed in front of her breasts, which pushed them up, better for me to appreciate them.

“At Hôtel La Soleil.” I undid my belt, letting it hang off the loops.

“What are you doing?” she shrieked, averting her eyes. “And he was just some journalist I had met.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know... something Landry.” She mumbled. “Evan? No. Everest. That’s it.”

“Like the mountain?”

“Yes, exactly like the mountain.”

“Pretentious.” I grumbled, as I toed off my running shoes and socks.

“What on earth are you doing?” She was one step down from shrieking.

I opened my fly and dropped my trousers, leaving me in nothing but my boxers.

“Going to bed.” I lifted up the duvet, and slid in. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“You can sleep on the floor!” She stomped her little foot.

It was amazing the effect I had on her. She was blushing, and that kinda aroused me. I remembered how her skin blushed when my tongue was between her legs.

“Or I can sleep in the much more comfortable bed.”

“*Or,*” she said with emphasis, enunciating every word in her cute accent. “You can sleep on the floor.”

“I could do a lot of things, Sunflower.” I tucked my legs under the comforter and leaned back. The pillows were made of satin, or silk. I wasn’t sure. It was soft and cool to the touch. “I could climb Kilimanjaro, hike the Andes mountains, ski the Alps, pet some penguins in Antarctica...” I was just naming off nonsense to get on her nerves. “But I choose to be here and protect you.”

She let out a breath, “Why?”

“I don’t know how many times I need to tell you,” I said, stretching my arms over my head. “Because I do what I want.”

“Why do you want to?”

I let out a sigh. There would be no answer that would chase her demons away, no words that would convince her that I was here because I cared about her and needed her in this world.

Because there aren't enough genuinely good people in the world, so I take a personal stake in your existence. Because if the world destroys someone like you, then there's no hope for the rest of us. Because I'm surrounded by sociopaths and killers, and I'd like one thing in my life to be good.

“Come to bed, Sunflower.” I patted the space beside me. “Turn out the light.”

I sensed her disappointment in her unanswered question, but she complied. She shut off the light and came to bed fully clothed, staying on top of the comforter. I don't know if that was because it was a warm night, or if it was to put a barrier between us. It wasn't the time to ask. As well as I knew her, there were a thousand little things I had yet to experience.

I was a patient man, and it would be worth the wait to find answers.

I waited until her breaths evened out, and I heard the shallow rhythm of her sleep. She slept with her back towards me, her hands under her cheek, her knees tucked up. The fetal position. She slept like she was protecting her most vital organs from attack.

You can tell a lot about a person in their sleep. People who slept in a ball on their side, like her, were protecting themselves. They were probably shy and introverted. I slept on my back, with my arms and legs straight. They called that the Soldier position.

Maybe that's why we made a good pair. I was a defender and she was worth defending.

Chapter 11

Chloe

I didn't toss and turn. I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. Maybe that was because of him, and his warmth. Despite the hot night, the feel of someone's body heat eased my loneliness.

I drifted to a dark sleep, a bit like falling slowly into a warm pool of water.

It started off well. A rare feeling of tranquility filled my mind.

I dreamed of the vivid alpine hues of Switzerland and the cold, still waters of its crystal lakes. White swans flew in a formation towards the horizon, their wings reflecting on the lake's taut surface. The majestic Chateau de Chillon, with its spires and bastions towering high above the shoreline, was in full view from where I stood.

Grandiose peaks of ice-encrusted mountains surrounded me, while St. Michael's boarding school nestled at their base. In my dream I wandered through the long Tudor-style manor

which housed our classrooms, each step echoing on the worn cobblestone walkway that weaved around the courtyard with its large clock atop a bell tower. I could feel the fabric of my navy-blue plaid skirt shift against my legs as I walked along, and my feet felt constrained within my woolen knee-high socks.

But I wasn't myself. I was another person staring at the students around us. There was Callum, Pippa and me. Twenty years younger, and carefree in our little neckties and uniforms.

I blinked and felt the sudden urge to fly.

I jumped into the cool lake, my knees up to my chest as I screamed with laughter. But instead of coming back up, I was stuck as a cannonball. I was going down, down, down into the murky darkness. I fell, further and further until I felt the air escaping my lungs. Darkness was holding me. It was keeping me.

And the blackness had a voice.

"No one is coming for you," it said.

Black leather gloves came out to my throat, constricting my air. The leather was all around me, tightening like a vice, pulling my hands and binding them behind me. Then another hand clamped over my mouth, as I screamed.

The darkness was all around, the only light was trapped in the bubbles that escaped from my nose and lips, pushing through my assailant's body, dancing up towards the surface until my lungs ached, my voice was hoarse, but unheard.

I screamed, and screamed.

And no one heard me.

Chapter 12

Leo

She was wracked in sobs, her body shaking in my arms.

She screams in her sleep. I had never noticed that. She didn't do that in Kemet. I would have noticed it in the numerous times I used to walk by her tent.

For the record, I wasn't stalking her. Her tent was just on the way from my temporary lodgings to the clinic. That, and there was an easiness that happened when I was physically near her.

I pulled her to my bare chest, letting her cheek fall on my pec. She struggled, thrashing, and I held her to me so that she didn't injure herself, or me. If she flailed anymore, she'd end up waking up on the floor.

"You're okay, Doc," I whispered to her, rocking her gently as she clung to me, her cheek on my bare chest. "Remember? We came and got you. You weren't alone. You weren't forgotten. Not for one minute. I was always coming to get you."

I brushed my hands against her rough, curling hair, letting it spread on her silk pillow.

“I was all alone, and they were... they...”

They had threatened to kill her. I knew that. She sobbed as she told me, once again, how they threatened to film her execution, and to mail her piece by piece to her only living relative. She had confessed all of this after I got her home. Callum and I had to de-brief her, and she went into painstaking detail of every harrowing threat that they’d used to gain her compliance.

I was glad I killed them all. Glad I had entered the tent and slit their pathetic throats. I’m glad I looked into their eyes as the life drained out of them.

“My sister wouldn’t have cared anyway,” Chloe said, cutting into my savored memories of death and destruction. “She would have thrown my pieces out with the trash.”

She wiped at her eyes, trying to push away from me, but I wouldn’t let her.

She needed to be held, and I’d *force* her to accept comfort. I also needed to feel her against my bare skin, even if it sent a jolt of lust through my body, down to my cock threatening to make an appearance and tent the blanket, giving her a ring-side seat to my dick’s incredible obsession with her.

“Yes, she would have,” I said, adjusting my legs to try and pack the anaconda away from her, so that I didn’t accidentally poke her thigh. “She would have cared a great deal.”

She scoffed. “*C’est de connerie!*” *Bullshit.*

Chloe lived in a world of good and evil, black and white. I gathered that her sister had abandoned her, and would have nothing to do with her. She wasn’t open to any other interpretation of the past, or any nuance and would hate me for trying to reconcile her with the portrait she had painted in her mind.

So, I clamped my mouth shut, though it was a Herculean effort.

I tucked one of her curls behind her ear. I placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up to look at me. Her eyes were amber, sad and dark. The constellation of little brown freckles on her nose.

I took my index finger and lightly touched the pattern, tracing it with the pad of my finger. She shut her eyes, almost leaning into my modest touch.

“Such a sweet little Sunflower,” I cooed into her ear.

God, I wanted her. I needed her. She smelled warm, like her skin was perfumed with sun-kissed barley and vanilla. Her lips parted as I continued to trace my finger down her nose.

“How long have you been having nightmares?” I could probably guess. Maybe it was after the incident.

“I used to have them as a child,” she whispered, then yawned. “But I got better. I hadn’t had them in a while.”

She swallowed, her throat bobbing as I traced my finger down her chin to her delicate throat.

“Now...” she swallowed again. “They started again when you were released from the hospital to Scotland, and we parted ways.”

Was she using me as her measurement of time? Instead of months and days, or other events, was she casting her perception of events based on my proximity? I had done that with her. She was the event that all other things were pinned on. I was bonded to her. Maybe that ran both ways?

“I guess it was calm after that,” she said. “Pippa was out of the hospital, and with Geordie. Kemet was done. Alex was gone... everything seemed so peaceful, and I had every reason to sleep well. The better I sleep, the more the nightmares come.”

“Getting longer hours of sleep means more REM.” I referred to the stage of sleep called Rapid Eye Movement, the one associated with dreams and restfulness, when the mind truly repairs itself. A lack of REM impairs mood, memory and ability to learn new things. It also comes with sleep paralysis, which can be terrifying to people who *know* they’re asleep and can’t wake up. “More vivid dreams are often a result.”

She nodded. Of course, she would know these things. She was a doctor. I didn’t say them to mansplain, it was just a *thing to say*. Like comments about the weather, or discussing the quality of the newest streaming app.

She lifted her head to fall more to her side, tucking into me so her hand lay across my ribs. Her cheek lay on my shoulder now, as she lazily blinked. She was openly snuggling with me, though the comforter still lay between us.

“What do you see in these dreams?” I asked. If she was going to be vulnerable with me, then I’d take advantage, prying out the answers from her as best as I could. “Do they start bad, or do they turn that way?”

She explained how her dreams began smoothly, in many different ways, but always faded to a murky black.

“I always see black gloved hands, and they’re always trying to hurt me.”

I remembered those gloves. The guy who had been in charge of her captivity wore black military gloves with the hardened plastic knuckles. When I had gotten to her tent, he was the only one guarding her. He’d beat the fuck out of her for humiliating him on live camera.

I took great pleasure in slitting his pathetic little throat. I had watched with satisfaction as his blood pooled around his body, his life’s essence mixing with the dirty floor.

“I’m ashamed,” she whispered.

“Why?” I continued to stroke her hair, holding her close to me, hoping she’d keep spilling her secrets. What were the things she kept inside as she went to sleep at night?

“Because...” She let out a small sigh, tilting her head into my pec. I felt her nose burying into my chest as she groaned. “I know it’s normal. I know that post-traumatic stress happens in one out of three people who undergo some kind of trauma. It’s the body’s biological reaction to high levels of adrenaline, and the survival instinct kicking in, which alters the brain...”

“Thanks for the lecture, Doc,” I interrupted her, twirling a curl in my finger. “But care to tell me what you’re actually ashamed about, instead of talking around it?”

She was quiet for a moment, and I waited. The dark was kind. The moon was silver, coming in through the open windows, casting a glow on her warm colored skin.

“Sometimes, when I’m... alone...” She audibly shut her lips, then shook her head. “Never mind, I can’t say ...”

“Now, now, you’re doing so well,” I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her further into me so that she almost lay in the prone position on my stomach. Her chin rested over my heart, her head tilted up to look at me. “Come on, I’m the last person in the world you need to keep secrets from.”

Her eyes blinked, and she almost smiled. She wasn’t a smiley kind of person. There was always something open and honest about her face. Something kind, and warm. It gave her a serious, but comforting, bedside manner. She wasn’t one of those smart girls who was mean to those less intelligent. If you were a person in her care, she’d treat you like a king. I knew that firsthand.

“Sometimes...” she faded out, her eyes turning to the open window. Maybe it would be easier for her to speak if she wasn’t looking at me. “I want it.”

I waited, but she didn’t say anymore.

“What do you want?”

“He threatened to...” She shut her eyes.

He threatened to rape her. She didn't need to confess it for me to know. Her captor had threatened to rape her. It was such a cliché and expected thing for an asshole like that to do.

"Sometimes, when I'm alone," she whispered, "I think that I might... want someone I was attracted to... to... take me without giving me a choice."

I froze.

I was clearly hallucinating. There was no way she was...

"Not *that* person of course, they were foul," she blurted out.

"But it might be nice to..."

She moaned in frustration, tilting her head down so her forehead was flush against my clavicle, her hair ticking the underside of my chin.

"I'm sorry, this is stupid. I know..."

"You're fetishizing your trauma," I said through the lump in my throat.

I had to label things. I had to give things their proper names. The syndromes, the theories, the maladies. They all needed to be labeled and categorized because that was how things made sense. Especially when someone was as black and white as Chloe Laurent.

"Yes," she said, quietly. "God, I'm such an idiot."

"It's normal." I told her, bringing a finger to her chin and tilting her head back up again.

She rolled her eyes like a brat.

“Okay, it’s not normal in the sense that it’s statistically common,” I rolled my eyes right back. “Freud’s analytic understanding of the psychic economy of trauma, and Heidegger’s phenomenological critique of the concept of lived experience has led trauma theorists to believe that fetishizing one’s trauma is a valid coping mechanism. Even acting out that fetish can be an exposure therapy that would...”

“I know the theory.” She pinched my rib. “Who’s the doctor here?”

“Ouch,” I chuckled, pretending to rub at the spot that didn’t hurt. “You’re a *medical* doctor. An MD is nothing to a Bachelors in Psychology.”

I was talking absolute bullshit. But it got her to smile.

“Is that what you majored in?”

“Psychology first, then I got a second bachelors in nursing.”

“And you moonlighted as an assassin?”

“That wasn’t until after I got my nursing degree,” I yawned.

She cuddled closer, which surprised me. Any discussion of my previous occupation used to make her withdraw. But not tonight.

“In your deep knowledge from your bachelors in psychology, do you think that exposure therapy could work on me?”

Jesus, did she know that her question was starting to turn me on?

If she asked me to be her exposure, to take her against her will, then I'd be the right man for it.

I'd do it willingly. But I'm not the kind of asshole who takes advantage of a vulnerable woman. Not after she just had a nightmare and dumped her trauma all over me. It wasn't the time. This wasn't the moment. No matter how much my cock disagreed with me. And holy shit, was he pissed. He was trying to drain all the blood from my brain.

Don't be a dick, Leo.

I kissed her forehead. "Go to sleep, Doc."

I wrapped my arm around her, turning to my side so that we were lying face to face. I cupped her cheeks in my hands, looking into those golden-hazel eyes.

"This isn't something we talk about now." My voice felt heavy, and thick. I struggled to say those words. I had to push them out because there was nothing I wanted more than to take her right now, right here.

Even the ache from the burning scar on my thigh added heat to my lust. It reminded me that she was mine. I had earned her. No one else could ever have her.

"When?" She asked. "When will we talk about it?"

"When we are both thinking clearly," I said, running my fingers over the crease on her forehead, down her cheek to her lips. "Go to sleep. I won't let the bad dreams take you."

"You didn't stop the last one."

“I didn’t know I had to protect you from your nightmares before,” I went back to the top of her forehead, tracing my fingers down again. “Now I do.”

Her face visibly relaxed, her shoulders slumped.

“I’ll do better next time, Sunflower.” I promised as her breathing evened out, her eyes fluttering closed. “I promise.”

I waited until she fell into a deep sleep. Her eyes were relaxed, her body limp in my arms. That little dimple between her brows had smoothed away. I fished my free arm down to the floor for my jeans until I felt my phone. I dialed Hugo and brought the volume down so that I didn’t disturb my sleeping beauty.

“Everest Landry,” I said, without preamble when the phone connected.

“*Qui?*” Hugo asked. *Who?*

“The guy she was dancing with in the Hôtel de Soleil. His name is Everest Landry.”

“I will check him out.” I heard the light sound of clicking keys and assumed he was writing it down on his computer. He was a meticulous note taker, but only ever did so on the computer. “You should know there’s someone else scoping her.”

“What?” I said, almost getting up, before her arm squeezed me across the ribs, keeping me in place.

“I can’t be sure, but I’m at the window, looking at someone in the street, squatting, and...” He paused, and I heard a shuffling

movement as if he was going to his own window to take a look out. “He’s definitely staring at her window.”

I took a moment to take on this information. I didn’t want to do anything rash, though a part of me wanted to stash her away, get her out of this place now, and spirit her to a safe house where no one could ever find her.

I had never worked with anyone but my sister. Her solution would be to kill whoever it was.

Lea wouldn’t care to confirm that he was a lookout. Killing was kind of her go-to solution for all of life’s problems. But now that her husband had brought us under his company, we played by a different set of rules that I wasn’t sure I fully understood yet.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“Nothing. I watch, you sleep.” To be fair, the man didn’t sound tired at all. In fact, I had never seen Hugo sleep. It was entirely possible that he slept upright, with his eyes open like an owl. “They don’t know we’re watching them. I doubt this kid is anything but a local beggar paid to call if she leaves her room. I will follow him in the morning. But keep your phone turned on and be ready for my call if anything happens.”

“Okay,” I whispered, as she stirred in my arm.

“Tomorrow morning, get your earpiece in and keep it there until we’re together again.” Hugo’s accent made him a bit hard to understand the more tired I got. Sometimes, I preferred it when he just spoke in French. But then he thought *my* accent

was horrendous too. “In the meantime, if you are feeling amorous, ensure that you keep one ear open so that you hear my call. Even if you are mid-thrust, you pause and answer. Do you understand?”

“The French truly are romantics,” I chuckled.

“I did not say you had to stop. Just that you had to pause. I’ll make sure you have time to finish your load.” Was that... a joke? Was the terse Frenchman making an *actual* joke? Holy shit. I didn’t think he was aware of humor as a concept.

“You’re kinda gross,” I chuckled.

“Are you in her bed right now?”

I didn’t want to answer, but if I lied, then I don’t know if that would have security implications. Maybe lying would be seen as a betrayal as well. So, I gave a flat, “Yes.”

“You’re fucking welcome,” he said, hanging up, leaving me with nothing but the sad three beeps of a disconnected line.

Chapter 13

Chloe

I slept like the dead. It was extraordinary. I had never been so comfortable. I felt like I was cocooned in silk and cotton, warm and cool at the same time, lulled in a gentle sway of the steady rhythm of quiet breathing.

I opened my eyes and felt warm skin beneath my cheek, my fingers running along the dark, muscled, hairless pecs that were so familiar to me. He smelled like coffee and some kind of hardwood tree.

“No more nightmares?” His voice sounded like it came from everywhere and nowhere, as his hand came to my cheek.

This was a dream. A very pleasant one.

“Mm,” I moaned, turning my head into the skin. My blurry eyes began to clear, knowing that this would fade away. “No nightmares,” I moaned.

Then gasped, as his face came to me, clear and clean. A part of him that had never been in my dreams - a splattering of facial

hair above his lip and in the dip above his chin came into focus. That was new.

I shot bolt upright.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, feeling a wave of dizziness as the blood rushed from my head.

“Yup, gonna take a minute for you to remember everything, huh?” He said with a slight chuckle. He tucked his knees up and swung himself off the bed in nothing but his black boxers. His taugt buttocks was on full display. Like the rest of him, I was certain it would be smooth and perfect. The man should be made into a statue.

“I’m here to keep you safe and get you to Pippa’s wedding in Venice.” He walked to the window, and with the brazenness of a real Westerner, stood half naked in front of the windows and opened the curtains wide to let in the mid-morning drizzle.

He scanned the street and watched some commotion below.

He stood silent for a moment, then gave a little nod as though approving of what was happening outside.

“I like rainy days, don’t you?” He asked, looking at me over his shoulder.

I must have looked like a deer in headlights, because he smiled, and walked out of the room, grabbing his trousers along the way.

Before he shut me in my bedroom, he called back, “Get dressed, Doc! We have a plane to catch.”

Chapter 14

Leo

Perks of being with Caledonia Security? The fucking rides are epic!

These British bastards really know how to travel in style. My sister and I used to huff it in economy class, but once you get a taste for the fucking highlife, I don't know if I could ever go back.

Lea and I, as two nurses, couldn't go around hiring private jets. Our cover didn't pay us enough for that to work.

Plus, our mother would have noticed if we didn't have the tang of economy on our clothes when we got home. That's not being paranoid. So, we shared the same old Audi that we'd owned for 15 years, lived at home, and flew in cramped spaces between screaming kids, people of dubious body odor, and dealt with angry flight attendants who were probably wondering why they were so well dressed for the mass of pungent humanity they had in front of them.

But with Lea married to Callum, and me now under his employ? Private jets baby! I didn't even give a shit that it was bad for the environment, and was wasteful spending. I got it now. Being an evil millionaire is fucking amazing.

I was ready to give up my proletariat ways until I looked at Chloe's ramrod straight back, and the curl of her upper lip.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

She looked at me, then looked back out the window.

"Come on, little Sunflower, tell me what's on your mind," I teased, patting her knee with the tip of my toe. "Your face is practically screaming."

She sucked in her lips, as if willing to bite them shut.

I leaned back in my seat, and waited. Just creepily staring at the little micro movements of her face.

I let her feel my eyes. When that got no reaction, I let my eyes move downward, to her rounded breasts, then her thick, beautiful thighs. *That* she felt. She crossed her arms and turned her legs away from me.

"A first-class passenger on a commercial flight creates 3.3 tons of carbon emissions." Had she been working the math out in her head? And if she had, why the fuck did that turn me on so much?

She turned her face towards me, and her lovely brown eyes were a dark amber. Just a shade or two darker than usual to indicate her mood. "That's five and a half times more than

what an individual should create in a year for things to be sustainable.”

She looked back at the window, and I was treated to the view of her profile. She looked like those old Renaissance paintings, with that up-turned nose, and pointed chin, and the light from outside shining down on her. Her deep tan, and brown freckles were brighter from the light that washed in from the outside.

“And it’s more, since we’re flying our own bloody plane,” she said, her frown increasing.

“It’s easier to secure you this way, than on commercial.”

“The consequences are devastation for so many others ...”

“I don’t care about the others. I care about *you*.” My words were harsher than I meant it. But there it was. The golden truth.

Her eyes snapped to me. Why was she surprised by this? Why were my words so goddamned strange that she looked at me with that much disbelief?

Her mouth opened, as if she was going to speak. Then she closed it again.

I leaned forward in my seat, resting my elbows on my knees.

“You don’t get it, Sunflower.” I reached out a hand and tucked a curl behind her ear.

I remembered how many times in the past I had wanted to do that. When she was seeing a patient in Kemet, or when she moved her head too fast and those stubborn little curls came

flying out, I always wanted to grab them and twist them around my finger, then tuck them back away from her pretty face. I never liked my view of her face obstructed.

“I ...” I cleared my throat. “*We* ... want you safe. That’s our priority. And if I have to plant some trees later to make up for it, then fine.”

“It’s more than just a few trees,” she rolled her eyes. “And these rumors of shadows lurking in the darkness ...” She shuddered. “They’re not real.” Her eyes went distant for a moment. “They’re just in my temporal lobe.”

“Dreams live in the hippocampus,” I whispered. “But these *shadows* live out there. In the real world.” I leaned down and took her hand. “They’re not the same as the shadows in your head.”

I remembered the feeling of slitting her captor’s throat. I had felt every tear of his flesh. Every sever of ligament. The way his throat hissed, the pressure releasing as I cut into his larynx. I treasured every memory of it because he had caused her harm. I was glad that he died, choking on his own blood. Face down in the very tent he had kept her.

Her eyes did that squinty thing again. The little thing she did every time she was trying to find a solution to a problem, or puzzle something out. I had seen her do this when she wondered about what treatment to prescribe, or how to triage something.

“What proof do you have?”

“It’s best you don’t know,” I leaned back in my seat, creating distance between us. Why was I purposely rattling her? Why was I enjoying the flush that crept up her cheeks? When did I become this kind of asshole? Probably when I was unleashed from my cover. “Don’t worry your pretty little head, Cabbage ...”

“I’m not a fucking Cabbage! I deserve to know!” There was a little wobble in her chin, and I swear to God, that was going to undo me.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Hugo raise his hand, palm towards him. He flicked his wrist in a “come here” gesture.

I stood, but before I went over to him, I stopped beside her, my hand cupping her cheek. I ran a finger over her hairline, then I played with the fleshy lower part of her earlobe. There was no piercing there. That little fact was so charming, it was tough not to kiss her.

I broke contact and moved to the back of the plane and took a seat across from Hugo.

“What’s good, my friend?” I asked, leaning an elbow on the hardwood table that split us apart. “Any news on last night’s lookout?”

“I caught him in the alleyway. He had a burner phone and was paid to just call if she left overnight,” Hugo said cavalierly.

“Caught him?” I was curious at the turn of phrase. I had been on the receiving end of Hugo’s *questioning*. He almost broke

my cheekbone doing it. “Did his face look as shitty as mine after I had the honor of making your acquaintance?”

Maybe I’m showing my shitty Americanness, but there was something about a French accent, or the French in general, that made me want to be snooty.

“Please,” he said with that lip curl. I was starting to think of it as a specifically Parisian lip curl, because Chloe did it too when she found something distasteful. “I would never hit a child on purpose.”

“Oh, so you do have limits?” I chuckled. “You’re not a complete psycho, then.”

“I’m a sociopath, not a psychopath. There is a difference.” I definitely knew the difference *but* was a bit surprised that he knew it, too. The quiet, angry, deeply tanned and weather-worn former French Legionnaire was a man of few words. He kept a lot of things close to the vest.

I observed my strange companion. Callum had once told me to get to know him. To see if I’d be willing to pair up with the man. Alastair, my cousin Rose’s husband, was normally Hugo’s partner on these missions. It was just the natural way things split up. People pair off as personalities mesh and work together. But Alastair was now getting pulled into some Mafia issues in New York, dragging Rose along with him. Or maybe it was Rose dragging him along? It was hard to tell. The two were fiery balls of chaos, ready to consume and destroy everything in their wake.

Rose and Lea should have been the twins. Not me. I should have been the only child, but the fates were a bitch that way. Or maybe I was the twin because if those two spent too much time together, they might burn the world down just for funsies.

“The boy was to call a number. Unfortunately, that number was also a burner. No records, and no way to know who was on the other end.” He tapped on his keyboard. “I attempted to call it, but it seems that SIM card has been taken out of the phone. No answer, not even a voicemail.”

He flipped his laptop around. He was on a news site, staring at a list of photographers. A handsome, punchable, black-haired man looked out from the photo. His keffiyeh was loosely slung around his broad shoulders. It was the man who had danced with Chloe.

“Everest Landry,” he continued as if we weren’t discussing anything at all. “He is a photo-journalist.”

“Great! So, he’s harmless, then?”

“Not great.” Hugo stopped me with a raised finger. “I have some concerns.”

“About a photo-journalist? Does he own a Nikon, while you’re more of a Sony guy?” What was it about me that wanted to poke the bear? I used to be such a nice guy.

I just wanted to see if there was anything else going on with that grumpy exterior. It was creepy to have someone be so monotone, not just in voice, but in personality as well.

“Sony? Really? Those barely rank as professional cameras.” Hugo really had that whole snobby thing down to an artform.

You’d think that Baron Callum MacLachlan of Strathlachlan, billionaire nobility, would be the snootiest of the Caledonia quartet, but no. It was Hugo, the guy from the suburbs of Paris - and believe me, suburbs in Paris weren’t like the suburbs of California.

“If you’re going to make a comparison, you choose Nikon or Canon,” he rolled his eyes as if this fact was so obvious, even a caveman should know it.

Well, damn...

“Know it all,” I grumbled with a smile.

“And no, he has a Canon 5D which is perfectly respectable.” He went back to his laptop and spoke to *it* instead of me. “His travel history is a bit suspect.”

“Travel history?” Well, that took the wind right out of my sails. Our little Indiana Jones, as well as dressing like Harrison Ford, might actually be a player in this game.

Maybe I should have broken his dancing legs when I had the chance. I missed an opportunity there...

“Oh, well, our little friend has been to all the world’s most dangerous places. Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan, South Sudan, Kemet...”

“That’s not relevant if he’s a war photographer.” I don’t know why I was sticking up for him, but I just was. To some degree, that was my job, right? To play devil’s advocate while we

figure out what's going on. That's what I had to do with Lea all the time, or she'd go full steam ahead into some insanity.

"It's not, but it's the timing that I'm curious about." Hugo leaned back in his seat and turned his black eyes to me.

I'm not great at guessing the ages of people outside my own ethnic group. But there was something fucking *ancient* looking about Hugo. Like he'd seen too much, and been too many places, and never wore any sunblock through any of it. He looked as old as my Dad, but I was pretty sure he wasn't.

He had served in Afghanistan, which I had surmised from conversations around the dinner table, so he was young enough to have been in the Global War on Terror. So he shouldn't be that much older than me, right?

"Every time he shows up somewhere, some shit goes down." That last phrase took me by surprise. That was more colloquial than he would normally use. "He's never related, but it's..."

"Like my travel history?" I lifted a brow.

I was always around when some shit went down, but always had an alibi at some camp, or other medical clinic. It was how Lea and I were able to assassinate people, undetected, for over five years.

"*Exactement.*" Hugo brought his finger up to the side of his nose. *Exactly.*

"It could be a coincidence but..." He gave a small, resigned shrug, expecting me to understand what he was implying.

Everest Landry was now on my shit list. “Coincidence kills in this line of work.”

Chapter 15

Chloe

They were talking about me, and I hated it. I hate it when people don't think I can handle things that concern my own safety as if I was a child, needing to be sheltered and cared for.

I never thought Leo would look at me that way. I had liked him because he wasn't like that. He was a nurse, and my subordinate when it came to work. He'd never talked down to me. He'd just followed my orders and working with him was like working with the perfect dance partner. I would move, he would counter, he'd anticipate my needs, and he would make a hard surgery feel so ... magical wasn't the right word. Maybe, cooperative? Like I was a part of a team.

No, that's not right. He made me feel like I was the most important player on a team. He was always there, coaxing, reassuring, supporting ...

And I had something to return to him. Leadership, maybe? Guidance? Direction? I certainly led in the operating room.

I didn't like *this* Leo. How could I? The one that ran right over me, silenced me, didn't take my concerns seriously... Like when he had dismissed me last night after I told him about my desires. How he shut me up and told me to go to sleep, like I was a child.

He had decided that I was irrelevant, now that he was a big tough man. Like I was some little thing in need of protection and had no means to help myself.

Leo finished his chat with Hugo. My compatriot turned on the large screen on the cabin wall and started watching the news. My least favorite anchorwoman was on again. I tried not to sneer as I looked away.

Leo walked back and took his seat across from me. "I need to ask you some questions."

"Yes, no, $E = mc^2$..."

"Theory of Relativity. Cute. But I'm serious, Chloe." He reached out and held my hand, his eyes earnest, his face close to mine. "I'm not teasing this time."

"You were always teasing me before?" I asked, lifting a brow.

"A little bit." He scooted forward in his chair until he was practically kneeling in the space between us. "I'm not kidding Chloe; I really need you to stay safe. I need to protect you."

"Why?"

He bit his lower lip, and bobbed side to side as if he was contemplating a very different decision. Whatever he was

thinking, he must have decided against it because he chose to ignore my question and posed one of his own instead.

“What do you know about Everest Landry?” That name again. He was sounding like a jealous lover. “What has he asked you about? What has he said to you?”

Or maybe that was just my own wishful thinking. Of course, this had to do with my protection. His interest in me was...

“Chloe?” He squeezed my hand, pulling it towards him so that I had to lean forward in the chair. “Did he hurt you? Threaten you?”

“No!” I protested. His hand was so warm and rough. Had I ever noticed how rough they were before? Or how square the ends of his fingers were? They looked like they belonged on a man who did manual labor. But ... hadn't I always thought his hands were so small and graceful? Or did he do some trickery to accomplish that? “He stopped a Mu'desseur from attacking when I bought an injured boy out of his Daara.”

“Okay,” he nodded, though his eyes hardened. “And you went dancing with him after his *little act of heroism*?”

The bitterness spilled off his lips. I didn't need to be a genius to read that.

I smiled. He was jealous after all. I don't think a man has ever acted jealous over me before...

“He was just there; I didn't invite him.” I couldn't help the heat rushing to my cheeks. I didn't want him to think that I

was on a date with him, but I couldn't figure out why. "He was just ..."

"Just there, by *coincidence*?" He sounded like he disliked the word.

He had put such a strange emphasis on the word coincidence that it made me jerk in his hold, but he didn't let my hand go. Was he accusing me of something?

"He never asked you about your work, your projects or where you were going after that night?"

"No, I don't think I even told him I was leaving Saint Julian."

He regarded me for a moment, and it wasn't like his flirtatious stares where his eyes wandered. He was just looking into my eyes, his thumb lightly caressing the inside of my wrist, right at the place where my pulse would be. Maybe he was measuring my heartbeat? No, that's not right. One does not measure a pulse on the wrist with a thumb. It's done with an index and middle finger, because the pulse on the thumb can often cause miscounts. He'd know that.

"Okay," he finally said, breaking the silence. "Tell me if he contacts you again."

"He doesn't even have my number, so I can't imagine how he'd contact me." I licked my lips and looked into his smooth face. I wasn't sure if I liked the new facial hair or not. I had been used to him clean shaven. "I don't think I'll see him again."

It didn't look like he could grow a full beard, but maybe a goatee could be quite dashing on his straight, black hair. I preferred the black hair to the blond, though. It was more natural.

"Does that disappoint you?" he asked, his voice very quiet, barely audible over the plane's engine. "Not seeing him again?"

"No." My answer made him smile, which made me smile in return.

I had always liked his smile. His deep tan made his white teeth seem so much brighter. Perfect, straight teeth. I didn't know how important that trait was until I saw them on his face. Now, I couldn't imagine ever looking into a man's face without noticing their smile.

"We were friends once, weren't we?" I asked him. "Even when you were... pretending to be someone else... was any of it real?"

"Of course, it was." He ran a frustrated hand over his face. "I never wanted to lie to you."

His eyes looked like the color of Swiss chocolate. I know that people think it's the same color as all other chocolate, but it's not. Swiss chocolate has always had a better shine and glow to it. A warmth that a Hershey bar could never have. That's what his eyes were like. There are many brown eyes in the world. But his had a shine that showed up not in the color, but in some other quality entirely.

Pippa would tell me that was something in my head, but I think she'd be wrong.

His mouth opened to speak, but the pilot announced that we were landing in Venice's Marco Polo Airport, and that we had to take our seats.

Whatever connection we had between us disappeared, as Hugo came to join us, his laptop on his massive lap.

The large man looked between me and Leo, before raising a sharp brow.

“Ça va?” he said, in way of greeting. *Okay?*

He had a little smirk when he asked the question, as if he had walked in on something.

“Ça va.” I answered.

Chapter 16

Leo

Another great thing about working for Caledonia Security? We get to go to places like Venice. The nicest place I traveled for work when it was just me and Lea was Vilnius, Lithuania to kill an arm's dealer.

Holy fuck, this was sweet! I got to go to a wedding in Venice and I was paid to do it. Sure, I wasn't getting a commission for being a bodyguard, but I was still getting a salary. And I was guarding a beautiful woman. I was the king of the world!

The taxi boat that took us from the airport to the mainland was sleek and gorgeous. The wind was frigid, but bearable, and a light mirror of ice floated over the water, breaking apart easily in front of the bows of the many water vessels that moved back and forth.

Despite the sights of the canals, and old buildings that leaned this way and that, their bricks and plaster adding that ancient

texture to the landscape, I still couldn't get rid of this weird feeling at the back of my neck.

It was the feeling of being followed.

I was on edge, jumping at every Canon camera I saw. Since Venice was every photographer's wet dream, and a destination for many affluent tourists, those damn things were everywhere.

I just didn't trust that pretty boy, Everest Landry. There was something off about him. Would he follow us out here? Would he follow her? For what purpose? Was he one of the guys that worked with Alexander Baas?

I needed to meet with Pippa and get more information. This was driving me insane, because the world of spies that she and Brett worked in meant that they only gave half-truths, and misleading answers. It was like they talked out the side of their mouths, never putting all their cards out there, even when the game was done.

But maybe I was paranoid because there was nothing more important than keeping my Sunflower safe.

She looked good on a boat, gliding over the water. She stood at the bow, her hair blown back and away from her face as she faced the sun, letting the splashes of the sea water leave small marks on her oversized, military-style, olive drab jacket. Even in her comfortable clothes, she looked like a vision. Or maybe that was because I knew her and could admire her for what she truly was.

I stood beside her, not looking at the water or the fortress city in the distance with its smashed together buildings and winding canal streets. Just her. She didn't need to smile to radiate her enjoyment of the wind in her hair, or her love of the scenery. It was in the relaxation around her eyes and the serenity of her gaze.

I wondered if her voice would radiate the same energy.

"Pippa picked a nice city to get hitched in," I said, opening the way for a conversation.

She shrugged, tilting her head languidly to the side. "It suits her to be married here."

"Is this the kind of place you'd want to do yours?"

"No," she shook her head, her curls bouncing with the movement. "Not that I'm likely to get married." She crossed her arms after a bounce on the boat splashed water up the bow. "But if I did, I'd do something quiet. Something remote, where it's just me and the wedding party."

"So, not a big hotel or anything like that."

"No," she smiled wistfully, her eyes not leaving the growing city in the distance. "I'd probably go to one of those enormous national parks, and just have something simple in nature." The smile blossomed slowly on her lips. "Then maybe just a nice French restaurant."

"Like reserving a room for a reception?"

"No! Just... going to a restaurant with friends."

She was the sweetest kind of person. I looked over at her, and she smiled back at me. I was bold enough to pull a curl from her forehead and tuck it behind her ear. She leaned into my hand for the briefest second, and only by the smallest of margins, before she straightened.

“In your wedding dress?” I chuckled, envisioning her in a veil and lace thing, going to a restaurant and waiting to be seated by a hostess.

A chill went up my spine, the hairs on the back of my neck rising in alertness. Someone was looking at me. I subtly turned away from the bow, leaning back with my elbows casually on the rail. I looked around the deck, scanning the faces. Hugo sat on a bench, his phone up. From where I stood, I could see he was watching the news. Was that why he was so well-informed about crime and business?

His burly legs lay over our luggage: Chloe’s duffel bag, my knapsack, and his military-style ruck.

I scanned further along the small taxi boat, to the passengers who huddled with their airport luggage at their feet or strewn protectively across their lap. The half dozen other people on the boat huddled in their own corners, naturally spreading under the covered interior, creating as much space between themselves as possible.

“No.” She laughed, then finally turned those golden eyes to me. “I wouldn’t wear a wedding dress. Maybe white, but it’d just be a dress, like any other. Something I would wear again and again to feel... special. It’d be a subtle affair. A large

table, and we would just stand around and talk.” She looked back to the fortress city. “I don’t think I’d like to sit at a table away from my guests. I’d hate to have so many people that I couldn’t talk to all of them.”

I scanned the faces, still listening to her, though my eyes were bouncing from face to face. A husband and wife with their Louis Vuitton bags. There was a family with a small toddler, sleeping across his father’s lap. There was a solo man in the back corner, his gray cap pulled low over his face as he leaned back, his arms crossed, asleep.

He had nothing but an enormous camera bag and a backpack, which he had strewn over his shoulder. There was no label on the bag, so I had no idea if it housed a Canon or a Nikon. But I made a mental note about the hat and bag.

If you’re gonna be suspicious of someone, always be suspicious of the people traveling solo.

If there was a hostile threat on this boat, it was going to be that guy. I kept a wary eye on the figure, but turned my face back towards Chloe so that I didn’t seem rude and didn’t make her nervous.

She looked down at her hands as she weaved her fingers together. She was still talking about her wedding when she said, “Why would I want them there, and not speak to them?”

She had thought about this. If I had to guess, she had thought about this a great deal. Enough that she had probably picked every person she would invite. Who, I wondered, would the groom be?

And why the hell did thinking about that make me want to pummel the nameless man to dust?

The boat started to rock as the waves bounced us above the water, the pilot not letting off the gas at all.

She swayed, almost stumbling, and I placed a hand around her waist to keep her steady. The waves calmed down, and I didn't move my arm. I didn't move it from the warmth of her body. She didn't move away when I squeezed her closer to me.

"You'll look beautiful," I told her. Beautiful today, tomorrow, and every day after that.

I made the conscious choice to savor her scent, mixed with the sea water because there were so few times when life would hand us anything this good, it was worth relishing. It wasn't likely to remain this way.

You take the good when it comes, because the bad times are inevitable. Like death and taxes.

Chapter 17

Chloe

Leo never let me carry my own bag. He slung his backpack on, then threw my cylindrical bag over his shoulder, holding it up with one arm. He stepped off the boat and onto the dock. The metal platform was attached to a plaza, with a huge Catholic church with stained glass windows and a bell greeting the noon day mass.

There was snow on the ground, and the faint sound of a troubadour in the distance, singing Silent Night in Italian.

Leo turned, and stretched out his hand, palm up to me as I stepped to the edge of the boat.

I looked at it in surprise. I wasn't sure what I expected, but I don't think I really considered that Leo might be a gentleman. I suppose that was silly. He had always been kind back when he was *just* my Leo. Well, not *my* Leo. But Leo, my friend. Now that he was a part of Callum's security company, did I expect him to be completely different?

“It’s not gonna bite you, Doc,” he said with a wink, when I stood on the edge of the boat too long, just staring.

I took his hand, allowing him to help me onto dry land.

“What?” Hugo called, his large ruck sack barely peeking out from his huge shoulders. “What am I? Chopped liver? I don’t get any help?”

He clobbered with far less grace than Leo over the edge, the boat swaying as his weight hopped off the step.

He cussed, good-naturedly, then turned to me. “Are you seeing this, Chloe? See how my partner ignores me? See what neglect I must deal with?”

“Shut the hell up,” Leo said with a roll of his eyes.

“The abuse I have to live with!” Hugo said with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “He has no eyes for anyone but you.”

I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks again.

“I liked you better when you didn’t speak.” Leo wrinkled his nose.

Again, Hugo gave me a playful nod as if to say, “you see?”

Was he antagonizing him on purpose? I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know Hugo well, and up until this moment, I had barely heard him say two phrases together. I wouldn’t be smart enough to read his expressions.

I watched as the family collected themselves on the dock. The mother carried a limp toddler in her arms as the dad struggled to get all the bags strapped to his person. Another couple

walked on, hand-in-hand, looking very much in love. Lastly, a single man with hunched shoulders, a large, padded bag walked around us, his eyes averted. His gray cap was pulled down low, hiding his eyes and most of his features.

I turned away from him to look back at Leo.

“We’ll drop you off at the Musico Palazzo. Pippa’s waiting for you there.” Leo still hadn’t let go of my hand. And just like on the boat, I was in no rush to break our contact. “We’ll be playing lookouts for the wedding ceremony.” He leaned over me, but his eyes remained over my shoulder. “Then I’ll see you at the reception.”

Leo’s eyes casually strayed over to the man in the gray cap. If I wasn’t watching him so closely, I wouldn’t have noticed how his eyes lazily followed him until he was out of sight, disappearing between the narrow streets and alleyways that make up the iconic city.

It was strange being in a European town again.

Maybe that sounds bizarre, but there are just certain norms that one might forget about when you live anywhere else.

In Saint Julian, there are livestock and chickens in the street, as much a part of the scenery as the pedestrians in vibrantly colored clothes. Laundry hung between buildings, garments of saffron yellow with floral patterns, and indigos and emerald blues give the buildings a certain visual abundance. And the children, Talibes and otherwise, run up and down the street with friendly smiles, usually with soccer jerseys and balls. Everywhere felt alive, and friendly.

Not in Italy. The children are stiffly dressed in dry-clean only clothes. Their chic parents in business suits wore mostly black with light splashes of color or some kind of neutral beige. With my bright yellow scarf, I was drawing at least a few gazes from those who looked offended at my attire.

“I’m gonna pluck everyone’s eyes out,” Leo said through his teeth, as he stepped in front of me in the narrow passages that wound up stairs, bridges, and over small palazzos with fountains and statues.

“What?” I asked, puzzled.

“These Italians have some wandering eyes,” he said under his breath.

“Oh, they’re just looking at my scarf,” I said with a laugh.

“No, they’re not.” There was an unfamiliar rumble in his voice. Something deeper and more guttural than what I had heard before. “You are terrible at reading people.”

The observation slapped me in the face.

“Don’t let it get to you,” Hugo called from behind me, as if his voice arched right over me, and to Leo in the lead. “That way madness lies.”

“You’re going to have to explain why you say that so much,” Leo called, turning his head away from my duffel that was hoisted like a limp body over his left shoulder.

“It’s because it’s true! Jealousy will drive you mad.”

“Jealous of what?” I asked, trying to interject myself into the conversation that was happening *around* me, rather than *with* me.

“*Ce n’est rien!*” Hugo said. I could feel the smirk in his voice. *Never mind.* “He’s just a little on edge. Doesn’t know how to handle his feelings.”

“I can *hear* you!” Leo called back.

Hugo laughed in response, “I know you can. You might be blind, but you’re not deaf.”

He wasn’t blind... what could that possibly mean? People say one thing and mean something completely different. I didn’t see the point of it.

I was so busy contemplating the silliness of human communication that I didn’t realize that Leo had stopped dead in his tracks. I ran into his back. I worried that I might knock him over, but he stood perfectly still. Unaffected. I may as well have run into a brick wall.

“What’s going on?” I asked, a little frustrated.

Leo unceremoniously dropped my duffel bag, slipped his own knapsack off his back and started to run, calling over his shoulder, “Gray cap, black bag. Get her to the Palazzo.”

He took off, dodging other passersby, before disappearing around a corner.

“What just happened?” I turned to Hugo, who casually stepped around me, grabbing the bags that Leo dropped and packing them onto his back.

“He thinks someone was stalking you, and he’s going to go interrogate them.” He didn’t even grunt as he hauled all the weight on top of himself like he was a pack mule. With the bags on top of his shoulders, he looked enormous.

I turned to Hugo with widened eyes.

“You mean...” Surely there were some things that Leo wouldn’t do. “Torture?”

“Well...” he shrugged, as if it was no big deal. “That’s one option, I suppose.”

Chapter 18

Leo

Once is luck, twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.

I saw the gray capped motherfucker three separate times. Once casually standing at the corner of a palazzo, obscured by a decorative statue of a seafood restaurant. Another time, walking behind us as we made our way over a bridge. He turned and walked in the opposite direction the moment I saw him.

The last time, he was leaning on a red brick wall, an unlit cigarette in his hand, his head down, the camera bag tucked behind his back.

He looked familiar, and not just from the fucking taxi boat. Recognition niggled in the back of my head like a wound that festers in your hairline. I felt like an idiot for not realizing earlier that it was Everest-fucking-Landry.

I dumped the bags, and he stood stock still, never looking up to reveal his face. Then he bolted. If I was at all unsure of his guilt, it disappeared in that moment.

I felt the chase ignite my thighs as I sprinted like Usain Bolt down the alleyways. The motherfucker was some kind of Parkour practitioner, because he was dodging fences, climbing low walls, and changing direction with an impressive determination. Thankfully, I was faster. But only by the slightest margin.

I was already closing in, my hand reaching out, my fingers ready to tap his jacket, then he'd switch direction, just evading my grip.

Down Saint Marco Square, past the vendors, and carts selling carnival masks and Santa hats, slipping in the puddles on the intricate stone flooring covered in slushy snow. He ran straight through the square, by the red, rectangular campanile with its white roof, and turned down the path that went in front of the Ducal Palace.

The Italian Soldier, with his Beretta ARX200 slung across his chest called out to us and said something in Italian. Probably something like "Stop!" or "No running in the Square!"

I tuned him out and went after gray cap down the Ponte della Paglia that ran in front of the white, stone-covered Bridge of Sighs. It was aptly named because it connected the prison to the Ducal interrogation chambers.

He's gonna wish he ended up in those interrogation rooms, instead of whatever back alley I'd drag him to whenever I got

my hands on him.

He tried to bolt past the Gondola Danieli, but a group of teens huddled around the dock of gondolas, blocking his way to the bridge. He looked absolutely panicked, looking back and forth, seeing that I was on his heels, and he sprinted towards the dock, then swan dove into the frigid water.

I stopped at the edge of the dock, looking down into the placid, glassy water with its light sheen of forming frosted ice.

I had my limits. Frostbite was one of them. And the water was just not a good place to have a chase. First off, it was too cold, and under water would be impossible to see where he was going.

I had a feeling that my buddy, Landry, had been here before. He obviously knew Venice better than I did, and even though he couldn't lose me on land, he might be able to lose me in the myriad of canals and their underwater caverns.

Despite that one James Bond movie, those waters were not a great place for a fight scene.

Guess I'll have to track him down another day. He'd be back. Whatever he was doing, he was tracking one, or all, of us. And we had enough enemies between us that it didn't narrow it down one bit.

Chapter 19

Chloe

The Musica Palazzo was all in white, cream and gold. Just like Pippa. She always exuded that clean, vanilla luxury. An effortless sophistication that I could never match. I don't know why she ever took a liking to me.

She was sitting in a salon swivel chair in the bridal suite, her hair up in curlers.

A man spoke animatedly, a curling iron in his long, delicate fingers. His orange shirt had frills and ruffles around the collar. His pants were silk and tight, ending above the calf, where white stockings met the top of his black loafers. He looked like the human form of the candlestick in *Beauty and the Beast*.

"I told you he was going to cave," the man teased, as Pippa beamed up at him.

"Well, you were right," she said, her eyes widening for emphasis. "Is that what you want me to say?"

“Yes,” he said, taking her curls and pinning them up into her crown. “I never tire of hearing that.”

They laughed together until she spied me in the mirror. She gasped, and shot up to her feet, her white, elaborate swan gown swishing with her movement. She looked like a portrait. Like absolute perfection.

With long, graceful arms, she opened herself up to me for an embrace and, like I had years ago when I was just a child, I ran into them. I wrapped my arm around her waist, and her arms went around my shoulders, cradling my head to her lace-covered chest.

She was still so much taller than me, plus she had heels. I felt like a baby again.

“Oh, my sweet Cabbage,” I felt her put a kiss against my curls. “I’ve been so worried about you.”

“Me? You’re the one that’s been in the hospital twice!”

Her shoulders shook as she chuckled. “Yes, but you’re my little sister. It’s my privilege to always worry about you.”

We broke apart, she held me at arm’s distance by the shoulders, and regarded me from top to bottom.

“I see no cuts, bruises and blood, so I take it Leo was a good bodyguard?” She said his name with so much insinuation that I blushed.

“I guess he had to go chase someone who was following us? Hugo got me here.” I looked around at Pippa, the man who

was doing her hair, and the luxurious surroundings. “What if something’s happened to him?”

I still wasn’t sure what the hell happened, or where Leo went. Hugo told me not to worry about it, and that he’d pop up at some point. But what if he was hurt? What if he was alone in an alleyway with whatever assailant he was after?

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll pop up soon,” she patted my cheek. “If not, his sister will go after him.”

I balked. “Lea’s here?”

“Oh yes,” Pippa said with a small smile. “I made her a bridesmaid. Especially since Geordie has Callum as his best man.”

I guess I hadn’t really thought about that. I hadn’t considered that Lea was now a part of the circle, and that the woman who broke them up would be inserted into our lives, our holidays... or maybe I was the one being pushed out?

“What is going on behind those fierce eyes?” The man said, the lace ruffles at his wrists swishing with movement as he fluttered his hands to my face. “It’s like you’ve got the weight of the world right here.” He tapped my forehead.

A man who speaks in metaphors. I was prone to dislike him. Not because the metaphor was mean or anything. But I just don’t like people who don’t say exactly what they mean. Sometimes I can’t figure out what they’re trying to say to me.

“I’m fine.” I told him.

“I’m not saying you’re not fine,” he said with a lifted brow. “But you’ve got some troubles.”

Who was this man? Was he a friend of Pippa? Or maybe he was another person who worked in her security team? I wasn’t sure. Though he didn’t seem like the kind of person who would work with Callum or Pippa. His hands were too soft, and smooth. In a way, he also smelled too good. Like Freesia, and sweetness.

“This is Ray Ricoda,” Pippa smirked, nudging him with her shoulder. “I was walking in his show when I got sent to the hospital the first time.”

Ray pursed his lips back at her and the two shared a wink.

“Oh, that’s ... nice. I think.” I wasn’t sure. I was never sure. There were obviously things happening below the surface that I was unable to see.

“It is,” Ray said melodically, “And I invited myself to her wedding because I feel like I’m part of the reason for it.” He then brought his hand to the side of his mouth and stage whispered, “I told her he couldn’t resist her after seeing her in a wedding dress.”

I felt a flush go up to my ears. I’m sure they were turning red. Did he know that Pippa marrying Geordie would be the end of one of my childhood dreams? The dream where I had a place to holiday, with little nieces and nephews in Scotland? Where I’d always been assured that space would be made for me at a family table? Geordie had never acted fond of me before. I’m

sure he'd want time with his family, without a strap-hanger like me around.

"There she goes again, with all the weight of the world crashing down on her." Ray tilted his head. "Penny for your thoughts, pretty one?"

"Pretty?" I almost laughed. No, I had never been described as that. He was just a flatterer. "I wasn't born pretty like Pippa."

"My love, if you think that beauty is something we're born with, then I have been an awful sister to you," Pippa said, coming over with her brushes and powders. "I thought your lack of makeup was a choice. An expression."

She took my hand and put me in the salon chair she had just occupied.

"It's an expression of my lack of time," I grumbled.

"Which absolutely makes sense." She leaned in toward me and I smelled her lily perfume. "You're a doctor. And a damn noble one, choosing the work that you have."

Her soft hands came to my face. I wondered if my skin felt coarse to her touch. Did she see how weather-worn I looked, when she was so glamorous?

"I'm so proud of you, Cabbage." She was making me blush with her compliment, and she chose to continue. "I never could have dreamed up everything that you have accomplished."

I blushed. She had said that to me half a dozen times in all the years we had known one another. But this felt different.

“Oh, you two are just so precious! I always wanted sisters.” Ray said, his hands coming to his mouth as if he was overwhelmed by his feelings. “You two are so cute!”

He walked away, through a set of double doors that went to another room. I didn't ask where he was going. Pippa didn't seem to care, so I chose not to be concerned. I took the moment of privacy to ask the question that had been weighing down on my heart.

I grabbed her hands in mine.

“Are you sure you want Geordie?” I blurted. “I'm not saying he's bad, it's just that... you never talked about him before. So, I wondered...”

“I kept him a secret, Cabbage.” She smiled gently. “You know that now. And we were always meant to be.”

“How do you know that?” I wasn't asking her about her relationship anymore. I was asking for me. “How do you know it was meant to be?”

She pursed her lips, searching for something in my eyes.

“Could these questions possibly have something to do with a certain man who joined Caledonia Security?”

I was blushing again.

In the next moment, Ray returned, and I recognized Callum's wife, Lea, following behind him. She marched in with her tight jeans and knee-high boots, swishing her butterfly knife in her hand. She walked to the window, and silently started looking up and down the street.

“My brother’s made it in and he’s getting dressed,” she said to no one in particular, but it made me slump in relief. “He said the guy jumped into the water.”

“That’s mad!” Pippa said, her eyes wide. “He’ll freeze to death.”

Lea was scanning up and down the street. Looking for what, I wasn’t sure. But she was strangely still, except for her eyes. It was uncanny. “Yup, but he seemed to have a plan, so maybe not. Leo said he knew the city well enough to almost lose him.”

Ray Ricoda returned in a gown of gold. “What do you think of this?”

I was still looking at Lea, her body silhouetted at the window by the white falling snow outside.

They were frighteningly similar, the twins. Their dark hair, which now she grew long, and he kept his short, marked them as male and female. Their faces were almost identical, though hers was a little rounder, and him a little more square. They were two sides of the same coin, physically, but there was something about them that was strangely different. Something in the eyes, or aura. I couldn’t describe it.

She moved with aggression, like the point of a rapier, ready to slice and cut. He was more like a shield, moving to cover and protect. She pushed people out of the way, and he moved around them like the water around the rocks and streams.

“Ahem? Miss Doctor lady?” Ray coughed, and I snapped my head to him.

“I’m sorry, what?” I flushed again.

“Do you like the dress?” I looked at what he held before me. It was a gold ball gown with circles of ruffled and ruched fabric along the bodice like a hundred tiny flowers pinned to the lace. The skirt was full, but A-line, coming to a small train. It was the color of sunlight and daffodils, and just as intricate. Trust in Pippa not to worry about her bridesmaids outshining her in gowns that could walk down a Paris runway.

“It’s gorgeous,” I whispered, reaching out to touch the soft fabric. It was smooth, and rich.

“Good, because Pippa was very specific about you being bathed in gold and sunlight.” He gave Pippa a little wink.

I looked at my friend in her bridal gown, her skin still free of any jewelry. I was sure she’d wear a tiara, or something. Maybe a Venetian mask.

“I’m surprised you didn’t dress me like a cabbage,” I said bitterly.

Everyone laughed, including Lea by the window as she kept glancing down at the street.

“Have you done anything to your hair?” Ray asked, touching my curls without permission. I’d normally flinch away, but there was something about him that didn’t feel invasive.

“No.” I tugged at it, trying to gather it in my hand for a ponytail.

“Don’t!” He smacked my hand away. “It’ll look better all natural.”

“Natural is not my best look,” I said under my breath.

“Of course, it is,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “Natural is always best.” He took a large chunk of my hair, and said, as if speaking to the curl, “You look like a 3C curl.”

He was right. Tight ringlet curls that frizzed and went everywhere.

“I hate it,” I said, bouncing it in my palms. It was so thick that even trimmed back, it still expanded wider than my shoulders.

“The big secret fashionistas never want you to know is that what God gave you is the best that it can possibly be.” He ran his fingers through my hair, pushing my hair this way and that to see how he wanted to style it. “If we told people that, we’d never get paid, of course.” He twisted one side of my hair, looked at it in the mirror, then let it fall. “The big secret is that whatever hair color you were born with, whatever mane you were gifted, and whatever your skin happens to be is the most beautiful it *can* be. All the bleach, and tanners and straight irons just try to make all of us look *exactly* the same, and that’s no fun.”

Pippa came to Ray’s side, looking at me in the mirror like a mother standing over a hair stylist.

“This is why Ray is a genius.” She started in on touching my hair, and they must have silently settled on a style because they both let go of it, as he picked up the scissors. “He works

with a woman's natural assets, instead of trying to conform and starve them to an ideal. He sculpts the best out of his subject, not beats them into a mold."

Ray leaned down, whispering in my ear, "I think you'll be the one catching the bouquet, yeah? I can't wait to meet this *Leo*."

Chapter 20

Leo

I'm not actually invited to the wedding. Not technically. I'll be present, but that's because I'm pulling security with Hugo. We'll be looking out at all the major avenues of approach.

Why did I have to wear tights, and old European style, silver silk capris with a big ass tunic and ornate blazer to do my job? No one fucking knows. Least of all me.

I looked like a 17th century fop I belonged on one of those regency romance book covers.

That fashion designer, Ray Ricoda, was apparently the wedding planner, complete with a headset, a la Jennifer Lopez. He was two seconds from putting white powder and a beauty mole on my face before I threatened to punch him in the throat.

"I bet you Chloe would like it," he crooned.

I had paused long enough that he went away in a fit of laughter. Like Anthony Andrews in that movie with Jane

Seymour.

While I knew the guys of Caledonia would give me shit about knowing those romance references, they didn't grow up with my mother and sister who love that shit. Tatay and I didn't stand a chance.

Ray Ricoda was clearly a nut job.

But nothing had ever shocked me quite as much as Hugo in a similar get up. He had indigo tights that struggled to contain his ham hock thighs, which puffed into bubbled pantaloons. The embroidered pattern of smoke swirled up his thighs in the printed silks, all the way to the ruffled collar that made him look like a flamboyant pirate.

When he came out of the bathroom, he and I looked at each other like two comrades before breaching into no-man's-land. This was so humiliating.

We looked like idiots. But at least Ray had enough sense to give us jackets with little holsters in the interior to hold Baretts. Our calf-height boots had an inner lining for a knife. I put a slim butterfly knife in, enjoying the genius of the little concealment.

Still... Ray was a dick for making us all dress like this.

One thing was for certain: I did not like Geordie, or Pippa, enough to be wearing this stupid outfit.

But here I was, paid to dress up like an idiot to pull security for a wedding.

"This is disgusting," Hugo said in that great Parisian voice.

I looked down at him, then smirked, and put my finger in my mouth to make a puking gesture. “Those tights are doing nothing for you.”

“You don’t exactly look like D’Artagnan, *mon pote*.” He used the French equivalent of “buddy”, but implied that we were anything but. Nothing was quite as adorable as French sarcasm.

The bridge held some special sentiment for the bride and groom. As did the season. So now we would all suffer for their it.

Hugo and I fanned out to the two alleys that led to the bridge, looking at the pedestrians who looked at our getups with disinterest.

Geordie was pacing the bridge, staring at his blue Rolex watch.

“She’s not coming.” His booming Scottish voice echoed off the stone walls.

Callum faced him, and must have given him some words of assurance, but I tuned it out. His griping was only going to bother me.

I almost flinched when a baritone voice started belting a song from down the canal. But it didn’t sound Italian... Was he singing in Spanish? How did this make sense? Spanish opera? Did I know any Spanish operas? The one with Carmen? Wait, no... that was French.

Whatever. I chalked it up to another high-class snobby act from Geordie and Pippa. The happy couple were entirely too rich to have anything resembling good taste.

The gondolier sang with fervor and zeal, his loud voice reverberating between the narrow buildings. The acoustics of the walled city were certainly outstanding. Along with all the romance, and promises of masks and decadent food, this place even sounded fancy.

The gondola was overflowing with tulle and silk. The women's enormous skirts gave the impression of a top-heavy cupcake, the gondola was the ruffled lining trying to keep the over abundant breadding within.

I took a peek, spying my cousin, Rose, Alastair's wife. She wore red and black with a mask that gave her the face of a lion. Then came my sister, dressed in blue and emerald tones with the mask of a dragon. Considering how much of a menace she was, that was quite appropriate. If Callum hadn't married her, she would have been the stereotypical angry Asian dragon-lady, probably with an overabundance of cats, and a frizzy, fake perm.

I barely spared the women of my family a glance. Yeah, they looked great. Blah-blah-blah. Their husbands would spend plenty of time fawning over them. I didn't need to add to their already inflated egos.

But when Rose and Lea leaned outward, Chloe appeared between them like they were the curtains hiding the main attraction from our eyes. Chloe was like a ray of sunshine. Her

black hair was in its wild curls, voluminous and free about her shoulders like a cascading black veil of the finest silks and lace. Her skin was radiant, simple, with little makeup.

Her mask was the same sunshine gold, with sharp petals all around. It was similar to a Sunflower, but longer and more graceful, like they were the rays of the sun.

“Close your mouth and pull security,” Hugo said into my earpiece with a chuckle.

I saw Callum’s head turn in my direction. Though he was best man, he insisted on hearing what the security was doing. He raised a ginger brow at me, before looking at Chloe, then back to me.

Shit. I was gonna get fired.

Chapter 21

Chloe

My best friend was beautiful. Decked from head to toe in snow white to match the light flurry that came down from above. Little flakes stuck to her hair, lingering like crystals. Her elaborate wedding was the very definition of expensive taste. The Palace of Music, the home of so many intimate operatic experiences, the bridge, the city, was everything luxurious and gorgeous.

She belonged here with Geordie, far more than she ever would have in the Scottish countryside with Callum. I could see that now.

I knew it the moment I helped walk her up those steps on unsteady legs, to her groom, who looked at her like she was heaven and earth, all things glorious and perfect. His glassy eyes looked on her with total adoration as they said their vows, their *traditional*, perfect vows.

He looked ready to ravish her right there. When he was able to kiss the bride, he lunged in with complete abandon, kissing her with a violent passion that almost made me swoon.

She didn't give us flowers to hold. Instead, she had us carrying umbrellas in jewel tones to match our dresses. Our task, should it become necessary, was to keep the rain or snow from ruining the vows. But thankfully, the skies were merciful, only letting a slow, light flurry that stuck to her long eyelashes but wasn't so cold as to ruin the ceremony.

At least not for us, who were under layers and layers of silk. For Callum and Geordie in kilts, that might be a different story.

I looked past Pippa's shoulder to Geordie's face, then to Callum who stood to his right. On and on, my eye wandered over the perfection of the bridge, the walls, the closed colored shutters of the residents, and taupe fading plaster of the walls.

At the alley, I saw his back. His black hair slicked back. He wore silver and black. The coat and tails, vest, and pants that stopped below his knees before his white, wool stockings made me want to chuckle. Then there were those black buccaneer boots. He looked ridiculous. And yet, I couldn't deny that in the old foppish clothes, there was *something* elegant about him. The way his broad shoulders filled out the ridiculous blazer, and how his arse shaped those pants, narrowing near the knees into muscular, thick calves.

It took a very impressive man to be able to fill those shoes.

He would have been a roguish regency rake. His deeply tanned skin, sharp jawline, and arched eyebrows would have made the women of the *ton* swoon. I bet he would have taken many a young woman in the back of a carriage or gone to the gentleman's club and been every lady-of-the-evening's favorite patron.

I sucked in my lips, trying to suppress a smile, just thinking of him in a ballroom, making the women flutter their fans as they gossiped about the stranger among them. I was so lost in my thoughts, that I didn't feel his eyes fall on me, boring into my cheek. Not until the kiss was done, and Pippa turned to me.

"He can't take his eyes off of you," she said as she kissed me on the cheek.

"Who?" I asked, in a poor attempt at a lie.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder, pointing to Leo with a nod.

There he was, leaning with his forearm against the wall, one brow raised. I blushed.

"He'll be escorting you to the reception," Pippa said with a wink.

"Or I could just walk with you." I grabbed her hand.

"Nonsense! Geordie and I will be taking some pictures with Ray out here. You should make your way into the reception hall and have some drinks." She smiled and took her new husband's hand.

“You don’t want me in any pictures?” I asked, trying not to sound desperate and needy but failing.

“Of course, I do, but *inside* the palace, my love.” She kissed my cheek, pushing my hair from my face the way she used to when I was a child. “I won’t make everyone suffer too much longer out here. It’s cold.”

She shooed me away, using her other hand to beckon Leo over.

“Take care of her,” Pippa said with *that* voice. The one she always used when she was in charge. That haughty British pronunciation that was best left to those aristocrats. “If one hair on her head is harmed this evening... you know what I’m capable of.”

Her eyes hardened. She turned into a different person. Leo wasn’t put off by it at all, as if this persona was something he regularly dealt with. But I had never seen it.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a solemn nod, before offering me his arm in a courtly manner.

I was so shocked that I took it without hesitation and allowed him to walk me off the bridge, down the little pavement along the canal to the alleyway entrance, and into the modest threshold of the palace. At least, as modest as can be expected of a palace.

“What were you thinking about when they were doing their vows?” he asked.

I took a breath, wishing he hadn’t noticed.

“I was thinking about how lovely the ceremony was.” I lied through my teeth. No way was I going to admit that I thought about him in a Regency romance. That would be insane.

“You’re a terrible liar, Doc.”

I looked at him from the corner of my eye for just a second, to see him smiling, and not looking my way.

The palace opened to a great reception room and ballroom. The walls were marble, as all good palaces would have. Antique furniture lined the walls, covered in velvet jewel tones. The ceiling had some cracked plaster, but the original gold filigree with candle chandeliers.

Flutes of Murano glass in silver and blue lined the walls. I picked up one with champagne and took a sip.

“So, what were you really thinking about?” I jumped. Leo had popped up beside me again.

“Stop doing that!” I said, pushing lightly at his shoulder, then checking that I hadn’t spilled on myself. “We need to put a bell around your neck!”

“I bet I can guess,” he said, leaning into me. I could smell him again. Like sea air, and the comfort of an old familiar book. He stepped closer to me, and I wanted to step back. I wanted to get out of his orbit, but it was like he was a sun, and I was just a planet, helplessly caught. “You were thinking about how sexy I look in these trousers.”

He pulled away, and I saw the amusement in his eyes. Was he being sarcastic? Was he joking?

I tried to examine his face. What had Pippa said? Look at their eyes, and the lines around it? Something like that? I tried, but I saw nothing. Nothing that would indicate his mood or if he was making a joke. Nothing. All those days she had tried to teach me to read people and I still couldn't. I never would.

"I'm kidding, Doc," he said with a wink. It made my heart flutter. He leaned back, his hands clasped behind his back like a real dandy. Maybe the clothes were making him move that way? I wasn't sure.

I snorted, "Hardly!"

"Tell the truth, Doc." He winked. "You think I'm sexy."

"No!"

"You're blushing."

"I'm cold."

He reached out and cupped my cheek. I should have dodged away from him, but I didn't. Instead, I let him touch me. His warm palm on my skin gave me goosebumps.

"*Maganda ka,*" he said with a smile.

"What?"

"You look beautiful," he said. "You're always treating me with French. I figured I should give you some of my own language."

I blushed, furiously, knowing that I only swore in French. And he had known what I was saying the entire time!

Then his eyes flashed, darting to the entrance of the hall.

“Get into the reception room, find Hugo,” he said.

Then he was gone. He ran down the steps, out into the cold, disappearing from view. Had I done something wrong?

Chapter 22

Leo

I was so close to kissing her. So, fucking close, I could practically taste her lips. Then this motherfucker had to show himself. Everest Landry.

The bastard had peeked his head in the door, taken one look at me, then ran. I followed him down the alleyways, and over bridges again. The foppish boots, surprisingly, had very good traction on the slick ground.

He tried to feint, taking a sudden turn. He slipped on a patch of ice and went down, face first into the cobblestone ground. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to the first darkened corner I could find.

Venice has a lot of dead ends, and I to be in one. Maybe fate was intervening and letting me know that this guy's time was up.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I pinned him with my forearm against his throat. I pulled the butterfly knife from my boot,

flipped it open and put the tip to his jugular. “Who are you?”

“Woah!” He said, his hands up and open in a surrender. His exclamation didn’t match the cold emptiness of his eyes. “I mean you no harm.”

His British accent grated me. No real reason. He was Asian *and* British. Like that Henry Golding actor who was now a damn heart throb. It made me dislike him even more.

“That wasn’t my question.” I pushed the blade into his skin, watching the flesh bend before it gave, tearing just a millimeter, enough to release a small droplet of blood down his throat and on to my pristine blade.

“I just wanted to talk to her. She knows me.” His hands stayed up as my steel touched his hot flesh, causing it to steam. Still, he didn’t even flinch. It was a stillness that was disturbing. Was he a robot? If I peeled his skin off, would there be a reptile underneath?

“Not buying it. Who are you and what do you want?” He tried to struggle, and even though I had to look up at him, I could keep him pinned to the wall unless he wanted to start kicking and screaming. Then we’d end up in a real fight, and I was ready to land a killing blow.

I heard the heavy, jogging footsteps that could only belong to Hugo coming from behind me. “He’s alone.”

“*Susmaryosep!*” I swore in Tagalog. Had he left Chloe by herself? “Where is she?”

“I dropped her off with Callum.” Hugo smirked. “Don’t worry, she’s protected.”

“Fine. If he’s alone then no one is gonna miss him,” I said, as I raised him to his toes. “Any last words, fucker?”

“Sideshow!” he said, loudly. “Call Philippa Fox, and she’ll vouch for me.”

Sideshow? The MI6 branch that Pippa Fox was a part of? Is that what he was talking about?

“Or I can save us time and dump you into the canal.” Fuck this guy. I already didn’t like him, and it was about time I had a recreational kill.

“If you call Pippa, she will confirm that I’m here at her command.” His voice didn’t waver. Neither did his expression. Like a fucking snake, he barely blinked. “I swear to God, I don’t want to die at the hands of a man dressed like a Popinjay. That’s a level of professional embarrassment I won’t live down, even in the afterlife.”

I cut my eyes to Hugo, who shrugged and fished out his phone. He dialed and put it on speaker, bringing the phone to hover near my shoulder. The phone rang, and was picked up.

“I cannot believe you’re calling me at my wedding reception,” the snooty voice of Philippa Fox came through the line loud and clear. “Truly, if you can’t handle a single...”

“*Kuya!* Get back in here before the Doctor...” My sister’s voice in the background was shushed. Probably by our cousin, Rose.

“Pippa, I need you to tell these nice people that you know me,” our hostage loudly bellowed, turning his head slightly towards where Hugo held the phone.

“Excuse me?” Pippa answered. I could hear feminine giggles around her fade away as she took the phone off speaker.

“This guy says he knows you.” I didn’t take my eyes off the snake for a second.

“What guy?” Her casual tone had no hint of confusion.

“Everest Landry,” the man called. Despite the blood pooling on his shirt, he still didn’t flinch. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

“Never heard of him.” Her voice was flat and certain. That was the moment I *knew* that they were colleagues. She was having a laugh at his expense.

“Pippa!” The man yelled, but the distress didn’t reach his dead eyes. I lightly pushed my blade into his throat. The small nick, expand to an inch long wound. Still, he had no expression.

“We dump him in the canal?” Hugo asked, also indifferent.

Did these two come from a land where expressions were illegal, or something?

“Sure thing...” I said, ready to slice the man. Heck, if Pippa wouldn’t stop us from dumping him, even if he was telling the truth, then I was cool with it.

“I’m kidding!” Pippa’s voice cut in with a laugh, that high, crystalline sound.

The man sagged just a hair’s breadth, letting out a small sigh. There was a slight trickle of sweat that went from his hairline, down his cheek.

“Serves him right for getting caught,” she said, her voice suddenly harsh, devoid of the merrymaking it had previously held. “Don’t kill him, Leo. You’d be forcing me to do a mountain of paperwork if you did. What kind of wedding gift would that be?”

“Mind letting me go, now, mate?” His eyes narrowed as he pushed back against my forearm. “And you didn’t tell me that she had a *real* operator guarding her. What the hell? You said he was some security man.”

“He’s not an operator,” Pippa said.

It wasn’t an insult. It just meant that I wasn’t a spy, or some special forces. I wasn’t some person who worked in the shadows as a government professional.

Landry gave us a “*Yeah, right*” look as he righted himself, pulling out a handkerchief from his front hip pocket and dabbing at the blood on his neck.

“I’m not an operator,” I shrugged, agreeing with Pippa. “I was a Navy corpsman.”

“A medic? And a sailor at that? Really?” The man finally had a genuine expression on his face, and it was one of utter disbelief. “God, I’m just mortified now.”

“What’s wrong with being a sailor?” Now I was fucking offended.

“Other than it being the bloody Navy?”

“Let me guess,” I rolled my eyes. “You were Army?”

“Special Air Service,” he said with a smug little smile.

“Wow,” I said in a sarcastic, sing-songy voice. “And you still got your ass kicked by a medic.”

I gave him three slow claps, as his eyes narrowed on me.

“Don’t worry, he takes us all by surprise,” Hugo said off-handedly.

“Whose side are you on, Pepé Le Pew?” Hugo has no chill.

“Are we done here? Can I get back to my party now?” Pippa’s voice on the phone pulled us from our little sausage measuring contest. I could imagine her on the other end of the line tapping her foot, and giving me a bombastic side eye. How she and Chloe were so close was a mystery to me. They were absolutely nothing alike.

“This was absolutely out of line, Pippa,” Everest said to the phone in Hugo’s hand, his voice becoming flat again. “It’s unbelievable to not warn me.”

“If you didn’t get caught, you wouldn’t have needed to know.” With that, the bride hung up without so much as a goodbye.

“I’d say sorry,” Hugo said, shrugging. “But well... it’s all in a days’ work.”

Landry was still trying to fix his collar, looking at the large blood stain with disdain. “God damnit, it’s bloody ruined.”

He straightened and looked at me with impassive eyes again. They were creepily deep-set, with thick black lashes that almost looked penciled in.

“Everest Landry.” He reached out his hand for a handshake. I shook it with some mild hesitance.

Hugo and I took turns introducing ourselves.

“And as I mentioned, I am a member of the illustrious league known as the Sideshow.” He gave up trying to clean up his shirt, and instead opted to wrap his keffiyeh around it, and pull up his wool shirt. “I was the one who reported that Dr. Laurent was being targeted.”

“Let’s go somewhere more private to have this chat,” I said, nodding towards the Musica Palazzo, near where the wedding took place. “I need to know what kind of threat we’re looking at.”

There was no way we were going anywhere else while Hugo and I were dressed like we were extras in a movie about the Sun King of Versailles.

Landry followed, still giving me a leery side eye every few steps. Hugo brought up the rear, the expressionless mountain of a man grunting as he walked along until we were down the alleyway and into the secluded foyer of the Palace.

“I don’t like how open this place is,” the lizard, Landry, said. I could imagine him with a forked tongue, making that hissing sound as he spoke. “Find somewhere with less echo.”

I looked at him, before nodding in agreement, though I still grumbled, “Like the bottom of the Canal, buddy?”

Hugo chuckled lightly as we made our way to the groom’s changing area, where suits were doffed for these ridiculous costumes. Everyone’s suits lined the wall, hanging on silver coat racks.

There were those pompous looking green and gold velvet fainting couches, like the ones that they used for women back when their corsets would squeeze them into unconsciousness. I kinda wondered how my sister was doing wearing a dress. I bet she wanted to clobber someone by now. Not like Chloe, who probably bore the costume with the same taciturn grace she did everything.

Hugo showed up with a bottle of wine and three glasses. He poured us each a glass of white wine. He pushed Everest’s glass towards him, “Drink.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said, taking the glass in his hand and taking a small sip.

He pulled a pen and notepad out of his jean’s pocket and started doodling. He was expanding on a woman’s face, adding in shading.

“And talk,” I commanded. “Why are you following Dr. Laurent around?”

“Doctor Laurent, is it?” Everest raised a brow, looking up from his sketch. “I would have figured you’d be more intimate than that.”

My hand shot out to his collar, twisting it in my fist until his throat started to constrict.

“I’d watch your fucking tone,” I snarled. “Trust me when I say no one will find your body. Not even Philippa Fox. Which will save her all of that precious paperwork.”

“Stand down, mate.” The man’s empty eyes didn’t change even as I tightened my grip and choked him. “No need to get touchy.”

I dropped him, and he fell back into his chair with a loud thud.

His pen and paper had fallen to the ground. He leaned down and picked them up. He coughed, cleared his throat and took another drink.

“Ousmane Seydi is a local of Saint Julian posing as a Mu’desseur,” he said. “He’s that in name only. And *Doctor Laurent*,” he gave her title and name special emphasis, but it didn’t phase my hatred of him, “recently took a boy out of his care. Her Hélios House threatens the man’s livelihood.”

“And your point?” I asked.

“Well, this Mu’desseur wouldn’t be allowed to continue if he didn’t have some very important men in his pocket.” Ah, corruption. It makes the world turn round. “And he certainly didn’t have that on his own. I’ve found a connection between

him and Alfred Crawley, an American who works for Laurent Media.”

This was truly a dizzying, circular, Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon type of situation.

“It seems that this Mu’desseur supplies bodies for the Triangle trade.” He said it so casually, without any feeling whatsoever. “A very high number of boys have been reported as ‘running away’ recently. Enough that I’m concerned. But I don’t think Crawley is the head of this particular snake.”

“Who do you think it is?” Hugo asked, refilling the man’s glass.

“Richard Davenport,” he said. “Dr. Laurent’s brother-in-law. We have human intelligence that backs that up.”

I sat back in my seat, trying to drink that in. The tangled web of Chloe. She had danger all around her, invisible threats wherever she went.

“My assignment wasn’t Chloe Laurent,” he said, putting his fingers down on the table, as if emphasizing his words. “And I have it on good authority that Richard Davenport is in Venice.”

Hugo scowled, his nose coming up like a wolf about to growl.

That was a pretty big reaction for him. I was surprised.

“I think that Richard Davenport is profiting from these boys being sold.” Everest continued, though the last bit didn’t need to be uttered out loud. I think we all knew the score by then. He didn’t need to hammer it home.

“How can you even talk about these kids this way,” I said, quietly, clenching my fists ready to punch the guy, even though I knew that he wasn’t the cause of any of these problems.

“Call it disillusionment.” His eyes finally had an expression. It was one of resignation and exhaustion. “But if my heart broke for every soul I couldn’t save, I’d never be able to wake up in the morning. Much less face myself in the mirror.”

“Is that why you’re so...” I scrunched my nose trying to find the right word.

“Cold?” He supplied with a slight lift of his brow.

“No, my *sister* is cold,” I said, shaking my head slightly.

“She’s a very cold-blooded killer,” Hugo said with a bit more admiration than I liked. “Fun to watch in the field.”

“You’re practically reptilian.” I snapped my fingers, as if I had just thought of the word. I still wasn’t completely sure that he wasn’t, in fact, a lizard in a human suit.

“Wow,” he said with what resembled a smirk on a person with actual emotions. “Way to soften the blow.” He gave an approximation of a chuckle. “If you don’t watch out, you’ll end up hurting my feeling.”

Feeling. Singular. He was making a joke. Maybe he wasn’t an unemotional hack. He was just drier than the Sahara in summer.

“Either way, we break this part of the triangle, we can disrupt them enough to make a difference.” The blue of his eyes

darkened to almost black. His face hardened, to one of complete determination, his jaw flexing with his words. “One cannot work against this evil while burdened with emotions. It will break you.”

I hated that the man was making sense.

“Fact is that Dr. Laurent is in danger, and her work has garnered the wrong attention.” His finger tapped on his knee as his legs spread wide. “And she’s getting in the way of some powerful people who aren’t pleased that she was rescued.”

My spine snapped ramrod straight. I had been a part of that rescue. I had been the person who had busted her from her chains and murdered her kidnapper. I was proud to have done it.

“So, she’ll need the security, and I was skulking around hoping to find my real target around here.”

I waited a moment, wondering where we had to go from here. I had to protect her, but there was a lot of information getting laid on the table.

“Come join the reception,” Hugo offered. “I’m sure the bride and groom won’t mind.”

“That would actually be incredibly helpful for me,” he said, looking at our outfits then, finally, showing a flash of fear.

“But I’m not going to wear *that*. Maybe next time.”

Chapter 23

Chloe

The reception was lovely. The Palace was perfect for Pippa. Geordie, for all of his faults, was obviously madly in love. He danced with her, his pleated Scottish kilt swirling around his knees as he twirled her around the dance floor, and kissed her with passion at every chance he got. My friend laughed so freely that it was difficult for me to watch. Not because I did not want her happy. I just envied that I was never likely to be that way.

She felt something and expressed it. It was easy for her. And he, in turn, received it and expressed it back.

Such a simple, normal thing that I could never do. So, this would always be out of reach.

“Hey, Doc,” a voice said over my ear. His small whisper could have been a clap of thunder for how much my body reacted to him.

I turned, my gold dress swaying along with me. He was still in his costume.

“Why didn’t Ray make you wear a wig? I feel like you should have one of those white powdered things. Like a British barrister.” I reached up and touched his soft, black hair.

I liked it better black. Not the bleached thing it had been before he rescued me.

“Because he knew that’d be a hard pass from me,” he leaned down, as though we were whispering secrets.

“Good to see you again, Dr. Laurent!” I was surprised to see Everest Landry coming out of the dressing rooms. He waved, blew me a kiss, then walked out of the Palazzo.

“What was he doing here?” I asked, turning to Leo. “Was he the one you chased?”

He didn’t answer my question. Instead, he turned me in his arms and said, “I don’t want you talking to him.”

“Why not?”

“Because... he’s not safe.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, he’s obviously a psychopath.”

I scoffed. “So are you.” “No, I’m not.” He looked down at me, bringing his face close so that we were nose to nose. “I am nowhere near a psychopath or a sociopath, Chloe. That’s something you’ve created in that temporal lobe of yours.”

“But you’re a killer.” I wanted to say that with venom and accusation. But it just came out like a sigh. It had no teeth.

“Yes. That one is accurate.” He leaned back up, his eyes looking away as he started to lead us in circles round the floor.

“You are surrounded by killers. And none of us want to do you any harm. You know that, right?”

He took his hand from around my waist and brought one hand to my cheek. Then the other.

“I know you don’t feel safe,” he said. “But I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

I should be scared of killers. All of them. But I wasn’t. Not of him.

“You’re the only killer I know,” I whispered.

He snorted. “You saw Callum kill just the same as me.”

He meant that I had seen Callum shooting men during my rescue. He had been remorseless in his defense. But that’s all it was. He wasn’t an assassin. That was different.

“That was self-defense.”

“He enjoyed it.”

“No, he didn’t!” I protested, standing up for my friend.

“Yes, he did.” His eyes came down to me, his face serious.

“You were there. You’re just giving him the benefit of the doubt because you all wear these damn matching watches.”

He indicated the blue Rolex on my wrist. The one all of us St. Michael’s kids had. A graduation tradition that we kept.

He put his hand back to my waist and started to dance again. He placed my hand in his, swaying back and forth. But now his jaw was tight, clenched. I could see every muscle on his lean face. Even I could tell that he was angry, and that I was the cause of it.

“Why are you angry at me?” I whispered to him. I couldn’t look at his face anymore. Instead, I looked at a particular stitch on his shoulder that had been tugged from the silk, causing a little bump in the pattern of his clothes.

“Jesus, Doc, I can’t imagine why.” He was still angry, but I didn’t know why. He needed to tell me. My heart was starting to flutter. I was almost sure he was being sarcastic, but the more addled my mind got, the less sure I was.

Between his scent, his touch, his words... I didn’t know up from down, a frown from a smile. I was just trying not to tremble.

“Is that sarcasm?” I asked, my heart suddenly heaved, my lips quivered. Jesus, was I about to cry?

“Ya think?”

I nodded, suddenly feeling my limbs empty and boneless. I wanted to fall down, and start screaming. Over his shoulder, I saw Pippa smiling at Geordie. Callum was dancing with his wife. There was music, and it was lovely, but it was screeching in my ears. And he was expecting me to know why he was mad, and I had to respond to it. I didn’t know how to. I didn’t know how I was supposed to feel.

My palms were sweating. I wanted to get away but I couldn't. I needed to stop dancing, but I couldn't control my limbs. I was frozen in place. Frozen in this dance. And I was spiraling ...

"I..." A tear slid down my cheek.

He spun me around, leading me by the waist out of the ballroom. Away from the noise, and the stares. He walked us out with determined steps until we were down a darkened hallway, then into the gentlemen's changing room. He pushed me against the wall. I looked up at his face, his knitted brows, his frown. He was still mad. I started shaking my head.

I whimpered, ready to slap myself, or to bang my head against the wall. Even the silence was too loud, and my feelings were too big.

Then his lips crashed into mine.

It was as if he was sucking the feelings, the noise, the prickling sensation on my skin out of me, and swallowing them up. His tongue delved into my mouth, as if it could pull out all of the darkness and take it from me.

Chapter 24

Leo

I kissed her because she was spiraling. I could feel it. It was an electricity in the air, made worse by the frantic darting of her eyes, and the shaking in her fingers.

I was so angry that I almost missed the signs. The way someone circles the drain on the way down is different from person to person, and I had never seen it happen to Chloe before. But the Doc I knew in Kemet was *before* the kidnapping. Sometimes all it took was one incident to unlock all the things they had closed behind a dam.

Maybe these panic attacks were new.

I kissed her because I knew how to. I kissed her because I remembered what she tasted like a year ago, and how she reacted to being held, and loved, and touched. How it steadied her eyes, and made her tense expression blank out for just a second.

When her fingers stopped trembling, and her eyes closed, I pulled away. Not too far. Just enough to let her breathe.

“You okay?” I whispered against her lips.

She nodded, hopping onto her toes to kiss me again. I obliged, letting her take her fill. I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her body flush to mine. Her arms went around my neck and we kissed and kissed. Like high school kids making out by the lockers.

She might think I’m a killer. She may call me a brute, but in the end, there was still fire between us. Something special happened when we were together, and nothing could change that.

I placed my hand on her throat, pushing her away until her head was against the wall. I could feel her fast pulse in my hand, her dreamy, glittery eyes looked up at me with unbridled lust.

My goal of stopping her panic attack had worked. But now, there was something else in its place.

“You’re taking your safety into your own fucking hands, Doc.” My voice felt heavy in my own throat. It was taking everything in me to not growl. “You open those doors, and I’m going to push you, further and further until I’m taking you in closets, seducing you in the back of cars, and tying you to my bed for days until I’ve had you in every conceivable way. Don’t fuck with me, Chloe. Because you have no idea what lengths I will go to have you in every way imaginable.”

Her eyes shuttered closed and I waited.

I wouldn't push. I wouldn't coerce. That wasn't my style. But God, if we came to an agreement, I would keep her tied up and wanting, needing and begging until I had tasted every inch of her flesh and made her orgasm so much that she'd forget her own name.

I hated that about myself. I hated that I wanted her miserable, and desperate, willing to degrade herself for my pleasure. It went against every feminist bone in my body, especially the one that dangled between my legs.

“How do you tell someone they're beautiful in your language? In... in...” Her brows came together, pinching a line above the bridge of her nose.

“In Tagalog?”

“Yes, in... in Tag-a-log.”

The rhythm of the word, my language, was so foreign to her that she couldn't ever figure out the right emphasis. It was cute when she tried, but her vowels and consonants were all wrong.

“*Maganda Ka.*”

I had already told her that before. She smiled, possibly remembering the words.

She tried to say it, butchered it and blushed. I smiled, happy that she was even trying.

“How do you say, ‘I love you?’” she asked.

“*Mahal Kita.*”

Again, she said it under her breath, but unable to form the language in her Francophonic lips.

“And how do you say,” her eyes rose, capturing me in their amber depths. “I want you?”

“You don’t need words for that,” I said, stroking her chin.

“You can just show it.”

Her eyes fluttered closed, as she took in a deep, steady breath. When her eyes opened again, they were gold like the inner ring of a bonfire, burning out the amber hues.

“Apollo,” she said.

“What?”

“Apollo.” She repeated the word as if it should mean something to me, but it didn’t.

“Break it down Barney-style, Doc.” If I could have scratched my head without letting go of her wrist, I would have, but I was unwilling to lose any of this physical connection between us. In fact, I needed more of it. I need to be in her, with her legs and arms wrapped around me like she was a spider monkey as I fucked her to within an inch of her life.

“That’s my safeword.” Her throat bobbed after her confession as she swallowed. “So... do your worst, Leo Bonifacio.”

“Why that word?”

“He’s a healer, and the God of the sun,” her eyes warmed as she looked at me, her gaze explaining when her words fell

short. “If I am a Sunflower, then I turn my head to the sun. So, you...”

Her voice faded as she blushed, and I took her mouth with an aggression I had never used before.

My restraint snapped. I wrapped my hand around her throat, pulling her toward me with such force that her head tilted back at the jerky movement. Her lips parted and I attacked. My little Sunflower had called me her God, and looked at me with adoring eyes. What man could possibly resist?

I peeled my mouth away from her, and her head fell back, her eyes closed in ecstasy as her ragged breaths made her chest rise and fall, scraping those taut nipples against me even through her dress.

“So does that make you my acolyte?” I teased, because I couldn’t help it. She was never one to take second place. She wouldn’t take an assistant’s role. So, when she gave me the barest nod, my heart threatened to burst out of my chest.

“In this? I am yours.” Her hoarse whisper made my blood come to life. Adrenaline must have burst through my veins, because my body felt like it was vibrating with the need to sink into her heat, and claim her in every way, pushing her just short of her safe word until she was marked and ruined for every other man in the world.

“Then worship me, Sunflower,” I loosened my hold on her throat. “Worship, and show me your devotion.”

Where the fuck was this coming from? I never watched porn, but the words spilling from my mouth felt completely filthy and delicious. And it only got worse, or better, depending on my mindset, when she slipped down the wall to come to her knees on the floor.

She tugged on the ribbons of the trousers – yeah, fucking ribbons – until she pulled out my aching cock. Her eyes looked up at me, hesitant, as she grabbed the base. She bit her lower lip, and I shot my hand out to cup her jaw, my thumb pulling out that plump lip and running across it.

“What’s wrong, Sunflower?” I asked, because as much of a bastard as I was being, as base and violent my desires might be, the idea of her discomfort still made me tense with the need to erase her enemies. Even if that enemy might be me.

“It’s just... bigger than I expected.” I almost laughed, as her eyes moved from the base to tip in awe.

I placed my thumb into her mouth and she beautifully sucked on it, her thick lips pursed, her eyes a molten gold. Jesus, she was too good for me, and I didn’t care. I didn’t give a shit about being selfless, because I was going to have her, and keep her, because she was absolute perfection, and I was flawed.

“Do a good job, and I’ll make sure you’re rewarded.” I growled the words.

I still had no fucking clue where all of this was coming from. A twisted part of my head envisioned her on the bed, tied, spread, and needy, her thighs soaked from her arousal, as I

feasted on her with no mercy, again and again until she was a sweaty, writhing mess unable to even beg for me to stop.

But in her golden gown, down on her knees, so lovely and sophisticated, taking me in her mouth was a vision I wasn't ever going to forget.

She parted her lips and placed them around my tip, lightly sucking. Even this barest movement made me want to fall back and groan in fucking ecstasy. When she swiped her tongue on the underside of my shaft, I had to think of dead babies and naked grandmas to not lose my fucking mind.

I needed this to be good. For me. For her. For us.

Whatever happened now would set the tone for the rest of our existence, and I *needed* to do this right. I needed to manage her expectations, and mold her to my desires. My sweet, wonderful, perfect Chloe was a destination, and I intended to enjoy the journey.

She moaned and the hum of it threatened to make my balls tighten and unload.

I twined my fingers through her rough curls, pulling her head back and directing her eyes back to me.

“You can take it,” I encouraged, not putting pressure, not moving her to take me. She averted her eyes as she hollowed her cheeks, taking me in further, pushing herself until she took me to the root. I knew I wouldn't blow in her mouth. One day, I would. But not today.

That wasn't what this was about.

This was us establishing the hierarchy of our future. I'd be fine acting as her assistant in the operating room. I'd carry her purse, drive her car, and cook her every meal, massage her hands and feet when she was tired from back-to-back shifts at whatever hospital she ended up in.

But the bedroom would be my domain. Our love making would be the place where I would lead, and she'd follow.

Something about that felt ideal. Perfect. Even sacred. To serve and be served in turn.

She moaned as I hit the back of her throat, the pressure of her light gagging washing me with a tingling, light pleasure that made my hands want to clutch her to me.

I swallowed to keep my voice even, "You're doing so well, Sunflower."

I was still running my hand down her hair like she was some kind of pet, pushing her unruly curls from that sweet face.

My compliment made her try harder; she pushed a little further. My little acolyte had a praise kink. I filed that information away, knowing that I would use it against her some day.

My hand went over her head as she continued to suck, pulling at her hair until I cupped the nape of her neck. I thrust my hips forward, pulling her down further until her lips grazed my pubic hair and she looked up at me in a panic, though she never pulled back or tried to push me away. Her thumb and

index finger didn't move, encircling the base of my cock, while her other hand clutched at my trousers.

“You're sure you want your fantasy to come true?” Asking this question might kill me, because the sheer devastation if she told me that she no longer wanted it would wreck me and I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from taking her anyway. “Because I will fulfill my role and only your safeword will be able to stop me. I won't stop for anything else. Not even your tears, your screams, you pleas... Do you understand?”

Tears pooled at the corner of her eyes, threatening to spill over, but she nodded.

“I'm going to pull you off my cock, and you're going to say just one thing for me.” I instructed, and her thighs clenched. Good lord, was being ordered around turning her on? Fuck, if I had known this a year ago, when I had first kissed her, I'm not sure I would have been able to keep my professional distance. “You're going to say your safeword. You're going to say it in a clear voice, and you're going to memorize it because when I've made you forget your own name, when you're too broken to conjure a coherent sentence, this is the word you'll have to remember. Do you understand?”

She nodded, my cock still in her mouth, my tip rubbing the soft hot flesh at the back of her throat, the suction of her mouth tugging against my eager dick.

I gathered her hair into a ponytail and inch by excruciating inch, I pulled her off of me until she let me go with a loud pop.

She swallowed, saliva pooling at the corner of her mouth.

“Say it,” I told her, and she blinked.

“Apollo.”

Game on.

Chapter 25

Chloe

No sooner had the safeword left my mouth that he grabbed me by the shoulders and *threw* me to the floor. I slid forward on my stomach with a surprised squeal, suddenly realizing that his warnings weren't just idle foreplay. He fucking meant it. He could, and would, hurt me.

I wanted to feel disgusted by that. I truly did. But all I felt was lust for the fact that he *could* have hurt me all along, but never did. He could have asserted himself from the first day we met, but he controlled that toxic machismo and was fine simply being little Leonard, a soft-spoken nurse who was there to help people.

He didn't care how anyone saw him, because the storm that brewed inside his soul had more power than anyone could ever realize. Even me.

He twined his fingers through the hair on the base of my skull, turning my head to the side so that I flipped to my back on the

marble ground. I looked up at him, and the darkness I saw there made my heart skip a beat. Those black eyes, made darker by the onyx, straight black hair that he now kept close-cut made him look like the devil I hated, and needed him to be. He ripped down the bodice of my dress to show my breasts, and he gasped.

“You’re going to be so fun to break.” He leaned down to kiss my cheek, his tongue darted out and with a menacing, cruel lick, he tasted the wet line that a stray tear had made. “Your fear tastes so good.”

His hot breath on my ear made me shiver. I realized that I should have been fighting. I tried to push off the ground but with a slight adjustment of his weight, his legs hiked my skirts up, until his unsheathed cock pressed between my thighs. I didn’t want to.

“Wait,” I said, as I felt the pain of his weight on my hips. He was kneeling my thighs apart, widening them so far that I felt a stretch in my groin. My dress gave no resistance. The skirt was so wide that it all just accommodated him. “You’re hurting me.”

“So?” His voice was cruel, like a wolf’s growl as they restrain themselves from destroying their prey. “Be a good girl, and don’t move while I get you ready. Defy me, and there will be consequences.”

His free hand traveled down the side of my nipple, the move so light it would have tickled if I wasn’t so fucking aroused.

“I’d hate to have to gag you, tie you, and use you like a fucking flesh light, but I will if I have to teach you your place.” His nose nudged my cheek. My thighs tensed, wanting to close, but his legs kept me apart. I felt heat pooling as my wetness betrayed me. My body was waiting for his assault the way I used to wait for the first beams of morning sun.

Then he took my shoulders and spun me back to my stomach so that my bare breasts were against the cold, marble floor.

I obediently stayed still. My mind rebelled. I should be fighting. I should be struggling. This is all humiliating, and degrading and I should hate it but...

A tearing of fabric sounded in my ears before I felt the cold air hit my bare backside. My underwear. He had torn off my underwear.

Then warm, roughened hands kneaded my arse cheeks, plumping and squeezing them like they were dough. It wasn’t a gentle massage, but a cruel, almost clinical inspection of my flesh. With two hands, he spread my cheeks apart, and I could feel his eyes boring into my most treasured spaces, inspecting me with clinical, cold judgment.

I felt his thumb touch my slit, lightly grazing the skin and I flinched.

He tsked, and I knew he was shaking his head like I was some kind of misbehaving child.

“That’s one,” he said, continuing his inspection, his thumb prying my labia apart. Was he trying to look inside me?

Merde!

My cheeks heated at the idea that he was assessing and judging me. My skin was so hot, it steamed against the marble. I squirmed, but stopped after he laid a firm, hard swat on my arse.

“That’s two,” he said, before he went back to his observation.

“Two, what?” I whined, not knowing what the hell he was talking about.

“That’s three,” he said, letting out a soft, irritated sigh. “You’re really going to make yourself suffer.”

“I don’t understand.” I whined, as I felt his breath against my tender, wet skin.

“Four.” He said, his lips lightly grazing my inner thigh. *Putain!* The heat of his breath was making my knees shake.

“There are only three things that I’ll allow to pass through your lips. You can say ‘Yes, sir’. You can beg me for more, like the sweet little greedy slut I know you can be. Or you can ask for permission to speak, though I probably won’t grant it.”

“But... but...” He was going to control my speech? My words? No. That can’t be possible. I had never heard of such a thing. But like everything else about Leo, it thrilled me.

“That’s five, Sunflower.” His voice was so neutral he could have been reading a grocery list. “Please, keep defying me. I’ll enjoy watching you take your punishments.”

The idea that he’d lay me bare and pleasure and punish my body made my stomach flip. It made my heart sore, and my

mind calm in a way I hadn't experienced before. No choices. No decisions. The simple acceptance of a man who would take my choice away made my feminist mind shriek in anger, but my heart... little Chloe Laurent's heart... craved that peace. That silence.

No guilt. No choice. Just submission to a body's natural feelings. Something ancient, and glorious.

He must have felt me relax under his touch, because he let out a satisfied groan as his thumbs parted my folds, and his tongue darted out, tasting me from the inside. I tried to close my eyes, to still my mind, and to concentrate on obedience. On lying as still as I could while he made me feel. To relax into his control.

I found it. The ability to move, to adjust my hips just a little to arch my arse so that I opened to him a little more. His hot tongue explored me. But just like before, it didn't have the desperation of a man with a naked woman, but of someone who was treating pleasure with a clinical distance. He drew my clit into his mouth, the suction of it shooting heat through my entire body. With a slight graze of his teeth, I screamed with pleasure, bucking against his mouth.

To my dismay, he pulled away entirely, staying perfectly still until I stopped moving. He was teasing. Testing me. Playing with me. Goddamnit. He was being a sadist.

"How many is that now, Sunflower?" He asked.

It took a moment for me to even realize what he was talking about.

“Five?” I said, unsure.

“Wrong.” My heart sank. Sure, I knew we were play-acting, and that this was all a fantasy. But I was fully immersed in it now, my mind no longer cared about a world outside, and my body had no memory of anything but the time it spent beneath Leo Bonifacio. “Six. But I might make it seven, since you were so...”

“Yes, sir,” I whispered, trying it out. Seeing if my compliance could win me points. Though what the hell we were counting to, I’m not sure.

When he let out a satisfied *hmm*, I knew I had done the right thing. When he sweetly purred, “good girl” was uttered against the curve of my arse, I knew I had struck gold. A new sort of pleasure that came from pleasing my partner. Why had I never experienced this before?

“Since you’re being so accommodating, I’ll be lenient,” he said, and I knew he’d have that crooked smile on his lips. But I didn’t dare look back at him.

He flipped me back over. I whimpered at the force of it. The force of his manhandling. His mouth came down and he started sucking on my nipple. Then the other. My chest wanted to arch, to reach up for more of his mouth, but I stopped myself. I stayed very, very still.

“Hands over your head, Sunflower.” Why was that nickname making me so compliant? The more he said it, the more I wanted to please him. To truly be his delicate, feminine flower. I placed my hands on top of my head, and naturally crossed

them at the wrist. It was as if we had done this before, but I knew we hadn't. Maybe only in my evening fantasies when I had touched myself.

He held shreds of cloth in his hands, and it took awhile for my addled mind to realize it was my silk, golden underwear.

He coiled the fabric, twisting it until it became a rope. He tied my wrists together, and I blushed as I felt my own moisture against the skin of my wrists. Jesus. What did I look like, my legs spread, and skirt up to my waist?

He kissed the apex of my thighs, nudging his nose across my mound.

"One," he said with a definitive command, and I didn't even know what he was counting. Not until he dove in between my thighs and his tongue started to fuck me with an aggression I didn't think was possible. He licked and sucked, and fucked me with his hot tongue, my thighs tensing and shaking. I didn't even realize that I was kicking to get away from the assault of his mouth. But his hands, his strong, calloused hands held me in place, stopping my escape.

I brought my hands down to his hair, weaving my fingers, pulling him closer, and also pushing him away with every other breath.

I needed more. But I couldn't take it. I was screaming! Incoherent babble, screaming his name, my name and so much more. I didn't know what was happening to me. Everything was too much, and not enough.

“Please, fuck me!” I begged, feeling it come from somewhere visceral inside me. With the words came a sudden heat that started in my core, and shot to my extremities, tensing every single fiber of my being. Sweat trickled between my breasts, soaking into the silk bodice. “Please!”

I saw stars! I shut my eyes as my vision blurred. I must have gone cross-eyed because the world spun, and I was twisting and twisting, trying to shut my thighs, to push his face from me, because it was too much. I was running from the intensity of the pleasure. And he let me. He watched me flip over and he laughed with a cruelty I didn’t recognize from him.

On my stomach, my hands bound, I tried to crawl away, but he wrapped his hands around my hipbones, and pulled me to him, my arse hitting his chest as he laughed.

“That was only the first one, Sunflower. How are you going to handle six?”

Six orgasms? That was what he was counting? That was what he was going to do to me? No. That couldn’t be. That was absolutely insane. I couldn’t handle those six different times. I’d fucking die. It wouldn’t be *un petit mort*, a little death. It would be a big death. A complete, and total, satisfying death from which I’d never recover.

“Keep fighting me, baby.” His teeth came down on my arse, biting so hard I swore he drew blood. My body shook from the pain and pleasure of it all, wanting to close and to gain distance. He was making me feel everything all at once. “I like it when you do.”

“Leo, please,” I moaned, my bound hands pulling the pillow toward me. “It’s too much. I can’t take it...”

“You don’t have a choice,” his hand shot up again, pulling my hair, which arched my back. I tried to relieve the pressure by planting my hands below me, but it wasn’t enough. He pulled harder, until I was suspended. He put one finger inside me. Just one. It slipped in so easily into my wetness, despite how thick it felt. He groaned, and tugged my hair more. The pain made my eyes water.

Another finger. Then another entered me as he pumped his hand in and out. In and out. I was dying. There was no other explanation. And what a glorious death it would be as my body convulsed and pushed against his hand. I fucked myself on his hand.

“Good girl,” he kept muttering, “Good girl. That’s right. Be a good, greedy little girl, and maybe I’ll give you a treat.”

“Yes, yes!” I whined. “More, please!”

How was I wanting more and afraid to have it all at once? I was crying, screaming. I was floating and falling all at the same time. I felt the heat on my lower back as my body tensed again. My core ached, and I was sore. And his thick cock hadn’t even been inside me yet.

I came. I felt like I was at the top of a roller coaster, right at the weightlessness before I plummeted down. I collapsed on the floor, shaking and sweaty. It took a minute to realize I was crying. Not an attractive little moany-tear. But sobbing like a child.

He crawled up my body, placing his lips to my ear.

“That was two, Sunflower.” I whimpered, like he had said something frightening. Because it was frightening. I felt stripped bare, even though I still had my clothes on. “You owe me four more.”

He placed a kiss on my shoulder, and I trembled, my body didn't receive the message that he was destroying us, bit by bit. No, my body welcomed him with open arms, as if he was giving us pleasure after a lifetime of nothing but pain.

“I can take my belt and tie you down. You can struggle and fight all you want, but you *will* give me four more orgasms. Or...” That ominous word made me gasp, my nipples hardening, aroused, needing his touch. How would his mouth feel on my breasts? How would they feel in his hands, pinched and bitten raw? “Or I can leave you free, just as you are, and add one more orgasm every time you defy me. Every time you move away. Every time you try to push me further from you.”

He placed a kiss on my cheek, his tongue darting out. I knew he was tasting my tears.

My bleary eyes tried to focus on anything. The light on the marble under my face, the distant wall. His hand planted in front of my face, keeping his weight off of me as he laid out his terrible, pleasurable promises.

“What do you want, Sunflower?” His breath on my ear sent a shiver down my neck. I had never thought that feeling someone breath on me could be arousing, but everything about Leo had turned me on. It was as if he was manufactured for

the single purpose of making my head swim with lust, from his sun-kissed brown skin, to those black eyes that saw right through me.

His finger traced from my ear, along my neck, down over the mound of my breast before circling a needy little nipple.

“Tie me up,” I finally chose. I wasn’t sure if he heard me. I was so hoarse from screaming.

He didn’t move far to reach to some clothes hanging by the wall. I recognized it as his traveling clothes. I heard the whip of his belt as he pulled it from the loops of his trousers.

When he returned, he took my wrists, still tied by my own underwear. He looped the belt through the middle, then bound it over my head, attaching them to the heavy table in the middle of the room. The marble floor was so cold, but I still felt fevered.

Now, on my back, he spread my knees again. There was a wicked glint in his eye, as he pumped his cock up and down. He traced it up and down my folds, the soft skin teasing me and I wished I could spread my legs even further. Open myself wider to invite him inside me. But he stopped, and pulled his cock away from it’s glorious destination. Instead, his thumb circled my over-stimulated, swollen, sensitive clit.

I shook my head, turning from side to side as it started to work. It began sending shivers through my body, arousing me again, building a craving that I didn’t know was possible. His rough finger circled, pressing harder, and I bucked against his hand, needing more friction. God, I needed him harder. I

needed more, if I was to climax again. But then he stopped, pulling his thumb from my clit to bend down and lick me.

“Please!” I whispered, needing him again. “Please don’t stop. I need it.”

“Yeah?” He teased, that crooked smile looking up at me from between my knees. “What do you need?”

“To come. Please.” I had no pride. Not anymore. Not with him.

“And how should I do that?” He asked, as if he was genuinely puzzled about how to pleasure a woman. Maybe a year ago, I would have thought that was true. I would have believed he was inexperienced. I had even thought that maybe he didn’t like women. But now I knew better. Beneath that jovial, smirking exterior was a man far stronger, far more masculine than any I had ever met. And he didn’t even need to try.

“Fuck me. Please.” I’d beg. I’d plead. I’d promise him anything he wanted so long as he made me orgasm.

His fingers delved inside me, his thumb circling my clit again. The sound of my wetness against his ministrations made me feel filthy, and beautiful, as my hips moved, wanting more of him. Wanting him deeper.

“Good girl,” he kept whispering, his free hand stroking my face as I tried to get away and fuck myself all at the same time.

“I don’t know if I can handle this, Leo... please...” I wasn’t sure what I was asking for.

“I don’t know if you can handle it either,” he chuckled cruelly. “But you will.” He put his lips on my bare skin in the tenderest kiss. “You have to.”

When that orgasm came, he didn’t stop. He casually counted, “Three,” then went on with his work. I was a panting, crying mess. My hair was plastered to my forehead.

“Good girl,” he whispered again. That was becoming my favorite phrase. The most delicious sound to ever come out of another human were the words “good girl” coming from Leo. Was I so deprived of praise and affection that this was what got me off?

He pulled down his trousers, unsheathing his engorged cock again. Pre-cum moistened the tip.

“My turn,” he said with a smirk.

God, no. He couldn’t possibly expect me to take any more.

I shook my head, crying again, my chest bouncing with the sobs. “I can’t possibly... Please... I’m already falling apart!”

“I’ll keep you together,” he promised it so casually. Like he was telling me that he’d go to the shop that day.

He didn’t need to guide himself into me. He didn’t need his hand to push himself into my wetness. I was so slick that he slid right into me, pushing out my walls, carving a space for himself in a opening that was too tight. Too small. But such a perfect fit.

How was I thirty-one and only now experiencing what sex was supposed to feel like? A man entering me like he was

conquering my soul. Like it was his right. Like he could own me. He didn't have to ask for permission, but had my consent all at the same time. How was he able to navigate such a tightrope so well? How was he able to give me so much with what was essentially a base, animalistic act, used for the purpose of procreation?

When he had pushed in all the way, his cock pressed against my cervix, I thought that he might push even further and scramble my guts. How was he too much and not enough all at once?

"Let me hold you," I begged, tugging on my restraints. "I want my arms around you."

"No," he said, crawling over my body.

"Please?" I tried to sound submissive and compliant. I tried to sound like I was a good, obedient woman in this chauvinistic sex game that we were playing. But he only lifted a brow.

"When you've earned it, I'll let you your arms free." He thrust his hips inside me, eliciting a gasp. "But right now, you just need to learn how to be grateful for what I offer."

I *was* grateful. I was grateful to feel, and not think. To be hollow and full with everything he was pulling from my body. To be more heart than head for once.

He thrust inside me, the sound of our wet flesh sliding together with every thrust filled my ears. I moaned and screamed, shamelessly expressing my pleasure and torment and hoping he would give me more.

He stretched me wide, my legs tensing, trying to come together, but his knees kept them wide apart.

“Four,” he said, as my eyes rolled to the back of my head and I saw stars. “That was your first time coming on my cock, Sunflower.” He kissed me deep, his tongue darting between my teeth, and I moaned against his lips.

“More,” I whispered.

“You’ll get more.” His threat was a promise. “You still owe me two more.”

He fisted his hand into my curls, arching my head back. He nibbled my sensitive neck, and bit down as he thrust in hard again. My body was so ready to respond to him. The fifth orgasm came so suddenly, not with the great earth-shattering tension and fanfare of the others, but in the slow rise of a changing tide. It started between my legs, where we connected. He wasn’t thrusting hard, it was slow and calculated. The feeling slowly moved up my back, and then to my head, where all love resides.

My vision went white, and I felt the tears falling down the side of my cheek. Then I felt the sudden tension as the sixth came all at once, like a flare bursting into flame.

“*Putain!*” I screamed, as I came for the sixth time, my thighs vibrating under the strain. He responded with his own loud “Fuck!” as he emptied himself inside me, his cum adding more pressure inside me.

I thought he'd soften and shrink inside me, but he didn't. He stayed hard, and thick. Was he always like this, even when not aroused?

He released my hands, and I wrapped them around his shoulders, my nails digging into his flesh. He didn't react. He simply allowed it, letting me claw at his back, trying to pull him closer to me as I embarrassingly cried, throwing my forehead into the crook of his neck.

It took long moments before I heard that he was whispering sweet things in my ear.

"You're such a good girl," he said. "You did so well. You are so precious."

He peppered soft kisses along my clavicle, and on my neck. I felt so sweaty and disgusting. I didn't understand how he could bear to taste me like this.

"Kiss me." My demand came out sharp, and bratty. But I needed it so bad. I needed to taste him. I was convinced that all the world's answers would be in his mouth.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said with a light cough.

"Why?" I whined. "You've kissed me before."

"It's different. If I kiss you now, then that's the end of it. After everything we've done, after everything we've just felt, kissing you now will seal us forever. I won't be able to let you go. Whether or not you have a safeword ..."

"Kiss me." I demanded again.

His eyes looked almost pained as he leaned up to plant a kiss on my cheek.

I whined, and he let out a little laugh, knowing that he hadn't given me what I demanded.

"You're sure?" He asked.

"Yes."

He took my mouth in a tender kiss. A kiss that said more than words ever could. A kiss that promised devotion, and eternity, and I wanted to live like this forever. To live in this primal, visceral space where there were no deep thoughts, no complicated feelings, no years of painful baggage... just two people devoted to one another in this exact moment.

After he pulled away, he put his forehead against mine and whispered, "Let's hope you don't regret your choice."

I would never regret my choice. I would never regret this.

For once, my body, my mind, my feelings were all one. When I was pleased, I moaned. When I came, I screamed in ecstasy. I didn't need to move my face to what I thought a feeling should look like, it just happened. All because of him.

"More," I moaned against his lips. He kissed me again. But I shook my head. "I love your kisses, but I want more."

I moved my hips against him, moving his thick cock inside me so that his tip grazed against my walls. He chuckled.

"Not here, Sunflower." He put a kiss on my throat. "We've done enough in this room. Someone's going to come looking

for you. Be good. We'll do more later."

He tapped his index finger against my nose as though I was a child. I didn't hate the gesture. I could feel that he was teasing me.

"Promise?" I nipped at his thick lower lip, sucking it into my mouth. I heard him groan as he pried himself away, slowly pulling out of me, leaving me empty.

"Such a greedy little acolyte." He kissed me again, before getting up.

He tucked himself away. He went to his bag, which hung on a hook on the wall, and came back with a shirt. He gingerly wiped down between my thighs, then planted a kiss on my thigh. Then he helped fix my skirts and bodice back into place and helped me to my wobbly feet.

He went to the door and un-locked it, then turned back around to give me with a wink. I blushed, wondering if anyone would notice our little glow.

He pulled the door open, and there stood Hugo, tall and imposing. He took one look at Leo and rolled his eyes. Then he looked at me and shook his head.

"Really? At your best friend's wedding?" He lifted a brow, but even I could tell he was joking. Then he poked Leo in the chest. "You're not getting paid for recreation."

"I was doing my job. I was protecting her," Leo said with mock innocence.

“No, *I* was protecting you both while you...” He waved a finger to indicate between the two of us.

I covered my mouth, realizing that he must have heard me scream. He must have heard what we said. These doors were paper thin, and old, and...

“Don’t embarrass her,” Leo said, his eyes narrowing as he stepped up to the giant man.

It was strange to see Leo, who was several inches shorter, seem to grow as he stood in front of Hugo. It was stranger still that Hugo took the challenge seriously and squared his shoulders as well. Like he actually respected Leo, and knew that he might win in a fight. When he stepped back, it was as though he admitted that Leo *could* win in a brawl. Was that... true? And why did some part of me like that? Why did that make him more attractive?

“Apologize,” Leo said, taking another step toward Hugo.

They stared at one another, like two men before a fight. I was waiting for someone to swing a fist.

“He doesn’t...” I started, but with one raised finger, Leo silenced me.

Hugo narrowed his eyes, but then relaxed them. He broke from Leo’s stare to look at me.

“*Je suis désolée, Chloe.*” He spoke in our native French. “*C’est juste une blague.*” *Sorry, Chloe. It’s just a joke.*

I nodded my head. “It’s okay.”

Leo stepped away from the giant, and that seemed to be the end of it. He came back to me and took my hand. “We should get you back into the ballroom.”

“Will you stay with me?” I asked him. “Don’t leave me on my own in there. I’m... scared. Everyone is partnered, and...”

He kissed me. It was chaste, and nothing like the last few. But it still communicated something between us. Something I wouldn’t necessarily understand if he had just used words.

He offered me his arm like a gentleman. I took it.

There was something special about that. How chivalrous that was. Like he was escorting me. In our strange get ups, it felt *right*.

I heard Hugo’s footsteps as he followed behind us. Pippa wasn’t kidding when she said he would be there as back up. He apparently took the position quite literally.

We were at the huge double doors that led to the ballroom. I could hear the laughter and music on the other end. There was a lot going on back there. A lot of commotion and merrymaking. I paused, bracing myself for the social interactions that I knew would overwhelm my senses. But I’d do it. For Pippa. Because she loved me despite my many flaws.

“Chloe?” That voice. Light, feminine, with a British accent. I held my breath.

Was I hallucinating? I never thought I’d hear that voice ever again. I slowly turned.

There she was, dressed in a black Alexander McQueen suit, with stilettos. Her brown curls were glossed and pulled back. They were lighter than mine, but so similar. We had the same shaped face, though her eyes were a dozen years older, with more lines and black circles. She didn't look this tired on Television.

“Calissandra?” I asked, taking a step forward and squinting my eyes. As if she was some kind of apparition that would disappear at any moment.

She didn't look judgmental, or cruel. But maybe that was her magic. She didn't look like the kind of woman who would abandon her sister after she became an orphan. She didn't seem like the heartless bitch that would turn her back on her only living relative and leave her in the care of strangers a continent away.

“Are you well?” she asked, her voice was heavy with concern. Sadness. Something I could only interpret as longing. But I couldn't trust myself. I had no instinct for reading expressions. Maybe I was only reading what I wanted to see.

I shook my head, stepping back until I felt Leo's arm curl around my waist. He pushed me behind him, as if he was protecting me from some threat.

“Cali,” I had forgotten that Hugo was there until I heard his voice. The way he looked at her... it was the way Geordie had looked at Pippa. Like a man in love. Did they know each other?

“Hugo?” she said on a wistful sigh. Then, as if she was coming from a daze, her voice became more solid when she asked. “Hugo, are you...” she glanced in my direction, then back to him. “Are you protecting her?”

He gave a slow, solemn nod.

Her mouth opened, her lips trembled. Her eyes became shiny, as a tear gathered on her long bottom lashes, then trailed down her cheek. “Thank you.”

Her voice was so breathy that I didn’t recognize it from the woman who had often looked at me from the other end of a screen. Was this really her? I wouldn’t know. I hadn’t been in the same room as her since I was six years old.

Then she lunged toward Hugo, grabbed his face and kissed him. He reciprocated, grabbing the back of her neck and pulling her to him. They kissed deep, with tongues and clashing teeth, melding together like long-time, reunited lovers.

Leo and I stood, stunned. Afraid to move in case the world swallowed us up. I felt like I was intruding on their moment of passion.

When they pried apart, they looked deep into each other’s eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered again. “Keep her safe.”

“As you wish,” he said back. The terse Hugo looked like he was melting into another man. A different person. “I am at your service, always.”

Why did he say it like he had recited those exact words over, and over, and over again. Why did she accept it, as if it was completely normal?

We heard the door behind us clanging, as the loud knob turned. The two of them leapt apart. Calissandra wiped at her cheeks to hide the tears then, as if she had turned into a robot, she assumed a casual pose, one arm on her hip, her brow raised.

She looked down her nose at everyone and everything around her.

“Richard, darling,” she said with a polite smile. She reached out her hand, and the man exiting the ballroom took it in his, planting a swift kiss on her fingertips.

“My love,” said Richard Davenport in a very proper British accent. A tall, sandy-haired man in a sleek Kiton blue suit. “I’m quite done here.”

“With good result, I trust?” she tilted her head slightly as she asked.

“Middling at best, I’m afraid,” he said, letting go of Calissandra’s hand, then placing his own in his pockets, pulling his blazer apart. He was a very tall, slim man. He was quite sophisticated, with a bit of silver around his temples. “But no matter. What’s going on here?”

“Oh, nothing,” Calissandra said with a slight roll of her eyes, she let her hand fall back with a flick of her wrist to indicate me. “You know my sister, of course.”

She didn't even look at me when she said this. Instead, she looked at the back of her nails.

"Never had the pleasure," said Richard, reaching a hand to me. "Richard Davenport. Your brother-in-law, though you wouldn't know it."

He spoke with a light-hearted chuckle. He bent down to kiss my hand when I went to shake his.

Something about his lips on my skin made it tingle in an unpleasant way. Like the pins and needles you get when you hit the ulnar nerve - the thing colloquially known as a funny bone in one's elbow.

"Don't be silly, Richard. You must have met her at some point." Calissandra still wouldn't look at me. Her voice had completely changed. Gone was the breathy whisper, and now was the woman I had seen on the television all those years. What had happened?

"No," Richard said with a downward inflection as though he thought Calissandra was being stupid. "I would remember if I had, my love."

"Oh, well," Calissandra shrugged. "Since we're done here, shall we go?" She lifted her perfectly sculpted brow and pursed her lips in disgust. "These costumes are absolutely ridiculous."

"Yes, dear." Richard juttled out his elbow, offering his arm to her, and she looped her slender fingers around his forearm. "I

hope to see more of you, Chloe. You've never met your nephews, have you?"

I was frozen, until I felt Leo squeeze my waist. "No! I haven't."

I had nephews?

"Maybe after Christmas," he offered, before he turned away.

"Adieu!"

He casually waved, with a lift of his hand as they paced down the hall. Calissandra looked over her shoulder one last time before they turned out of view. *That* expression was absolutely unmistakable. She looked at me and Hugo with a desperation that I hadn't seen in a long time. Not since the evacuation of Kemet when every face was stricken with fear and pain.

Then she put on a brave smile.

"Happy Birthday." She silently mouthed behind her husband's back.

Then her face turned back into that impartial mask as the two of them turned to leave.

She was gone. Like the hallucination I truly thought she was.

Leo turned to Hugo. Looking completely shell shocked, he asked, "What the fuck just happened?"

Chapter 26

Leo

Everyone keeps secrets. There were no exceptions to this.

I wanted my life as an assassin back. At least that made sense. Bad guy needed killing. Someone paid us to do it. Then we went home to our parent's house, until the next guy needed killing. Oddly enough, there was actually *less* deception involved there.

Hugo didn't speak on the way to Chloe's hotel. He didn't say anything when he took his post outside her suite, by the door, staring at it like it owed him money. He didn't speak when spoken to. He didn't do anything. His mind, while present on security, scanning faces, vulnerable spots, and his general surroundings, wasn't really *here*.

He was a robot. Soulless and not willing to speak.

I took Chloe back to her room, because as much as I wanted to crack Hugo's brain on the pavement like a coconut and see

what the fuck was going on inside, I couldn't. I had someone else more important to tend to.

As stunned as Hugo might be, Chloe looked like she was holding herself together by a thread.

I stood behind her, guiding her by the shoulders into her room. I sat her on the end of the bed, and she complied without a word. Her eyes had that thousand-yard stare thing going on.

I took off her shoes, and massaged her feet. Then gently traced my fingers up her legs, to where her tights ended at her thighs, and tenderly pulled each one down. Then I undid the buttons on the corset, which was meticulous buttoned down her bosom, ending low on her belly.

When she was stripped, I carried her bridal style to her side of the bed, pulling the comforter down before I laid her on her side and tucked her in. I stripped off my shirt, then slid under the sheet beside her. I wrapped her in my arms, and to my surprise, she didn't resist. She actually clung to my hands, pulling me to hold her tighter until I worried that I'd squeeze the air from her lungs.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I said into her ear.

She shook her head.

"Do you want to sleep?"

She shook her head again.

"Do you need something from me?"

Again, she took my hands and pulled them so that my arms tightened around her. I pulled my legs up so that I was spooning her, my thighs against hers, her ass perilously nestled against my hardening cock.

What? I'm only human. I was mostly naked with the girl of my dreams. Biologically, it's bound to happen. But I could ignore it.

I kissed her bare shoulder.

"I'm here for you," I whispered against her skin. "I'll always protect you."

She said nothing. Her heavy breathing let me know that she was asleep. She had slipped into it quietly, and peacefully, and I hoped that she could get some much-needed rest. As much as I wanted to continue what we had started not that long ago, I knew that I had to wait.

I shouldn't have taken her in the changing room. That was a stupid, stupid mistake, on top of a pile of other mistakes that I had made in my life. I was constantly giving her less than what she deserved, and I had to stop before she got hurt.

I snuck away from her, slowly unwrapping my arms, before tucking her in tightly under the covers.

"I'll be back, Sunflower," I whispered into her ear. She gave a small moan in response.

I planted a kiss on her temple, then walked back out into the main area.

Hugo was sitting, staring at the door, as if he hadn't moved. The man was a creepy statue, his tanned features a mask of indifference. Only a slight scowl gave away the turmoil going through his mind.

I pulled up a seat beside him and stared at the door as well.

We sat in silence. I waited.

I had played this game a hundred times with my sister. As Hugo had said, he wasn't a psychopath. He was a sociopath. He was a lot like my sister in that way.

Neuro-atypical? Maybe. Bat shit crazy? Definitely.

One didn't always go hand in hand with the other, but for Hugo and Lea? It was part of the package.

So, I waited. And waited. And waited.

"Cali and I have been involved for ten years," he finally said, without even looking at me. "We had an affair. It lasted almost a month."

I leaned forward in my seat, boldly looking at him now. I was searching his face for traces of... anything. A hint of what he *wasn't* saying.

"Did you know that I'm from Marseille?" He was asking a rhetorical question.

"I thought you were from Paris," I said, slightly surprised. I don't know where I had heard that. Did he say it? Or did someone else tell me? I had been so certain of that fact that this news made me balk.

Marseille is a crime-riddled place. Famous for having an inexhaustible supply of young hitmen, and absolutely riddled with Mafia.

“I joined the Legion for a reason.” His words chilled me. A lot of people ran away into the Legion, sometimes to hide from crimes they had committed. Sometimes, people chose new identities to hide from a past. But I don’t think that’s what Hugo did. Then again, with a name like Hugo Martin, he might as well have been John Smith. “When I started working for Caledonia Security,” he said, jumping very far ahead in the story, I suspected. “I started to know Cali better. I saw more.”

By that, he means he stalked her. Through CCTV, hacking, computers, and other means. She was the woman he was always watching on his screens anytime he wasn’t working. He was addicted to it.

His eyes, which I now noticed were a little golden on the inside, turned towards me. He looked me dead in the eyes as he said, “She is my woman.”

“She’s married,” I said, not to challenge him, but to see how he was able to wrap his mind around that fact.

“And he is a terrible man, who I will kill.”

“Is he terrible because he’s married to her or...”

“No,” he said with a scoff. “He’s terrible because he is the head of the snake. I know it in my bones. He is the man we must destroy to stop all of this.”

“All of what?” I felt like a therapist, trying to pull the pieces from a reluctant patient. “The triangle trade, Kemet, whoever is after Chloe. It all goes back to Richard Davenport.” He almost spat the name like it was a curse.

I nodded. But I knew his instinct, and his seething hate, wasn't enough to make these wishes true.

“I have waited for her to ask me for help,” he scowled, then nodded slightly with determination. “She has leashed me for years to protect herself, her sister, and her children. If she did not have children, I would have taken her away years ago.”

“I don't think Chloe knew she had kids.”

“Because she was never pregnant.” His face was so still, it was unsettling. “She has adopted them, yes. But they are *his* children, with a mistress.” He looked away from me this time. Maybe it was easier for him to confess all of this if he couldn't actually see me. “I found the woman's body floating in the Thames. I tested her hair against the children, and his.”

“He killed the mistress that birthed his children?” I said, shocked. This was turning into something that belonged in my mother's daytime shows on The Filipino Channel.

“And Cali thinks of them as her own,” he didn't quite answer me, but the fact he didn't contradict me was answer enough. “She wouldn't leave them behind. And he would never let them go. He has more claim to them than she ever will. But they turn eighteen soon.”

Pieces were clicking into place. A dark picture was starting to form. A tragic picture of a woman trapped in a marriage, unable to escape, and a distant lover, pining and waiting.

“She will call.” He was so certain, it was hard not to believe him. Then his next words chilled me to the bone. “And I will reign hell down on Richard Davenport. He will pay for all of his sins.”

He meant every single fucking word.

Chapter 27

Chloe

My dreams were different this time. I saw the masked Brute. But instead of seeing him from where I had been tied, I saw him from somewhere above. Like I was floating overhead like a strange specter. And it wasn't me that was tied to the pillar. It was my sister. That terrified look on her face. The same one she had flashed us before she disappeared.

Calissandra needed rescuing. And no one was coming for her. No one was answering her screams.

No one except me. I screamed back into the darkness, answering her. Until the darkness faded, and I was in a room, on a bed. Strong arms holding me tight to a warm body.

"It's okay, Sunflower," Leo whispered against my skin. "I'll protect you. I swear."

He repeated the mantra over and over again, until it sank into my brain, settling there like a leaf that had been on the wind, suddenly finding a perch somewhere safe.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know what I could possibly say. But I knew that I wanted to say something.

“My sister looked scared,” I said.

I don't think I had really referred to her as my sister in a long time. That bitch, that *conasse*, and a slew of other expletives. But my sister? I hadn't called her that since I was maybe eight years old, after I realized that she'd never come back for me. Pippa was my sister now.

“She did.”

“Did you talk to Hugo?” I wondered, remembering how they had passionately kissed. How they seemed so in love. Is it possible that my sister's perfect marriage hid something else? Was my sister a cheater? No. That didn't look like she was cheating. It looked like she was trapped.

“I did.” He said nothing more.

“What did he say?”

“I don't think it's for me to say,” he finally said with a small sigh. “But they're in love.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No. I just know it.”

“How?”

“Because you and I both saw it,” he said. But I could never trust my eyes when it came to emotions and expressions and

all the silly ways people communicate without words. “And because of what he told me.”

“You can’t shut me out. I have a right to know about my own sister.”

“You told me you didn’t have a sister,” he said flatly. “Back in Kemet, you said you were an only child.”

I clamped my mouth shut. I wrapped my arms around myself, pushing away from him a little, just to get some separation.

“That was different.”

He gave me an annoyed look, and adjusted under the covers so that his arms were around me, and he plastered me against his smooth, hairless chest, my arms still between us. He wrapped his legs around mine.

“I’ll tell you when I know everything,” he said.

“No! Tell me right now!”

“You’re not in charge here, Doc,” his eyes narrowed.

“You’re *my* bodyguard, no? You work for me.”

“I work for Caledonia Security, and if I deem it necessary to tell you something, I will.”

“You’re impossible!”

“Takes one to know one.”

Our spat was interrupted by my phone ringing on the nightstand. I pried out of his arms, and he eventually relented with an angry grunt of irritation.

“*Oui?*” I answered. *Yes?*

“Chloe?” It was Rabia’s voice. It sounded heavy, like she had been running. Or maybe crying? I couldn’t tell.

“Yes, what’s wrong?”

“Asa has disappeared.” I now recognized that she was frantic. I could figure that much out from context. “He was just playing in the yard, then he disappeared. No one saw anything.”

The yard was gated, surrounded by a wall that was at least six feet high with an ancient Baobab tree in the middle, providing shade near a children’s playground. You had to go through the house in order to go in and out of it.

“Has he spoken about running away? Did something happen?”

“No! Nothing! But...” She sighed. “It’s not unusual for boys to run away, especially when they have had a difficult childhood, like he has. But I thought... I thought you’d want to know.”

“He didn’t run away.” I had never been more certain of anything in my life. The boy who had clung onto me as I left, who was so grateful to be safe, the boy with the intelligent brown eyes would never have run away. “Someone took him.”

“I’ve already asked Ousmane Seydi, and he just laughed, and said he hadn’t seen him...”

“The man is a liar,” I said, standing from the bed. “You cannot trust a single word he says.”

I looked around my room, at the discarded bridesmaids dress, the bags that were only halfway unpacked, and the man in my bed. The last part gave me pause. It had been a very long time since I had a man in there. And I didn't even have time to think on it, and savor the feeling...

"I'll be there soon," I said, determined to get back there.

"Chloe, I didn't call to get you to come back here, it was just..."

"I'm coming back." I hung up the phone before she could protest any further.

A part of me, one that I acknowledged and chose to disregard, said that she was right. Boys ran away. Especially ones who had been hurt and in pain. Their ability to trust is limited, and the restrictions the school put on the children was stricter than the Mu'desseur's, who let them wander the streets each day with no supervision. But I knew Asa. I knew it in my heart.

"What's happening?" Leo was sitting up in bed, his shirtless torso bare. I could see every ripple of muscle beneath his smooth, tan skin. He was perfectly hairless, like a Greek statue. I bit my lower lip, as the memories of what we had done the day before came flooding to mind. His kiss. His touch. His words...

My Apollo. My sun god, full of warmth.

"I have to go back to Saint Julian," I told him, tearing my gaze from him.

The light was starting to peek through the curtains, announcing the rude arrival of the dawn.

“There’s problems with...”

“I heard, Chloe, but that’s not what I’m asking.” The blanket fell down to his waist. Was he wearing boxers or briefs under there? I didn’t remember seeing that happen. I would have known if he was naked beside me, right? “Why do you feel the need to go back?”

“A child is missing.” I wasn’t sure why I had to explain this. That seemed such a simple thing. A child is missing, you go and find them.

“It’s not your problem.”

“Of course, it is!” I protested.

“Explain,” he prompted, leaning forward, his biceps bulging as he moved. “Because it sounds like you’re making a problem of something that is a normal occurrence.”

“Because I have to!” I blurted out, then brought my hands to my mouth.

He didn’t say anything. He simply looked at me, waiting, as if there was something more to say. When I expected him to say something, he didn’t. He just stayed silent. Waiting and waiting, until the silence of it all threatened to pierce through my brain.

“You wouldn’t understand!” I screamed.

“Make me understand Chloe, because I’m damn good at reading people but I have no idea how the fuck to read this.”

“Because I’m not good enough!” I don’t know why I was saying all of this. Why was I saying this to him of all people? “And maybe if I...” I placed a hand to the crease of my brow, trying to massage away the tension that took residence there. “Maybe if I save another life or if I do enough... if I’m good enough then I could...”

I looked out the window. I looked at the floor. I stared anywhere but up at him. “If I work hard enough, then maybe I could...” I didn’t even know where to end that sentence, so I tried something else. “Asa is special.”

“Who did this to you?” he asked, his head tilting a little to the side.

With one strong movement, he pulled off the covers, and stood up, his body on full display apart from the tight boxer briefs that covered his arse, though it did nothing to hide the manhood that stood erect.

“Who made you think you weren’t good enough?” he asked.

His words didn’t register. I was too busy staring at his display of... attraction. I had to pry my eyes away, and felt the blush creep up my cheeks again. Why did he have this effect on me? No one ever made my skin heat like this.

I shook my head. I wasn’t going to tell. But then he stepped closer to me. His skin smelled like coconut, like the scent of sunrays on a redwood tree. His shadow fell over me, and I

struggled not to collapse into him, and place my cheek on his naked chest.

“Tell me, little Sunflower.” He placed a finger under my chin, tilting it up so that I looked right into those brown eyes. He wasn’t too much taller than me. But there was something about his presence that felt massive. Like there was a power behind him that could match the greatest ocean storm. “Tell me who made you feel this way.”

I knew the answer, but I didn’t want to say. I think he knew it too, but he needed to hear me say it. A tear fell down my cheek.

“Don’t cry, Sunflower,” he said against my skin, letting his breath spread out into the stubborn curls that always fell over my face. “So beautiful that it makes me want to break whoever made those tears happen.”

Chapter 28

Leo

I pulled away, and looked at her large, golden eyes, the way a slight blush colored her cheeks and reddened her lips, and the graceful, fat tears that raced down her cheek. So gorgeous, and vulnerable. So intimate and rare. This was a beauty worth dying for.

“Tell me who did this to you, and I’ll make them pay. I’ll make them see the error of their ways.” I kissed her forehead, and the wrinkle between her brows. “I will do anything to make you happy, especially when you look like this.”

If she wept and told me to conquer a small country, I would. If she cried and ordered me to slaughter an army with my bare hands, I’d ask her if she wanted me to bring back a trophy. If she looked at me with unshed tears and asked me to spill my blood, I’d ask her which artery she’d like me to cut open.

She wiped her flat palm over her cheeks to erase the wetness there. But still, the blush remained.

“My sister,” she said with a sad laugh.

I should have expected that answer. A small part of me had. But it was still tough to hear.

“Sisters can be hell,” I finally said.

She looked at me and raised her brow. I couldn’t help but smile. She may not know Lea well, but you only had to be in her presence for a moment to know that she was the embodiment of chaos.

I waited, letting her think. Waiting for her to make the right choice, and tell me what I needed to know.

“She used to say that there was no greater aim than to *be* good and *do* good,” she finally said. She tried to tilt her head away to break our contact, but I pinched her chin harder, keeping her in place. “For years, I thought she dumped me in a boarding school because I had been bad. Maybe she found out that I had seen this wounded bird in the park.” Her lips began to curve down. “It was this fat, dirty looking sparrow. And I wanted to stop and help. But I didn’t because I knew my sister would be home early and I wanted to see her.”

She took a deep breath. I watched her chest rise and fall as she tries to steady herself. My poor sweet Sunflower.

“I got home to an empty house, news that my father was in the hospital and that my sister was sending me to a boarding school in Switzerland.”

Ah, the everlasting logic of a child’s mind in trauma. It’s false connections that cement and become permanent bonds that

shackle it to the past.

My Sunflower was human after all.

I pulled her face towards me, and she didn't resist, folding into me as I wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

"I understand." I tucked her head into the crook of my neck. "But that's not what happened. Not stopping to help a bird isn't why your sister pulled away."

"Then why did she?" The force of the wailed question took me by surprise. "I know that it's probably not the reason, but then what is?"

I felt her fingers crawl along my shirt, tugging and griping it to pull us closer together.

"I'll find out, Sunflower. I will. I promise."

Calissandra Davenport was now on my shit list.

I kissed Chloe deep, delving my tongue into her lips. I wasn't kidding when I said that if I kissed her, after all that we experienced, that she'd become mine. That I'd never let her go. And that meant that she was mine to protect as well. Not just because I was hired to - though that was a great way to justify it - but because it was not a part of my fiber to do so.

Her problems were my problems. Her pain was my pain. And it was my job to make sure that she was safe, protected. From herself, and others.

"Pack your bags, Sunflower." I placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. "We'll handle getting the jet ready."

She scrunched her nose.

“Do you want to get there fast, or do you want to get there environmentally friendly?”

She pursed her lips.

“If we do this, do you promise we can take some time to plant... something?” She pursed her lips to the side, one cheek bunching outward. “Or... I don’t know. I can’t think right now. My head is...”

“You’re going through a lot.” I told her. I cupped her face in my hands. “Your sister, whatever is happening in Donostria. All of it.”

I kissed her nose again. While I was deeply fond of the sweet, warm flavor that existed between her thighs, there was something wonderful about being able to give her a simple, chaste kiss on the tip of that adorable, upturned nose.

“I’m keeping score of everything, so you don’t have to,” I promised. That meant that I knew about her sister, her past, the carbon emissions. I’d keep all of it in my mind, so that she wouldn’t have to deal with it.

I don’t know what it’s like to think your sister abandoned you. There were times I wished my sister would leave me the fuck alone. The little parasite was as impossible to get rid of as a spider monkey on my back. At least until Callum.

Now, she had flown the coop. I had all of this bandwidth left over to give to someone else. To someone who needed it. To someone so worthy of all my attention. Someone who saved

lives, instead of took them. And I could use a little bit more of that in my existence.

I got her ready, careful to hover near her, to give her direction as the events of the past twenty-four hours frequently fogged her brain and froze her mid-movement. A slight touch, a whispered bit of encouragement, and she'd come back. Still dazed, but moving.

The car ride wasn't much better. She was somewhere deep in her mind, her eyes distant. She reminded me of a wilted flower.

We got to the terminal, and I was surprised to see Landry waiting on his flight, heading through security. He gave me a nod. He even smiled at Chloe, who didn't smile back. In fact, I don't think she even noticed him.

Landry said nothing to us, but simply walked by, bumping my shoulder as he went. I felt something heavy land in my pocket. A classic bump-pass. A spy tactic to send messages.

I didn't look at it at that moment. If he was trying to pass a message secretly, I'd fuck it up by just pulling it out and reading it right now.

I waited to get on the plane, where a pilot and crew awaited us. Alastair was unavailable for the flight, so they had to hire a pilot.

We were taking off on the silver plane before I reached into my pocket to find the message.

“Stake out. Alfred Crawley. Meet at Daara, St J.”

He was inviting me out on a date.

He should buy a guy a drink first... I thought with a wry smile.

We were going to spy on Laurent Media's Donostria liaison at the Daara, a word derived from Madrasa, or *school*. It was where a Mu'desseur would house the boys under his care, under the auspices of giving them a religious education. The very boys that Chloe was trying to save.

Fascinating.

Chloe fell asleep on the flight, sprawled on two seats, her legs curled up in the fetal position. I placed my jacket over her, hoping it would help ease her mind and body for a moment.

With any luck, she'd sleep the day away, and be refreshed for our arrival.

Hugo sat on his own, his fingers interlaced in front of him as he stared out the window. Instead of the usual placidness, his eyes were hard, wrinkling at the corners. Whatever he was imagining, it wasn't good. He looked like he was about to stab someone in the face.

I took the seat across from him. I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it.

"What's the plan?" he asked.

I narrowed my eyes.

"You have to do the thinking for both of us," he said. "My mind is very, very dark right now. I cannot be trusted."

He looked at me. Not only was his mind dark, but his eyes were too. Like bottomless black pits, with no soul underneath it all.

“My first instinct will be to kill.” He leaned forward. “So you have to make the choices now, *chef*.”

I was the boss. I suppose this was the whole point of having a team. It was more of a collective, rather than a hierarchy. Peer leadership, more than linear. People would take turns leading with a seamless ease.

It was a strange concept. Certainly, different from the military, and absolutely unlike my relationship with my sister. Where she led, I followed to clean up her mess.

“I think we have a plan...”

Chapter 29

Chloe

Hélios House was dark. The gray skies and heavy rains didn't help. It left great puddles on the orange and red earth. The puddles reflected the red sunset sky back at us, looking like a frightening, ethereal version of itself. We may as well have been on Mars.

Children, as always, were running up and down the street playing. They jumped around the mud puddles and yelled at the taxis that sprayed them on the sidewalk, their wheels causing a huge wave of red water as they sped by.

Hugo and Leo had an SUV, which they assured me had been armored.

At the bottom steps of the house, Leo let go of my hand for the first time since I woke up on the plane.

"I have to go do something," he said, as he kissed my cheek.
"Hugo will protect you."

I reached for his hand again. I wanted to ask him to stay, but I couldn't. A small whine left my throat, as I tried to pull him back to me.

He placed a calloused hand on the side of my cheek, swiping his thumb across my lips. "I'll be back, I promise," he kissed my forehead. Then my brow. Then the tip of my nose.

"No," I managed to whisper. "If you go, I won't see you again."

That farewell feeling was overwhelming. The one where no one would ever come back. That I'd be alone forever. That people would disappear and never return because they didn't want to. He wouldn't want me when he came back.

"It's all in your head," he said, squeezing my face between his palms. "Look at me."

I did. Right into his chocolate eyes.

"I'm always going to be there for you," he said with eyes so bright that it was hard to look away. "I'm never leaving you. You understand?"

I nodded, because he was going to go no matter what I said. I couldn't keep him here. It was mad to think I could.

I expected him to get into the SUV, but he didn't. Instead, he stepped to the street, and started walking.

"Wait! Where is he going?" I asked as Hugo grabbed my arm and led me into Hélios House, to a waiting Rabia.

"Work," Hugo grunted.

“But... but...”

“Leave him alone, Chloe.” He shook his head like I was some kind of misbehaving child. “He knows what he’s doing.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw a boy running up the street, his little sandals thwacking against the pavement.

“How do you know that?”

“Because he’s the most capable man I know,” he said. “And that includes every other man in Caledonia Security.”

With a sweeping gesture, he indicated that I lead the way into Hélios House. A group of boys, laughing, and skipping came to us. Hugo yelled at them to stay away. One of them slapped a piece of paper on my stomach. Probably an advert of some kind. I held it against my skin, as the boy ran off.

“You shouldn’t let them so close to you,” Hugo said with a shake of his head. “They’ll pick your pockets clean.”

I scoffed. I had no pockets to pick. I never did when I traveled. My money and other things were in a pouch kept under my shirt, and strapped to my belly. It was the only way to travel.

Hugo and I marched up the white steps to the grand wooden door. I looked over my shoulder, but Leo had disappeared. I wished I had the presence of mind to tell him to be careful. But I hadn’t.

Rabia came before me, hands on her hips.

“Chloe, I don’t think you should have come back,” she fluttered her hands before wiping her face. “Boys run away.

He'll probably come back on his own."

That sinking feeling in my gut returned. The kind of squeezing emptiness that told me she was wrong. I have no emotional instincts. I know that. I rely on logic, and mathematics. But in *this*, I knew she was wrong. I knew that Asa was out there, and that he was in trouble, and it was my fault. I needed to get him back. I needed my boy back. I needed him in my arms because he was special.

There were no battles before or after. Just this.

I finally realized I had a piece of paper in my hand, still held against my belly. When I peeled it off, I froze. It wasn't an advert after all. It was a handwritten note.

"Asa is at the Daara. Bring \$10,000, or you'll get him piece by piece. Tonight, you'll get his hand. Tomorrow, his head. Tell no one."

The scrawl was elegant. In English. And professional. These weren't the scratches of the Mu'desseur. I was sure of it.

Tell no one.

I crumpled the paper in my hand. I suppose I could get \$10,000. I doubt they'd accept some kind of card payment. A bank transfer? I don't know. I just knew that I couldn't show up with a suitcase full of bills.

I could trade my life for his. Yes. That would be enough, surely. That was what they truly wanted, right? Me. That was why they attacked my taxi. I knew that whoever was running Seydi must also be the same person who tried to attack me. It

was all coming together. And in the center of all these events was me. Just as Leo said it was.

Well, if I turned myself over to them, then no one else would get hurt.

“Are you okay?” Rabia asked.

I nodded. “I just need to lie down.”

I had to get rid of Hugo. The only way to do that was to go to my room, and to sneak out like a thief in the night. Hugo couldn't be a part of this.

I needed to do good. And to do that, I had to give myself up.

Chapter 30

Leo

The reptile, Landry, was obscured in a nearby cafe. I barely would have noticed him. The man was great at hiding in plain sight. Something about his posture, and the way he hunched his shoulders forward, hiding in the seat, and drawing eyes away from him made him easy to overlook. The man could be a walking neutral tone.

But I knew that tan keffiyeh. I had fixated on it when I held a knife at his throat.

It did cross my mind that he'd consider getting revenge for the damage I did to his neck, but I don't think he's the kind to hold a grudge. Or to have feelings. The man had the emotional depth of kiddie pool.

I silently took a seat beside him, and he didn't acknowledge me. He just kept on sipping from his little glass tea cup.

"The kid the good doctor rescued is in there," he said as if he was talking about the weather. "My little birdies tell me he

was kidnapped from the Hélios House.”

“Shit,” I said under my breath, plastering on a smile that didn’t match what was happening inside of me. “They definitely lured her back here.”

“And I’m sure she’ll get a message soon, if she hasn’t already.”

“Is that why you brought me here?” I raised my finger to the woman behind the counter. I pointed to Landry’s tea, indicating I’d like one of my own.

I leaned over the little plastic table. We were obscured by the phone cards, burner phones, and assortments of postcards on sale in this little shop. There was a row of red Gauloise cigarettes hanging on one corner.

“Human nature is a predictable, and sad thing,” Landry said, putting his tea cup down on the saucer. “She’s going to come in, probably ready to sacrifice herself. She’ll probably ditch that guard too. The burly French one. What was his name?”

“Hugo,” I supplied. “No, I don’t think she’ll ditch him.”

“You never saw how she looked at this kid,” Landry said with a slight, smug smirk. “I bet her ovaries exploded the moment she saw him.”

I considered punching him in the throat for talking about her ovaries.

Then I saw her. Her cargo pants did nothing to hide the shapeliness of her hips even though they were a size too big. Her brown shirt had faded through use, now taking on a more

taupe color. It was buttoned up to her neck, and the rain pelted down on her.

“Right on time.” I didn’t like Landry’s smug little face.

We huddled together, hiding ourselves from her view, though it didn’t matter. She was so concentrated on the Daara that she wouldn’t have noticed us anyway. God bless her single-mindedness.

I’d have to punish my little Sunflower’s disobedience later. Still, I admired her selflessness.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something move, ducking behind a building.

“You were wrong too,” I said with my own shit-eating grin. “Hugo’s here.”

Landry took a casual glance over his shoulder. There was the briefest pause in his scan when his eyes landed on the burly Hugo, leaning against a wall, looking at his watch. Then he resumed his scan and turned back to me.

“Well, it seems we were both a little bit right.”

“You were also a little bit wrong.”

“So were you.” He was a little more sour about it than I was, but it wasn’t the time to argue with the reptile.

We watched as Chloe went up to the building and knocked on the door.

“Are you carrying?” he asked casually.

“Of course,” I said, lightly tapping on the side of my shirt. I had two Glockes tucked into my shirt. “So is Hugo.”

“Good,” he said, leaning back, and he tapped his camera bag, indicating that he had a weapon in there.

“Shock and Awe?” I asked, lifting a brow.

“I think that’s the best method, but we should wait a moment, and get your man in.”

“No need,” I took a sip of the tea.

There’s a certain faith that happens when you work with NATO countries. Particularly when it’s the Five Eyes or the five English speaking nations, minus Ireland who have a strict policy about neutrality.

There are just certain things we all do alike. Rank structures, standard operating procedures, and military operations in urban warfare, or MOUT. We were all trained to clear a room in the same way. That training would come in handy today.

“He’ll follow our lead. I’m going straight for Chloe. You two get the rest.” I stood up, the plastic chair rattling against the harsh, cement floor.

“Done.”

Chapter 31

Chloe

The look Ousmane Seydi gave me when he opened the door made me want to peel my skin off. His cigarette-stained teeth grinned at me. I noticed that the roots were rotted. I quietly hoped that they got infected and went to his bones.

When I walked, I felt the blade I stowed in my hip pocket. It wasn't anything special. Just something I found in the kitchen when I was getting a glass of water. A steak knife. It was unsheathed, and the serrated edge was sharp, even through the lining of my pocket.

Seydi stepped out of the way, gesturing for me to go into the darkened room.

I mentally braced myself.

It was dark inside. The same murky darkness that had haunted me in the past. There were voices. Children's. They were whispering about in the corners I couldn't see, like spirits I couldn't touch.

I wanted to scream. But I couldn't. As always, I was frozen. Unmoving. Like a deer caught in the road.

Someone flicked on a light. My boy was in a plastic chair, tied with duct tape. His arm... oh God, the arm that had been in a cast was bent in the middle of his forearm.

A tear went down my face.

Boys - *just children* - hovered around him. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I *knew* they were awful. I knew that they were taunting him. Teasing him. Their cruelty made me sick. Children aren't inherently cruel. They are *taught* to hate and hurt. That is what Seydi did. These boys weren't responsible for their actions. That evil Seydi was.

"Hello, Doctor Laurent," a malicious, American voice said.

I looked around, searching for the source. I don't think I had ever heard this voice before. It didn't ring with familiarity.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"You probably don't know me. But I certainly know you." He dramatically stepped out of the shadows, his shined leather loafers gliding across the dirty floor. Still, his face was cloaked in darkness.

I hated that Seydi put children in these types of surroundings. The unswept, damp, rotten floor made me want to puke. No wonder the children weren't bathed or cared for.

Poor Asa's mouth was duct taped closed. But even a broken arm didn't stop the determination in those eyes. He looked up at me, and it was full of will and aggression, and total faith

that I would get him out of here. His nostrils flared as he gave me a small nod.

If only I had such faith in myself.

“Let him go,” I said to the disembodied voice.

Why the fuck did this man have to be so dramatic? And why did these theatrics have such an effect on me?

They don't know you have a blade. At least that's something. At least I can still surprise them.

“We will,” the man in shadow stepped forward again, his face coming into the light that streamed from the window. I recognized him then. He was thin, with a mole on his neck, and a black goatee that lined his lips, twisting up in a cruel sneer. “Or, at least, we’ll get him out of here. Do you know how much people are willing to pay for a young, healthy boy?”

His name was Alfred Crawley, and he worked for Laurent Media. For *my* family’s media company. How dare he!

“Not as much as they pay for girls,” he said. “But it doesn’t matter. Money is money, right?” He brought his hand up, brandishing a small pistol in his limp-wristed hand. “You’ve been hurting our bottom line.”

I raised my chin. This was not my first time staring down the barrel of a gun. I suspected it wouldn’t be my last.

“I will do as you say, if you untie the boy, and let him out the front door,” I said, expanding my demands. I looked down at Asa, whose brow furrowed in concern. He had the smarts to

run. If nothing else, I knew he had a sense of self-preservation. If he got out the door, he could have a fighting chance.

“No can do,” he said. “Supply us the money, and be a good girl...”

“*Va tu faire foutre!*” I sneered. *Go fuck yourself!*

“Wrong answer, bitch!” his hand extended, his wrist straightened.

Everything moved slowly, even though it happened all at once.

The door behind me burst open, showering the room with light. A body moved in front of me, knocking me to the floor. Alfred Crawley’s finger tightened on the trigger of his silver pistol.

Seydi, still standing by the open door was punched in the face by a man entering the space. He screamed, “*Putain!*” then fell to the floor in a bloody mess.

The children ran out of the room, filing out the door in a screaming rush. Another weapon fired, I didn’t know from where, and Crawley fell backwards, his leg giving out beneath him, breaking as he fell to the ground.

“Get down motherfucker!” This was a British voice. One I recognized. Everest Landry.

“This one is dead,” said a voice with a French accent. Hugo. From the corner of my eye, I saw his bloodied fist as he got up from beside Ousmaine Seydi.

He rushed over to Asa, unbinding his broken arm as delicately as he could. It took longer for me to realize that the body above me was bleeding. I pushed it, and with a grunt, Leo rolled off. He was wheezing, his chest rising and falling unevenly. One side of his chest was compressed, and his eyes bulged. He was losing air.

“*Merde!*” I whimpered, my hands coming to his chest. It was a tension pneumothorax. Colloquially known as a “sucking chest wound”. It occurs when a projectile punctures the chest, creating a new pathway for air to enter, pushing air into the chest cavity outside of the lungs. It crushes the lungs, and prevents the patient from breathing.

But it had a fast remedy, I just needed to find something...

He was going pale. His lips turning blue. His eyes bulged unnaturally. On instinct, I searched for an exit wound. There was none. I only had one hole to plug. I looked around for... something, anything. I needed something airtight to plug his wound.

Each shallow breath he took collapsed his lungs further.

“Is he alright?” said Landry.

“*Ta gueule!*” I ordered. I needed to think. *Shut the fuck up!*

Then I remembered the container that housed my money and identification under my shirt. I lifted it, and pulled it down, the ties breaking with the effort. I opened the container, dumped the cash, and pushed the plastic lining apart. I pulled the knife from my pocket and cut it to the right side. I put it over the

wound, and as I expected, his intake of breath started to suck the plastic into his chest cavity, which prevented more air from entering. That would help.

“Does someone have a pen?” I yelled.

“Yes,” Landry said, going into his pocket, pulling out a ball point pen.

He must have known what I was doing, because he took the pen apart, pulling out the ink pieces and leaving me only the outer shell. I took it from his hand. I only had one hand to work with, as my palm was occupied trying to keep the plastic over the hole on his chest. I kept one small opening on the square plastic so that air was allowed to escape, but it just couldn't reenter and further deflate his lungs.

This next bit would be delicate. I needed to find the third intercostal space. I turned my hand so that the edge of the knife went into the flesh. It only takes about a pound and a half of pressure to get through skin and muscle if you have a sharp object like this.

I pushed, my hand shaking with the effort, until I heard the sudden pop as it went into the chest cavity. Then I pulled the knife out.

This was all incredibly unsanitary, but one can fight off an infection. One cannot survive without air.

I tossed the knife aside, and took the pen's casing and pierced it into the hole.

The whooshing sound of air exiting his chest cavity was immediate. With a loud, wheezing inhale, color immediately returned to Leo's cheeks. His chest evened out, and his eyes settled back into their sockets.

A small body came and clashed into me. Asa. His good arm wrapped around my neck as he placed his face in into my hair.

"Hugo, can you... can you give him a splint?" I watched as the two men looked around for a stick, or anything else they could use to stabilize the boy's poor arm. They found a broom. Hugo brought it down over his bent knee, breaking it into four pieces.

Landry took off his keffiyeh and the two of them started working on treating the boy.

Leo blinked, his pupils came back to their normal size.

With my hand on the wound on his chest, I caressed his face. "Leo?"

"Thanks, Doc," he said between gasps.

"Leo," I felt a tear fall down my cheek. "We have to get you out of here. Get you to the clinic. I can treat you there."

"I have a car nearby," Landry said, as he was tying Asa's new splint around his neck. "It'll be a tight squeeze, but it'll do."

He disappeared out through the door. The sky was turning dark, but for the streetlights outside.

This was the second time Leo had gotten shot for me.

“Hey, Doc,” Leo’s voice was so weak, I could barely hear him. I leaned down, putting my face near his mouth. “Told you I’d always be there.”

He juttred his face up, lifting his head off the ground and placed a kiss on my cheek. Then he leaned back down, his eyes flitting closed as the strength left his body.

“Leo,” I said on a whisper, as another tear went down my face. “I love you.”

Chapter 32

Leo

The greatest thing I have ever done was take a bullet for Chloe Marie Laurent.

There is no greater feeling than to *be* good and *do* good. That's what she told me. And the most good I have done, was to stand bodily between an angel like her, and the evil that encircled her.

I'm not religious. But surely, there's a place in heaven for a person like Chloe. And maybe this act of good can pave my way to the good place, if she puts in a word for me.

"Leo? *Leve-toi, mon cher.*" A voice was calling me home.
Wake up, my love.

I always knew that if something was going to lead me home, the angel to shepherd me would be French. I had known that from the moment I showed up in Kemet, and an angry voice swore up a storm, screaming at armed men to get out of her way if they wanted to keep their balls. With that threat, she ran

towards a woman, one of the many Kemet refugees, who had collapsed with her arms around her swollen, pregnant belly.

From that moment, I knew that my purpose in life would be to assist her. To enable her to do good. Never had my purpose been so clear than in that moment.

“Leve-toi, Leo,” that voice again, bidding me to wake up.

Then beeps, and the scent of Pine-Sol and un-scented Clorox wipes called me back to my senses.

“There you are, you lazy pig.” Shit. That was my sister’s voice. I wasn’t dead and going to heaven. I was probably heading to hell if she was there.

I groaned, as the fog of heaven started fading like the morning mist burning off into blue sky.

“Don’t talk to him like that!” Chloe’s voice was even, but stern. “He’s injured.”

“He’s fine,” my sister said back. “He’s faking it.”

“How dare you!” There was a stomping sound, and I almost smiled, imagining Chloe stomping that angry right foot of hers.

“He’s been a lazy shit since the womb, I promise you.” My sister wasn’t teasing me, so much as she was trying to piss off Chloe. I wanted to open my mouth to get her to stop, but my muscles weren’t cooperating.

With my new awareness came the feel of pain in my chest. I was shot. Huh. Funny how I remember that now.

“He’s a fucking hero!” Chloe was rising to my defense. I kinda liked it. “If I had a sister like you, I would... I would...”

“You do have a sister.” Lea was crossing the line now, and I knew I had to step in before she really pissed off Chloe. “Care to tell us about that part of the family tree?”

“None of your business,” I croaked out.

I was able to pry one eye open, but the light was so bright that I shut it again.

“There he is!” My sister said with a small laugh. “Sorry Doc Laurent. Used to be that the quickest way to get him off his ass was for me to get in trouble.”

Truer words were never spoken. I felt wheezy as I said, “She got in trouble a lot.”

“Now, it looks like the quickest way to spur him into action is to get *you* in trouble.” I could *hear* the smartass expression on her voice. “Cute, right?”

“I don’t think I like you,” said Chloe.

“Me neither,” I agreed.

“How dare you!” Lea said, not offended at all.

“Get out.” My voice was so hoarse, I felt like I was talking through sand paper. Like I had smoked a pack a day since birth.

“Well!” My sister exclaimed. I swear, I could still hear her smiling, being a little pest as always. “I know where I’m not

wanted!” She huffed and her footsteps sounded on the floor, retreating out of the room.

Did she really leave? That was way too easy. She was up to something.

“Make sure she’s not lighting anyone on fire.” Or, fuck it, let her light people on fire. She was Callum’s problem now.

“We should get you to Donaville,” Chloe said, as I was finally able to open my eyes to look at her. “Then back to Britain, or even Switzerland or America so you can recuperate.”

“Where will you be?”

“I will help here. Rabia will be taking on all of Ousmane Seydi’s Talibés,” she said, her voice already tired. “I’ll help them with the transition, and we have to double the staff.” Her face cleared up in front of my eyes. She leaned over me, her golden eyes radiating sunshine and warmth. “And I don’t think Asa can stay here. Not after that monster made the other children hurt him.” She looked away for a moment, before her eyes came back to me. “I’ve started talking to lawyers to start the adoption process. He’ll be coming home with me...”

She straightened. She took one hand and started scratching her arm. Nervous tick, maybe?

“I know you didn’t sign up for it, so I understand that this changes things between us.”

Jesus Christ, she really didn’t think much of me, did she?

“I’ll recuperate right here.”

“What?” She looked around the small room that served as a clinic. It was more suited to treat broken bones, and knee scrapes, than a chest wound. “I only managed to get the bullet out of you by the narrowest margins. And only because your sister rushed over with supplies and assisted... I can’t take care of you here.”

“You don’t need to. I can take care of myself.” I raised my hand to see the IV poking from my forearm. “I’m a nurse, remember?” Then I smirked, remembering that she said my sister rushed here. “It’s about time Lea did something useful.”

I was kidding, of course. Despite appearances, I did love my sister. I had no desire to be an only child, no matter how much I said otherwise.

“Yes, but you’re a rotten patient,” she narrowed her eyes.

“I recovered from my leg wound just fine,” I rolled my eyes.

“In my medical opinion, it is better that you go to a bigger city for your recovery,” she said, her face placid.

“And in your personal opinion?” I asked, lifting a brow.

“My... personal opinion? I don’t... think that’s relevant...”

“Not relevant?” I asked, feeling resentment bubbling in my chest where my lung had collapsed. There was an ache in my thigh from the bullet I had taken there too. An ache I would feel for the rest of my life. But she wasn’t going to budge, was she? No matter how many bullets I took for her, she’d be as impersonal as ever. “Or is it because you don’t care?”

She froze, her hand hovering over the edge of my bed, her eyes wide.

“Chloe, I have pursued you from the moment I could tell you the truth about my occupation,” I said, slowly. Not because she was dense, but because this was my last chance. This had to be my last time pursuing her, because as Hugo said, going after a woman who won’t be yours is where madness lies. And I didn’t want to be mad. “If you don’t feel the same, then...”

I’m not sure what I’d do if she didn’t reciprocate, actually. She had occupied my thoughts from the moment she was drunk on her last birthday and I made the mistake of believing I could be anything but alone. The moment I became obsessed with the feel of her hair, the taste of her skin...

“I avoided you after your last birthday because I knew I couldn’t tell you the truth,” I said, feeling the clawing ache around my heart, and it wasn’t from the wound. “That’s not an obstacle now. But if you want me to leave you alone, I will. I’ll leave right now.”

I tried to sit up, but she shot forward, putting her hands on my chest. “It’s too soon to get up... You should...”

“No, I think it’s a perfect time for me to get up and leave, if...” I grunted, trying to turn onto my good side so I could do the fifteen-step process of getting to my feet.

“Please, stop.” She was frozen again. Her hands open at her sides, her limbs shaking as she looked down at the floor. “I... I can’t read people well. I can’t understand everything that people mean when they don’t say it with words. I can’t

understand the subtext. Please. Give me a moment. I... I'm trying..."

"It's a simple question, Chloe," I said, looking down at the same spot on the floor she was. It was a random space, just in front of her toe. Unremarkable, gray cement. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

She shook her head. I could see the sway of her curls with the movement. "No."

I let out a sigh of relief. Though, it wasn't quite complete. The silence dragged between us, and she didn't move. She was like an animal, scared of a predator in the darkness.

"I love you, Chloe," I said, and she flinched. But I couldn't bring myself to look at her face. Not yet. "Do you feel the same way about me?"

A drop of moisture fell from her face, landing on the cement floor, splashing into a little, darkened circle.

The trembling of her legs spread to her torso, then to her hands. But still I couldn't look up at her face because I didn't know if that was from an emotion that led to - *no, I don't want you. You're a killer. A brute...*

"I don't want children," her voice was as light as air. "Asa is one thing, but I don't want to carry my own."

"Probably a good thing, since twins run in my family."

"I haven't had a permanent home since I graduated from Cambridge."

“I live with my parents,” I scoffed. “Or my sister.”

“I don’t know how I feel about marriage ...”

“It’s really only good for insurance purposes.”

“I have no family.”

“I have plenty to spare.”

A second tear dropped onto the ground beside the first. I traced my eyes up to her hand, her fingers splayed and trembling. Up her slender arm, to her shoulder where her thick curls shook. To her face, where two trails of tears left a shine on her skin.

“Do you love me?” I finally asked. But because I was a coward, and because I wanted her so badly, I amended my question: “Can you love me?”

She started shaking so hard, I wasn’t sure if I should grab her and hold her still. I didn’t even know if I could get out of bed to be the man to hold her. But I’d try. It was in my soul to try.

It was several minutes before I realized that her trembling wasn’t just from the shaking of her body, and whatever was roiling inside her mind. She was nodding. She was nodding emphatically.

“Say it, Chloe,” I whispered. I didn’t want to *need* to hear it. I just did. “Say it.”

“Yes.” It sounded like a whimper. “Yes, I love you.”

Movement for her started all at once. She lunged forward, collapsing into my arms, and I grunted at her impact. She

flinched away.

“I’m sorry!” she cried. “Oh God, I didn’t mean to hurt you!”

“Hurt me,” I said, wrapping my arms around her, and lying back onto the bed so she fell on top of me. “It reassures me that you’re alive, and safe.”

“I’m always getting you hurt,” she whispered.

“Stop getting into trouble, and it won’t be an issue anymore.”

“What if I keep getting in trouble?” There was a weird strain on her voice. She was baring herself for me. “Will you grow tired of me?”

“I’m not like your sister,” I tell her, though I was starting to believe that something very different was happening with her sister. Especially after my chat with Hugo. “If I haven’t disowned Lea after the shit she’s done, I think you’re quite safe.”

She laughed. “Is she really that bad?”

“You have no idea.” I ran my hand through those curls that I loved so much. “But you’ll learn.”

Chapter 33

Chloe

We didn't have to stay in Donostria long. I was disappointed, but it was so clear that Rabia didn't need me there after I examined and treated each child for maladies from malnourishment and unsanitary living conditions. She had picked out staff from the local families. Many teachers stepped forward to teach the children, and there were more women offering to do overnight shifts to ensure that each child was cared for.

Nightmares were common for many. So was sleep disruption, and a fixation on food. Hungry bellies will always feel hungry, and they'd need to be helped through all of that.

But not by me. And that was alright.

Well, not alright. I wish I could have been more useful, but Rabia put her foot down and let me know that my presence would take too much of everyone's attention and undermine

local solutions – the only solution that would have any real lasting effect.

So, Leo and I left for Strathlachlan, to the solitude of the Highlands. He was recuperating in their in-house clinic. His sister and I took turns taking care of him, and I was getting used to her rather acerbic brand of affection.

But there was still something I had to get off my chest. Something that had weighed down on my mind so much that I couldn't let it go.

So I barged into the Caledonia Security offices.

“She still won't answer my calls.” The men had renovated an old carriage house. I say “men” because until Lea joined their ranks, they had always been male. I suppose I should start using a more gender-neutral term.

The carriage house was like the inside of a spaceship. There were screens on the walls, and six cubicles with their own three screens facing the middle of the room. At the center was a conference table.

So, this was where they worked when they weren't jumping out of planes or rescuing me from criminals?

“Who?” Geordie popped his head up from behind his screens, his brown hair styled with mousse. Probably Pippa's doing.

“My sister.” I looked right at Hugo when I said her name. “Calissandra Melody Laurent Davenport.”

Hugo tensed, and he shut his laptop, blackening the screens around him.

“Anything to say?” I stepped toward Hugo.

He shrugged, but said nothing. His placid nature was absolutely infuriating!

“What don’t I know?” I tried to loom over him, but even in his chair, we were at eye level.

He tapped his finger on his armrest, as if he was contemplating something. But his face didn’t change. Not in ways that I could see, at least.

“Tell me what’s going on with my sister.” I tried to be commanding. Like Pippa, or Lea, or any of the other women who could make these men sit up and come to heel. “She looked terrified. I have a right to know.”

Hugo nodded at this. The movement was slight, but I did catch it, because I was trying very hard to read his face.

“I agree with you, Doctor Laurent.” He then shrugged again. “But you should talk to her about it.”

“How can I when she doesn’t answer my calls?” I waved my phone in the air to emphasize my point.

“When you see her in person.” He was so flat and matter of fact in his delivery that it was making me madder.

“Venice was the first time I had seen her in 25 years!” I screamed. “Tell me what I need to know.”

Hugo didn’t look angry that I yelled at him. He simply shrugged as if we were talking about the weather.

He stared at me and just blinked. I couldn't detect a feeling or a thought in that face of his. He was silent for so long that I almost thought he hadn't heard me.

Then he shook his head. "I cannot betray her like that."

"She was terrified," I said.

"Yes." His voice was so calm it was eerie. "She has spent the last twenty-five years of her life in one form of terror or another." He clenched one fist, though his feelings did not extend to his face. "If I could rescue her right now, I would. I would bring her here and protect her, but I cannot!" His voice rose with his growing fury. I stepped back. "But *she* has to ask me for help. And I have waited for ten years for her call, and I am still waiting!"

I stepped back even more when he finally pushed off the armrests and came to his full height. Hugo was massive, his brooding face darkening as he continued to speak.

"You think you've suffered when you didn't hear from her?" He took a fist and beat his chest over his heart. "I *know* what she has gone through. And I have watched and waited as she suffered."

"Then how do we help her?" I screamed at him, waving my arms around like a crazy person.

"You don't! You sit, and you wait." He stepped forward, until we were eye to eye. I felt like David trying to stand up to Goliath. "You wait, just like me until *she* calls for us."

The story continues in [Unleash Hades: A Stalker Romance](#)

Epilogue

Two months later

Strathlachlan, Scotland

“When will you get married?” Nanay said, as Tatay sat with Asa as they looked at a picture together.

“*Ano ba ito?*” my father asked in Tagalog. What is this?

“*Ang baka ito,*” Asa said with no hint of an accent. *This is a cow.*

We were staying with my sister in Scotland. Since their kids moved overseas, my parents decided that they would retire, and travel. Mostly out here, to see Asa, and to check on Lea’s growing bump. They were determined to teach everyone Tagalog – the baffled Callum included. Ever heard Tagalog spoken with a Scottish accent? It was not pretty...

Chloe and I had decided that St. Michael’s was the best place for Asa, but we wouldn’t want to put him in boarding school. I put my foot down on that. A boy like him needed the consistency of parents, who would tuck him in, bathe him, and

be attentive to his needs. He needed parents, and not some dorm mother.

We'd buy a house in Switzerland and enroll him in the day school, which meant he'd come home to us each night. Chloe would time her volunteering in Donostria so that I'd be home, and I, in turn, would stay with them when I wasn't running missions for Caledonia Security.

One home. One family. That was our decision.

The chalet we purchased was almost ready, and we'd move in before Asa started kindergarten.

"Nanay, I already told you that we're not getting married," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Is that so?" Callum said from his seat at the head of the table, raising a brow at me. "You're okay with that, Cabbage?"

"Of course," she said with a smile. "It's just a contract anyway, isn't it?"

"But don't you want..." Callum looked perplexed. So did my mother.

Frankly, my father was taking it in stride better than anyone. "Marriage is nice, but not necessary. It is the commitment in your heart that matters."

My sister placed her hands on top of her growing belly. She had popped so early that she went in for a second scan. Sure enough – twins. And they had both flashed their genitals at the ultrasound tech the moment she had the wand over them. A boy and a girl.

“But you have a child together,” Nanay said, looking between me and Chloe, who she had instantly loved the moment she met her because... well... she’s a doctor. And there’s no profession she held in higher regard. When she was apprised of her humanitarian work, I swear, she was getting ready to draft a letter to the Pope to have Chloe canonized as a saint. Not that I disagreed with that sentiment.

“Papa,” Asa said, raising his head.

He reached out his arms to me, and I was so proud to say that his broken arm had healed nicely. He sometimes complained of a phantom pain. He’d wake up screaming that it was out of place, only to come to his senses, and realize that it was all a dream. He didn’t scream, though. Chloe and I often took shifts, just watching him sleep, happy to see that he was safe.

Some nights, though, when we were in bed, a weeping Asa would sneak into our room, crawling into the space between us. He’d hold on to his mother, his arms around her neck. She’d hug him back, and would quietly stroke his back until we heard his low, slow snoring. For now, a simple hug was enough for him, but I knew that therapy would be necessary at some point.

I walked around Callum’s huge table and picked Asa up from Tatay’s lap, and brought him back over to my seat and sat him on my left thigh. He started picking at the food on my plate.

He still had a food fixation which was common for someone in his circumstances. The boy could clean a plate like no one’s business. But it also meant that he was growing fast. He was

under weight when we adopted him, but he was rapidly catching up. I was sure that by the time he hit puberty, he'd be towering over me.

“We have no plans to get married,” I told them. “But if we change our minds, you'll be the first to know.”

Chloe blushed. I didn't understand that reaction. I looked at her and tilted my head. She smiled.

“I wouldn't mind, if...” She coughed, her face turning beet red. “I would not be opposed to the idea, if such a question were asked.”

What the hell was she saying? I wasn't sure because if she ever gave me the green light, I'd wife her up faster than she could say “I do”.

“What?” I said, lamely, bouncing Asa on my leg.

My sister rolled her eyes. “Propose, asshole.”

“Language!” I admonished, covering Asa's ears.

Lea stuck her tongue out at me, her hands caressing her bump.

I looked at Chloe, who looked at me from beneath her lowered lashes. God, her blush was cute as hell. Then she shrugged.

Holy shit. I was getting married. I just had to pick out a ring.

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About the Author

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