



THE
CORRUPT
EMPIRE

VOLUME ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AVA HARRISON

THE CORRUPT EMPIRE

VOLUME ONE

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The Corrupt Empire

Volume One

Ava Harrison

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THE CORRUPT EMPIRE

VOLUME ONE

AVA HARRISON

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Also by Ava Harrison

CORRUPT KINGDOM

DEDICATION

To my baby girl.
Be the kickass heroine in your own story.

EPIGRAPH

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

-Friedrich Nietzsche

PREFACE

*The Devil came out to play, bargaining lives for a price,
sending those to Hell who crossed him.*

Cyrus

I'm the king. This is my castle, and if I had a throne, I'd be fucking sitting on it.

I set my cognac glass on the staircase's banister, watching it teetering near the edge. Below me, one of my subjects holds court in my mansion, no shits given, but once I descend the steps, he'll remember his place.

I own him.

I own everyone here.

Officially, my bank is the wealthiest private bank in the world. Unofficially, it is the gateway to the underworld. Every penny earned by criminals passes through me. Unlike most of the banks on Wall Street, I don't pretend to be something I'm not. The money that lies in my vaults is dirty as fuck because I don't cater to a normal clientele.

No.

Mine is of a different breed.

The lowest dregs of life.

They are drug dealers. Gunrunners. They are the cartel and the mafia. At times, they are even the shady politicians who run countries, and the trust fund babies who fuck up.

To them, I'm their savior. No more hiding bags of cash under their beds. Nope. Instead, they all come to me to clean their money and, once it's spotless, grow it.

Even though I'm technically one of them—a criminal—I can't stand them. Although that really means nothing, as I can't stand anyone. But their cash is green. Fuck, theirs might be greener. A new shade stained by the life taken to make it.

Tonight, the money they don't deposit in my bank will be brought here instead. It will arrive dirty, smeared with the sins from which they earned it, but by the time the evening ends, the tainted blood will be gone, and they'll leave with bills as clean as freshly washed laundry.

My house is ready, and the staff is prepared. The game will begin soon, so all I have to do now is wait.

I hate this shit, but it's a necessary evil. Here, I'll learn secrets. Possess fortunes. I will amass an empire.

This is my corrupt kingdom, where I am a god.

Time comes to a halt as I wait at the top of my stairs. My gaze drifts across the foyer as each guest arrives. The crowd assembles in the center of the room, waiting for instructions, but really, they're waiting for the poker game to start.

Sometimes, I only observe. Sometimes, I don't even bother to come down. I'm not always needed. The fact that I host the game is enough to keep the players in line. Today, I'll venture downstairs.

I want to monitor a new guest who will be attending. Someone I have been luring for years. He hasn't arrived yet, but my sources say he has taken the bait. Once I have the opportunity, I'll set the trap.

As I wait, I notice a few unfamiliar faces that I need to vet before they can play. I can tell tonight will be worse than most nights, and that is saying a lot. Some of the seediest men I know are among the crowd.

I see the irony. Judging men who are no different from me.

They kill.

I kill.

But there is one difference. I only kill when I need to.

Some of these dipshits kill for sport.

To prove they are men.

None of this shit makes them a man. Since they don't see that, there really is no helping them. So, I just clean their money and bleed them with interest instead.

Yet even knowing this, they stand here in my house, offering me their souls. I have enough leverage to bring them all down. But there's only one I'm looking for.

With a shake of my head, I walk in their direction with slow and deliberate steps. Sizing them up, one by one.

Until I find him, I'll search for the big offenders and then signal Z. He will be my second pair of eyes and ears and watch them.

At first, I notice the usual crowd—rich douchebags who have nothing better to do than spend their daddy's money. I know the type, and I fucking hate the type.

On the other side of the room are the drug dealers, mafia members, and dirtier than fuck politicians.

Each group is important to my operation. One washes the other's hand. Most of the people in this room are on my client lists. My banking does the heavy load of cleaning, but what I can't clean that way, I clean through my poker game. That's why the rich boys are here. They don't know how to play; they know how to lose.

With drinks in hand, the men sit at the tables. The crowd tonight is not as large as usual, so only a few tables are set up, each ranging from eight to ten players. It's a healthy mix of legit versus illegal.

Slowly, but with precision, I make my way over, skating my gaze across the tables.

I take in each guest tonight.

At the far left is Matteo. He runs the East Coast mafia, and I do a lot of business with him. Beside him is his right-hand man, his cousin. I don't care too much for him either, but he's a necessary evil.

Alaric, Tobias, Mathis, and James are also in attendance. Even though they are some of the fiercest men around, they're also the only clients I can tolerate.

To the left of them is just another rich pretty boy. I say this because that's what he is, a trust fund baby who's perfect to clean their money. Also known as Trent Aldridge.

He's been coming for years, even though he sucks at cards. His motives don't differ from my motives for being here. He wants to get more clients. Recently, Z mentioned he works in hedge funds, and apparently, he's been funneling clients out of here.

Regardless of why he's here, he's harmless. I look at who sits next to him. I've never seen him before, and he stands out from the rest of the crowd. He looks older than my norm.

Like he could be my father. Or, better yet, Trent's father. They have the same eyes, same coloring, and same hair. Trent is a younger version of him. Except Trent isn't weathered. Trent does not look haunted. Interesting. Why is this man here? I need to monitor him.

I pull my gaze away, and my eyes land on the man I have been waiting for.

He's here.

Looking at Z, I incline my head, and he nods his understanding. Hook, line, sinker.

"Welcome," I say, all eyes on me. "Boris"—I turn to the man in question—"how good of you to come."

Boris.

AKA: The Butcher.

The man I hope to entrap tonight. He is one sick fuck. He and his friend are not clients. Even I have some limits. I don't

clean money for men who traffic women, but he is a means to an end.

Now to figure out a way to get him to tell me what I want.

To tell me about his organization and where his boss is.

That's why he's here. The best way to gather intel is to get him drunk, make him money, and wait for him to get comfortable. He might not disclose exactly what I'm looking for, but men talk, and all words are clues.

Like a game of chess, look for the advantage, learn to spot patterns, and then play the board in front of you. He'll give something away and I'll take it. I've waited too long for this chance to let anything fuck it up.

With a drop of my head, I give my approval to the dealer, and the game begins. From the sidelines, I watch, observing and gathering information about each person's character. Especially Boris.

As the pot continues to grow, some players act reckless while others are more confident.

One server comes over and takes the drink orders. Most of the men have stopped playing to look at her. I glance over too. She's pretty, but she's not my type.

As the rest of the men sit out the hand, Trent's father is apparently all in.

He's reckless.

From where I am, I can see a line of sweat drip down his brow, and when I look at who he's playing, I understand why he's nervous. He's playing Boris.

This is more than just fear that The Butcher might chop him up. This is something more.

This is desperation. *Interesting.*

I hope for his sake no one else notices. He needs the win. For the money.

Millions are in the pot.

Things will get interesting now. I step closer so I don't miss a minute. He's really sweating. It pours off him, and no one misses it. Trent especially.

"Father." He tries to intervene, but his father doesn't listen. Instead, he pushes forward on to his elbow, throwing more chips into the fray. The gleam in Boris's eyes is predatory. He has him right where he wants him.

He's all in.

Trent's father looks toward Trent. He has no more chips to throw in. Trent shakes his head.

"Father." Nothing. "Dad." His eyes implore him to stop, to halt the insanity. He can't, though. It's clear as day in the old man's eyes. He came to win. He needs to win.

"I have to," he whispers to his son. "It will be okay."

Father and son are at a standstill. A silent argument. Trent won't win. I know men like his father ... I had a father like that.

"So what's it going to be?" Boris asks, pulling me from my inner thoughts and back to the present. I watch as Trent's father fumbles around.

"I call." There is no conviction in his voice. Boris leans onto the table, resting his elbows on the surface. Cocking his head, he lifts his eyebrow. "With what money? It looks like you are out of chips."

"I have it ..." His voice breaks. "Just not on me."

"No good." He shakes his head. "Something else ..." he leads.

Aldridge Sr. lifts his wrist. Red and flashy. A Richard Mille watch.

"No." Boris shoots him down again, boredom etching away at his face.

"B-But it's worth almost six hundred thousand dollars," he stutters.

If I was a better man, I'd step in and stop this shit. But I'm not, so I nod to Z, allowing it to continue. It's entertaining me, at least. Plus, this could be what I need on Boris. I'll see where it goes.

"What else do you have of value ... because I have watches."

"My house?"

"I already have a home. I have multiple." A sinister smirk spreads across his face. "Something of real value ..." He trails off.

"Cars."

"You have nothing I want." The answer is final as he places his hands on the table to pull the pot to him. The game will be over before it's even started.

"My daughter."

Fuck. This is not what I want.

Silence descends on the room, hovering over us like a cloudy smog, clinging to everything in its path. I feel as his words enter through my mouth into my lungs.

He would sell his daughter.

To this man.

The man people call The Butcher.

A man known through the underworld to capture and play with his prey. His favorite pastime is carving flesh. Hence the name.

"You would sell your daughter to me?" He's not surprised. This is what he does. He barter and steals.

"Father ..." Trent tries desperately to interject.

"Shut up," the old man shouts at his son, who's now ghostly white. If possible, Boris's grin becomes even bigger, spreading farther across his unshaven face. "Yes." He tries to appear strong, but he's bluffing. I know this. Trent knows this. To be fucking serious, everyone in the room knows. Except for

him. He's so desperate, he truly believes his lies. I should put my foot down. This is not what I intended when I started this game.

"We don't trade flesh here." I step forward, and from the corner of my eye, I see Z shake his head. He doesn't agree with me intervening. Knowing him, he thinks this is exactly what we need on Boris. But even I have limits, and I won't condone it. My word is law here, and no one would be dumb enough to cross me.

"Is there something else of value you have?" Boris leads. I don't listen to them talk anymore. A new deal happens, and the game continues.

It always does.

It's inevitable. This man will lose, and he will owe the Russian his life.

I raise my hand to Maggie, the woman who owns the company I hire for waitstaff. She knows what I want, so without a word, she scurries off.

The game is back on, and as Maggie rushes up to me, her heels clinking against my marble floor, she hands me my glass of Louis XIII.

I take a swig. It burns as it trails down my throat, scorching old demons that once lay dormant.

They deal.

Words are spoken.

Cards are flipped.

The winner revealed.

I know the victor without looking.

I know the prize too.

A life.

The question is whose?

Ivy

It's an unusually warm day for the end of winter.

Normally, the ground is still frozen and fresh snow covers all the surfaces this time of the year.

But not today.

Today, the sun is out, and I can feel spring in the air.

It invigorates me. Breathes new life into my heart. Something I need right now with everything going on. My mother isn't getting better, and it's silently killing me.

It's a good day, though. She always does better when the outside world is beautiful. It's as if she is a flower, and when the sun is out, she blooms.

I live with my parents in the brownstone they own in the West Village. I'm twenty-two—old enough to move out and old enough to live on my own—but leaving this place would mean I leave a piece of my heart.

My garden.

Her garden.

I'm the only one who takes care of it now. Like everything else in this house, they would leave it to wilt and die if it weren't for me. So, instead, I'm on my knees pulling all the weeds and dead plants from the ground.

It's the reason I stay. My mother lost her will to tend to it years ago, around the same time she lost her will to live. She might still be here with us, but she is a shell of the woman she once was.

So, now I tend to it. Using everything she taught me, I bring it back to life, year after year.

My hands touch the withered stems, then I grab them. The hard ground loosens as I free the dead plants and place them in a garbage bag.

After I finish pulling the weeds, I stand from where I'm kneeling, grab the garbage bag, and then turn toward the back door to the house. Through the large bay window, I can see my mother standing there. She's in the kitchen, and even from where I am outside, I can see the blank look in her eyes.

She's vacant. Hollow.

Some days are worse than others.

From what I can gather, today will be one of those days.

My father never came home last night.

It's not unusual for him, nor is it unusual for my mother to be more despondent the day after.

He's probably having an affair. Whenever I ask him where he's been, he says he had to work late. I know better and, unfortunately, so does she.

"Hi, Mom." I walk up beside her and place a kiss on the top of her cheek. She inhales me, probably smelling the fresh air that clings to my skin, and then she looks up as if it invigorates her.

"Where is your father?"

From where I'm standing, I can see straight into her eyes. They used to be a vibrant blue, much like my own. I've always been told I look like her. Sandy blond hair that falls in loose waves down my back and large blue eyes. Now, we no longer look alike. Her blond hair has gone gray, and her eyes have lost their sparkle.

But at least they're no longer blank. Staring at her, looking into her eyes, I can see recognition. I give her a tight smile, taking a step closer to her, and reach for her hand.

"I don't know, Mom," I answer, my voice low with uncertainty.

She pulls her hand from mine, lifting and running it through her disheveled hair. She pushes the strands around as if trying to tidy up and look presentable for him. If my father wasn't such a prick, I would think it was cute. But unfortunately, he is, and she deserves better.

She deserves to be someone's everything.

"I saw him before. He was here ... angry." Her voice dips on the last word.

My eyebrow lifts. I didn't see him, but he probably was here. I don't doubt it.

It would make sense; he comes and goes as he pleases without a care in the world. He gives no shits of the havoc he causes Mom. Especially when he is angry. And he has been furious recently.

On edge.

Another reason I stay here. Her being alone here is not an option.

Just in case.

I don't trust my father. It's not that I think he'd hurt her, but something is off with him. I've often wondered if Trent realizes something is up. I'd ask him, but he's too busy running around the city, and we don't catch up that often.

No two siblings could be further apart or more different.

I'm a homebody. I like the simple things in life. I live at home and tend my garden and work part-time as a florist.

He's all about the money and prestige. The nightlife. Living fast and hard. He's so cliché.

The paps love him.

He's their favorite "billionaire trust fund boy." Although by the looks of the house I live in, I'm not sure the title fits anymore.

Listen, I don't judge him. If he wants to party and play the field, that's fine for him. I want none of that, but that doesn't make me miss him less.

"Are the flowers blooming?" My mother's voice pulls me out of my faraway thoughts. It's nice to hear. It sounds so crisp, reminding me of good times. When Dad was here, and the madness hadn't taken root in her mind yet. It reminds me of when the backyard is speckled pink and lush and vibrant.

There is hope in her voice. Reaching my hand out once again, I take her frail one in mine. "Not yet, Mom. But soon."

She nods her head, and then like a channel changing on a TV, she's no longer here with me. She's gone somewhere else. Somewhere far in her mind. A heavy sadness weighs down on me, filling my veins slowly. The sound of her footsteps leaving the room makes me take action, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm back outside.

The first flowers won't bloom in our garden for another few months. But I still welcome the balmy winter day. Because days like today bring her back, even if only for a short time.

With my knees back on the hard, weathered grass, I pull again, lifting the earth with my hands. Loose soil sifts through my fingers like grains of sand passing the time.

A noise coming from in front of where I am, has me looking up to see who's there. "Trent?" I say, lifting my hand up to cover the sunlight. My older brother steps out from the shadows. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't I come to check on my sister?" He tries to say this in a joking manner, but his tone doesn't match his words.

I lift a brow in speculation. "You could, but then you wouldn't be my brother."

"What is that supposed to mean?" He halts his steps and then stares at me.

With the bright light gleaming down on me, I can't see him well. I place my shovel on the ground, and then I stand before making my way to him. When he's directly in front of me, I look at him closely and then shake my head.

He looks like shit.

Normally handsome, he seems rundown and tired. Large dark circles and dull eyes make it appear as though he hasn't slept in days.

"Did you come here straight from the bar?" I incline my head to get a better look before narrowing my eyes. On top of his appearance, Trent is acting strange. He's bouncing from foot to foot, almost as though he's high or in withdrawal from drugs. "Why are you acting like this?"

"Like what?"

"Cagey," I respond. "Are you high?"

"No, Ivy." His voice is stern, not even trying to mask his annoyance at my question. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it, though? You show up out of nowhere, and you look like ... shit," I deadpan.

He takes a deep breath, then shakes his head. His signature smirk appears on his handsome face, and a glimmer of his normally playful personality pops through. It reminds me of when we were kids, and we used to play in the dirt together. Trent would grab Mom's watering hose and sprinkle us like it was raining. After playing for hours, we would both be drenched, and Mom would watch us as she gardened, laughing. "You're not being very nice, sis."

"And you are being shady as fuck." I place my hands on my hips and purse my lips. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I told you." He stops talking and starts to pace back and forth on the patio in the backyard. His short-lived good mood fading faster than a mirage in a desert.

What's going on with him?

This is odd behavior, even for Trent. I watch as he walks, his mouth moving as if he's talking to himself, but no words

come out, and then he's pulling out his phone from his pocket. His shoulder tense as he reads what I assume is a text message.

"Everything okay?" I ask him.

He looks exhausted and beat as he lifts his free hand and runs it through his light brown hair.

"It will be," he says before letting out a sigh. Whatever the text was about is obviously not good because he looks worse off than when he first got here.

"You're worrying me. Are you sure? If you need help—"

He raises his hand to stop me from talking, and I do. Normally, I would fire back a witty comment about how rude it is to butt in, but something tells me I shouldn't. Maybe it's the circles under his eyes or the way his brow furrows, but I decide to shut my mouth instead and hear what he has to say.

"I'm not using drugs, Ivy, but I appreciate the concern. Can't I just be here to see my baby sister?"

I opt for a joke, trying to cut the tension hovering in the air between us. "Yes. If that brother is anyone but you." He chuckles, and then I begin to laugh too. I love the sound of his laughter. He places his hand against his chest in mock disbelief. "Just keeping it real, bro." I miss this version of my brother.

We both go quiet after our momentary reprieve from the tension. It's once again awkward and uncomfortable, and although I'm not close with my brother anymore, it feels wrong. With his shoulders slumped forward, he kicks the dirt with his shoe before looking up and meeting my stare.

"Is Mom okay?" He finally breaks the silence.

"You can ask her yourself, Trent."

He looks back at his phone before his pale blue eyes meet mine. "On that note, I think I'll be going now."

"Please, Trent, what's going on? Are you okay?"

A shadow of something passes over his features before he rubs his temples as if a headache is forming.

“I’m just checking on you. I was here to talk to Dad ...”

“He’s back?” My stomach muscles tighten. I have no desire to see him today.

“No.”

I shake my head in confusion. “I don’t understand. Mom said he was, but I didn’t see him.”

“Stay away from him.” His tone has my back straightening.

“Why? You’re scaring me. Did he do something?”

“Just promise me you’ll stay away from him. I’ll go find him, but in the meantime, can you go back inside? And if anyone comes here looking for him, don’t answer.”

“What? No. Look at it outside, it’s beautiful.”

“Please.”

“Listen, Trent. I appreciate you being here. I love to see you, but I think I can handle Dad.”

“It’s just—”

“No,” I cut him off, lifting my hand. “You aren’t here. I am. I deal with him. His mood. I have done a good job raising myself, regardless. But as much as I appreciate your concern, I need to take care of Mom, and right now, that means getting her garden ready.”

“She’s not getting better?”

“Her depression is worse in the winter, but when the sun comes out, she does.”

He looks down and then looks off in the direction of the pile of dirt I’ve made.

“I love you, sis.”

“I love you too, big bro. Now let me get back to this. It will be dark soon.” With one last nod, he leaves.

I can’t help but think something is wrong with him. He said he’s not using drugs, but I’m not sure I believe him.

Sometime later, when I'm about to stand and head inside, I hear noises. The sound of a car door. Footsteps. From the corner of my eye, I see a shadow. My body pivots to see who's coming toward me. My mom? My dad?

Maybe it's Trent again.

But when I'm fully turned in the direction of the noise and shadows, no one is there.

I fight off the foreboding feeling that I'm being watched. As my fingers pull at the remnants of last summer, I swear I see movement. As if the world around me feels it too, the sky darkens.

I can smell the rain before it starts. The damp, musty air infiltrates my nostrils.

I should move, but I don't. Instead, I wait.

I wait for the crack in the sky, and then I wait for the first drop. Most people don't enjoy being in the rain, but I love it. It invigorates me. It reminds me of the beginning of spring.

Rebirth.

Cyrus

LAST NIGHT WAS A SHITSHOW.

It wasn't until early this morning that I finally went to bed. I lost track of how much money traded hands, not that it matters. All I really care about is how much money I made.

Taking a rake will do that.

Sure, it's illegal, but not one motherfucker who comes into my house will open their mouth to complain. Not the patrons, and certainly not the staff.

That move would sign their death certificate.

But no matter how much money I skimmed from the pot, last night was not successful. The objective of the night was never met. We never got any information from Boris that we could use in order to take down the organization he works for. We are no closer to finding *Alexander*, and that thought pisses me the fuck off. All the information my men have collected have ended up as dead ends. No one knows where he is, where he lives, or how to get in touch with him. The only man that can provide that intel is Boris, but he would die before giving up his boss.

My phone vibrating next to my bed has me lifting my arm to grab it. It's an unknown number. The clientele I work with don't have numbers that are trackable.

“Speak,” I bark into the line. Everyone who knows me knows not to bother me. Period. Especially in the morning. What time is it, anyway?

With the phone next to my ear, I glance at the clock. The red glow of the numbers reflects off the pitch black of my room.

It’s like a tomb in here.

It’s like hell.

My own personal hell.

Eleven fucking a.m.

“Cyrus,” the familiar voice says. It’s Z, my right-hand man.

“What number is this?”

“New one.”

He doesn’t have to clarify. We go through burners like candy, depending on new clientele and whatnot.

“Why are you calling this early?”

“It’s almost noon.” He chuckles, but I don’t respond to his comment. It doesn’t matter what time it is; unless it’s an emergency, I don’t like to be bothered when I’m sleeping. When he realizes I’m not going to respond, he continues. “It’s about Trent Aldridge. From the game last night. You know who I—”

“I know who you’re talking about,” I cut him off. I know exactly who he is. His father was a degenerate last night. Z has known me for years, has been my most trusted man for most of them, so the fact that Z would bother me over something to do with him makes me move to the edge of the bed, place my feet on the floor, and stand. “What about him?”

“He’s demanding you speak to him,” Z says, and my head shakes.

Un-fucking-believable.

“No one demands anything of me.” My voice is calm, but there’s no mistaking the anger in my tone. It’s deadly.

The phone line goes quiet.

Very fucking quiet.

The silence stretches between us, and I know the truth is there. I let out a long-drawn-out breath.

When the game ended, Trent’s father, Ronald Aldridge, owed Boris a fortune. What happens with the collection of said money isn’t my problem. They know the rules, so I’m not sure what he wants.

“You’re right, boss, but he wishes to speak with you, and he sounded rather desperate. Maybe this is still our in ...” He trails off, and that’s when the stars align. He may just be right. I’ve been looking for a way in, the debt that Aldridge owes Boris could be exactly what I need as leverage.

“Very well. Tell him to come here.”

Hanging up, I stalk toward the bathroom. I have to get ready for the day. Turning on the shower, I wash the night off.

The phone rings the moment I step out, so I secure a towel around my waist and answer it.

“Speak.”

“He’s begging for you to come to him.”

“The fuck, Z?” I respond. “No.”

I don’t go to him. That’s my one rule. I don’t leave my fortress. People come to me, not vice versa. Not to mention the fact this trouble his father got in isn’t my problem, it might be my solution, but it’s not my fucking place to go to him to solve it.

“Boss. I’ve never heard him sound like this.”

“I said no.”

“He said it was life or death.”

Interesting. “Go on.”

“He was rambling about a sister. I think this could be our ace in the hole.” Z’s voice rises. The pieces of the puzzle for Trent Aldridge’s desperate phone call click into place. This isn’t about money. It’s about his sister. The fucker didn’t listen. I don’t condone trafficking. Now there will be consequences.

“Tell him I’ll be there.”

Today will be an exception. I’ll go to him because I allowed this shit to go down, and they’ll have to pay the price for going against my ruling.

“Very well, boss. I’ll have the chopper readied,” Z says. There is nothing more to talk about, so I hang up and head into my closet to get dressed.

Now donning my usual three-piece suit, I head out of the room, down the hall, and then I exit the house. In the distance, I see my heliport. Z is standing beside Maxwell, who will fly it. Once inside, it’s fired up, and we head down to the city.

In.

Out.

Soon, we’re landing on the roof of a building I own. We hop in my car, and then we are off to the address Trent provided for us.

Fifteen minutes later, we park the car outside a brownstone in the West Village located on a quiet street.

This is good. There will be no witnesses if I have to use violence to drive my message home.

“What do you want to do, boss?” Z asks from where he sits in the front seat beside Maxwell.

“Get him.”

A few moments later, I see a very different Trent. Not the same man who comes to play in my Friday game each week. Normally, he looks like the rich playboy next door. Today, he looks like a disheveled mess.

Like he hasn’t slept in days.

Even from here, nestled in my car, I can see through the car window how he shakes. Rage? Fear? I'm not sure. But he doesn't look like he'll be able to sit long enough to tell me what the fuck is going on.

I fling the door open to the car and step outside. It's unusually warm today. I walk to where he's pacing.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I can't stop him," he mutters under his breath as he buries his hands in his hair. "I don't know what to do."

"How is this my problem?"

He takes a deep breath. His chest rising and falling. "My father."

"Again, I don't see how this concerns me." I clench my jaw. I knew that fucker would be an issue. The moment I saw him, and as I watched the game, I knew. Fuck. "I'm not seeing how this is my problem." But it is. And no matter what I say, I know it is.

"Your game—" he starts, but I don't let him finish as I grab his jacket in my hands.

"This has nothing to do with my game," I grit. "Your father shouldn't have been there. This is on you." I'm pissed, and it should scare him. Trent does something I don't expect and pulls away from my hold. He's bolder than I first thought, but even with this new bravado, I can still tell that my words crush him.

"I need your help."

"There is nothing I can do for you." I move to turn and go back to the car. I don't need to stay for this, and I'm pretty fucking pissed that I left my fort for this. Even though I came here in order to figure out a way to spin this in my favor, it's not worth the hassle to deal with this level of stupidity.

"Stop." His voice is strong. "Yes, it is my fault, but I can't let him take her."

I knew this is where it was going, but the words have me halting my movements.

“I said last night ...”

“Yeah, you did, but it didn’t mean shit to my father. He lost everything. He has nothing ... and last night, apparently he lost what little was left, that and more.”

“What else? There’s more, or you wouldn’t have risked your life to summon me.”

Trent looks me straight in the eye and nods. “I heard him. He’s selling her. For the debt. And Boris said she would be perfect.”

Perfect? For what? Or, better yet, whom?

“And this is my problem how?” I keep my voice steady, never showing emotions, but his words cut me to the bone. No woman should have that fate. I might do a lot of evil things, but a woman on the auction block is not one of them. Especially not a block with Boris calling the shots. In this case, her best chance of survival is him selling her because if Boris keeps her, he’s nicknamed The Butcher for a reason. There is also the possibility—

“I thought ...” Trent’s voice cuts through my inner thoughts.

“What the fuck did you think?”

He looks down. The arrogant shit looks devastated.

“The bank ... I know ...”

Trent starts to pace, and there is a long, brittle silence before he speaks. “You think my bank would bail you out? Listen, pretty boy, there is no collateral you could give me to cover it.”

He flinches at my words before righting himself. But even with his newfound composure, there is no denying the unease etched on his face.

“I’m good for the money. I’ll pay you back. All you have to do is give the money to Boris. Help her ...” He points to the right. I can’t see what he’s pointing at, so I take a step closer.

My eyes find their intended destination.

There, amongst the bleak earth recently frozen by snow, is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

She's young, much younger than a woman I should be looking at, but it doesn't stop me from staring.

"How old is she? Is she even legal?" I grit through clenched teeth.

"Yes. Twenty-two."

Thank fuck.

She looks ethereal, like a goddess of spring come down from the heavens to bring life.

"A means to an end," Z mouths to me, echoing the idea that has also taken root in my head.

I nod to my men. "It's done. I won't be loaning you the money to fix your problem. There is only one solution."

"What? I don't understand?" Trent asks, following my gaze.

"I'm taking the girl."

Ivy

MY HEAD THROBS.

Why does it hurt so bad?

It feels like a jackhammer digging into my skull, reminding me of a construction site. My scalp being like the first bit of gravel to break before all the stone crumbles.

I reach my hands up to rub the sleep out of my eyes. The weight of my arm is unfamiliar. It's as if I'm weighted down to my bed and can't get up.

What's wrong with me?

My eyes won't open properly, but even with my temporary blindness, I can tell something else is off.

My limbs. My stomach. Everything aches, but it's my head that scares me. It feels like a thick fog has descended over a mountain, making the visibility limited, but instead of a landscape, it's happening to me.

When my eyes finally open, I'm met with little light. The windows are covered, making it hard to see. The sparse beams that stream across the room don't do much to illuminate the space. An instant wave of nausea hits me at the same time that reality sinks in.

I'm not in my house.

The room is unfamiliar.

I lift myself to a seated position. My muscles scream as if I had drunk too much booze. But that makes little sense. The room comes into focus. Beautiful and ornate. It looks straight out of a castle. High ceilings, marble floors. Even though it's dim, I swear I see gold leaf on the walls. What is this place, and what has happened to me?

I lift my hand and run my fingers through my hair, trying to remember.

Nothing comes to mind.

The last thing I remember is being in the garden. *Odd*. But that makes no sense. I must have done something else. Otherwise, how could I be here right now?

I'm in a house. In a bed. Alone.

I pull the sheet down, checking to make sure I'm not naked. A long-drawn-out sigh of relief pours from my lungs like the steam from a train.

Fully dressed.

I'm still in the clothes I wore when gardening, which means I didn't get drunk, nor do I remember going out.

What happened then?

Throwing the sheet all the way back, I climb out of the bed. My body shakes uncontrollably. Something is wrong with me. It's almost as if I have taken a sleeping pill.

But that wouldn't explain where I am?

Unless ...

My limbs begin to quiver as fear twists inside me. Cold as ice, the thought chills me to the bone.

I was drugged. *Taken*.

My head moves back and forth frantically as blinding terror drips into my veins. It pours like a rambling river with no end. The farther I walk into the room, moving toward the door, the faster the current moves inside me.

By the time my hand touches the metal handle, I fear I might pass out from the way my blood pumps.

Swishing.

Pounding.

Begging me to turn back, but go where? The only way out of this unknown room is through that door. The metal is cold to the touch, making me shiver. Slowly, as if to creep out of the room, I turn it, but what I'm met with forces my ears to ring with terror.

I'm locked in. I shake the door handle now, desperate to escape.

When that doesn't work, I kick. I scream.

I pound on the door with my fist. Flailing as pain radiates through my arms. The scene is straight out of a bad Lifetime movie. The harder I try, the more frail I feel. It's as if the door is made of steel. In the movies, it looks so easy. The heroine bangs on the door with all her might, and lo and behold, it cracks, except in my case, there isn't any indication that my efforts are fruitful. The wood looks just as intact as when I first started this endeavor.

All the oxygen in my lungs feels depleted as I try desperately to break through.

Nothing.

There has to be another way out. Peering around the room, I look at the window. There. That. I can climb out.

Maybe.

I have to try.

I run toward it, and then pull back the curtain. There is a metal handle that I grasp to unlock it, and then I swing it toward me.

As soon as it flies open, the cold air hits me in the face.

Could it be this easy?

Could I escape?

The muscles in my stomach tense as I lean up onto my tiptoes to peer out the window.

I look down.

That's when I realize this is worse than I thought. From my window, the ground drops beneath into a bluff. Open water crashes against the beach.

I choke back a sob that threatens to escape. There's no time for tears. Even though my chest feels like it will burst, I need to stay calm and figure out a way out of this room.

I have nowhere to go, but I have to try. I can't just lie in wait for my fate. I can't stay in this bed, waiting for whoever took me to come back and hurt me.

With my hands on the edge of the windowsill, I move to climb out. Maybe once I'm farther outside, I'll notice another way to get away.

My head and chest are almost through the window. There must be a rail somewhere? Maybe a window beneath that I can shimmy down. I push forward until I lock my arms. But I'm still not seeing any easy solution for my salvation. Lifting a leg, I move to crawl out.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." I hear from behind me and I freeze in fear. *I'm not alone.* I thought I was, and in my rush to leave, he had slipped into the room. How had I not heard him come in?

"Get down from there." The voice is cold, making me shiver as if an arctic blast has blown through.

Slowly, I step down, the drapes moving back into place as I turn to see who is here.

It's almost pitch black again. Hard to see. I squint my eyes, trying to adjust to the darkness that surrounds me.

Only small slivers of light shine in a tiny beam, but it's not enough.

He's in the shadows.

Tall and dominating.

Like the angel of death come forth to pull me to the other side. *To Hell.*

A chill runs up my spine.

I haven't seen his face, and I'm already afraid. His presence alone is enough to have me cower in the corner.

I can't, though.

He is the only thing blocking the door to my escape.

So, I need to be smart about this.

I step forward, resting my hands at my hips. I might be petrified, but I won't show him my fear.

"Who are you?" I ask.

He doesn't speak.

"Why am I here?" My voice is louder this time than before. When he doesn't answer again, I wonder if I had even heard him before. I take another step.

"I said, why am I here?"

This time, he steps out of the shadow, and his face comes into focus.

Handsome. Devastatingly handsome.

A god among mortals.

Sharp lines. Strong and powerful. Dark hair. Pressed suit. Not just any suit, though. This one screams money.

Power.

He screams power with dark eyes that have no soul.

"Why am I here?"

The silence that descends upon the room is deafening.

Talk to me. Answer me. Acknowledge I've spoken.

Anything.

But instead of giving me what I look for, he steps back into the shadows.

Closing the door. Locking it again.

With him now gone, I sit back on the bed and pull my knees into my body. I wrap myself up in a protective cocoon. It's hard to stop the tremors that run through my body at what just happened. Who is this man, and what does he want?

I continue to shake as fear knots inside me.

A gasp escapes as realization hits; there can only be one reason I'm here. I've been kidnapped probably because he wants to rape, and maybe even kill me.

Disturbing thoughts start to play out, building images in my head that I can't stop. A sob escapes as water cascades down my cheeks. No. I shake my head back and forth. I can't cry. I won't cry. Reaching up, I wipe my damp cheeks.

There has to be a way. I look back to the door. The *locked* door.

I'm trapped.

I'm in a cage. A gilded cage, but a cage, nonetheless.

Ivy

WHEN I OPEN MY EYES SOMETIME LATER, MY HEAD SHAKES back and forth in confusion.

The door is now open. I must be seeing things that aren't really there. But as my eyes adjust to waking, there's no mistaking the gleam of light penetrating the crack in the door right now.

It's open, and a light in the hall reflects into my room.

What the hell is going on? Why would he lock me in, only to then leave the door open?

It makes no sense.

Is this the twilight zone? An alternate universe? I'm so confused by this new turn of events that I just sit here, staring like an idiot at the route I can use to potentially escape.

Yet when my limbs don't move, I shake my head. What am I doing? Move. Taking stock of my surroundings, I note that I'm still dressed, still have my sneakers on, and am still wearing a coat. Nothing is stopping me from walking out that door. Except fear.

I need to leave. This is my chance. I will my body to go, and with that, I propel myself as if I'm a runner in the Olympics.

I lift off the bed. My shoes hit the floor, and I'm out the door before I can think better of it. By the time I'm in the hallway, I realize my mistake.

I could find anything out here.

This could be a trap.

I halt my movements, taking slow, meaningful steps. I don't want the sound of my feet to alert anyone to my presence. That's my worst nightmare, to come so close, only to be stopped by stupidity. I need to be careful to make sure there will be no sound as I make my way out.

In the distance, I see the stairwell. It's grand, but no lights are on in that part of the house. Not one.

I have no idea what time it is, but I have to be careful.

I can't risk him seeing me, finding me, hurting me.

My heart thumps in my chest like a stampede of elephants. It ricochets off my breastbone, rattling. If I don't calm down, I'll hyperventilate.

Lifting my shoulders, I take a soft breath and then move toward the stairs that lead to the front foyer.

Before taking them down, I stop, listening for any signs of life.

There's nothing.

The house or, by the look of the hallway and stairs, the mansion is empty. No one is here. But then why would he leave the door open? Was he in a rush? Was it a mistake?

Is this a trick?

Maybe I should head back to my room?

No.

I'm not that girl. I'm not the type to hide in the corner and wait for the villain to arrive. I won't be a victim. I won't be a helpless lamb waiting for the predator to kill her.

I have to see if I can escape. Or at the very least, find someone to help me.

By this point, I'm not even sure how long I've been here. A day?

One thing I'm sure of is, no one is looking for me. My mom probably doesn't know that I'm gone. Dad wouldn't care, and Trent is too busy.

I'm not scheduled to work until next week, so my boss won't even wonder where I am.

I can't sit around waiting for someone to help me. I have to help myself.

So I do.

I don't allow my fear to stop me.

As I tiptoe down the stairs, each step is more precarious than the last. When I finally hit the bottom, I see the front door. It's grand and dark and ominous. It's the door in a scary movie that led to a house of horrors. I know that if I open it, the sound will be terrible. It will squeak, or worse, it will alert him to my escape. This is the part in the movie where the scared heroine runs for her life. Hopefully, in this story, I get away. I'm not dumb enough to think it won't be hard, but the thing is, I have nothing to lose.

I won't be another statistic.

My hand lifts the knob, and as I suspected, the door makes a horrible sound against the quiet of the night. It's awful.

Like metal and wood scraping together.

I'm not sure if it's as bad as I assume, but it hurts my ears, and it makes my heart jump out of my chest.

I don't stop, though, and instead, I fling it open, emerging into the eerie night.

There are no lights outside, it's nighttime now. Pitch black other than the small stars twinkling from above.

Looking up, I see more here than I have in a long time, showing that I am no longer anywhere near the city.

Where am I?

I walk, using the stars as my only light. I can't walk fast, though; with limited visibility, I don't want to hurt myself.

Time passes in a series of heavy breaths verging on a panic attack.

As far as I go and as many steps as I take, it doesn't matter because there is nothing here. I push through branches, and then I see it.

As the light brightens, I see the stars reflecting off water.

But what scares me more is that it's black all around except in the distance. In the distance, I can finally see light.

But it's not close enough, and there is no way to swim there.

It's too far. Standing on what must be a beach, I walk along the coast, looking up at the stars to use them for direction. At some point the beach stops, and rocks and grass replace the sand. It's harder to walk now, especially with no visibility, so I take small measured steps. The terrain changes, and now I'm surrounded by trees and boulders.

Where the hell am I?

I keep going.

With each new step, the light from the water disappears more and more, cloaking me in darkness. At least I have the stars.

I walk for God knows how long.

But before I know it, I'm once again back on sand, staring out across the water into the vast distance at the lights on the beach.

Is it the same?

Am I just walking around in circles?

I need to mark my spot.

Pulling off my coat, I drop it on the ground, putting some rocks over it to keep it in place.

Now, without my coat, my body shivers from the cold. I start to walk in the same path I had just made. Through the beach, then the rocks, then the trees. I walk for what seems like forever, with my arms wrapped around my body to keep myself warm. In the distance, I see something, my stomach muscles tighten as I make my approach.

This confirms my fears. There is nowhere to go.

The blood in my veins pumps so hard it sounds like drums are playing.

Thud.

Thud.

My jacket.

I look up, staring at a sight that makes me shake all over and not because of the cold this time. But because there it is, yet again.

In the distance are lights, and then realization hits me like a ton of bricks.

I now know him leaving the door open was no accident. There was no reason to lock it because I have nowhere to go.

I'm stuck.

On whatever island it is I'm on.

He doesn't need to lock any doors because it appears that there is no way off.

Maybe in the light, I'll find something.

Or maybe ...

My head shakes back and forth. I can't dwell on the what-if. I need to calm myself and think.

I sit staring at the beach in front of me. It's dark so I can't see much, but there are enough stars in the sky to make the water visible. Each time the waves crash against the shore, little bursts of light dance in my eye as I catch the reflection of the moon.

I don't move as I try to think of a plan.

But nothing comes to me. Not now. Not at night. And especially not on an island probably surrounded by sharks.

That's just what I need, to escape and then be eaten by bloodthirsty sharks desperate for food. Me being lunch.

That would be just my luck.

I should go back.

Admit my fate.

But I don't want to.

I feel I'm suffocating, but at least here I have air.

I stare off into the night sky, wondering how this happened.

Why am I here, and what does he want?

Fear dances within me. My brain's running a mile a minute. The muscles in my heart beat so fast, I fear I'll pass out. I need to calm down. My brain runs through all the techniques I've learned over the years to help my mom through her depression. This isn't the same, but maybe it will help. The doctor once told me to have her breathe deeply, to focus on an object and forget everything else.

I WATCH AS THE WAVES CRASH AGAINST THE SHORE.

As they break and turn to crystals against the moonlight.

Inhaling slowly, I will myself to calm.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale ...

I'll find a way. I know I will.

I have no other choice.

I'm no one's victim.

Exhale ...

Ivy

THROUGH THE HAZE OF MY DREAM, I CAN SEE A BRIGHT LIGHT peeking in. My eyes hurt. They blink rapidly as I take stock of where I am. Lifting my hands, I rub at them, but as I do, I notice the chill in the air. My body aches, and as the world appears before me, I know why.

I'm not in my bed, nor am I in a bed at all.

No. Instead, the vision in front of me makes me shake. Now the cold makes sense.

I fell asleep outside.

Sitting up, I look around me.

Still on the grass that sits nestled against the beach. Still on an island in the middle of fuck knows where. Still cold.

I pull my jacket tighter.

Now, in the harsh morning light, I can see the land in the distance. From where I am, a giant estate sits on the property. It's too far to be sure if it's a house or even a hotel—that's how large it is—but clearly, I went around in circles last night on my tour, so it's obvious I'm on an island. But if I'm on an island, there has to be a way off.

A boat?

Yes. There has to be one somewhere.

I just need to search.

I'm about to stand when I hear a sound behind me.

My back goes straight because that is not the sound of a person. It's the sound of an animal.

Then I hear barking.

Vicious, loud, scary barking.

My fight-or-flight kicks in. I need to get out of here.

A dog is coming, and it's coming to attack, so I weigh my options. I don't know where to go. On the one hand, I can jump into the water, and on the other, I can run to the beach.

Or ...

I shake my head. No. I can't run back to the house, but there really is no option. I'm screwed either way, and the water is probably freezing.

Shit.

What do I do?

In the distance, I can see trees. That's the only safe bet. Before I can second-guess my decision, I'm up and running.

My feet pound the grass beneath as it cracks under the pressure. The ground hard and brittle from the cold winter months.

Wind hits my face, and my lungs expel oxygen.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I'm running so fast, my vision starts to haze from the exertion, but I hear the sound gaining on me.

And then it's right behind me.

I wasn't fast enough.

I fall.

My knees hit the cold earth; hands next. Loose gravel scratches me, causing a burning feeling to radiate inside me. I need to get up.

The sound intensifies, and I know I need to get up *now*.

I'm just about to push off the ground when I hear the words.

"Stop," he bellows, and I know I have only spoken to him once, but I know the sound. I would know that voice anywhere.

I might not know his name, but I know his voice. Not heeding his warning, I push off anyway, but the growling stops me.

I turn slowly to find the scariest dog I have ever seen, and he's poised to attack.

Looking down his long nose at me.

Teeth bared. "*Liggen*."

I have no idea what he's just said to me, but then I realize he's not talking to me. He's talking to the dog.

The snarling dog who is now in a down position staring at me.

"What are you doing out here?" he says, and I look up at him.

At this man I don't know.

Nor do I want to.

In the light of the early morning, he looks even more handsome than he did last night. I know I shouldn't think that, but even if he is a killer, it doesn't change the truth. He might be psychotic, but maybe that's his lure.

I shake my head back and forth; his appearance or mental capacity shouldn't be on my mind. The only thing I should care about is how I'm leaving.

"Did you sleep out here?" He steps closer, and I try to retreat, but that elicits another snarl from his watchdog. "Answer me."

"Yes."

“You tried to escape?” I can hear a hint of dismay as he nods to himself. “Even in the dark.”

“Yes,” I hiss back. “Even in the dark.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t get hurt.”

“Better drowned than ...” A shudder draws down my spine.

“I will not touch you.” His words come out with conviction. Unwavering, with no trace of a lie. It doesn’t make me feel any safer, though. He might say he won’t rape me, but can I really believe him?

He took me, so how can I trust anything he says?

“Then why am I here?” My eyes narrow suspiciously as he steps closer. His stone-cold features give nothing away. Then he turns on his heels and starts walking back to the house.

“Are you coming?” he says over his shoulder.

“No.”

“Not a very smart answer. A storm is coming. If I were you, I would take shelter in the house.”

“And you? Will you be taking shelter in the house with me too?”

No way in hell am I getting stuck in closed quarters with him. Who knows what this man will do.

“No.”

The breath I didn’t know I was even holding releases, but then another thought hits me. If he’s leaving ...

“So, I’m stuck here alone?”

That makes him stop walking and turn to face me.

“Would you rather I stay?” He lifts a seductive brow.

“You said you wouldn’t touch me.”

“And I won’t. Not unless you ask.”

“Well, then, don’t hold your breath because I’ll never ask for that.”

“If you say so.” And with that, he keeps heading toward the house, his dog beside him. Although, I’m not sure I would call that thing a dog. More like a beast that wants to kill me.

Weighing my options, I can either try to escape again or follow him.

I shouldn’t trust him, and I don’t. The options are limited, though.

The truth is, I don’t know if he will keep his word ...

Then another thought hits me straight in the stomach. My legs almost give out under the weight of the train of thought driving through my head.

I have seen his face.

Multiple times.

If asked, I could sketch it, describe it. I could tell the police who he is. I’m a liability, a potential loose end to a crime committed.

Kidnappers only show you their face if they’re planning to kill you.

My feet stop, no longer able to walk a step.

I pray he doesn’t look back, but he does. Staring at me intently, but it’s not a normal look though. It’s dark and predatory, and if I don’t move, he will make me, but my fear has me stuck in quicksand.

“Let’s go.”

“No.”

He arches an eyebrow, and it’s almost as if he’s smirking at me. The line of his lips is a flat line, but it appears the right side is lifting a little bit higher. Or maybe I’m just reading into things, probably from dehydration and desperation.

“I’m not coming with you.”

“Don’t make me come get you. You won’t like it if I do.”

We are at an impasse, but I have no choice but to succeed first.

“Will you kill me?”

“No.” I don’t know if he’s telling the truth, but I guess I have no choice but to believe him.

Cyrus

WHEN I SHOWED UP THIS MORNING AND SHE WASN'T IN HER room, I thought she had maybe escaped. That faded fast when I realized there was no way off this island.

No one could come or go without my permission.

The island sits close enough to the land that it isn't in the direct view of passing boats, and my property is large enough that the nearest neighbor is too far to see what happens on the island.

They would have to be close, and anyone who gets that close will be noticed. I have men watching the waters now.

Normally, I don't.

But this isn't a normal occasion.

I've never taken a woman captive before, so the added security is necessary.

It doesn't matter why she's here; her obedience is required, and trying to escape will not be tolerated.

I turn around and watch as she trudges after me. She's disheveled from sleeping outside. The beach was the last place I looked when it should have been the first.

If I was taken—obviously, that would never happen, but if I was—you bet the first thing I would do is try to escape. I just

figured she was in the house somewhere.

But after I looked everywhere, and it was obvious she wasn't there, I went to the front door. Nothing was there to indicate she had left.

The door automatically locks from the outside.

A part of me wonders if she ever tried to come back last night. Her quest would have been fruitless.

She wouldn't have been able to get back in, even if she tried, but something tells me this girl didn't even try.

She would rather freeze to death sitting outside than admit it was safer inside.

I stare at her as she makes her approach. Standing by the large front door, I dangle the metal key from my hand.

"After you." I swing it open and step aside for her to enter. When she doesn't move, I lift my hands in surrender. "I will not hurt you."

Meeting my stare boldly, she doesn't flinch, just speaks. "Like you would admit to it."

I could answer her, but I don't. It would be easy to put her mind at ease. I don't do easy, and I don't explain myself. "It's your choice. Stay outside and freeze or take your chances inside with me."

She looks back toward the beach, unsure of what to do. She's weighing her options, but from the way her jaw hardens, I know she's come to the conclusion she doesn't have any other option.

"First, I have a question."

I knew she would. She's too fiery not to. I admire it.

Not that I'll tell her shit.

Instead, she'll stay here locked up in my fortress with no clue why.

"Inside. Now."

She should shake in fear at my tone, but she doesn't.

Nope. Not her.

Instead, she straightens her back, keeps her head held high, and walks through the door.

Her steps halt the moment she's in the foyer, and with the strength reserved for a superhero, she glares at me.

“Now that I came inside, why am I here?” she asks firmly.

“For your protection.”

She steps slowly forward as if pondering my words, then glances down at the floor. Halting her movements, she once again lifts her eyes to meet my gaze. Those blue eyes, deep with thought, read me, challenge me. I shouldn't like the way she narrows her eyes and tests me, but I do. More than I should. It's like a losing game of chess. She should cut her losses, minimize the outcome, but yet she presses on.

It's admirable.

“My protection. That's rich. You kidnap me and lock me up, and then you claim it's for my protection.” She inclines her head in thought. “Okay, I'll bite. From whom?”

I don't answer her question. Again, that would be too easy. I prefer to watch her get angry. To watch as her skin turns a vibrant red and her cheeks suck in when she bites them. It's probably a reaction to anger that she doesn't even realize she does. It's cute. Watching Ivy get angry might be my new favorite pastime.

“So that's it. You make some ridiculous claim and don't back it up.”

“Exactly.”

I really could tell her, but I almost like this better. The attitude, her strength. No one challenges me. Regardless that she is my captive, she still has the strength and will to challenge me, and it's invigorating.

Men clamor at me. Women fawn.

But not her.

Yeah. Decision made.

This is the most alive I've felt in years, and I'm not willing to give this feeling up. No. I can't tell her the truth, and I can't let her go. Instead, I let her pass and follow her as she heads to the stairs.

"I'll leave you." I look toward the front door and then back at her. Her eyes widen because she thinks this is her chance. I stifle my laughter because there is no getting away. "I won't lock you in," I confirm. "You have free rein of the house. You'll find nothing here to help you."

"But how will—"

I hold my hand up. "There is food. Water. Everything you need is here. But there is nothing in this house or on this property to help you leave."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I can." I walk toward the door. "*Bescherm*," I say, and my dog moves to stand beside Ivy.

"You can't leave me with him. He might kill me."

"He will protect you. Which also means no one but me will come or go from this house."

"What's his name?"

"Cerberus."

She laughs, a full-body laugh, and when she throws her head back, I stare at the curve of her neck.

"How cliché are you? Cerberus? Really. Jeez, you have to be kidding."

I shake my head at her words.

"Who do you think you are, Hades? You are no king."

I advance toward her, stalking over like a lion ready to devour its prey.

"I'm Cyrus Reed, and that is exactly what I am."

And on those parting words, I leave her standing in my foyer with her pale blue eyes still wide with fear.

Good.

She should be afraid.

BACK AT MY ESTATE, I'M SITTING IN MY LARGE CHAIR IN MY office that faces the ocean. In the distance, I can see the outline of the manor that sits on my secluded island.

No one knows it's there.

No one but me. Well, that and the limited people I trust.

There are only a handful.

I wonder what she is doing now. Is she searching for a way to escape again? Probably. I wouldn't put it past her.

If it was me, I would never give up. I wouldn't cower in fear either. *She never cowered.*

When I first saw her, she left me breathless. Something that rarely happens to me.

Sure, I fuck a lot, but more often than not, I barely care to even look at the woman when I do. I choose instead to take her from behind, a hole for me to sate my own baser needs in.

But Ivy is different.

I won't fuck her.

Not unless she begs for it. Not unless she gives herself to me willingly, but I can't pretend I don't want to. Even with her sun-kissed hair matted with dirt, and her fair skin pale from exhaustion, she is still more beautiful than anyone.

Couple that with her inner strength and she is irresistible to me. Temptation at its finest.

When the phone rings on my desk, I welcome the distraction. It can only be one of a few people.

"Yes," I answer.

"Tobias is on the phone."

Tobias, one of my clients, will give me business to work on. That way I'll no longer be preoccupied with the fiery

blonde an ocean away. “Put him through.” The phone call connects. “Tobias,” I say.

“Cyrus Reed. You are a hard man to get in touch with.”

I recline back in my chair and chuckle. “I am. But I’m also the best at what I do.”

Tobias laughs in return. “Hence, why I wait. And I don’t enjoy waiting.”

“And I don’t like false pretenses, so tell me why you’re calling,” I respond.

Tobias might be the leading distributor of cocaine on the eastern seaboard, but I don’t fear anyone.

He needs me more than I need him.

“Also, to the point. I like that about you.”

“Good to know,” I respond as my mouth twitches with amusement.

“I need to make a deposit.”

Leaning forward, I type into my computer, pulling up his embedded file. “Figured as much.”

“A fairly large one.”

“Again, not surprised,” I deadpan.

“Ten million.”

“That can be arranged. Cash?”

Dumb question, but hey, you never know. Maybe drug dealers deal in credit now. But to be honest, you would be surprised by how often I get diamonds or gold. Fuck, drugs too. I don’t deal in humans, though.

Well ... Ivy is the exception.

This girl is fucking poison.

“Yes. Are you in the office?”

Even dumber question. I’m never in my office.

I never go into the city unless it is necessary, and if he wants to give me a fucking briefcase with ten million dollars, he can fucking come to me.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” I respond. “My estate. Tonight.”

“Any chance there is a game going on?”

I shake my head. They are all the same, and I’m okay with that. He’ll come with ten million but only deposit half.

Works every damn time. The good news is, less to clean. Funneling five million is much easier, and plus, I’ll make a better cut if he spends it.

Not that I need money.

I have more money than I can spend in five lifetimes, but what I like is the power.

These men need me, and that is priceless. I rule the underworld.

Ivy was right.

I might not be Hades, but I damn well run the show like I am. I own these men, and they fucking know it.

Before he can say anything else, I hang up. I’m not one for small talk or talking at all. Instead, I prefer to sit back and observe. That’s my strength.

I was hoping I could observe her tonight.

But alas, work comes first.

I refresh my computer screen and prepare the proper funnels to hide his money.

It will be a long night.

HOURS PASS.

My eyes are burning, but once Tobias shows up with his suitcase, I have all the paperwork in place. By the time I rid

him of his satchel, it will look like he struck it rich on the stock market.

See, this is why it pays to have the seediest of clients.

Take Trent, for example ...

He needed my help.

I gave him said help, and now, in turn, he will invest a percentage of the money Tobias brings as well as some of my other clients, without a blink of an eye. It will appear on the up-and-up, but he'll know it's not.

I pick up my cell and scroll through the contacts.

Hitting him up.

"Is she okay?" he answers.

Regardless of the fact I think he's a self-indulgent douchebag, I have to admit he loves his sister.

I let out a sigh. "Yes." It's not his fault that his father got him into this mess. That's something I know way too well. My nostrils flare at the memory threatening to surface. The less I think about the man who gave me life, the better.

"Where is she?" There's an edge to his voice, one I hope for his sake isn't aimed at me. He'll learn rather quickly that no one talks to me like that.

"The less you know, the better," I respond matter-of-factly.

"I want to speak to her."

I've got to hand it to him, he does have balls. The more I talk to Trent, the more I can see that stubbornness might, in fact, be a family trait.

"Not going to happen. She doesn't know the full story, and unless you finally came up with something to tell her, the answer is no."

He goes silent for a minute. "Maybe I just should ..." he says, resigned to the fact that there is no other way. "Have you made any headway to fix it?"

"No."

“Are you even trying?” He scoffs.

This has gone on long enough. If he was in the room, my gun would be out and aimed at his head right now, but he’s not, and there are bigger issues at hand at the moment, which means, I’ll rein his attitude in and not kill the son of a bitch.

“Listen, you fuck, do not question me.” My tone brooks no argument. Have I tried to fix it? Truth? No, I haven’t. Why? Fuck knows why. Maybe I don’t want to. Maybe I want to keep her all to myself.

I haven’t even tried to come up with a solution. I don’t tell him that, though. He’s clearly unhinged over his sister, and I don’t need the complication.

I wait for a few seconds and then speak. “I’m not calling regarding your sister.”

“Then why are you calling?” he replies without inflection, as though he’s come to terms with the fact that he has no power here and recognizes all the power is mine.

“Because you owe me. Regardless of anything, I fucking saved your sister’s life, and now it’s time to pay up.”

“What do you need?”

And then I tell him exactly what I need.

I imagine he’s wishing he never brought his father to my poker game.

Ivy

I EXPECTED HIM TO STORM THE ROOM—TO SHOW UP AND demand something I'm not willing to give—but he doesn't.

He never appeared.

I should be relieved, but I'm more on edge. It's like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Normally, I'm not one to be scared, but now I'm feeling petrified. The uncertainty is killing me. I would rather know what my fate is. Why I'm here. But seeing as I'm still alone, I know that will not happen.

Yesterday, I sulked for the rest of my night.

Today isn't much better. I'm still sulking. A fact that I hate.

I am not that girl.

But desperate times call for desperate measures, and right now, I'm having a goddamn pathetic pity party for myself.

I miss my mom.

I miss my friends.

I miss my brother.

I don't miss my dad.

But other than that, I want out of this place, stat.

I walk around the large estate. It's odd how it sits here vacant. It's old, older than Cyrus Reed to have built, so he must have bought it, but for what? It reminds me of a smaller version of a medieval castle.

Except this one is located in Hell.

A small but nervous chuckle escapes my mouth as I realize I referred to him as Hades and remember that not only is his dog named Cerberus but also this island can only be accessed by boat.

It seems my host must have an affinity for Greek mythology.

Seems fitting as I do too.

No. We are not the same at all. One little detail doesn't make us similar. No, I could never be like him.

He's a monster who probably kills. And I like to give life, helping things grow and flourish. He probably stops the light. Blocks it with his large, powerful frame. Snuffing out life.

I tiptoe around the corner, waiting for his dog to attack. He knows I'm coming because he's there, turning the corner. He must have some good hearing. I expect him to pounce, but he doesn't. Instead, he gives me a large berth to walk.

He shadows me as if I commanded it, which I guess since Cyrus did, he's just following orders.

My eyes roll of their own accord. Even though I have been here for a few days, I haven't checked out the house much. I need to explore.

There must be a boat somewhere. First, though, I need to eat, so I head to the kitchen. Walking into the large pantry, I find slim pickings. Barely enough to survive.

He said I had food and water, but clearly, that's a stretch of the truth. The food here won't last more than a few days.

I grab bread and then open the fridge. If I thought the pantry was empty, this is post-apocalyptic. Not a stitch of food.

Great. I have bread and water. That's not called food. That's a form of torture in some cultures.

With my prison meal in hand, I take a seat. Better make it last since who knows how long it will be before I get more.

I take a small bite of the bread. He didn't even include something to put on it.

What an asshole.

He really is the devil.

Conserving it, I continue to nibble. The slower I eat, the faster I'll grow full. I just need to chug water and force myself to believe I'm not hungry.

As I eat the tiny morsels, I notice that Cerberus stands guard. Hovering by the table.

Against my better judgment, I rip a piece of my bread and hold it out to him in my hand.

He doesn't move. Instead, he snarls. Probably trained not to accept food from strangers.

If only I could stick to my guns too.

"Cerberus," I say to him, but he doesn't look at me. He doesn't even acknowledge that I've spoken. If I didn't know better, I would think he didn't understand. But seeing as with one command, in who knows what language, he's followed me around, watched me, and apparently not eaten my scraps, it's obvious he knows more than the average dog. What else could I expect from the dog that guards Hell?

When I'm done with my bread, I stand and start my mission. I begin with the door right outside the kitchen. Then after that, I walk the main floor. Opening every door and every cupboard, I'm not sure what I'm looking for, maybe a key for a secret door or something. Although that won't help me. Only a boat will, and it's not like he would have a boat in the hallway. But I keep looking. I hit the jackpot when I find toiletries and women's clothes. A part of me doesn't want to use the clothes I find. Who knows who they belong to? For all I know, it's another captive of his. But desperate times call for

desperate measures, and I need to shower and change. I'll wash the clothes I have on, but while I wait for them to be clean, I can't be sitting around here naked.

My body trembles at the thought of Cyrus coming back and finding me in that state. Reluctantly, I strip down and get in the shower in the bathroom of my room. I bring my dirty clothes in with me. I'll wash them with soap and water until I can find out if there is a washer in my prison. That will take more exploring, but at least it passes the time.

Ivy

THE DAYS MESH TOGETHER, BLENDING LIKE THE STROKES OF an impressionist painting. When I'm hungry, I eat. When I'm tired, I sleep. I'm always hungry, though. That's the problem with living on bread and water for days.

The sound of the door opening has me bolting from my bed. I quickly slip on my sweater over my leggings and head down the stairs. What I'm met with once I hit the bottom landing has me halting to a stop. It's not Cyrus.

My brain can't even register what is happening.

Has the moment finally come?

Is this it? The moment I've been waiting for.

All the what-ifs bounce around like a pinball in my brain.

Before I can second-guess myself, I'm running toward her.

She can help me. The sound of my approach must take her by surprise because she holds her hand to her chest.

Yes.

This is exactly what I need.

"Help me," I say as I run to where she is standing. Her eyes go wide as she looks me up and down, and that's when I

finally look at her. She appears to be around my age, maybe older by a few years.

I expect her to say something, but when I move to touch her, to beg her, she takes a step back.

Her hand rises to stop me.

“Please,” I implore. “Help me. I’m being kept here. I’ve been kidnapped.” My voice cracks as my emotions threaten to overcome me. I’m petrified that this might be my only shot.

She looks at me with wide eyes, and then she does the unthinkable. She shakes her head back and forth.

“*Não falo inglês,*” she responds.

The language sounds like Spanish, but it’s not. I remember taking Spanish in high school. This is something else, but regardless of the fact that I can’t understand her, it’s rather clear that I have to assume she is saying she doesn’t understand English.

“Please help me,” I implore again, but this time, she doesn’t answer.

I lift my hand to my ear. “Telephone.” I gesture my hand to pretend I’m calling someone.

“*Desculpa,*” she whispers.

I continue to stare at her as my heart beats frantically in my chest. I can escape. Even if she doesn’t understand me, this woman must have keys to a boat. Could I be that lucky? Maybe? But then my stomach bottoms out as another thought crosses my mind. What good are keys when I have no boat?

She was probably dropped off.

The sinking feeling festers, spreading from my belly to all the other parts of my body, including my heart, that now pounds heavily. My plan won’t work. It’s hopeless. This woman can’t help me.

With my shoulders slumped forward, a sigh escapes me.

She bites her lip at my clear show of defeat, and then she walks through the house, leaving me stunned in the foyer. As

she trails off, I force myself to calm down and follow her to the kitchen. There has to be something I can do. Some way she can help me.

Once I'm standing in the doorway, I observe her. That's when I finally notice she has bags in her hand.

Food.

She's here to make sure I'm fed.

Shit.

That means I'll be here for longer than I wanted to believe. If he's feeding me, he has no intention of letting me off the island anytime soon.

This is bad.

Really bad.

There is a pressure building in my head, and my jaw starts to tremble. I'm about to cry in front of this woman if I don't pull myself together.

No.

Pushing all thoughts of my predicament aside, I sit at the kitchen table and watch her. She puts some food away, but the rest she cooks.

It's like I'm a stalker, or at least that is how I feel, as I sit at the table and just observe.

It must be hours that I watch her.

A part of me is hoping if I stay long enough, she will turn around and say "surprise, I'm here to help you."

That won't happen, but a part of me is so desperate to believe that, so I just watch as she cooks and then sections off the food into small plastic containers for me to eat.

One. Two. Three. Four. I lost count after ten because it's too depressing to think about. If she has to cook that much food, then there is no way he's coming back for me today or tomorrow.

There is no way anyone is coming for me for days, at least.

I must have lost track of time because the next thing I know, the woman, who I have to assume works for Cyrus as a cook, is standing beside me. She has a plate in her hand.

She tries to hand it to me.

But I shake my head.

“No.” My voice is more forceful than I intend, but I need to get my point across. I am not eating.

She pushes the plate at me again, rambling something in her foreign tongue.

“No.”

This time, she places the plate on the table, but I don't touch it. I don't even acknowledge it sitting in front of me; instead, I turn my head blatantly to look away. Then I lift my hand.

The lady stares at me, and then she lifts her hand to me, the one with the fork in it. The movement makes the sleeves of her shirt pull back, and that's when the breath leaves my body.

On her exposed skin are scars.

Deep scars. But also old scars. It looks like someone sliced her forearm open.

It feels like snakes are crawling up my body as the ramifications of what those scars can mean beat down inside my brain.

Is she like me?

Was she kidnapped?

Did the man who took me make those marks on her?

I can feel bile running up my throat and coating my tongue. I need to swallow a few times and will myself to breathe in through my nose to make sure I don't throw up right here on the kitchen table.

My hand lifts to touch her. I expect her to move away like last time, but she doesn't. She just stares at me as I take her hand in mine.

“Help me,” I say for what must now be the billionth time.

Again, she talks, but there is no way to get my point across, so I drop her hand. If she won't help me, there is only one person who can, and that person is myself. I just need a plan.

Any plan.

Don't eat.

If I don't eat, he'll have only two choices—come here or let me die. It's a big risk, but it's the only chance I have.

I won't eat, not until I speak to Cyrus.

“No food. Not until phone. Not until he comes,” I say as I stand, making my back appear ramrod straight. There must be a way for her to get in touch with him.

I head back to my room, and once inside it doesn't take long for my body to object to my new approach on my kidnapping. My stomach sounds like an earthquake is happening inside it.

Rumbling and shaking.

It takes every bit of resistance to object.

But this is a hunger strike.

I have no choice.

As time passes, the pain doesn't get any better. I was never good at going hungry. As a kid, before my mom faded away, she would joke that when I hadn't eaten in a long time, I would become angry and hostile to everyone around. Seems not much has changed over the years. Now starving, I want to throw something to make the cramps subside. Instead of being destructive, I throw my body on the bed and try to sleep.

It might hurt to lie down, but at least if I'm out cold, I won't feel the pains any longer.

Unfortunately, the plan is bad. Before I can second-guess myself, I'm standing in the kitchen with the fridge open.

Fuck this.

I can eat if I want to, and he'll never know. Or will he?

A thought pops into my head as I stand there with the cold air hitting my face and stomach groaning. *What if there are cameras?*

He will see me eat, and then there is no strike. He won't come.

Making sure I don't move too much, I pop open one lid. My whole torso is inside the fridge. The slight chance that he can see it here is worth taking the smallest bite. Using two fingers, I take a tiny scoop of the chicken salad she made. The food tastes amazing against my tongue, making my mouth salivate.

I have to stop myself from eating more. If I touch or take too much food, he will know, so I don't. Just that one bite and then I grab a bottle of water and head back to my room.

Cyrus will have to show up.

If he appears, I'll have a chance at convincing him to let me go.

Later that night, and after just enough food to let the pain go away, I fall asleep with a smile on my face. This plan will work. It has to.

The next morning comes, and not eating is harder than I thought, especially when I'm sitting there watching the dog eat.

Apparently, he has an automatic feeder. *Must be nice.*

Storming out of the room, I decide to search the estate to see if I'm alone. After going over every square inch again, I can't find the lady from yesterday.

Good thing? Or bad thing?

As much as I hated that she couldn't talk to me, it was nice to have someone else around, even if she didn't exactly come across as friendly. The only thing I can hope at this point is that she goes back to Cyrus and tells him how I'm faring or, better yet, how I'm starving.

A laugh bubbles up at the thought of the arrogant bastard finding out his captive is being defiant.

With no more rooms to search, I head back into the kitchen, take a seat at the table, and then I stare at the fridge.

My stomach growls loudly in protest.

It's loud enough to have the dog stop eating and look up at me. He cocks his head at the second growl that leaves my body.

"I know," I say to him.

This will be torture.

I can't survive on water and the small bites I took last night. Maybe I can take more without showing anyone I'm eating from the containers.

When another loud sound emanates from my stomach, Cerberus stands from where he is eating and drops something at my feet.

Kibble. He's trying to feed me.

"As much as I would love to eat this, I think it will kill me." Standing, I head to the fridge, opening it and popping the lids of the food that is there.

I take a bite from each one, but still a small enough amount that no one would notice it's gone.

It's enough to keep me alive, but my brain is fuzzy, and I feel weak.

IT'S GETTING HARDER AND HARDER TO PICK FOOD OUT OF THE containers without it being obvious. But the only hope I have of this plan working is being able to sell my hunger as real.

Today, I hear the door, but I'm too weak to approach her in the foyer. Instead, I wait for her in the kitchen, sitting in the same spot that I sat the last time I saw her.

When she walks in, I notice that once again she has groceries. She sets about with the same routine as last time. Putting a few bags down on the counter that she will eventually unpack in the pantry and then walking to the fridge. When she opens the door, she stops.

The food in the bag in her hand hits the floor.

I don't need to see what she's doing to know. She's opening each one, making sure I'm telling the truth. The evidence is there. All the containers of food she cooked are still full. Or so it would appear.

If I wasn't so weak, I'd smile at my victory. Too bad, I am.

The sound of the fridge slamming has me looking at her. She turns to me and begins to speak in quick succession.

"No. Call him. I will not eat. Not until he comes here." I know she can't understand what I'm saying, but I hope she understands my hand gestures. I lift my hand to my mouth, pretending to eat, then I shake my head and gesture to the phone. Her eyes are wide, and she looks scared.

A part of me feels bad. The scars on her body twist at my heart, but I can't back down now.

I'm a fighter, and I'll fight with whatever I have to.

Once I'm sure she understands the message, I stand and leave her once again. Staring at my back.

Let's hope this works.

Cyrus

WORK HAS BEEN KEEPING ME BUSY FOR THE PAST FEW DAYS, and I haven't been able to check on my prisoner.

I always knew I was a monster but leaving Ivy alone on the island just confirms it.

You're as bad as him.

No. I'm not the same. I don't take something not clearly offered.

I did what I had to do to protect her. Taking her was the only way to keep her safe.

But why do I even fucking care? The answer screams at me in my head, behind distant and buried memories, but I refuse to let it resurface. I push the thought out of my mind. I can't think about that now. I have other, more pressing matters.

Like what the fuck am I going to do with the girl? I told her brother I won't hurt her, and I meant it.

I'm a man of my word, so I won't touch her.

But what will I do with her?

I shove my hands in my pockets and finally walk to the window, the large window that faces the water. The waves crash against the shore. Each time one hits the rocks, white

bubbles to the surface like small crystals. Beside that, the ocean looms in the distance. Dark and menacing. A perfect storm is brewing.

A minute passes as I look out into the dark abyss.

“Boss.” I hear Z’s voice. “What’s the plan?” he asks, and I shrug at his question. “Are you going to bring her here?”

That has me stop and look toward him. “No.”

I couldn’t. It’s not safe here. Not that Boris knows I have her yet, but he will.

He can come here all he wants. No one knows about the island. No one but Z and Maxwell and me. I trust them with my life, so there is nothing to worry about there.

“I know it’s not my place ...” he starts to say, and I lift my hand to silence him.

“No. It’s not.”

When he doesn’t move, I shake my head, but then I let out a breath. The man has been with me since the beginning. His father worked for my father. He lived in my house; he was like a brother to me. He’s been with me since before I lost everything and then after I burned myself to the ground. He was still there with me when I rose from the ashes to build all this.

“If you have something to say, then please, by all means, talk.”

“What are you doing, boss? We can end this now. Call Boris, broker the trade. Saving her won’t—”

I was wrong. I don’t want to hear what he says.

“Enough.” My voice booms. “I saw her. I wanted her. That’s it.”

“Keeping her will ruin—”

“Stop,” I cut him off again. Z might be the closest person I have to a friend, but it is not his place to question my authority and rule.

A tense silence stretches out between us as he waits for me to say more, but I don't. I don't even know why I did this. Why this girl is stranded on my island.

When I saw her ... there was so much about her that ... I shake my head. "I couldn't let her have that fate," I answer because that's the only thing I can say. "No one should have that."

Many things about me are evil, but not that.

An hour later, Z and I are still sitting in my office when the phone rings on my desk. It's one of the landlines from within the house, probably Maxwell.

"Speak," I answer.

"Mariana wishes to speak with you, sir."

"Send her in." I hang up the phone and look up to see Z staring at me. "Mariana."

He nods his head in understanding. Mariana works in my household, but she is also providing my little captive her food.

The sound of the door has both me and Z looking to the left.

Mariana walks in, timid as usual. She's been with me for only a few years, but it doesn't matter how long she's been here, she still acts like a scared mouse when I'm around.

"Mariana."

"Hello, Mr. Reed."

"Cyrus, please," I tell her. I might be a dick, but there is no reason to be one to her. She's been through enough. "What can I do for you?"

She looks down at the floor, but it's when she worries her lip that I know something is wrong.

"What's going on, Mariana?" I speak softly so I don't send her shaking with fear to the corner of the room.

"She won't eat."

My hands ball into fists, but instead of losing my shit, I inhale deeply. “What do you mean she won’t eat?”

Fear, stark and vivid, glitters in her eyes. “S-She ...” She stops, probably petrified of me. Even trying to be calm, I’m still scaring this poor girl. “She said she won’t eat until you come.”

The room goes quiet. If a pin dropped on the floor, the sound would be as clear as day right now.

I give her a reassuring smile. “Did you speak to her?”

Mariana was given strict instruction not to engage. To pretend she didn’t speak English.

“No, sir. I did just as you asked. But even if I didn’t understand her, she made it quite clear.”

Interesting. A hunger strike. My parted lips spread farther. She is quite the conundrum, constantly refusing to do what the norm would do in her position.

I like it. Fuck that, I love it.

“And she is following through with this?”

“Yes, sir. I came back, and none of the food was touched.”

A change of plans is in order.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

Mariana nods her head and then leaves the room, after which I stand from my desk and straighten my jacket.

“Where are you going?” Z asks.

“The island.”

“Why? Because she isn’t eating. If you go, you are playing into her hand.”

“Be that as it may, I’m going.”

“It’s a bad idea. Why don’t you just let me make the phone call? The longer you hold her, the bigger the risk to you. Let’s tell Boris we have her ...”

I halt my steps and turn around. “I’ll let you speak out of turn this one time because I know that you think you are looking out for me, but remember your place, Z.”

He nods his head, but his words still ring through my mind. I know what he wants me to do.

“This will start a war when it gets out. We can use this to our advantage now,” he states, and I consider his words.

“War is already upon us. It has been for years. Ever since ...” I stop myself, not wanting to feel weak.

“So then let’s use her. You could have her by your side at the next poker game, he’s sure to come out of hiding if he hears that.”

“No.”

I know Z feels loyal to me, protective even, and I know he thinks this plan is our best option, but I disagree.

I watch as he opens his mouth and shuts it. “You know, boss, after what you did for me . . .” His words trail off. He is referring to helping him get back on his feet by giving him a job and mission in life after he too lost someone he cared about like I had. It bonded us, the loss. We were both alone in the world with no direction. I gave us both a common goal. Ever since then, Z has been by my side. I know he has my best interests at heart, and normally, I would agree, but not this time.

He’s overstepped, and he knows it. Without another word, I head toward the docks. Time to see what my little prisoner is doing.

The small boat is ready to go in no time with Maxwell at the helm. It doesn’t take long to get there.

“Do you want me to wait?” Maxwell asks.

No one knows about this island, but I can’t take any chances now that Boris wants her.

“Offshore. Not visible.”

“Got it, boss.”

Stepping on to the dock, I make my way through the path up to the estate. When I open the door, I'm not sure where I'll find her. I'm actually surprised when I hear her padding down the stairs.

Her hair is pulled into a ponytail, and she has a tight-fitting sweater on that she must have found in one of the drawers.

She looks younger today, but when our gazes pass, I know it's all an illusion. She is still the headstrong and brave woman I have come to admire.

I wouldn't tell her that, but in the time she's been here, I have to admit she's not at all like I thought she would be.

"You won't eat."

Her full pink lips part and then spread into a large smile.

"So, she does talk. What language?"

I ignore her question. "Enough of the shit, Sun. You will eat."

She looks at me confused by the nickname, and I expect her to ask, but instead she puffs out her chest, and I can't help but look at their full shape under the tight-fitting gear. Her back is straight, and I can tell she is trying to be tough. Good fight. I like that.

"No," she says.

"Very well, I guess I have no choice but to make you."

Her eyes go wide, bulging from the sockets. In all the times I've seen her, she's never looked as shocked as she does now. Which, seeing as she orchestrated this whole thing, is not expected. However, as much as I want to read into it, she pulls herself together faster than a race car driver on the last lap of a race, schooling her features and placing her hands on her hips.

"Or" —she cocks her head— "you can let me go."

"Any other requests?"

"You dead." She shrugs.

“That would leave you in a predicament. I’d be dead, and then you would die here too.”

Like a blazing inferno doused by a fire hydrant, she sizzles. It’s true. I die; she dies.

“Come with me.”

My demand should squash her remaining defiance, but instead, in typical Ivy fashion, she responds, “No.”

I move toward her, towering over her small and lithe frame. “I said move.”

Then off I go, prowling to the kitchen, and shockingly, she follows.

“Sit.” I point at the table, and once she is sitting, I go to the fridge and grab a container. “Eat.”

She doesn’t move to follow my orders. She doesn’t do much of anything. Staring at me with hatred in her eyes, she commences a silent battle of wills.

There is no hope for her, though. I always win.

I lean forward in my chair. “We can do this one of two ways. I can force you ...”

“Option two, don’t eat,” she chimes in.

“No, option two is not that.”

“What’s option two?”

My lips spread into a large and thoroughly pleased grin.

“I’m happy you ask, Ivy. Option two is I chain you to the table until you do.” Her mouth drops open at my words, so I continue. “I have been easy on you.”

“Easy? You call this easy? You locked me in your scary home.”

“I hardly call living in a mansion, roughing it.”

“I’m all alone. The only companion is that dog.” She points at Cerberus, who chooses that moment to bark at her, and I can’t hold back the chuckle.

“You think that’s funny?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not funny that you have left me alone with a dog that wants to chew my face off.”

My lips keep pulling up. Watching her get so angry over the dog is fucking hilarious.

“How about this ... why don’t you tell me why I’m here? Tell me why you took me, and I’ll eat.”

“Interesting idea.” And it is, but Ivy doesn’t know me. Everything comes with a price. Leaning forward, I rest my weight on my forearms. “Fine, I have one stipulation. You cannot ask me why I took you.”

“But—”

“Option two it is. I’ll just tell Cerberus to watch you while I get the chains.”

The shiver that runs down her spine is obvious. It’s as obvious as the fear that reflects back at me from her large blue eyes. Ivy is scared, and she should be.

“Fine.” She lifts her hands in acceptance. “Fine. One bite, one question.”

I nod. “I agree to those terms.”

She lifts the fork off the table and looks at me and then the food.

“Cyrus Reed, you better not be lying.”

“Ivy Aldridge,” I counter, “I don’t lie.”

“How did you take me, and before you say anything, the question is not why? It’s *how*.”

“Chloroform,” I answer truthfully. By now there is no proof, so she can’t do anything with this information.

“You have access to chloroform?”

I lift a brow and dart my eyes toward the food. “That’s two questions. Now you owe me two bites.”

She takes the two bites, and I can tell she wants to say how good it tastes after not eating for so long, but she's too strong to do that. So she stifles the moan threatening to escape and swallows.

“Yes.”

She places her fork down and furrows her brow.

“That's not an answer.”

“Well then, you should probably ask better questions,” I deadpan.

A groan of displeasure pours from her mouth as she shakes her head. She rights herself quickly. I'm not sure if it's because she is hungry and wants to eat more, or if it's because she really wants to know the answer.

“How do you have access to chloroform?”

“A store.”

Cue the groan again.

“This isn't fair.”

“And you owe me another bite.”

She huffs in annoyance but takes the bite.

Ivy

A FEW DAYS HAVE PASSED SINCE CYRUS CAME HERE AND forced me to eat. I'm no longer starving, but I'm still annoyed. The man is infuriating. Never in my life has someone evaded questions quite like him. The whole thing was a giant waste of time.

Searching the property has also proven fruitless. I still have yet to find anything useful for a potential escape.

The worst part, cabin fever has set in.

I'm bored, have no one to talk to, and my only companion wants to eat me for breakfast.

Things aren't looking good for me these days.

No. Not true. There has been one bright light in all this darkness. During my latest search, I did find one thing. Off the side of the house, I stumbled upon a door. It was jammed, and I almost broke my arm trying to bust in, but it was well worth it.

A greenhouse.

Not a very nice one, but still it has the potential to make my days better. Everything inside is dead and unkempt. But I did find seeds and will plant them in the abandoned pots I found. Maybe I'll even be able to grow flowers.

I'm not sure what plants or flowers the seeds are, but I'll plant and water them, nonetheless. As soon as they sprout, I'll know.

Or maybe I won't.

Hopefully, I won't be here that long. My stomach drops at the thought. Will I?

At first, I would've said no, but seeing as I've come no further in a week, there's a good chance I will be. At this point, I'm so desperate I had full conversations with Cerberus. As if he will answer.

I have made it my lifelong goal to turn him from the dark side to my alliance. At every meal, I try to feed him, and at every meal, he rejects my advances. I will win him over. I'll get him to like me. Today, he guards me once again as I tend to my new flowers. It's hard to plant anything, seeing as there're no shovels. Cyrus was smart; he left nothing that could be construed as a weapon.

When I'm done in the greenhouse, I make my way back into the main part of the house. On the first day, I had noticed stairs, and today, I'm finally prepared to search. There's no light, so I leave the door open and head down. The dog follows me, and when I get down there, you can smell the dank air.

It's an old storage room, maybe for wine. When I look around, I notice old metal chains on the floor. A shiver runs down my spine as I realize this didn't hold wine; it holds prisoners. They're too old for Cyrus to have put them there. My curiosity piques. What was this place, and how did he come to purchase it?

Is this his family's house? Is kidnapping in his blood?

No. I refuse to believe that. If that was the case, why hasn't he come back?

He muttered it was for my protection.

From whom or what, I don't know.

But why is the better question. It's the question that has plagued me for days. I need to find out.

I wake the next day to a sound in the house. The sound of something that sounds a lot like the door opening. This could be my chance to escape ... I look out the window, but I don't see any boats.

It doesn't matter, though. Even if there is no boat, and I can't escape, I don't care. No, but what it does mean is that maybe someone is here.

Someone who can help me.

Or even just someone to talk to.

Never in my life have I been much of a talker. Often, I have chosen to be alone, but I still miss the companionship. Even before I came here, after my mom had succumbed to her depression and stopped talking to me, I at least had her presence. Here, I have no one. Well, that's not true. Here, I have a dog, but he doesn't answer me. Though that doesn't stop me from talking to him.

The idea of not being alone has me quickly putting on my clothes, and then I find myself running down the stairs.

As soon as I reach the landing, I realize no one has come to save me.

It's Cyrus in the foyer, and Cerberus is beside him.

A strange feeling works its way down my spine as I take him in. It's terrifying because it doesn't feel like fear. It feels like something entirely different.

Excitement.

It feels a lot like excitement as butterflies start to swarm in my belly.

Shit.

I'm actually happy to see him. I hate how *happy* I am.

No. It's not him. This isn't about him, in particular. It could be anyone, and I would be internally jumping for joy. That's what happens when you have no one to talk to for days.

Hell, the Grim Reaper could walk in this door right now, and I'd probably ask him to join me for dinner. Or in this case, make it *Hades*. I tone down my thought. No matter how starved for attention I am, I won't let him know.

"You're here."

His expression darkens when our gaze meets. "I am."

"Do you ever speak in full sentences?"

"Didn't I just now? I am. That's a *full* sentence."

"Yes. But not really." The man drives me crazy. I take a deep breath and try again. "*Why* are you here?" It's really a dumb question, but I ask anyway. I know why he's here, to make sure I eat.

"Have you forgotten our deal? I'm here to fulfill my promise, Sun." I'm perplexed by why he keeps calling me that, but by the time I open my mouth to ask, he's already heading toward the kitchen.

Like Hansel and Gretel looking for breadcrumbs, I follow him and then take my seat at the table.

He's already pulling out whatever he brought for me. Bare bones. That's what he does. He gives me just enough to live, and then like the asshole he is, he takes days to return.

I'm not an idiot, but I still play the game. He knows he doesn't have to answer any questions in order for me to eat, but he likes wielding the power.

I grab the fork out of his hand and scoop a bite of the rice in the bowl. He walks over to the fridge and places the rest of the containers to last me until he returns in a few days.

I take a bite, swallow, and then place my fork down. "What is this place?" I ask, gesturing my hands around the space.

He turns from the fridge, directing his attention on me now.

"I thought a girl as smart as you would know what a house is." Deep, smooth, and laced with sarcasm, his voice washes

over me, making me clench my fist and try my hardest not to punch him.

I could try, but something tells me it wouldn't end well for me.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.” I follow his gaze and see that he's talking about my right-hand fist that is balled and ready to strike. If it were possible for my eyes to roll out of their sockets, they would.

“I meant why is this ‘house’”—I air quote—“on its own island?”

“Two bites.”

“I just took one ...” Still, I place my fork in the food and then take another bite.

“It's the reason I bought my estate.”

“I don't get it.” This man is about to make me bash my head into the table with his half answers.

He sits back in his seat and cocks his head. The presence of a smirk lines his normally stone-cold face. “Is that your next question?”

Before I can stop it, a long, audible sigh escapes my mouth. “Jeez, fine. Yes.”

“The seclusion and proximity to my estate on the mainland is invaluable to me.”

I throw my hands up in the air at his once again vague answer. “You know what ... I'll just eat this. You can leave now.”

And with that, he laughs.

Ass.

Ivy

THIS TIME, I KNOW HE'S COMING. HE'S BECOME PREDICTABLE. Every three days like clockwork. By the time he gets here, all the food he's left from the previous visit are scraps. It's planned to a T.

Today, when he arrives, I greet him in the foyer.

"When are you going to let me go?" I ask. He ignores me, walking into the living room and checking the logs.

"You haven't used the wood."

"It hasn't been that cold."

Lies. It has been, but I refuse to admit that I don't know how to start a fire. I wasn't a Brownie growing up. Wasn't a Girl Scout. I grew up in Manhattan with a trust fund, so the fact I have a green thumb is a modern miracle.

"Take this," he says as he passes me a bag that I didn't even realize he was holding.

"What is it?"

"Just take it. It's more clothes. Although, there are also more supplies you might need in the cabinets."

I don't tell him I've been through everything. Or how I found the basic necessities I need to live. The fact he hasn't

brought shampoo and other toiletries until today leads me to believe he already knows this fact.

“Now that I have seen that you’re okay ...” He starts to turn around, and it feels like a red-hot poker is being jabbed in my chest. I’m not ready to be alone again.

“No. You can’t leave yet,” I plead before catching myself. “I haven’t eaten.” I hate myself for the desperation.

“You made it clear last time that you didn’t want to play my game.” He sounds smug as shit as he says this. The worst part is, now, I need to grovel because I don’t want to be alone again. I won’t tell him that, though.

“I still have questions, and I won’t eat this if you don’t answer them.”

“Do you want me to stay?” he asks, lifting a suggestive brow. Nope. He saw right through me.

My head shakes back and forth. “Not like that.”

“Pity, Sun.”

That nickname again. “Sun?”

His lip tips up into a dangerous smirk. “Yes. It’s fitting.”

“For my sunny personality? I find that hard to believe.”

Something tells me he’s toying with me, messing with me somehow. I don’t like it one bit.

“If you knew why I called you Sun, you’d understand.”

Does this man ever speak in clear sentences, everything out of his mouth is like a damn riddle.

He starts back toward the front door.

“Please don’t ... I can’t take much more time alone.”

He turns in my direction, scanning his eyes over me. It’s only then that I remember my precarious spot. Although I got dressed, the clothing was slim pickings. All I have are the clothes on my back and some soap I have been using to wash them. I did find the clothes in the bedroom, but I’ve used them

only when I'm desperate. I was about to get dressed, but ran down so quickly, I forgot to throw on the rest of my clothes.

So here I am standing in the cold foyer in nothing but a flimsy camisole and barely there shorts. I was so excited I had forgotten. Shit.

I can feel his eyes dancing across my skin. It's unnerving. And I fear that in my insolence, I have pushed the boundaries. He was going to leave, and now he'll defile me.

I have dangled a piece of steak in front of a lion. If only I had a weapon to fight him off.

"I thought you said you wouldn't touch me without my permission."

"Does it look like I'm touching you, Sun?"

"No. But it looks like you want to."

"Wanting and doing are two very different things. I might be a monster and make no mistake, I am, but I'm not that kind of monster."

"If you say so."

"I do. Now let's go feed you. I don't have all day."

This time when I'm sitting at the table, I use my questions to ask more important things, things that hopefully he will answer. But first I have a demand.

"I won't eat anything unless I can call my mother."

"No." He doesn't even consider granting me this, and it pisses me off.

"Why the hell not?"

"Eat, and I'll tell you." He winks.

His need to drive me crazy is having its desired effect, but I refuse to show it, instead, I place my hands on my legs and squeeze my nails into my thighs to keep me from going off. This is important, and I won't let my anger toward this man ruin my chance of connecting with my mom.

“Please.” I hate how desperate I sound. I hate this weak person, sitting at the table, biting her tongue and trying to be a docile little thing.

When he doesn’t answer me, I take my fork, stab the steak in front of me, and take a bite.

“Ivy. I’m doing what’s best for you. You can’t talk to her.”

My mouth opens and shuts. I’m not sure what to do, how to get him to tell me more. I’m in a precarious situation, if I push too hard, I’ll never find out anything.

“Is she okay?” Despite my best efforts, tears start to form in my eyes, I try hard not to blink, harder for them not to fall.

Cyrus leans in and his finger lifts up. Confusion clouds my brain. It feels like I’m trapped in fog and can’t see my way out of this. He’s going to touch me, and I don’t know what I’ll do if he does.

There is a slight hesitation in his eyes, but then I feel it, and I’m too baffled to do anything.

The rough pad of his finger touches my cheek, brushing a lone tear that has fallen. He collects it on his finger. It feels oddly intimate, and I hate it, but at the same time, I welcome the comfort. It feels good and I don’t know what that means.

Am I starved for attention? Is that the problem, am I desperate and needy?

Another tear falls. He’s the first person to soothe me in a long time and I don’t want it to stop, no matter what that means.

I still hate him.

But I welcome the support.

“I might not let you speak to her, but I’ll do something for you ...” His gaze is unwavering, searing me with emotions I can’t place. “I’ll call your brother. I’ll make sure your mom is okay.”

Cyrus

THE FUCKER IS CALLING ME.

Turns out, I don't actually need to call Trent after all.

I have no intention of telling him I was planning on calling him. The shit needs to be scared of me and seeing as he went against what I said, there will be hell to pay.

"Why are you calling me again?" I grind the words out between my teeth. He should know better. This is the kind of bullshit that will get him, and his sister killed.

"Where is my sister?"

Apparently, he has a death wish after all. Lifting the glass of cognac I just poured myself, I take a drink. As the spicy yet bitter flavor works its way down my throat, my shoulders loosen enough to answer him.

"I thought we covered this, Trent."

"We covered shit." He fires back, the little shit is lucky he's not here right now.

"Careful, Trent. I would hate for your sister to lose her brother."

One thing is certain, hotheadedness apparently must run in the family.

"You threaten, but I see no action," Trent presses.

I slam the glass down. It doesn't break, which is a modern miracle.

"One last warning out of respect for Ivy." My voice is slow, steady, and controlled.

"Don't say her name like you know her."

"I might not know her, but I know that the fucking Butcher wants her. If what you say is true, that she's meant for someone else, it's even worse."

"You—"

"Listen, pretty boy, I know you think you know what horrors are, but you don't know shit about anything. You think over on Park Avenue you know shit?"

"What do you mean?"

"While you're bitching because you want to talk to your sister, I'm protecting her, it's more than just Boris."

"What are we talking about here?"

"Trafficking. Human fucking trafficking. Boris works for one of the largest traffickers in Europe."

"I don't understand."

"He works for one of the largest organizations involved in human trafficking and ... it sounds like Ivy is already meant for someone. If it's who I think it is, she is better off with me, no matter what you think I am."

That shuts him up, finally. The only sound coming through the phone is the sound of heavy breathing. He finally understands.

Thank fuck.

"You can protect her?"

An odd sense of unease finds me, but I push it down. Normally, I would say fuck yes, but this is different. The leader of the organization has been evading me for years. I don't say that to Trent, though. He's already a loose cannon as is, I need to rein him in, not send him off the deep end.

“Better than you can. But I need you to stop calling me. Stop calling attention to yourself and me. Right now, where does Boris think she is?”

“I told him she was away.”

“And how long do you think that will buy you. A week, two? The one saving grace for you, is that they think she’s worth not killing you. Not just for the money, but for whoever she’s meant for. You need to contact Boris, and tell him you will pay off your debt, tell him you need more time.”

“I’m not calling that motherfucker.”

“You will. Because if you don’t, he will kill you. Tell him you will pay him back with interest. Anything you have to make him not murder you. You understand?”

“Yes.”

I’m about to hang up, but then I remember what Ivy asked of me and how broken she was. “Trent.” It might make me sound weak to ask this of him, but the look on her face has me asking anyway. “I need you to take care of your mother. Ivy is worried about her.”

“I am. She’s staying with me.”

“Good. Don’t call me again.” I hang up and pick up my glass and drink the remainder of it.

The door to my office opens and Z comes striding in like he owns the place. I’m too bothered by the reaction I have to Ivy to do something about it. Instead, I grab the bottle of Louis XIII and pour myself some more. Nothing like the earthy taste to bring me back down to the ground.

“What’s going on, boss?” Z asks, stepping farther into the room.

“Aldridge again.” I motion to the bottle of cognac on the counter. “Want some?”

“Nope. I’m good. What’s the problem now?”

Placing my glass down, I lift my hand to scrub at the headache that’s starting to form. “He wanted to check on his

sister.”

“Okay ...” he leads, wanting for me to go on.

“To make sure she was fine.”

“Doesn’t he understand what could have happened to her. Fuck. The bastard should be grateful you stepped in. Those bastards would have destroyed her by now.”

“I informed him.”

Z chuckles, he knows what that means. Typically, it means I threatened his life. Not too far from the truth. “How’d he take it?” he asks.

“Honestly, I probably made him shit himself.” It wouldn’t surprise me one bit if Trent Aldridge was vomiting right now after our conversation of Boris and his associates.

“Better that than the alternative.”

“This is true.”

Z’s expression hardens, and then he takes a seat across from me.

“Speaking of, boss. I think we should leak to Boris that we have her.”

“No.” The word falls from my mouth before I can stop it.

“But—”

“Not yet.” My voice is firm, but Z now looks confused. His eyebrows have knit together and a large line forms between them.

“That was always the plan. Why not now? Keeping her logistically is a nightmare. Boris will probably kill her family and then we will be stuck with her.”

“It’s taken care of.”

“How?”

“Let me worry about that. You just keep up surveillance on the island when I’m not there. The timing isn’t right.”

The timing will never be right.

But handing her over as bait to catch a bigger fish, is wrong.

FRIDAY NIGHT IS HERE, AND THE GAME IS ON. TONIGHT, I'M here for no other reason than I need to distance myself from the temptation waiting back on the island for me. Each day that I'm there feeding her, it gets harder and harder not to give in to my primal urge to push her against the kitchen counter and show her just how much she truly wants me.

That's why I'm here tonight, even though I should be bringing her more food.

I've chosen a spot by Matteo Amante tonight.

"Boss." I hear from behind me. "Aldridge is here."

I turn to face Z. Stern as always, he stands behind me with his lips thinned and his arms at his side. Watching. Waiting. Observing. The best man to have covering your back.

"Does he never learn?" I mutter to myself.

One would think after losing his daughter, he would have learned something, but nope, this fucker came back.

"Not senior," he clarifies.

"Trent."

Z gives me a small bob of his head before turning to face where the man must be waiting in my foyer.

"I told him not to come back." I start to walk out of the parlor room of my estate where tonight's game is being played. Trent is in the foyer, pacing back and forth. When he sees me, he halts his steps. "Thought I told you, you were no longer welcome here."

"You did." His nostrils flare, and I take a step up to him. I expect him to step back, to flinch, but I'm actually impressed. It seems Trent has grown a pair of balls.

He doesn't even look like the same Trent I've met in the past. Instead of being funny like when he used to play poker or disheveled like the last time I saw him at his place before I took Ivy, he stands up straight today, his face determined to say his piece. "I'm here to talk business."

"And this couldn't have waited?"

"Well, it could have, but I know you don't leave your estate, and I wanted to talk to you about the money I invested for you. I figured you wouldn't want to talk over the phone."

"And you would be right." I nod to my men who flank him, and I allow him to pass. Together, we walk back into the parlor, but instead of going to a table, I lead him to the bar.

"What are you drinking?" I ask as I call Maggie over. She knows what I drink. In no time, she will be getting me my signature glass of Louis. When she approaches, I gesture for Trent to order from her.

"Don Julio 1942 extra chilled."

Maggie smiles before heading off to get us drinks.

It doesn't take long, and as Trent lifts his drink to his mouth a few minutes later, we move to stand far enough away from the tables so no one can hear.

"Now that you have my attention, and a drink, tell me why the fuck you came to my house even though I was clear that you and your father were no longer welcome."

"I thought you would be interested to know that the fund is up forty percent. It is now worth one hundred and forty million."

My hand lowers, but that is the only sign I allow to show he's shocked me. When I commanded this job of him, I didn't expect him to be that successful.

"Now, that is good to know." I lift my glass and take another swig.

"Thought so."

As hard as it is for me to admit, this kid might actually know what he's doing.

“Trent, how would you like to do another job for me?”

“I thought this was a one-time deal.”

“It doesn't have to be. I know you came to my game to get clients, but how would you like to get the bigger dogs? Take him, for example.” I point my finger to the far table. “He could bring another hundred million to the fund if you play your cards right.”

“Doesn't he run the Italian mafia? What do you have to do with the mafia?”

“The Italian mafia wouldn't exist without me. I am the mafia. All the money passes through me.”

“I'm not sure I want to get into bed with you.”

“Interesting. Working together in the future could be mutually beneficial.”

“True, but first I want to know when you are going to take care of Boris.”

I step into him, tall and powerful. “Don't question me.”

“What does that mean?” He doesn't back down. Instead, the muscles in his neck flex.

“Keeping her hidden is the best option right now.”

There is no hiding how he clenches his teeth. He hates this. Hell, he should. I hate it too.

“You better not touch her,” he grits out.

“What I do with Ivy is none of your business.”

“There is no you and Ivy, because if there was, you would be no better than Boris. Maybe you aren't different. But you won't be screwing my sister. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

His words hit me in the stomach.

As much as I want her, I can't have her.

Because despite what Trent says, he doesn't know how accurate his words are. If I touch her, I'm no better than Boris.

IT'S BEEN A FEW DAYS SINCE I'VE BEEN TO THE ISLAND. AFTER the morning I've just had, the last thing I want to do is check on my little prisoner.

She is a perfectly wrapped gift box that I'm dying to tear into. Unfortunately for me, she's not mine to open. Since I won't take her, I try to stay away from her.

But she needs food, and I need to make sure she hasn't gotten herself in any sort of trouble. There is a good chance she's locked herself in the room, which is fine by me. The need to reach out and touch her pisses me the fuck off.

Why couldn't she not evoke emotions in me?

No one does.

Why her?

It's bad enough that I'm going on about this, but it would be much easier if I didn't want to sink into her every time I see her.

I shake my head. It's fine. I have control.

Plus, I doubt I'll even bump into her. The past few times I have come by, I haven't seen her.

For all I know, she's dead in her bed.

That would probably make my life easier.

But then I couldn't use her to get what I need from Boris.

The truth is, that's fine by me.

There are other ways.

I'm not sold that the plan to use her as bait is the way to go anyway.

Z keeps saying she's a means to an end, but for some reason, it doesn't sit well with me.

It's because I want to fuck her.

Maybe if I did ...

Nope.

Not going there.

Trent's words about Boris are still too clear in my head. In order for that to ever happen, she would need to beg for me to take her.

I'm a lot of things, but rapist, is not one of them.

Today will be a fast trip to the island. Maxwell will wait offshore for me to do what I need to do.

Then I'm off to a meeting with my client Alaric; we need to discuss his acquisition of a new territory for the distribution of arms.

First, though, to check on Ivy.

Metal key in hand, plus a bag that Z filled with God knows what, but knowing him, a bomb, I step into the house set on my private island.

To think, this place was once a summer getaway for my family.

Then it housed all kinds of shady deals.

Now, it holds a captive hostage. Life has gone full circle.

Moving farther into the space, I find the house quiet. *She must be in her room.* Then I hear a noise coming from the far side of the house.

Cerberus?

Or is it her?

She wouldn't go in there, would she?

The muscles in my back tighten as I drop the bag and head toward the greenhouse.

A part of my house she shouldn't have access to.

It should have been locked.

Turning the corner, I take slow, measured steps through the kitchen to the door that isn't locked at all. It's wide open, but I don't want to alert her of my presence if it is her.

Standing in the doorway, I see her kneeling over a pot in the corner. She doesn't notice me as I watch her for a minute. The sun that beams in through the glass ceiling illuminates her blond hair, casting a glow.

Like an angel.

So different from the last one to garden here.

The anger I had tried to tamp down from her being here rises to the surface.

Simmering as I watch her touch something that doesn't belong to her without a care in the world.

She's alone in this house. What else was there for her to do?

Not break into a greenhouse that was clearly locked.

"What are you doing in here?" I scoff, entering. She shouldn't be here. No one should. No one has in a long time.

Years.

By the looks of the space, it's obvious, except ...

Around where Ivy is are newly planted pots. It looks clean and put together, as if she has worked countless hours to tidy and tend to it.

It makes my blood boil. This isn't her dirt to sow.

Soon, I'm towering over her. I need to rein in my emotions because if I don't pull myself together, I'll be no better than the monster I'm hiding her from.

"Leave this room." My voice comes out harsher than I intend, and from where I'm standing, I can see her body go tense.

"No," she fires back, and I want to applaud her for schooling her features. She's a good actress. I can tell she's

frightened of me, but she won't give me the satisfaction of showing it.

I reach for where she is kneeling to grab her by her shoulders, but she sees what I'm doing before I connect and moves back while still kneeling.

"Don't touch me," she hisses as if I'm going to rape her in this place. As if I would tarnish what happy memories I have left with her presence.

"I wouldn't think of it."

"Sure," she mumbles under her breath.

"I don't need to touch you." Our bodies are still close, and once she stands to her full height, she's even closer. I'm close enough to see the ring of her irises, and the bright flecks staring back at me.

"What do you want from me?" she asks.

"All in good time," I divert.

I'm not sure why I don't tell her. Probably because it gets a rise out of her. I like to see her angry, and I like to frustrate her. It's a dance, a fight, a war, and I never lose.

"I want you to stay the fuck out of my greenhouse." I take a step forward, essentially blocking her escape now. She'll have to pass me to get by.

Touch me even.

Because I won't move otherwise.

"Let me pass." Her jaw is tight, and her eyes are narrowed. She's trying to stay strong in front of me with her hand on her hip. I know what she's trying to portray, but it does the opposite. Instead, all her little show of defiance does is make me want her more. It makes me want to have her begging for me on her knees.

The vision of that starts to play out in my mind.

"Stay out of my greenhouse," I grit again through clenched teeth. She has me all worked up, and I hate it.

“Get out of my way.”

“Agree.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You won’t like my response.” I let my eyes trail over her exposed skin. As cold as it is outside, it’s sweltering inside the greenhouse, and Ivy is wearing only a tank top. A light sheen of sweat glistens on her neck.

I want to lick it off. Taste her.

I devour that moisture with my eyes and then lift my gaze. She must read my thoughts because I watch her neck as she swallows and goose bumps break against her hot skin.

Interesting.

She’s not immune to me after all.

I file that knowledge away before turning and leaving her in the greenhouse.

“Next time I come back, I don’t want to see you in here.”

She groans.

Good.

Hate me, *Sun*. It’s easier this way.

Ivy

I NOW MEASURE MY TIME ON THIS ISLAND BY MY VISITS FROM Cyrus. However, unlike the last few times he's come, he's spaced this trip longer than normal.

“Time to eat, little Sun.”

“Oh, now it's time to eat. Now, after you have starved me for days.” I lift my brow up at him from where I'm perched at the kitchen table.

“Days? Hardly.” He walks farther into the room. The smell of whatever he's brought wafting through the air and making my stomach growl.

At first, I was picking at my food to get him to come here, but ever since I started getting answers, I've been eating more and more. Apparently, Cyrus didn't want to give answers more than he wanted me to eat because he's been taking longer and longer to come back. He used to have his lady come cook and restock the food every other day. But now I haven't seen her in a long time. I've already gone through most of the food, even though I've been trying to ration.

It's like my damn plan backfired on me. Not only am I starving, but I'm also not getting answers.

And now, I'm also so hungry that I have shown him my hand. He knows he has one on me.

“Just give me the damn food.”

“No. I don’t think I will.” He smirks, and if I wasn’t so dizzy right now, I would probably throw something at him. Unfortunately, my strength is not what I’m used to.

“I know you think you’re clever. But I know what you’re doing.”

“And what, pray tell, would that be?”

“You’re spacing out my food to be a dick. You don’t want to answer my questions.”

His eyes darken, and he steps closer to where I am.

“I don’t lie. And I don’t play games. If I wanted you to die, you’d be dead. Choose your words carefully, Sun.”

“You won’t kill me,” I say with false bravado.

“Is that so?”

I stand from my chair, feigning strength I don’t have.
“No.”

He approaches me. His large frame towering over my frail one. “Do not make me angry, Sun.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I mock.

“Sit.”

“Or?”

“I’ll make you. I’ll give you this one pass because I know you’re hungry.”

“Whatever you say.”

I sit back down, but he’s right. I’m way too weak to stand my ground with him right now, and if I push, he’ll see my weakness. That is something I can’t have.

Once I’m sitting, he pulls out a container from a bag he brought with him today.

“Where is your slave?”

“My slave?”

“The woman with the scars.”

Cyrus’s fist hits the table, startling me. “Sun, I will say this one time. I do not take slaves. She is no one’s slave.”

“I-I ...”

“The proper sentence is ... I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” I say sheepishly.

For the first time since being here, I feel the weight of his anger, and I realize I don’t want to be on the receiving end of it.

We both sit silently for a few minutes before I decide to break the ice.

“What did you bring?” I keep my voice neutral, gauging how he’ll react.

“Lasagna.”

My mouth waters at the idea.

Cyrus brings over a fork and a plate.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I ask before I can think better of it.

“Why, Sun, did you want me to join you?”

I stare at him for a minute. If this were any other time, I would say yes. Who wouldn’t want him to? He’s gorgeous, sinfully so, but not without answers. Which is why I take a bite.

“First question,” I say, mouth full of food.

“Chew before you talk, Sun.”

I swallow. “How long will you have me?”

“That depends.”

“That’s not a real answer.”

“It’s the only one you’ll get.”

“Then I’m not eating.”

He stands from the chair, and his arm reaches to grab the food.

My arm reaches out, landing on his skin.

“I-I ...” I stutter as I look down at where my hand is and I freeze. It feels like an electric current of energy courses through me as realization hits that I am still holding on to him.

“Please don’t take it,” I whisper.

“Sit down,” he says through gritted teeth that make no sense to me. I do as he asks and drop his arm.

I scurry to grab my fork again, but he still won’t give me access to the plate.

“Change of plans. I’m going to tell you one thing. You can’t ask any questions after I say what I have to say, after, you will eat—”

“What? No. That’s not fair,” I interrupt.

“No one ever said I was fair. But trust me, you want to hear what I have to say.”

I let out a huff of oxygen. I don’t want to trust him, but I really don’t have any other choice. “Fine.”

The way he looks at me is unreadable. I don’t know if it’s good or bad. My stomach knots as I wait. His obsidian orbs smoldering with unspoken words that scare me.

“I spoke to your brother,” he starts to say, pausing for a brief second. A second long enough to make my pulse accelerate. “Your mom is fine. She’s staying with your brother.”

Oxygen expels from my lungs in a heavy relief filled pant. I open my mouth to ask more, but he lifts his hand, silencing me. “Now, tell me something about yourself, and after you do, I’ll let you take a bite.”

As much as I don’t want to do this now, I must. He did what he said, and now I need to honor the agreement. The thing is, that doesn’t mean I have to tell him anything important.

I think about what to say. I don't want this man knowing much about me. I don't want him using anything I divulge against me, so I decide to beat him at his own game.

“My favorite color is pink.”

He inclines his head, and now it's my turn to smile. “You never said what I had to tell you.”

“Touché.”

He hands over the plate, and I go at it like a starving child in a candy store whose parents never let them eat sweets.

I don't even come up for air until I'm halfway through.

“Tell me more.”

I finish chewing my bite. “I love to read.”

“You're really divulging a lot,” he deadpans.

“I learned from the best.” I shrug.

I look up at him, waiting for him to ask me to tell him more about myself, but he signals down to the plate. “Just eat.”

“Thank you,” I whisper before taking a bite, and we both know I'm not talking about the food.

Ivy

KNOWING MY MOM IS BEING TAKEN CARE OF HELPS TO KEEP ME at peace. I think about her often, think about my life back home, I wonder if I was replaced at my job; I wonder what Trent told them? It doesn't matter. Nothing matters from that life right now. As long as my family is okay, I can't let it get to me. I need to stay positive.

It's hard though when I feel like I'm not getting anywhere. Yes. I'm getting bits and pieces of answers, but the one question I want to ask, I can't.

Keeping my spirits up is almost impossible in this house. It's like I'm stuck in a mausoleum.

Preserved and untouched.

Cobwebs and dust from years of neglect litter the rooms, and it's apparent no one has frequented any of them in some time.

I need to get out of here, but there is nowhere to go. I need to talk to someone, but there is no one to talk to. I would even eat a full pie at this point just to hear Cyrus speak. Not that he speaks all that much.

I'm not stupid. He barely answers any of my questions, and he's evasive as fuck.

It's almost like a giant game to him, and it pisses me off. Then there was the moment with the dog.

Cerberus.

For a man who shows very little emotion, he sure did find it entertaining that his dog hates me.

If only I could wipe that grin off his face.

Turn his dog around.

Ideas take root in my brain, and before I know it, I'm in the cupboard of the kitchen. Spoon in hand, I dip it inside the jar of peanut butter.

"Cerberus!" I shout, even though it's not necessary. For a dog that doesn't like me, he never leaves my side. I should change his name to shadow, because that's what he is.

Something tells me the dog that only speaks God knows what language is not going to answer to that name.

I'll need to ask him that next time he is here.

It's been days, and I'm running low on supplies, which means he'll be here soon. I have to work fast.

When the dog cocks his head at me, I kneel on the floor, lifting the spoon up. Growing up, I never had pets, but I've always assumed or at least heard no dog can say no to peanut butter, but apparently, I found the dog.

He looks at me with his dark eyes. Dark eyes that have probably seen worlds of things I have no idea about, and then he turns his head away from me.

Not interested.

There isn't much more to offer him.

"Cerberus," I say again, and this time, I dip my finger in the peanut butter.

Again, he looks at me like I'm batshit crazy. As if he is trained too well to fall for my shit.

When he refuses to eat it, I lick my own finger, tasting the peanut butter. This is hopeless.

The weight of my situation comes crashing down on me. Here I am, so desperate for attention, for someone to talk to, for anything, that I'm trying to win over the dog that is named after the protector of the underworld.

There's no way it will work.

Suddenly, my chest feels like it's tightening. It's like I'm suffocating. Standing from my spot on the floor, I run toward the front door and swing it open.

Air. I need air.

Before long, I'm sitting on the beach facing the ocean.

The chill in the air has me wrapping my arms around my body tightly.

In front of me, the vastness of the dark abyss reminds me how hopeless this is. There's no way to escape. I'm at the mercy of a man, and I don't even know why.

The water starts to blur as my eyes fill with tears.

No. I won't cry.

I can't.

Once I cry, there's no coming back from that. I am stronger than that.

Inhaling, I try to force my walls up. The walls I have learned to erect over the years. When my mother needed me to care for her, I learned how to build these walls, and I refuse to let them go.

My mother.

Despite how hard I try, a tear slips down my cheek at the thought of her.

Does she know I'm gone?

Is she okay?

I'm the only one who can help her through her depression.

With me not around, are there any good days?

Or are they all bad?

Like a busted faucet, water leaks from my eyes until the tears come out strong and fierce. My breathing becomes erratic, hard, and choppy as everything I have been trying to push beneath the surface comes pouring out of me in breathless sobs. Every wall falls down. Crashing against the beach.

I'm not sure how long I sob.

But then I feel it.

Something I never thought I would feel, the gentle nuzzles of something. No, not something, it's Cerberus.

I look up at him through tear-lined eyes.

His brown ones hold my gaze.

"I'm okay, boy," I say, but he only cocks his head in confusion.

I don't know how to speak to him, how to tell him I'm okay.

He continues to stare, and I continue to cry.

Looking away from the dog, I stare back into the horizon. It's too far to that land. I have to wait.

But I am not the girl who likes to wait. I am the type of girl who never waits, who does it herself, which is why this is even harder.

I know I need to pull myself together and stop this bout of hysterics, but I can't seem to get myself to. Each thought pops into my brain, making it harder.

I cry and I cry until I feel Cerberus approach me again.

This time, he stands directly in front of me.

Blocking my view as if he knows this hurts me.

He sits down and then lifts his jaw. That's when I see a twig in his mouth.

Then he nudges it forward. I take the stick in my hand. "What do you want, boy?" I ask. He cocks his head. I really

need to figure out what language he speaks. Because this is ridiculous.

He looks at the stick and then looks behind me.

“Do you want me to throw it?” I ask, knowing full well that he can’t answer, and he probably doesn’t even know what I’m saying. But I might as well try because when I lift the stick in my hand, I think his tail wags.

I saw it from the corner of my eye, but I think he wants to play fetch.

Without a second thought, I throw the stick back toward the path to the house, and off he goes. A smile breaks across my face.

That’s all he wanted.

Someone to play with.

When he runs back to me, stick in mouth, he drops it on the ground in front of where I am sitting. Once again, I pick up the stick and play. This time, my smile widens, and a laugh bubbles up.

Like me, Cerberus is lonely.

We play fetch, and I laugh, and he might not understand what I am saying, but we have passed that because he understands what I need—a friend—and he gives that to me.

Eventually, we move off the beach and back toward the house; I keep throwing, and he keeps fetching.

Flinging it this time toward the trees isn’t a good idea because when Cerberus runs back up to me and licks my face, I lose my heart to him. It also very well might have resulted in me losing my sweater because when I look down, I notice that a now muddy Cerberus is licking and jumping on me. “Great. Boy. Time for a bath ...” This should be fun.

Cyrus

IT'S A FEW DAYS LATER WHEN I DECIDE TO COME BACK TO THE island. I've been busy. Things are going well with both Tobias and Alaric.

Alaric has made a sizeable deposit, which has taken up a large portion of my time. Fifty million will do that. His business is apparently doing good.

Which is fine by me. What the future holds with its competitors is not my problem; eventually, a war will come. My business is strictly holding the money. I have too much other shit to think about, say, for example, my prisoner.

Captive.

Sun.

She thinks I call her that because of the obvious reasons. If she only knew what it meant, she'd probably throw a pot at my head.

Speaking of pots, she better not be in the greenhouse when I arrive.

From where I enter the room, I find her leaning over the bathtub.

But it's who she is washing that has my movement stopping, and my eyes going wide. There, in the tub, is Cerberus.

My dog.

My guard dog.

He's sopping wet, and she is scrubbing behind his ears.

There is no way this is happening. The dog is licking her face now, and her head is thrown back as she laughs.

He's transfixed by her, and I understand why.

Fuck, I'm transfixed by her, and she's not even rubbing me.

She's a goddess come down to Earth, thrust into my hell, and making me feel things I shouldn't.

Staring at her is like looking at the sun. Ironic, really.

As if she can hear my thoughts, she looks up at me.

Her large blue eyes widen in surprise.

She doesn't understand the precarious situation she's in. I'm a monster. She is the prey, and if she knows what's good for her, she will run.

Cerberus wags his tail back and forth when he sees me. Who is this dog? What has she done to him? Only Ivy.

Cerberus chooses that moment to jump out of the bath and shake before Ivy can grab a towel. Water sprays everywhere, and Ivy is drenched.

Her nipples pebble beneath that damn tank she always wears.

"Why don't you ever wear clothes?" I say gruffly.

"Um. Kidnapped."

"I gave you some."

"I'm not wearing your shit."

"Is that so, Sun?" I say, stepping out from the doorway and into the bathroom. She steps back, but she has nowhere to go because behind her is the bathroom counter.

Her hands reach out until they are hovering close to my chest. I step forward, toward her, and her skin collides with my

shirt.

“Get out of my way,” she says, more like pleads.

I look down at her, and a smirk lines my face.

“Do you really want me to?”

From my vantage point, I can see the way her chest heaves at my words. “I-I.” she stutters.

“Yes?”

She shakes her head, righting herself.

“Are you done staring?” She asks.

“No.”

“Well, I’m done letting you.”

She lowers her body and escapes under the space in my arms where I had bracketed her in.

One thing is clear, though, from this interaction. Ivy isn’t immune to me. She feels the pull, and she wants it too. She just won’t admit it to herself.

I love a good challenge.

Ivy

I'M PATHETIC. I KNOW I'M PATHETIC. BUT KNOWING THIS doesn't stop me from now being so eager to see this man that I'm sitting outside waiting for him. As soon as I heard the boat approaching, I headed down here, and now, like the idiot I am, I wait.

"You're more trouble than you're worth," a new voice says, and I turn my head in the direction where it's coming from. A man I've never seen is standing there, glaring at me. He looks at me as if he wants to kill me. The way you would look at your worst enemy just before you slashed their neck, but that makes no sense. I don't know him.

My back goes ramrod straight, and my fists ball at my waist. This man might be scary, but I won't back down.

"What did you say?" I ask the stranger, my eyes meeting his, but what I see there makes me shudder despite my false bravado. Dark eyes full of hatred. It really looks like he wants me dead.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answers, and my anger rises to his blatant lie.

"If you're going to talk smack, you should own it." Snarky is probably not my best course of action with this man, but snarky is my best form of defense at the moment. My only defense, if I'm honest.

“You don’t think I own my shit, little girl?” He steps closer, looking down his sharp but crooked nose at me. I can’t imagine how many fights he’s been in for it to look like that. I don’t want to, especially since I’m throwing attitude at him. I square my shoulders, refusing to back down to fear.

“Well, apparently not.” I let my lip tip up, calling him out on the lie.

“I know what you want me to do. You want me to tell you something. Anger me enough, right? But let me tell you this. You are a distraction, and I don’t like you. If it was up to me, I’d get rid of you. Because, believe it or not, I don’t give a shit what happens to you. Only him. And I will take you out if need be.”

His words drip with so much malice I know I need to believe him, and while I want to be scared, I refuse to. Instead, I stand taller and smirk. “Do your worst.”

He looks me up and down, and I know without a measure of doubt this man would squash me like a bug if given the opportunity.

Luckily, the moment ends as footsteps can clearly be heard approaching. It must be Cyrus, finally.

I look toward the beach, but still I don’t see the boat. Is that what this goon is doing? Running interference?

Interesting. The boat must be my best bet for survival. If I can swim to it, I have a chance of escaping.

“What is going on here?” I hear, and we both turn in the direction of Cyrus. “Z?” When he doesn’t answer, Cyrus’s jaw tightens.

“Go to your room, Ivy.”

“I’m not a little girl.”

“I said leave.” His deep voice bellows, leaving no room for protest. Whatever words that are about to transpire, I want no part of. I normally wouldn’t turn tail, but even as stubborn and bullheaded as I am, I know when to pick and choose my battles.

Cyrus

“WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT?” I STORM UP TO Z, AND HE HAS THE audacity to look confused. I don’t like the fact that he’s here, nor do I like the fact that he spoke to Ivy.

“Nothing.” He shrugs.

Once I’m standing directly in front of him, I stare down at him with my eyes narrowed, and his widen in return. “I know you don’t agree with what I’m doing here, but it is not your place to question me,” I snarl.

He looks toward the house, and something passes over his features. It’s too fast to gauge what it is, but eventually, he nods his head in submission. Good. He should know his place. This is my business, my operation, he needs to know where he stands.

“Z, you are one of my most trusted men. Is this going to be a problem?”

“No.” His mouth opens and then closes. He has more to say. Probably something that will get him killed if he’s not careful one day.

“Speak,” I order.

“It’s just ...” He pauses, thinking, and then he must decide it’s worth the risk to his life to continue because he opens his

mouth, and says, “We are so close. I don’t want this to be fucked up over a girl.”

He’s not wrong. Fuck. I agree. But I’m not going to let him know that.

“We’ll do things my way. Do you understand me?”

His head bounces up and down again in agreement.

“Good.” I look toward where Ivy went and back at Z. “Now leave. I’ll call you when I need you to come back.”

The air around us is tense, and I can tell he wants to say more. Instead, he doesn’t speak. His shoulders rise and fall, and then he sighs. I watch as he walks away, back down the path toward the docks where Maxwell will pick him up.

I, on the other hand, head back to the house.

Once inside, I head up the stairs toward where her room is. I had ordered her to her room like a petulant child in a time-out. I wonder if she followed that order or if, once again, she will be a problem.

Ivy is a distraction, but there is something about her that makes me want to keep her locked up here, even if it’s not in my best interest.

You like her fire.

She’s like the sun.

Both definitions of it.

When I finally get to her room, I lift my hand to knock and then pull my hand back. This is my house, and she’s my prisoner, so I don’t have to alert her of my presence. Throwing the door open, I notice that all the lights are off. It’s pitch black in here. Other than the small streams of light coming in through the curtains, it’s hard to see.

“Why are you in the dark?” I move into the room, standing by the foot of her bed. “Sulking?” I ask with a smile she can’t see on my face.

“Hardly. I wouldn’t sulk over you.”

“Then why are you in here?” I start to walk over to the light switch. When I flick it up, I realize the problem. “They’re dead.”

“Bingo. Ten points for Hades.”

“Keep up that mouth, and I’ll punish you.”

“Promises, promises. Do your worst. You stole me from my life, what more are you going to do with me?”

“There are a lot worse things than being my captive.”

“Punish me then and get out.” I step away from the bed and head out the room but not before I hear her say, “Thought so.”

Truth. I would punish her. I’ll starve her if need be, and if she proved to be an enemy, I would do a lot worse. But the reason I leave the room is because I need to take a deep fucking breath.

Her fire, attitude, and refusal to cooperate does something to me.

I ball my hands and head down the hall. Once I make it to the closet, I grab a light bulb. In the dark of the closet, I allow myself to breathe. It wouldn’t be smart to go in there and show her the true force of my strength; however, making her fear me a little could prove beneficial to tame her.

Even though I’m calm now, I still go through with my plan and storm back into her room. The door slams shut as I pass through, and the walls shake from the force. Regardless of how dark it is, I can see the shadow of her body jump.

Good.

Mission accomplished. I scared her.

I prefer her be scared than tempt me with the flames.

Once I’m standing right by where she’s lying in the bed, I notice something else.

Fuck.

She is wearing next to nothing. It's dark, but not dark enough to cover up the fact that she is practically naked. All she has on is that damn fucking camisole. I trail my eyes lower, noting an outline of material covering her, maybe boy shorts too.

How am I supposed to do anything with her looking like this? Here's the thing about Ivy—she's not even trying to be sexy, and she's sexier than any other woman I have met. She's certainly not trying to drive me crazy and entice me, but she does anyway. The feeling she evokes in me makes me feel equal measures of anger and desire. I want to strangle her for confusing me. She's too much temptation.

I give myself a shake and pull all thoughts away from the naked girl on the bed, so I stand on the mattress. The bed shifts with my weight.

Ivy groans, "Seriously, couldn't you grab a chair?"

"No."

"Come on, please." The way she asks has me hopping back off. Hearing a woman beg will make even the toughest men weak.

I grab the chair, the one I purposely forego in order to piss her off and then make quick work to change the light bulb. Once it turns on, I look down at Ivy who is reclined in the bed beside where I am. Her eyes are wide, and I follow her line of vision.

When I was changing the light bulb, my shirt rose, and Ivy now has a perfect view of my torso, and apparently, she's eating it up.

I can't help the shit-eating grin that spreads across my face.

"Like what you see?" I'm back to being a dick because it's easier this way. She shakes her head, but now bathed in light, I don't miss the blush crawling up her skin. I also don't miss that I was right about her attire. She is wearing that fucking damn camisole and small barely-there boy shorts.

I'm about to jump off the chair and stop looking at her when Cerberus runs up and bumps me where I'm standing.

"Fuck," I snarl, but it's too late. The chair is tipping.

I catch myself, though, and being the dick I am, I opt for where she is, directly on top of her, all my weight balancing on her bed, slightly hovered above her.

We're close enough that I can feel the rise and fall of her chest.

"What are you doing?" she breathes out, and her words tickle my chin. Her body stiffens, and I push back a little to stare into her eyes. Silently, she begs me to move, but instead, I continue to hold my weight on my hands and watch as she breathes in my air.

We're both locked in a trance. Her breathing. My breathing. Her exhale. My exhale.

It's a wicked dance, but neither of us pulls away.

We're two flames, burning brightly to merge and become one. The type of fire that scorches everything in its path and causes mass destruction. That's what we'll be if I cross the imaginary divide between us.

Logic dictates the need to pull away, but instead, I lean toward her. We are now close enough that if I move a fraction of an inch, our mouths will touch in a kiss. Her eyes are large, the blue almost completely gone, hidden behind wide eyes, filled with desire. Lowering my gaze, I notice how she trembles beneath me and I ache to close the distance, to put us both out of our misery already.

"You can go now. The light bulb is changed."

I know I should get up, but I hold myself there for another second, watching as she swallows, watching her mouth. Memorizing the look in her eyes, and then, when she licks her lips, I get up.

Z might be right after all. She might be too big of a distraction.

Now to figure out what to do with this distraction.

Ivy

ONLY ONE DAY PASSES WHEN I HEAR THE FRONT DOOR opening. I head out of my bedroom and down the stairs. He's here. Why? Usually, he makes me wait days. When I approach the foyer, I stop, cock my hip, and raise a brow at Cyrus. "For someone who was trying to starve me into submission, you're doing a horrible job."

"And why is that?" A ghost of a smirk appears on his handsome face.

My hands rest on my hips before I answer. "Because you are here yet again to feed me." Then I smile at him, an overly fake one, and his once upturning lip pulls down into a straight line.

"The first thing you have to know about me is if I wanted you submissive, you would be submissive." The way he says the word submissive should be illegal.

Get a grip, Ivy. Head in the game.

"And the second?"

Then he smiles.

Shit. It's not a smirk or a grin, but a full smile that makes my heart flutter in my chest. Damn. Why does he have to be so good-looking? No, I chastise myself. He's not good-looking; he's evil. The devil. The devil can't be handsome. Who am I

trying to kid? He's delicious when he looks at me like this. There is an unfamiliar glint to his dark eyes.

"What?" I ask.

"Your smart mouth will get you in trouble." He starts to walk to the kitchen, and I follow behind like a lost little puppy.

"Yet you're here, feeding me," I chide, trying my best to feign indifference to the butterflies now flying in my belly.

He lets out a small chuckle. "Do you have your list of questions handy?" His voice sounds different than normal, and that's when I realize he's playing with me. Poking fun at me.

"Was that a joke?" I ask as I take a seat at the table.

He shrugs, moving toward the fridge.

"Wow. I didn't know you had it in you."

And I'm going to need you to stop acting like this.

I can handle gruff. I can handle asshole. What I'm not sure I can handle is playful Cyrus Reed.

He's deadlier than the rest.

"Well, apparently, you bring out all different sides of me." His tone changes and his eyes darken. I'm not exactly sure what he means.

Not wanting to read more into it, I lean forward, placing my weight on my forearms.

"What language does Cerberus understand?" I ask, changing the topic.

"Is that your question? Because that will cost you a bite."

It's probably pretty obvious at this point that he doesn't need to answer questions for me to eat, but we keep up the pretense anyway.

Not sure why.

Maybe it's easier for me to talk to him under the guise that it's for food.

"Done."

He opens the container he has set on the table and then brings me a fork.

My eyes narrow at the food in front of me. It looks like rice and veggies, but there is a sauce on it.

“What is it?”

“That’s two bites.”

I roll my eyes. Why would I think he would answer? That would be too easy for Cyrus Reed. “Fine.”

“It’s Biryani. A popular Indian dish.”

I take a bite and swallow. It’s delicious, but I won’t tell him that, though.

“Dutch,” he says as I take my second bite.

I quirk my brow at him. No wonder the dog thinks I’m crazy every time I speak. “Dutch?”

“Cerberus is a Dutch Shepherd. He’s trained to understand Dutch commands.”

“You speak Dutch?” I ask.

“You don’t?”

“How many languages do you speak?”

He skims his eyes down my body. “All of them.”

“Why?”

“Because of my clients.”

“Well. Um. That’s not helpful at all. I was hoping you would say Spanish.” I take another two small bites. Technically I owe him three, but apparently, he’s not counting. After I swallow, I place my fork down. “Teach me commands for him.”

“That will cost you.”

“Okay ...” I trail off, afraid of what I’ll have to do.

“You eat the rest of the meal. No more questions. I’ll teach you Dutch, but that’s all I’m answering.”

“Well, that’s not really fair.”

“Life’s not fair.”

I bite my lip, trying to think of a witty response, but when I come up short, he leans forward. “Do we have a deal?”

“No.”

“I’m a fair man. If you want to learn how to command my dog, that is all you will get from me tonight.”

He’s right. He doesn’t answer any important questions anyway. It’s not like I’ll be getting anything else from him.

“Deal.”

Cyrus turns to the center of the kitchen, then sweeps his hand in a half-circle motion in front of his body while saying, “*Kom*.”

Cerberus comes pounding over. “*Zit*,” he says next, and I notice his pointer finger is pointing up.

It’s pretty obvious what he means with these, but I still turn to Cyrus for clarification on the hand gestures.

“*Kom* means come. When I give the verbal cue, I also use hand gestures.”

That makes me lean forward. “Really? Why?”

Cyrus looks at Cerberus and then with his right pointer finger traces a command in the shape of an *L*. Cerberus lies down on the floor by his feet. “If it’s loud, and he can’t hear my words, he will still come. He will sit, and he will lie *down*.”

That’s what he was just commanding him without words, down. The shape of an *L*, the lower part of the letter, tracing the floor.

Interesting.

I nod because this all makes sense to me. “And *zit*? I must assume that means sit.”

“Yes. Correct.”

“Those were easy. I could have figured that out eventually. What else can you tell me?”

“I won’t teach you all my tricks, Sun.” The corner of his lip tips up into a smirk. A very sexy smirk that I shouldn’t think is, but it doesn’t stop it from being true. Cyrus Reed should smirk more. Rewind. No. No, he shouldn’t. He’s way too sinful for him to be making me think that.

“Fine. What about what you told him the first day?”

“*Bescherm?*”

“Yeah. That one. You told it to him before you left me.”

Cyrus looks over at the dog and then back at me. His features seem to soften. “Protect. I was telling him to protect you.”

The words make me feel light-headed. I’m on the top of a roller coaster, about to spin out of control. I should be scared, but instead, I’m excited.

Standing from my chair, I try to get distance, but the room feels too small for all the emotions propelling around inside me.

“Why are you pacing, Sun?” His question has my movements stopping. I hadn’t realized I was.

Cyrus is now standing right in front of me.

His large and masculine frame, pulling in all the oxygen from the room. He’s too close, and I need air.

“Was it something I said?”

I look up at him. What I see is unnerving, he’s watching me, but it’s the look in his eyes that has my pulse pounding in my ears. He’s stares into my soul as if he can crack it open. What he’ll find is unknown. I’m treading in deep and dangerous waters and I’m sure I’ll drown.

I know I need to pull my gaze, but as we look into each other’s eyes, there is an electric pulse between us.

Silence stretches with a million unspoken words. I have so many questions, but the only one I can ask is...

“Why?”

“Why what?” He steps closer, and our bodies are practically touching now.

“Why did you tell him to protect me?” I whisper, tilting my head down to the ground to not look into his eyes, but he’s not having it. His hand reaches out, his fingers brushing against my jaw, then my chin.

He draws my gaze back up. “Because you’re mine to protect.”

“I’m not yours to protect.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

My pulse skitters alarmingly fast, and I lick my lips. I don’t mean to, but Cyrus doesn’t miss it. His blazing stare now lingering on my parted mouth, I try to ignore how my heart flutters as he looks at me, how it ping-pongs in my chest.

But it’s impossible.

There’s no way.

He’s larger than life.

He’s too much.

He’s everything I shouldn’t want, and yet the way he stares at me makes me feel alive. It scares me. It scares me so much; that before I can think better of it, I run.

I don’t get far.

I don’t even bother to leave the house. Instead, I open the door to the library and slip inside. He needs to leave the island. Once he’s gone, I can rein in these emotions that have taken on a life of their own. I shouldn’t want him, I shouldn’t crave him, but I do, so he needs to get back on that boat of his before I do something, I know that I shouldn’t. I can’t have him on this island, not in this house, and definitely not near me.

He does strange things to my body whenever he is around. I feel warm and tingly. I hate it.

I’m like a bad romance novel.

He's my captor, and I refuse to have Stockholm syndrome. The problem is, he hasn't gotten the memo that he needs to stay the hell away from me.

I swear he's everywhere I am.

When I'm in the kitchen, he's there. When I'm taking a walk ... there.

What does he want from me?

And after all this time, he still refuses to talk. To tell me about his cryptic words.

Protecting me? From who?

It makes no sense, and I refuse to find him and ask. Because even though I am so starved for attention at this point, I don't trust myself with him near me. As if summoned by my thoughts, he steps into the library. The room I was hiding in.

"Don't run from me, Sun."

"I can't be here." My voice is fragile and shaky. I need space, but he doesn't give me that, instead he steps closer. I raise my hands in the air as I take a step back. "You can let me go," I whisper. "I won't tell anyone. But you have to let me go." *I can't control the way you make me feel.*

"I can't let you go."

"Why?"

I take another step back, and my butt hits the desk in the corner of the library.

"Because you're mine now, and I won't let anyone have you."

His words shock me, making my muscles freeze. I've felt the heat of every stare, but this is more, and the look in his eyes scares me.

"You don't even like me. You hate me." I shake my head, not wanting to let my brain go there. Denying the truth that is right in front of me. He moves closer, his body touching mine.

"Does this feel like I hate you?"

“You kidnapped me ...”

“I did what I had to do.” His answer is cryptic, as usual. I want to bash his head against a wall for not telling me what he means, but my brain and arms aren’t working properly due to the proximity of our bodies. I know I should push him off, but I can’t think of anything but the feel of him.

I hate him, but most of all, I hate myself for feeling this way.

“I’ll tell you the truth,” he says, “but it will cost you more than food.”

“What?”

“You have to earn it ...” His words hang in the air, mischievous, sinful, and full of dirty promises.

“What do you want?”

“You.”

“I thought you wouldn’t take something not given?”

He lifts his hands, touching my jaw.

“Who says anything about taking?” He smirks.

“But you just said ...”

“I said I wanted you, Ivy. And I do. I want to taste you. Feel you. I want to know what it feels like when you come apart under my tongue.”

“I hate you.”

“You don’t hate me. Let me show you just how much you don’t hate me. Your body will show you.”

He lifts his hands to cup my jaw. His fingers trail against my skin. “Does this feel like you hate me?” He continues his path down the hollow of my neck. “How about this?”

“Why then?”

“I have my reasons.”

My breath comes out in shallow pulls, and my body shakes under his ministrations. “I won’t hurt you, Sun.”

“Why do you call me that?”

He doesn't answer my question, though; he just keeps up the path of his fingers. I stare at him. Shocked by what I see.

The passion in his eyes screams that he's telling the truth. Screams for me to allow this. But what does that make me if I do?

You want him. I shake my head, and as if he can read my mind, he speaks the words.

“You want me.”

I shake my head again.

“I don't.” My voice cracks pathetically, even I can't pretend.

“You do, and you want to hate me for it.”

“I do ...” Not even I can believe myself.

“You don't. Because deep inside you, you know the truth.”

“And what truth is that?”

“That you are here because you need to be here.”

His words are still cryptic and still make no sense. But when I look into his eyes, I know he's speaking the truth, or at least a truth he believes.

His hands continue their path to the center of my chest.

I think he will stop touching me. Lean forward and kiss me. He doesn't move forward, though; instead, his hands cup me.

“I can feel how wet you are ...”

My chest rises and falls.

He's right; I am. I'm so desperate for him to touch me that I hate myself. What does it mean that I want my kidnapper?

“I don't want you. You kidnapped me.”

“I saved you.”

“You have delusions of grandeur.”

His hands are still on me, warming my body and making me feel alive under his touch, blossoming. Blooming.

I need to push it down and stop it.

He's lying.

He's crazy.

Then why does he look at me like this?

Like I'm his salvation.

And he'll do anything to protect me.

It doesn't make any sense.

He leans forward, his lips hovering close to my mouth. His fingers touching me between my thighs. One swipe against the inseam of my pants has my breath hitching.

I shiver. A soft moan escapes my mouth.

My brain is rapid-firing why this can't happen. Why I need to push him away and say no, but as his breath tickles my lips, I can't find any words.

I do want him to touch me.

Desperately.

I want him in a way I've never wanted anyone before, and I don't know what that says about me.

It must be Stockholm syndrome, or maybe his words are true. Maybe I recognize them for what they are, for the conviction in them.

He hasn't hurt me.

Lust.

It's just lust talking.

He kidnapped ...

His finger touches me again, and this time, my head lolls back. I shouldn't want this. I shouldn't want him. But I bask in his touch, regardless.

Because with a touch of his hand, I forget why I'm supposed to hate him. I forget why I'm fighting this.

I forget everything but the here and now and the feeling inside me.

He's like the storm that batters the island outside. Like a hurricane, growing, gathering strength until it strikes. I'm the eye, and he is the storm.

His lip tips up.

I wait for him to kiss me, to do something. Anything.

I want to beg him to finish what he's started. To soothe the burn that has been building inside me. But I don't say anything and neither does he.

He just stands in front of me.

Not speaking. Just staring. A look passes through his gaze. I can't put my finger on it, but if it was anyone else, I'd say it was regret.

Silence looms between us like a heavy mist as I wait for something to happen. Finally, it does as he inclines his head down and shakes it. "Nope." He looks back at me. "You don't hate me ..." He trails off before he turns and walks away. "Not at all."

I need to get out of here. My desperation is getting to me. My need for attention making me feel things I shouldn't.

The next time he comes back, I'll leave. I *will* escape. No matter what.

Ivy

HE HAS TO LEAVE THIS DAMN ISLAND. AFTER OUR LITTLE RUN-in earlier in the library, I need to be alone. I'm a mess. Not only am I confused, but I'm so turned on, I'm afraid at any moment I might hump his leg. Which I can't do for obvious reasons.

My options are limited in places to go. I'm afraid I'll see him, and I can't be held responsible for my actions if I do.

Truth is, it feels like I'm suffocating with him here. I know what he's doing; he's trying to torture me. Well, it's worked.

He is.

A million conflicting thoughts are spiraling in my brain, and that doesn't even touch upon my body. My treacherous body that refuses to take the memo: *You are not allowed to be turned on by your kidnapper.*

I can pretend that I'm not, but then I would be lying.

No point. I know the truth. Hell, he felt the truth.

My cheeks become warm as I think over the things that he said to me.

The bastard.

He ate that shit up. Probably still is.

I wonder if I can hide from him.

Well, I'm already doing that. I'm hiding in my bedroom, but eventually, I'll have to go downstairs, and with my luck, he will speak to me.

Little damn butterflies start to fly in my stomach. Great. Even my stomach knows I'm lying. I want to speak to him.

I hate myself for it, but it doesn't make it any less true. My stomach hasn't gotten the memo that we are avoiding Cyrus and his meals because it starts to growl in protest.

There's no fighting this. I have to go down and eat.

Without a second thought, I head straight for the kitchen. What I'm met with has my breath hitching.

What is going on?

I look around the room, but no one is there. It's the table that has me blinking. The room in general that unnerves me.

The lights are dimmed, and there are candles set in the center of the table. A table that has food placement for two.

"What is this?" Cyrus says as he steps up from behind.

I turn over my shoulder. "If you didn't do this ..."

"Mariana."

I shake my head, not knowing who that is.

"She brings the food. Cooks it."

Aww. It all makes sense. "She was here today?" he nods. I wonder why I didn't see her. *Probably because you were too busy panting after Cyrus.* "But why would she set it for two?"

"That was my doing. I told her I would be eating dinner. The rest"—he gestures to the table—"that's all her."

The room is the perfect romantic date, if we were going on a romantic date. We aren't, so instead of setting the mood, a heavy tension hovers in the air.

"Sit. Stop thinking. Just sit and eat."

"Always a gentleman," I say under my breath.

"Sun ..." he warns, and I shut my mouth and sit.

Now that we are both at the table, we both reach for our silverware to eat.

The food, as always, is delicious, but the silence is deafening. I look down to the floor and notice that Cerberus is curled up against my leg.

Cyrus follows my line of sight. “You really have him wrapped around your little finger.”

That makes me smile.

“What did you do to win him over?”

“As if I would tell you.” I smirk. Intense pleasure over that fact that he was wrong about his own dog has a laugh bubbling up inside me. I bask in knowing that I have bested him. Take that. A taste of his own medicine.

“You think you have the upper hand? It’s cute.”

“I do.”

“I let you believe that, but you don’t.”

“Tonight, I do.”

He leans forward, placing his elbows on the table. “And how do you figure this?”

“Well. Normally, you make me eat, but today, you’re eating. Which means the ball isn’t in your court anymore. Actually, I think it’s in mine, and you owe me.”

Beautiful dark eyes smolder at me, reminding me of silky-smooth satin. The type of satin Cyrus would probably use to tie me up with.

The memory of earlier becomes vivid and clear in my head. The feel of his fingers haunts me. The way they teased and tortured. There is no denying how my body reacted.

My cheeks burn from the images playing in my mind. I try to push the thoughts out, but instead they bury themselves in deeper, making my blood soar through my veins, and the unquenched hunger that I thought I had under control now rekindles in my core.

“What are you thinking?” His voice dips low and only serves to make me feel warm all over.

I shake my head and try to think of something to say. “Um. How about you owe me answers? How about for every bite you take, you answer?”

“Or ...” he drawls out. “We each answer questions.”

“Can I ask—”

“No.”

“Why not?” I find myself pouting, and I want to slap myself.

“It’s better this way right now. You have to trust me.”

That word again. There is no way that is happening. Hell, when he’s around I can’t even trust myself. “I can’t do that.”

“Try.”

My head drops down and then lifts up. “Fine.” At least this way I might be able to find out something about my host and stop staring at him. Maybe I’ll find out something that will make me stop fantasizing about the way he touched me. As if he can hear my mind, he starts to drum his *fingers* on the table. A choke escapes my mouth, and I know that all these lusty thoughts have turned my cheeks red from how hot I feel as I stare at his masculine hands.

“You okay, over there?” he asks, sexy grin large and very happy with himself and the feelings he so obviously brings out in me.

There’s a part of me, that wants to stand from the table and put an end to this game of cat and mouse, but instead, I school my features, extinguish my desires and pretend I’m talking to a stranger, and not a stranger I want to kiss.

Shit.

Not doing a good job of pretending.

With a deep inhale, I try again. “I’ll start the questions. What exactly do you do?”

“I run a bank. Next question.” His answer is short, and I file it away as something I want to find out about.

“What is it you do, Sun?”

I narrow my eyes. “I thought you knew this?”

“Nope.” His answer doesn’t meet his eyes, but maybe I’m reading into things too much.

“I work at a flower shop. Or I did.” I can’t help but feel the loss as the words pass through my lips. I shake away the thoughts and smirk. “Are you as evil as I think you are?”

“More so,” he responds, not missing a beat.

“For some reason, that I believe.”

His lips tip up into a heart-stopping grin. “I’m more wicked than you could ever imagine.”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute.”

“And you, Ivy.” His dark eyes sparkle with mischief, “Have you ever done anything wicked?”

Don’t fall into the trick.

My cheeks turn hot at the inquisition, my body obviously a traitor. “Maybe. But I’m not telling you.”

“Live a little. No one’s here. It’s just you and me ...” The husky tone in his voice makes me think of decadent chocolate, sinful and delicious and probably not the best thing for you. “I won’t tell.”

Jeez, this man. The way he speaks, silky smooth with innuendo should come with a warning label.

Careful when engaging, highly combustible.

I need to steer this conversation into safer waters.

“Do you have a girl—” I stop myself before I finish my ridiculous and totally not safe question. Hopefully, before he notices, but unfortunately from the way he grins, it’s obvious he heard me.

Someone save me.

Cyrus Reed will never let this go.

“Girlfriend? Ivy. Were you asking me on a date?”

“What. No. That’s not what I meant.”

He leans in, elbows on the table, head cocked as he stares at me, or better yet undresses me at the table. “No. I don’t.”

Sinful.

He is sinfully delicious.

I need a life preserver to sit at this table with him. Especially with the ambiance set. At this point, all that’s missing is sexy music.

That would be bad.

The longer he stares at me, the hotter my cheeks get, I swear they are going to catch on fire, because he just won’t stop.

I can’t think of anything else to ask. I need something. Anything.

“Do you have any hobbies?” I blurt.

“Chess.”

Of course, that’s his hobby. Doesn’t surprise me at all. Our whole relationship is one big chessboard, and I’m the pawn.

“And you?” he asks.

“Gardening,” I answer, and he shakes his head.

“I was referring to the boyfriend.”

My mouth drops open. If we were outside, I’d have a mouthful of flies in it.

“I-I. That’s none of your business,” I respond, trying to save the last of my dignity I have left.

“Good.”

That shuts me up, and the room goes quiet once again. I wonder what his next move will be. Will he steer us back to dangerous waters or throw me a life raft.

His face is impassive as I wait for my fate.

Then it opens. “Why flowers?” he asks, breaking the silence and I wonder why after all we talked about; he goes back to this of all questions. Seems strange, but one thing I’ve learnt about Cyrus Reed is never to think you can anticipate his next move.

“My mother. She loved to garden. She taught me everything.” I close my eyes, and I can almost imagine I’m in a garden. I remember the smell; I remember the feeling of the dirt in my hands. I remember everything.

“What are you thinking about?”

I open my eyes; Cyrus is staring at me. “How much I love to garden. I feel lost without it.”

“You can use my greenhouse,” he says before standing from the table and severing the moment.

But the feelings I feel from his words have already buried themselves in my soul.

Warmth.

Happiness.

Hope.

There might be more to Cyrus Reed than he lets on.

He might be a good man.

Fuck.

I cannot think these thoughts. This is too much. These feelings are too much.

My resolve is set.

I need to get out of here.

Now.

Cyrus

“WHO’S MY MEETING WITH TODAY?” I ASK Z AS I WALK DOWN the stairs into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee.

“Alaric.”

Mariana is in the kitchen cooking breakfast, and as soon as she sees me, she sets off to prepare my cup.

The stunt she pulled yesterday wasn’t missed. Candles. No, it was pretty fucking obvious what she was doing.

It was hard enough not to fuck Ivy on my desk as it was. Couple that with how fucking beautiful she looked last night, and the ambiance, and I’m lucky I didn’t do something I would have regretted in the morning.

Catching up with Alaric will be just what I need to sort myself.

“What time?” I ask as Mariana hands me my mug, and I take a swig.

“Noon.”

Taking a seat at the table, I motion for Z to join me. “Let’s go over numbers before he gets here. He’s probably expanding and needs to deposit more money, but in case it’s something else, I need to know everything about his account.”

“No problem.”

By the time Alaric is set to arrive, I'm standing outside on the dock of my estate. The beauty of my property is most of my clients can come in undetected by boat. Alaric's yacht, for example, can come in from the Atlantic, and no one will be any the wiser.

Which is what he's doing right now.

We hold many of our meetings out here on the dock. Far enough in all directions that no one can listen in.

When Alaric's small yacht docks, he hops off and heads over to me.

"Pleasure to see you," I greet, extending my hand.

He meets mine and shakes it. "Thank you for taking this meeting. I had some business I wanted to discuss with you."

"Don't you always?" I laugh.

"I have guns I need to move, and I need your help."

My brow lifts. "Arms dealing is your business, Alaric. I'm not sure how I can help?"

"I need you to store some," he says.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because we're friends."

"Is that what we are, Alaric?"

"I'd like to think so, and friends help friends ..." he leads, and I know what he's saying. If I help him with this, he has my back in the future.

"Tell me about the guns."

"They're hot right now. Too hot for me to sell."

"I won't agree until you tell me why."

"We lifted them off the competition, Cyrus."

I nod. "And why are they flagged?"

"They are the same lot and caliber as the guns used in the attack in Italy."

I look back at the house where Z is standing. If we do this, it could come back to bite us in the ass, but the risk is worth it to have Alaric in my pocket.

“Very well. Where are the guns?”

He turns to the yacht. I lift my hand and signal Z, who’s standing in front of me not a minute later.

“We need to rid Alaric of a load.”

“On it.” Z walks toward the dock and boards the yacht. His cell phone is lifted to his ear as he calls my men to help him.

A few minutes later, Alaric and my men start to bring the crates inside, and once they are all out of sight, I turn to Alaric.

“Since Maxwell is helping your men, care to give me a lift?”

“Of course.” He smiles broadly. “Where to?”

“The island over there.” I point at the island.

“What’s there?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. All you have to worry about is dropping me off and grabbing your men once they place your guns in my possession.”

Ivy

I HAVE BEEN A MESS EVER SINCE OUR LAST DINNER.

From the window in my bedroom, I have a perfect view of the ocean. I think I see a boat approach the island. It might not be coming here, but it's been a few days, so it is undoubtedly bringing him back. The thought makes me feel like a million tiny little spiders are crawling all over me.

What will he do this time?

Will he tease me again?

Will he make my body betray me once more?

The last time I almost didn't escape his clutches. My mind screams that I hate him, but my body says otherwise.

I wanted him then.

I want him still now.

A part of me needs him to do everything he promised.

He's a savage. A beast.

He's the devil.

Playing me like a fiddle, he lured me in. The way he pressed himself against me, unabashed. The dirty things he promised. The tiny moments of warmth I saw in his gaze, followed by the utter coldness in his soulless eyes.

He is Hades.

Holding me prisoner on an island and refusing to tell me why.

He says he has his reasons, but not a damn thing could justify what he's done. I don't care if the place is a mansion, and it doesn't matter that my every need could be found here. I'm a prisoner, and he's my captor. That makes him the worst kind of evil.

Surely, I'll never get out of here alive.

He said he couldn't let me go. He claimed I was his. He can't set me free, and because of that, I know I'll die here. Unless I take matters into my own hands.

My best shot of survival is getting on that boat.

Right now, it's still off the coast.

I need to hurry. It will be here soon, and then they will be on their way.

"I'll have to swim," I say to myself, preparing for the task ahead.

Easier said than done.

I take several deep breaths, trying to calm my nerves.

The swim isn't going to be easy, and I need to have my head about me. Another thought pops into my head, making me feel dizzy with nerves. When I get onto the boat ...

Who will be driving it?

Will they be willing to help me?

Probably not.

A scarier thought hits me next, stealing all the oxygen from my lungs ... will they hurt me?

Knowing how powerful and frightening Cyrus is, I doubt anyone will betray him and live to tell about it. But it's not worth the risk. No, I'll have to sneak on board and hope like hell I can find a small compartment to hide in.

The good news is that the boat isn't a small speed boat like usual. No, today it's a full-blown yacht. It's different from the usual boat that drops him off.

This must mean something. It has to be easier to escape on that, right?

My feet pace in front of the window. Waiting. Watching. The boat is fast approaching, so I need to move.

The humming of the craft is my signal that it's now or never.

If I want to get off this island, I need to take my chances and move quickly. But how will I escape him? I might get off this island, but staying hidden from him will be a whole other issue.

One that I can't worry about now.

My goal has to be getting out of here first.

Hide second.

At that moment, Cerberus nudges my leg.

I look down into his big brown eyes and feel a moment's hesitation at leaving him here. "You're the only thing I'll miss, boy," I say to him. It's almost as if he's begging me to take him.

It breaks my heart, but that isn't possible. "I can't take you with me. I would if I could. You believe me, don't you?" His whimpers threaten to break me, but as fond of him as I have grown, I have to go.

I can't swim to the boat if I'm worrying about him, and there is no way he'll make it all the way out there.

With my head held high, I make my way out of my bedroom and down the stairs.

My plan depends on evading Cyrus. If he catches me, I'll lose my one shot at escape from this hellish island.

He's too big. Too powerful.

Shut up, Ivy. You've got this. This is your chance to escape.

When the sound of the boat stops for a moment, I know that Cyrus is on the island.

He'll be inside within moments.

I try to think of where I can go to hide as the front door creeps open.

Shit.

"Ivy?" he calls out, and I know I have a matter of minutes to get to the boat before it takes off.

I look down at Cerberus, who is following closely behind me.

"*Gaan*," I prompt him in Dutch. "Go. Get him." I hope he'll take the bait and stall Cyrus. I need the dog not to follow me anymore.

It will give away my position. When Cerberus does what I tell him, I breathe a sigh of relief, and then when Cyrus is distracted, I make my dash for the open door. I run as fast as my feet can go.

Fuck.

All hope is dashed away as Cyrus steps into my path; his eyes wild with rage. He still looks at me with a heated stare. The type of stare that in another time in another life would light me on fire. My skin sizzles, but I tamp it down.

He might be good-looking. But I am not that girl.

I am no foregone conclusion.

What I am is a fighter, and I will not let him leave me again.

A new plan takes root. A good one. Stepping up to him, I lift my hand and then I trail my hands down my chest, all while seductively stepping toward him.

Even I can admit this probably won't work, but I have to try.

I reach my hand out and touch his chest.

His eyes widen. I've taken him off guard.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” His deep timbre manages to frighten me even more than his deadly stare. He’s angry, and that is more dangerous than any come-ons from the other day.

If the malice he portrays is any indication, I have to change the game. I don’t have time to waste quaking in fear.

I squash it down and act quickly. Stepping into him, I throw him off and bring my knee firmly into his groin as hard as I can manage.

It does the trick. He bends over, groaning in pain, and I don’t stop to think about it. I pump my arms as fast as I can and don’t look back.

When I reach the end of the beach, I dive headfirst into the cold water.

I welcome the icy chill.

It’s my savior.

My escape.

I channel all the years of swimming I have under my belt and swim as though my life depends on it—which it does.

It’s all going well ... until it isn’t.

A strong current pulls me under, dragging me across the jagged rocks below.

Years at the beach in the summer have taught me how to handle such a situation.

I kick my arms and legs to swim directly into the current and let it take me. I try not to panic as I’m quickly running out of air. My hand skims past something hard, and without another thought, I reach out and grab ahold. I yank hard and am able to pull myself up.

When my head crests the water, I gulp in a lungful of air greedily as I cling to the large branch for dear life.

Every ounce of energy I have is depleted along with any hope of escaping. There is no way I’ll make it to that boat now.

I'm going to die.

No. I can't go this way. I have to fight. I need to swim. My legs are cut up, and if I let go of this branch, I'll drown.

"Help me," I cry out to whoever is on the boat, but it's in vain. I'm too far away, and my voice is too weak to be heard.

Tears well in my eyes as I realize that the only option I have is to try to make it back to shore.

But I can't.

For one, I don't have the strength to fight that current again, and for another, Cyrus will be there waiting for me on the shore.

What if he makes me pay for my attempt to escape, and for what I've done to him?

The dread becomes even worse when I see Cyrus race for the shore.

He's coming for me, and I can't escape his wrath. My fear turns to shock as minutes later I realize he isn't coming for me. He's carrying Cerberus in his arms toward the shore.

"Oh, no. Cerberus, you didn't," I say, guilt-ridden. The dog had followed me into the water, and I can't tell if he's been hurt or not.

Based on the way Cyrus cradles him into his chest, it doesn't look good. I have to get back to the shore and help.

It's all my fault.

Now that getting off this island isn't an option, I need to make sure Cerberus will be okay.

When Cyrus lowers the dog to the ground, he stands on his feet, his poor tail sagging limply before he lays down on the beach.

I cry out at the sight. I'm an idiot.

Why did I ever think I could escape?

A part of me withers and dies as the realization hits me.

What's happening to Cerberus is my fault, and I'll pay the consequences. I continue to lie atop the piece of wood, unmoving. The goal is to get my energy back enough to attempt to swim back. The sky is getting darker.

Large clouds rolling in. If my situation couldn't get any worse, it does, as the winds begin to pick up. A storm is coming, and it's coming fast. The current won't last forever. Soon the waves will pull me out. I'm just not sure for how long until it will pose a threat.

My question is answered as rain starts to pound down from the sky. The waves crashing along the rocks where I've drifted. There's no way to go back, I try to kick to push off from the rocks, but I can't move. I'm barely holding on, my hands slipping. I can't let go. I know if I'm pulled under again, this time I'll die.

Cyrus

RAGE CONSUMES ME AT HER DISOBEDIENCE. DOES SHE NOT know who I am?

Does she not understand that she belongs to me? Her body had reacted exactly as I had hoped.

She wants me to taste her. To take her. Why is she trying to escape? Doesn't she realize she'll never be able to outrun me?

I clench and unclench my fists, trying to calm down. She'll pay for her blatant disregard of the rules laid forth. Nobody crosses me and lives.

But for her, I'll make this exception.

She'll live, but she'll pay in other ways.

Cerberus whines at my feet. He's laid limply on the shore, not bothering to lift his head to look at me. He's had a hell of a scare, but he's all right. He's strong.

What the hell was Ivy thinking? These waters are dangerous.

I have to figure out how to get her ass back to shore. The boat she's trying to reach is already on its way out to sea.

They can't see her.

They can't help her.

No one can help her but me.

I'm her only savior. If she would just believe me, trust me, things would be different.

She's still trying to make it to the boat, but even if they did see her, they wouldn't come back unless I called them back, and I won't.

Today, I took a different boat. Today, I hitched a ride with men I don't necessarily trust. But they know the consequences of talking. I would not make exceptions for them. They'd die.

Regardless, it would be reckless of me to introduce them to my captive. Getting Ivy back to shore is all on me.

I'll drag her back by her hair if I have to.

My eyes roam the water, landing on the location she had last been, but she's gone. It doesn't help that it's raining over the ocean. The clouds are moving fast, it will be over the house in no time. I have to find her now. My head whips back and forth, trying to find her, but with each second that passes without her in my sight, unease grows heavily within me.

This is an emotion I rarely feel.

I'm usually in control.

I rule my world. Nothing makes me uneasy.

So why does my stomach turn and sweat pool at my temples?

This is beyond unease.

This is fucking panic.

And for the first time in a very long time, it's for someone else's life and not my own.

Her head pops up out of the water, and I watch as her hands flail. She's in trouble.

"Fuck," I yell out as my heart pounds in my chest. When her head goes back under and doesn't come back up, my breathing stops.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm running toward the water and diving in.

She's about twenty yards off the shore, and if I'm going to save her, I have to swim faster than ever. My arms burn with each stroke, but I push harder.

When I feel like I'm getting close to where she was, I pop my head up to see if I can locate her. After catching a glimpse of flailing arms, I know where I need to be. She's dangerously close to the cliff. If I don't get there soon, she could crash into it. I dive back under and swim to my right. When I'm almost to her, a large wave smacks against us, pushing closer to the rocks, I brace for impact, trying to protect my body from the sharp shards of rocks that strikes me in the side of my thigh, shooting pain through my entire body. As awful as the pain is, I've suffered worse, and I have to find Ivy.

That part of the water isn't too deep, which is my only saving grace.

I skim the bottom of the water, and finally, my hands brush against skin, and I grab and yank upward until we both reach the surface.

She gasps for air, clawing at my neck.

"Ivy. I've got you. Breathe," I order, trying to calm her down. She obeys, sucking in deep lungfuls of air as sobs escape her lips. Her entire body starts to shake, and all I can do is crush her into my chest, willing her to relax.

She'll be okay. As my fear for her safety starts to abate, my anger creeps back to the surface.

"Stop fucking crying," I demand. "You got yourself into this."

"Just fucking kill me," she screams. "You can't keep me here. I'll do it again."

If we weren't treading water and my leg wasn't throbbing, I would throttle her.

She put her life in danger. On top of that, Boris is looking for her. I trust my men, but if the men on Alaric's boat today

saw her ...

I don't know what would have happened.

I start swimming back toward the shallow water where I'll be able to drag her the rest of the way in. With every kick of my leg, the searing pain intensifies.

The throbbing is at an all-time high, and I am at serious risk of passing out.

When we finally get to the shallow shore, I yank Ivy's arm, pulling her to my side and practically dragging her behind me.

She gasps. "The water ... it's red. Why is it red?" she asks in a panic.

"Nothing to concern yourself with," I say through gritted teeth. I don't need to give her any indication that I'm compromised. She won't get far, but I don't put it past her to try running off again.

"Cyrus, wait, you're bleeding." She grimaces. Her face turns sickly pale as she looks at me. When I finally look down, I see scratches, scrapes, and a big fucking piece of wood sticking out of a gaping hole in my leg. "You hurt yourself"—her voice is low—"trying to save me."

Fuck.

I'll need stitches.

"Stop dragging me," she barks. "Let me look at it."

I let go of her arm, unable to carry her weight any longer. With every step I take, the dizziness becomes more intense.

"Sit," Ivy commands. "I need to get something to stop the bleeding." She removes her sweater. "This will work," she says. "First, we need to get that branch out of your leg. Is it deep?" she asks, looking into my eyes. Her blue irises are as clear as the water, and her blond hair is wet and clinging to her skin. She reminds me of a mermaid, a mythical creature that came up from the ocean to save a drowning sailor. There's never been a doubt that Ivy is beautiful, but at this moment, she looks ethereal. Like the first time I saw her in the garden. The moment I took her.

“Why did you do it?” she mutters. “Why did you save me?”

“Because I couldn’t let anything happen to you. I said I would protect you.”

Her eyes go wide, her lip trembling. “Thank you,” she whispers with more sincerity than I deserve.

Light to my darkness. Good to my evil.

“Cyrus?” she repeats. “Is it too deep?”

“It’s deep,” I reply gruffly. “I have a sewing kit back in the house. I’ll need you to stitch me up.”

What little color that was left on her face completely vanishes, and she looks like a ghost.

“I’m not a nurse. You need a doctor.”

“You’ll have to do.” I grit my teeth through the pain ricocheting inside me.

“I can’t,” she screeches. “I’m not trained to do that.”

“You got us into this mess, so you’re going to get us out of it.”

Thunder rolls in the distance, signaling a nasty storm to go along with the rain.

“Let me help you into the house,” Ivy suggests, but I shake my head.

“You get Cerberus,” I say, nodding my head in the direction of the dog.

“Oh God,” she gasps, seeing the beast still lying limp on the shore. He hasn’t moved since I had brought him back to land.

“Is he ... is he d-dead?” she whimpers.

“No. He’s alive. Get him back to the house.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?” she cries. “I can’t carry him.”

“Not my problem. Figure it out.” I stand and limp toward the house.

“Cyrus, wait,” she calls out toward my back, but I don’t turn to her.

She needs to learn her place here. I’ve saved her. I’ll provide everything she needs, but if she betrays me, she’ll suffer the consequences. This would be one of those times. The sky is about to open up and soak the earth. She can’t escape that. Not that it matters.

She’s already wet. But the wind is picking up, and it promises to be quite the storm.

If she stops bitching, she might get the dog back in time to miss the worst part of it.

Right now, my concern is getting to the house and finding the emergency medical kit and some painkillers. If not, it will be a long night ahead of me because based on this storm, I’m not going anywhere tonight.

When I finally make it to the door, I turn to watch as Ivy crouches down to Cerberus.

After a few moments, she attempts to pick the dog up to no avail—not surprising. What is, however, is Ivy’s tenacity.

When the rain hammers down, she doesn’t run away and leave the dog to fend for himself like other women I’ve known would’ve. She stays until somehow, she manages to get the dog up.

Ivy is a rare woman.

A prize meant for some stuffy man in a cheap suit who could never give her the things she deserves.

The things I can give to her.

I could shower her in the most expensive gowns and jewelry. I could whisk her away on my private jet to places she could only dream of. She’d want for nothing.

But that’s not how our relationship would ever be.

Not now.

Ivy is too proud to forget all that I have done to her. All that I have stolen. This thing between us will never be more than me taking everything from her, and her fighting to hold on to what makes Ivy, Ivy.

The strong woman making her way to me would never truly be mine. And for the first time in my life, I don't want to take something not meant for me.

Ivy

“OH, BOY. I’M SO SORRY,” I SAY, MY HEART BREAKING AT THE broken Cerberus at my feet.

It’s my fault he’s in this shape. “I had to try. You understand, right?” His eyes look up at me, and that’s all the movement I get. This is gonna be harder than I thought, and at any moment, the sky is going to pour down on us. “I know you’re hurt, but I really need you to get up.” I nudge at him a bit.

He whines and shifts, but he doesn’t stand. “Come on, Cerberus. Help me out here.” I put my hands underneath him and lift. Finally, he stands to his feet. I’m on my knees, nose to nose with the dog, wanting to cry.

For him.

For me.

For whatever is to come once I get us back into that prison. My eyes flicker toward the house, and I know he is watching. I can’t see him, but I can feel his eyes on me.

All over me.

I can almost feel his anger pulsing through the air.

Something tells me that Cyrus is rarely on the receiving end of pain. No, he’s definitely a giver in that department.

There was so much blood, and that gaping wound will need to be stitched up. There is no way this is going to go unpunished, but what would he do to me?

I don't think he'd hurt me, but I don't know him. I don't understand his motives, and because of that, I'm uneasy.

"Come on, buddy. Let's go see what awaits us," I say, allowing Cerberus to go ahead of me. I watch him hobble as his tail droops, and I want to cry.

Not just for Cerberus, but for me too. At least he's up and walking. Surely, that means he's all right, or he will be at least.

Following the trail of blood from Cyrus, I push down the bile caught in my throat.

When I find him, he's sitting at the kitchen island going through a box of supplies. He has rubbing alcohol and a suture set already laid out. The towel he has pressed against his leg is already soaking through, and I know he needs a doctor.

"Cyrus, call the boat back. We need to get you to the hospital."

"No." He huffs. "They're not coming back. Do you not see the storm outside?" he says, gesturing toward the window. "We're stuck here."

All the air whooshes out of my body as I realize that we're alone in this. He needs to get sewed up, and it's on me. I don't have time to stand around.

"All right. Let's get this cleaned and sewed up. You're getting blood everywhere," I say with a smile, trying to lighten the moment. I have to get out of my head if I'm going to do this.

He nods his head, then sitting back against the chair, he puts his hands out to the side in a "come get me" gesture that sends heat through my body.

"You're um—" My cheeks warm. "You're going to need to take your clothes off. I—" Why is this so hard. "I need to check to make sure ..."

With a smirk on his face, he lifts his wet shirt over his head.

The man is magnificent. He looks like a Greek god, all tanned and toned.

Despite every instinct, my eyes rake down his pecs and over his chiseled stomach until they land on the light dusting of hair trailing out of sight.

My mouth feels like there are marbles in it, but somehow, I say, “Your pants too.”

I try not to look as he lowers them, but I can’t help myself.

Cyrus Reed is in boxer briefs.

Magnificent.

That’s the only word to describe the view in front me.

I shake off the thoughts, sidling up to the table and looking for the gauze so I can clean the wound.

Within five minutes, I have his leg cleaned and have begun stitching him up.

Periodically, I look up to gauge how he is doing. His face is blank, as though this isn’t affecting him in the slightest. The pure control the man has is unnerving.

“Um ... so you’ll be staying here tonight?” I squeak out the words, sounding like a frightened virgin being eyed up by her prom date.

“Yes,” he replies, and that does nothing to calm my nerves.

“Is ... is this okay?” I ask, nodding my head at my trembling hand. I need to pull myself together or else I’m going to butcher this sew job.

He raises his brows. “It’ll have to do, considering you’re the only one here to do it.”

Does he have to be such an asshole? He could thank me. Would that be too much to ask for?

For crying out loud, he should be happy I’m even willing to help him. After all, he’s holding me prisoner. He’s lucky I

don't stab him with the needle.

"I didn't ask you to come after me."

"You shouldn't have tried to run in the first place."

I stop stitching and look up at him. "You're a fool if you think I wouldn't."

"You're a fool if you think you could ever succeed."

I blow out a harsh breath. "Do you want me to finish this? Or would you prefer to bleed out all over the floor?"

He smirks. "I won't bleed out."

"Pity."

He chuckles. "You're beautiful when you're angry."

I look up at him, searching his face, but for what, I don't know. "Don't say things like that."

"Why?" he questions with a frown. "You are beautiful."

"Just stop. I'm under no delusion that you care for me. And I don't need you trying to confuse me."

"I'm not the bad guy here, Ivy."

"That's not how I see it."

He places his hand on top of mine and looks me in the eye. "You have it all wrong."

"Tell me why I'm here."

He looks away. "Some things are better left a mystery. Trust me on that."

"I don't know your motives, and because of that, I don't trust you. I can't."

We don't say anything after that. I go about sewing up his leg, paying special care not to look up at him. After a solid fifteen minutes, I'm done and cleaning up when Cerberus whines from the corner.

"He'll be okay," Cyrus says. "He's just got a limp tail. He'll be better in a few days with some rest."

“How do you know?”

“I’ve seen it before. He overexerted himself, and the water was too cold. Trust me. He just needs rest.”

There’s that word again ... trust. I look away, not needing to have the same conversation we’ve already had.

In this particular case, I was just going to have to be patient. If Cerberus doesn’t show any signs of improvement within a few days, I’ll insist that Cyrus take him off the island to be checked out. Even if I’ll be completely alone out here.

“You’re all done,” I say, turning my back on him to finish cleaning up.

“Thank you, Sun.”

I still, his words catching me off guard. Looking over my shoulder, I smile tightly.

“You’re welcome. Why don’t you go rest somewhere while I clean up the bloody trail you left in the foyer.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he says. “You’re not a slave.”

“Whatever I am, the blood still needs to be cleaned, and you’re in no condition to do it. Go get yourself cleaned up. There’s dried blood all over your leg.”

He goes to stand but quickly falls back into his chair. “Whoa. What’s wrong?”

He inhales deeply. “I’m fine,” he barks. “I just got a little light-headed.”

“Of course, you are. You lost a lot of blood, Cyrus. Just stay put. I’ll clean up the blood, and then I’ll help you upstairs.”

He considers me for several seconds. “Why?” he finally asks.

“Why?” I parrot, knowing full well what he is asking.

“Why are you helping me?”

I laugh, but there is no humor in it. “The way I see it, my only way off this island is you. If you die, God only knows

what shady people will come here looking for you.” I shrug.
“The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t.”

He chuckles. “Touché.”

“Now, let me get this cleaned up.” I turn toward the foyer to mop up the trail of blood. But just before leaving the room, I glance over my shoulder to look at my patient one more time. Every corded muscle is on display, and despite myself, I grow warm, thinking of all the salacious things he said last time we were alone. God, I am an idiot.

Ivy

IT TAKES OVER AN HOUR TO CLEAN UP ALL THE BLOOD AND dispose of the ruined towels. By the time I'm done, I'm hot and gross, and in desperate need of a shower, but first, I need to check on my patient.

I walk into the kitchen to help Cyrus move somewhere more comfortable, but the kitchen is empty.

"Where the hell did you go?" I mumble to nobody. I search the lower half of the place, and when I come up short, I decide to check upstairs.

The master bedroom door is open, so I walk in. "You shouldn't have climbed those steps," I lecture, but he isn't in there either. I hear a commotion through the half-opened door to my right and proceed toward it.

"Dammit, Cyrus, you should be in bed, not walking around. You'll split open your stitches," I bark before halting in my tracks.

The door is open just enough to showcase Cyrus lowering his briefs to the ground, as steam from the shower rolls into the room. He doesn't see me, and I take full advantage. He stands bare with his back to me.

My breath hitches at the sight. I know I should turn away. I should not be looking, but I can't force my eyes from him. He's single handedly the most beautiful man I have ever seen,

and my body reacts in ways it never has before. Want and need beg me to press forward while my head screams for me to look away.

“Like the view, Ivy?” His cocky remark does the trick. Cold seeps into my once hot flesh.

“I-I just came to help you get settled. I must now bleach my eyes,” I say lamely, and he roars with laughter. “It’s not funny, Cyrus. I’m scarred for life.”

“Liar,” he accuses, and I don’t say another word.

“Just call when you’re done, and I’ll help you. You shouldn’t be pushing things. If that breaks open, I don’t have the proper supplies to help you. You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“I just need to get this blood off me. I’ll be five minutes, Ivy.”

I swear under my breath, making my way back into what must be the room he’s claiming. I go through drawers and find that it is stocked. I pull out a pair of athletic shorts and a T-shirt, but it’s when I stumble across briefs that I once again go down the rabbit hole of want. God, will my body and brain ever be on the same damn page? It’s pissing me off.

Sure, he’s beautiful, but he’s evil. I try to drill that truth into my head, but with every negative thought, two sexual ones take root.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Has it been that long that I’d find just about anyone worth sleeping with?

That has to be it.

My celibacy is the root problem. Well, there are other ways to handle that problem that don’t include giving my body to my kidnapper.

I need space to clear my head. Being close to him is not a good idea right now.

Once I get him situated, I have to get the hell out of this room.

I'll take care of him for the injury I caused, but I won't spend a moment more with him.

It isn't good for me. I'm beginning to be one of those idiot girls who fall for their captors.

Yep. Stockholm syndrome, it is.

I'm ninety percent sure that's what I'm coming down with. It's a real thing, and I can't be blamed for my lapse in judgment.

He's doing this. It's his fault.

I straighten things on the dresser, dust the windowsill, and turn down the bed. Anything to keep my hands and mind occupied. I'm so engrossed in what I am doing that I don't hear him approach.

I don't know he's there until I feel his touch.

One finger grazes down my spine, leaving goose bumps in its wake. I shiver all over and hate that my body reacts to his touch. There is no denying it. He has to feel my body shake.

“What are you doing, Sun?”

There it is again, that stupid freaking nickname.

I have yet to figure out what it even means. I look at him over my shoulder warily. Droplets of water trickle down his carved chest, and I follow them as they make their way down his toned abs.

A towel hangs loosely on his hips. I swallow, turning my head, but his fingers grab my chin, easing me to look at him. His eyes burn with something I don't want to think too much about.

Not while I'm this close to him.

Not when my senses want to leave completely and just give in to this insane chemistry floating between us.

We are two strangers on a deserted island, completely and utterly alone. He is beyond attractive. Can't I just pretend he is someone else for just a few moments? Just long enough to get lost in his touch.

“Ivy,” he whispers my name like a prayer. “Can you hand me the clothes?” And just like that, the spell is broken.

“U-Um ... obviously. Please put them on.” I sound out of breath and like a total moron. He chuckles again. This gruff man has obviously lost way too much blood if he is laughing so much all of a sudden, and even though I’m sure he’s delirious with pain, I still want to slap his face.

Asshole.

“Here.” I throw the pile of clothes I have laid out at his head.

He ducks, laughing all the while.

Okay, strike my earlier remark. He’s so damn sexy when he’s like this that I can’t help but smile. Even though I hate myself for admitting it. But he’s so carefree at this moment. It’s easy to forget he’s a bad man.

I’m only human, after all.

“Put your clothes on and then get in bed. You need to rest. I’m going to go shower.”

“I’m fine,” he counters, sounding annoyed. “This is my place. I’ll do what I want.” He sounds like a petulant child. It’s a bit comical, considering the man is lord of the underworld, but

I don’t say anything else.

I leave the room, giving him privacy and me the space I need to get myself in check. Hurt Cyrus is almost endearing, and that is not good. I need to hold on to my hatred. That will get me out of here unscathed.

My room is not as nice as the one I’ve just come from, but it has everything that I need. When I step into the large shower, I bask in the warmth that cascades over me. I want to wipe off the memories of my near escape just as much as I want to rid myself of the blood and grime.

I moan as I lather my hair with the coconut shampoo.

It feels so good. With my eyes closed tightly, images of a naked Cyrus assault me, and I groan. Whether in frustration or annoyance, I'm not entirely sure. I'm trying to escape him, not pine for the man. But I can't really be blamed. He is perfection personified.

My hands make their way from my scalp down my neck, and I revel in the feeling as I imagine they're his hands running all over my body. I inhale deeply and sigh on an exhale. Maybe if I give myself release, my brain will start functioning again. Maybe I can beat the building Stockholm I fear I've developed.

"Stop it, Ivy," I chastise myself aloud. I finish quickly, needing to find something for dinner.

My stomach is rumbling, so it's time to eat. Added bonus, eating means I can keep myself occupied for a while. I run a brush through my hair, throw on a white slip dress that I had found in the armoire, and head out the door and down to the kitchen.

Rummaging through the refrigerator, I make a mental note to find out when the boat is coming back.

After the day we had, we're sure to be hungry, so I browse through the freezer and pull out some frozen food that he left the last time he came.

Needing something to make the process less drab, I turn on the meager radio that I had found in the greenhouse and tune it to the first station I find.

It's some upbeat station with dance music that has my hips moving as I heat the food and set the table.

Wine would complement this meal well.

What am I saying?

Alcohol with a criminal is not a good idea. In fact, it's the worst I've had yet. No. I'll be keeping my wits about me tonight.

I'm quickly learning that Cyrus is dangerous in more ways than one.

Cyrus

I WATCH AS HER HIPS SWAY AND HEAD BOBS TO THE MUSIC. She's captivating, and I can't get enough. Something inside me starts to thaw when this woman is around, and it is hazardous.

My life isn't conducive to such feelings. The more I care about her, the more I have to lose. But here I am, allowing it to happen with every swish of her body.

My mind reels at how her father could've been so careless with something so damn valuable. He deserves to die at Boris's hand, and that I won't stop. She's worth all the fucking shit that will come down on me once Boris realizes that I have taken her.

Fuck him.

They can all come.

All the men he works with.

I'll burn down the fucking world before I allow that man to touch something that belongs to me. And she does.

With every minute we've spent together, I can see her walls breaking down. I'll bend her to my will, and have her, but on her terms. I won't take what isn't offered, but I have no doubt I won't have to. Her body begs for me, and it won't be long before she utters the words herself.

After watching her for several minutes, I pull myself away, not wanting to torture myself any longer. She's coming around, but she isn't there yet. I'll give her time. I will not force myself on her no matter how much I want to. I'll never hurt her.

Instead, I go to my hidden room that is stocked with vintage wines. It was the first thing I had built upon finishing the updates on the place.

I keep my private collection here, as this place isn't frequently used. This is my escape. I come here to get away and to hide out when necessary... on the rare occasion, my men will bring in an adversary, but often, we don't have to go that route.

Only a few people know about this island, and they know their life, and that of their families, are dependent on their secrecy. I pay them handsomely for the inconvenience. I sift through my collection and come upon a 1949 Chateau Lafite Rothschild.

It isn't my most expensive bottle, but it's a good one, and I want to share it with her.

If there's one thing I know about Ivy, it's that she was deprived of the finer things in life, all so that her father could indulge in his vices.

I saw the state of the exterior of the brownstone she lived in. Any man who wears a watch like he did but couldn't keep up his shit privately wouldn't treat his family right, and then don't get me started on gambling her virtue away.

The thought of the man turns my stomach and makes me rage.

I return to the kitchen just in time to see her putting the silverware in place. She looks up, smiling when she sees me until her eyes land on my hands. One is holding the bottle of wine and the other, two goblets.

"What's that for?" she says, furrowing her brows.

"To drink," I pronounce, earning a scowl from her.

“I know what you do with it. I asked why you’re bringing it in here.” Her hands rest on her hips, and her eyes are in two thin slits as she glowers my way.

Frustration is rolling off her in waves, and I can’t help but chuckle. She is adorable when she is flustered and gorgeous as fuck when she is pissed.

“It’s a peace offering. For you saving my life,” I explain with nonchalance.

She rolls her eyes at me, and a part of me wants to throw her across my lap and punish her. I won’t, though.

Damn fucking morals.

“I hardly saved your life. I merely stitched you up.”

“You’re right.” I shrug. “This is for me since you nearly got me killed, along with yourself, and poor Cerberus. Look what you did to him. He looks worse than both of us,” I say, nodding my head toward the limp tail.

“Cerberus,” she says, looking close to tears. “Is he going to be all right?” she asks for the umpteenth time.

“Ivy, he’ll be fine. I was only messing with you.”

“Don’t joke about stuff like that. I feel terrible about what I did to him.”

Now it’s my turn to feel like a shit. “I’m sorry. I won’t joke about that anymore,” I promise. “Cerberus will be fine. I assure you.”

She nods her head but doesn’t say another word. So, I forge forward, hoping to lighten the mood with my offering. I’ve never met a woman who didn’t like wine, and a vintage bottle at that.

“Now that I’m stranded here, I sure as hell am not going to be denied appropriate drink,” I tease, looking down at the glass of water she has sitting out for me.

She rolls her eyes. “Ever the opportunist.”

I act affronted. “There are no motivations here, Ivy. I simply want to share a near priceless bottle of wine. With

you.” I grin. “Is that so bad?”

She mumbles something under her breath but acquiesces and then points at the chair for me to sit. I oblige, not wanting to further her irritation. I want to have a decent meal with good conversation.

“Do you always give your prisoners expensive wine?” she asks, raising a brow.

I groan. “So, we’re going to go there, are we?”

“Why not discuss the elephant in the room? Surely, we’ll enjoy our food more once this topic is out in the open. Heaven knows I’ll feel more comfortable tasting your near priceless bottle with some answers.” She mocks my very words, and I have to count to three so I don’t lose my temper.

“Must you ruin every moment with your smart mouth?”

Her back straightens. “Have you ever been stolen from your life and held captive? No? Then don’t talk to me about my smart mouth.”

I can’t help the smile that forms on my lips. Her argumentative attitude should make me livid. Bigger men have fallen for talking to me like that, but something about her feisty side makes me crave her even more. I revel in her boldness.

I lean forward, placing my elbows on the table, to give her the platform to voice her obvious disapproval with my actions. It’s not like I haven’t heard them before, but apparently, she’s determined to beat a dead horse.

“Ask whatever you’d like. But just be prepared for non-answers.”

She huffs. “Then what’s the damn point?”

I shrug. “You’ll never know unless you ask, right?”

Her face falls, and her eyes drop to the table. “I’m not even sure what more I can ask? Every time I do, you are evasive,” she says, sounding defeated. “I should continue to fight. If I stop, I’m complacent about this whole thing. And I’m not,” she basically shouts. “I should beg for my release. If I don’t,

again ... complacent. Can't you understand that? Or are you so evil that you have no compassion for the fact that I have been stolen away from my friends and family ... my life, and without any explanation aside from *you have your reasons*," she imitates my voice, her face growing red under my watchful eye.

I want to tell her.

I might be a monster in her eyes, but this time, there are scarier things at play than me. It was all to save her. Then again, if it wasn't for the poker tournament I had organized, she wouldn't be in this mess to begin with. I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't where she's concerned.

"I know that you want to tell me. It's written all over your face," she says, voice softening. "It's clear to me that you're not a bad guy, Cyrus. So just tell me."

She's lying. I know she is by the way she fidgets when she says the words. She doesn't truly believe them. She is just saying what she thinks I want to hear. She's smart not to believe it. I am the bad guy.

I may not have been the villain in her particular situation, but I am in everyone else's. I am the man you fear. The one you lower your head to when you walk past me on the streets. The one you would never speak out against for fear you'll lose your life. She isn't wrong to doubt me. But fuck if it isn't making me want to strangle her.

I stand from the chair, scraping my knee as I go.

"Fuck," I yell out as the stitches rip open, and blood begins to seep through my pants.

"Oh, God, Cyrus." She jumps up, rushing to my side.

"Stay away," I warn, needing to get my anger under control. This is not her fault.

She only pointed out the truth, but for whatever reason, I don't want to be that guy to her. I want her to trust me. And that is the dumbest thing of all.

The truth is, I don't have the capacity to love her the way she deserves to be loved. I don't even have the capacity to truly like her. So why does it matter how she feels about me? All of these thoughts going through my head are doing nothing to calm my anger.

"Cyrus," she says, softly. Her hand comes up to my arm. "Let me take care of you." Her eyes bore into mine, and all the anger quickly melts away. She helps set me back into the chair, then grabs a napkin and presses it to my bleeding thigh. "I'm going to need to stitch that again. Can you take your pants off for me?"

I raise a brow. I can't help it. I am a man, after all.

She shakes her head. "Just take off your pants, Casanova," she instructs.

As she walks away, I watch as the white dress swishes back and forth. She looks like an angel. My angel.

If only I had a soul worth saving.

Ivy

I CAN'T BELIEVE I HAVE TO DO THIS AGAIN.

If he had just been less of a pain in the ass, he wouldn't be back in this position right now, and I wouldn't be forced to do something I'm not qualified to do. Concentrating, I work to re-stitch his leg, shaking my head the entire time at how careless he is.

The utter bullheadedness of this man makes me want to strangle him.

"Should I be concerned?" he asks, pulling my eyes upward to look at him. I don't answer him. Instead, I narrow my eyes. "You've got such a death grip on that needle, and you're not exactly being gentle."

My fingers tighten. "I told you to be careful. You acted like an animal, and now here we are," I snap. "You really need to see a doctor." I lift my hand in the air. "When will that boat be coming back?"

"When I tell them to," he answers.

"How do you know that? Do you have a phone with you?" Without realizing, I have leaned into him. His eyes widen, and I instantly hate that I've given that thought away.

"Even if I did, you'd never get access to it. Face it, Ivy, you're mine."

If I had to put a definition on the way I'm looking at him, it would go in the dictionary as *a death glare*.

"Do you want me to patch this up? Or should I leave you to bleed out?"

He shrugs. "Whatever you want, Sun."

I huff under my breath but manage to finish the task. When I stand, he goes to stand too, but I shake my head. "Sit down. I'm just getting some water."

He doesn't say anything, just nods. When I get back, he's still in the same position, slouched back without a care in the world. Or so he appears. When I begin to clean off his leg, he stiffens. "What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning up the blood," I deadpan. "What does it look like?"

He remains silent for several seconds as he considers me. "Why are you helping me?"

I sigh. "Because I'm not like you, Cyrus. I help people. I don't harm them. And besides, if I'm stuck here, I'd prefer not to have to see blood everywhere."

He chuckles at that. "Not a fan?"

"I could live without it," I admit. "I'm not one for violence." I watch him while I say this, looking for any indication of remorse or that he feels the same way, but his blank stare gives nothing away. "I take it violence doesn't bother you?" I press my luck in asking that question.

He shrugs. "Violence is necessary sometimes. It's all I've ever known."

My stomach roils at his admission. What the hell has happened to this man to make him so callous about such things?

"That's ... sad, Cyrus. Violence should never be necessary," I say. "What happened to make you like this?"

He jerks back. "Like what?"

“Like ... like this.” I gesture at him with my hand. “Gruff, callous, dangerous.”

His eyes narrow, and he leans toward me. “You have no idea how dangerous I am, Ivy.”

His words, the proximity of his body ... they do something to me that I can't quite explain. I should be repulsed or, at the very least, angry, but all I feel is need.

I'm on fire.

My stomach flutters, and my core pulses with need.

The way I feel for him is amplified at this moment, and a part of me is disgusted with myself. Am I getting off on the fact that he's a violent man? Do I like that he's dangerous?

Am I sick?

Am I a bad person?

“Let's play a game,” he says, pulling me out of my own thoughts. “A game for the *answer*.”

The way he says that word has me perking up. “Are you serious? You'll finally answer *the* question?”

Neither of us have to clarify what the question is. It's been hovering above us since the first day I met Cyrus.

“Only if you win.” He smirks, looking entirely too smug for my liking.

“What game?”

“You name it,” he says.

I tap my finger to my chin, trying to think of the best game. What could I suggest that would give me an edge with this man? “Let's play spades,” I finally suggest.

He cocks an eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

I think about his question. No, I'm not sure about anything. I have no idea what this guy is involved in.

For all I know, gambling is his thing. He does run a poker game, but that doesn't mean he plays.

I have to hope that after all those times I played with Trent, I have enough practice under my belt to at the very least hang. Besides, I have nothing to hide. So even if I do lose, the joke is on him. He won't get much from me.

"I'm sure," I say, sounding more confident than I feel.

"Spades it is," he says.

He tells me where to find the deck of cards. I shuffle and set the pile in the middle.

"You first." I offer him the cards to draw from the top. He draws the top card and decides to keep it. We continue to take turns picking cards until we each have thirteen in our hands, deciding whether or not to keep them.

"I'll bid three," he says, looking far too confident.

"I'll bid four," I respond, hoping like hell I can get to five hundred first.

I start the game by laying a four of diamonds. He follows up with a queen of diamonds, winning the hand. As we continue to play over the next twenty minutes, it's clear he is a master at cards. I should have known; you don't host a game unless you can play. I just have to have faith that my luck will turn around soon.

As I look at the cards, a nostalgic feeling rolls over me of a time when I was young, and things were different. "I used to play this with my dad all the time." I close my eyes as I speak, replaying the good times before everything changed. "I remember the first time he sat me next to him and Trent, and they made me play for hours." I chuckle, my eyes opening again. How things have changed since then. I wish my dad was still that man. "That was so long ago. I miss those times," I whisper more to myself than to him.

"Your father is worthless."

My eyes snap to him. "What did you say?" There is no way he said that. He doesn't know my father. Sure, my father was no prize these days, but still ...

He looks directly in my eyes and repeats the offensive words, shocking me to the core. Malice drips from his tone, but the malice is misplaced. My dad is bad, but he's not a monster like Cyrus is making him out to be.

“Why would you say that? You don't know my father.”

“I know his kind,” Cyrus answers sternly.

“And what kind is that?” I shoot back, growing more pissed by the second.

“The kind who treats his daughter like a meaningless possession to be handed off whenever it suits him. The kind who wouldn't know something valuable if it were looking him square in the eye. A worthless fuck.” He emphasizes the last word so crisply, I flinch.

My lower lip starts to quiver. It feels like the walls are closing in on me. It's the first time I have thought of my childhood in some time. It's one of the fond memories I possess, and Cyrus practically spat on it.

I've felt alone for so long. Even before the island, I have missed the happy times, and finally, when I remember something good, he has to go and remind me of what a pitiful asshole he is.

I stand abruptly. “I'm done.”

“Ivy, wait. Please. I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things.”

My chin tips down to meet his dark eyes. They drill into me, and there is an endless depth to them. So many unspoken words and sorrow swim in them, but I don't want to hear them now, so I shake my head.

“Well, you did, Cyrus. Attacking my family won't get you far with me. They're all I have.”

“Just sit, will you? Let me explain.”

I want to walk out of the room and get as far away from him as possible, but the offer of any type of explanation is too great a promise.

Curiosity killed the cat.

“I ...” He starts and then stops. Whether he is choosing his words carefully or deciding whether to go back on his word, I’m not sure, but he finally continues. “I didn’t have the best home life, Ivy. Things were ... difficult. I’ve had to do some bad things to change my circumstances. I didn’t have a choice. But others ... they do, yet they still choose their vices. Their families suffer at their hands and don’t even realize it.”

My eyebrows knit together. “I’m sorry for that, Cyrus. But I don’t understand why your past would make you so hostile toward someone you don’t even know,” I say. “I won’t lie and say my dad has been the best recently. My father might not be the best man right now, but deep down, he’s a good man.”

He inhales deeply, several emotions playing out on his face, which is a contradiction to the Cyrus I’ve grown to know.

A man who is anything but readable. Someone who can school his features so well that you can’t tell what he is thinking. Or if he’s thinking at all. At this moment, he looks almost ... vulnerable.

“If I were a father, I’d protect my child with my own life. Nothing would ever happen to her. He had you, Ivy, and he let you be taken. That’s unforgivable in my book.”

I smile at his backward thinking. “I’m an adult, Cyrus. He couldn’t have prevented this.

At some point in time, we become responsible for ourselves. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing more.”

His eyes harden. “It’s so much more than that, Ivy,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Tell me then,” I counter. “If you have something more to say, open your mouth and tell me. Enough secrets.” My hand reaches up in the air, angrily. “I’m sick of it.”

He shakes his head. “That’s all I’m willing to share for tonight.”

And with those words, the conversation is cut off, and I'm left in the dark yet again.

Cyrus

MY BLOOD FUCKING BOILS AT THE FACT THAT PRICK YET AGAIN is the cause of turmoil for Ivy. I have asked myself a dozen fucking times over the past twenty-four hours why I don't just tell her. I can't quite figure out who I am protecting by keeping this secret. But I know now. I'm protecting her.

I didn't want to break her any more than she is already broken.

In her eyes, her family is everything. She might not like her father these days, but her memories live inside her still. Can I tarnish that?

I know it would kill her to know that the reason she is a captive on a private island is because her own father sold her during a game of cards.

The very thought of it makes me want to kill someone.

She's too good to see the evil that lives in her father. That or too naïve, but I'd like to think it's the former.

I'm not just pissed off about that. I am disgusted with myself. What am I even thinking by suggesting a card game, knowing that this is the reason she's here in the first place? It had just been an idea to pass the time and hopefully get to know her a little better.

There isn't a game out there I don't feel confident I would win against her.

But I wanted to use that to my advantage to get her to open up to me. I wanted the mood to be lightened. I wanted to see her let loose and have fun.

But like everything I touch, it quickly turned to shit.

I do want to tell her why she's here. I want her to understand that I don't want to hurt her. But for the first time in my life, I care that my truth will hurt her even worse.

It's better for her to think I'm the bad guy. Someone she doesn't know, yet already hates. Knowing that a man she's loved her entire life threw her to the sharks will destroy her.

I'm under no false illusions that I'm a good guy, but I can't do that to her.

I care.

I fucking care, and that's a fucking travesty.

It makes me weak. It compromises my entire empire.

The more I know about this girl, the more reckless my decisions get. I've already lost an entire fucking day to save her. When have I ever cared enough about another human life to risk my own?

Years.

It's been years.

I grab my hair at the roots and pull, wanting to scream, but not wanting to alarm her.

Fuck! I am completely fucked as long as I'm around her.

I need to get off this island and back to work. Back to my sanity. Then I'll be able to think clearly. Focus. Get her out of my system. Or maybe I need to just take her and make her mine. Maybe that's what it would take.

Where the fuck is she?

I haven't seen or heard from her since she stormed out.

Not wanting to upset her more, I remain sitting in the room, contemplating all the things I have to do when the boat eventually comes to get me, when Ivy re-enters the room, pillow and blankets in hand.

“What’s that?” I ask, raking my eyes down her body.

She’s wearing that tight camisole again, the one that manages to push up her breasts.

Why in the fuck does she have to keep torturing me with it?

My mouth waters at the sight of her round breasts and ample cleavage. She’s a sight to behold in simple fucking nightclothes. Her linen pants hug her curves and ass in just the right way to have me hardening. At least she’s wearing the pants I brought her. I don’t think I could handle it if she was only wearing her boy shorts again.

As it is, it’s torture to witness her like this. Her hair is thrown into a messy bun, and I can hardly contain myself. No man can exert this much restraint and not be in serious pain.

“I’m sleeping down here,” she says, tersely.

“Why?”

“Do you always have to question me? Can’t you just take my answer and keep your mouth shut?”

Her smart mouth has me somehow harder. I lick my lips, running my eyes over her body without an ounce of care. She blushes under my stare.

Good. I hope she’s good and wet. I hope she dreams about my hands running over every one of her curves.

Feeling her.

Tasting her.

Fucking her.

“I-I want ... want to be close to Cerberus,” she stutters, clearly unnerved. “I need to make sure he’s okay.”

I stand, stalking toward her with purpose. Her eyes widen at my approach.

“Ivy,” I whisper into her ear.

“Y-Yes,” she stammers.

“What are you wearing? I brought you a whole bag of clothes,” I rasp, drawing a sharp inhale from her. She doesn’t answer me, but her breathing becomes shallow and her chest heaves. I trail my hand up her arm, leaving goose bumps in my wake.

“What are you doing, Cyrus?” She’s breathless, and I fucking love it.

“Showing you how good I can make you feel. All you have to do is ask for it.”

She shudders and then takes a deep breath while stepping back out of my grasp.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but I won’t let you do this. Until I have the answer I’m looking for, this will never happen.”

“You admit you want it?” I respond arrogantly, wanting to make it clear that she isn’t in control despite my raging hard-on. “You admit you want me to fuck you, Ivy?”

Her eyes harden. “Not on your life.”

“You can lie to yourself, Sun, but I felt the way your body ached for me. Every shudder, every goose bump told me how bad you want me to fuck you. You want to play puritan? Fine. But you’ll have to beg me to fuck you.”

She huffs. “You fucking pig. I wouldn’t touch you if you were the last person on this godforsaken island,” she spits.

“Have it your way.” I sit back on the couch and get settled in for the night.

“You can’t be serious. You aren’t sleeping down here,” she screeches. “I need some distance from you.”

I smirk at her haughty attitude. She’s so damn hot when she’s angry, and at that moment, she looks like she could spit

fire.

“If you’re sleeping down here, then so am I.”

She stiffens, looking at me with just barely contained rage. “Why, you ... you ...”

With every word she says, my smile grows bigger.

“You asshat!” she finally bellows. I throw my head back and laugh. The whole scene is comical. I haven’t laughed this much in years. It feels good.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she barks. “You are a complete dick.”

When I finally get myself under control, I shake my head. “All true. I’ll give you that.” She crosses her arms across her chest, which only manages to show more of her cleavage. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the past day, it’s that you do what you want, and there’s no use in fighting you.” She takes a deep breath and looks at me tensely. “But can I trust you to be a gentleman?”

I frown. “I’ve told you I will not touch you unless you want me to, Ivy, and I mean it.”

She nods, taking deep breaths and seemingly calming down. “Here, you can have this pillow.” She throws it at me.

“I don’t need it,” I respond.

“Please take it. You’re hurt, and I’ll feel better knowing you’re comfortable.” This woman is a conundrum. One minute, she looks as though she’ll kill me, and the next, she is kind and thoughtful. I’ve never met a woman like her in my life.

She gets to making up a bed on the couch adjacent to where I’ll be sleeping. When she is all settled, I shut off the lights. For several minutes, we just lie in the dark, neither one of us saying anything until Ivy breaks the silence.

“I love the smell of this fabric softener. It reminds me of my mother.”

The mention of her mother has me paying attention. I know little about her family, and I always wondered how her

mother factored in.

“Smells like lilacs,” she continues. “Flowers always remind me of her. She loved to garden. She’d spend all summer planting new flowers, pruning ... anything to be outside,” she says wistfully. “She taught me everything I know.”

The reverence in her voice mixed with the tinge of sadness tells me that her mother isn’t around. “What happened to her?” I ask. I know Ivy was concerned about her well-being, but I never thought to find out why.

“She’s basically dead.” She buries her head in her hands and then looks back over at me. Unshed tears linger in her eyes. “Not truly, but she might as well be.”

That’s all Ivy offers, and I don’t press. I don’t deserve any more.

“Someday, I want to open my own floral shop. It’s always been my dream.”

“I think you’ll do great,” I offer, not understanding why I’d say such a thing.

I know nothing about flowers or what experience Ivy has with them. But now I feel like a dick for screaming at her when I found her in my greenhouse. Thankfully, I already gave her free rein to use it again, or I would feel like a bigger dick. I want to make her happy. It’s a strange feeling, but not unwelcome.

“If you want it, you should do it.”

“Kind of hard to open a business on a deserted island.”

I think about her words for a while. I don’t have any intentions of keeping her here forever, but I’m sure as hell not going to let her leave until I know the danger has passed. The reality is, I have no idea how long that will take. What possesses me to say the next words to her, I don’t know, but I do anyway. “You won’t be here forever, Ivy. I can’t tell you how long, but one day you’ll be able to leave, and I promise you’ll start your business.”

She inhales sharply. “Do you promise? I’ll be able to leave here?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” she whispers into the dark.

I only hope that I’ll be able to keep that promise.

MY LEG HURTS MORE TODAY THAN YESTERDAY. I DESPISE THAT Ivy has to see me like this. Weak and hurt, and not able to stitch my own leg.

Ivy isn’t someone I would want to have leverage on me. She might be my prisoner, but I’ve gotten to know her, if her escape attempt proves anything it’s that she is resourceful.

I wouldn’t put it past her, that she’ll figure out a way to spin this in her favor.

Not that I think she’ll try to escape, but she’ll probably try to milk a phone call to her mother from me.

That’s something I can’t do.

From the research I have done on her, and the fact that I know her father, her mother can’t be called. Her father is a liability, and there is no way I would trust Ivy’s location with anyone in that family. Even Trent doesn’t know she’s on my island. I can’t have anyone breach my trust and tell Boris I have her.

It’s been two days since the accident, and I’m still not sleeping in my bed. Ivy doesn’t think I can handle the steps yet without tearing my stitches. She’s being ridiculous. I’ve been hurt plenty to know what I can handle.

Taking a bullet to the chest, being stabbed in the back, literally, has me knowing my limits.

A small gash in my leg isn’t one of them. However, it’s not awful having someone as fucking gorgeous as Ivy, waiting on me hand and foot.

As if she can hear my thoughts, she stirs beside me. The close proximity has me hyper-aware of what she sleeps in. Basically nothing.

This girl will be the death of me.

“You okay,” she mumbles, her voice still drowsy with sleep.

“Yep,” I mutter back, distracted with the sight in front of me, and she must notice because she follows my gaze, and then her cheeks go bright red.

She pulls her tank up before she speaks again. “Um, how’s your leg?”

“Better.”

“Pain.”

“Nope.” Fuck yeah, but I’m not admitting that. “How’s the weather?” Yeah, I just became that guy, the one who asks about the weather.

“Still storming, I think.” She stands and heads over to the window to get a better view. “It’s awful out. I guess you’re stuck here another day. Let me get you some breakfast.”

“I can walk, Sun.”

“It’s probably better that you don’t.”

“Now who’s being ridiculous?” I stand from my makeshift bed. Hurts like a bitch, but I bite back the pain.

“You sure, you look a little green.”

“I’m fucking sure,” I grit out.

She lifts her shoulders. “Fine, have it your way.”

Once I’m standing, Ivy takes it upon herself to wrap her arm around me, as if she could hold my weight. I’m about to tell her I don’t need help, but something stops me.

When we’re in the kitchen, I take a seat, and she stares at me.

“I feel like all we do is eat.” She laughs.

“We have spent most of our time in here. I would say we can eat somewhere else, or do something else, but—”

“You think I’m too hurt. Trust me when I say this, Sun. This is nothing. I have been hurt far worse.”

Her eyes go wide like saucers, but then she rights herself. “Well, if you don’t want to eat yet, why are we here?”

“Cause you led me here,” I joke, and her own lips tip up when I do.

“What do you want to do then?”

“No food and no spades.” Now she laughs.

“Yeah, neither of those works, how about I make us some coffee and you think of something else.”

My eyebrow raises and she rolls her eyes. “Not that either.”

“Our options are rather limited then ...” I trail off with a grin.

“There has to be something else you do. Come on, what do you do for fun?” When I don’t answer her question, she proceeds. “Seriously? Is there anything you do besides being”—she points at me—“you?”

“I play chess.”

“Now that makes complete sense.”

“How so?”

“Cold and calculated. Perfect chess player.” She beams.

“Do you play?” My eyebrow lifts. This could prove interesting.

“No. I don’t know how to.”

“Then I’ll teach you. Meet me in my office, bring the coffee.” I stand, the movement still hurts, but I’m becoming used to the pulling pain.

When I’m in my office, I walk over to my chessboard.

Ivy is following closely behind, because apparently, I walk slow enough that she was able to use the Keurig for two cups in the time it took me to walk.

Fuck. I hate being weak.

“This is beautiful,” she exclaims, walking into the room, two mugs in hand and Cerberus in tow.

I look at the board where we’ll be playing. It should be, seeing as each piece is cast from gold.

“Where did you get this?” Her finger reaches out and touches the top of the queen.

“It was made for me.”

I motion for her to sit at the table. She does, and my dog lays down by her feet.

“Seeing as you don’t play, today is your lucky day, because you have a very good teacher.”

I lean closer to the table and then arrange the pieces. “Do you know anything about chess?” She shakes her head. “Each chess piece can move only a certain way. For example”—I lift the pawn in my hand—“a pawn can only move straight ahead and can only attack on an angle, one square at a time. Make sense?”

“No. But I’m a fast learner.” She winks, and so I continue my tutorial. I teach her about every piece. Every rule and I’m sure I’ve lost her, but she’s a good sport. Lifting her coffee up, drinking but never letting her gaze leave mine.

“How did you learn so much?”

My throat closes up, but I push back the emotion threatening to expel. I don’t do emotions. “My father taught me.”

“Oh—”

“No, *oh*. He was a bastard. He taught me nothing. This is the only thing positive I took from his whole existence.” My jaw clenches. Thinking about the bastard always makes me angry. “Now, if you think you understand, let’s play.”

I'm surprised when she doesn't press, but thankful. "Okay."

She nibbles on her lip as she moves her pawn to f4, opening up her king without realizing it. She's created a weakness; I'll take advantage of.

"In chess, every move has a purpose." I move my pawn, opening up a space for my queen and bishop. "Think of it like life. Every move you make can either bring you an advantage or a disadvantage."

She watches me with narrowed eyes, trying to learn as she goes, but it's too late as she moves her pawn yet again. She's put herself in more danger. Her move allows me to bring the queen diagonal.

"Check." My lip tips up into a grin.

Her king has no safe space. There are no pieces that she has that can capture me.

I've captured her piece in two moves.

Ivy

A DAY HAS PASSED SINCE CYRUS TRIED TO TEACH ME CHESS. Something I should never do again, being with him, and seeing him like that is dangerous. Thoughts grew in my mind like English Ivy, covering the walls, grasping on tight, and blocking the view and smothering other plants.

He's not that bad ...

Smart. Witty, and most of all insightful.

As he spoke, it reminded me of the many layers of an onion. There are too many layers of this man to count, but for some reason, I want to.

Shaking my head, I make my way to the kitchen. The place where I know I'll probably find him. As I step inside the room, my hands and arms stretch up into a long-drawn-out yawn.

"Morning," Cyrus's husky voice calls from a seat at the table. His eyes trail down my chest to my bared abdomen. I revel at the idea that I'm able to affect the hard man in front of me. Licking my lips, I then pull the bottom one into my mouth because I'm thinking about such inappropriate things way too early in the morning. I have several hours to get through, and if I want to keep my dignity, I need to avoid him.

Jeez. I'm so pathetic. Does it really come down to avoiding him and hiding in order to calm down these ridiculous thoughts going through my brain?

Yes.

Apparently.

“I was thinking we could spend the day together, again,” he suggests, and I cringe at the implications of spending the day with him when I’m already keyed up. Okay, who am I kidding? Butterflies are flying in my stomach, and my heart is beating so fast I swear I might pass out.

What has gotten into me? I’m acting like a hormonal preteen. Also, a very confused one, apparently, with multiple personalities. One minute, I hate him, and the next, I want to hump his leg.

Maybe it’s his promises mixed with the fact he hasn’t hurt me.

The truth is, despite the whole kidnapping thing, he hasn’t done anything to give me a reason to hate him or not to trust him. He’s said on multiple occasions that he had to take me. I can’t claim to understand why, but for some reason, I believe him. Right or wrong, I believe he acted out of a sense of need. The reason? I still need to know that. Perhaps spending the day with him can get me the answer to that question.

“What were you thinking today?” I ask, grabbing a cup of coffee and sitting in my spot.

“Up for another game?”

I want to say no, strictly because watching him play chess was an aphrodisiac, but I don’t.

Instead, I smile wide, hopefully hiding the inner turmoil inside me.

“Sure, why not.”

A WEEK HAS PASSED, AND CYRUS SEEMS TO BE WALKING normally again. I’m surprised he hasn’t left, supplies and food were dropped off, but he stayed with me.

We have spent the last seven days in his office, with him teaching me every possible thing I will ever need to know about chess, but I have also learned so much more.

Without even realizing it, I have grown to care for this man. There's much he tries to hide, but like the Wizard of Oz, once you pull back that curtain, it's all there to see. That's what I think I've been doing this week, yanking back the curtain, and what I've seen, I've liked.

More than I should.

"Let's do something different today. I need to get out of this house."

"What do you have in mind?" I ask, happy to do something *different*, I could use the fresh air too.

"I thought you could choose," he says, taking a sip from his coffee mug.

Us sitting here, drinking coffee and planning our day, feels domestic. My skin warms with the implication.

"It's nice out. Maybe we can sit by the water."

He cringes. "The last time we were near the water, you almost drowned, and I was injured."

"First off, I'm a capable swimmer when I'm not trying to escape," I challenge. "When I was younger, we used to do a polar bear challenge. We would jump into the water when it was still cold out. We should totally do it. It really makes you feel alive." I close my eyes and smile at the memory of my mom and I running into the frigid ocean waters. "Maybe we'll be able to see fish."

When I open them again, Cyrus has put his hands up in surrender. "I have equipment and life vests," he offers as an olive branch. "There might not be great visibility from the storms, but we can try."

I hadn't thought about that. From my time at the beach, I know that storms kick up the sand and typically make the water murky for a day or two following. It'd be unlikely that we'd see anything.

“We could take a walk around the island and see what the water situation is. That is if you feel up to it?”

He nods.

“How’s your leg? Do I need to rebandage it?”

“I’m fine, Ivy. I’m not a child you have to take care of.”

I roll my eyes. “I was just checking.” Quietly I think of what else we can do, when an idea hits me. “I could pack a picnic,” I continue, suddenly excited to have a journey. Now that I know he plans to let me go, I don’t feel like a prisoner so much. I’m actually looking forward to enjoying the beauty of this place.

“We can do whatever you want,” he says, smiling. I cock my head at him, looking at the way his lips pull up. He’s a devastatingly handsome man to begin with—even when his appearance is dark and ominous—but when he smiles ...

It makes me feel alive. Something tells me he doesn’t show this side to anyone, and I cherish it. I’m not sure how long it will last, but I want to bask in its glow while I can.

“I have to get dressed. We’re wasting the day away.” As I rush from the room, I can hear him laughing, and his carefree attitude has me smiling from ear to ear. As I get dressed, I mentally make a list of what I should pack for our picnic. I think another bottle of wine might be good to get him to open up and spill his secrets.

Yes ... definitely wine.

I take a quick glance in the mirror and smile at my reflection. Despite everything I’ve been through, I look ... happy. My cheeks are rosy, and these clothes fit me like a glove. I marvel at how the random attire he brought me plus the clothes I found in the armoire fit me. They are a little tighter than I’m accustomed to wearing, but they make me look good.

I wonder who they belong to.

What girl has Cyrus brought here before? Why would her clothes still be here? Has he kidnapped someone before? I

shake off the thoughts running amok through my head. I really don't want to know because it won't change my current situation. In fact, it will just ruin my day. A day I intend to enjoy.

I run down the stairs and package our lunch, eager to get out into the beautiful sun and finally explore the island ... with Cyrus. I can't help the excitement that flows through me at the thought of spending the day with him in paradise.

Dumb girl.

I internally chastised myself for being so flimsy with my heart. It isn't anything serious. I'm simply attracted to him, but that is still way too much, considering.

"Cyrus," I call out, trying to figure out where he is.

When he walks around the corner, I swear I stopped breathing. He's wearing a pair of jeans and a thermal. The man might look great in a three-piece suit, but lord. My eyes rake over him, and I can't help the way my mouth drops open. He clearly sees my reaction if his answering smirk is any indication. I really need to be more careful about being so blatant with my staring.

"I-Is that what you're wearing?" I ask, looking anywhere but at him.

"What? You don't approve?" he teases, grinning ear to ear.

"It's not that. I just thought—" I blow out too harsh of a breath. He looks too normal, and this feels too intimate. I shake my head. "I just expected ... a suit," I say lamely.

"Island is the keyword here, Ivy. We're on an island. Would you expect me in a suit and tie? Maybe a *bathing* suit?" His lip tips into a smirk. "Actually, come to think of it, it's not that cold out. Maybe I should take this off." His hand goes to lift the thermal. "I'll grab a bathing suit for that ... What did you call it? Polar dip?"

"Um. No. It's fine. I'm fine. You don't have to change."

I can barely handle him in jeans. How would I ever handle Cyrus Reed in less clothes?

“I hope you have a swimsuit under that outfit of yours.” His right eyebrow lifts. “Because there’s absolutely no way you’re not ending up in the water.”

“But I ...” I stuttered lamely. “You can’t get wet. You have a bandage on your leg.”

“It’ll be fine,” he assured. “The bandage is secure, the wound is almost healed, and as long as you’re not trying to escape, there won’t be any issues. We’re not going to go far enough out anyway. It’s a warm spring day, and I guarantee after walking, you’re going to want to take a ‘polar dip.’”

Images of water droplets rolling down his firm chest have my hands clenching and wetness pooling in my panties. How in the hell am I going to pull myself together long enough to spend the day with him?

The way my body is reacting to him is absurd. Embarrassing even. “Doesn’t matter what I’m wearing under here. Let’s go,” I say, needing to get some fresh air, but before walking out I hear Cyrus say to Cerberus. “*Blijf*” which I remember as meaning stay. He probably doesn’t want him going swimming after the last incident.

For the next hour, we stroll around the island. It’s much larger than I had originally believed it to be, and one whole part is dense trees. It’s almost spooky.

“What’s in there?” I ask, looking toward the dark wooded area.

“I don’t know. I’ve never really roamed that part,” he says, kicking at the sand. “I imagine it’s just trees and overgrowth.”

I remember this spot. It’s where I tried to run the day Cerberus stopped me.

“When I come here, it’s to relax. I use it to get away from the real world.”

“So it’s your hideout?” I say, raising my eyes. “Who are you hiding from, Cyrus?” I meant the question to be funny, but by the way Cyrus tenses, I can tell I hit a sore spot. I want to press him on his reaction, but I also don’t want to force anything from him.

I know from experience that would only back him into a corner and ruin the entire day. And for the first time since I have been there, I feel good. I want that to continue.

Something flies overhead, swooping down toward me. I yelp, guarding my head, but Cyrus is already looming over me, shielding me from whatever it had been.

I'm still crouched in a defensive position when Cyrus's laughter burst through my spike of fear. After I untangle myself, I look up into his smiling eyes.

“Are you laughing at me?”

He nods his head, continuing to chuckle. I flick his nose, standing on my tippy toes so that we are almost at eye level. “It's not funny.”

“It was hysterical,” he counters.

I want to keep the banter going, but when I look into his deep brown eyes, I freeze. We are but an inch apart. If either one of us leans in slightly, our lips will touch. My eyes catch the way his tongue darts out, running across his bottom lip, and I shudder.

His arms come around me, pulling me against his chest, and I want to let go. I want to give in and feel his mouth on mine.

I'm just closing the distance when my stomach rumbles loudly, breaking the spell and darkening my cheeks.

“Hungry?” he asks, and that one word is full of so much meaning. He knows it. I know it. We both want it.

Cyrus

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

Like a fucking idiot, I let her pull away. She wanted me to kiss her. She was practically begging me to, yet I let the moment slip through my fingers.

I've never been such a fucking pussy in all my life.

Normally, if I want something, I take it, but with her, everything is proving to be different.

If this were a different time and a different place, I would have, but as much as I want it, I can't reconcile the difference between me and *him*, if I do.

She needs to come to me.

It has to be her choice.

And most of all, I have to get off this island.

Being here with her is like a kid in a toy store who's been told he can't buy anything.

Case in point, right now.

We are sitting on a blanket in the middle of paradise, and I'm torturing myself by watching as she takes a bite of a ripe strawberry and the juice trickles down her chin. She swipes the juice, smiling at me while she does it.

Temptress.

It's like she is doing it on purpose to torture me.

This is what I get for being an asshole.

Karma is a bitch.

I have to shield my dick from view now.

It's hard ... so fucking hard. I need to do something, anything to get my mind off her lips.

"Do you like the island so far?" I ask, feeling like an asshole for asking. It's a dumb-ass question, considering how she got here. It isn't a goddamn vacation. She's forced to be here, and I really want to avoid anything that will bring us back to that topic.

But I'm apparently a raging idiot around her.

Everything I say makes me feel like a blundering high school boy who has his first crush, it's an unnatural feeling for me. In the real world, I'm confident to the point of arrogance. I am cold and ruthless. But that's what I have to be.

Considering someone else's feelings and trying to hold regular conversations are not expected of me, and it shows in every normal conversation I attempt to have with her.

I'm becoming frustrated at how hard this is, and I'm not just talking about my dick.

I haven't felt this way since junior high. It's pathetic. Getting off the island and getting back is necessary. Killing someone could help too.

"Are you okay?" Her angelic voice brings my eyes back to hers. Her brow is furrowed, and her eyes are full of concern.

"I'm fine," I lie. "I was just thinking about everything I have to do when I get back." Not a lie. "The boat will be here in a bit, and I need to get some work done."

Her shoulders deflate. "I forgot you were leaving today," she says, sounding disappointed. "Will you be back soon?" Her voice pitches, rises with what I have to assume is hope,

and it makes me happy. Another unfamiliar emotion that only she has been able to bring out in me.

“I’m hoping to come back the following day. You’re running out of supplies, so I need to bring back groceries,” I say, wondering if there is anything else she might need. “Is there anything else that I can get for you back in town?”

She bites her lip. “Anything?”

“Whatever will make your time here better?”

She thinks on that for a moment before offering some ideas. “I don’t suppose I could have my phone?”

“Next idea,” I respond, quirking my lip.

She nods her head. “It’s fine,” she draws out. “Maybe a puzzle?”

“A puzzle?” I ask, confused.

“Yeah. You know. Those things with different pieces that you fit together, and it makes an image.” She smirks.

“I know what a puzzle is, Ivy, but you want one?”

She shrugs. “Well, yeah. What else is there to do here?”

I wave my hand around. “You have an ocean and the beach in your front yard. It’s an island with more places to explore.”

“Yes. But when it rains, it would be nice to have some things to do indoors, and since you’ll be gone, I won’t have anyone to play chess with.”

“All right. A puzzle it is. Anything else?”

“And a couple of books. Your library is kind of dated,” she adds. “Something with mystery and romance.”

“Mystery and romance,” I repeat, chuckling.

“A girl’s got her vices.” She flashes her beautiful smile at me.

I’m fucked. I’d buy her all the damn puzzles and books she wanted, if only she’d never stop smiling.

“Let’s swim,” Ivy suggests. “Let’s see how cold it is.”

Watching her strip down to her bra and panties is a brand of torture I'm not accustomed to. I've been with many women—beautiful, exotic, sexually skilled women who I have enjoyed several nights with—but they never lasted long. I lost interest fast. They were either too eager, too clingy, or just too caught up in my lifestyle. Regardless of all their attributes, not one of them holds me as fascinated as Ivy does.

The black piece of lace hugs every one of her curves, and she looks magnificent. Her golden blond hair shines under the sun's bright rays, and my mouth is dry.

I want her.

I need her.

God, the things I'd do to her.

“Swim with me.” She gestures me toward her with one dainty finger.

I oblige. After pulling off my thermal, I remove my jeans, then stalk into the water after her. She squeals, running farther in.

Fuck, it's cold.

Really fucking cold.

But I have to agree with her; it feels amazing.

Invigorating.

“Don't get my hair wet, you Neanderthal,” she calls over her shoulder.

“No chance. Going out that way won't save you, Ivy. You're going under whether your pretty ass wants to or not.”

“I don't want,” she quips. “You stay on your side, and we'll be just fine.”

“What's the fun in that?” I call as I charge toward her. “I thought you wanted to swim together.”

She stops moving away from me and makes the mistake of walking back toward me. “I can trust you, right?”

The one thing she shouldn't do is trust me because I'll disappoint her. It's guaranteed where this conversation is concerned. I wait like a shark as she draws in closer. I stalk my prey, and she doesn't even realize I'm doing it. When she's in swimming distance from me, I dive right toward her, hearing her playful screech before I'm fully submerged.

I swim around her in circles until I'm at her backside. I reach out, grab her around the waist, and pull her under with me. When we surface, I turn her so our bodies are flush, and her breasts press against my chest. I inhale, holding in the groan that threatens to break through my chest. It's a perfect moment until I hear the approaching boat.

It's my ride coming to get me and take me back to my life of mayhem.

"Fuck," I say. "That's my ride. I have to get my stuff and go."

Her face falls, but she nods. "Oh, okay."

I want to comfort her, but I know it won't do either one of us any good. So, I release her from my grip and stride out of the water, heading to grab my stuff. The more time I spend with her, the more I want to know about her, and the less I want to leave.

I've watched men fall at the feet of women and thought them the biggest idiots. How could a woman wrap a man so thoroughly around her finger? So much so that he'd give up everything just for her. I've never understood it, and I've always thought them weak, but Ivy has me questioning that notion. Perhaps a better man can admit his weakness and change for love.

No matter how much I may want that, it will never be my life. I'm in too deep in another world. A dark world. One I'll never bring Ivy into. Even if her father has already thrown her into it, I'll do everything I have to, to protect her. To shield her from it. Including keeping my distance. The best thing I can do for her is to leave.

“BOSS, I’M IN THE SURVEILLANCE ROOM. YOU NEED TO GET IN here right away.”

I hang the phone up, push away from my desk and stand. Z isn’t one to bother me with nonsense, so if he wants me, it has to be something important.

Moving fast, I head toward the back elevator of my house. Not something I use frequently, but something tells me it’s important, and time is of the essence.

When I push the door open, I find Z and Maxwell looking at multiple images of the island.

Instantly, my back goes rigid.

“What the fuck is going on?” Now, I’m standing directly behind them. There are different vantage points.

Some are of the house. We also have cameras in the trees and others angled toward the ocean.

We set the computer up with six squares, and carefully I look over each one.

“It looks like a boat is close,” Maxwell says, lifting his hand to point to the square on the bottom right.

I see nothing at first, but then Maxwell zooms in. Far enough away to not send out any red flags, but close enough to be worrisome.

“Fuck.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Is there a way to get closer?”

I don’t know shit about surveillance.

But I need to know right the fuck now why there is someone sailing too close to my private island that shouldn’t show up on anyone’s fucking radar.

Best case, it's off track and randomly passing by the island. Worse case, I don't want to think about the worst case.

"Yeah. I think I can. Hold."

Maxwell fiddles around, pulling the image, zooming in. The larger it gets, the more it pixelates.

But it doesn't matter how distorted it gets, I can see the shape of the boat, the style too. If we zoom in closer, I'll see the name.

"The fuck?"

"What?" Z asks, his forehead furrowing with confusion.

"That's Alaric's boat."

Both my men continue to look, and then I hear Maxwell mutter his agreement.

"What are you going to do about it, boss?"

"I'll find out why he's there."

Z pivots in his chair to look at me.

He's still sitting, so his neck cranes up. "How do you want to handle this?" he asks me.

"I'll take care of Alaric," I respond.

Z moves to come with me, but I lift my hand, stopping him.

"I need you to run point on Ivy's safety. She is your number one priority."

He might not speak, but his expression on his face is thunderous. Eyes black, darkened with fury.

"My place is by your side, boss," Z replies with a low voice taut with frustration and anger. His contempt for me placing Ivy in his care clear.

"This is not up for discussion. Ivy is the priority. Monitor. If the boat gets any closer, I expect you on the helicopter protecting her." His lips thin, and his nostrils flare. The silent air around us crackles. "You need to protect Ivy at all costs."

That's the last thing I say as I storm out of the room, and onto the deck. Once I have the island in sight, I pick up my phone.

I don't wait for Alaric to address me. As soon as the ringing sound stops and I hear the familiar click that he answered, I fire away.

"Why is your boat by my island?"

"Hello to you too, Cyrus."

"Fuck hello. Answer me."

"Nothing to fear. With you storing my guns, my men are making sure everything is running smoothly."

"Your goddamn guns are at my estate."

"And the island left me curious. I always do recon when I'm working with someone. Your island is part of that."

"You know what they said about curiosity and the cat."

"Is that a threat, Cyrus?"

"No. It's a promise. Stay off my island. I have your money and your guns. Back the fuck off."

"Duly noted. I wouldn't have been doing my due diligence if I hadn't tried to see what was so special."

"It's nothing. It's an abandoned family home."

"Then why the secrecy?"

"Again, none of your business. But because I value our working relationship, I'll let this go. The home is sentimental, stay the fuck away from it."

"Very well. I'll call my men back."

"Goodbye, Alaric."

I press the end button and as the line goes quiet; I wonder if I have an enemy of one of my best clients. Mentally, I calculate the repercussions if I have to kill him.

I stalk back into the house where I find Maxwell and Z still in the surveillance room.

“I want the island always monitored.”

“Boss. The manpower it would take. I think it would be easier—”

“Always,” I bellow. My word final.

“Very well.”

Ivy

HE LEFT WITHOUT BARELY A WORD YESTERDAY. IT'S SO strange how quickly his moods shift. One minute, we are having a great time, splashing, playing, and yes, freezing our asses off, and the next, he's back to cold. I'm getting whiplash where his moods are concerned.

Despite all of that, I sit in the empty estate, bored and somehow missing Cyrus. It's an odd feeling to miss someone who I only recently despised, but it is my truth. I miss our banter and the way he looks at me.

As though I'm some valuable item.

Some mystic creature he wants to understand. Someone ... special to him. It might be absurd, but he makes me think that at times.

I need to find something to preoccupy me until he returns. He had said it could possibly be today, but he hasn't come. I decide to go through the house. Specifically, the room he chose to stay in. I open drawers to find nothing but clothes. Ties, socks, briefs ... nothing interesting.

I even move things around, but there isn't so much as a hidden item underneath. Looking under the bed proves to be even more of a bust.

There is literally nothing there.

He said this is his escape. Wouldn't you have sentimental personal items in the one place you can get away that nobody knows about?

I open the closet door to find a large walk-in space filled to the brim with clothes.

Why he needs suits and dress clothes in his escape is beyond me, but who am I to judge? If you have the kind of money Cyrus does, I guess you can have anything you want, wherever you want.

Including a stolen girl stowed away on a deserted island.

I sigh, growing bored with my lack of findings until my hand lands on a knob hidden behind a row of suits. Pushing the clothes out of the way, I stumble across a small door hidden in the back of the closet.

What are you hiding in there, Cyrus?

I have a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, and each suggests something different. One part of me thinks better of opening that door. The contents behind it could be so many things, and if I've learned anything in my short life, it's that some things are better left unknown.

If I find something terrible behind that door, I'll never be able to unsee it.

The other part of me is eager to rip it open and have some adventure. The problem is, both sides make valid points, and I am stuck in limbo trying to decide which is best.

So, I do what any self-respecting girl would do. I find a coin and flip it.

I call tails is open, heads is walk away.

Tails wins. *Of course, it does.*

Placing my hand on the knob, I draw it down, and the door creaks open.

That seems like a good sign to me, as nobody I know leaves questionable doors unlocked. If this is hiding something big, then surely Cyrus would have it locked.

When it opens all the way, it's hard to see anything.

A little of the overhead closet light filters in, but as far as I can see, there isn't another switch to illuminate the small room.

I run downstairs to the kitchen where I know I'll find a flashlight and hurry back up to the closet. Shining the small stream of light into the room, I'm surprised to find it empty save a small shoe-sized box in the middle of the floor.

Curious.

Popping the lid off, I find a few trinkets inside. Nothing of monetary value, though, as far as I can tell. There are a few pictures of a young Cyrus and a pretty girl, also one of another girl who looks vaguely familiar to me, but that makes no sense. With a shake of the head, I continue to look, and I find a few letters.

I open the first and realize it isn't actually a letter, but a note or maybe a poem.

The handwriting is masculine and hard to read. The letters each appear to have been read hundreds of times. The paper worn, and the ink fading.

The next one I open has me furrowing my brow in confusion. It's a list of names. Some are scratched out, others untouched. Attached to another letter are news clippings talking about area homicides and missing persons.

Oh, God. Was this a hit list?

I continue to sift through the paper-clipped obituaries—most of which belong to well-known mobsters. Their deaths are not tragic in my opinion. The world is better off with them dead. They are horrible men who did horrible things to others.

I sort through the contents and find myself confused as to what the notes and clips have to do with the girl in the photos. Had one of these men done something to her? Why else would these things be put together in this empty, hidden room?

Behind the newspaper clippings is one more list. This one is different, though. This one doesn't have any scratched-out

names. No, this one is worse because it only has names of females. All my prior suspicions are thrown out the window after looking at this list. Maybe the last one was a hit list, but this one might be a list of conquests. My stomach tightens at the thought. A wave of irrational jealousy working its way through me. This is obviously where he keeps things he doesn't want me to find.

"Ivy?" Cyrus's voice calls, and I nearly jump out of my skin. He's back, and I'm snooping through his personal things.

I quickly shove the items back into the box, shut the door, and try desperately to replace everything back to where it was. My hands are shaking as I walk out of the closet. And I don't have enough time to get out of the room before Cyrus finds me.

His brows knit in confusion when he finds me in his room.

"What are you doing in here?" he asks.

He doesn't seem angry, just confused.

"I was bored," I admit. It isn't a lie.

"Are you snooping through my stuff?" He guesses accurately, standing in front of me. I have to crane my head to look at him.

I shrug at his question. I'm not sure what to say. There's no sense in lying because I'm basically caught. What did he expect me to do in this house all alone? Plus, I'm also not sure how I feel about this list. Who are these women?

"You missed me." His statement takes me off guard, and I realize I did.

The fear I had moments ago about being caught is replaced by something else. A warmth travels through my body at seeing him. My pulse picks up, and a smile spreads across my face. He winks at me, and I swear, it makes my knees weak and my brain mush.

"I did," I confess.

His smile turns to something closer to a smolder, and he moves toward me. It's like we're magnets being drawn to each

other. He moves toward me as I move toward him. There's no control over it. My body demands I get closer.

When we are a foot apart, Cyrus reaches out and pulls me to him. I sigh as I breathe him in. Spice and mint mixed with sandalwood. All male and so damn intoxicating.

“Ivy, I—”

I cut off his words when I lean up on my toes and run my hand down the side of his face. That's all it takes for him to close the distance between us. Our lips crash together, and we both groan in response.

My mouth opens to him, allowing his tongue to dominate me.

He can take what he wants. I'm his at this moment. His hands grip my hips, crushing me even farther against him. The hard length of his erection presses against my stomach, telling me what I already know. He wants this as badly as I do. His hands find the bottom of my shirt and are beginning to lift it when I finally snap to my senses.

I jump back, gasping for breath and red-faced as I try desperately to control my panting. I've allowed things to go too far.

I want it, but that doesn't mean it is the right thing to do. There are still so many unknowns where Cyrus is concerned. Including the list, I just found. What does it all mean?

What if I give myself to him, and he tires of me? What if he decides I can't go home?

Self-loathing seeps into me, making me question my every move. Have I lost my fucking mind? Despite how gorgeous Cyrus is, he is a kidnapper and God only knows what else.

“Ivy, look at me,” he demands, and I shake my head. “Get out of your head. You wanted that just as much as I did.”

“That's the thing, Cyrus. This isn't on you. I did this!” I yell. “I kissed you back because I wanted to.” Pulling on my hair, I groan in frustration. “What kind of an idiot am I?”

“Stop, Sun. Look at me,” Cyrus commands, and this time, I listen. “This isn’t wrong. We’re two adults capable of making decisions for ourselves. Get out of your head and let go. Just feel,” he says, pulling me to him again. His grip tight, face unyielding. “I’m going to kiss you again, and you’re going to let me.”

But instead, I allow my fears to win, and I push back. I run out of his room, down the stairs, and into the library.

My breath comes out in heavy pants as I fling myself in the chair to calm down.

I expect him to follow me, but he doesn’t.

He let me go.

Ivy

IT'S BEEN HOURS SINCE I EVADED HIM, AND HE STILL HASN'T found me. Or maybe he isn't even looking. A dizzy feeling hits me at that thought.

My hand reaches up to the shelf to grab a book to read. With him being here on the island with me, my time in the greenhouse hasn't been as much as I'd like, but thankfully, there is a fully stocked library to pass the time. Especially now that Cyrus brought new books.

It gives me something to do.

From behind me, I hear him first. The sound of his shoes hitting the marble beneath us. I don't want to look at him. I have tried my best to keep my distance. It's as if he's been summoned by my constant thoughts of him.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he says from behind me, and my back goes straight. "Why are you denying this?"

"Denying what?" I ask as I turn around to face him. He moves in closer, caging me in yet again.

"The last time we were here in this room, I left you unscathed. But this time ..."

"This time?"

"I won't because there is no denying us."

Words escape me. Like the Sahara Desert, my mouth is dry, parched, and I can't speak. Instead, I try to lull the rapid beat of my heart.

"The need we have for each other. I know you feel it. You felt it then, and you feel it now."

He steps forward again, and I step back again. It's like déjà vu, but a lifetime has passed.

I want to say I hate him, but that would be a lie.

Last time I was here, I said it, but even then, there was no conviction to my words, and now ...

He's not the man I thought he was.

I still don't know why.

But after he ran into the water and almost died for me, I can't deny that he believes he is protecting me. And there is no limit to what he will do.

I don't know what I'm being protected from or why, but I believe him.

He takes a step forward again, and this time, my butt touches the desk.

We've been here before, but last time, I tried to deny that he was right. My need for him is palpable and all-consuming, but as he's said before, he won.

"How can you pretend you don't feel it?" He steps forward just one step, but it's the last step before our bodies touch and his legs press against mine. "I can't pretend any longer." He reaches his hands out and touches my jaw. "I can't pretend that I don't want you. Because I do."

"I just—"

He lifts his hand to my mouth, silencing me. "Why do you need to talk constantly?" He smirks. "This is what you need to know. You need to know what my lips feel like as I kiss you." He leans forward, placing his mouth on mine.

His hands move to rest on my shoulders, and then he pushes me back until I'm leaning back on my elbows.

My breathing comes out in short bursts of air.

“Since the first time I laid eyes on you, all I’ve been thinking about is what you would taste like ...”

He leans in.

I move back. “Here.” His right hand reaches up, and then the rough pad of his thumb touches my lower lip. “But now that I’ve tasted you ... I want to know what you taste like here.” As he whispers his fingers lower to cup my face all while continuing to swirl soft patterns on my skin.

I shake my head. The thought of him devouring me is too much right now. I feel like a raging inferno.

“Is that what you want, Sun?”

“Stop calling me that. Unless you tell me why.”

“You don’t want me to taste you here?” He kisses my jaw ignoring my plea. “What about here?” He kisses the hollow of my neck. “What about here?” He lifts his face away from me, and his eyes darken. There is no iris at all now, just the pupil. “Do you want that?” He lowers his head. “Do you?”

“We can’t,” I whisper. “You kidnapped me. I don’t want you,” I say, but there is no conviction in my words. His jaw tightens, and then I feel his hands trying to pull my legs apart.

“Are you sure about that?”

I nod.

“How about I check to see if you’re lying?” His eyes light up with mischief because both of us know what he’ll find. My face warms as I feel his fingers press gently against my core.

“Admit you want me. Admit you want this.”

Then his hand is cupping me.

I watch as his lip tips up. “Tell me.”

“I want you ...” My voice is low, and he lifts his eyebrow.

“Louder.” He begins to rub on the bundle of nerves hidden beneath my leggings.

When I don't answer, his pace increases, the pressure getting harder and harder, and I can feel myself losing the battle of wills.

"Say it again."

"I want you!" I shout this time because there is no denying it. I want him. I'm desperate for him.

I need him.

"Then you'll have me."

I expect him to undress. To pull my legs apart and fuck me on the desk. Instead, he gets down on his knees.

"W-What are you doing?" I stutter.

"Tasting you." The cold air hits my legs, and that's when I notice he's pulling off my pants. "Tasting your lies."

Once I'm bare before him, he spreads my legs wide.

It's agonizing torture as I wait.

Then I feel it. The first swipe of his tongue against my skin.

A sigh escapes my mouth, or maybe a groan. I can't hear over the sound of my pounding heart.

He tastes me. Devours me. Feeds off my essence. A man in a drought. Parched and desperate.

He drinks me up as if I'm what he needs to live.

He consumes me with each swipe of the tongue until a wave builds inside me and I'm crashing against the earth.

I open my eyes to find him staring down at me. He lifts his hand and wipes away the remnants from his lips. Then he lowers his head, pressing his lips to mine and letting me taste my lie. I'm not sure what I expect next, but it's not for him to take a step back.

"What are you doing?" I ask, and he smiles. "I thought ..."
I trail off.

"You thought I would fuck you?" I don't answer his question, my face warming at the conversation. "I will fuck

you. But not here and not like this.”

“Then like what?”

“When you are begging me.”

He touches his finger to my head. “You are still fighting this right here, and until you let go, until you are ready to ask for it, beg for it, I won’t fuck you. Taste you ...” He kisses me again. “But not fuck you. When you are ready, you will come to me.”

And then like that, I’m left alone again, on his desk, needy and desperate for Cyrus Reed.

Cyrus

FUCK ME ... I CAN STILL TASTE HER ON MY LIPS.

Still feel her coming apart on my tongue. It took everything in my power to walk away, but I had to.

This needs to be her decision and not when she's floating off the high of coming on my face.

I'm an asshole, but I'm not that big of an asshole. I take, but never like that. So, as much as my dick hates me right now, my brain knows I did the right thing.

A criminal with a conscience. Oh, the fucking irony.

I'm in my room, staring out the window like a love-sick fool.

I should call Z and have him bring the boat around. The weather isn't bad right now, and who knows how long it will last.

They're calling for another storm this weekend. As much as I'm needed back at the main estate, I can't fathom leaving Ivy all by herself.

She asked me again why I call her Sun.

The words were on the tip of my tongue to tell her, but when I tasted her, I realized how far from the truth it was.

So instead, I diverted the question yet again by licking her with abandon.

She came apart in front of me, the way a flower finally opens her petals when it blooms.

Erotic, sensual, a sight I will always remember even long after.

Her cheeks are a warm shade of pink as she comes down from her high, fueling the need inside me.

My cock grows hard in my pants, and I know without a measure of a doubt that I'll have to finish myself off in the bathroom.

With an exhale, I walk toward the shower and turn on the water.

The scalding hot water will only fuel the heat inside me, but I have no other choice. If I go to her now ...

I won't see her until I'm sated.

Standing under the hot water, I desperately need to find my release. Watching her come has me ready to ignite.

The pent-up need is unrivaled.

Closing my eyes, I fist myself in my hands and imagine what it will feel like when she finally gives in and admits she wants me the way I want her.

I imagine what it would feel like to thrust in and out of her. Dragging myself through her heat.

With my dick in my hand, I grip myself tightly in my palm.

Pulling from root to tip, slowly, I fuck my hand.

I tighten my grip. My hips rock up. My back goes rigid as I chase my high.

It's building. I can feel the end is near.

The sound of the shower door opening pulls me out of my haze.

"What are you doing in here?" I growl.

Her lip tucks in between her teeth.

Gone is the self-assured Ivy. She's nervous, and she should be. Once she says the words, I will ruin her.

I will take her. She'll be mine. I'll consume her.

"I want you," she whispers.

"Are you sure?"

She nods. Still timid. Still scared.

I don't know what demons she battled on her way in here, but I'm not sure it's enough.

"No," I respond, and I hate myself for being the man that I am right now. I should fucking say yes, grab her, and pound her into the shower tile. Instead, I turn off the shower and grab the towel and head out the door.

"Where are you going?" she asks quickly as she follows me into my bedroom, and I turn to face her.

"I will not fuck you like this."

"Like what?"

"Unsure." I move toward the cabinet to grab clothes. With my back toward her, I rifle through the shirts. I can hear her steps behind me. Then I feel her hand on my back. My spine straightens, willing myself not to let loose a beast and grab her.

Let her come to you, the voice in my head says.

The voice that stops me when I know I will go too far.

You need her to come to you.

"Cyrus," she says, and I don't respond. Instead, my lungs expand with an inhale. "Turn around," I hear from behind me. Her voice is not weak this time. It sounds like the Ivy who's been fighting this attraction between us has finally gotten the memo: this will happen. I turn around as she's asked and look at her. "I want you."

Narrowing my eyes, I study her. Her chest heaves as her breath comes out heavy, and her pupils are dilated as she licks

her lips. There is no questioning it this time. It's written all over her features. She wants this. But I'm a dick and saying it isn't enough.

“Prove it.” I smirk.

Then she drops to her knees.

Thank fuck.

Ivy

I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAS COME OVER ME, BUT THE FACT THAT he rejected me and walked away was too much to handle. I sat in the room for what seemed like forever, but really was only a few minutes before my brain finally caught up to what was happening.

I needed him.

Yet when I found him in the shower, pleasuring himself, that's when I knew what I needed to do.

As much as I wanted him, though, I'm not the best with men, and apparently, it showed through with my indecision or shyness. It's funny how bold I can be in certain aspects, but with men, not so much.

Now, I kneel in front of him, and as he looks down at me, the only thing I can imagine is what he will taste like.

What he will sound like when I drive him as crazy as he drove me.

It makes me feel bold with need, so I grab the towel around his waist, pull it down, and meet his eyes.

The look he's giving me is enough for me to combust. It makes me feel like a flower as the first ray of sunlight in the morning hits it. I want to reach for him and show him what he does to me, so I do.

I make sure not to be tentative. There is no way I'm letting him reject me again.

When I take him in my hand, I don't give him a second to think or say anything. Instead, I pump my hand up and down, and then lean forward and place the tip in my mouth. A groan of satisfaction is enough to urge me on.

My feelings of desire and the need to bring him to his knees consume me. With every moan that he expels, I feel bolder. Placing him fully in my mouth, I devour him. His hands find purchase in my hair, tugging lightly as he finds his release.

I love the way it feels.

I love the power I possess *over him*.

It's nothing I have ever felt before.

Before I know it, he's pulling me off him.

"I need to be inside you," he grunts before picking me up under my arms and throwing me down on his bed. I watch through hooded lids as he prowls over to the bedside table and grabs a condom.

He rolls it on slowly and then stalks to me, grabbing my legs and pulling off my leggings in one move.

"Shirt. Off."

I scramble to remove it, and then I'm lying on my back fully naked before him.

"I'd taste you again, but I can't wait. Open your legs for me, Sun."

I shake my head and do as he commands.

He crawls up my body, aligning us, and then I feel him at my entrance. With one quick thrust, he's inside. I let out a gasp at the sudden movement.

Nothing happens for a moment. We breathe together as he allows me to adjust.

Looking up at him, I nod, and then he moves inside me. He lowers his mouth to mine as he starts to fuck me, brushing our lips together. I open, and he swipes his tongue. Before long, he's kissing me at a frantic clip, plunging his tongue into my mouth. He tells me with his body and mouth how much he wants me.

He gives me exactly what I want and need. Moving at a delicious pace, he slowly drags himself in and out.

When he goes to leave my body yet again, I wrap my legs around him, pulling him back in.

He lets out a hearty laugh. A laugh I have never heard leave his lips before.

I love the sound.

With that, he pumps faster.

I claw at his back, pulling him closer.

He thrusts harder.

Faster.

In. Out. In. Out.

Slowly dragging me over a cliff. No, more like throwing me. My breathing becomes frantic, and I'm so close, but just not close enough.

"More," I pant. "Need. More."

He answers my pleas by placing a finger where I need him most. I'm so close. He presses harder and firmer against me, swiveling his hips and picking up his pace.

The building feeling spreads through my body.

My heart beats faster as I climb toward my release.

He must be close too, because his movements become more erratic.

Together, we fall over the edge.

"Fuck," he grunts as he twitches inside me.

We stay entwined in each other's arms for a few more minutes, allowing our breathing to regulate.

When we both calm, he pushes off me, and I miss his weight immediately. But at least the view is good as he leaves. His ass looks amazing as he walks into the bathroom, and I stare in awe. A second later, I hear the same chuckle.

“Did I ruin you?” he asks playfully.

“Was that what you were trying to do?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Ruin me for what?”

“Everyone. I want to ruin you for everyone but me.” He crawls back onto the bed, and this time, he has a towel in his hand.

When he cleans me, I all but die at the surrounding intimacy.

Yes, I healed him, and I saw him at his weakest, but this feels like so much more. Cocking his head, he stares at me before he gets back off the bed to dispose of the towel. I stand and move to leave the room.

I know we just had amazing sex, but I'm not sure what that means.

“Where are you going?” he asks from behind me.

I stop my movements and look back at him. Still naked. My heart flutters behind my breastbone.

“In the bed now. Keep the clothes off. I'm not nearly done with you.”

Wide-eyed, I obey, dropping my clothes and getting back into the bed.

There I let him keep me up all night long. He shows me over and over again just how much he wants me, and I let him.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG WE LIE IN BED. CYRUS DRAWS SOFT circles on my back. It's the next day. I don't think either of us slept. Well, I know I didn't. My mind was racing too much.

Too many questions run through my brain. It's like a never-ending stream of consciousness. A loop on repeat. It's like a damn kid's train on a track that keeps going and going.

I need it to stop, but the only way to do that is to grow a pair of balls, which, for obvious reasons, I don't have.

I want to ask him.

But something stops me. Something makes the words die on my tongue.

"You're thinking too hard." He stops his movements and places his hand on my shoulders to turn me around.

Now facing him, he looks down at me. He's up on his elbows with his brow furrowed.

"What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?"

When I say nothing, his jaw tightens. "I'm not ready to tell you," he says, knowing what I want to ask.

"I thought I wasn't ready to hear."

He leans forward and places a kiss on my lips.

"I'm not sure you are, but right now, I'm not either." His admission makes my heart flutter like the wings of a hummingbird. It's flying fast, but I need to hold it back. I need to put it back in the cage.

"Why?"

"Because if I tell you, you'll be upset and then you won't let me touch you, and I really want to fucking touch you right now."

"You are touching me." I raise a brow.

His hand reaches under the blanket. "Not there, Sun."

"Cyrus," I say, but it comes out as a pant as he runs his fingers over my sensitive nipples.

"Sun?"

“Stop trying to distract me.”

“Cyrus.” I move my hands to stop him. His hand is now on my lower abdomen. “Please.”

“I will.” *Lower.* “Just let me have you a bit longer before you ruin it.” His hand travels lower.

“How long?” I pant.

“As long as it takes me to get my fill.”

“That’s not an answer,” I say. My breath hitches as he parts my legs and teases me.

“It’s the only answer you are going to get. Now shut up and let me in.”

I part my legs farther and do. His mouth finds mine, and he silences me.

When we come up for air sometime later, the questions still weigh heavy in my mind, but I know he’s right.

Talking about the kidnapping is an inevitable thing, but once we breach that topic, everything will change.

No matter what he says, he’s a criminal.

I have allowed the haze of my desire to cloud my judgment. Once I hear it, once we talk about it, I will have to stop pretending I’m living in a bubble where Cyrus and I can make love and nothing else matters.

Since I’m not ready for it to end yet, I table the conversation.

Denial is a wicked thing, but since he’s the devil himself, I might as well indulge for a little longer.

I MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP BECAUSE WHEN I OPEN MY EYES Cyrus is not in bed, so I stand, grab his discarded shirt, and head out to look for him.

I wonder how much longer he’ll stay.

Does he have to head out?

My footsteps echo through the quiet of the house, and I find him in the kitchen.

He's cooking.

It's crazy to see him.

Most of the times he came to see me, prior to when he was hurt, he was always in a three-piece suit, but now he's in sweats. They may be fancy sweats, but they're sweats all the same.

He's wearing no shirt, and his rock-hard and cut abdomen is on full display.

He must hear me because he lifts his gaze.

Even though he's cooking, he still appears deep in thought.

I wonder if he ever really lets go.

Sometimes he does.

For me, he laughs, smiles, jokes.

I wonder if he does those things for anyone else?

When he does these things, it's like seeing a whole different side of him. That's what warmed my heart toward him. The secret side, the real side, he doesn't share. Each laugh thawed the once icy feelings I had toward him.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I step into the kitchen.

He lifts a brow. "I mean other than cooking yourself breakfast." I laugh because my question really was stupid.

"I'm making *you* breakfast," he answers with a shrug.

My mouth drops open at what he just said. Did he really wake up early to make me food? It seems so out of place. Or does it? Maybe in the beginning, but recently, he's been caring and thoughtful. Still, it feels strangely domestic and out of character ...

"You are?" I question.

“Yes. I am. Now sit down.”

I stroll over to the table and take a seat. *In my spot.* Another thing that’s odd. How can I refer to this seat as mine? It’s crazy how I now consider this my spot. These thoughts shouldn’t be in my mind, but regardless, they are. I feel comfortable here—on this island, in this house—with him.

Cyrus is quietly cooking. Cerberus is eating from his automatic feeder on the floor. It’s oddly quiet right now. A part of me expected small talk to be made, but apparently not.

It seems that even after sex, he’s back to being his grumpy self, but I think that’s just who he is. Grumpy. Gruff. Isolated.

I know he doesn’t leave his main estate unless he has to. I wonder why?

I wonder what happened to make him this way.

A few minutes later, he places the plate in front of me, and I look down to see eggs and toast.

Simple. Like him. Lifting the fork, I take a bite. It’s surprisingly good.

“Are you going to eat?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Do you not eat?” I know he does since he ate when he was hurt, and when we had dinner together before I tried to escape but maybe that was just to appease me.

There is so much I don’t know about this man.

Other than the obvious.

“What’s going on, Sun?” He inhales deeply, placing a mug of coffee down in front of him.

His features have darkened. It’s as if a cloud has formed around him. Hovering close.

A storm is brewing. Not just in the room, but outside. The sound of thunder makes me shake.

“It’s going to rain,” I say, looking out the window.

“It will be over soon.”

I turn back to Cyrus, but he's not looking outside. He's watching me.

It's strange to have someone watch me so intently. I'm not used to it. As much as I like the attention from Cyrus, I also feel like a zoo animal on display. Maybe if there were no secrets between us, I wouldn't feel this way. Or maybe I would feel worse. Once I know the truth, it will hang over us, casting a shadow of darkness and doubt. I shudder inwardly at that thought. I don't want this to end or change.

"I want to know things, but I'm not ready yet."

He nods.

"But that doesn't mean I don't want to get to know you. I might not ask the whys yet, but before I do, before everything changes, I just want to know you."

He stands, charging me, lifting me up from my breakfast.

His mouth attacking mine.

"All you need to know is this." He devours my mouth. "This." *Kiss*. "Is all I'm willing to tell you now." He kisses me again. His tongue attacks mine. Then I hear the dishes hitting the floor, and I'm lifted onto the table.

And before I can object, my legs are parted open, and he descends.

Cyrus

JUST AS PREDICTED, ANOTHER STORM ROLLS BY. THIS TIME, bringing fierce rain. It's officially spring, and we have crappy rainy weather to prove it.

I have business to attend to and going back to the mainland isn't something I want to do now. The weather is a perfect excuse to stay. I haven't had my fill of Ivy, and until I do, I hope the weather doesn't turn.

Picking up my phone, I make my way into the office and call Z.

"Boss," he answers.

"I will not be needing the boat today."

"You won't ...?" He trails off. The way he draws out the word makes an implication of why.

"No." I know he wants to ask, but he won't. Although he is the closest thing I have to a friend, we don't talk about women.

Actually, that's not true. We just haven't talked about one for a long time.

"Anything I should know, boss?"

"No," I say sterner than I mean. We are not females, and we will not be gossiping.

“What about the meeting with Mathis?”

Mathis is one of my clients. He runs all sorts of illegal businesses here and in Europe. According to the United States government, he owns nightclubs, hence the large sums of cash that I clean for him and hold in my bank. The truth is, he is a club owner, but his money comes from all sorts of shit he has his hands on. Including distributing a hefty portion of Tobias’s cocaine.

“He wants to meet next week.”

“Do I have any other meetings this week?” I ask.

“Not that I’m aware of. Oh, wait, Alaric. Maybe Tobias as well. I’ll have to check and get back with you,” he says.

“Very well. What about the game, who’s playing?”

“So far, it’s the usual suspects ... a few trustees.”

I start to pace the length of my office. “Trent?” He better not be, not after everything I’ve done.

I hardly think he would appreciate knowing I’ve fucked his sister while I’m supposed to be protecting her.

“Nope. He hasn’t been back since you spoke with him.”

“Good.”

I’m happy he hasn’t pressed the issue. I’m still not happy I have to deal with it, but as long as he’s not making it worse, Ivy will be okay. *Safe and sound in my bed.*

Once I have my fill, I’ll decide what to do with her. Trent is gathering the money to pay Boris. Once that’s done, she can go back to her life.

A pit forms in my stomach at the thought of letting her go. She was never supposed to stay. She is a means to an end. Walking over to the chair in my office, I plop myself down and lift my hand to rub my temples. A headache is forming just thinking about this shit. “And Boris? Any word on that front yet?”

The line is silent, and I look down to make sure the call hasn’t dropped due to the impending weather.

“Still putting feelers out.”

I don't like this. No one should be this hard to find. It never bodes well. Usually, it means war is coming.

“The Russians have been too quiet. Do they know I have her?”

“Doubtful,” he answers, but I wonder if that's true. The lack of control I have over this matter is infuriating. Taking back the reins is the only way this is going to work, but how?

If they find out I have her, I'll be fighting two fronts. I need to find leverage on them and ultimately bait them, but until I have what I need, I need to lie low and come up with a foolproof plan.

Z has one, but I'm not willing to go down that route. At least not yet.

“It wasn't supposed to happen this way,” I say on a sigh. Because it wasn't. None of it.

“I know.”

I look toward the door. Ivy is now standing there, her blond hair flowing down her shoulders.

“I have to go.”

“When should I come back for you?” Z asks.

“After the storm,” I say. After the storm, another will brew, but this one will be different. This one, I'll use to my advantage.

I hang up the phone, and Ivy's nose is scrunched. I'm not sure how much she heard.

“Everything okay?” she asks as she takes a step into the room.

I nod.

“If you want to talk about it ...” she starts, but the idea of unburdening on the woman I've kidnapped sounds ridiculous.

I shake my head.

“Are you leaving again?”

I stand from my chair and walk toward her. Leaning down, I place a kiss on her lips. “No. Not yet.”

Pulling away, I take her hand in mine. It looks so small. “There’s a storm rolling in. You’re stuck with me for a few more days.”

She nods silently. I wonder if she’s happy or sad about that fact.

I don’t ask because I don’t want to know. Soon, this will be over, and she’ll be gone. Once again, the light will go out. But until then, I plan to bask in her warmth.

I start to lead her out of the room.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

Instead of answering, I pull her beside me and tuck her under my arm. Then together we walk to the great room.

With large windows that face the outside, the clouds looming in the distance are present.

“Sit,” I say before heading across the room.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I’m going to start a fire for us,” I say over my shoulder as I head where the logs are in the corner of the room.

“And then what?”

I stop and look over my shoulder toward her.

“Are we going to talk?” I hear the apprehension in her voice.

Turning back around, I grab a log and then prepare a fire. I was never a Boy Scout, but I still taught myself how to build a fire. A trait I learned as a child to warm my house whenever my father forgot to pay the heat.

The question still lingers in the air when I’m sitting beside her a few minutes later.

Her chin is tucked down as she stares at the fire that has started to take life.

“Soon, okay?”

She looks up, her eyes large. “Really?”

“Yes. With the storm coming, I don’t want the truth hanging over us too. Once it passes.”

She nods her head in understanding.

We both go quiet then, both staring into the flames, lost in our own thoughts. I try to find a solution to the problem dangling above my head. What to do with Ivy once the truth is out and what to do with the Russians.

I’m not sure where she is mentally, but I can see little lines have formed between her brows.

Finally, after what seems like forever has passed, she turns to me, cocking her head.

“Tell me about yourself?”

Her question takes me off guard, but I’m not sure why. It’s not like we’ve never spoken, but a part of me expected her to ask me about the reason I took her again.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“That’s a vague question, Sun.”

She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. There is a mischievous twinkle in her eye. This should be interesting.

“Spit it out. Whatever you’re going to ask.” My lips tip up into a smirk. “But no promises I’ll answer.”

“Why are there chains in the basement?”

“It’s cute that you think I’m going to answer that.” I laugh. She’d hate me if she knew.

“Come on, just tell me.”

I grow quiet, trying to think of an evasive answer to this question. No wonder Ivy is wearing a shit-eating grin. All the times when we played questions and answers over food, I was able to sidestep all her questions, but this one won’t be as easy.

There is no plausible answer other than the truth that would do. But I can't tell her the truth.

That I have chains in the basement because in order to become the banker to the underworld, I had to become the monster my competition was and take anyone down who got in my way. I can't tell her that in order to get the contacts I needed to have men like Alaric on my Rolodex, I needed to lie, steal, and apparently torture. Nope. That won't be my answer. Leaning closer to her, I place my hands on her face, tilt her head back to expose her neck, and then kiss the pulse that thumps heavily beneath my touch.

“They came with the house.”

“Seriously, you won't answer.” She lets out a puff of air. “Fine. But I'm not done asking questions.”

Ivy

I EXPECT HIM TO SAY NO AFTER MY LAST QUESTION. TO BE honest, I expect him to actually stand from the couch and leave. I'm just barely scratching the surface of who he is, so to put him on the spot like that ...

The thing is, ever since we both finally gave in to our desires, I want to know more about him.

But I don't just want to know what his part in my life is. I want to know everything.

Most people would think I'm crazy. Hell, half the time, I think I'm crazy. The man kidnapped me, for fuck's sake. But for some reason—and the reasons elude me completely—when he said he was protecting me, I believed him.

I still do.

Cyrus Reed might be a cold man. He might also be the villain in most people's stories. Heck, he could even end up being the villain in my story, but I'm not afraid of him.

I shouldn't think he wants to help me after everything, but I do.

Some people might look at me and think I'm a foregone conclusion, a weak woman with a weak mind who fell for her captor, but I think it's the opposite. I know what I feel, and Cyrus isn't the bad guy.

Yes, he might act that way sometimes, but I also know what I see when I look into his eyes, and that is a protector.

He wouldn't hurt me.

I know the truth still hovers over us, and once I find out, it will surely change things, so that's why I don't press. Because like him, right now, I'd prefer to live in this fantasy bubble just a little while longer.

That doesn't mean I don't want to know more, and being stranded on an island alone with this man is the perfect excuse.

"Or we don't have to talk at all," he offers up gruffly.

I tilt my head in his direction, allowing my left brow to lift. "We aren't having sex again."

If Cyrus Reed could pout, he would, but since that's not on his list of facial expressions, I have to assume by the way he furrows his brow that he doesn't agree.

"Talk first, sex later?" I suggest with a raise of my shoulders.

He studies me for a minute in full thought before he nods his head. A man of many words.

"By agreeing to my terms, you will answer anything?" I joke.

"No. I will answer what I want."

"You aren't very fun."

"You're wasting your chance. Goad me, and I'll have you on your knees. That will shut you up."

I lift my hand up in the air. "Fine. Fine. Jeez. You're no fun."

Cocking my head, I look at him and try to decide how to use this opportunity. I need to ask him questions, but at the same time, I don't want to ruin the remainder of the time we have together.

“Do you watch TV?” I ask. His brown eyes widen, and it makes me laugh. Yep. That was not what he was expecting. “See? No questions about chains.” I wink.

“No.”

Now that answer I was expecting.

“Why do you ask?”

“You’re so serious. I can’t imagine you lying in front of a TV and being able to rest.”

“I rest.”

“No ... you don’t.”

He doesn’t say anything for a minute, and then he inclines his head. “You’re right. I don’t.” His hand lifts, and he runs it through his hair. “The first time I have rested in years is here with you.”

“That hardly counts,” I respond, rolling my eyes.

“Of course, it counts.”

“You were dying.” I throw my hand up in the air dramatically. He scoffs at my display.

“First of all, I was not dying. Second, if I’m not working, I’m resting.”

“And what is it you actually do, Cyrus?” I cock my head to the side and raise a brow with a full smirk lining my face. I’m teasing him, goading him.

“You know this. I run a bank.” He looks bored by my line of questions.

“There has to be more than that,” I say.

Because no way does it make sense. Why would a billionaire banker want me? That’s not to say I’m not good enough for him, but I have always known there is more.

People talk about Cyrus Reed in passing. At least Trent does. It’s as if he’s a legend.

“I hold a very exclusive and private poker game.” He shrugs.

“More.”

“The rest I can’t tell you.”

“Or what? You will have to kill me,” I joke, but the moment the words leave my lips, I realize just how not funny they are.

He surprises me when he takes my hands in his and lifts them to his mouth. A kiss is placed on each knuckle. The move is slow, soft, and completely out of character. “I would never hurt you, Sun.”

“Why Sun? You told me it’s not because of my sunny personality, so then why?”

“As I’m sure you know, I speak many languages. When I first saw you, spoke to you, you were like a poison that seeped into my veins. I knew you would be bad for me. So, I called you Sun.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Sun means poison in Somali. But that isn’t why I call you Sun now.”

“You called me Sun ’cause I’m poison.”

“Yes, Ivy. When I first met you, you were like poison ivy that creeps into your skin, burning you. But over time, and as you took care of me, it changed.”

“And now why do you call me Sun?”

“Because you brighten my dark world. You make me feel like maybe ...”

“Like maybe?” I beg him to continue, but instead, he stops, then stands and pulls on my arms.

“What are you doing?” I ask, confused by his change of topic.

“Taking you outside.” He starts to walk, still holding on to me.

“It’s raining,” I whine.

“And you say I’m no fun,” he jokes, and his playful voice warms my heart.

“You want to go outside and what, dance in the rain?” I stop walking and so does he, looking back. His face serious.

“No, I want to go outside and fuck you in the rain.”

Holy.

Yes. Please.

But then I let my lip tip up. “Dance first, play later.” And then I take off, knowing full well he will follow.

I run as fast as I can into the greenhouse, grabbing the supplies I need. I know Cyrus doesn’t like me being in here, but I want to do this, so I will.

Grabbing a tarp, I head back to where I left him and then walk toward the outdoors.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his footsteps sounding from behind me.

I’m at the front door now.

“Why are you holding a tarp?”

“Wait and see.”

“Ivy.”

“Not Sun? Am I not brightening your day?” I waggle my brows at him. He just shakes his head like he doesn’t know what to do with me. “I have cabin fever. You mentioned going outside, so I’m taking you up on your offer.”

“And doing what with the tarp? Going fishing?”

I roll my eyes at him and continue my trek. “Hardly. What fun would that be?” I ask before stopping again to make sure he’s following. When he doesn’t move closer, I furrow my brow. “Were you ever fun?”

He stares at me blankly.

“Okay, better question. Were you ever a kid?” It’s a dumb question. Of course, he was a kid, but I wonder if he ever was different. Or has he always been this way? I’ve seen him let

loose and relax, but more often than not, he's uptight and angry.

Again, his expression doesn't change. However, his jaw tightens, and I file that away. Cyrus doesn't want to think about his childhood.

I push the thought away before I take a step outside, tarp in hand.

"Come on, when I was searching for an escape off the island, I found a smaller hill to the beach."

"And ...?"

"I thought we could make a slip and slide."

When he says nothing, I go on. "Like when you were a kid. Okay, fine, maybe not when *you* were a kid, but when I was. When we were younger, we used to live by Central Park. When the weather was like this, Trent and I would grab one of Mom's tarps, and we would go to Central Park and slide down it."

He doesn't look at all amused. "We didn't have a lot of toys. Dad thought they were beneath us. There was a time when he was present. When he would laugh and play with us ... but that stopped when I was around ten. But Mom ... she used to come with us, help us."

I let out a small sigh.

"Do you miss her?" His voice is softer than normal. Filled with compassion, I don't often hear that in his tone.

"Yes." I nod. "Trent too."

"And your father?" This time, there is no mistaking the bite to his words; he doesn't like my dad. I'm still not sure why, though. It doesn't make sense, but maybe as a man, he thinks my dad should have protected me from him. He's right. He should have.

"No," I answer truthfully.

He nods as if he understands.

“Soon,” he says, and I’m not exactly sure what that means. Will I be going home soon? Is it safe for me? He still hasn’t even explained what wasn’t safe, so I don’t understand. I give him a small smile. I don’t want to go there now. No. Now I want to have fun because I know everything will change soon.

“My mom used to hold down the top end.” I continue to walk toward the hill through the path of trees until we’re almost at the beach.

Most of the hills are too steep, but this one will be perfect. Here, the land isn’t too high, but it’s high enough to gather water.

“Come on. I won’t bite,” I joke, and his dark eyes get even darker if that is even possible.

I think that’s exactly what he wants me to do, but we have been playing by his rules today. In the rain, we will play by mine.

The wind is starting to pick up. Small raindrops fall from the sky, and my hair clings to my forehead.

Soon the storm will come, but for now, it coats the tarp as we wait.

It doesn’t take long. With each passing moment, more rain falls from the sky until the tarp has a constant stream. I’m happy it’s warmer today because if it wasn’t, the rain would feel like little needles against my skin. Luck was in my favor because I couldn’t stay inside another second.

I love the fresh air.

Even with rain, I can smell it. Spring.

Tilting my head back, I allow the water to drip down my face and off my nose, and then I look down. Cyrus is leaning over, holding my tarp, and I smile at him before I step up to where he is and slide down.

I close my eyes.

And right now, I’m not on an island.

No. Right now, I'm a little girl whose mother pushes her to be different, to be herself, and to be whoever she wants to be.

I haven't done this since my mom became the shell, but doing it now, even with Cyrus, makes me feel closer to her.

When I'm at the bottom of the hill, I look up to see Cyrus standing there. He's still dressed casually, but that's not what does me in. It's how he looks so large on the hill, more than life. Like a god.

He looked that way the first time I saw him too, but now I know the man.

He once reminded me of Hades, the god of the underworld.

He still does, but now I think Hades was misunderstood.

When I walk back up to where he was standing, I lift my hand. "You're next."

"No."

"Come on, live a little."

He stands firm, looking at the slide like it's beneath him. I take his hand in mine. "With me. Together."

I know he wants to say no, but I don't let him. I grab him and pull him to the ground. I know his clothes will be muddy, but so will mine.

"Please." I look at him through the pellets of water cascading down my cheek.

He nods, pulling me into his arms and placing me on his lap. Then he pushes off. Mud is everywhere.

Rain starts to pound down on us, and we go.

As I try to close my eyes, Cyrus tightens his arms around me, keeping me steady.

Laughter breaks against the wind, spilling out of my mouth, but as we make our descent, I realize I'm not the only one laughing, and it warms every part of me.

Before long, we are on the edge of the tarp. I'm still in his arms when he turns me to look at him.

Gone is the smile.

Gone is the laugh.

All that I see are lust, desire, and most of all need.

Ivy

THE DAYS HAVE PASSED. THE STORM A DISTANT MEMORY. I know it's time for Cyrus to leave once again.

I should be happy, but I'm not. The time we have spent together has actually been some of the best of my life. I don't even know how that has happened.

How that can be true.

I should hate him. But as much as I know I should, I can't help the way I feel, and I can't help the simple truth: I believe him when he said he was protecting me.

But from what?

Am I ready to ask, and the better question, is he ready to tell?

No. I'm not ready yet.

Instead, I enjoy the time we have left. Like now, in his arms.

I think this is my new favorite place to be.

It's crazy how only a few weeks ago I would never have said that. Hell, a month ago, I would have kicked him and ran ... okay, swam for my life.

Life changes so fast, but the more I get to know Cyrus, the more I truly see his real self.

To some, he might be the bad guy, but he's no monster to me.

Rather, he's the guy I have come to trust.

Right now, his arm is wrapped around me as we sit together in the den, staring at a fire Cyrus started. It's something we have been doing every day together, that and chess. It's nice to have, even though it's not that cold, but the fire gives an intimate feel I love.

The nice thing about being with him is we don't have to talk. Neither one of us needs that to fill the silence.

Instead, he strokes my arm with his hand, and I close my eyes. His movements are slow and leisurely, as though he has all the time in the world.

"That feels good."

"Mmm," he responds.

I open my eyes and tilt my head up from where I am in his arms. I can't see his features, but I can tell he is looking toward the fireplace in the center of the room.

For a moment, I watch also, mesmerized by the red sparks bursting up from the wood. Time stands still at that moment as the fire flickers.

A sound has me looking in the other direction. When I see who is watching me, an involuntary shiver runs up my spine.

Z.

His right-hand man.

But it's not his presence that has me feeling like this; it's the look in his eyes. The darkness that lives behind them.

"Are you cold?" Cyrus says from beside me, wrapping his arms tighter around me. A part of me wants to close my eyes and not let this man come into the bubble Cyrus and I have created, but I can't. Something tells me Z wouldn't let me.

I shake my head before saying, "No."

At my one-word answer, Cyrus removes his arm and looks over his shoulder.

“Z. Why are you here?” The bellow of his voice reverberates through my body.

“I came to check on you,” Z responds as I pull away from Cyrus’s grip and move to stand.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Cyrus places a kiss on my shoulder, halting my retreat.

“I’ll give you guys a minute.” I force myself to smile over my shoulder at Cyrus, who seems appeased by this.

“Very well,” he answers.

I stand, straightening my shirt, and start to walk out of the room.

As I pass Z, I note the look of disdain in his eyes. Why the animosity? I’m not sure, but I don’t care to find out.

Whatever issue he has with me, he can take up with his boss.

Instead, I head in the direction of the greenhouse.

With Cyrus preoccupied, it’s the perfect time to water the plants.

Doing that always calms me and makes me feel better, and after the way Z looked at me, it’s exactly what I need.

Cyrus

I PUSH UP TO STAND AND WALK OVER TO Z. MY FACE IS unreadable as per usual. Stone cold. Calculated. Angry. With Ivy, my walls come down, but now that I am standing in front of one of my men, I need to right that shit.

The surest way to lose everything is for someone to underestimate me and try to take what's mine.

Z wouldn't do that. He's been with me way too long. He knows the consequences for crossing me, but one can never be complacent. Not even with your most loyal and trusted.

"What are you doing here?" My voice leaves no question of how I feel about the interruption. I'm not happy, and he needs to give me a damn good reason.

"I came to make sure you were okay," he responds.

Not a good answer. I narrow my eyes at him before responding, "Now that you have, you can leave."

He's been dismissed, but surprisingly, he doesn't go.

Instead, Z looks toward the fireplace. I follow his line of vision. I watch as the wood cracks and explodes under the mantel, burning fast. It reminds me a little about Ivy and me. It's not just the fire, though; Z coming here also reminds me how this is temporary.

Soon, she'll ask me the question that will change everything.

Then like a log that burns into the night, we too shall burn away and be left with only ash.

I wish it didn't have to be this way.

Truly, I do.

But it will.

I took her. No matter what happens, nothing will change that.

Not how I feel. Not how I act.

Time is limited. We are mere grains of sand running through an hourglass, and soon, it will run out.

At least until she speaks, until she asks the questions I don't want her to, we can pretend, but Z being here will impede on that.

"You missed a meeting." He finally speaks up, and that has me lifting my gaze to meet his.

"With?"

"Alaric. I handled it. But I shouldn't have to. While you're here playing house, you have forgotten what's important."

Anger rises inside me like a dormant volcano ready to erupt. "And what is that, Z?"

"Your clients. Your business. Taking down the organization. Bringing people to their knees."

"Not that I need to answer to you, but that is exactly what I'm doing."

"It looks like you're pussy whipped," he mumbles under his breath, low enough that he doesn't think I can hear. But he's underestimated me. I hear everything. Know everything. I might as well be a fucking god.

Before he can even fathom what I'm doing, I have him in a headlock.

“I understand what this means to you, so that is why, this one time, I will give you a pass. But know, I’m not weak for making this choice. Question my authority again, and I will kill you. No matter our past, I will snap your neck.”

I remove my hands from his body and step back. Z lowers his head.

“I’m sorry I overstepped.” He looks defeated as the words leave his mouth.

I nod. “Was there anything else you needed before you leave the island?”

“Boss,” he says.

“*Boss*. So you remember your place after all.” I narrow my eyes at him, and at least he has the decency to appear remorseful for speaking out of turn. “Speak. Tell me what you wanted to say.”

“Can we discuss Matteo?”

“What about him?” Striding over to the side table, I grab a glass and the decanter of scotch, lifting it up to Z. To most people, it would seem I’m indecisive, but Z knows me. I said my piece and now we move on. Business as usual. I don’t hold grudges; they are beneath me.

When he nods, I pour us two glasses and then take a seat in a chair in the corner of the room. Z grabs the one I prepared for him and then accompanies me.

“What’s going on?” I ask as I lift the glass to my mouth and take a drink.

“War. Apparently.”

This is news to me. Not that I should be surprised, though. There is always a war brewing within the mafia.

I set the glass down and lean forward. “How so?”

“From what I hear, he and his cousins are at war over who will take over the new territory they took from the Irish.”

“War is good.”

“It is.”

“Have you crunched the number?”

“Maxwell says if they go to war, with the guns Matteo will need from Alaric, we are looking at bringing in a fuck ton of money.”

“How much are we talking?”

“Fifty million, give or take.”

“War is inevitable, and it always pays to be on the right side. Matteo runs the East Coast. If he expands into the Midwest, is there any chance his cousin will win?”

“No.”

“Good.” I lean back in my chair and bring the glass up to my mouth. “Any other business you want to discuss, or can we now enjoy this hundred-year-old scotch?”

His eyes dart to the bottle of Glenlivet on the console across the room. I’m usually a cognac drinker, but Z prefers scotch, and seeing as I only minutes ago had him in a headlock, this is my peace offering.

“Nope.”

“Perfect.”

With war on the horizon for one of my clients, I can’t stay on the island that much longer. The time is coming to finally come clean and tell her the truth.

The only problem will be convincing her it’s in her best interest to stay, even if I’m not here.

But something tells me when I do finally give her the choice, she will make the wrong decision.

Ivy

IT'S BEEN A DAY SINCE Z CAME, AND I CAN NO LONGER pretend. His visit brought reality home. His hatred for me seemed deep rooted, and I have to believe it's connected to why I'm here. I tried my hardest to stay in my little bubble with Cyrus a little longer, but things are different now.

I need to know what is going on and he needs to tell me.

It's time.

My head has been buried in the sand long enough, but I need to break free and find out the truth, even if that truth hurts me.

With my mind made up, I stand from where I'm kneeling over the freshly potted plants and go in search of him.

I find him where I always find him.

He's in his office. Or what I assume is an office. I'm not sure how much work he gets done when he's here. Maybe he did in the beginning when he locked me in my room.

My stomach tightens at the memory, but then the muscles loosen as I remember that even then, even when he was the devil, he still never harmed me.

Never once did he touch me in a way I didn't want. Even before I would admit it out loud, he didn't.

It seems like so long ago

How long have I been gone?

“What month is it?” I ask as I enter the wood-paneled room and step to where he is sitting behind the large oak desk.

“April.”

“And the day?”

“Why are you asking me this?”

Still standing, I walk to where he is. He swivels his chair so I can step between his legs.

He places his large hands around my thighs, holding me to him.

“Why, Sun?”

“I’m ready,” I say. There is no need to clarify what I’m asking for.

His hands drop from my thighs as though they are burned by a flame.

He’s quiet. The silence screams between us, ripping at my ears and begging for words. Any words.

A part of me knew that we were a foregone conclusion, I’d eventually have to deal with reality and find out why he’s holding me here, but another part hoped we could live in the bubble forever.

But the truth is, no matter what he answers, I need to know the truth, no matter what that truth does to me.

I step back and then look down at him.

He gives me a nod before he moves to stand, steps around me, and starts to walk out the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Outside.”

I follow him out of the office, down the hall, and into the grand foyer.

Once we are outside, he takes my hand, and I'm surprised by this gesture. He seems so far away and closed off. But still, I welcome the warmth it brings and follow him blindly.

It's odd that I do.

Most wouldn't follow their kidnapper.

Even though we have spent the past week entwined in each other's arms, it doesn't mean he won't kill me now.

But I know he won't.

But deep down in my heart, I know he would never hurt me, so I follow him through the trees and up the gravel terrain until the trees clear. We have walked some ways, and when I step out into the clearing, I'm not surprised we have come to the highest point of the island. I remember seeing the steep slope from the beach up when I tried to find a way off, but I never ventured this way.

From where we are standing, I can see the whole island, and I was right; there is no place to go.

The trees are too dense to land a plane, and if you were to jump ...

I shake my head, not thinking of that.

I'm not sure why he's brought me here, but I know it's not for that.

"See over there?" He points into the distance. I look and see what appears to be a large mansion in the distance. That must have been where the lights were coming from.

"Where is that?"

"That's my estate." At his words, I turn toward him. That's where he is when he is not with me. Why does he keep this place?

I have so many questions, but the truth is, those questions are about him, and this is about me. I don't ask. Instead, I cock my head. "Why are you showing me your estate?" I ask.

"That's where it all began. That's why you're here." He gestures his hand to the ground beneath us. "Sit."

I do as he asks, and when he sits beside me, I know whatever he is going to say will be bad.

“Every Friday night, I have a poker game,” he starts.

“I know.” I didn’t know it was every Friday, but I knew Trent went, and I knew it was often.

“The poker game is only one piece of who I am. Of what I do. See, I’m also a banker as you know.”

I nod, still not understanding what this has to do with me. “My clients ... let’s just say not all are law-abiding citizens. Without going against their trust, some use the poker game for their needs. Cash is exchanged, dirty cash ... for clean.”

Now I understand. A feeling of foreboding courses down my spine as I think of my brother being involved with this, but I push it away.

Trent, who never does anything wrong.

“A few months ago, your brother came to my game, but this time, he wasn’t alone.”

My heart rate picks up.

The blood in my veins thumping just a little bit stronger.

“Who?” I ask.

“Your father.” He inhales deeply, and I can tell whatever he needs to say is weighing deeply on him. “This wasn’t their typical game. The guest of this game ...” He trails off, and I want to cover my head with my hands. Close my ears.

“He placed a bet, and he lost.”

“What was the bet?”

“It’s not a what, but a who.”

I feel like the world is closing in as my mouth opens. “Who?”

“The bet was for you.”

A heavy pain sits on my chest, and I feel like I’m suffocating. Like I’m drowning in a pool of water, I can see

the surface, but as much as I kick, I can't break free. I can't breathe.

My father bet me.

The man who was supposed to love me unconditionally, placed a bet and I was the stakes. My heart thumps madly as tears well in my eyes.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

I pull my legs in tight, my arms wrapping around my knees as I begin to rock.

My father doesn't deserve my tears.

I take a deep breath and try to relax; there is more I need to know, and I can't lose it now.

I swallow and find my voice. "You won me?" I choke out. "I'm a game." The tears I thought I had stopped threaten to fall from my eyes.

He shakes his head.

"No. Ivy, I didn't win you in a bet."

I don't understand what he's saying. My mouth feels like it's wired shut, and my throat feels like it's closing, but no matter how much it hurts to open it and speak the words, I do.

"Then who?" Barely audible words, but they come out regardless and he hears them, because he closes his eyes before speaking.

"The Butcher."

The blood in my veins turns to ice, and my whole body starts to shake uncontrollably.

The Butcher.

I belong to The Butcher.

You would have to be living under a rock not to know who The Butcher was.

Even though I don't go out much, I've watched the news enough to know of him.

“Isn’t he like Russian mafia or something?”

When I don’t speak, he leans forward and buries his head in his hands.

“He is.”

“Why would he want me?”

“He takes women.”

Thump.

“Sells the lucky ones.”

“And the unlucky ones?”

Thump.

“He keeps them for his own sick amusement. They don’t call him The Butcher for no reason.”

“H-He ...” I stutter.

“He carves them up, rapes them, and then throws them away when he’s done.”

Fear slithers in my veins, poisoning and killing off the remainder of peace within my body.

“What does this have to do with you?” I ask. Was he a part of this? Was he holding me for him? I push to stand, my back straight and my body tense. “Are you going to give me to him? Did you have your fun, and now it’s time for me to go?”

He stands and comes toward me, but I lift my hands in the air to stop him.

“How can you say that?”

“How can I say that!” I scream. “You kidnapped me. Now you tell me I belong to The Butcher, and you have the nerve to ask me how I could say that. It all makes sense.” I take a step back. “You wouldn’t touch me, probably because you were scared of The Butcher finding out.”

He stalks me like a predator stalking his prey. Grabbing me, he yanks me toward him.

His lips inch toward my ear, his breaths tickling my skin. It sends a shiver down my spine as he speaks. "I'm not scared of him or anyone who tries to take you. And do you want to know why?"

His arms wrap around my front, and he slips his hand into my leggings. When his fingers find my core, he speaks. "Because you're mine. Understand me, Sun. You are mine. Not his. And I will fucking kill him or anyone who tries to take you from me."

I bite my lower lip at his words, stifling the moan threatening to expel.

He parts me with his finger. "Do you understand me?"

My head falls back, and my eyes close. "Tell me you understand, Sun."

I let out a whimper. His fingers stop their ministrations. Instead, they hover over where I need him, teasing, toying, but not breaching. "Tell me."

"I understand," I pant.

"And who do you belong to?"

"No one," I say, and he thrusts his fingers back inside me.

"Wrong answer, Sun." Behind me, I can hear him rummaging to free himself. "Hold on to the tree."

I open my eyes, placing my hand on the tree inches away from us.

He grips me by the waist and pushes me forward to angle my ass up. I'm shaking with need as I wait for him to touch me again.

A primal moan escapes me as he thrusts inside me.

His thrusts are hard and fast.

Violent. He is telling me he owns me.

I'm his.

I arch my back, letting him take me deeper.

One hand lifts from where it is resting on my hip, and he grabs my hair, pulling my head back until his lips find mine.

Our tongues dance together.

The insanity is unlike anything I've ever felt before. Nothing has ever felt like this.

No kiss. No touch.

This is different. *This is primal.*

Desperate.

I need this right now. My world is spinning out of control and I need the power Cyrus yields.

I need the pain. The control. I need him.

My eyes roll back from the frantic need building inside me as he slams into me over and over again.

A wave begins to grow inside me. "*Betatee,*" he growls again, and I'm not sure if it's the way he moves inside me or how he says the words I don't even know, but I fall and crash, spiraling over the edge to oblivion.

He must find his release too because as I return to Earth from my haze, I notice the warmth inside me, and he's stopped moving.

Together, we catch our breaths.

Slowly, he pulls out of me. "I won't let him take you from me."

I straighten my pants.

"I'll protect you." Relying on him isn't easy for me. I've learned over the years that I can't rely on anyone. "Trust me. I will protect you."

I'm not sure he will. I'm not sure anyone can.

Cyrus

I TOOK HER LIKE AN ANIMAL AGAINST A TREE.

I don't know what the fuck got into me. Normally, I'm more reserved and don't show my emotions like that. But her doubt made me see red, and all I wanted to do is mark her as my own.

I couldn't control myself. This girl has gotten to me in a way I never predicted or anticipated. I'm not sure how I feel about it. Maybe it's time to go back to my estate and distance myself from her.

Right now, we lie in bed together. We haven't spoken since what happened outside. I'm sure she has a lot to process after what I told her.

The silence stretches around us. It's not unwelcome. I have a lot to think about too.

Last I heard, Boris has gone underground. If I can't find him, I'm not sure how I can accomplish my goal. There has to be a way to draw him out.

"Why?" she asks.

I turn toward her. She's watching me with wide eyes that are red from unshed tears. I can't imagine it's easy to hear that your father has sold you.

No. I know it's not.

“It’s time to tell me why you took me.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I respond, arching a brow.

“Not to me. You run a poker game, an illegal one. It doesn’t seem like you care who plays, so why this? Why me?”

“I saw you ...” My eyes close on their own accord as I try to remember exactly what went through my head when I did. Why did I take her? It was more than her looks; it was the energy that wafted off her. “Trent asked me to help you.”

She sits up from where we are lying and tilts her head in question.

“There has to be more.”

She’s right; there was. But the idea of saying it tastes bitter on my tongue. It’s so far from what I’m feeling now. The fact I even thought it at any point doesn’t sit well with me. Ivy Aldridge will never be a means to an end.

Still searching her eyes, I remember the feeling that spread through my chest. That’s the real reason, but at the time, I wouldn’t admit it. But here and now, with the future so uncertain, I decide to be honest about at least one thing.

“When I finally looked at you, so serene and beautiful, I couldn’t fathom a world where you didn’t exist. So, I took you.”

“But—”

I lift my hand, stopping her. I never thought I would do this, but with her, I find I want to. Looking into her blue eyes, I find myself speaking.

“Let me tell you a story.”

“Okay.”

“There once was a man and a woman. They were very happy and fell madly in love. This man and woman loved each other so much that they decided to have a baby. They loved the baby and for years tried to have another. Years passed, but it didn’t seem like that was in the cards. The man had given up. He was happy, but the woman was desperate. She wanted a

son. A son to look like the man she loved. And one day she grew pregnant ...” My throat feels like it is closing as I push down the emotions swirling inside me. I haven’t spoken of this ever, and I find that it’s harder to get the words out than I thought.

With a cough, I continue. “When the baby was to come, there was a complication. The mother finally had her son, but as she held him, she took her last breath. The man always resented the boy. He was angry and sad, and started to drink and gamble. After he lost his job, he became even angrier and turned to crime.

“Luckily for the boy, the sister was there to raise him. The father became a criminal, dealing drugs, but often, he did more than he sold. He took loans and owed a Russian billionaire hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“By this point, the little boy was now a young man, and one day, he came home from school, and his sister was gone. He searched everywhere. Then he found his father.”

I pause. Ivy must realize this part is harder for me to say because she reaches her hand out and takes mine in hers. With a small squeeze, I continue.

“He was drunk, and when the boy asked him, he said to the boy, ‘You took my wife from me, so I took her from you.’ It turns out, the girl was sold to a vile man who made her his wife. There was nothing the little boy could do. No one could save her.”

“What happened?”

My eyes close. The memories assaulting me as I speak. “She was found dead. Shot in the head.” I look at her. “The woman was my sister.” She blinks, and that’s when one tear escapes her blue eyes. “But more importantly, she was a mother to me. She was my home. She showed me love. She was everything good in the world. Growing up, I knew there was more to life because of her. But her light faded and so did mine. I never saw sunlight until I saw you that day. I saved you because I couldn’t save her.”

When I stop talking, I wait for her to say something.

But she doesn't.

Instead, I hear a small snuffle.

Pulling back, I see that she's crying. My hand swipes against her face, catching her tears.

"Don't cry for me," I say, my voice gruff and tight from retaining my emotions.

"How could I not?" She lifts her hand and touches my jaw. "You were just a boy."

"It made me a man."

"What happened to your father?" she asks, but I know she probably already knows.

"He's dead."

The unspoken question is there. What kind of man grows up to kill his father?

I'm not sure if she's ready to hear my words, but I tell them anyway. She should know the man she got in bed with. I am no hero. I'm a villain.

"I killed him, and then I took his business contacts and started my bank."

"That's what I don't understand."

"I vowed never to be him. Never to need money so badly that I would resort to that. So, I became the bank, and I don't trade flesh."

"Then why was The Butcher at your game?"

It's a good question, but I'm not ready to tell her that part of the story. So instead, I lean forward and silence her with my mouth.

Ivy

HE REFUSES TO TALK. INSTEAD, HE SHUTS ME UP WITH HIS mouth, but I push back, removing my mouth from his.

“Let me see all of you, Cyrus.” I lift my hand to touch his face, to run my fingers along his jaw down to the pulse on his neck. “Please.”

I can feel his heartbeat accelerate as it jumps under my skin. There is so much more to Cyrus Reed, and I want to see him, all of him. I know there are levels of depth he doesn’t show, but I want to see them. Need to see them.

“You have.” He tries to remove my hand, but I shake my head.

“No. I want to see the parts you don’t show anyone. The parts that you fear will scare me. I want to know all of you.”

“You won’t like what you see. The darkness you see.”

His deep brown, earnest eyes seek mine. They are dangerously ominous. Somber and full of emotions I can’t comprehend, but I want to. I move closer until our lips touch. “Let me be the judge of that.” *Kiss*. “What are you hiding from me?”

“I’m a bad man, Sun. I don’t deserve to bask in your light. My hands are dirty. They’re not clean enough to touch you.”

“Not true. You’re too blind to see what I see.” A sudden chill descends on my words and what he will say next.

“I killed to become the man I am.” There is a vulnerability to him when he admits this, and it makes me fall for him even more.

“I know,” I whisper back.

“I murdered men.”

My head tilts down in contemplation. “Did you murder children?”

“No.”

“Women?”

“Fuck no, but that doesn’t absolve me of my sin. In order to be powerful, I took the power.”

I take his hand in mine. “Why did you need the power?”

“For vengeance,” he responds, his face clouded with unease. “But I am no saint. I didn’t do it just for that. I now control the underworld. I’m the one who holds the coin for the most powerful men in the world, and in turn, I rule everyone.”

I shake my head and then kiss his fingers. “Say what you will, but you won’t convince me otherwise.”

“It started off as a way to have the power to save my sister,” he admits on a sigh, defeated.

“It was your father’s job. You were just a boy. But you see, this is why there might be blood tainting you, but it will never consume you. You are a good man, Cyrus.” His hand drops from mine, but this time, I reach my hand out and trail my finger over a scar that tarnishes his chest. There is a round one that looks like it was caused by a bullet. I had noticed it before, but never felt comfortable asking about it. “This scar —”

“Is my monster.”

“No. That is your hope. It is your strength. It is your love. Each scar on your body *inside* and out was placed there

because you loved your sister enough to try not to let this ever happen again.”

My fingers trail over his stomach, up his torso.

I touch his jagged scar first, then I drop a kiss on it followed by the rest of his chest. To all his exposed skin, blemished and unblemished. Because I know that even behind the muscle are scars I can't even comprehend. There are stories that Cyrus believes makes him a monster, but I know the truth. They might tell a story, but they tell the story of a boy who lost everything. A boy who deserves love.

The scars didn't take away from his beauty. Even with them littering the surface of his skin, he's still beautiful. If anything, now that he told me a little bit about each one, he is more beautiful.

When I finally reach his mouth with mine, he kisses me. He kisses me like I'm the last bit of oxygen before he dies.

“Your father never deserved a daughter like you. You're beautiful, Sun.”

He kisses my lip. “*Gamilla*,” he whispers as he flips me over so he's on top of me.

“What?” I question.

“It means beautiful.” Then his lips find my jaw. “*Amar*. Gorgeous.” His lips trail over my throat. He kisses the hollow of my neck. “*Noor Eineya*. The light of my eyes.” And then he places his lips on my heart. “*Tu es à moi*.” His words cause my heart to swell, making me want to give that boy my love.

But can I?

He says he's a monster, and I know he's not.

But is he mine to love?

Will he ever be?

He took me for the right reasons to protect me, but what happens next?

Will he love me?

Can he?

Or like the list of women in his closet, will my name just be added?

WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, I FIND CYRUS'S PART OF the bed empty. Without him here, it feels like a blinding fog has lifted from my eyes.

Last night still lingers in the air. All the truths we spoke, and what it means for the future.

I'm falling for Cyrus Reed. A part of me already has, but there is one part that can't reconcile the man who took me, who kept me here all these months.

What do I really know about him?

A lot, actually.

Probably more than most.

He told me about his job, about his sister.

But still, something feels unsaid.

I stand from the bed and grab his button-down shirt that lays on the chair. Once it's buttoned, I head into his closet.

Last night, I was consumed with him and his demons, but now in the light of the day, the things I tried to push away come rushing back in.

The list.

I never asked him what it meant.

How can I move forward without knowing what this means?

Sitting on the floor, I pull the box out from where it is hidden and start to rummage through it again.

Cyrus caught me the last time, but this time, I will ask him point-blank what the list is. Who are the women?

I need to know.

So many feelings are circulating through my body. Feelings burst out of me, but I can't let them take root and grow, not until I have all the truths.

Not until I know what this is.

He says beautiful words I don't really understand.

He makes love to my body and touches my soul. It would be so easy to fall in love with him, to admit that this is what I am feeling, but until I know that I am not another notch on his belt or, better yet, another name on a list, I need to tamp down the feelings that threaten to spill forth from my heart.

I need to erect those walls.

Because once they come down, once I give every last part of myself to Cyrus, I'm not sure I will ever be able to rebuild them again.

I'm there for a while, on the floor of the closet, staring. When I hear the sound of a gasp behind me.

The woman.

The one I haven't seen in weeks, ever since Cyrus started feeding me himself, is here.

I look up at her like a deer in headlights, but she's not looking at me. She's looking at the picture in my hand. I follow her line of vision, from her to the photograph, that's when I finally see it.

Why the woman looked familiar.

Much younger, but still recognizable.

It's her.

Pulling out his list of names, I see Mariana. Wasn't that what Cyrus referred to her as?

My heart starts to hammer in my chest.

Does he employ his ex? Or is it worse than that? I can feel the muscles in my stomach contract as bile threatens to rise. A

new thought pops into my head; a dark and disturbing thought that chills me to the bone.

Is she his captive too?

Was everything a lie?

No.

It couldn't have been.

The blood thumping through my veins makes me feel dizzy and weak. I fear I might pass out.

Last night, we broke down walls, and he told me his truth. There has to be more.

"It's not what you think," she says, and I look up at her, my mouth hanging open when she does.

"You-you speak English," I stutter. "But ... why?" Then it hits me in the chest. "Cyrus." It all makes sense, yet makes no sense at all. Why wouldn't he want me to speak with her? Was he trying to isolate me? Did he not want me to know I am one of many?

She steps forward and shakes her head. "It's not what you think."

"Oh, no. Because to me, it sure does look like it." I gesture to the pictures. "To me, it looks like Cyrus is full of shit, and he took me because he likes to take women. Not protect them." The pain that radiates through my body is not like anything I have ever felt before. "Was it all lie?" I feel like I'm drowning. As if cold water is slowly filling my lungs. "Did my father—"

"Stop," her voice cuts in. "Mr. Reed is a good man. He saved you. Just like he saved me." She rolls up the sleeves over her arms. "He saved you from my fate."

The scars on her arms scream at me that there is a truth so much bigger than even I can fathom.

"Those women, he saved all of them in some way or another. Some from poverty. Some from being so hungry that

they were going to sell themselves on the street. Others from drugs. And for me, he saved me from a fate worse than death.”

“Boris?” I whisper.

“No. This was my husband’s doing. He was an abusive man who worked for Cyrus. Cyrus didn’t know at first that he beat me, cut me, burned me. But once he did ... Cyrus lost someone close to him, and he vowed to help women who couldn’t help themselves.”

My eyes widen as her words hit me in the gut.

Each woman on this list represented something that reminded him of his sister. He saved them because he couldn’t save her.

Like me.

He never was lying.

He really was protecting me.

“Cyrus Reed is a good man,” she says again as she moves to leave the closet.

He helps women.

Now that I’m alone again, my mind is going a million miles a minute.

Standing, I place all the pictures and the list back in the box and leave the room.

I need to go for a walk and think about all I learned today. Stopping in my room, or at least what used to be my room, I grab a pair of leggings and slip them on, then socks and shoes.

Now that it’s April, the weather should be nice enough to not need to have a coat, especially with Cyrus’s long sleeve button-down on.

Fresh air will do me good.

On my way out of the house, I pass by Cyrus’s office, but it’s empty. Mariana must have heard me come down because she walks up behind me.

“He’s not here.” Her voice startles me. There is a long, brittle silence that stretches between us as I think of a response. She lied, which means Cyrus probably lied. What else could he be lying about?

My mouth opens and shuts, like a guppy trying to eat food.

All I muster out is an, “Oh?”

“Yeah, when you were sleeping, he headed back to the house. That’s when I was dropped off.”

A part of me wants to leave the room without asking the question that burns on my tongue because ignorance is bliss after all. But that’s not the girl I am, so I incline my head, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Why didn’t you tell me you spoke English?” I ask.

“Cyrus was worried I would tell you the truth about your father.”

“Wasn’t that my right?”

“It is, but—” She stops herself, swallowing and then meeting my gaze. “He thought he was doing right by you.”

I nod, and then walk past her. “I’m going for a walk.”

Cerberus chooses that moment to walk up to me. Well trained. “Kom,” I say to him, and he follows me outside.

I don’t mind him coming, though. He makes me feel safe and cared for.

I had started to feel that way about Cyrus, but all the lies, or omissions of truth, still sit heavy in my heart.

By the time Cerberus and I make it up the hill through the trees to the clearing, my mind has started to clear.

Once I’m sitting, I stare out at the ocean. It’s vast, but in the distance, a small glimpse of land appears. Where it all started. How I got here?

He did everything to protect you.

As if the air has cleared me, I feel emotions I have not felt in a long time. For so long, I have been the only one looking

out for myself, but now, Cyrus has shown me he too has.

I feel special. Cherished. Loved.

Love?

I never thought I would feel this way, but Cyrus has shown me so much. My chest flutters as an overwhelming feeling pours through every molecule of my being.

Until I can't not say the words out loud.

"I love Cyrus Reed."

Even if he's a monster, he's my monster, and I love him.

Cyrus

AS PER USUAL, I'M WORKING. WHICH, UNFORTUNATELY, means leaving Ivy alone in my bed. I had to head back to the estate to get some files, but now I'm back, knee deep in shit.

Holding the money for the mafia would be a full-time job as it is, but couple it with the fact that I also do business with the cartel and arms dealers, and it could take two lifetimes to do what I do.

It's why I'm so damn successful. Because I have no life.

Well, that's not true. Recently, I have finally let myself indulge a bit, but today, even though I'm still on the island with Ivy, there is plenty to be done for my clients.

Turning dirty money clean isn't as easy as everyone thinks. But luckily, I am damn fucking good at what I do.

Today, I'm helping broker a deal between Alaric and Matteo.

Alaric has guns, and Matteo needs guns. Although this isn't my typical day's work, it benefits me regardless.

Not only do I make money off Alaric's deposit with the interest I charge for him to keep his money in my bank, but I also get a cut of the sale.

Think of it like a finder's fee or kickback. Whatever the fuck it is, just money in my pocket.

“Are you busy?” I hear from the doorway.

Yes. I want to say, but I can't. Not when my eyes meet hers.

She's so fucking stunning, and it knocks the words right out of my mouth. Her hair is pulled back in a disheveled bun on the top of her head.

There is something dark on her nose, though.

I stand and make my way to her.

“What's this?” I swipe the dirt off.

“I was gardening.”

“Oh, were you now?” But then it dawns on me where she was, and my jaw tightens.

She drops her head, her blond hair falling over her face as she looks at me through the wisps. The way she stares is unnerving. She is really looking at me, like she can see past every lie I have ever spewed.

I'm not sure how I feel about it. In the past, I would have hated it. Fuck, if anyone else looked at me like this, I would, but when Ivy does, it's different.

“Why do you hate it?” she asks, her voice low and uncertain that she can talk about this.

Feelings. God, I fucking hate them, but just thinking about going in there brings them up.

I shake my head and walk past her, toward the door. This is not something I want to get into right now.

“Cyrus.” I stop and turn to look at her over my shoulder. “What is it?” she asks.

“It was hers,” I grit.

She looks at me with confusion, but then it must hit her because her eyes go wide.

“Your sister's.”

“I lied when I said I bought this home because of the proximity to my estate. This was my family's summer home.”

I bury my hands in my pockets.

“Can I tell you something?” she asks, and I don’t answer, so she continues. “When I was a little girl, my mother taught me how to garden, but as I got older, I didn’t like to go out there with her anymore. I wanted to live my life. It wasn’t until she had her mental breakdown and I came back home to live with her, to take care of her, that I stepped foot in a garden again. I was eighteen. The first time I stepped foot in it, I sobbed. I lost it right there because everything reminded me of the mom I lost. Then I pushed past the pain, and I started to dig. It was hard at first, but as I planted my first seed, I remembered her smile. I remembered the jokes she used to tell when she was happy. From that moment on, it no longer made me sad.”

She pauses, and I see a tear in her eyes. I lift my hand and catch it.

“When the flowers bloomed that summer, my mom spoke to me. A woman who hadn’t spoken to me in months spoke. From then on out, I knew the pain was worth it. Let me show you.”

I think about her words for a while and then with reluctance reach out to her. Hand in hand, she leads me to the greenhouse. As soon as I step in, the smell hits me. The smell that reminds me of Sybil.

She’s everywhere in this room. So much so, I feel like I’m suffocating.

“I have to leave,” I say, emotions clogging my lungs.

“Let me help you,” she says, and she hands me the shovel and leads me to a fresh pot filled with dirt.

“This dirt is the beginning of something new. Think of your sister, of all she thought of you, and of how she protected you, and grow something in her honor.”

I close my eyes, afraid to show emotions, but with my eyes closed, I see everything Ivy said I would see.

I see my sister laughing, smiling, living.

Opening my eyes, I dig. I break through the earth, through the pain. I can feel my eyes becoming moist, but I don't cry. Instead, I live.

AFTER DIVULGING SO MUCH TO IVY, I SEQUESTER MYSELF back in my office. It's not that I said much, but she saw a part of me I have never shown anyone before. It felt like I took a knife, cut my heart open, and bled all over the dirt I planted in.

Feeling vulnerable is not a feeling I like to have, nor is it one I want a repeat performance of. Which leads me to the here and now, sitting behind my desk under the guise of working.

You're avoiding her.

I'm building my walls back up because I will be useless to her in this state. It's bad enough that I have yet to come up with a viable plan on how to bring the asshole down.

My fingers drum on the wood surface of my desk. The one thing I know is I have to be smart about it. He won't come out for just anything. He's heavily guarded at all times.

It's not something I can't do, but it's not ideal.

My thoughts are cut off by the sound of footsteps, I look up to see Ivy leaning in the doorframe.

"Penny for your thoughts." She smiles.

"There isn't enough money in the world to tell you some of the terrors, I think."

Her smile fades, turning into a thin and tight line. "What can I do to help you?"

"Take my mind off things." Before she can object, I motion to the chessboard. "Play me?"

"Okay." Her voice is low.

The board is set up, and I let her go first. She's gotten better. Her moves are calculated, and analytical. She's no

longer thinking in the present, she's steps ahead. She maneuvers her pieces around the board as if she were playing for years, the way I would have if I were her.

When it's my turn, my brain is not here, I'm far off, thinking of what the future will be. But that's my demise, because my mistake will be her win.

Again, it's her turn, and I follow, but it's too late for me.

"Check," she says, surprising me yet again.

The thing to remember is even acting on the best plan can bring a negative outcome. I thought I knew the right move, but in the end, Ivy backed me into a corner.

It reminds me of taking Ivy. At the time, I thought I saw five steps ahead, but I could never anticipate how I would feel for her down the line, how much I would want to protect her. She might have been the pawn, but the more I know her, the more I see her as much more.

She's the queen.

AN HOUR LATER, SHE'S GONE TO GARDEN AND I'M PICKING UP my phone, Z answers. "You ready for the boat?" I can hear the bite in his voice. He's not happy.

He doesn't understand why I'm dragging my feet. Why I haven't solved shit yet.

Good thing I'm the boss, so he really doesn't have to understand.

"Not yet."

"It's time, boss."

"Oh, so you do remember who's boss?"

He's silent, and I think he might cut his losses and not push his agenda. I know he has one. It's not much different from mine. We all have our own, but ours just run in the same direction. It's actually how Z came to be my employee.

“We going to use the girl?” he asks.

The idea of using Ivy doesn't sit well with me. Not after everything. She makes me feel too much, and while a part of me hates that she has opened up this part of me that I've wanted closed, I'm not willing to risk her.

“No,” I answer.

“It's a solid plan to lure him in. He's keeping her for himself ...”

“We don't know that,” I respond back.

“She's his type. We have to use this to our advantage. Give her to him.”

My fists ball on my desk. There is no way I will let that happen. “No.”

“Why not?”

The sound of my hands banging on the desk echoes through the room. Loud. Violent. But the idea makes me want to kill someone. Anger spreads through every molecule of my body, reminding me of a fire. Scorching, blistering, and burning.

“He can't have her,” I grit.

Z needs to shut the fuck up. He's lucky he's nowhere near me right now, or I would bash his head in.

“It will never be done until we stop him. You will never have peace ...”

“That might be the case, but I won't.”

“He would come. Then we—”

“Enough!” I shout, before taking a deep breath to calm the raging inferno building inside me. “Using her is a last resort.”

I understand the merit of his suggestion, and once upon a time, I suggested it too, but it makes me fucking livid now. It makes me want to rip someone apart, or better yet, it makes me want to grab a gun and shoot someone in the head.

“Just think about it,” he presses.

“She would make good bait.” I’m about to tell him why it doesn’t matter, though, when I hear an audible gasp.

Before I can object, I look up to see Ivy running toward the door. I bolt after her, grabbing her by her arm to stop her.

“It’s not what you think,” I say, and she shakes her head, pushing my hands out to escape my grasp.

“I don’t care.” She looks down at the ground, but I don’t miss the way her jaw trembles from unspoken emotions. I place my fingers under her chin to lift her gaze to meet mine.

“It’s not like that. You aren’t bait.”

“But I was.” She lifts her eyebrow, challenging me to object.

Unfortunately, I can’t. She’s right.

Originally, the thought had crossed my mind. Had I not become so enamored by her, she probably would be.

I don’t speak because what is there to say. She might not be here to be bait, but I would be lying if I tell her otherwise, and I never lie. I’m a lot of things ...

A crook.

A criminal.

A murderer.

A villain.

A liar isn’t one of them.

She shakes her head side to side; the movement making my hands drop.

“It’s fine. You said you weren’t a nice man when you took me. You held me here. You never lied. I’m the idiot who thought there was more.”

“Sun.”

“No, don’t ‘Sun’ me.” She air quotes. “You were always the villain, but I just forgot. It’s fine.”

I step toward her, and she steps away.

“It was a fun distraction.” She shrugs, then turns away from me. “Don’t you have work to do? Go back to your castle and leave me alone.”

She doesn’t wait for me to say anything else before she turns and sets off up toward the high point. The same point where I told her the truth.

I grab my cell from my pocket. “Send the boat.”

“For both of you?”

“Mariana too.”

He’s quiet, and I wonder if he will tell me to bring her and set a plan in motion. He thinks she is bait.

She’s not.

She’s so much more than that.

Ivy

MY HEARTBEAT IS ERRATIC. I FEEL LOST, AS IF I'M A FLOATING balloon lifting off the ground, and I'm not sure how I'll ever be grounded again.

It's hard to walk away.

Each step feels more painful than the last.

That's the problem with falling in love with a criminal. He might not have meant to hurt me, but he did anyway.

Bait.

I was meant to be bait. Even though a part of me knows the truth—that he would never use me as bait—it still hurts to hear it.

Regardless of how I feel about him, I have to leave. I can't stay. My walls need to be up. It will hurt. Because we have an expiration date.

So I do. My eyes fill with tears. I already miss the feeling he brings out in me.

It's over.

It's time to walk away and let him go. It's time for me to figure out a plan, but that's a little harder. As much as I hate it, I need his help. I'll discuss it with him once we've both cooled down. The thing is, I wasn't off.

He was using me. But in the end, I know deep down something changed. He didn't deserve my words. When he comes back, I'll say I'm sorry. I will walk away, though. It will hurt, and I'll miss him. I'll miss what he makes me feel. But it's time to go home and live my life. Not that I have much to go back to.

A father who sold me.

Shit.

I haven't had time to even process that.

My feet take me up to the spot on the top of the island. I stand in the same place where he opened up to me only days ago. I shake my head. He wouldn't have opened up to me if things hadn't changed between us.

Obviously, it had to mean something.

But my defense mechanism kicked in, and I didn't let him explain. I look down at the ocean. A boat in the distance.

He must not have left yet.

If I go now, I can apologize.

I know he's not a good guy, but I don't think he'd hurt me.

No.

I know he won't. I was a fool for saying what I said.

Maybe.

Maybe I can catch him.

I start to head back down the hill. Through the trees and shrubs. My pace picks up.

Almost there. I dash forward.

Thump. Thump.

The boat is approaching. My gaze skates the distance. He should be somewhere near, but I can't find him. Maybe I beat him here. Just as I'm making it through the clearing, I see someone emerging from the boat. I take a step back on instinct. Slowly, to not be seen.

The sound of my shoe hitting a fallen branch screams into the silence.

Fuck.

My gaze is still forward, praying this stranger didn't hear, but his head rises.

Dark, menacing eyes meet mine, and the left side of his mouth tips up, showing teeth in a snarl.

“Hello, Ivy. It's about time we become acquainted.”

Without another thought, I turn around, dashing toward the house. Cerberus is inside, if I can get to him, he will protect me. Now I'm alone with this man, and I don't need an introduction to know exactly who that man was. Boris.

A man known to cut up his victims. As I head back to the estate, branches and twigs scrape against my limbs, cutting into my skin.

Burning.

But I don't let that stop me.

I need to find Cyrus. I need to get away.

But then my stomach drops. If that boat wasn't for Cyrus, that must mean Cyrus isn't on the island.

I run faster. My legs burning with pain.

I can't hear his footsteps behind me over the pounding of my heart.

It rattles violently in my chest, telling me to go faster.

Run harder.

I don't need to hear him, though, to know he's gaining on me. I can feel it in my bones. In the ice that travels through my veins.

I don't stop, though. I push past the pain. Through the aches and scrapes. I'm so close.

I can see the large oak door. If I can just get to the door.

What?

What will I do? I'm stuck here.

No weapons.

No escape.

I push down the thoughts and keep going.

I'm not weak. I will never be weak. I will fight with everything I have before I let him take me.

I'm there. So close. My hand reaches out, and my fingertips touch the cold knob. But then I'm slammed forward. My head ricocheting off the wood that should have been my salvation. I can't see the blood, but I can feel the bite of my flesh ripping. His hands bracket around me, pulling my limp body to his. Bile travels up my throat. A ringing sound echoes in my ear.

"You will be fun to break," he whispers in my ear.

Making my stomach roil. A metallic taste infiltrates my mouth.

No.

I can't let him take me.

"Get your hands off me."

I kick.

I shout.

I throw my head back. But it doesn't stop him from grabbing me and pulling me toward the boat.

My arms burn in the sockets, and I'm sure if I fight harder, I'll dislocate my shoulders.

I try to struggle, but it's no use. It's hopeless as he throws me on board. My body grabbed by another man as The Butcher pulls my arms behind my back and secures them with zip ties.

He looks down at me.

There is nothing but malice in his eyes.

I had thought Cyrus was a monster, but this man is truly one.

Cyrus.

My gaze turns the island as the boat pulls away.

Will he look for me?

Will he find me?

Will he even care?

Cyrus

I SHOULD HAVE ANSWERED HER. I SHOULD HAVE TOLD HER THE truth. But the words died on my tongue. What could I have said anyway?

Truth.

A part of me did want to use her.

Fact.

But that changed, and I should have told her. Another truth, I didn't want to. A dark feeling spread through my chest at the accusation.

How could she doubt me? I had borne my inner turmoil to her. She saw my demons and embraced them only turn me away. Did I deserve it? Fuck yes.

But it didn't make the pill any less bitter to swallow. So here I am, with my head up my own ass, avoiding her.

A grown-ass man.

A man who fucking holds the money and fortunes of the world's worst men in my hands, and I'm hiding from a little girl.

A girl who makes you feel.

Sun.

She started off as a poison in my life, a means to an end, a sick obsession I needed to exploit for my own gains, then she became someone to protect, someone to care about, someone to cherish.

How the fuck did I let it get this bad?

Never did I think this type of distraction was in the cards for me.

Z is actually right. I have an objective, and playing around with a girl, no matter how beautiful and alive she makes me feel, is a bad idea.

I open my computer, checking the figures in a few offshore accounts. Then I fire off an email to Trent, letting him know his sister is okay and checking in on the millions of dollars I have him investing for me and my clients. Holding their money isn't enough. Increasing and cleaning is why they come.

An hour passes before I can no longer pretend my mind isn't elsewhere. I wonder what she's doing.

Is she still pissed at me? Or has she calmed enough for me to explain? If she knew the truth, how would she feel?

Why am I acting like a little bitch? Because she means something to me, and I don't want to hurt her.

The truth is, she means so much more than I will ever admit, and the thought scares the fuck out of me.

A gun to my head doesn't scare me this bad.

I stand from my desk because there's no reason to pretend I'll get shit done. Stalking out of the office, I go in search for Z. When I find him, he's pacing the drawing room, looking out to the ocean.

"Tell Maxwell to bring the boat around." Z's body stiffens at my voice before turning around and facing me.

"You're going back?"

I cock my head at him, daring him to say something else. His jaw is tight. He doesn't agree with my decision to keep

her. By the tic under his eye, I know he wants to tell me that.

He's not happy.

We have always seen eye to eye on what to do about business and other shit, really. He thinks she's a distraction.

Well, he's right. She is.

But I don't fucking care.

He nods his head and then shakes it in disbelief before he stalks off to get the boat. Now alone, I look toward the island. I'm going to have to let her go, but I need to see if Trent has settled shit with Boris yet for his father.

Pulling out my cell, I make the call.

"Cyrus," he answers.

"Do you have the money?" I ask. There's no reason to pretend we like each other. No reason to keep up the false pretenses.

"I do."

I don't want to know how he came up with that money right now, but I'm sure it's not something too far off from what I deal with.

Trent's resourceful.

He probably has a Ponzi scheme going. As long as it's not with the money he's taking care of for me, I don't give a fuck.

I will gut him if it is, but he knows better than that.

"Have your father call Boris and set up the drop. Once it's done, I'll release your sister. But if I ever see him in my house. If I ever hear—"

"I know."

"I won't hesitate to kill him, and then after, I will kill you for allowing it to happen."

"I know."

With that out of the way, I hang up. There is no question in my mind that if this man puts Ivy in danger—I don't care if

she loves him—I will torture him slowly. Very fucking slowly.

I might not be The Butcher, but I'm just as fucking lethal. Killing and torturing when I need to.

The sound of shoes in the hall has me pulling my gaze away from the window and back to Z.

“Ready?”

“Yep,” he responds, his voice tight with anger.

Z has a massive fucking stick up his ass, but I don't give two shits. If he has a problem with me, he can keep that shit to himself. I don't pay him for his opinions.

I pay him to have my back.

Having my back means shutting the fuck up, getting my goddamn boat, and taking me to my girl.

My girl.

Shit.

When the fuck did I start referring to Ivy Aldridge as that?

The faster that fuck Trent pays off Boris, the faster I can send her back and stop this insanity.

Once on the boat, it doesn't take long with the wind.

I'm not sure how long I'll stay this time, but since the meet is happening soon, I make a new plan.

“Stay by the dock.” Maxwell nods, and Z turns to face me. “Trent is making the exchange, so I see no reason why she can't come back to the house with me tonight.”

There is that tic again.

“Do you have something you want to say?” I level him with my stare.

“No, boss.”

Once we pull up to the dock, I head up to the house.

I'm about to open the door when I notice a faint red mark.

Is that blood?

My stomach drops, and I wonder if after I left, she hurt herself on her walk. Throwing open the door, I don't expect her to come running into my arms, but I do expect to find her on the main floor.

Ever since we reached an accord when I got hurt, she no longer secludes herself in the bedroom. I walk through all the rooms on the main floor, yet no one is there.

I go into my room next.

Nothing.

Maybe she's so pissed she's in her old room. When I swing the door open, I find nothing at all. The feeling that hit me when I saw the blood starts to intensify.

If she's hurt, where could she be?

I go to walk back outside when Cerberus runs out of the house. Maybe he knows where Ivy is, but instead of stopping, he runs off barking. He heads in the direction of the beach.

I follow him.

Running behind as he barks.

The first thought is that, once again, she tried to escape. She tried to leave me.

But when I get to where the beach starts, every muscle in my back tightens.

Footprints.

They are not hers. They are much larger. Another set trail as if she was being dragged.

Emotions I thought I had buried deep within me rise to the surface.

I can't push it down.

Before her, I didn't feel, but now that I have met her, found her, and lost her, I can't control myself.

The raw emptiness inside me was finally starting to fill with her in my presence, and now it feels like a knife has

stabbed me, emptying once again but unlike before when I closed off the pain, this time, the pain is real and tangible.

I head back to the boat.

Both my men look at me. They instantly draw their guns and are on high alert.

“She’s gone.”

“What? How...?” Maxwell asks.

“I don’t fucking know!” I scream. “I want all the surveillance tapes. Get me the fuck home and find out how that fucker found her.”

The ride back is tense.

No one speaks.

When I’m finally back in the house, my worst nightmare comes true. There is nothing on the cameras. A glitch, whatever the fuck that means.

“Fuck!” I bellow as my fist flies through the air, punching the wall. The plaster concaves in, leaving behind a bloody hole.

Not knowing what else to do, I call Trent.

“Hello,” he answers.

“Did you give him the money?”

“What? No. Not yet. I can’t get through to him.”

“He has her. That’s why he doesn’t need your fucking money. He fucking has her.”

“Who?”

“Boris.”

The line goes quiet. My heart tightens in my chest. “What the fuck am I going to do?” My hard voice cuts through the silence. I’m not usually at a loss, but this time, I am. I don’t know.

“How did he find her?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure as shit going to find out.”

A part of me always knew this was a possibility, and even Z had mentioned it. Using her was a good way to lure him in. Finish him and everything he stood for.

But I never anticipated what she would mean to me.

She's my sun.

I realize now I was just fooling myself.

With a deep inhale, I calm all my nerves. This is not who I am. I tamp down any emotion I have for her because I won't let them blind me to what I need to do.

This is a war now.

He came onto my property and took something that was mine. Because yes, Sun, Ivy, is mine. And I'm going to get her back. I will use every last resource I have. It's time to do that.

I grab my phone and dial the one man you need standing beside you during a battle.

Matteo Amante.

"Cyrus Reed, to what do I owe the honor? It's not often you call unless ... is everything okay with the money?"

"Yes, Matteo. This is actually a different matter. A personal matter."

The line goes silent. It's as if he is weighing his options of whether to humor me on this. We have worked together for a few years, but I have never called in a favor. This is practically unheard of. Cyrus Reed doesn't ask for help, nor does he help others. At least not for free.

My reputation is what precedes me and why men fear me.

"Now you have me intrigued."

Of course, he's intrigued, and at this point, I'm desperate. Not a good combination.

"I need your help," I say on a sigh. Bitter words. An even more bitter pill to swallow.

"More intrigued." This time, he chuckles. Not good. He will bleed me dry for his help.

“Something of mine was taken. And I need your help to get it back.”

“Old friend, I would love to help you ...” He trails off.

“But it will cost me.”

“I can’t be doing business for free.”

The fact that he’s right sucks, but it’s the nature of the beast. I wish there was another way, but I’m all out of options.

“I respect that. Consider yourself interest-free for your next deposit.”

“Life.”

“One year.”

“Five.”

“Deal.”

Five years interest-free comes out to a shit ton of money, but her life is priceless to me.

The next phone call I have to make is going to be harder, but some things don’t add up. I hit the contact on my phone and wait.

“Cyrus,” Alaric answers.

“Did you do it?” I ask.

“Do what?”

“Did you sell me out?”

“What? Fuck, no. What the hell are you talking about, man?”

I lean forward in my chair. “The island.”

“One, I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about. Two, think really carefully about your next words will be. They very well may be your last.”

I consider myself a good judge of character, and nothing in his pitch indicates he’s lying. I let out a deep breath. “If that’s the case, I need your help.”

“Cyrus, we have worked together a long time, and out of respect for those years, I won’t kill you for questioning me ...”

He’s right, and I know he’s right.

In this business, you’re only as good as your honor, and by questioning his, I should be a dead man. I won’t apologize because that’s not me, but I fucked up by accusing him before I had proof. Ivy’s disappearance is making me act recklessly.

“Thank you.”

“Tell me what the fuck is going on, and how I can help.” The fact that Alaric is willing to help after what I accused him of speaks of his integrity. I’m not sure I would be that forgiving. I’ll owe him, but somehow that fact doesn’t bother me.

“I need guns and I’m prepared to offer you the same deal I gave Matteo.”

“Which is?”

“No interest for five years.”

“Done. What else?”

“Care to go to war?” I ask, and he chuckles through the phone at my request.

“Where and when. I’ll be there.”

War it is.

Ivy

I BLINK A FEW TIMES TO HELP MY EYES ADJUST TO THE DARK.

As the room starts to focus and the foggy haze that I've been in dissipates, confusion sets in. I'm staring at a wall. On a bed?

My head is pounding. My muscles ache. Where the hell am I?

Something bites at my skin when I try to move. That's when I realize I can't move.

A scream escapes my mouth.

"Help." I kick myself up and try to leave the bed, but I don't make it far, only a mere foot before a wave of nausea hits, making me retch.

I move in the opposite direction, trying to find something to illuminate the room.

The shackles bite my skin, rattling every time I try to move.

Where am I? I try to move again, but my distance is limited. I need to try to get them off. Sitting back down, I try to pull at them, but it's impossible. They are on too tight, and even if I could manage to get out, I'm too dizzy to escape.

I must have lost more blood than I thought.

Lifting my chained arm, I touch my head. I rub at my temples and then bring it back down. Dried, caked-on blood is present on my fingertips.

The throbbing intensifies; the pain is too intense.

Tears run unbidden down my cheeks. I swipe them away.

I move to stand off the bed, but even that is too much. I'm feeling light-headed and all I have managed to do is sit up. I wrack my brain for memories of what happened to me.

Tears roll down my cheeks as it comes crashing back.

My fight with Cyrus. The boat.

Boris.

He found me.

And now I'm chained to a bed, waiting for him to come back. To hurt me. I bring my knees to my chest and rock back and forth. What am I going to do? My head shakes violently.

Fight.

You will fight. You will fight even if it's with your last breath.

My body slumps to the cold bed. I don't have enough energy to stand, plus I'm not sure how much distance I can even go, but I need to try.

How to get out of here.

I don't even want to know why there is a bed in this place. What is this place?

My breathing picks up, and I will myself to calm.

That is, until I hear something. My grip tightens on my chains.

The door squeaks, and a glimmer of light appears in the dark room. Fear bursts through my veins like ice-cold water from a faucet.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

My heart beats so hard it might explode. I might pass out.

No. I can't. If I pass out ...

The door opens. More light streams in and a large figure strides closer to me. I recognize him, and it makes bile form in my mouth when I see what he's holding. In Boris's hand is a knife. But it's not just any knife. No, it's a butcher knife. I move away from him, launching my body as far away as I can.

I refuse to scream again, though. There is no way I will give the maniac that. My screams are his aphrodisiac, and I won't give in.

There must be a way out. I might lose a part of myself in the process, but I will get away.

Or I will die trying.

"Here," the bastard says as he throws me a bottle of water. I don't want to drink it. Fuck, I don't want anything from this monster, but my mouth is parched, and I have to keep my strength up if I have any shot of ever getting out ...

Grabbing the bottle, I drink it way too fast, choking on the water and coughing it back up.

It settles in my stomach, making it turn.

Once I swallow, I look back up at him.

He steps closer, and I can see the look in his eyes as he looks me up and down.

His gaze makes me feel ill as it settles on my breasts.

"Too bad," he says as he steps closer. "I would have liked to fuck you, but *he* wants you for himself. He wants to see what's so special about the girl who brought Cyrus Reed to his knees."

My shoulders drop for a second at his words, but when he lifts up the knife, they tense again.

Adrenaline floods my blood as I wait. Beating fast and heavy. Making me feel dizzy. Saliva thickens in my throat as each second passes.

“But just because I won’t be able to, doesn’t mean I won’t ruin you. I’m still allowed to play and since you aren’t being picked up for a few days, we can have some uninterrupted fun.”

I won’t scream.

I won’t scream.

I won’t scream.

Fear chokes me like a tight necklace around my neck. Cutting off my supply of oxygen, he approaches me like a cheetah, faster than I can ever imagine. My chains are tightening in his arms as he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out another set. This time, I’m stuck in place, and I won’t be able to move.

I kick and try to break the chains, but as I’m secured tighter to the bed, I know it’s futile. I won’t break out.

The first slice comes. Breaking through my efforts. My shoulder burns from where he left the gash. His blade hovers against my skin. Across my shoulders, down my bicep.

Slash.

Slash.

Slash.

My breath comes out choppy. Liquid dripping from where I was cut.

I pray it will end soon.

Cyrus

TWO DAYS.

Two long days.

I haven't eaten. I haven't showered. I haven't fucking slept. Time drags on in a never-ending loop. It melds together like a form of torture.

I wish I didn't care.

I wish I didn't feel.

But this girl changed everything. All I can think about is her. What he's doing to her. If he's broke her. I know I'm too late. He will have taken all the parts I love ...

My movements stop.

Fuck.

My hand lifts to my head.

Love.

I fucking love this girl.

Slowly, she pulled me from my darkness. She has shown me what it is to bask in the light again. I stand from my chair. The legs scrape against the floor as I head to where my men are.

I find them where they have been for days, except this time, Jaxson Price is here too. He's supposed to be one of the best hackers out there. He better be, because I need him to find Ivy.

He's using the intel Matteo has gotten to pinpoint the GPS location of Boris's phone. Apparently, the thing is not turned on, and when it is, it's untraceable. But I know if anyone can find her, it's him.

Alaric is also working with them to try to lure Boris in with a new shipment of guns, and Tobias is here as well. Pays to have the mafia and the most ruthless men on speed dial.

"I got something," Jaxson announces, pivoting in his chair to look at me.

I step closer to where he's sitting in the room. "What?" I'm in his face now. I know I shouldn't be, but I am. As if I think threatening Jaxson Price will get her back any faster.

I'm a fucking mess.

"Here." He points at one of the computer monitors in the surveillance room. "When Boris called to schedule the pickup of the guns, he pinged this location."

"Yeah. We know this, but there are too many buildings."

"I hacked into a satellite."

"Your point?" I have no idea what he's going on about, but if he could just get to it. So much time has been wasted already. We need to find her. I'm about to bark at him that he needs to clarify when he lifts a hand and points at the screen.

"See the red?" In front of me on one of the monitors is what appears to be a building. The image is a live feed taken from above. There are small red dots moving around. "That's a heat index," he clarifies. "There are bodies moving in that building."

"How do we know it's them?"

"We don't."

"I'm going." Trent stands.

And I follow him out the door, grabbing his shoulder. “No, you go in there, you die. I won’t have that shit on my shoulders because when I get Ivy back, she will have my balls if I let her brother die for this shit.”

He lets out a long-drawn-out sigh. “Then what?”

“I’ll go in. With my men. You’ll stay here.”

“I—”

I lift my hand. “She will need to know you are safe. You are staying here.”

He nods in defeat, but he won’t argue with me. He’s only ventured a moment in this underworld. I live my life here.

I turn to Matteo. “How many men can you spare?”

His lip tips up, and I know it will cost me.

“I don’t fucking care.” I might sound weak, but she’s it for me. She’s mine, and if it costs me every penny I have ever made, I will gladly pay the price.

He cocks his head. “Done. And it won’t cost you anything else.”

I turn to my men. Fifteen of my most trusted men are here. Awaiting orders.

“Alright, everyone, fall out.”

With Matteo’s men and Alaric’s guns, we are heavily loaded, expecting war, but I don’t think it will come to that. That’s not how the operation works.

The ride from my compound in Connecticut to the warehouse in Jersey is a lot longer than I want, but the use of helicopters is out of the question for now. The sound it would make would give us away for sure. So instead, we have them on standby just in case we need them. We’re not sure what condition we’ll find her in. I shake my head. Nope. I’m not going to think about that now. I need my head in the game if I’m going to get her out of there alive.

The minutes pass slowly, and it’s agony. Even though I tell myself not to think about what I’ll find in that warehouse, I

can't help it. My stomach is in knots. I have never felt this lost before. My brain is on an endless loop of what-ifs. It's like I'm lost in a maze of my own thoughts, one of the mazes with tall shrubs and no exit.

All the possibilities hitting like a ton of bricks.

“Almost there,” one of Matteo's men says, and I finally focus back on the road ahead of us. “We are a few miles outside the radius.”

There is no longer a highway. Now, we are on the side roads. Roads that seem deserted. The car slows to a stop, and then it shuts off.

“We get out here and go the rest of the way on foot.”

We all get out, and then we move in. It takes us fifteen minutes on foot to make our way through the trees that surround the warehouse.

This place is isolated. We made the right move by driving in.

Silently, we access the location. Luckily for us, Jaxson Price, who is still at our headquarters at my estate, is guiding us using the satellite he has accessed.

We could have gone in guns blazing, but then we risk casualties. Instead, we scope out the location, and once it's clear, I nod. It's time.

“How we getting in?”

Alaric holds up a grenade.

Leave it to him.

The plan is sound. Blow the door, storm the building.

“On three.”

And then it begins.

Mayhem. Complete pandemonium. My ears ring as debris starts to fly. The door completely gone now. Smoke billows out through what must be the hallway. Even with smoke, I can make out the way. I run, not wanting to spare another minute,

and then I turn the corner and run some more. It doesn't take me long to reach the only door in the hallway, and I kick it down. It bursts open, and lifting my gun, I storm in.

What I see has my movements halting, my muscles tightening, and an unnatural anger forms inside me. Tied to a bed is Ivy. She's still dressed, thankfully, but I see splotches of dried blood on her skin.

Her hair is disheveled, and her eyes are wide. I turn to the other presence in the room. Then I see him. Boris.

He has his butcher knife in his hand.

"Z," I say, motioning for him to secure Boris before I head to my girl.

Slowly, I pull her to me. "I have you now," I coo.

She winces at the contact.

"You're safe." She turns her head.

I expect her to cower, but instead, she pulls back, looking at Boris.

"Give me the knife."

My eyes go wide, but I don't move.

"Give me the fucking knife, Cyrus."

"Don't," I say, looking down. "You don't want his blood on your hands. Let me take this burden for you."

"But then it's on your hands."

"My hands are already stained with blood."

She gives me a nod, and I turn to face Boris. He looks from me to Z, who is holding the knife in one hand and a gun in the other.

"You can't kill me. Without me, you won't ..."

A gunshot goes off, smoke rising from the gun in Z's hand. "I didn't want to hear him speak."

"We needed him." I shout.

“We don’t need him; we still have her,” he narrows his eyes in Ivy’s direction.

I’m about to step forward to silence him when I feel a hand on my arm and the clank of the chains. I stop what I’m about to say and grab the keys in Boris’s pocket.

She feels weak in my arms. Barely able to lift her head up at all. I want to cradle her to me, kiss her head, and tell her I will never let her go.

Gone is the man I’ve always been.

Strong and unfeeling.

He’s been replaced by a man whose heart has been opened.

I don’t even care who can see me. All my men and Matteo’s. All I care about is Ivy.

Pulling her closer to my body, I undo every chain on her frail body. Then I stand, Ivy in my arms, and walk out the door.

I’ll leave Z to clean up the mess. All my thoughts are on my Sun. Getting her home. Protecting her.

Over my shoulder, I look at Maxwell. “Call the doctor. Have him meet us at my house. Also tell the helicopter they can land.”

Since the threat is taken care of, we can return home faster this way.

Even though it’s only been two days, Ivy feels lighter in my arms. I wonder if he fed her.

If I could kill the bastard again, I would.

I cross the distance and get us into the helicopter. Keeping her in my arms, we take off and head toward my compound.

She doesn’t speak during the ride. Instead, she snuggles in closer to me. Broken.

I was too late.

The marks on her body prove it.

My fists clench, and I want to kill her father next. This is his fault. Ivy deserves justice. But I know that has to be her choice. She has to decide her father's fate. If he lives or dies.

Personally, I wouldn't allow the fucker to live. If it was up to me, I would drop off Ivy and go straight to his desolate brownstone and put a bullet in his head. But even that would be too nice. Ivy has multiple cut marks on her upper body, and he deserves the same.

Before long, the helicopter lands, and I'm carrying Ivy into the house. I don't stop until I'm on the second floor in my bedroom.

I walk over to the bed and place her down before moving to get a towel.

Her hand shoots up when I try to leave. "No," she croaks, her voice strained. "Don't leave yet."

I look down at her, and her gaze is on me. Her eyes haunted by whatever horror she endured.

"The doctor is coming," I tell her.

She nods but grimaces at the movement. "He didn't—"

She starts, and I shake my head. "You don't need to tell me."

"He didn't rape me," she says, and I let out a sigh of relief. "He hurt me, but not that."

I lean down and kiss the top of her head. "Let's not talk now. Let me clean you up and tend to your wounds."

"Okay." Her voice is soft like a whisper, and her eyelids flutter shut.

I use the opportunity to head to the bathroom and grab a towel.

When I return, she's sleeping peacefully. Her mind finally shutting down.

Slowly, I remove her shirt. I pull the blanket over her chest, only exposing her upper arms to me. I wipe the dried blood off her limbs. The cuts aren't that deep. He made them

deep enough to bleed, but they won't need stitches. The Butcher was known for toying with his prey. First with superficial cuts and then escalating.

It seems I got to her in time. Of course, there is damage, but it could have been so much worse.

While I clean her, I hear a knock on the door.

"Come in," I say, followed by the sounds of footsteps. The doctor is the type of doctor who doesn't ask questions. He's on my payroll as well as Tobias and company.

He keeps his head down and stays out of everyone's business.

"I'll leave you."

A small hand touches mine, and I look down to see crystal blue eyes staring up at me.

"You can stay," she whispers.

"Are you sure?"

She gives me a small nod.

The doctor is quiet as he assesses her injuries, but before long, he leaves. She's bandaged up, but just as I figured, any scars will fade over time. The scars inside her might not. But Ivy is strong. Bright like the sun, she will be okay. I know it.

"Are you okay?" I ask, sitting down on the bed and pulling her close to me.

"No, but I will be."

She is very quiet for a moment. "It will never end, right?"

"What do you mean?" I ask. "You're safe with me."

"He didn't rape me because I wasn't meant for him." My blood runs cold. Words dry on my tongue as I try to think of something to say.

"I will keep you safe," I repeat.

"I don't want to lie in wait." She pushes away and looks down at me.

From this angle, she looks fierce.

“Okay.”

“Use me.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“This isn’t your choice, Cyrus Reed.” She moves to stand and leave the bed. “If you won’t, I’ll use myself.”

“Sun ...” I pull her back, burying my face in her neck. “I can’t lose you too.”

“You won’t. But I can’t wait for the other shoe to drop. I won’t be anyone’s scared victim. Use me as bait and then finish it.”

I know she’s right. I know it’s the only option. But I still hate it.

“Say yes.” She turns her face to kiss me on the lips.

“Yes.”

One word. One word that changes everything. Because that one word means there is nothing I wouldn’t do for Ivy Aldridge.

She will be my doom.

Ivy

I CAN'T BELIEVE I AGREED TO THIS. ACTUALLY, WORSE ... I can't believe this was my idea. Tomorrow morning, I'll be putting myself on the chopping block. I'll pretend to be docile and scared, but in truth, the anger inside me is so deep, I'm not sure how I'll do it.

Acting is not my strong suit.

Never has been. If I don't like you, you know it. If I do, I'll do anything for you.

It's a trait I like about myself, normally. But now, when it could cost me my life, not so much.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Cyrus asks, pulling me closer to him in the bed.

"Nothing." I have so many things I want to say to him, but I just don't know how to. It's not the time.

It should be easy, but the emotions I feel for this man are suffocating me.

He saved me.

For that, I owe him my life. But it's so much more than that ...

Emotions are running high tonight, so as much as I want to say things to him right now, I can't. Both of us need to be in a

good headspace.

“It’s not nothing, Sun.” He cuts into my inner ramblings.

“You’re right. It’s not.”

He leans forward and kisses my head, a gesture I have grown to love.

Love.

The words hover inside me to say out loud, but how can I know if this is love? It might be. The circumstances leading to our relationship are strange, to say the least, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t real.

They are.

But still, the words stick to the roof of my mouth, refusing to leave.

I swallow with difficulty, trying desperately to find my voice and say the thoughts plaguing my brain.

“What if something goes wrong?” My voice drifts from my mouth in a soft whisper.

“It won’t.” There’s conviction in his tone, but I’m not sure I believe him. Not after everything I’ve been through. Nervously, I bite my lip.

“You can’t know that for sure.”

“I can. And I do. I will not let him have you. Ever. Do you hear me?”

I nod silently, and he lifts his hand and strokes my cheek.

“Words. Say you understand.”

“I understand.”

“You’re mine, and no one takes from me.” His words are final and resolute. But I wonder how long he’ll want to keep me.

I expect him to try to chase the demons away by kissing me, but it never comes. Instead, he holds me tight and rocks me in his arms. It’s not what I expect from him, but it’s so

much more. It's exactly what I needed, even though I didn't know it.

He makes me feel cherished, safe, and most of all, even if it's temporary, he makes me feel like I'm his.

THE NEXT MORNING COMES BEFORE I'M READY FOR IT. Sunlight streams in from the closed blinds being pulled back. When I open my eyes, I'm temporarily blinded.

"Good morning," Cyrus says as he crosses the distance. He makes it to me in two steps, his heavy footsteps making me smile. Before I can think about it, he's placing a gentle kiss on my mouth.

"What time is it?"

"Four p.m."

"What? That's not morning. Shit. I have to get up." I jump up too quickly, forgetting that I had hit my head only days earlier.

Although I'm feeling dizzy, I refuse to show it. I know if I do, Cyrus won't let me help him.

Failure isn't an option on this.

This sicko was going to take me, and my worst nightmares can't tell me what he would do if he got me.

I'm not dumb enough to think another woman won't take my place if we don't get him.

Slowly, I walk to Cyrus's bathroom.

When I step inside, my steps falter at the reflection of myself in the mirror. Boris might not have touched my face, but the remnants of my capture are clear all over me. From my hollowed eyes and the dark circles, my skin looks drab. But it's the sight of the bandages on my arms that makes my blood turn cold.

There are at least five on each arm. I remember each cut, and a shiver works its way down my spine.

“What are you looking at?”

When I don't answer, he steps up behind me. “I asked you a question. What are you looking at?”

“How I look,” I whisper.

“And how is it you think you look?” I turn my head to look at him, but he follows my movement. “No. Don't look at me. Look at yourself.”

He steps up closer, so close I can feel each inhale and exhale of his body.

In the reflection of the mirror, his eyes beg me if this is okay. I nod, and he puts his hands on my hips.

“Look at yourself.”

I do.

“You know what I see?”

I shake my head.

“I see a survivor. I see a strong woman who didn't break. Yes, you are bruised, but you didn't break. I see a woman who, even though she should be scared, offers herself so that no other woman would have to endure what she has. Now look at yourself. Do you still see anything else? On top of being the strongest woman I know, you're also the most beautiful.”

“Hardly.”

One hand lands on my back, tilting me forward. The other shimmies up my T-shirt, exposing my panties to him.

I catch his stare in the mirror as he slowly lowers them down my ass until they pool on the floor.

“Is this okay?” he asks, and a part of me melts right there. Even through his haze, he won't take.

I nod.

“Words.”

“Yes, Cyrus.”

“You are the sun. You shine brighter than anything in this universe. You burn so hot that when I touch you, I’m sure I’ll melt.” His hand parts my legs, and then his finger teases my seam. When he dips inside, I swear I will combust from the heat growing inside me. “See that flush? See the way you look? The haze in your eyes.” He pumps his finger in and out. “You are gorgeous. This is the most beautiful you have ever looked.”

I hear him moving behind me, and then he leans closer to me, flicking his tongue on the skin by my ear.

He removes his fingers, and just as I’m about to beg him not to, he thrusts to the hilt inside me. I lean forward over the counter, my face close to my own reflection. My pupils are wide.

He thrusts in and out of me like a possessed man.

“Like this ...” He fucks me harder. “Like this, with me inside you ...” *Thrust.* “You are perfect.” *Thrust.* “You are everything.” *Thrust.* “You are my light.” *Thrust.* “*Entee albi.*”

His moves become more animalistic at that, and I know we are both close.

Together, we fall over the edge.

Ivy

THE PLAN IS IN MOTION. WE ARE HEADING TO THE LOCATION we found on Boris's phone. Apparently, and I don't know all the details, Cyrus hired some ridiculous hacker to break into Boris's phone. From there, they impersonated Boris, saying the girl was ready ... the girl being me.

I'm not sure exactly what was said about me, but after Cyrus received the text, he threw stuff. Broke a table and didn't seem too happy. Yet the plan is still on, so it must have worked.

When I asked, he didn't say one word about it. He just told me not to worry and that he would take care of me.

Whoever we are meeting will be ambushed, but that's not how the plan will go down.

I'm still bait.

So that means, right now, I'm chained up again.

The only difference is these chains are for show.

They aren't secure, and I have a gun on my back. Not that I think I will use it, but the security of knowing it's there is worth it.

I'm still not sure how much I like this plan, or if I think it will work, but either way, I support Cyrus.

It feels like an eternity as I wait, arms fatigued from being behind my back.

“Incoming,” I hear, and I know that Cyrus isn’t in the room right now.

Instead, one of Matteo’s men is here with me. Matteo thought that they would send a man in first to make sure I was here. This is the part of the plan that should scare me.

But instead of letting it, I breathe in slowly, not allowing it to.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest as I hear the sound of footsteps, and then I hear more. Craning my neck, I see five men walking toward me, and in the center is a handsome man in a suit.

This must be the leader. He’s getting closer and closer, and all the nerves in my body feel like they are on edge.

“Magnificent.” He’s close enough that I can smell his cologne.

“Where is Boris?” He turns to Matteo’s man. “He did well.”

“Boris is on his way,” Matteo’s man answers. Lies, more like it. Boris will be going nowhere anytime soon, but he plays his part perfectly in the deception.

The man looks back at me and then turns to the other man. “How long have you been working for Boris?” he asks.

Whatever the man does or says has things going tense.

I can’t understand what he says, but something is not right. Before I can reach for the gun tucked in the back of my pants, I’m grabbed from the front.

“Out.” I hear, and I’m being forced forward.

That’s when all hell breaks loose.

Cyrus and Tobias’s men come out. It’s pandemonium. Shots are fired. Bullets fly through the air.

It's an all-out war. Bodies start to drop. I try to run away, but the man holding me, the man in the suit, grabs me and pulls me in front of him.

Cyrus steps out from where he was fighting.

It almost reminds me of an old-fashioned showdown, except I'm being held hostage.

If only I could grab my gun.

But I know it's impossible. Even from this angle where this man holds me in front of him, there is no way I'd be able to get to it. Especially since I have a knife cutting my neck to stop me from moving

"Cyrus Reed," the man states. He knows him.

"Alexander."

But the voice holds no warmth, just malice.

"She's quite lovely. I have to assume Boris is dead."

"You assume right."

"Well, then I thank you for delivering my new pet."

Cyrus's jaw clenches.

"Hopefully, she outlasts the last few. Few last long. None as long as—"

"Shut the fuck up." Cyrus lifts his gun.

"You always did have a soft spot for my pets," the man I now know as Alexander says. "I wonder if when I fuck her in the as—"

"I said shut the fuck up."

"Oh, this one is important. Dare I say more than Sybil?"

Sybil?

My brain tries to catch up to what I'm hearing. Who is Sybil? It sounds so familiar.

Sybil.

Cyrus steps forward. He doesn't have a clean shot. The only way to shoot him is through me.

But by the look in Cyrus's eyes, it's a possibility.

"Dear Cyrus. Why all the theatrics? Is that any way to greet your brother-in-law?"

And then all the pieces click together.

His first pet.

His favorite pet.

His broken pet is Cyrus's sister.

The knowledge swirls inside me like a venomous snake with a need to strike, and before I can think of why I shouldn't, I do. I strike. Not caring what happens to me, I move my body. Throwing my head back, I bash his nose, then drop to the floor.

"Don't ever speak of my sister." The gun raises, and the shot is fired.

The sound of his body hitting the floor ricochets like the bullet flying.

Cyrus dashes toward me, his arms coming around me.

"Why did you do that?" he asks.

"You were talking too much." I laugh.

"You could have died." He lifts his finger and swipes the blood from where the knife grazed my skin.

"But I didn't."

"Thank you," he says. Lowering his mouth to mine, he says, "Thank you for bringing me peace."

I know what his sister's death brought him, and this was my way of thanking him.

Cyrus

I CRADLE HER IN MY ARMS. TIGHTLY. THAT WAS CLOSE. TOO close.

But in the end, Ivy, being Ivy, did what she had to do. This woman will be the death of me. She is strong, smart, and she is my equal match. Now if only I could keep her.

I can't, though, and I know this. If I do, she will always wonder if what we had was real. I will always wonder it too. We came together because I took her. She never came to me of her own free will.

I know what I have to do.

I have to let her go. There is just one thing I need to do first.

Pulling out my cell phone, I hit the contact. "Bring him in."

Ivy is still in my arms, but at the sound of more feet, she takes a step away from me.

"Dad?" Her voice rises a pitch.

"What we do with him is up to you," I tell her. She looks at me, her eyes wide. No daughter should ever have to make this choice, but I won't take it away from her. She deserves it. Everything that has ever happened to her is because of this man.

“Help me, Ivy.”

At that, she laughs. She pulls completely away from me and stalks toward him. When she is standing in front of him, I notice the gun in her hand.

I step toward her, putting my hand on the barrel and turning it toward the ground.

“What are you doing?” she asks me.

“I can’t let you do that.”

Her mouth opens and closes before I take the gun out of her hand.

“You will get justice.”

“Will you kill him?” she asks me. “I don’t want another death on your hands.”

“Why?” I say, cocking my head at her.

She leans up and places her lips on mine. “You are a good man.”

“I won’t kill him.”

“What will you do with him?”

“Death is too easy for him. I will make him pay for the rest of his life.”

I lift the gun and aim it at Aldridge’s head. “I thought you said you wouldn’t kill him.”

“I did, but I will kill someone.”

My hand moves and takes aim exactly where it needs to be, to the blood I will spill today. Right now.

“Boss.”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t know?” I say, aiming right between Z’s eyes.

The traitor.

“She was a distraction. She was clouding your judgment. Sybil deserved better. She raised me too, she was like a sister

to me. I couldn't let your whore—" he starts to say, but I shut him the fuck up.

Bang.

His body drops to the ground. Aldridge starts to shake uncontrollably. I turn to Maxwell. "Set it up." I don't need to say more because he knows the plan. What the plan has always been since Ivy went missing from my island.

Z's death.

Aldridge framed for it.

"I'm taking her home," I say to Alaric. Wrapping my arm around Ivy, I lead her out of the warehouse.

"Cut out his tongue," I hear Tobias say as we walk out. Ivy shivers in my arms, but she doesn't object. She knows this is what needs to happen to protect us. To protect her.

Tobias doesn't like people to talk, and I can't say that I blame him. All the deaths will fall on Aldridge, a sale gone wrong.

She will finally be safe. Now to tell her.

Ivy

Something is wrong. Something is very wrong. Cyrus won't look at me. He won't speak to me. He won't even touch me.

He held me as he walked me to the car, but now we are driving, and instead of talking to me, he stares out the window.

"Cyrus ..." I start to say, but I don't know what to say after that.

A weird foreboding feeling claws in my skin.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

How could he be? I'm not. After everything that has happened, I'm not okay. He killed the man responsible for the death of his sister, the man who took me, the man who wanted me. The past few days have been a shitshow, so I understand why he's like this, but still, I expected more.

I expected him to hold me.

Comfort me.

I wrap my arms around myself.

I turn to look out my own window, and that's when I see it. We aren't heading to his compound; we are entering the city. In the direction of downtown.

Where I live.

“Why are we going this way?” I ask, looking back at him. He, however, is staring out his window. His jaw is tight, shoulders tense, but it’s his clenched fists that worry me.

“It’s time for you to go home.” His voice is robotic, lacking all the warmth I have come to know.

My hands reach out to touch him, but I stop myself before it connects with his skin.

“Why are you acting like this?” I ask, but he doesn’t even glance toward me at the sound of my voice. “Look at me, goddammit.”

That makes him turn.

Still, he doesn’t speak, and I’m transported to a time before. When his walls were down.

They are once again in place, and I hate it.

“Please don’t do this. Talk to me.” I reach out my hand and go to touch him, but instead, he takes my hand in his and places it back on my lap. The movement infuriates me.

“Don’t make this harder.” He turns his head to gaze out the window. He won’t look at me.

“Make what harder? What is this?” I say, demanding he speak to me.

“I was wrong about you being the sun, you are a blazing comet in the sky. You burn bright, but you aren’t meant to stay with me. I’m letting you go.”

Those words feel like daggers in my heart. “What if I don’t want to be let go?” I whisper.

“It’s not your choice.”

“Like hell, it isn’t. Look at me. Tell that to my face.”

I hope when he does, I will see the lie. But when he looks at me, I feel like ice has spread through my veins.

“Sun.”

“No. You don’t get to tell me it’s over and then call me your sun.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to admit you love me. Because I—”

“You want me to admit I love you. Of course, I fucking love you. I will and have killed for you. You are my everything. You are the only light I see in my dark world. But it isn’t fucking enough.”

“It is to me because I love you too.”

“But do you? You don’t know if you do. And if you stay, you will never know. Right now, you might think that, but next week, next month? Next year.”

“So, this is a test?”

“It’s not a fucking test. I love you, and I’m letting you go. No test. No tricks. I’m doing the right thing for once.”

“How could you?”

He’s quiet. “It’s for the best.”

“For who? For you. You’re taking the easy way out.”

“You need to go home. You need to think about what has happened. You need to be with your family ...”

The car pulls up to my house, and the door opens from the outside. He doesn’t move. Not one inch.

“This is it?” I choke back the sob that has lodged itself in the back of my throat. It hurts. It hurts so bad I want to scream. I want to shout at the injustice, but more than anything, I want to fall down onto the street and cry. Not only because of Cyrus, but because of everything. The past few months crash into my chest. Beating down on my heart.

“It’s the way it has to be. I took you ...”

He’s right. No matter how angry I am, I know he’s right. He took me, and this is the only way it can be.

I turn back to him.

To the man who proved himself to me. Who protected me. The man who loved me enough to let me go.

A tear falls from my eyes, then another one as I step out of the car. The door still open as I walk the few steps to the front door. By the time it opens and I'm in Trent's arms, my face glistens with a never-ending current of tears.

I cry for yesterday; I cry for today, and I cry for a future without Cyrus.

It isn't until the next day that I finally feel the full weight of everything that has happened to me. It's not until I'm alone in my bedroom that I stare at the cuts and bruises from everything I went through.

As much as I don't want to be away from him, I realize now how fucked I am from my ordeal.

I spend the first day crying in bed.

I don't eat.

I don't sleep.

I don't even want to speak.

By day two, things get a little better. I'm now able to look at myself in the mirror without crying. Food has taste again.

I beg for Trent to bring back my mom, but he says I need more time. That I need to be stronger.

It isn't until day five after my return that my mom walks in.

It's been months since I've seen her. She looks good. For the first time in forever, her hair is brushed, and her eyes are clear.

When she sees me, she smiles, and of course, that makes me cry again. She doesn't talk, but that's okay. A smile is enough to bring the light back inside me.

It takes another week before she starts to talk, and when she opens her mouth and says my name, tears fall from my eyes.

We're outside and the sun is shining bright. She blooms in front of my eyes.

“Your father is gone, you know?” she says and my heart lurches in my chest.

I lift my hand from where it is in my lap and take hers in mine. We’re sitting on the back patio, staring at the flower buds that are growing in our garden.

“I finally feel like I can breathe,” she whispers.

She might be able to, but now I can’t.

TIME PASSES SLOWLY WHEN YOU MISS SOMEONE. I THOUGHT that when I left Cyrus behind that day, the empty feeling in my heart would fill over time. But instead, the longer it is, the more my heart feels like it’s breaking in two.

It’s been one month.

I’ve spent my time bringing my mother’s garden and my mother back to life.

With my father gone, my mother has finally gotten to a better place.

It didn’t happen overnight, and maybe the flowers helped, but now, we stand together outside watering the plants.

They are in full bloom now. Spring is thick in the air. The smell of flowers permeates through my nostrils, making me feel alive. But as much as I do feel alive, there is still something missing. My mother is my priority, though. She needs me now. With my father in jail, she can’t be alone.

“It’s beautiful,” she says.

I turn to the flower she’s looking at. “See this flower here.” She points at a closed bud. She must have planted it without me as I haven’t seen it before.

“It’s evening primrose. During the day, it closes. Sometimes it even withers, but that doesn’t mean she won’t flourish.” She holds the closed bud to me. “It’s in the dark

when it comes alive. Some of the most beautiful things grow in the darkness.”

I look up to find her gazing at me.

“Go to him,” she says, and I don’t even know how she knows.

“I might not have been here.” She points at her head. “But I heard. Go to him.”

“But who will take care of you?”

“Ivy, when I named you, I would never know how true your name would mean. Do you know what Ivy means?”

I shake my head.

“It means faithfulness. You are everything an Ivy should be. But you put yourself last. It’s time you stop thinking about me. Be true to you.”

“Go.”

I look back at the flower, the evening primrose, and then I go.

Cyrus

ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT. ANOTHER POKER GAME. I'M SICK OF the pretense. I never loved being here, but now what little I liked is gone.

It's like all the light in my world has been robbed from me. It's like the sun that my life orbits is gone, and in truth, it has. Letting her go was and is the hardest thing I have ever done.

There isn't a second that I don't think I should change my mind, break into her house, and take her back.

But I don't.

Instead, I wait for her to decide. I need her to come back to me. To tell me again that she loves me. To love me now that it is her choice.

I'm standing in the same place I have stood for weeks, watching as bets are made and money is lost and won.

Alaric is at the table and beside him is Matteo and Tobias. I have grown used to them here now. Ever since they helped me, I owe them, so they always have a spot at my table.

I keep to myself as always, drinking my cognac. Cards are being drawn when I see him from the corner of the bar.

What the fuck is that fucker doing here?

He is no longer welcome at my game.

I know it's not his fault, but rules are rules. Maxwell sees him at the same time I do, and both of us start walking to the entrance of the room.

That's when the crowd parts, and I see he's not alone.

My fists unclench.

Trent looks up at my men surrounding him. "Call off the dogs."

With one signal of my hand, they stand down as I approach Trent and Ivy.

She's even more beautiful today than she ever was in the past. Her skin has a healthy glow as if she's been out in the garden too long and her cuts have faded.

"What are you doing here?" I ask probably gruffer than I should, but I can't help it. If this is a mirage, I don't want it to fade. But I also don't want to get my hopes up.

I have lived in the dark too long to see a glimmer of light and then be thrust back in.

She steps closer, and the smell of a freshly bloomed flower hits my nose. I want to inhale her and never let her go.

She opens her mouth to speak, but I lift my hand.

"No. Not here," I say. "Follow me."

There are too many people here. I don't want this—whatever this is—to be done here in front of people I don't trust. These men will use my weakness against me if I'm not careful.

"She's not going anywhere with you."

I level Trent with my eyes, about to tell Maxwell to take him out back when I feel a soft hand touch me.

"Trent." Her hand is still on my arm. "I'm going with Cyrus. Thank you for bringing me here, but I need to speak to him alone."

He looks at her for a second before reluctantly nodding.

Once he steps away, I grab her hand and pull her out of the ballroom and up the stairs to my office. I don't know what this is, so that seems like the best place to go.

When we are inside, I turn to her. "I'm listening." She doesn't deserve my attitude, but I'm too wound up to tone it down.

"I love you," she blurts out, and that's enough for me because as soon as the words leave her lips, I pounce. Pulling her toward me, I wrap my arms around her and seal my mouth to hers.

"Took you long enough," I grit out, and her blue eyes widen as she pushes back to look at me.

"I had to know," she whispers.

"And do you?"

"I do."

The space that separates us shrinks as I move toward her again, until our bodies touch and I can feel her inhale of breath.

"You know I will never be anyone other than the man that I am. I don't leave my compound."

"You've left for me." Her mouth twitches with amusement.

"Yes. Only for you or if I need to." I lean down and kiss her small nose. "Life won't be easy with me."

"I don't care."

"It might be darker than you're used to."

She wraps her arms around my neck, lifts up to her tiptoes, and brushes her lips against mine. "Then I will be the evening primrose." I cock my head, not understanding her words. "I'll live in the dark. I'll bloom in dark. All I need is you, Cyrus."

I kiss her again. "All I need is you. I love you, Sun. I stopped believing. Long before you, I stopped believing, I thought I would always live in the blackness, but you brought me light."

And she has.

She's all the light I will ever need.

EPILOGUE

Cyrus

FOUR YEARS LATER.

FROM ACROSS THE DISTANCE, I CAN SEE HER. SHE'S STILL JUST as beautiful as she was that first time. Actually, even more so. She was pure light. As bright as the sun.

I took her then.

Made her mine.

I've never regretted that decision because she illuminated every dark crevice of my mind, of my heart, and most importantly, of my soul.

Am I still the villain?

Fuck yeah, I am.

But with her, never.

She has shown me that no matter how dark and twisted I am, she will love me anyway, and even the monster can get a happy ending.

I stroll toward them without a care in the world. One thing I decided when I made Ivy my wife, three weeks after she came back to me, was to never let her go.

She fought me at first, claiming she needed to see her mom. That her mom would fade away again if she wasn't there.

I compromised.

So, every summer, we move to the island estate with her mother in tow. They spend the days gardening and playing out on the beach. Ivy did eventually open up that flower shop she always dreamed of. It's back on the mainland and the flowers she grows in our greenhouse she sells there. Her mother runs it for her when Ivy can't be there. It's given her something to live for and it makes my wife happy to see her mom flourishing.

It's perfect.

This island that once caused me pain is now my safe haven.

Here in this bubble, I'm at peace.

That doesn't mean I don't have to work, and I still hold my Friday night game.

But I don't let that touch my life.

That's business, and this ... this is family. I wouldn't trade it for a second.

Endless hours away from them is worth it to see them in the middle of the open grass. Knees on the dirt. Planting.

I walk up behind them before she sees me.

Primrose. Rose for short.

Named after a flower that grows in the dark, or so Ivy said.

"Daddy!" She jumps up, pulling away from her mom and grandmother, and flying into my arms.

"Momma teaching me how to plant."

After she lets me go, she steps back to point at the ground. To the pile of dirt that Rose has dug up.

Her whole body is covered in mud, including her face.

"Momma is letting me put the seeds."

“I see that, baby.”

My mother-in-law stands up from the ground and takes Rose’s hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” she says, and then they walk away toward the main house.

Ivy is still on her knees, patting the ground, when I reach my hand out to help her stand.

She’s not as dirty as Rose, but there is a smudge of mud on her face too.

Lifting my hand, I rub off the smudge and lean down and place my lips on hers.

Her mouth opens against mine.

It’s like coming home.

“Everything I am, everything I ever could be, is because of you and your love. You have given me a family.” I look at where her mother, who has become a mother to me as well, plays with our baby, and then I place a hand on Ivy’s rounded belly. “You have given me peace.” I lean down and kiss her. “Thank you.” She smiles against my mouth again before pulling away.

We carry our past with us. It’s in every inch of our skin. Our scars. Some you just can’t see, but they are there. I used to wear my scars as if they were the only part of me that mattered. But because of Ivy, I wear them like a faded memory. Sure, they are there, but they no longer define me.

Ivy taught me to no longer live in the past, but instead, to live for today. Live for right now.

Just plain live.

TARNISHED EMPIRE

DEDICATION

To my mom.

Thank you for always listening to me ramble about my crazy plot ideas.

P.S. Please skip all scenes where the characters are ... kissing.

EPIGRAPH

*Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing
with the darkneses of other people.*

~ Carl Jung

PROLOGUE

Alaric

Life is pretty fucking good.

My business is thriving. Money is plentiful, and a willing girl is always available to entertain me.

Tonight, I have a business meeting that could change the whole trajectory of my life. Word around town is Michael Lawrence is thinking of retiring. When I heard this, I jumped on the opportunity to speak with him. Apparently, he'll sell for the right price, which is cause for a celebration, considering he's the leading distributor of guns in the Southern Hemisphere.

The honey-colored liquor beckons to me from across my desk. Leaning forward in my chair, I reach for the decanter. My staff always know to keep it full.

This information almost seems too good to be true, but it's exactly what I need to get to the next level. To make this business my own instead of the floundering one my father left me when he passed away a few years back.

A person will always show their true colors, you just need to be watching them to see. I wasn't watching my father.

A valuable lesson learned.

One I will not forget.

But all the anger in the world won't change the past, so instead, I need to look toward the future.

I'm lost in thought until a sound coming from across the room has me looking up from my desk. My office door swings open, and my brother, Damian, walks in.

I haven't seen my brother in what seems like forever. He looks different standing there. Older. His dark eyes are the same—a complete contrast to my light ones—but his hair is longer and disheveled. Like me, he always looks like he has bedhead, but this is more. He looks like he just doesn't care.

He strides across the room toward my desk as if he owns the place, and he should.

Hands in his pockets, head cocked, he asks, "What time is the meeting?"

Despite his absence, I apprise him of my dealings.

"In an hour."

His mouth thins with displeasure. "You sure you want to do this?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think—"

My hand lifts to silence him. "Damian. When you run your own business, you can do what's best for you. This is my business, and this is what we need." Low blow, even for me, talking about the big fucking elephant in the room.

Years ago, when my father was still around, and Damian's actions mattered, he was reckless. He spent the early years of his life doing things he shouldn't, and it cost him everything.

What should have been his life is now mine.

He hates me for it—resents me—and I don't blame him. I'd hate me too. I took his birthright.

But his loss is my gain, or at least that's what my father told me when he handed me the keys to the almost crumbled castle.

My father was always quick to tell me this wasn't my fault, but rather Damian's. He deserved everything he got because he let a woman come before family.

When he should have been working, he was nursing a broken heart.

A lost love that was never his to have.

In the world I live in, there is no time for love. No place for it.

Always my father's punching bag, I listened and learned not to show weakness at an early age.

The most important thing is the "Business."

Family second.

And a wife ...

That wasn't on his radar.

My mother was easily forgotten once she left. After he knocked her up, not once but twice, she was more than happy to leave with fat pockets of cash.

Damian is an idiot who let his feelings get in the way.

When my father died, drugs and booze were Damian's only friends.

Even if he's never around, he still works for me.

"Lawrence could be up to something."

I shrug. "The old man wants out."

"Ever think it could be a ruse?" His question takes me off guard. Rarely did anyone question my judgment, let alone him.

"No," I answer firmly. Damian is silent, but then his hands reach out and rest on my desk, his fingers tapping out a beat. I wonder if he realizes he's doing it. He's always had that nervous tic. I cock my head and wait for him to say what he so badly wants to.

"You should consider it. Never can tell who to trust." His words cut through me. They reach their intended mark. The

thing is, even if I do care, even if I feel guilty for my part in his dismissal from the family business, I don't respond to his dig.

I narrow my gaze at him.

"You want to go for me?" I ask.

"What?"

My eyes search his face as I take him in. "Do you want to go in my place?"

"Because ..." His jaw is tight as he inhales in deeply before continuing. "Why would I do that? You already took everything from me. Do I really need to be your errand boy now, too?"

Sitting forward in my chair, I hit my fists on the desk. My scotch glass shakes, and the amber liquid inside swooshes toward the edge. It doesn't spill, though it made its point. "It's not my fault you fucked up your life."

A heavy silence falls upon us. My brother's face is unreadable as he coughs and then speaks. "This should have been mine." His voice is lower and more somber than normal.

"*Should* have," I stress, "but you fucked that up when you were banging hookers and snorting coke." No need to mince words. My brother was a real fuckup.

"I was in mourning."

Even fifteen years later, he still hasn't learned. I shake my head at his ridiculous comment. "You act like she was your wife."

"She could have been ..." His eyes bore into mine. I can feel the pain in his words. She was never his.

But in his mind, she could have been. Should have been.

He's loved her since we were children.

She was the daughter of my father's colleague. We all assumed that one day they would marry and combine the families. And maybe that would have been the case, but fate had other plans.

He continues to stare at me, his unwavering gaze making me uncomfortable. The old scar that runs from his left brow down his cheek looks darker than normal. A stark reminder of all the ways I hurt my brother in the past. Pain and regret seep into my blood, making me want to take away his pain. It's not an easy task, but emotions like this have their way of making me want to drink.

When I look at him, I still see the man who crumpled upon the news, who vanished into a shell from the loss he suffered. The loss he blames on me. He thinks her death is my fault, and maybe it is. I can still feel the heavy burden of guilt that sits on my shoulders. And if he's right, and it is my fault, it's made even worse because I'm also the asshole who stole his life.

"It wasn't meant to be," he repeats.

"It's my business," I remind him. Regardless of whether my actions brought us here, his inaction sealed the deal.

"Would it kill you just to stop?"

On a large exhale, I stare at the man who I once looked up to.

The man who helped me become who I am today. The clarity and resolution in his eyes haven't been present for years. He looks like the brother I lost, and I realize what a fool I've been.

My anger from the years I lost with him has blinded me to the fact that he's here now, and maybe he's right. Maybe we could run this business together. It's what my father was training us for before Grace.

"Sit." I gesture to the chair across from me, and he doesn't think twice before he takes a seat. Maybe this can be the beginning of something new. It always should have been two brothers working together. I reach for the glass to hand him one.

"What are you doing?" His deep brown eyes watch my every move.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm inviting you to have a drink with me."

Dark eyebrows slant into a frown before he nods. Still uncomfortable, still waiting on my answer.

“You’re going,” I finally say, and he stares blankly at me. Knowing my brother, he probably doesn’t want to get his hopes up. “You will go in my place. You want in? This is what you have to do. No objections,” I say smoothly.

His expression freezes. “Are you serious?”

“It’s not the final meeting. It’s only a talk to go over details. But if you want to be active in this, you have to start somewhere.”

His face continues to be unreadable, but I expect little from him. I won’t tell him my plans until I’m sure he can handle it. But when the time comes, I’ll give Damian the keys back to his portion of the castle.

“To the end of an era.” I lift my glass to make a toast.

“Only the dead have seen the end of war.” He smirks as he says his signature catchphrase that he stole from Plato, making me chuckle in response. I hadn’t realized I missed it until now.

“This is the beginning.”

“We shall see.” He rubs the back of his neck as he stands from his chair.

“Take my car. And pass along my apologies. Tell him something unavoidable came up.”

“Will do, brother.”

The word brother causes a stabbing pain to radiate inside me. It’s been too long since we’ve interacted like this.

As he walks out the door, he puts his phone to his ear. I’m not sure who he’s calling, but I lean back in my chair.

For the first time in a long time, things don’t seem so heavy.

Phoenix

Four years later ...

My father paces the office.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

What's wrong with him? This isn't normal behavior.

Right after college graduation, he demanded my presence back home. Then he tells me to come to his office to talk about "work." A part of me wonders if he's planning to pass down the company to me, but that wouldn't make any sense. He refuses to ever talk about it, but something is obviously driving him to act like a madman because no sane person acts this way at two p.m.

Sure, the pacing isn't necessarily a sign of an issue, but it's his office that has set off red flags.

Disarray.

Complete and utter disarray.

Those words clearly depict what is going on inside the four walls of this office.

I pull my gaze away from my father and allow myself to take in what should be a clean sanctuary for him to do business. Instead, it looks like a construction site that just had demo work done.

The first thing I see is the desk. It's turned over. My forehead scrunches as I look at it.

Wow.

That takes real strength to knock it down like that.

I can't believe the man who raised me could do that.

I'm impressed.

Not only is the desk on the floor, but so are the papers that should be resting on his desk. The phone is smashed.

I have to assume whoever called him pissed him off.

"What happened?" I take a step closer, and he steps back. From the way his brows knit together and his fist clenches, it's apparent that he's hanging on by a thread and trying not to snap at me.

"Leave, Phoenix," he grits out through clenched teeth.

I advance toward him, shaking my head on my approach. When I'm standing close enough that I can touch him, I place my hand on his shoulder.

"You asked me to come, so I'm here. Talk to me," I say. He turns his head and looks at me. Then he closes his eyes. They don't stay closed for a long time—just a beat—but long enough for his chest to rise and fall with his breaths.

With his gaze on mine, the look in his eyes begins to soften. "I don't want—"

"No." I place my hand on my hip, indicating I mean business. "You no longer get to push me away. You summoned me here for a reason. I'm your daughter, and this is my legacy too ..."

"Don't you want more?"

"No. Dad." I say the word and let it hang in the air. He might not be my biological father, but he raised me, and this is my choice. "I want to help."

His shoulders drop, and he walks toward the couch in the corner of his office. I follow suit and sit across from him.

“If we are going to talk business, we might as well drink.”

“Agree.”

Sitting down, he pours himself a glass of scotch and me another one. I’m not one for scotch, but if I’m trying to prove myself, I’ll accept.

“What’s going on with the business?”

My father rubs at his chin. “Nix, there is something I need to tell you ...” he says, and I laugh. He used my nickname, one he rarely uses. It’s reserved for times when he thinks he’ll disappoint me.

“Dad, I know what you do.” My voice is nonchalant. He can pretend all he wants that he’s simply in the import-export business, but I’m no fool.

I watch as he opens his eyes wider, surprised by my revelation. “How?” he asks.

“You might have sent me to boarding school and then away to Switzerland for college, but I have always known.”

From where I sit, I can see the muscles in his jaw tighten. He’s not happy, and I know it. It doesn’t matter, though. This day was going to happen sooner or later.

“You have?”

“Of course.”

His eyes go wide at that, and his mouth hangs open. He rights himself rather fast and cocks his head, still staring at me in complete shock. “And you don’t hate me?”

“You saved me. How could I ever hate you?” My voice drips with emotion. I don’t like to think about my life before, but it doesn’t stop it from being true. He saved me. After my parents died, he took me in and raised me as his own. I owe my life to him. So even if he’s a criminal, I’ll always love him.

He mulls over my words, but eventually, he nods his head in acceptance then lifts his glass to take a swig.

I lift my own, placing it to my lips. When the first drop touches my tongue, I bite back the urge to cough. I need my

father to take me seriously, and coughing would probably show my lack of maturity.

He treats me like his little girl. Capable and smart, but still a little girl. Now that I'm out of college, I want him to see me as the adult I am—if I have any hope that he'll let me help him.

After everything he's done for me, I owe him. I have to repay him for taking me in and caring for me.

Most girls my age would be okay living in the lap of luxury, but I'm not most girls.

Being taken care of isn't for me. I want to earn my keep and show my worth.

I let the scotch pour down my throat, allowing it to scorch a path as it pools in my stomach and makes me warm.

This makes my dad smile. "It's an acquired taste." He takes another swig, and the sound of the glass against the wood echoes through the quiet of the room as he places the glass on the coffee table.

It reminds me of the noises that come from a grandfather clock ticking in the dead of night, dark and ominous. But there's no need to baby me, and he'll find out soon enough. "How much do you know?" he asks. Leaning forward, he balances his elbows on his thighs.

"Everything," I admit.

He's silent, taking in this information. A girl can learn a lot about her family while attending a private school. Some good, most bad. Bratty rich girls love nothing more than to tear a fantasy down. It's fine. I'm happy I'm no longer blind to the truth. I'm about to open my mouth when he lifts his hand to speak.

"The guns ..." He lifts his right brow, checking to see just how far my knowledge goes.

"I know *everything*," I clarify. I know that my adoptive dad is one of the largest arms dealers in the world. "I know what you do. I know you sell guns."

“My clients—”

“Dad.” I hold up my hand. “I know your clients aren’t honorable people. Probably none of them are law-abiding citizens, either.”

Deep lines full of worry form along his brow. “You *really* don’t hate me?”

“Of course not. Who you are isn’t defined by what you do. You are my father, and I’d love you no matter what you did. Now tell me what happened and let me help you.”

As if my words are waging war inside him, he takes a deep drawn-out breath.

“I didn’t want you to be a part of this. I wanted more for you.” His soft and powerful words are full of love, but it’s my life, and I’ll make him understand.

“I’m an adult now, and this is what I want.” I level him with my eyes. “Now talk.” There is no room for objection. He knows me well enough to know this.

“Very well.” He lets out a throaty laugh before grabbing his drink, leaning back, and getting comfy on the couch. I know this conversation will be long. “My guns were seized.”

I didn’t expect that, and I’m instantly on edge, praying he’s not going to jail.

“By ...?”

“The competition. A piece of shit who is trying to destroy me. I never wanted this to touch you.”

“Tell me.”

The hand holding his glass tightens, his knuckles turning white. This can’t be good.

“His name is Alaric Prince, and he’s the worst of men. He has been systematically trying to ruin me for years. Not to mention the hit he put on my life that by some chance I’ve avoided.”

Hit?

It feels like I've been sucker punched. There's a hit on my father. The one word is like a puzzle piece that has been lost for years but is now placed in its slot. Everything that's happened over the years begins to make more sense. The reason my father hides in his compound. There's a hit on his life. I need to know more.

"I don't understand. Who is he?"

"A little shit." The force in his voice takes me off guard. There is a story here, and he has to fill me in so I can help him.

"You will have to give me more than that." I lift my right brow at him in challenge. "We've come this far. If we are doing this, you might as well tell me everything."

"It's a long, complicated story."

I lean my body forward, placing my elbows on my knees. Cocking my head, I smile. "Well, then it's a good thing I'm home for good. Because time is something I have in spades. I have all the time in the world, Dad. Tell me. How long have you been at war?"

"Four years."

Suddenly, more things come together. The reason he shipped me off to a private college in the middle of nowhere. Why he never let me take his name when I asked. Why he doesn't publicly acknowledge me. I thought it was because I hadn't proved myself, but he was at war. He was protecting me. A warm feeling spreads inside me, followed by one as cold as ice. This Alaric person has hurt the one person who has tried to protect me. I need to do something; I need to know more. But first, I need to make sure I'm hearing him right. That all this time, I was enough.

"This is why ..." Tears well in my eyes.

Lifting his hand, he reaches across the coffee table and takes mine. "I was never embarrassed by you. You are my daughter. Maybe not by blood. But because I loved you, he couldn't know about you."

The love and devotion I have for this man makes me stand and start pacing. I am now where he was only a few short

minutes ago. Nervous energy courses through my body as I think of what all this means.

I walk back and forth a few times, but no words form in my mouth. They feel dry as though I am chewing on sand. But I need to say something. Ask something. “And now? Does he know?”

“I have no reason to believe he does.” Behind his words is doubt.

“Why does he hate you?”

He shrugs, but I level him with a stare. He needs to tell me. Whatever it is, I need to know.

“Because he thinks I murdered his brother.”

It doesn't surprise me to hear my father has killed someone. Michael Lawrence is a ruthless man, but from the way he looks at me, I don't believe he did it.

But I still ask, “Did you?”

He looks at me, eyes widening. “No.”

That makes me stop pacing. I nod to myself, knowing there is only one solution. “Then we must stop this war.”

“Trust me, I've tried. There is nothing I can do. We are well beyond him listening or believing.”

We both sit in silence, and a million thoughts run through my brain. My knee starts to shake from nerves, but I squash it down. Inaction is not feasible, and even if I'm not sure about my idea, I have to voice it. “Then I guess there is only one thing we can do.”

“And that is?”

“Make him.” My lips part into a large smile. My father doesn't return the sentiment, instead choosing to give me a look that says, *Okay, captain obvious, but how.*

“How do you suppose we do that?”

“Leverage. Take everything from him, and once we burn him to the ground, he will.”

“By then, it will be too late.”

“Why?” I ask.

“There is no way to get close enough to him.”

More ideas start flying through my mind, but they are darker and dirtier, and I’m so sure my father will hate every single one.

“I can. He doesn’t know me. No one does. I can get the information you need.”

“Phoenix.”

“No, Dad. Don’t *Phoenix* me. This is my choice. I’m not the little girl you sent away. Let me help you.”

His lips form a thin line as he stands and starts pacing again. He doesn’t like the idea, but at least he’s considering it.

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” he implores.

“I won’t.”

“You don’t know that ...” His hand reaches up to pull at his hair. “Alaric Prince is out for revenge. He is the worst of men. I should know.”

I move around the fallen desk to where he stands so I can get closer to him. When I’m directly beside him, I look up at him. “Don’t doubt me.”

“I don’t. I just can’t—”

I can see the love, fear and desperation deep in my father’s eyes.

“Trust me. Believe in me. Let me help you.”

Let me save you the way you did me.

“Okay.” And with that, we seal my fate and the fate of Alaric Prince.

I will find the leverage needed to bring the enemy down. No matter what.

Alaric

WITH BUSINESS SETTLED IN THE STATES, IT'S TIME FOR A change of venue. My guns are secure—or better yet, the AK-47s I stole from Michael Lawrence are secure in Cyrus Reed's estate.

Normally, I wouldn't store my guns outside my warehouses, but since I lifted these off the competition, I can't have them in circulation yet. The voyage from Cyrus's to the Caribbean only takes a week, but it's the perfect opportunity for me to relax before work picks up again.

I'm headed to the Bahamas first, then making stops and detours along the way. At some point, I need to go to Venezuela and then while in South America I'll schedule the rest of my meetings.

But it's not just business for me on this trip. I plan on indulging in a few pleasures.

Which is why I'll kick off my trip in the Bahamas.

Mathis has opened a new club at the large hotel on the island, and he's throwing a gigantic party next week.

It's an excellent place to hold a few meetings.

One might not think of a club as a suitable location to sell guns, but I have found since taking over the business that

clubs are the perfect place. Women, booze, drugs, and guns are, in fact, the perfect mix.

Men are more apt to spend when a pretty young thing is grinding on their dick.

BY THE TIME THE YACHT DOCKS, I'M READY TO LET LOOSE. I used my time at sea as an opportunity to schedule meetings for this weekend, the first one being with Xavier. He wants fifteen thousand guns for a government coup.

I don't give two shits what he's using them for; all I care about is the money. This deal alone will gross me twenty million.

In my office on the main deck, I pick up the phone and dial Cristian's extension. He answers on the first ring. "Be ready to leave at eleven," I order before he can speak.

"Yes, Boss," he replies, and I hang up. There isn't much else to say. My men know the drill. They accompany me everywhere—a night out clubbing on a tropical island included.

Cristian is my right-hand man and my head of security. I don't mix business and pleasure with my staff, so these men are not my friends. I run a tight ship and have no attachments to anyone. It makes life a hell of a lot easier.

The only person I ever truly cared about is dead. It was my fault, and I won't make that mistake again. If I don't care, then everyone is dispensable.

Standing from my desk, I head to my master stateroom in the front of my boat. Once inside, I strip out of my clothes and step into the shower.

My yacht is my home. Although I own a few residences scattered around the world, I rarely stay in any of them.

I stay in the Caribbean during winter and spring, and I usually spend the summer in Europe. But this year, because

of business, I never made the transatlantic crossing, which is fine. I like how empty the islands are right now.

Every once in a while, I stay put. In my business, it's better not to be in one place too long.

Where most people have storage in the bottom of the boat, I keep my smaller shipment of guns that still need to be transported. My boat is large enough. At over one hundred and seventy feet, it's large enough for all my needs but still small enough to float under the radar. Pun intended.

I finish showering and head to the main salon. My men are standing in all-black suits, wearing their earpieces, ready to go. It doesn't take us long to arrive at the club.

And once I get there, Mathis has a beautiful woman waiting for us. My friend isn't in town. Apparently, he's in the South of France somewhere, St. Tropez probably, but he knows how to make a guy feel special. When the beauty in the red dress shows me to my table set up high above the club in the roped-off section of the VIP lounge, half-naked women are already dancing nearby.

There's no need even to order, as the table has already been prepared to my liking. Vodka, tequila, scotch, and champagne—something for anyone who comes by with guests.

The first person to arrive is Xavier.

“What can I get you?” I ask.

“Vodka,” he answers, and I nod to the waitress who goes about pouring us both drinks.

“How many?” I know the number we agreed upon during our earlier phone calls, but things change, so it's always smart to double-check.

“Fifteen thousand,” he confirms. Maybe not enough for a war, but I wouldn't put it past him to be getting guns from my competition too.

Not for long, though. If all goes as planned, Lawrence will be as good as dead by month's end. Now just to find the

right bait to lure him into my trap.

Lifting my glass, I take a swig, shutting down all thoughts of revenge so I can deal with the matters at hand, the reason I'm here at this club to begin with. "When?"

"End of the month."

"Location?"

"Same as before."

Good. I know the area. Lawrence also keeps some of his gun shipments there, which means Xavier is double-dipping. He knows Michael will probably not come through, not after the last smaller shipment I lifted from him, but it appears my buddy over here is giving him one more chance to right his wrongs.

I can feel the smile growing on my face. I'll steal that shipment too, and in turn, after I ruin him, I'll make Michael Lawrence beg.

"It will be the same price as before."

"Thank you, my friend."

I wish he wouldn't call me that. He's no friend of mine. He's a client, plain and simple, but worse, he's not a very loyal one. But that's okay. He doesn't even realize he's just a pawn in my game.

"Anything else?" I ask. He shakes his head at my question. "Then let's drink."

"And get laid." He laughs. They are all the same—every damn one of them. As much as I would love to do that, looking around the room, I have yet to see anyone who catches my attention. They all scream desperate the way they seductively shake their bodies for me to appreciate. I lift my drink and allow my gaze to skate across the vastness in front of me. In typical Mathis form, he designed this club for decadence and sin. Most of the space is modern. Cold and sterile, with a metal ceiling and metal bars. But it's the VIP room where I am that really stands out.

Each private banquette has the ability to be closed off to the public, with white chiffon drapes that you can pull shut to hide all manner of business. At the moment, mine are open, allowing me the perfect vantage point to watch.

Mathis did an excellent job.

As we both bring our drinks to our mouths, I notice that Cristian isn't looking at me, so I follow his gaze. It doesn't take me long to see what or rather who he is staring at. There, at the end of the row of banquettes, is the most exquisite woman I have ever seen.

Long brown hair that flows down past the swell of her breasts. It's her eyes, though, that keep me from looking away. From where I'm sitting, I can't see the color, but when she sees me, they are mesmerizing. She only glances my way for a second before turning around and giving me the cold shoulder.

Few women have done that. Not at a place like this.

Most women throw themselves at me. She, however, stands with her back to me. Her behind is not the worst view I've seen. Her short dress that looking from the front seemed modest is anything but.

No. Here, from this angle, nothing is left to the imagination. Two thin straps lower to an open back that dips to the dimples of her ass.

Possessed, I stand from my seat, needing to know who this girl is—and why she so casually dismissed me.

I'm a man on a mission as I stalk over to her. My team is quick to follow, so I'm intimidating as hell as I make my approach.

I should tell them to stand down, but I want to see her squirm. There's no way that a little thing like her won't.

When I finally make my appearance, I'm towering behind her. She hasn't seen me, but she must feel my presence because I watch her back muscles tighten.

Slowly, and with purpose, she turns around to face me.

She has to crane her neck up, but when her gaze reaches mine, her pupils dilate.

I hadn't come here tonight hoping to fuck, but after watching the way her mouth parts and a slight puff of oxygen escapes her pouty yet full lips, I want to fuck her. I want to feel those lips wrapped around my cock.

"I'm not interested," she spits out before I can even speak. Her response has me throwing back my head, laughing—something I rarely do these days.

"You don't even know what I was going to ask."

"You were going to ask me if I wanted a drink. And seeing as I already have one ..."

She lifts the glass that I hadn't previously seen in the air. It's new, the bubbles still bouncing on the glass from the pour. "I don't need another."

"And what if you're wrong?"

"So, you were coming to ask me if I wanted to... what?" Her eyebrow lifts. "*Talk with you?*"

"Again, wrong." Not entirely wrong, but wrong enough.

"Well, color me intrigued. You came all the way here—"

"You noticed me." I smirk, and she must realize her mistake, and my smile broadens. "Here's what I think. I think you wanted me to come over here. I think you like the game of cat and mouse."

"I think you know nothing."

"Pity," I say, before turning and walking away.

"That's it?" she asks from behind me.

"Yep." I turn my head over my shoulder. "But ..."

I pause for emphasis. "If you have a different answer for me, I'll be back tomorrow. Same time. Same place." And with that, I walk away, right out of the VIP area and then right out of the club.

Once we step outside, I stop. Turning to the right, I look at Cristian.

“Yes, Boss?”

“Her name. Her social security number. Find me everything there is to know about that woman by tomorrow.”

He doesn't ask me why I need the info. I plan to fuck that girl, but I don't touch anyone without doing my due diligence.

Phoenix

I DID IT.

I can't believe I pulled it off.

The moment he turns and walks away, I refrain from the need to slump to the floor and let out the breath I have been holding through the entire exchange. I'm not sure if he'll turn around again, so I have to stay composed for a few more moments.

Come on. Come on. Leave already.

I watch intently as his body disappears in front of me. His men flank his side, a layer of protection that is intimidating. My heart is hammering in my chest, as the fear I was keeping at bay rattles inside me like a snake ready to attack.

They're almost completely out of sight, and then I can breathe. Then the panic will subside.

Maybe a few more moments.

The time passes slowly as I wait, like tiny grains of sand that get stuck in an hourglass. I want to shake it to make it go faster, but I know it's no use. Instead, I inhale deeply and will my hands not to tremble.

One, two, three, four ... By the time I hit ten, they have faded into the crowd, and there is nothing left other than a throng of women who desperately want that handsome man to

return. Not me. No, it doesn't matter how completely devastatingly handsome that he is; I'm happy he's gone. Because now I can finally let out the breath I was holding.

My gut reaction is to run out of here and go straight to my hotel to call my father. But I don't allow myself to do that.

I need to act cool and collected, just in case.

With my shoulders pulled back, I walk to the bar. I'm still in the VIP area, so there's no wait. Most of the guests in this section have bottle service at their tables. As easy as it is to just sit with some desperate man to get a drink, I don't. Not after my time with Alaric Prince.

On the outside, I might have looked cool and collected, but inside I shook the whole time we spoke. I wasn't prepared. Photos didn't do him justice. I knew he was attractive, but what I met at the bar tonight was so much more than attractive.

The word god springs to mind.

Like a real-life Poseidon. King of the ocean.

I knew from pictures that he had brown hair, but what I couldn't see in a picture was that nestled amongst the brown locks were streaks of blond from his time on the yacht. Sun-kissed features and crisp blue eyes.

He's gorgeous. Although, that might not be even strong enough of a word.

Needing to calm myself from the interaction, I smile at the handsome man behind the bar.

"Tequila." My hands still shake beside me.

"Any brand in particular?"

"Your best." Whatever will take the edge off. I don't normally drink this much, haven't since I graduated from college, but this calls for one or two. I wish my best friend Hannah were here. She would know how to talk me down from my crazy.

My nerves knot up tight. My breaths lodge in my throat from fear that I would misstep.

This is my time to show my father that I can help him. I know I don't have to, but after everything he's done for me, I want to.

It's not long before I'm settling my tab and heading to my hotel. I'm not drunk per se, but I'm not sober either. I have a large tolerance to alcohol despite my size. I'm short and petite, a combo that shouldn't bode well for heavy drinking, but I can hold my own. I thank my days at boarding school for that. No matter how much I have, I never really get drunk. Now with a healthy buzz going on, I just want to relax and climb into my hotel bed and fall asleep.

I'm not sure how long I've slept, but when I open my eyes, streams of light peek in through the curtains.

Turning to my side, I swipe my phone and look at the time. It's eleven a.m. I must have had more to drink than I thought.

Even though it's late, I have plenty of time to get ready. Tonight is the night that I approach him again, but first I have to call my father.

The phone only rings once before he answers. I pace the floor as he says hello.

"Hi," I respond, more timidly than I want. I'm not afraid of what he will ask of me. I'm afraid I'll disappoint him.

"I was worried about you." He has every right to be. I'm sure I'll wear a hole in the carpet with all this pacing back and forth. He can't see it, but I'm just as nervous as he is.

I stop in front of the mirror across from the bed and stand stiffly, holding my body.

Not a good look for me. Nope. This face has seen better days. I look tired. My eyes are normally harder, but now I just look exhausted.

"I'm good."

"Did you make contact?" he asks. He wasn't on board with my plan, but it was the only one we had.

"I did," I respond, and it makes me smile. I hadn't thought about it yet today, but I did it. I did what I was supposed to do.

I contacted Alaric Prince. “I set the bait.” My voice already sounds stronger with purpose.

“And what exactly is the bait? Please tell me you—”

“I have it under control. I did nothing but stand there. He did the rest.”

“The rest being ...?”

I can hear the concern in his voice. My adoptive dad might have sent me away for half my life, but he’s always shown how much he cares for me. His voice is inaudible and reminds me of when I first came to be in his custody.

The muscles around my heart tighten, but I shake my head. I will not go there right now.

I push down all my past and think about the future. The future, meaning tonight.

“Phoenix, tell me what you have planned.” He practically begs me.

His nerves make mine flare. “He’s invited me to the club tonight. I plan to drink and find out more.”

“You truly think he will tell you where my guns are?” I can hear the doubt in my father’s voice, and it makes me want to work that much harder to succeed.

“Well, no, obviously not. But maybe I can find a way to get to his phone—”

“This is too dangerous. I’ll send—”

I know what he’s about to say—*he’ll send his men in*—but that would be war. When I saw Alaric yesterday, he had a minimum of twenty men with him, and that was only the ones I could see. The man has an entourage larger than any celebrity.

“You can’t send anyone in. I saw it last night. There is no getting close enough to him. Unless you want a war.”

“I don’t want that. There have already been too many casualties. I want to shut him down, but I don’t want to kill innocent people ...” His voice is soft and sad. He doesn’t

sound like the businessman I have grown to know over the years. Yes, he has always loved and cared for me, but this is different. I just don't know why. I shake off these thoughts and let out a breath.

“I promise I'll be safe. I'm just going to find out where he's staying. Try to figure out a way to get his phone. It shouldn't be that hard.”

Lies. It will be impossible, but I'll figure something out. I'm resourceful.

Like my namesake, they burned me to the ground, but I rose. That's why I go by the name Phoenix.

From the ash, I was reborn, and I have no intention of failing in this.

I owe Michael Lawrence, my father in every way that matters, for my life, and if ending this war is how I can repay him, then that's exactly what I will do.

Alaric

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG FOR CRISTIAN TO ARRIVE. I EMPLOY AS many men as I do because they all have a unique skill set that I need. When he opens the door to my office, I recline in my chair and continue to drink a glass of scotch.

We're docked, so the boat only sways slightly but enough for the amber liquid to resemble a wave.

"What do you have for me?" I ask between sips.

"Actually, a lot," he answers, and that's when I notice his hands aren't empty. That fact alone has me placing the glass down and leaning forward. I place my elbows on the desk in front of me, tilting my head to signal for him to sit.

The sound of the chair pulling back echoes through the space as he takes a seat. "Remember that adoptive son you've been searching for?"

I know exactly who he's talking about. Word around town is my enemy has one weakness. A man with no family has a secret son. I've been searching for him ever since my brother died.

An eye for an eye—or in this case, a brother for a son.

"Phoenix, right?"

But that's all I had. No last name. Nothing. Word has gotten back that Phoenix means something to Michael, but no

one knows more than that. Since Michael ignited the flames of war four years ago, no one has seen him. He has been a complete recluse, which makes seeking vengeance nearly impossible.

“Well, it seems we had a few of the details wrong.”

“Speak.” My voice comes out rough and abrasive, but I have waited years to find ammunition to use on him.

Sure, I have bled him dry by stealing his merchandise as often as I could, but affecting his profit margins doesn't pack a punch. It stings, but it doesn't burn.

I want to burn this motherfucker to the ground.

Take and torture whatever he holds dear.

We only just got word six months ago that there might be a son.

A lot of chatter, but no location. I'm not sure that this has anything to do with the task at hand, but I'm intrigued.

“He doesn't have a son.”

That can't be right. We had good intel on this “Phoenix.” My jaw tightens, and I can feel myself becoming impatient. Why is he telling me this, especially if it will only lead to a dead-end?

“Then how does this help me?”

His lips spread, and an enormous smile appears on his face.

“What aren't you telling me?”

“It appears he has a daughter. An adoptive daughter named Phoenix Michaels. She doesn't even have his last name.”

He throws the file down, and staring back at me are the big blue eyes of the goddess from last night. Her image is attached to the front of the file with a paper clip. I open it and see the school transcripts. It appears she went to a private school in Switzerland.

I keep turning, but there isn't much there.

“She wasn’t formally adopted.”

That piece of information has me placing the file down on my desk and looking up toward Cristian. “Then how do you know she’s important to him?”

“He paid for her school. We tracked her credit card, and from there, we got a name. It wasn’t too hard to piece two and two together once we knew where to look. Plus, it can’t be a coincidence that she uses his first name as her last name.”

My fingers begin to tap a rhythm as I take in this information. A habit that makes me think of my brother—and apparently, I’ve picked up as my own after losing him. “Seems too easy.”

“Not if we didn’t know Michael had a son. That was a stroke of luck. The man gave no indication that anyone meant anything to him.”

I nod my head. It’s true. All these years, I could never find a thing, and now, she found me.

“It can’t be a coincidence.” Cristian bobs his head in agreement.

“No. It can’t.” We both fall silent as I continue to stare at the exotic beauty. Last night she was gorgeous, but in this picture, she’s even more so.

Full lips, small freckles dot her nose, long wavy dark brown hair falls to her breasts, and bright blue eyes.

She was a knockout last night. Someone I could imagine myself drowning in, but seeing her without a stitch of that shit on her face is better. She looks innocent, and it makes me want to corrupt her even more.

“What are you going to do about it, Boss?”

I lean back in my chair. Thoughts and ideas run through my brain a million miles a minute.

What to do with Phoenix? The name isn’t really fitting for her. She’s too small and weak. What to do with the little dove?

I look up and reach for my glass, lifting it to my mouth and taking a long swig.

What to do?

What to do?

I'm halfway through my glass, and I meet Cristian's stare.

"You have that look, Boss." He laughs.

"Grab a glass." I'll need a few minutes to concoct a plan, and while I do that, we'll have a drink. Cristian stands from his chair and moves over to the side table, followed by the sound of the tumbler being lifted and then scotch pouring into the glass. When he finally takes his seat in front of me again, I lift my own to make a toast.

I don't offer words, just a wicked and devious smirk. She came to me, and she will get what she deserves, but first, I'll play with my new pet.

"So, what will it be?" he asks. His brow furrows as he waits. He leans forward, and I smile brightly, placing the glass down. Standing, I walk to the door to return to my stateroom so I can get ready for the night. My hand reaches for the knob, and I pull open the heavy door, but just as I'm about to step through, I turn, looking over my shoulder at Cristian.

"Isn't it obvious?" My lips pull up into a sardonic smile.

"Not to me," he responds.

"Well ..." I like the idea more and more the longer I think about it. "Obviously, we are going to catch a bird."

"And once we do?"

His question makes me laugh.

"We put her in a cage."

SOMEONE RARELY PULLS ONE OVER ON ME. IT'S EVEN RARER that I find myself surprised. But here I am.

She doesn't know that I know her.

I do.

I know everything.

Including her face.

If she thinks she can pull a fast one on me, she is wrong. Deadly wrong.

The thing is, she has no clue, and I plan to use that weakness against her. So here I am at the club in the VIP lounge yet again—trap set.

She's not here yet, but if I know anything about her, I don't expect her to be. No. No, she will make me wait.

Lure me in.

Maybe another guy would be fooled, but another guy isn't me.

I almost find it insulting that Michael thought this plan would work. That he thought he was clever enough to use his daughter against me.

Shows just how desperate he must be.

I take a seat on the soft velvet bench of the banquette that Mathis reserved for me. Women dance to the left and right of me, but I don't have eyes for any of them. I'm waiting for one bird, a little dove.

That's what she is. She might think she's a phoenix, but to me, she's a small, helpless little bird that Michael tried to pull out of his hat for a trick.

As if she can hear my inner ramblings, she enters. Now that I know who she is, I shouldn't find her as gorgeous as I do. But even if she had a knife to my heart, she'd still be the most beautiful woman in the room.

Tonight, unlike in the pictures, she's wearing makeup. Soft streams of light bounce around the room, hitting her with each step she takes.

With shoulders pulled back, she stands tall and proud. She's sexy as all fuck with her regal persona. Now that I know who she is, it fits.

She's the dethroned king's princess. *But that's not necessarily true*, I tell myself. She was hidden away. Like a fairy tale. Far away in a tower. But I'm not a prince, and she's not my princess.

No, instead, she's the means to an end.

I'll bait her to fall into my trap and use her to kill my opponent.

It's time this war ends once and for all.

She gets closer with each step. She hasn't noticed me yet, which allows me to admire her from afar without her knowing. My disdain is probably palpable at this moment. As gorgeous as she is, I hate her with every fiber of my being.

No, hate is too strong a word. I don't give a shit about her. I hate her father.

The world stops when our eyes finally lock. She's an exotic beauty. Blue eyes stare at me as if I have all the answers in the world, which is impressive. She must be a talented actress.

I stand and place my glass down, heading over to where she is. She stops in her tracks as I approach, making me come to her.

Well played.

If I were a normal fool, I would eat that shit up and be desperate to have her in my arms. But like her, I know the game I'm playing.

Unlucky for her, she's ignorant.

If she thinks she can get the upper hand on me, she is dead wrong.

Once in front of her, I stare down at her, not smiling and not welcoming. But I don't smile often, and anyone who knows me knows this.

If my intel is correct, she knows I'm lethal, and anything more than a smirk would give me away.

"I wasn't sure you would come ..."

 This time, the smirk reaches my eyes. *Lies*. I knew she would come.

"You didn't leave me time to answer. You were in a rush to leave."

"I had business," I respond before turning toward the table. "Sit," I instruct, and she gives a small nod. "I'm Alaric."

"Raven." Another lie. They slip off her tongue with little resistance. *Impressive*.

She takes a step forward until our bodies are side by side, and I reach out my arm and splay my hand on the small of her back. My fingers touch the soft slope of her spine until it rests on her warm skin.

I can't see her full dress, but from what I can tell from my touch, it's open in the back. Without further delay, I lead us back to the table and have her sit beside me.

"What do you want to drink?"

She looks around the table, scanning all the bottles in front of her.

"Tequila," she responds.

You can learn a lot about a girl from the drink they pick. Yesterday, she drank champagne, today tequila. She needs liquid courage for whatever the next part of her plan is.

I lift my hand and signal the waitress. "Two shots of Don Julio. Extra chilled."

There might be a bottle already at my table, but it's not good enough for me. To get the drink to the right temperature, it needs a shaker, something that is not at my disposal right now. However, the waitress in front of me knows that even though I'm a scotch drinker, when I do indulge in tequila, I like it prepared a certain way, so she has one in her hand already as she smiles down at me.

It doesn't take long before the shots are poured, and with glasses now in hand, I raise mine for a toast.

“What shall we celebrate?” I ask.

“Letting loose. Having fun. Getting drunk?”

“New friends?” I respond, my voice dropping an octave. All the wicked things I want to do to her are evident in my tone.

Her pupils widen a fraction, but not enough for someone to notice unless they were watching.

Good.

Keep her on her toes.

Phoenix

I'M READY TO LEAVE. HAVING A CONVERSATION AND FLIRTING are hard to do at a location like this.

Sure, I could throw myself at him, but from what I saw the day before when I was watching him, that would not hold his interest for long.

The night before, plenty of women approached him. They rubbed their barely dressed bodies against him, but not one of them held his attention. I was the only one, and that's because I paid him no mind.

I know plenty of assholes like him.

Not only from my early upbringing, but also from my experience at the private schools I went to in Switzerland. I learned there that men want what they think they can't have.

So, I played coy. Now, it's time for me to go, and I'm not sure the gamble paid off.

Maybe I misread the situation. Maybe he's not falling for it.

I stand from the table, and he looks up at me.

Please take the bait, I silently pray. Please. This is my last chance to help. To prove I can help.

“And where do you think you’re going?” His deep voice cuts through my nerves, and when he smirks, I think I might fall over from the anxious feeling coursing through me. If what I’m doing isn’t bad enough, him being this handsome makes it even harder.

I do my best to plaster on a sweet yet sexy smile.

“I’m going home,” I respond.

“Already? You just got here.” He shifts in his seat and then moves to stand. When he’s directly in front of me, I can barely breathe. He’s too close. Way too close. Then if his proximity wasn’t enough, he pushes his sleeves up, showing me his tanned and heavily tattooed arms.

Shit.

This is not okay.

This man needs to come with warning labels.

It should be illegal to be this sexy.

He’s stealing the oxygen from my lungs. Everything about him—his eyes, the way he holds my gaze—demands respect. He commands attention, and I hate the way I feel when he looks at me because I hate him for hurting the only person I love.

Why does he have to be so damn handsome? And why does he have to know it? We stare at each other, and my breath stills in my chest, wanting to come out in ragged bursts from the pounding of my heart. I will it not to and demand my heart to hold a steady beat of indifference. Being so close to the objective, I can’t falter now.

I’m too damn close to mess this up. I’ve come too far.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Breathe, goddammit. Breathe and act like you aren’t affected by him and his larger-than-life presence.

“I have to go. Plus ...” I start to say, trying desperately to set the trap. “It’s too loud in here.” I gesture around to the club

and all that it entails—music, dancing, and debauchery.

He cocks his head to the left. “Come to my place.” His words are powerful. He’s not asking. He’s telling.

I shake my head. “I can’t.” I really freaking can’t because the way I’m all jumbled up, I’d forget why I’m here and end up kissing this man. My gaze dips on instinct, and I look at his full and majorly kissable lips.

Shit.

Look up, Phoenix.

His forehead. That’s a safe place to look.

I watch as his brow furrows, and I wonder if he will say more to convince me, but he shakes his head. “You misunderstand me. I wasn’t inviting you tonight.”

“Oh.” I sound like an idiot, but I’m confused. Isn’t that what he said?

“What I was going to say, had you let me, was that tomorrow I’m having a small gathering on my yacht. Come. It will be much quieter than this.” He gestures to the crowd, dancing and milling around us.

The answer is yes. This invitation is exactly my goal. I have to say yes, but I keep quiet for a minute.

Again, my heart pounds. This is my in.

But I don’t want to seem too desperate, so instead, I lower my gaze to the floor, and then I count slowly in my head.

One.

Two.

Three.

When I get to ten, I look up from the speck of imaginary dirt I was staring at. It’s too dark for me to have seen anything, but in my head, I know it was there.

“There will be people there?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I finally meet his eyes when I ask, “What time and where?”

“Party starts at eight p.m. My yacht is docked at the pier. It’s the last one docked, and it’s called the *Empire*.”

I want to barf in my mouth. Of course, it is. An empire he stole.

“Interesting name.”

“You would think that,” he smarts, his smirk dangerously close to detonating my underwear. This hits too close to home. I bite the inside of my cheek until I’m sure it will bleed.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” I finally say, and without waiting for him to say anything, I give one last smile and turn my back on him.

Then I’m walking out of the VIP area and the club. When I leave the building, and the warm air hits my face, it makes me feel like my skin is on fire.

I need to calm down.

I need to come up with a plan.

I walk to the street and make a quick left. As soon as I’m out of distance from the club, I fish my phone out of the pocket of my dress. Who doesn’t love a dress with pockets?

The phone rings as I walk closer and closer to my hotel.

Finally, I hear my father’s voice.

“Nix?” he answers in a low and troubled voice. He’s not happy with my plan, and from his tone, I can tell he’s nervous.

“Job done. I have my in.”

“Not the phone, Nix,” he responds, and I feel silly for not thinking of that. “George will meet you at the bar in your hotel. Ten minutes,” my father says before hanging up.

I knew he had men here, but I didn’t realize they were that close.

Knowing what I’m about to do, it makes me feel safer. Knowing George is here will help calm my nerves tomorrow.

After a few more blocks, I'm back at the hotel and head straight to the bar. The woman standing behind it smiles. "What can I get for you?" she asks, her French accent curling around each word. She appears to be around my age, and I wonder what brought her to work at this hotel? Is she a fresh graduate like me, trying to find her place in the world? Or maybe she came here on vacation and fell in love? A million scenarios run through my brain as I realize I haven't answered her yet. Instead, I've been gawking.

"Vodka martini straight up," I respond before pulling my attention away from her as I wait. I'm halfway through my drink before George sits down. George has been a loyal employee of my father for as long as I can remember. I don't know him well, but I trust him with my life.

We don't look at each other as we drink our drinks.

"He invited me to his boat tomorrow," I tell him, never looking at him.

"When and where?" he asks. His voice is low as though he's trying extra hard not to alert anyone to the fact we are talking to each other.

I fill him in on the details, and then I turn to meet his stare even though I shouldn't. "I'm going."

"Your father won't like that."

"It's on his yacht. He could keep information ..."

"Be that as it may, he won't let you do that."

"Then we won't tell him."

"Nix, you know I can't do that." He tilts his head to the side and pleads with his eyes.

"Then find a way to be on that boat."

"I'll be there," he responds, but his voice is tight, and I know this will be no small feat.

"How?"

"Let me worry about that." He chuckles, and I nod in agreement.

“Okay.”

“I’ll only be there long enough to look around. He must have a place where he puts his stuff. In and out. It will be easy.”

“I’m still telling your father.”

“Fine.”

Then I lift my drink and take a swig. With that out of the way, my nerves grow even more. The plan is set, so now I just need to follow through on it.

Alaric

I'M STILL IN THE CLUB DRINKING MY SCOTCH WHEN CRISTIAN approaches my table. Placing my drink down, I tilt my head to look up at him.

“You take care of it?” I ask, and he nods. I stand from my seat and move until I'm right before him. “And ...?”

“Tom is following them as you requested. They're at a hotel.”

My brow lifts. “Is that so?”

“They're at the bar. How would you like me to tell them to proceed?”

“Tell Tom as soon as the girl is gone that I want whoever she was speaking to in the warehouse by the pier. I'll be there shortly to see what the little dove is up to.”

With that settled, I don't bother to tell my men I'm leaving. I pay them to watch and follow. When I stride out the door, my men, as expected, flank me. As soon as the warm air hits my face, my caravan of SUVs comes to a stop at the sidewalk; they're here for me and my men.

I walk toward the second one. Pulling the door open, I step inside and sit. Some of my men go to the first SUV and some to the third. Cristian is the only one to join me, sitting in the front with Peter.

There is no need for me to speak. My team runs like a well-oiled machine. Everyone knows where we are going, what we are doing, and most importantly, who we will torture.

If Michael Lawrence thinks he can make a play against me, he is grossly mistaken.

Sending his daughter in to do his work will be a grave mistake.

Not just for him but also her.

I don't relish in the thought of killing a woman. In fact, I've never killed one. But seeing as he sent her in, I might have to reconsider my stance on that. I govern myself by one strict rule: Never murder anyone who doesn't deserve it.

Guess time will tell with this one.

The ride to the warehouse at the dock doesn't take long, and eventually, we pull up to what appears to be an abandoned building from the outside.

I pay good money to keep up the appearance that nothing is here. I also pay very good money to the owner of the building to leave me undisturbed.

Luckily for me, the owner is a friend, not a foe, and although he takes the money, he would turn a blind eye regardless if I paid him. But I loathe being in anyone's debt.

The only time I have ever asked for a favor was from Cyrus Reed, but I have long since returned that one.

When the SUV pulls to a stop, I throw my door open and step into the warm salty air. My men are out of their vehicles before my foot even hits the pavement so they can walk by my side. Once we reach the entrance, they throw open the rusted metal door for me. This warehouse stores guns—my guns—but more than that, it currently holds Michael's man, sitting front and center tied naked to a chair.

As much as I don't want to see him naked, it's a necessity.

Having him in his birthday suit is the only way I can, with one hundred percent certainty, know that he isn't wearing a listening device or any form of tracking device.

He hasn't noticed me yet. I'm still lurking in the shadows, but the moment my feet echo in the large cavernous space, he lifts his head and meets my stare.

The moment recognition sets in, I can see his pupils dilate in fear.

His body begins to shake the closer I get.

Yep, bastard. You're caught.

He knows it. I know it, and the tiny beads of sweat that roll down the side of his face tell me he knows what this means for him.

He's dead.

The only question now is if his death will be painless or if I will have to torture him for the information I need.

As soon as I'm standing directly in front of him, Cristian hands me a folder similar to the one from last night.

It contains all the pertinent information on the man in my custody.

"What do we have here?" I step closer, and with each move, I allow my lips to tip up into a smile. "It seems we have caught vermin," I state to Cristian.

"That we have," he responds.

"And what do we do when we find vermin?" I ask, mocking the tied-up man.

"We kill it."

My men laugh.

"But not before we play." A table loaded with instruments to make his demise very painful sits beside the man.

I look over what they have set in front of me. A knife, pliers, scissors ...

"What to use first?"

"Pliers," I hear from my right and look over at Cristian. My mouth opens on a chuckle.

“Always so violent. Maybe we should let”—I pick up the dossier and look for his name—“George here decide if we need to make this painful before I start to rip his fingernails out one by one.”

“So, what’s it going to be, Georgie boy? Painful or ...” I pull the gun out of the back of my pants. “Not so painful.”

“Please, I don’t know anything.” He sounds like a blubbering baby as he begs for his life. I take a step over to the table, grabbing the knife.

“It seems you don’t want to take the painless way out. Maybe there’s more to you than I thought.” With the knife in my hand, he watches me. “Listen, we don’t have to make this hard. All you have to do is tell me what I want to know. If you do that, I won’t go looking for your family. I won’t pay your brother a visit.”

His eyes widen at that, but apparently, I misjudged his love for his brother because he still doesn’t speak.

I drag the knife up his leg. The blade cuts into his skin, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

It’s obvious where my knife is leading.

“Okay, let’s try another approach. Tell me what Phoenix is planning.”

His head lifts, and he meets my stare again with wide eyes full of surprise. Interesting.

He thought he was here for something else and didn’t realize we’d put two and two together.

“Yes, that’s right, George, we know all about Phoenix ... Nix. Michael’s daughter.”

“She has nothing to do with this.” His voice cracks.

“No. That’s where you’re wrong. She has everything to do with this.”

I remove the knife from where it rests on his thigh and angle it up.

“I wouldn’t shake too much if I were you. Here’s how it’s going to go. I’m going to kill you regardless. But if you don’t tell me what Phoenix has planned, then I will feed you your balls, and then I will keep torturing you before I find your brother and bring him here.” Smile. Yep. I’m a sick motherfucker, but no one fucks with me.

“She wants on your yacht.”

“This I know. More.”

He shakes his head, but I lift the knife upward. “She plans to seduce you enough to get into your office.”

“Was she sent in to kill me?”

“No. Please don’t hurt her. She’s had a rough enough life.” Interesting. “She just wants to find out where you keep her father’s guns. She wasn’t planning on hurting you. We can’t afford to miss this delivery, so she’s stepped in to get the intel.”

“And no one is backing her up?”

“I was.”

“What is her father’s role in this plan?”

His lips form a thin line, not answering me.

“Does he approve?”

“He agreed reluctantly. He didn’t want her to do this, but he knows his daughter, and he knows once Nix wants something, she gets it.”

I flick the knife in my hand, twirling it around to decide if this is enough information. I’m not surprised by what he is telling me. I knew there was a plan, but a part of me had hoped I wouldn’t have to kill her.

I still don’t.

Except he killed my brother, so it would only be fair for me to kill the one person who means something to him.

The idea holds weight but still tastes bitter in my mouth.

“What are you going to do to me now?” he asks, wondering if I’m going to torture him for more information

I could.

I could use this moment to find out more, but I am a man of my word. I told him if he told me her plan, then I wouldn’t hurt him more than I have to. Death not included.

As much as this is an opportunity that shouldn’t be passed up, I won’t.

Turning to Cristian, I give him the nod. He returns the sentiment.

He knows me.

He knows my word is gold.

He knows I never go back on it.

And in that way, I am honorable.

Without a backward glance at the man still sitting naked in a chair, tied up and bleeding from his leg, I walk out of the warehouse and toward the car.

Gunfire rings through the air as soon as I open the door.

It’s done.

Now to catch a bird.

Phoenix

THE RAPID BEAT OF MY HEART SHOULD BE ENOUGH TO MAKE me wonder if I'm in a bit over my head.

The thing is, stubbornness is a trait of mine, so regardless of my body trying to warn me, I refuse to let it. Even though my brain screams at me to pick up the phone and call this entire thing off, I don't.

I'm sure George is in place by now—and even if I want to, it's probably too late to turn back. I just need to put my big girl panties on and walk out the door.

One more glance, and then it's time.

I head over to the mirror in the foyer of my hotel suite.

Everything is as it should be.

All the pieces of my façade are in place.

My dark brown hair is pulled up in a messy bun with slight wisps framing my face to give me a sexy beach vibe. My dress has a plunging neckline that dips almost to my naval. I'm not one for jewelry, but today, I have a diamond pendant that falls low in the valley of my breasts.

Nothing is left to the imagination in this crisp white form-fitting dress. If this doesn't distract him, I don't know what will.

According to what George said, the guns we're looking for are imperative to my father's survival. He will not have enough inventory to give his client without this shipment. Not only has the client paid in full, but he's also one who's not to be trifled with.

No. This could be my father's last chance. He saved me when I was nine. This is my chance to return the favor.

To save him.

I'll find the guns, then he'll give them to the client, and everything will be okay.

It's a solid plan with a bonus that maybe when I'm in Alaric's office, I'll be able to find something else incriminating to use against him in the future.

This can kill two birds with one stone.

This *Phoenix* can at least hope.

After I double- and triple-check that my outfit and face are to my liking, I head out the door. My hotel is close to the pier, so instead of getting a ride, I walk. Yeah, my heels are probably too high for the trek, but it's an excellent way to expend some of my nervous energy.

Throughout my walk, I check my phone. George hasn't called, and neither has my father. I didn't expect them to, but still, it doesn't settle my stomach not knowing whether everything is going to go as planned.

The air, although warm, isn't unpleasant, and a gentle breeze picks up as I get closer to the docks.

There's a chill in the night air once there.

Small goosebumps form on my arms from the breeze coming off the ocean. But even as cold as it is, it's not cold enough to ruin my outfit by wearing a coat, however it appears my nipples have a different opinion as they have pebbled into hard peaks beneath my white dress. It probably will add to my allure, or at least that's what I hope as I approach the boat.

His boat isn't a boat, but rather an enormous yacht. The thing of beauty gleams against the night sky.

It's much bigger than I had imagined, but from what I have heard, Alaric Prince lives on his yacht.

When I'm standing close enough, I can see on the side of the boat is the name that makes me cringe. *Empire*.

It makes me want to turn back. I don't need a reminder he is the king here, but he's about to find out, unlike his little soldiers, I'm no peasant.

There is no turning back now, so with my head held high and my shoulders pulled back, I make my last approach, tearing down walls that I never knew I had inside me until I embarked on this mission.

Soon I'm standing in front of one of his men. The man is tall and jacked. He looks like he spends half his life in the gym and the other half probably torturing people for fun.

As he looks at me, I wonder if I'm his next victim, but before I can turn around, he's stepping aside and allowing me to pass.

The party isn't in full swing yet; only a few people milling around the deck. They are all drinking and laughing, but that's why I'm here early. I plan to slip in and mingle, and when more guests arrive, I'll sneak beneath the party deck and look around.

If what George says is true, and Alaric Prince does live here, the guns could be on this boat, or maybe at least an address or something.

I keep walking as I allow my eyes to take in my surroundings.

I don't see George, but if he said he'd be here backing me, then he will. And knowing George, I won't see him unless I need him.

I'm on the deck when I see Alaric from the corner of my eye. Tiny goosebumps form on my exposed skin as he makes his way over to me.

He looks dashing as always, dressed in black pants and a crisp white button-down with the sleeves rolled to his elbows.

The worst part is the way he looks at me. The way his full lips tip up slightly on the right side of his face into a perfect smirk is downright sinful.

One that says he knows just how perfect he is.

Too bad he's the enemy. If he wasn't, I might allow myself to get lost in him for a moment.

He's not the man you fall in love with.

He's not the type you hang your hopes and dreams on.

He's the man who uses you and then spits you out.

It's a good thing he's the enemy. I can't afford to let myself get lost in anyone, especially someone so deadly.

The closer he gets, the more unnerved I get. His eyes trail over me, starting on my legs and moving to the valley between my breasts until our gaze locks.

His blue eyes are stormy.

Full of emotions I can't place.

I see lust.

I feel it. It exudes through the strained muscles in his face and neck.

I feel the lust too. It's thick in the air, making my skin heat. My cheeks flush at the way he looks me up and down.

His gaze slithers over me seductively.

He's so damn enticing, but I need to remind myself why I'm here. I'm not here for that. And as much as he warms my body with his stare, I can't get lost in the fire he stokes within me.

"What would you like to drink?" he asks as he places his hand on the small of my back and walks me toward the bar. A few people are already standing there, but I know he won't wait. Alaric doesn't wait. The crowd parts for us as we walk past them.

Like the Red Sea. Like a king.

Well, technically a prince, but something tells me his name is not enough for the man that he is.

“Glass of champagne,” I respond.

The bubbles will loosen my nerves. I’ll need all the help I can get if I’m going to sneak around this place.

He’s quick to get me my glass, and I’m even quicker to drink it.

Just as I suspected, it calms me. It helps me believe that maybe I can pull this off.

After a long sip, I lower my glass to smile at him, batting my eyelashes like a seductive temptress.

“This is beautiful,” I say.

“Thank you.” He turns from me briefly, looking around the open deck, and gives a nod to someone. The man looks vaguely familiar. I think it’s one of his henchmen who was with him at the club. Once he seems satisfied with whatever silent message he is trying to convey, he turns his attention back to me. “Now that I have you here”—cue grin—“and we can hear each other, what brings you to the Bahamas?”

“Probably the same as you.” I run my fingers up and down the stem of the champagne flute as I lift my shoulders.

“And what would that be?” The deep timbre of his voice has my insides growing warm. Not a good thing when I’m supposed to hate this man. At least there is a chance he might fall for my act since I’m so obviously affected by him.

“Relaxation, of course.” *I wish.*

My life right now is anything but relaxing. It takes everything in me not to allow myself to shake like a leaf blowing in the wind as I try to manipulate this man into giving me the ammunition to help my father take him down.

“And you’re all alone ...”

I allow my lip to tip up into a playful smile. “What makes you think that?”

“The fact that you aren’t here with anyone,” he deadpans dryly.

“I’m in the Bahamas with friends.” *Lie*. My voice stays leveled. Hopefully, I don’t give myself away.

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“You could have brought your magical friends over.”

I did, and his name is George. “They had other plans.” The inside of my chest feels like it will burst from the deception, but I keep my breathing steady and throw myself into the mission.

“And you didn’t want to join them instead? I’m flattered.”

Snake. The longer we talk about this, the better the chance I give myself away. Time to up the sexy.

“You should be.” I bite my lip. “Turning you down was hard to do.”

To that, he gives me a large smile, gleaming white teeth and all.

“Their loss is my gain.” He lifts his drink to his mouth and takes a sip, all while watching me. Or appraising me is more like it. By the way his blue eyes trail over my body, I feel naked, and the worst part, I like the way he looks at me. It makes my stomach churn, that even though I know he’s at war with my father, I can find him attractive. What kind of person does it make me? “Tell me about yourself.” The deep baritone of his voice pulls me from my inner ramblings. Lifting my glass to my mouth, I use the time it takes me to take a sip to calm my racing heart before I can answer.

“I just graduated.” I once heard if you are going to lie to keep it as close to the truth as you can, so that’s what I do. I allow myself another taste of the crisp and refreshing champagne and let the bubbles loosen my tongue.

His eyes never leave me. Instead, he stares at me like the words leaving my mouth are the most interesting things ever said. “What did you get a degree in?”

“History.”

My answer makes his eyes taper. “Interesting.”

“How so?”

“I never met a history major. Now that you’re done, what do you plan to do with it?”

His comment is hard to believe, seeing as it’s a very popular subject to study, but I don’t let on my thoughts on the matter.

“Isn’t that the age-old question? Probably nothing, I guess. Maybe become a historian,” I answer truthfully, or at least my truth before my father called me back. Funny how one phone call can change your life. A part of me always wanted to talk to my father about the business he was in, but I never had the guts until that fateful day in the office. It seems like forever ago, but it’s only been a week. Before that I chose to be ignorant, my life was simple, and now ... Now it’s anything but, as I stand here, batting my eyelashes at a man dangerous enough that I should be scared, but instead, I’m wondering if my plan is working.

“I’d like to see that.” His blue eyes sparkle with mischief.

“What do you mean?”

“You. Behind a desk.” He parts his lips, and his mouth spreads into a smile, but not just any smile. No, this one is deadly. This smile could suck all the oxygen in the room. *Good thing we are outside.* “Maybe a pair of glasses.”

“I said historian, not librarian. And you? What is it that you do?” I step closer to him, feigning interest.

“Import and exports,” he answers with a straight face.

Not a lie, but not necessarily the truth. It seems Alaric Prince follows the same rules as I do when it comes to false truths.

“What do you import?”

He shrugs at my question, his gaze leaving mine, and looking across the deck.

“A little of this. A little of that.”

“And export?”

“Same.”

“A man of many words.” He doesn’t answer that with a sarcastic rebuttal, and I wonder if I took it too far. Did I ruin my chances? Blood pounds in my ears at the thought of failing my father. I owe him everything, and I might have lost the game before it even started. But then Alaric lifts his hand and gestures to the small crowd starting to form.

“Before more people come, would you like me to give you a tour?”

My heart hammers hard behind my breastbone. This is exactly what I need. A tour to determine the lay of the land. This is perfect.

I take another sip before placing my glass on the bar.

“Lead the way.”

He takes my hand in his and then links our fingers together. It’s intimate, and I have to will myself to stop the butterflies swarming in my stomach.

Damn. Maybe I shouldn’t have had the champagne because the farther I walk with him and the longer he touches me, the harder I find it to keep my body from shaking with nerves.

I suck in a slight breath, praying he doesn’t notice, but if he does, at least he’s courteous enough not to mention it.

One point for the villain.

I almost chuckle at my endless mental commentary, but I don’t. I can’t fuck this up. As we walk together, he points at the galley. The kitchen. The bar. We take another step, and he smiles. I want to ask why, but he just walks up the stairs.

“This way. It’s not too many.”

I follow him up. There’s a parlor, and at the end of the room is another door.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Just my office,” he says as he leads me back toward the stairs.

“You aren’t going to show me?”

“Do you want to see my office?”

He raises a brow, and I realize I’m about to step into a problem if I keep this up, so instead, I lean in toward him.

“Not really.”

“Then what is it you want?”

I bite my lip and meet his gaze. He steps forward, and I step back, hitting the wall. He’s so close I can feel the fabric of his shirt grazing my exposed skin.

His hand drops from mine and trails up my arm and across my collarbone.

I lean in closer, and now, his mouth is almost touching mine. I can smell the earthy hints of scotch on his lips.

“You want me to kiss you,” he states, his warm breath tickling my flesh.

His fingers cradle my face, and when he pulls back, I get lost in his gaze.

It feels like I’m on fire, ablaze with a desire I need to extinguish. But will one kiss change anything?

I don’t have time to think about it before his lips find mine. His mouth opens, asking me to let him in.

I do. I let him kiss me.

Allowing our tongues to dance to a seductive rhythm.

Becoming lost in the sensation.

Lost to this man.

He tastes like everything I knew he would.

Sins and lies.

His tongue runs across my bottom lip. Mouth hungry, his lips leaving a searing kiss. It's as if he wants to give me everything. Demand everything.

But as soon as the kiss starts, he pulls back, his vibrating phone breaking through the haze of lust between us.

He scoffs at the disturbance, pulling out his phone and reading the message.

Then he shakes his head. He steps back, and I miss his warmth, but at the same time, relief hits me like a ton of bricks. Five minutes more and I don't know what I would have done. By the way I was just kissing him, I probably would have abandoned the mission like a love-sick teenager.

Thankfully, that doesn't happen because I'd never forgive myself if my dad lost everything.

"Everything okay?" I whisper, still not one hundred percent over the kiss.

"I have to go back down."

This is my shot. I'm a mere two feet from his office, so maybe I can sneak in without him being the wiser.

"Where's the little ladies' room? This lipstick is not going to fix itself." I make myself sound coy and even blush when he looks at my lips. "Next to the office. You can find your way down?"

"Yes."

He pulls me closer, sealing his lips to mine one more time. My legs are like putty as he worships my mouth and then pushes away.

"What was that?"

"I figure you won't let me do that later." I cock my head at his statement. "After you fix your lipstick," he clarifies.

"True."

"See you downstairs."

As soon as he heads down the stairs, I jet off to the office.

The door is locked, which I expected. It's a good thing I can pick a lock—another little thing I picked up in boarding school. I'm sure my father would love to know what his money paid for. Sneaking around and not getting caught.

I lift my hand and grab the extra bobby pin in my hair. It's now or never.

The door creaks open, and I step inside. I close it behind me and make my way toward the desk, pin still in hand. Something tells me I'll have more locks to pick.

I begin to search the desk by opening each drawer. I need to be quick so he won't look for me, but I also need to be thorough.

Once I pull the drawers open, I rummage through each one, my fingers flipping through papers. The boat dips slightly, and my hand slips.

A boat must be docking next to us, making the yacht rock from its wake.

I look through more papers. Something has to be here. I'm in the bottom drawer when I knock on it and hear the echo—a false bottom. My fingers feel around, and I can feel a tiny protruding piece of wood. I carefully lift it, and the wood pops off.

Bingo.

I found it.

It might not be about the guns, but it has to be reliable intel my father can use.

With the false bottom exposed, I find a lockbox large enough to hold folders.

Grabbing the pin, I attempt to open it up when I fly backward.

What the hell? I grip the desk to keep my balance.

We are moving.

And not just from another boat. No, this boat ... Alaric's yacht is really moving. It's as if we are no longer docked, and

instead, we are taking a joyride.

With a deep inhale, I try to remain rational. It wouldn't be so far-fetched to believe he was taking his guests out for a spin. The night is gorgeous. Maybe he wants to show everyone what his toy can do.

I wouldn't put it past him. Maybe some bimbo asked him to.

But how long will this ride last, and will it affect my plans?

Shit. I need to get this open, find George, and then we need to abandon ship.

I head back to the desk and continue my pursuit. I'm sure we'll dock again soon, and I need to make sure I'm down below when that happens.

It pops open, and I don't even bother looking. I just grab my phone and start clicking the camera, taking pictures of the documents Alaric has hidden in the desk.

The boat turns again and starts to pick up speed.

Something isn't right. It's one thing to show off, but not like this.

I need to get out of here. I put the papers back in the box and close it then place it back in its spot, leaving everything the way it was.

Then I head toward the door.

It feels like my heart is beating out of my chest at the sight in front of me. There's no knob. No door. It's locked completely from the inside. I'm stuck, and I can't get out.

I grab my phone to call George for help, but I have no service.

I don't know what to do.

I bang on the wall, hoping a guest will hear and find me. I'll explain I thought it was the bathroom and the door shut before I realized.

I continue to bang and bang, but no one comes.

Time stands still as I start attacking the door. No one is coming. The party music is too loud, and with my luck, they are probably driving around to light off some fireworks.

I'll just have to wait until Alaric realizes I'm gone.

I feel sick to my stomach, but since the bathroom is next door, he might believe my story. I sit down on the couch, my feet starting to hurt from my shoes.

I flip through the pictures I took on my phone when I was in a rush to gather any evidence from the documents in his desk. It's too small to read the text on the papers, so I enlarge the words on the first image I took.

What I see makes my fingers flick faster and faster.

It's not a document. No, not at all.

It's the same words typed over and over again. It feels like I'm living in a horror movie and I'm the star of the film.

We think caged birds sing when indeed, they cry.

John Webster? Why is there a quote from John Webster here? I keep reading, and the wind is knocked out of me with what I see next.

How do you like your cage, little dove?

My body trembles as my phone slips from my hand and crashes to the floor.

He knows.

Phoenix

THIS IS BAD.

Way worse than anything I had mentally plotted out in my head.

The boat is still moving, and I'm still locked in this room. There is no way this isn't intentional.

They are driving out to sea to dump me overboard. The worst part, my phone is still not working, which leads me to believe they have something blocking the signal.

My father will never know what happened to me.

It won't take a rocket scientist to know I'm dead, but he'll never get the closure he deserves.

Now what do I? And another question is, where's George? If I can get out of here and find him on the boat, we might have a chance.

If I was caught, there's a good chance he was too. Maybe if I can get out of here and search the boat, I'll find him, and we can come up with a plan.

The only problem is, I'll have to wait until someone opens this damn door. Resigned to my fate, I flop back on the couch in the office.

I could search for something, but let's be honest. It's pointless.

I'm stuck here. Probably in the middle of nowhere and the worst part ...

All that planning on using the bathroom as my excuse for being here now makes me have to pee.

Don't think of water.

Don't think of water.

Easier said than done when I'm on a boat surrounded by water. I sit for what seems like forever before I stand and start pacing.

The boat rocks, hitting a wave.

Come to think of it, the boat has been getting rockier with each minute that passes.

Oh God.

There's only one reason that would happen.

He's taking us out to sea. No matter what happens now, I'm royally screwed, because if the roll of the boat is any indication, we are nowhere near land.

This is bad. Really, really bad.

What the hell am I going to do?

When we do finally stop, will I be able to get off? As if summoned by my thoughts, I can hear the door opening from the outside. I glance around the room, looking for anything that I can use as a weapon. It's probably not a smart idea. There is no getting off this boat. But at least I can fight. The door opens just as I'm grabbing the lamp.

"Well. Well. Well. What do we have here? A stowaway." Our gazes lock before he's dropping his to look at my hands. "I wouldn't do that." His voice cuts through the stale air, loud and sinister. "Drop the lamp."

"You lock me in here, and you don't expect me to fight back?" My hand is still reaching out, but without the element

of surprise, I have no hope to get past him, even with a giant lamp as a weapon.

“There would be no fun if you didn’t try. But let me tell you something, little dove, there’s no getting off this boat until you tell me what I want to know.”

“Little dove?” I grit, not liking what the nickname is implying.

“It’s more fitting than Phoenix,” he says with a wicked and large smirk, confirming my fear that he knows exactly who I am. “A dove is easily caught.”

“I won’t talk.” I flatten my lips into a straight line.

“Everyone talks. It’s all about finding the right incentive. I’ll find yours or ...”

“Or?”

He ignores my question and opens the door farther. That’s when I see he’s not alone. A freaking team waits for me in the hallway. Four men, to be exact. They surround him in the room as he catches me by my arm. I kick and punch, but it’s no use.

Before I can even think about what to do next, he wraps a zip tie around my wrists.

Bound and now helpless, he steps back, admiring his handiwork. “Now let’s go up top. It’s quite a beautiful sunrise. No need to waste it inside.”

Sunrise. What the hell does he mean by sunrise? How long was I locked in this room?

He pulls my hands.

“Wait—”

He exhales a breath. “What now?”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I answer through gritted teeth. Not a lie. I’ve had to go for hours.

His brow lifts. “Isn’t that what got you into this mess in the first place?” I don’t answer his silly comment, so he

continues. “Very well, I’d hate for you to make a mess on the new rug they just installed prior to this trip.”

He leads us out of the office, and once we’re back in the main room, he points at the door I know to be the bathroom.

“Don’t even think of doing anything fucking stupid. There’s no escaping. Soon you will see, your options are limited, so trying to defy me is futile.”

Not wanting to hear another word he says, I gesture to the bathroom. “Are you going to at least open it for me? Seeing as my hands are tied,” I deadpan. My attitude probably won’t get me anywhere, but I refuse to give in that easily.

“And what will you do for me if I do?” He chuckles, and I grind my teeth together. As much as I want to tell him to go to hell, I know that what he says is true. My options are limited; mouthing off to him won’t help. The only option I have is to look for George, and then I need to get hold of the radio. Every boat has a radio. I should be able to call the Coast Guard.

It’s a solid plan. *As solid as the last plan you had.*

God, this is bad.

I step into the bathroom then use my feet to kick it closed.

To get out of this bathroom, I’m going to have to do some fancy maneuvers with my hands, but I don’t want to ask for his help.

The need to pee was so bad that I was desperate, but once I’m done, it will be fine.

I make my way over to the toilet, and using my fingers, I lift it. Hard but manageable. It doesn’t take me long before I’m done, and I thank my lucky stars I’m wearing a dress because pants would’ve been difficult at this moment. I wash my hands and then go to the door. My fingers are just about to start to turn the knob again when it opens. Alaric is standing there.

“I thought you could use a hand.” I step past him, and he chuckles. He probably thinks I should say thank you, but nope, that will not happen. No thank you will ever leave my mouth.

Now, a colossal fuck you? That I can do.

With my head held high, I walk toward the door to the deck on this level.

The sticky salty air hits my face, lashing my skin with the disheveled wisps from last night.

We are going very fast for a yacht.

He's trying to get as far away from land as possible. Seeing as we have been on the water for at least six hours, who knows where we are. This is bad. Terrible.

"I can see the wheels turning," he says as he stands beside me. "Trying to figure out where we are. Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there's no hope for you unless I decide to be a gentleman and let you go."

"Yeah? How are my chances looking?" I bite out. No point in playing coy anymore.

That makes him laugh. A hardy laugh that bounces around inside me and warms my stomach from the sound. I hate how my body responds to him. I hate that I gave him liberties to kiss me yesterday because now as he laughs, I can imagine the feel of his lips on mine.

When his laughter dries up, he advances toward me. I step back, hitting the cold metal of a safety rail.

I turn over my shoulder, glancing at the water below. The way it shines and sparkles as the sun dances on its surface reminds me of an explosion of diamonds.

How far is the drop? Would I survive? I look out at a horizon of endless blue with no land in sight.

"To answer your question ..." he starts, and I turn back to face him. "No. Also, don't jump. I'd hate to jump in after you. That's right, little dove, I won't let you die. Death would be too easy for what he deserves."

Alaric

SHE TRULY IS A SIGHT TO BEHOLD. HER HAIR is disheveled, whipping against her face. Her skintight white dress hides little of her small and petite frame, and its hem is a little too high, but with her hands tied, she can't do anything about it.

She's feisty, I'll give her that much. And gorgeous.

It's a shame she's Michael's daughter. I'd fuck her to get her out of my system, but the way she snarls at me, that will not happen.

But now I know what she tastes like, so not wanting to fuck her will be a problem.

I won't go there, and neither will she, but when I see her struggle against the bonds, I can't help but imagine what she would look like tied to my bed, begging me.

I shake my head. There's no place for that. "Come on," I say, wrapping my hand around her bicep and turning her. "You must be hungry, and we have to talk."

She refuses to speak. Instead, her lips are impassive, and it's actually a cute look on her.

She's acting like a petulant child, throwing a tantrum and refusing to speak, but she makes it look good. Much better than most would fair under the circumstances.

I would expect tears and begging, yet I find neither with this one. She's resolved in her mind that she won't talk, and to be honest, I kind of respect her for it.

She may be a worthy opponent.

Leading us to the deck, I pull a chair out for her when we reach the table setup.

"Sit," I growl, not at all liking how much I enjoy staring at her. I can't have any distractions now. George, Michael's henchman, had no useful intel for me. I hadn't questioned him really, but the daughter of my enemy? Yes, I could use her as bait. I could finally get the revenge I have desired all these years.

Ever since her father killed the only family I had left.

My brother.

A casualty of a war he should never have been a part of.

The guilt I feel in my chest is a weight that makes it hard to breathe some days. Today, looking at her makes me clench my fist. I'm better than this. Yes, I'll kill Michael, and yes, I'll use his daughter in my plan, but I won't hurt her. Not truly.

When she doesn't sit right away, I push her shoulder down, forcing the movement.

Although she's frail like a small dove, she's no porcelain doll.

Anyone who did what she intended to do can face the consequences of their actions.

"I said sit," I bark out, aggravation heavy in my voice.

"I'm not a dog that you can command." Her comment makes me chuckle.

"No, you're a caged bird."

"Great metaphor," she hisses. "Very lyrical. Now tell me why I'm here."

"Is that really how you're going to play it? I catch you snooping in my office, and this is how you're going to act?"

She leans forward in her chair, resting her elbow on the surface. Cocking her head to the side, she smiles. A coy smile filled with the innocence of a child who found her presents on Christmas Eve but is pretending she didn't.

“I have no idea what you're talking about. I had to go to the bathroom, and I opened the wrong door. By the time I stepped inside, the door had closed, but there was no doorknob.”

Now it's my time to lean forward. Mimicking her position, I lift my brow in question.

“You really expect me to believe that?” I ask.

“Well.” Cue a broad saccharine smile. “Of course.”

My fist pounds the glass, making the table wobble under the pressure. “Cut the shit.”

Her eyes widen, and the silly smirk is now gone. She thought she had one more shot to pull one over on me.

She doesn't. She won't.

“Phoenix. Adoptive daughter of Michael Lawrence.”

Sitting across the table from me, she tries hard to appear unaffected by my revelation. Her face is stoic. She shows no emotion whatsoever.

But that is for the unobservant person. I have made it my lifelong mission to be able to read people. I don't even know her, but I can tell knowing all of this secret information scares her. I watch as a little vein in her neck throbs, and her jaw tightens. At my news, I watch as her breasts heave on the inhale she takes. Again most people wouldn't notice, but I see *everything*.

“So, what are we going to do with you?”

“I don't suppose dropping me off at the next port would do.” She shrugs.

“No. I don't think that's in the cards right now.”

“Why don't you tell me then?” She leans back in her chair, trying to look uninterested.

“Here’s what we’ll do. We are going to talk about you.”

She chuckles. “As if I’ll tell you anything about me.”

“You will.” There is no room for objection in my voice, but she just smiles.

“Oh, is big bad Alaric Prince going to torture me?” Her words drip with sarcasm.

“I won’t need to,” I respond coolly.

“I’m not going to speak.”

“Probably not.” I smile. But I don’t say another word. Instead, I reach for the glass of water in front of me.

As if on cue, one of my staff members brings out plates of fresh food. I didn’t know what she liked, so I had my chef make one of everything.

“Enough food here?” she says.

“I don’t think so, actually. Shall I order more?”

She shakes her head at my quip.

“How do you expect me to eat this?”

“With your mouth, obviously.”

She lifts her hands and puckers her lips. “With what hands?” she deadpans.

“From where I’m sitting, I see two perfectly good hands.”

“Tied hands,” she interjects.

“As you’re a rather resourceful girl, I don’t expect this to be a problem for you.”

She glares at me from across the table. “And how am I supposed to cut it?”

“Again, you’re resourceful. You did sneak into my office, after all.”

“A fat lot of good that did me,” she murmurs under her breath.

“You get an A for effort.”

She rolls her eyes before lowering her bound hands to the plate, and then she does something I don't expect. She bypasses the fork altogether. Instead, she grabs the piece of French toast between her fingers and lifts it to her mouth. She pretends she doesn't like it. Hell, she pretends she's not starving, but I know she is. She eats the piece without ever lowering her hands, and once she's done, she looks back up at me.

"Is this necessary?" She wiggles her arm around.

"No. It's not," I admit on a chuckle.

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because I like to play before I go in for the kill." Her face blanches at my words, but she's quick to pull herself together.

"You plan on killing me?"

She stops eating now, and all her attention is focused on me, on what my answer will be. It's impressive how calm Phoenix pretends to be. If it weren't for the sound of a knee bouncing, I would think she's unaffected by my threat.

"Still on the fence. It all depends."

"Is this the part where you try to make a deal? Because if it is, you can hold your breath. I'm not going to tell you anything. I'm certainly not gonna tell you where my father is. And I'm not gonna be used as bait."

"But that's where you're wrong." Lifting my fork, I take a bite of the French toast in front of me.

Her eyes narrow, and then she opens her mouth. "How do you figure?"

The fork clangs against the table as I place it down and then stare into her eyes. "You already are bait. Already strung up and hooked by the fishing line. The only question is, are you a catch and release?"

Phoenix

HOLY CRAP.

I am in way over my head. My stomach flip-flops as his words bounce around in my head.

There has to be a way off this boat.

It takes all my effort to appear unaffected, but it's pretty much a lost cause. Because no matter how hard I try, what he said sits heavy in my belly, and all the food I've just shoved in my mouth is not making me feel any better. I can feel bile rising up my throat. I try to swallow, but it's hard.

Slowly, and with careful precision, I reach my hands to grab the glass of water in front of me.

Eating and drinking, pretty much doing anything, is nearly impossible with your hands tied. Each move I make hurts more than the next. The plastic bites at my skin, but I don't show that I'm in pain. I refuse for him to see that it's hurting me.

The only thing I should be thankful for is that he didn't secure my hands behind my back. Lord, that would suck.

I lift it to my mouth and guzzle it down. Yeah, this is much easier in the movies.

"Having a problem?" the bastard asks from across the table. It's probably a good thing I'm in this predicament right

now because a very large part of me wants to throw this glass across the table at his head. That move would one hundred percent get me a one-way ticket into the ocean. Life vest not included.

Nope. Dying is not part of the plan. It's obvious I have to abandon my mission, and now my only plan is getting off this boat alive and not allowing this asshole to use me as "bait."

"How about I take those off?" Alaric says as he continues to look at me. I wish he would stop because it's unnerving.

"Why do I feel like there's a catch?"

"There's no catch."

Not one part of me believes him.

"There always is. Spit it out, and I'll decide."

"You don't try to kill me. That's the catch," he says nonchalantly, and my mouth drops open. "I'll keep you alive. I won't kill you. I'll even promise once your part is played in all this, I'll let you go."

The bargain doesn't sit well, but I know I have no choice. "Fine."

I'll think of another plan. I always do. I'll pretend to play nice, then I'll search the boat for George. Together, I'm sure we can think of something.

Alaric abruptly stands and prowls over. With me sitting and him standing, he towers above me.

Tall and domineering.

He's quick to reach under his shirt, to his hip, and pulls out a knife.

This isn't some small pocketknife. This is a large hunting knife.

Seriously, Phoenix, what the hell have you gotten yourself involved in?

Who carries a knife that big? Someone who probably has a gun there too. Why am I surprised? The man employs an

entourage of villains all on standby. He's an arms dealer for crying out loud. Yep. I'm in way over my head.

The plastic pulls at my wrist, but then with a slice of his knife, I'm released.

I shake out my wrists. Once the blood begins to circulate properly, I rub at them. A small groove is present from the plastic. Luckily for me, it didn't chafe.

After he banded my hands, I didn't bother fighting because I didn't want to tear my skin. With my free hands now at my disposal, I look at the table, my gaze lingering on the knife.

"Easy there, killer. We had a deal."

"I know."

"Then stop eyeing the butter knife. One, it won't kill me, and two ... it will just piss me off."

"Good to know."

I grab my fork and continue eating. With what I have planned, I'll need my strength.

AFTER THE MEAL, ALARIC ESCORTS ME TO MY STATEROOM.

It's different than what I imagined. Luxurious and decadent. An enormous queen-sized bed sits in the middle of the room, and there are pillows for days, which makes me yawn.

But I don't step inside.

"Is it not to your liking?" he asks, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"It's not what I expected."

"Did you expect a dungeon in the boat's bow?"

"Basically," I mutter.

He moves toward me, and I back away from him.

“You are not my prisoner.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Go to bed. You haven’t slept yet, so you must be exhausted.”

I hesitate before stepping farther into the room.

“This isn’t a trick or a trap. You are safe here.”

For now. He might not have said the words, but they hang in the air, heavy and thick with a warning.

“No one will disturb you.” He doesn’t wait for me to step in, nor does he say goodbye. Instead, I’m left standing in the door’s threshold. The choice is mine.

I don’t know if I believe him that I’m safe for the time being, but I have no choice but to accept that I’m here now, and I have no place to go.

I’ll need my strength and my wits, and I won’t be able to think if I’m delirious. I decide to walk inside, close the door, and throw myself onto the bed. I don’t bother looking for clothes or stripping. Instead, I close my eyes and let sleep find me.

When I wake sometime later, the boat is no longer moving. Or if it is, it’s moving very slow.

Pulling the shades back from the window above my bed, all I see is darkness. It’s the middle of the night.

Now is the perfect time.

I can sneak around ...

Maybe I’ll find George.

My bare feet hit the carpeted floor, and I wonder if I should put on shoes, but then I shake that thought away. If I do, I won’t be able to creep around.

I’m still dressed in my clothes from before, but I don’t have anything else to change into, so it will have to do.

Heading for the door, I slowly open it, not wanting to make too much noise. The door is heavy. Much heavier than a

normal door. The urge to use all my weight to swing it open is strong, but I can't. Instead, I try to be as quiet as I can when I open it. When it does finally open, I realize my attempts were in vain.

Standing outside my door is one of his men.

Without a word, I slam the door shut, not caring how loud it echoes, and flop back on my bed.

So much for that.

Phoenix

FALLING.

It feels like the ground is rocking underneath me, and I'm about to lose purchase just as my eyelids jolt open.

A dream. It was only a dream. But as I rub the sleep from my eyes, I realize that's not the case. My nightmare, as it turned out, is also my reality. I am stuck on Alaric's boat. I look around the plush and beautifully decorated stateroom Alaric led me to. When was that? How long have I slept? I feel groggy, not refreshed. Sitting up in the bed, I look around the room. There's no clock, which makes sense.

Time is irrelevant. It drips between my fingers, almost tauntingly.

The drapes are still pulled back from my earlier attempt to leave, and again, I am met with darkness. The moonlight reflecting in the distance is the only visible light.

How can it still be night?

Should I go outside? Should I try again? Although I slept, I'm not in the mood to bump into him, so instead, I walk into the bathroom inside my room and turn on the shower. Before I strip out of my clothes I have been wearing for days, I look around for something to put on, and that's when I see a robe hanging behind the door. Later, I'll look to see if there're any clothes, but for now, I need to wash off the past forty-

something hours. I don't know how long it's been, but it makes no difference. I still feel dirty, tired, and disgusted with myself.

Once the water is on and my clothes are on the floor, I step into the scorching water and let it beat down on me, cleansing away the grime and salty air that clings to my body.

It doesn't take me long to feel like a new person. I shut the off water and dry myself with a towel. Then I wrap the robe around my body and feel ready to search the boat. The only problem is my lack of clothing. I have a choice, but the idea of putting on that little dress again makes my skin crawl. I notice a pair of slippers, put them on, and head out the door. The first thing I notice is that my guard is missing. The next is how quiet the boat is, leading me to believe that it's well past midnight. If it's the wee hours of the morning, this might be the perfect time to look for the radio. The boat isn't moving right now—or if it is, it's moving slow, which could bode well in my favor. Maybe the captain is sleeping. I kick off my slippers, realizing the sound they make slapping against the floor is too loud.

I make it up the stairs and toward the front of the boat. When I push open the door to where the captain should be, I see a light glimmer in the corner.

I'm not alone in here. Fear wraps around me like a tight belt. Each step I take farther into the room tightens the belt another notch.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” the voice that has haunted my dreams purrs from the shadows.

I turn my head in his direction, but there's not much I can see. Even with the lamp, he is bathed in darkness, but the whites of his eyes shine in the dim light.

“Are you here to play, little dove?”

That made me step closer, teeth bared and ready to fight. “My name is Phoenix.”

“I'm well aware of your name. But it doesn't fit or work under the circumstances, so I've changed it.”

“You can’t change it on me. I have a say. I’m not frail or weak.”

“No. You are just a pawn I will use to my advantage.”

I place my hands on my hips in defiance. “You think so little of my father that you can lure him into a trap?”

“Not little,” he says, but he doesn’t clarify his meaning.

“Then what?”

“He loves you. He will do anything to get you back. I will use this to my advantage.”

“Will you kill him?”

He leans forward in his chair, the light now hitting the sharp lines of his face. The way he looks at me makes my insides tremble. The usual smirk is long gone, and the playfulness in his eyes has disappeared.

Only malice and hatred stare back at me.

He is every bit the killer right now that the rumors spoke of.

“Killing him would be too easy.”

I charge forward, not knowing what I’m doing, but as soon as I do, I realize my mistake because he grabs my arms, twisting and pulling, until he’s on top of me.

My back hits the couch, my hands drawn together in his grasp above my head.

He’s too damn close, his rock-hard body against mine. “Do not test me,” he hisses as I try to break free. “I don’t like to be tested.”

“Let me go.” The pressure of his body against mine has me going into fight-or-flight mode. I try to move my hands to push him off me.

It’s useless.

“Not until you calm down. I don’t want to lock you up. I don’t want to hurt you. But if you don’t put your claws away, I will.”

I can't move. Completely immobilized. My chest heaves with each attempt, but it's no use. We stay in this position for too long. His warm breath fans my face, my body pliant beneath his. He could try to take me, and the thought makes me tense.

"You don't have to fear that," he says as if he has a window into my soul, like he can hear my nightmares as they replay in my head.

"Sure."

"I don't need to force anyone." His voice is cocky, and I know he's not lying. There's no hint of anything but arrogance. He doesn't need to take because women must throw themselves at him. Beg him.

Not me. I'll never beg. Nor would I ever want this man.

No matter how beautiful he is from the outside, the inside is rotten to the core. Time crawls slowly as I inhale and exhale, trying to calm the anger inside me.

When it finally subsides, he stands and releases my hands.

"Let me go."

"You chose to be a stowaway. It's not my fault you ended up stuck on my yacht." The bastard smirks.

"I didn't know you were going to leave the port."

"I made an announcement. You must have been busy searching my office. Did you find anything?"

"Fuck you."

"You don't want to be my enemy, dove. Now be a good little bird and go back to bed. We have much to discuss tomorrow."

I stand, fixing my now disheveled robe. "I won't stop until I burn you to the ground."

"You can try."

Alaric

“SHE’S SLEEPING?” CRISTIAN ASKS AS HE STEPS OUT INTO THE warm air. I’ve been here for the past hour—ever since I walked Phoenix to her room. I brought out a glass and a tumbler of scotch.

“Can’t you hear it’s quiet?” I gesture to the seat across from me. “Grab a glass and have a drink with me.”

“Should I gather the men?”

“That would probably be an excellent idea,” I say, lifting the drink to my mouth. It doesn’t take long. Soon, five of my best men surround me at the table. A few light cigars, and everyone drinks.

When my glass is empty, I lean forward. “What have you heard from Michael? Has he put two and two together yet?”

“He’s been quiet. No one has seen or heard from him. But seeing as Peter dropped George’s body in the middle of the square, wrapped up like a Christmas present, we have to assume he got the message. It’s been two days since he’s probably spoken to her. He must know we have her.”

“So, then what the fuck is he waiting for? He needs to crawl out of the hole he’s hiding in.”

That’s the thing about Michael. Ever since our war began, no one has seen him. He was like a fog, hovering close but just

out of reach.

Cristian leans forward. “Cut her finger off.”

My hands hit the table. “No. She won’t be harmed. We don’t have to harm her to get what we want. Her father will leave his rock if we give him enough rope to hang himself.”

“You want to let him know where we are.” His brown eyes are wide in shock.

“Yes.”

“But—”

“No buts. We won’t hurt her; he will come. And because it involves his feelings, he won’t risk her. No war has to bring him to us. It’s almost too easy. He can trade himself for her.”

“Think he will?” Cristian asks.

I think about that for a minute. To ask that question would imply he didn’t love her, but to keep her hidden so well for all these years means my plan will work.

I won’t need to hunt for him. He will come to me willingly.

THE NEXT DAY COMES BEFORE I KNOW IT. I SPENT MOST OF the night not sleeping but talking logistics. We have a fairly large shipment of guns on the boat. We need to transport them to Caracas and make a pickup. Then I can handle Phoenix. The problem being, however, what to do with her.

She’s a slippery little thing, one who will use the opportunity to attempt escape. We won’t be there for a week, though, which will give us plenty of time to get her father to come.

Once on land, we can make the trade—one feisty little bird for a dead man.

That’s what he will be. I’ve already taken his guns. This last shipment I plan to intercept will be the nail in his coffin.

He owes money to corrupt men as is. But I'm fair. Although I should torture him for my brother, I've grown tired of this war.

We've been on the boat for two days now, and the waters are choppy as we cross over toward South America.

As I walk down the hall, I hear a noise coming from Phoenix's room. The first thing I notice as I make my way into her dark stateroom is the bed is unmade, the second being that it's empty. Scanning the room, I hear the grumbling again. It's coming from the bathroom.

"Dove." I walk toward the door. Lifting my hand, I knock. She doesn't answer, so I push it open.

The sight before makes me inhale deeply.

She looks so pathetic curled over the toilet. Since she wasn't sick yesterday, I thought she would be okay, but the waters are rocky even for me, and I live here.

I move closer. Her hair hangs in her face as she gets sick all over again.

I step up behind her and reach my hand out as she continues to be ill.

A part of me can't believe I'm doing this, that I'm holding her hair back. But seeing her like this touches a place in my heart. I don't want to care, and I don't. But one thing I enjoy most about Phoenix is her attitude, her spirit, and now she has neither. It's not fun when we don't spar.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" she asks, lifting her head to look me in the eyes.

"I can't have my bait dying before I use her?" I respond, ever the asshole.

Phoenix scoffs into the toilet. She must be done because she gets up quickly, and my hands slip out of her hair.

"Where are you going?" I ask, standing up as well.

"To bed."

“I’ll get you some medicine. Don’t stay inside when you’re sick.”

“Leave me alone. I don’t need your advice.” She walks away from me but doesn’t make it far before the boat hits a wave and rocks abruptly. She groans loudly as her hands reach out to steady herself on the wall.

“Go upstairs. Can’t you just listen to me. What the fuck are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking you trying to help me is rich.”

“I might be an asshole, but I’m not that big of one.”

“Only a murderer.”

“Yep. Only a murderer. Go up to the sundeck. Fresh air and the horizon will make you feel better. I’ll grab you some medicine. It’ll take about thirty minutes to kick in, but as long as you take it for the next few days, you won’t get sick, and you’ll get your sea legs.”

“Where are we going? Why can’t you just let me go?”

“Unfortunately, that’s not in the cards for you right now.”

“My presence is still needed?” She groans.

“It is.”

“Whatever.” She scoffs as she wipes her mouth and walks past me.

Even sick, she’s stronger than most, an interesting and somewhat upsetting notion. Because to do what I’m going to do, I can’t feel anything for her at all, and every second I stay with her, I’m finding it harder and harder not to like her.

She’s the enemy.

I shake my head. Even as sick as she is, I can’t let my guard down.

She’s the girl who could knock on death’s door and still find the strength for one last stand.

That’s why she’s dangerous.

She’s the female version of me.

Phoenix

ANOTHER DAY.

The endless loop of waiting and not knowing what my future will bring makes me restless.

I know Alaric has a plan.

And I'm well versed with one aspect of said plan.

That being my role in this whole mess.

At least I am no longer sick.

That's a miracle.

Now that I feel better, I really have to search this yacht. There is no time left to wait.

In my nightmares, the ones that plague me while I toss and turn in my bed at night, George is tied to some strange contraption in the engine room. When I wake, covered in sweat, I tell myself maybe he never got on this godforsaken yacht.

Maybe he's okay, and maybe he told my dad when the boat left the dock.

My father will find me.

The waters haven't calmed; we still cross deep, dangerous waves that make the boat roll like a ball in a pinball machine.

I wonder where we are.

I know nothing about sailing, but if I had to guess, we are crossing between continents. Today, I found the men on the deck. They were deep in conversation, and I know without a measure of a doubt that they were talking about their plan for me.

Without waiting to be announced, I take a seat beside Alaric. No one speaks.

“Boys, what’s the plan today?”

“Are you bored?”

“I am.”

“Would you like me to entertain you?” His words drip with innuendo. Decadent and sweet. Like a strawberry freshly dipped in chocolate, oozing on your lips as you lick it off. His voice is so damn husky that the words leaving Alaric’s lips explode inside me like little butterflies let loose.

“Not you,” I hiss before standing abruptly and walking away from him.

A few days ago, I finally noticed the clothing Alaric had bought for me. Everything I would need for a long trip at sea. I realized then that I had walked into a well-thought-out plan. He had thought of everything. There were short dresses, bathing suits, and the worst part—the part that made me squeamish, that made me feel sick to my stomach—was when I found the tampons. Because yes, that meant I would be here for a long time.

I’m not stupid.

I know that my stay will be at least a few weeks. Hopefully, since I just had it, I won’t need to worry, but it doesn’t matter.

I’m trapped here indefinitely, all because I was stupid enough to walk into a damn trap.

I make my way to the front sundeck. This deck is larger than the one I usually find Alaric sitting at. This deck has lounge chairs and a hot tub.

I strip off my clothes, until I'm only in my bikini, and walk toward the beckoning warm water. The footsteps behind me don't deter my progress.

"Going for a swim?" he asks, his voice like warm honey dripping all over me. I shake the thought of the sexy way he sounds out of my head.

"If I'm stuck here, I might as well work on my tan."

"Let me help you with your sunblock."

I turn around to find him smiling at me—smirking is more like it. "I would rather burn than have you touch my skin."

Instead of going in the water, I lie down on the nearest lounge chair. Maybe if I fall asleep, he will stop bothering me.

No such luck.

He steps in, and I look up from where I'm lying on the chair. The shadow his large frame casts blocks the sun, and I peer up at him.

"Do you mind?"

"This is my boat, and there are rules."

"Is there something else you wanted me to do ... Prince, or should I call you king?" I roll my eyes.

"I like that."

"What, the nickname?"

"Your attitude. Makes me want to show you who's in charge."

My teeth grind, and I sit up, pivoting my body toward his. I narrow my eyes in defiance. "You wouldn't dare."

He steps closer. A predator stalking his prey.

"Wouldn't I?" His eyes gleam. "I have you at my mercy. Maybe I would."

A snarl leaves my mouth. "What do you want me to do, then? If I can't sunbathe, then what?"

"Ask next time."

I flip my hair and turn back around, dismissing him.
“Fine.”

“You still haven’t asked permission.”

Air leaves my mouth. “May I please relax on your deck?”

“Why, yes, you can. See. Was that so hard?”

“Asshole,” I mutter under my breath.

“Did you say something?”

“Nope. Nothing here.”

I close my eyes and go back to enjoying the beautiful day. I have realized there is no getting off this boat now, so I might as well get a good tan and piss him off in the meantime.

“Dinner is at seven. Be dressed by then and meet me in the dining room.”

“I’m good.”

“If you know what’s good for you, you will be there.”

I don’t acknowledge the threat in his words. They ring very clearly in the afternoon air.

I’m done with him.

I’ll be dressed and ready. And I’ll bide my time because although I might be stuck on this boat, I’ll make sure to find a way to tell my father not to fall for the trick. Let me die, but don’t come for me.

No matter what.

I SPENT HOURS OUTSIDE. AT SOME POINT, ONE OF HIS MEN brings me a bottle of water and something to eat. It’s almost like being on vacation. Well, unless you consider that we are probably doing a gun run right now.

Who knows where we are going? All I know is as I sit in my towel with my damp hair falling down my back, I have to get ready to eat dinner with the enemy.

Normally, if I was somewhere else, I wouldn't mind so much. At least he's easy on the eyes.

Too easy if you ask me.

Personality-wise, he sucks. Sure, I see him and his men laugh every so often, so maybe he's not bad with them, but with me, he's my captor. Someone I have no interest in spending more time with.

Oh well, no use crying over spilled milk. I have no other choice, so I might as well put on my big girl panties. I look at the tiny scrap of lace Alaric has provided for me and chuckle. It's certainly not what I think anyone had in mind when they came up with that sentence.

Once I finish putting on my makeup and blowing dry my hair, I stand from the vanity and put the underwear on and look for a dress.

He was spot-on in the size department.

A chill runs up my spine over that fact.

How long was he planning this? I had only been planning for a few days before I got stuck on this yacht.

As I stare at my reflection in the mirror, another idea pops into my brain.

Seduction.

It's the one thing I haven't tried yet.

It's the only thing that can work.

I need to seduce Alaric.

Once I do, I'll be able to look for George, maybe even find a way to get help.

But how?

If I come on too strong, he'll know. But if I'm drunk ...

That could work.

Squaring my shoulders in the scrap of a dress I'm wearing, I head toward the door that will lead me up to the main deck.

This has to work.

When I make it out of my room, I can hear the men speaking in the distance. I follow their voices. They are sitting in a different spot than usual. Now they are at the aft deck.

Stars illuminate the dark night sky. Alaric has scattered a few lights in the space for added ambiance.

Not for my sake, I'm sure.

These lights are probably left over from the party.

The party that set my fate in motion.

"Dove, to what do we owe this honor?" His tone is mocking.

Keep your cool. The plan won't work if you blow up and throw something at him.

"I was bored," I respond in my best nonchalant voice, hoping that I do nothing to give myself away.

"Then, by all means, let me and the boys entertain you." A small smile tips his lips. It's meant to be playful, but I can read through Alaric. This smile is anything but playful. This one is deadly.

I'm about to walk into hell, and the devil wants to play.

I square my shoulders and take the seat next to him. He lifts a brow. "You really must be bored if you want my company."

"There are only so many ways I can keep myself entertained in my room every night." I bite my lip; it's a seductive move, but I play it off as coy. Then to seal the deal, I part my mouth and then roll my tongue over the now puffy skin.

His pupils widen as he watches the movement, and then he must think better of it, because he shakes his head, places his hand on the table, and stands. I know it hit its mark when he clears his throat. "What are you drinking?" he asks as he walks over to the bar.

"Vodka on the rocks."

I watch his movements as he starts to make my drink. This is probably a bad idea, but in order for me to make a pass at him later, I need him to see me looking.

The problem is that's he's beautiful, dark, and elusive. A deadly combination, if I can't keep my wits about me.

The tattoos on his forearms are on display. Again lethal. Those tattoos should come with a warning label. The desire to look away and stop gawking at him is intense, but I don't. Instead, I've thrown myself into the ruse.

I keep watching as he walks back over to me, takes a seat beside me, and then hands me my drink.

The taste of the vodka is a welcome distraction.

It courses down my throat, burning a wake in its path. I enjoy the burn. It makes me feel like I can do this.

I'll need all the strength in the world for this.

"It's a nice night," I say, even though I sound like an idiot. Because what else do you say when you're drinking with a bunch of guys, and one happens to be your father's biggest enemy.

"You really must be hard up for entertainment, if you're leading with that."

Telling him he's a jerk sits heavy on my lips, but I refrain. Instead, I give him a false smile.

"Then what do you guys normally talk about?"

"Pussy," one says.

Alaric shoots him a look that puts the drunk idiot back in his place. I don't know his name or what he even does for Alaric. I do remember him at the club, stone-cold and serious. Obviously, they don't perceive me as a threat here on the boat, wherever we are. This will work to my advantage.

"What Tom meant to say is we talk about ..." He lets out a chuckle. "Fuck it. I can't think of anything."

"Women it is."

He shrugs.

“And when you aren’t talking about women ...”

“We sure as shit aren’t talking about the weather.”

“Touché.” I lift my glass and down the rest of the clear liquid. “Then let’s talk about women. Or sex or whatever you guys talk about. But first another.”

Alaric’s mouth parts, and he smiles broadly before standing. This time he doesn’t take my glass. He takes the whole bottle. He holds it up to me.

“Glass or do you just want to drink straight from here?” He winks.

I grab the bottle from his hand and take a large swig, causing the boys to cheer and give me a round of applause.

“Careful. I don’t want you getting sick.”

His meaning comes in loud and clear, hinting at the night he played nurse when I had seasickness. What he doesn’t know is, I might be small, but I’m no lightweight.

Back in school, my roommate Hannah and I drank a lot. I’m no stranger to drinking heavily. I can hold my own. But he’s doesn’t need to know that, and he won’t.

“I’ll be fine,” I say and then giggle.

I see the look that passes between Alaric and his boys. The look that says *she’s yours to take care of if she gets sick*.

Good. Take the bait.

As we continue to drink, everyone around me loosens up.

Somehow, we venture into a conversation about sexual positions.

Now, I’m no prude or anything, but sitting around the room talking sex with a man who looks like Alaric has my cheeks feeling hot.

The man who I now know as Tom laughs about the last woman he slept with.

I listen with feigned interest, watching Alaric the whole time to see what he adds to the conversation.

“And you ...” Tom asks, and I realize I was so enthralled with my father’s enemy, I didn’t realize what he asked. I look up at Alaric with confused eyes, and a wicked smirk lines his face.

“Position? Tom was just telling us he likes it when he doesn’t have to do any work. Now, he wanted to know your favorite.”

If my cheeks could get any warmer, they would be on fire, but I don’t let it stop me. Instead, I continue to look at the man whose attention I need. I lift my right index finger and start to trail it across my lips as I think.

“For me ...” I can see the lust in his eyes and the way his gaze traces over my lips. I part my mouth, and his jaw twitches, his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, watching me. “Well, boys ... That I’m not going to tell.” I wink at Alaric, and he rewards me with a smile. A heart-stopping smile. “On that note ...” I move to stand and purposely stumble. Alaric is fast, and before I know it, I’m in his lap, his arms wrapped around me.

A slight breath escapes my lips at the contact. His fingers splay across my ribs. The position is intimate, and I tilt my head up to look at him.

He looks down at me, ready to meet my stare but not before an unspoken command is issued. The next thing I know, it’s only us.

The salty air feels warmer now. Or maybe it’s the proximity of our bodies.

With our eyes now locked, he pulls me closer. Close enough that my chest now touches his. I can feel him breathe. Can feel his heart as it beats against my own. The feeling is intoxicating. Regardless of why I’m here, or why I’m doing this, I can’t deny this pull between us right now. Despite the heat, goosebumps break out across my exposed skin. His fingers decadently trail up my arm as if he’s tracing them. He

moves to my shoulder, across my collarbone, until his journey takes him to my jaw.

He cups my chin. His eyes are dark and hungry as they pull away from my gaze and travel down to my mouth.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest, heady and desperate for him to kiss me. Maybe it's the vodka that courses through my veins, but I desperately need to feel his lips on mine right now.

“Dove,” he says, and our breath mingles together when he does. The faint hint of an earthy wood dances on my lips. His scotch. The desire to lick the peppery taste of him has a small moan leaving my lips.

The sudden force of his lips slamming against my own makes me quiver. Or whimper. I'm not even sure.

All I know is that his kiss is firm and demanding. It commands me to open to him and give him everything I have.

A part of me screams not to, that this is part of the ruse. But as my mouth opens to his, and his tongue sweeps inside, all those thoughts are brushed away. Instead, I find my hands sliding up his chest.

This isn't real.

It shouldn't feel this good.

But it does.

I push away my thoughts and all the things I know I should be thinking right now, and instead, I give in to the kiss.

Allowing him to deepen it.

Allowing myself to become lost in it.

Our tongues collide. His arms wrap around my back.

There is no space separating us now.

This kiss is different than the last one. Yes, it's still under false pretense, but it feels different. It feels real. Too real.

The notion has me pulling away, panting.

Alaric dips his head down and looks at me.

“Show me your boat,” I whisper.

“No.” His words take me by surprise. A smile curls up his lips. “Little dove, what are you looking for on my boat?”

“Nothing,” I respond, my voice quick and shaky.

“As much as I liked the kiss, do you think I’m an idiot?”

I push my hand off his chest and stand.

“Little dove,” he muses.

“Phoenix. Repeat after me. Phoenix. *P. H. O. E. N. I. X.* That’s my name!” I scream. Clearly, the booze has gotten to me because this is not a part of my master plan of seduction. Which has failed, apparently.

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” he chides.

“We are not Romeo and Juliet.” I step back from where he’s sitting as he moves to stand.

“We could be.” He approaches me, and it feels like I’m trapped in a tight space with nowhere to go.

“Never going to happen.”

“But didn’t it almost ...”

He steps toward me, his hand reaching out. It starts to run down my arm until it’s enclosed around my wrist.

“We could fuck,” he mocks. I step back, but he follows. It’s a wicked dance.

“No. We can’t,” I hiss. “I don’t want you.”

Lies. My attraction to him is painfully obvious, from every whimper to every moan. The evidence screams of my lie, but I keep my back straight and tell the lie anyway.

“Then why does your skin heat when I touch it? Why do you tremble beneath my fingers?” Again, he lifts his hand, and this time I swat it away. Anger fuels me.

“Don’t touch me,” I hiss like a viper ready to snap.

“Are you sure?”

His brow lifts in a mocking gesture, and I grind my teeth at his question. “Yes.”

“If you say so. I guess that means you’re not hungry for dinner.” With a large self-satisfied smile on his face that I so desperately want to smack off him, he starts to walk away.

“Wait.” He stops and turns to look back at me. “Let me and George go.” My hands move to the side of my hips as I prepare for a showdown.

“But what message would that send?”

“That you’re not a monster.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong, dove. I am, and your father made me one.” My mouth opens and shuts because I don’t know what to say to his comment.

“Then keep me. Don’t do this to George. He doesn’t deserve it.” My words come out as a plea, desperate to save this man my father calls a friend.

“You don’t have to worry about George,” he retorts in cold sarcasm, and I bite down hard on my lower lip at his blank and empty stare. “He’s not on this boat.”

By the time I make it back into my stateroom, I can barely control the pain I’m feeling. When the door slams shut behind me, I allow the tears to cascade down my cheeks. I’m all alone here. There’s no one to help me.

You can help yourself. You aren’t helpless.

I just have to remember the plan. No more kissing. No more forgetting that Alaric Prince is not a good man.

He is the villain in this story. He will pay.

I’ll make him.

My hand reaches up, and I swipe at the wetness under my eyes.

Tonight was a misstep. But the plan can still work. I need to play nice. The idea doesn’t sit well in my stomach, but I’m a survivor. There is nothing I can’t do.

When I was young, cold, and hurt, Michael Lawrence took me in.

Now it's my turn to do what I need to for him.

No matter the consequences.

I'll do whatever I have to so I can save him and protect him, even if that means ending my own life.

Alaric

WE'RE GETTING CLOSER. THERE'S ONLY ANOTHER DAY OR SO before we will hit port. I know Michael knows we have a guest on our boat. It's only a matter of time before he'll try to contact us.

We are still too far out to make a concrete plan, but as of now, when we call him, we expect the exchange to go smoothly.

We'll suggest a simple trade.

Her for him.

My men on the island have already secured his guns. The information will spread fast, and he will know I have him exactly where I need him—royally screwed.

There has never been a moment in the last four years that Michael Lawrence hasn't had a hit on him. He's been smart, though. He rarely leaves his compound. When he does, he has an armed guard with him. He's like me in that way. That's why seeking my revenge has been unfruitful. But now I have him.

Now, he'll be lured out of the hole he's been hiding in.

He is a dead man walking the moment the Camerino family finds out they had paid to secure guns, and he has no product.

Maybe he can figure out a way to get out of this mess and pay back the money. But I have already fucked him there too.

The money from the deal is gone. I don't just want revenge for my brother's death; I want him to suffer for the innocent life he took. That's where he and I differ; I have never killed someone who hasn't deserved it. Take George for example, he was plotting against me with Michael, but my brother ...

Michael Lawrence deserves what's coming to him, and he's soon going to pay for his crimes against me.

Without the guns, he has no choice left but to make this easy on himself. Striking a deal with me will have the same result. Him dead. But this way, in the offer I gave him, his precious child will be safe.

I'll make the call tonight. But first, I have to find the little minx.

It's been hard to keep my distance, even with a boat as large as this is, she's always there. Always barely dressed.

It's as if she's doing it on purpose, which I wouldn't put past her, to be honest.

She knows she is gorgeous, and she is wielding her beauty like a weapon.

Too bad for her, I appear to be immune. Even if it's not true, and the idea that I'm not pisses me the fuck off, she'll never know the truth. She thinks I am, and that's all that matters.

My men, on the other hand, aren't so lucky. She's been laying it on thick by batting her eyelashes at them.

But I know my men. I've saved them from too many wars to have them turn their back on me.

That's the thing a girl like her will never understand. When you lie in the trenches with someone, when you bring them back to life, they owe you a life debt.

My men owe that to me, and I owe my life to them. There is no coming between us. Not now. Not ever.

I find her right where I expect her to be, in the scrap of a bathing suit I bought her. I should have thought this through better.

If she's going to be flaunting her beauty, I might as well watch as she slathers sunblock on her legs. Legs that go on for days.

I step forward. Like yesterday, I purposely block out the sunlight, giving her no choice but to stare up at me with a hand covering her face against the glare.

"What do you want?" she hisses.

I'm used to the attitude. The sugary sweet voice she has is only ever aimed at my men. No, for me, she reserves the lethal one, a voice dripping with venom.

"We need to talk."

That makes her sit up, and her hand reaches out to grab a towel. She knows what I'm about to say is real, and she doesn't want to be vulnerable when I do.

Not naked like she is now.

Once the towel is wrapped around her body tightly, she looks at me.

"Speak."

"Such an attitude. Have I harmed you in any way to have you talk to me with such disdain?"

"I'm here—somewhere I don't want to be—alone. I'm thinking that yes, you have."

"But see, that's where I must have gotten mistaken. You came on my boat. You chose to look around ... If anything, this is your fault."

Her face turns pale as my words hit her, making her jaw tremble, but she must catch herself because she clenches her teeth to stop the chattering as she faces me head-on.

"That wasn't an invitation to move," she seethes. "I thought you would be docked."

I nod. “Yes, you thought you could just sneak into my office and what ...? Find your father’s guns? Hate to break it to you, dove, but those guns, they are long gone. And the ones my men just seized? Gone too.”

Her mouth drops open, her shoulders going rigid at the same time.

“You-You ...”

“Stole his next shipment.” I beam as I fill in her missing words.

“But ...” She can’t even speak because she is shaking so badly.

“This was all for nothing. You sneaking on my boat. You looking. I was always one step ahead of you.”

“Why don’t you just stop and tell me what you want.”

“Tonight, we call your father.”

Her eyes go wide. “And say what?”

“Inform him of the trade I want to make.”

Her head shakes back and forth, already coming to understand what that means. “No.”

“Yes.”

My one-word answers for most would make them shut up. But she’s not most.

“I will not have you use me as bait.” Before I know what she’s doing, she’s flinging her towel off and running to the railing.

“Stop!” I shout.

She’s already jumping by the time I spring into action.

Everything stands still for a second, an endless second as I’m screaming for my men.

Running to the end, I see her surface from below. She’s kicking and swimming, but there is no place for her to go. She would rather die than let me use her as bait.

Too bad I'm not merciful.

Without another thought, I'm jumping in after her. My body hits the water, and then I'm kicking up to the surface. The water is much rougher, and I can see the fear in her eyes. She wanted to die, but until you look death in the eye, you don't really know what that means.

And I wonder if this is it. If this is the way to win.

Let her die.

Don't save her.

My brother's words ring in my ear as I kick my legs out to grab her. Her movements are choppy, her strength waning on the onslaught of the battering waves. "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

She will be a casualty regardless, but this way, if she dies, she won't have to see the bloodshed.

I look at her, our eyes catching. She implores me without words to let her go.

If I was a better man, I would.

But I'm not.

Phoenix

IT FEELS LIKE A WEIGHT IS PULLING ME. HEAVY. SO HEAVY I can't breathe.

I know I need to kick, but I can't.

After everything my father—a man who was never supposed to be my father—did for me, I can't allow myself to be used to hurt him. So I jumped. As much as my lungs scream, I won't fight.

I will let the dark abyss have me. Let it seal my fate.

Darkness comes fast. Followed by what I can only imagine death must feel like.

Drowning. Drowning.

Hands reach for me, and a choke breaks through my mouth. My eyes flutter open.

What the hell happened? The world around me is still blurry, but with each inhale, it comes into focus.

I'm on the boat.

"No," I scream, thrashing my arms, trying to break free. I can't let him use me to hurt my father. "No!"

"Shh," he coos. For some reason, it calms me. It shouldn't, but it does.

My breathing regulates, and I take in everything. From my wet bathing suit to the water still clinging to my body, but the big thing I notice is Alaric sitting beside me.

Wet as well.

He saved me.

And in doing so, he's condemned my father to death.

His hand reaches out.

"Don't." I push back. "Don't touch me."

"Touch you. I fucking saved you." His voice would make the arctic melt. There's a fire I've never heard before in his tone. It's scary, but it also lights me up—something I don't want to think about.

"I didn't ask you to. I didn't *want* you to."

"What would your death cause? Nothing. Your father will die regardless. His crime is too great not to, but with your death, nothing changes. I'm offering him more. I will pay off his debt for his life, and in turn, you will live. No one will collect his debt off your flesh."

The meaning behind his words sinks in. My body shivers at the thought.

My father owes dangerous men their guns. They would use me. No different from Alaric.

No. That's not true. Even though he's killed, when I look at Alaric, I know he's not lying. He would never use me like that. Not unwillingly.

But even though I know it, I can't help but fire back. "They are taking a play out of your book."

A very angry Alaric stands from where he was perched on my seat.

He paces back and forth then turns to me. "I never hurt you. I never raped you. Do not compare me to those animals."

"But you want to kill my only family. My father." My voice is barely a whisper. I look down to the ground and

swallow before meeting his eyes again.

“I am giving him mercy. I won’t let them harm you. I will take my pound of flesh, and in return, I will guarantee your safety, which is more than he deserves.”

“Why would you save me?”

But he doesn’t answer my question. He just stalks off, leaving me with his men.

I look up at the one called Cristian. His right hand. “Aren’t you going to chase after him?”

“You should count yourself lucky that he is fair. If it was up to me, I would let you both die.” And with that, he stalks off too. One thing is abundantly clear. I can’t die. Jumping is not an option.

No matter what, my father’s fate has been written if I die, but if I live ... if I fight, if I get the chance to warn him ...

Yes, maybe there’s still hope. Tonight, we call my father. I can warn him tonight. Tell him our location, something, anything, and it will all be okay.

It’s hard to keep myself busy and entertained. The truth is, I’m nervous. Another truth: I’m disappointed with myself. In the end, no matter how hard I try, I keep messing up.

I only have one more way to deal with this.

As soon as Alaric and his men are confident I won’t fling myself off the boat again, I’m allowed to head back down to my stateroom.

I refuse to give them the satisfaction of losing my shit, so I catch my breath, throw up my walls and pretend not to care.

It works.

They know I am no longer a threat.

That I’m safe and will play their game.

Once I get out of the shower, I go to look for Alaric. I want to see if I can pinpoint our location.

Anything to help tip off my father. I find him on the bridge.

He's sitting at a small table with Cristian.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe a map that will tell me where we are going. But since that's not the case, I plop down in the chair next to him and lean forward until my elbows rest on the cold metal of the table.

"Since I have nothing better to do ..."

"You might as well annoy me?" Alaric finishes for me.

"Exactly." I can hear the groan emanating from Cristian's mouth, but he doesn't say anything. "Where are we going?"

"Caracas."

The little composure I've held since the other night when I lost it is starting to evaporate when he tells me the location. What concerns me isn't the distance, I haven't been back to South America since my parents died.

A strange feeling worms its way into my soul, like this trip will be the end for me. I was ready to jump, but now that I know what's in store for my father, regardless of my life, I can't give up without a fight.

"Why there?" I ask with as little emotions as possible, trying my best not to give anything away.

"So many questions."

"I don't understand what the secrets are all about. There's nothing I can do. I'm stuck on this boat. I haven't seen another boat. It's not like I have magical powers where I can mentally tell him your plan."

Alaric's brows pinch, and he leans forward. "Very well," he says before standing and walking to a desk in the corner.

He comes back a second later. This time, a map is in his hands. He must not think I'm a threat at all if he's prepared to show me the location. The thought is sobering, but I don't allow myself to get burdened by it. Instead, I welcome any information I can get. I'm not good at maps or at least nautical

maps, so I cut my head to the side and then look up into his crystal blues.

“What’s the plan?” I ask.

“You see this island over here?”

His long arm stretches across the map.

“We are about seventy nautical miles from it.”

His lips tip up into a wicked smile.

“Basically, what you’re trying to say is had I swum, I would’ve died because there’s no place to go.”

“Yes, basically.”

“And where are we headed?” I asked.

“Right here.” I look back to where the map is and where his finger sits. Between the two points—where we are now and where we need to go—there is vast blue, so at least a day at sea.

I do notice a sprinkling of islands, and he must catch me.

“You won’t find any help there. And again, it’s too far to swim. Most of those islands are uninhabitable.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know everything about the ocean.”

I wonder how much of that is true. Does he really know everything? It would appear so, since he lives on this boat, spending his time going from port to port. I imagine it’s so he can transport guns under the radar—a small private yacht under the guise of being some sort of rich playboy. I wonder if he pays off the government at each location.

“So now that you’ve told me where we are and where we’re going, why don’t you just tell me what your actual plan is?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I think it’s only fair for you to tell me if I am to be used as bait.”

“Here’s the thing you need to learn: life is not fair. You’ll be granted life, but unfortunately, to do so, I must take your father’s. He wronged me. There is always a price to pay. Now, it’s his turn, and no, I won’t give you leverage to try to stop that.”

His words feel like tiny shards of glass cutting me. Even though I knew this was the case, it still hurts to know he wants to use me to kill my father, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. Maybe I can try to convince him that my father played no part in his brother’s death. I’ve been working to try to stop his plan, but maybe I just need to talk to him.

“Talk to me. Maybe I can help mend this—”

“That is between him and me.”

I slam my hands down on the table. “That’s horseshit, and you know it. You want to kill him because you think he murdered your brother. He didn’t.”

“You don’t know shit. You think this is your war, but this started when you were still ignorant, nestled in your private school. Let the adults handle matters. This is no game for a little girl.”

“Little girl? I’m twenty-two.”

He moves closer to me, his hand reaching out to brush a loose strand of hair from my forehead.

“Still just a little dove. Not strong enough to fly.”

“And how old are you?” I sneer.

“Thirty-four.”

With that, he stands and walks out the door, leaving me with the map and nothing more.

This afternoon was a complete waste of time.

I found out nothing.

He took my father’s shipment. Not once but twice. The men who paid my father still don’t have the guns, and Alaric did something with the money, making it impossible for my father to even pay them back. This shipment, the one Alaric

has intercepted, was a shipment of goodwill, coming out of my father's pocket. Yet again, it was taken.

Nothing I can say will change the fact that there are two prices on my father's head. The question is which one is worse.

Will my father come willingly to the slaughter in order to save me? Maybe there is still hope. Maybe the guns are on the boat, and maybe my father's men can take the boat, kill my captor, and everything will be okay.

Tonight, we call him. Tonight, Alaric will tell him of the proposed swap. I'll tell him our location. I'll make sure he knows where we are. And I'll trust my father to do what is needed to survive, even if I'm a casualty.

My days have been numbered for a long time. The sand in the hourglass should have run out when I was ten, but I was given another chance. So maybe it's time.

Alaric

SHE IS UNUSUALLY QUIET TODAY. I'M NOT SURE WHAT I expected. More pushback, I guess. Which is why I'm sure she will do something to sabotage the call to her father.

We're sitting on the deck when I pull out my phone. Phoenix's eyes go wide at my movement. Her skin, which normally sports a healthy tan, seems to whiten in fear.

"Yes?" I ask in a teasing tone. Its only purpose is to play up her fear.

"I thought ... I thought phones don't work here?" She's wondering if this whole time she could have done more to escape. More to warn him.

"They don't usually." I smile wickedly. "Not unless I allow them to."

Her mouth opens and shuts at my admission. "I thought you would be using the radio thing?"

"Were you hoping you could call for help?"

She scowls at me. All traces of fear are now gone, replaced by the anger I have grown to like in her.

"Unfortunately for you, calling the Coast Guard is not an option. Now come over here," I pat the seat beside me, "and speak to your father."

She shakes her head.

“No. Interesting. And I assumed you would want to warn him of my trap.” I smirk as her eyes narrow at me. “No need. I’ll tell him point-blank that it is a trap.”

I grab my phone from the table and then dial. It rings one time before he picks up.

The phone is on speaker when he answers.

“Give me back my daughter.” His anger echoes through the air, and I laugh.

“Work on your manners. That is no way to say hello.”

“Cut the shit and tell me what you want. I’ll give you anything.”

I lean forward in my chair. “Here is the thing, Michael, you don’t get to make suggestions on how we handle things. Phoenix is in no danger.” He scoffs on the phone, obviously not believing me.

“She got on my boat,” I remind him.

“What do you want?”

“Here’s what you don’t understand. I have everything I want already. I have your guns. Both shipments. I have your money. And best of all ... your daughter. The most important person in your life is on my boat as my guest, so there is nothing you can give me other than yourself.”

I’m dangling the hook. Let’s see if he bites.

“Fine.”

Hook. Line. Sinker.

“No.” Phoenix stands, rushing over to where I am and grabbing the phone from my hand. I let her have it, loving the fire that plays in her eyes as she thinks she can pull one over on me yet again. “Don’t do it. I’m not worth it,” she pleads.

“You are.” His voice is soft, pleading with her to let him do what he needs to do. “Take me off speaker, Alaric.”

Standing from where I'm sitting, I make my way over to her. She's nibbling her bottom lip. The movement calls attention to how her mouth trembles. "Phone." My hand reaches out, and she looks into my eyes. Her big blue eyes beg and plead for me to reconsider. That ship has sailed already. There is no going back. Unless I give him back his money or his guns, he's dead. Truth. He's dead regardless, and he knows it. This is his best option.

"Please," she mutters as I take the phone. "Please don't do this." She's speaking to both of us.

To her father for offering himself on a platter and to me for doing this in the first place.

I grab the phone from her hand and place it on my ear.

"We'll meet at The Port of La Guaira. You will come alone."

"You won't harm her?" His voice is broken. He loves her. I should care, but I don't. He deserves what's coming to him.

"You have my word."

"And you'll make sure they don't."

"As soon as you are with me, I will have the guns dropped off for the Camerinos."

He's silent as he considers this. He is probably trying to find a way around this, which would require him to find the guns first.

Would he risk his daughter for one last Hail Mary?

"You have a deal. How long until you're there?"

"One day. You have one day to get your life in order." He understands my meaning. He has one day to make sure his affairs are in order to make sure Phoenix is forever taken care of. With the guns and money returned to him after the exchange, he will have to transfer everything into her name. A lot of work to do in one day, but that's his problem, not mine.

"Very well." He pauses, and for a moment, I wonder if he hung up. "Will I see her?"

“Yes.”

It’s the least I can do. I can grant him that little mercy, although he never granted me the same. Had I known that day four years ago would be the last time I spoke to my brother, I might have said something different or done something different.

But unlike this man, I won’t do the same.

With nothing more to say, I hang up the phone. My gaze slides toward Phoenix, who is now sitting in the chair across the table from where I was sitting.

Tears stream down her face.

I take the seat across from her, staring at her as she cries. She’s mesmerizing as she lets her walls crumble.

I shouldn’t enjoy her crying.

Normally, watching a woman cry would put me on edge, annoy me.

But the love she feels for him, it’s real. Genuine. He is her world.

The two sides of this man don’t reconcile with me.

He killed my brother. No remorse. He killed him because he thought he was me. Unforgivable.

“Don’t do this.” She hiccups as she sobs.

“I am offering him an option the Camerino won’t. I will give him a swift death and make sure you are safe.”

“You did this to him. He’s only in this position because of you.”

“Your father started this war, dove. I’m only finishing it.”

I stand and grab a box of tissues, placing them in front of her.

“Clean yourself off and pack.”

“There is nothing here I want,” she fires back, tears now dry from her rage. It simmers beneath the surface, the red

flames peeking out from behind her eyes. They remind me of burning coals full of fire and heat.

“Then don’t pack. This is our last night together. Join me for dinner.”

“No.”

I shrug. “Very well.”

Turning from her, I stroll out of the room, ready to make the final provisions for the exchange.

By this time tomorrow, vengeance will finally be mine.

Phoenix

TIME IS RUNNING OUT, AND THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO WAY OUT of this situation.

It's late. Probably around midnight, maybe later. I still don't have a clock, but seeing as the boat is quiet, I have to imagine the time to be after everyone has fallen asleep.

With so much nervous energy jumping in my veins, I decide to go for a walk.

I'm too cooped up in this stateroom. I throw on a pair of yoga pants, a tank, and sneakers.

I don't get very far before I hear a crash at the same time the boat lurches forward.

What the hell?

Screams pierce through the air.

Did we crash? How is that possible?

Then I hear footsteps running.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

The noises echoing through the boat makes my blood run cold.

Those were gunshots. Someone is shooting on the boat.

It feels as though my legs are stuck in quicksand. I can't move. I don't know who is firing or where to go.

The sound of steps has me shaking out of my fog as I dash for the staircase. The one place I don't want to be is caught without a chance to escape. If I'm at the back of the boat, I can ...

What?

Jump?

There is no place to go.

The extra boat.

Although I've never seen it, there must be something. Isn't it mandatory to have a lifeboat, raft, something?

I'm running now, as fast as I can, but the gunshots get louder. My heart pounds in my chest as I make my way toward the back of the ship.

What if that's where they are?

I'm not sure what's happening, but soon I will as I swing open the door and make my way out in the warm summer air.

"Phoenix." My movements stop, and I turn to see Alaric. He looks disheveled, like he's been fighting. Dressed in gray sweats and a white T-shirt, he looks like he could have been working out. But I know better, and if I need any more evidence to prove he wasn't, he has a gun in his hand.

My brow furrows. Maybe he was firing at his own men, but as he lifts his free hand to his mouth, I know that's not the case.

He's being hunted too.

"Follow me," he whispers as we move toward the passage that will lead us to the back.

"What's happening?" My voice is low enough that I don't think he can hear me.

"Pirates."

My feet stop short, and he turns around to look at me, imploring I move.

“Nice try, Captain Sparrow. Pirates don’t exist. This isn’t a Disney movie,” I deadpan. “Tell me the truth!”

“Not that we have the time to argue, but there are, in fact, pirates in the Caribbean, and as funny as that sounds, it’s no joke. They are ruthless, out for blood, and they are about to board this ship.”

“What are they after?” I whisper, hoping they don’t hear me.

“*You.*”

Before I can ask more questions, he grabs my arm and is pulling me.

Why would someone want me? Unless ...

“My father?” I whisper. That’s the only thing that makes sense. But does it? They are shooting and firing—

Crash.

Our bodies fling in the air as an explosion rocks the ground.

A bomb.

“They’re trying to blow up the ship.”

“It can’t be my father.” *Could it?*

Why would he have bombs on a boat? Especially a boat I’m on.

“I don’t know. Maybe he decided you weren’t worth the hassle. Now, let’s go unless you want to die on this boat.”

He pulls me around, and I allow it. The air is filled with smoke. Fire engulfs the space behind us.

Panic fills my veins.

I always knew that death was a possibility, but now that I’m looking at it in the face, fire and smoke billowing from behind me, I know I don’t want it.

I need to fight. My brain becomes more alert, and I see where we are going.

“Come on. We are headed toward the Zodiac. If we get on it, we can escape,” he says, his words giving me the strength to push on.

Another series of gunshots ring out through the air. My arms pump harder.

The sound of footsteps approaching.

“They boarded,” he whispers, and I wonder if he’s worried about his men. “I can’t let them get you.” His words sting. If it really is my father behind this, wouldn’t it just be easier to give him what he wants?

It makes little sense. “It can’t be him.”

“We won’t be here long enough to find out. As much as I should fight, I can’t let anything happen to you.”

Heavy footsteps are gaining on us as we get to where the large Zodiac tender is. There’s no way we will make it out of here, though. Not without them hearing us open the back of the boat to escape. If they hear, they will just come after us.

“We won’t have time.”

“What should we do?”

He pulls me out of the room then starts to guide me farther away. I follow him blindly in the dark as we keep moving through the yacht until we are finally outside. The warm air hits my face once we are on the stern of the boat.

“Help me grab the raft.”

“Seriously? You want to take a raft out into the ocean instead of the boat?”

“One, we would never have had enough time to get the tender in the water before they found us. Two, even if we were able to, there is no quiet way to do it. The sound alone will have them firing at this.”

“Fine, I guess we are taking the raft. Where is it?” It might be dark, but there is enough visibility out here, and I don’t see

anything at all resembling a raft.

“It’s on the transom.”

“Do you have that in English?”

He points at a large white canister that’s attached to the horizontal wall of the boat right above the waterline in front of us.

“What the hell is that?” I whisper-shout.

“That’s the raft.” My eyes go wide at his words. “Once I throw it in the ocean, and pull the painter out, it will inflate.”

“And then what? We get on a raft and pray?”

“Pretty much.”

“There’s no way whatever is in that box will have enough room for both of us.”

“It’s built for six. This isn’t *Titanic*. I have no intention of letting you push me off.”

He moves away from me and grabs something, then he throws the white canister into the water before pulling on a rope, which I guess from his earlier description is called a painter. It starts to inflate before my eyes. The bottom looks like a large black inflatable tube, and on top is a red canopy.

My eyes are wide, and Alaric must see my distress because his hand reaches out and reassuringly squeezes my own. “It’s not fully inflated. It will be okay; we just have to wait a few more seconds.”

The sound of air seeping out has my nerves on edge that someone will hear, but Alaric doesn’t seem worried. I have to assume that with the gunshots sounding in the distance, no one will hear.

Once it’s full size, Alaric pulls it close until it’s hovering right by the boat in the blackness of the water below.

It reminds me of the type of life raft the Coast Guard uses in movies I’ve seen. I can’t imagine he ever thought he would have to use it, but here it is inflated. He probably uses it for fun. It’s probably nothing more than a toy for him to play with.

“This is crazy. We are going to die,” I mumble.

“Probably, but at least we won’t die by their hands.”

“I can’t do this.” My head shakes back and forth. No way am I jumping into that little thing that can probably pop if a wave is too big.

“You can, and you will. Cristian will find us. If anyone is going to live through this, it’s him. We just need to get you off the boat now until he kills them all.” He pulls me along to where the back of the boat is open. Water batters against the ladder.

“I’m not jumping in.”

“Then I’ll push you in. But either way, you are getting on this raft.”

The water is choppy, and no part of me wants to jump in. Just as I’m about to step off, the boat pitches again, and another explosion sounds in the distance.

“Step in. Can you reach?”

“You want me to step into that? How?”

“Step through the canopy entrance. Come on, we don’t have any time. Get in!” he screams, getting impatient with my fear.

With a deep breath, I jump, angling myself through the entryway until I’m landing in the middle of the raft.

Once I’m inside, Alaric looks down at me. “Catch.”

He throws something at me—a very heavy bag—and then he’s jumping in after me. We are engulfed in pitch-black from where we are in the back of the boat.

“Do not say a word. Not a sound. They can’t see us back here. As long as we’re quiet, we will be okay.”

“But for how long?”

“There are hundreds of islands out here. We’ll be fine.”

“But who will fin—” He places his hand on my mouth.

I'm not sure if it's from the chilly water or the fear that's rushing through my veins, but as we drift off into the darkness of the night with guns firing behind us, I can't help but shake.

I have no idea what's in store for us, or how we'll make it through the night. The only thing I'm sure of is my fear.

Alaric

We watch the yacht become smaller and smaller in complete silence. I haven't closed up the canopy yet. Instead, I watch as the lights flicker from on board, and I know without a measure of doubt that my men are dead.

There is no way they could have survived that fight. It's only a matter of time before my yacht sinks. But I don't care about the damn boat. An empty feeling spreads through my chest as I realize despite my best efforts to never mix business with pleasure, I fucked up. I did.

They do mean something to me. I care.

The men with me might be evil to some, but to me, they are my brothers.

A heavy, somber feeling weighs me down, and the desire to scream into the night overwhelms me.

But there would be no point. Instead, I turn toward Phoenix to make sure she is okay.

Her knees are pulled into her chest, arms wrapped around them. She shakes beside me. A part of me wants to comfort her, but I'm not even sure how to do it.

She blames me for everything.

If only she knew how wrong she was. None of this was my doing. The boat is just a casualty from actions a long time

coming.

“It will be okay,” I say to her, but it’s as if she’s in shock and can’t hear me because she says nothing, just clutches her knees tighter and looks out at the ocean ahead of us.

It’s a cloudless night tonight, which is the only saving grace. If a storm hits, we probably won’t live.

But if the water remains calm, there is a good chance we will come upon another boat tomorrow.

We are too small, and with the proximity to my enemies, I won’t risk the flares today, but tomorrow, when the morning sun hits us, we should be able to find someone to help us.

Both of us settle into a tense quiet. She’s too afraid to speak, and I’m too angry.

Once they find us, I will send word to my men who weren’t with me on the boat. After that, a painless death will no longer be on the table for Michael.

No, the time for mercy is over. He will pay. Repeatedly.

Stars are the only light around the raft, the sound of the water crashing the only music.

I will myself not to sleep and stay vigil during the night.

But as each wave hits us, and as the energy that had once coursed through my body fades, I find it harder and harder to keep that promise to myself.

Instead, darkness beckons to me.

Vivid nightmares full of screams and death lull me to sleep.

Phoenix

Water splashes against my face. A bright blinding light makes my eyes squint.

I lift my hand to wipe the sleep out of my eyes.

It feels like I'm blind when my eyes flutter open.

Where the hell am I? What happened? With a jolt, I fling my body forward as everything that happened comes back to me at breakneck speed. Guns. Explosions. Escaping into the night on a raft.

The bright red canopy is pulled back from the raft that I see I'm still sitting in. I look around, trying to take in where I am.

Blue water surrounds me, but I'm not moving. It splashes over the side of the boat ...

I look behind me and see that we're actually on sand.

Alaric?

Where's Alaric?

Frantically, I look for him. He's a few feet away on the sand with his hand lifted toward the sky to block the bright rays of the sun.

He must see me sitting up because he walks in my direction.

“You’re up.”

I blink a few times. “Where are we?” I ask, my voice cracking from how parched I am.

“Beats the fuck out of me.”

His answer makes my belly feel like it’s dropping.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He lowers his hand for me to grab it, and as much as I want to feign that I don’t need his help, I’m not stupid. I do.

The nausea and dizziness make me feel as though I spent the night in the middle of the ocean.

Which I did.

His hand encompasses mine, and then he’s pulling me up.

Once on the sand, I look around. “Do you really not know where we are?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No. I can guess a general location, but we were in that raft for hours.”

“How many islands can there really be?”

“You’d be surprised. Remember the map I showed you?”

I think back to that moment, to what now seems like a million years ago.

The map. The location. The cluster of hundreds of small islands.

Deserted islands, he’d said.

We could be on any of them.

As if reading my mind, he shrugs. “Yep.”

“This isn’t good.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

I have seen many sides of him since I stowed away on his yacht, but never have I seen the expression he has on his face now as he looks across the vast beach and at the trees behind him.

“We’ll be okay,” he finally says, but I’m not sure who he is trying to convince, him or me.

The first thing I notice is nothing.

Lots and lots of nothing.

White sand that stretches for miles. Turquoise blue sea that spans even further.

“Have you looked around yet?” I ask.

“Not yet. I didn’t want to leave until you were up.”

“And now that I am?”

“I’ll go, and you’ll stay here.”

My eyes flare. “You want me to stay here alone?”

He steps closer to me, his face hard. “You will be safer here. Fuck knows what I’ll find in there.” He gestures to the woods. Tall trees block whatever is in the center of the island.

“There could be people.”

“Or animals. Until I know what’s there, I can’t have you slowing me down.”

My mouth flies open to say something, but I’m at a loss for words.

“Also, what if a boat passes by? If we are both in the middle of God knows what in there, who will signal to them?”

I know he’s right. However, the need not to agree makes me scowl at him. It’s deep-seated, and I can’t back down. I refuse to be weak, so I plop myself on the sand and turn toward the ocean.

“And how do you expect me to get their attention if they come?”

He steps up behind me, his sizeable frame casting a shadow in front of me. I look up, squinting into the sun as he hands me an enormous flare gun. My eyes go wide, I can’t use that.

It’s not a real gun.

It feels heavy in my hand, but nothing like—I stop the train of thought that threatens to put me in a dark place.

Instead, I openly gawk at him, as I realize he just gave me a weapon. One I could use to hurt him. What does that mean? That he thinks me weak, or is it something else? Does he trust me?

“You fire this in the air.”

“Can I just shoot you with it?” I mutter under my breath, low enough that he probably doesn’t hear.

However, his chuckle as he walks away tells me he heard.

Great. Just great.

Stuck on an island with him.

How can things get any worse?

Hunger. That’s how. Because the moment Alaric leaves, my stomach growls loudly. Embarrassingly so.

Lucky for me, I’m alone.

Unlucky for me, there’s nothing to eat.

So instead of thinking about it, I keep my gaze toward the ocean. The water is unlike anything I have ever seen.

A shade of blue that only appears in dreams. It’s as if the sky and water blend seamlessly in the distance.

I can’t tell where one stops and one begins. I lose myself in the horizon, staring and wondering how this all came to pass.

The last week filters through my brain.

It’s all his fault.

Everything that happened.

One might say I’m to blame for my circumstances. A stowaway locked in a room deserves what she will get.

But this feud has been brewing and festering for a long time. Eventually, it would have come to a head.

It’s my fault I stepped in and tried to play a game I was grossly unprepared for, but this man doesn’t fight fair. I had no

choice.

I'm not sure how long I sit, staring out at the endless seas.

How long I squint to see if that's a boat or just a mirage.

It's the latter.

Each time, I'm sure.

Placing my hand on the flare gun, I aim toward the sky, and each time my finger goes to press down, as I feel the weight and pressure forming, I realize it's just my eyes playing tricks on me.

No one is here to save us.

A thought pops into my head ...

How can they save us if they can't see us?

I remember watching a documentary about a group of sailors. Their boat lost fuel, leaving them stranded on a remote Pacific island. A military team found them alive three days later. The sailors had written SOS in the sand. Lucky for them, a helicopter spotted the message.

I wonder if we could do something like that. Would it work for us? Never know until you try.

Standing from my spot on the beach, I place the flare gun down and walk toward the tree line, looking for anything I can use to build my SOS. Unfortunately, I come up empty-handed.

There are no large rocks, nor nearly enough twigs to do anything.

Instead, I head back over to the sand and get on my hands and knees. How big does this have to be? Large enough that someone in a helicopter can see it. On an exhale, I place my hands in the coarse sand and begin to dig. Instantly, I realize this will not be as easy as I thought.

My nails are full of sand and I only just started. I used to love playing on the beach as a child.

When I was around five, a few years before my parents died, they brought me with them on a trip to the Dominican Republic. I spent hours burying myself in the sand. The coarse grains were everywhere. Even places that later I wished they weren't. The memory makes me smile. For a second, I pretend I'm that person again. Young, innocent, untainted by life.

But the feeling of happiness doesn't last long.

This isn't paradise. This is hell.

With a shake of my head, I go back to what I'm doing, dragging my hands through the sand.

Time passes.

I've scraped my knees, and my hands are dried out, but I've carved out the letters SOS. Took me way longer than it should have. Also, a shovel would have been nice, but I guess in the end it doesn't matter because I did it. Without Alaric's help.

Phoenix

HOURS PASS, AND BY THE TIME THE SUN IS HIGH IN THE SKY, I'm no longer sitting on the sand. Now my back leans up against a palm tree that faces the beach.

I hear the sound before I see who's coming. The faint slapping of shoes hitting the ground behind me. I turn swiftly and then rise to a standing position. My hands cross in front of my chest, all while gazing around to determine if there's a weapon I can use to defend myself. But my breath releases in a puff of oxygen when I realize it's only Alaric.

"You changed locations?" he says, taking long strides toward me.

"I can still look from here," I tell him before lifting my arm to block the sun rays. "It was getting hot over there. Not that this location is much better."

He nods to himself, walking closer, until he stops short, noticing the beach. "What the hell is that?"

"An SOS. I thought it was rather obvious," I deadpan.

"I hate to burst your bubble, but that's useless." He points to the letters I spent hours digging in the sand.

"You're just jealous that I thought of it first."

"Though I appreciate the effort, you realize all your work was for nothing."

The look on Alaric's face is one of faint amusement. It makes my teeth grind together as I ask my next question, "How so?"

"See that?" He points to where the sand meets the tree line. "The water comes *all* the way up to there. As soon as the tide comes in, your message will disappear."

"You're an asshole."

"We've established this. It's not new. But on that note ... Are you hungry?"

"I'm fine." I'm not sure why I'm being so difficult, but after the past week and everything that has transpired, including him crushing my dream of an easy rescue, I can't let him be my savior.

His lip tips up. "So, that means you don't want food ...?"

"I'm not hungry." *I'm starving*, I think to myself, but I stand and start walking in the direction that will take me far away from him. "If you're back, I'm going to go look around." He walks up behind me. I can feel his presence catching up with each step I take.

"I wouldn't do that. If you want to go looking, I'll come with you."

"Fine," I huff. "I'll stay here."

I plop myself back on the ground as he walks to the life raft. He rummages through it, and I'm shocked when he pulls out some things that must have been packed away inside.

He places them back and pulls the whole raft out of the water and up the beach until it's sitting right in front of me.

"While I search the other side of those trees, you can look through and see what we have. I threw in a few of the packs from the Zodiac, and there should be water." I lean forward to look as he continues to talk. "Don't eat or drink until I get back. Don't know how long we will be here and what is on this island, so rationing is important for now."

"Whatever you say," I mumble under my breath, trying my hardest not to look up at him. If he notices my attitude, he

doesn't say because, without another word, Alaric walks off in the opposite direction. This time I notice what he took from the boat and what he's still holding in his hand.

A large knife.

This one is even bigger than the knife he used on the boat. This is like a freaking machete. I wouldn't want to be the one he is hunting. However, from what I can see, that won't be a problem.

Other than the sound of the water crashing against the sand, there are no noises on the island at all. Okay, that's not true. There are birds. Bugs. But nothing that implies any life.

Absolutely no sign that this island has any people on it. It's deserted. Or maybe no one has ever been here?

Which is not good if we hope to survive.

No one knows to look for us.

Everyone from the boat is probably dead, and even if my father knows what happened, he wouldn't know where to search. I never got around to telling him our location.

The only chance we have is if some random boat passes by, but seeing as I sat and stared at the water for hours and there was nothing, I doubt that is in the cards for us.

The future is looking bleak.

Despite the beauty of this location that I now might call my final resting spot, it's not looking like we will get out of here.

Wait, maybe there is a radio in the raft?

Leaning forward, I reach my hands into the side compartment, where I noticed that Alaric had pulled out the flare gun earlier today.

I'm met with nothing but sand.

There has to be more. No way is there only one storage space in this thing. I move into a standing position, and then I'm stepping into the life raft to look around. There are actually a few places for things. I remember Alaric placing

stuff inside before we left last night, so I move to see what it was.

My hand touches a soft bag, I pull it out and find that Alaric had the presence of mind to pack a first-aid kit. A bottle of water.

That won't get us very far. Next, I find some kind of straw, but I've seen it before; it filters water. Unless we find a stream or lake, it won't help.

He took the gun and the knife.

I find another pack, and this one weighs a lot more. I recognize it right away. It's the bag he grabbed from the Zodiac before we jumped into the ocean.

Holy hell.

We might be stuck here on this island, but at least we won't die on day one.

Alaric had at least packed an emergency survival bag with everything you would need to survive on a deserted island for a few days. If we're conservative, probably for a week.

A flashlight, batteries, pocketknife, water, food. It even has one blanket. I keep searching, pulling out more and more stuff. My mouth drops open when I see toilet paper. This bag really does have everything. Well, that's not true. There is one thing I don't find. It's missing a radio, but this is better than nothing. I hear his footsteps before I'm done taking everything out.

"I see you found the ditch bag."

I look over my shoulder to see him walking toward me. He's taken his shirt off and tied it around his head. It's hot on the beach where the breeze is strong, so I can't imagine how it must feel in the center of the island. I let my gaze linger too long on his face, on the tiny beads of sweat dripping down his brow. I need to pull my gaze away, but when I do, I regret the decision right away.

I have seen him every day for the last week, but I have never seen him without a shirt on.

His tattoos are on full display.

I knew from the first day I met him that he had tats up and down his forearms, but this is something else. I find no ink marring his chest, just rock-hard abs and a V that makes drool pool in my mouth.

I hear the faint sound of a chuckle, and I know I've been caught gawking.

Not wanting to hear anything more from him, I swiftly turn my face and go back to pulling out all the supplies we have.

He moves closer, and then once he approaches, he steps into the raft.

The last thing I expect is for him to sit next to me while I search, but here he is, only a few inches away as I pull out more items.

“We have enough here to last us for seventy-two hours.” His low voice cuts through the air, weighing me down with the implication of what that means.

“And then what?”

“Then we hope someone comes.”

“Do you think they will?” I ask, my voice cracking.

It's rare that I'm afraid, but knowing we might die here has my body shaking.

His hand reaches out and lands on top of my trembling one. The warmth is a balm to my troubled soul ... until he opens his mouth.

“Your father sent fucking pirates after my ship. There is a bounty on both of us. I'm sure they will come.”

I stand abruptly, his hand falling from where it was perched.

“It wasn't my father,” I spit.

“You can't possibly believe that.”

“I do. The people on the boat wanted us dead.”

He lifts his brow. “It would solve all his problems,” he responds.

“It wasn’t him. What part of that do you not understand? He will find me. George will find me. They are both looking for me.” Red fiery anger boils inside me. I start walking away from him.

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

My pace halts. “What do you mean?”

I can hear him as he steps closer.

“George is dead.”

My stomach hollows at his words. My legs drop from beneath me.

Alaric is quick to try to lift me from the ground, but I swat at his arms.

“What did you do?” I cry.

Tears pour down my face at the revelation he has just made.

“I was protecting my empire.” His voice makes my body shiver in fear, but I push down that feeling, standing up tall in front of him.

“Your empire!” I scream. “He meant more than that. He meant more than your tarnished empire.”

“George was a casualty of war, and that war is between Michael and me. He knew what he was risking when he got involved.”

“You’re a monster.” As the words leave my mouth, I feel the familiar feeling of moisture starting to collect in my eyes, but I push them back.

I won’t let him see my tears.

George and I weren’t close, but he’s been with my father since the day he took me in. I can’t believe he’s gone. I can’t believe that Alaric—

I stop myself. Of course, I can believe it. As I said, he is a monster. A certifiable monster. If I thought there was a way off

this island without him, I would kill him myself for what he's done.

I feel helpless.

Nothing I do will change what's happened, but it's the feeling of the walls inside me closing up and no solution that makes the oxygen in my lungs feel depleted. Ever since I was a child, I have hated this feeling. I have tried everything to prevent it, and this man has stranded me in it.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Away from you." It takes everything in me to hold back my sob as I hiss at him.

"Yeah, and where is that? We're on a deserted island."

"Anywhere but where you are sounds promising."

Walking a few feet in the opposite direction, I head toward where the trees part, leading farther inland.

"I wouldn't go that way if I were you. It's about to get dark out. Who knows what lives in there. And seeing as I have the knife and you have no weapons, it wouldn't be smart."

I scoff at his comment and continue walking. I don't go in, though. Instead, I find another palm tree to plop myself in front of, and in silence, I let my tears fall. Like wax slowly dripping down a candle until there is nothing left, I, too, fall apart.

Phoenix

MY STOMACH WON'T STOP GROWLING. IT'S AS IF AN ANIMAL IS living inside me. Unfortunately, food isn't an option. But as much as I know I can't eat, it doesn't stop the gnawing feeling of hunger from spreading inside me.

My vision is spotty, and my limbs shake. But I'm too stubborn to do anything about it; even if I'm so dizzy, I'm afraid I'll fall over if I move too quickly.

Maybe if Alaric wasn't a murdering asshole, I could bite my tongue and ask him for one of the protein bars in the safety pack he grabbed before we left.

But, alas, that won't happen. I'd rather starve to death than speak to him now.

Which very well might happen.

Instead of eating, I stare out at the ocean.

The bastard was right. My SOS is no longer written on the beach. It's long gone. Battered by the water.

The waves are stronger now than they were earlier in the day.

They crash against the shore like a storm might come. That would be just our luck: stranded on an island with no shelter when a hurricane hits. Behind me, I hear hammering. Alaric is

building something, but I refuse to turn around and acknowledge whatever he's doing.

The sea blurs after a time, and the sunlight fades into the horizon as night beckons.

My stomach screams at me to grow up, and I'm thankful he left a bottle of water with me.

At least I have that.

From across the sand, I can hear the crackling first, and then the smell hits me.

Fire. The bastard started a fire on the beach.

Great. Just freaking great.

Here I am freezing, and he's probably roasting marshmallows.

No, not marshmallows, as those weren't in his survival pack.

My eyes roll of their own accord. If I could gag over how annoying he is, I would. But seeing as I have no food in my stomach, vomiting won't happen.

"Are you going to sulk over there all night?" he asks, and I'm still angry and hurt over what he told me earlier, so I respond, "Yes."

"Suit yourself." He goes back to whatever he's doing.

"I will," I mutter under my breath before I look up to the night sky and pretend I'm on this beach alone.

With the silence descending yet again, it grows nearly impossible not to look, so I do. I turn my body and glance at where he is sitting.

With his back against a palm tree, he's tied the raft to a tree to keep it from moving. In front of him is a makeshift firepit. He's even using the damn blanket.

From this angle, it looks like Alaric Prince is living his best life. Must be nice. He's on vacation, relaxing, the only thing he needs is a drink with a little tiny umbrella in it. I turn

away so he doesn't catch me staring. Instead of looking at the endless ocean, I turn my gaze to the sky.

I have never seen a sky like this. Millions of stars twinkle in the darkness.

I feel so small, looking up at the vastness above me.

Leaning my back against the tree, I will my breathing to slow.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Praying that sleep finds me.

I'M WOKEN THE NEXT MORNING TO THE SOUND OF BUZZING BY my face.

The mosquitos are in full effect this morning.

My stomach revolts from the lack of food, and sharp pains stab my insides.

Reaching my arm up, I wipe the sleep from my eyes.

It's hard to pry them open today. As much as I slept, I still feel groggy and sleep-deprived. A tree apparently does not make a suitable bed. I wonder how he fared with his tree, his fire, and probably his turndown bed. I stretch my arms and look over to where he set up camp. It's empty.

The fire long since put out. Where did he go?

Now awake, I move to stand, and that's when I realize one of the protein bars is sitting on my lap. In my mind, I think I am better than to tear into the wrapper like I'm starving even though I am.

Unfortunately, any semblance of restraint was apparently set adrift because I want to be calm, but I'm not.

Nope. Instead, my actions resemble that of a rabid animal feasting on a meal after months of starvation.

I'm pathetic.

But as I rip into the wrapper and stuff a piece in my mouth, I let out a sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't eat that so fast. Take small bites and have a sip of water with each bite."

My chewing stops when I see Alaric standing directly in front of me.

He looks as disheveled as I feel, but I probably look like I have a bird's nest in my hair, whereas on him ...

Well, he just looks freaking amazing, and it's not right for anyone to look this good when stranded on an island without a bathroom or shower. It's not fair. No one should sleep in the sand and look as good as he does.

I pull my gaze away from him quickly, and even though I don't want to listen to his pearls of wisdom, I do. Something tells me he knows a lot more about living than I do.

This time, I take a feeble bite. The texture is chalky, so I grab the bottle of water from yesterday and take a small sip to wash it down.

"Try to wait a minute between bites. Not only will it help you feel fuller, but it will keep the nausea at bay."

I give him a nod. My way of saying thank you before I continue to eat.

Standing, it feels too close on this big, open beach, as I wait for him to speak, but it appears he's not going to. He's content just watching me.

"Is there something you need?" I ask.

"I'm going to go explore some more today. You should join me."

"Thought it wasn't safe?" I say, my annoyance from before obvious.

"I checked it out a little, and there seems to be a clearing. There might be animals, but nothing we can't handle." He lifts the knife for emphasis.

“What about keeping an eye out for a boat?”

“That’s why I tied up the boat.”

“I thought you did that ... oh, never mind,” I say, not really knowing what I’m trying to say. I’m tired and delusional, apparently.

“For a shelter?”

I nod at his question.

“Hardly. Although we could actually use it as a bed. That way, if a storm comes, we can put the top up.”

I cock my head. “What is this? A convertible. Put it on, take it off?” I roll my eyes.

“Yep.” Why does he always have to sound so damn sarcastic? It drives me crazy.

“Oh.”

“The only problem is it will get rather small if the two of us are in it with the top on. It’s fine on the ocean, but here, we can make a better option so we don’t feel claustrophobic. Maybe if I can find wider leaves, I can build something in case it rains. But another reason I tied the raft in this location is because there is reflective tape on it. Maybe a boat can see it.”

“Smart,” I mutter.

“I try.” He shrugs. “Let me know when you’re done doing everything you need, and we can go.”

“Everything I need?” I question, but as if my body understands, the need to pee hits me and hits me hard.

My mouth opens and shuts like a fish out of water.

“Where should I go?”

Yesterday, when I was alone, I did my business in the sand. It wasn’t my finer moment, but at least Alaric wasn’t here to see it. Now he is, and my face warms with embarrassment at the thought.

“Two choices. Behind that tree. But we have very little toilet paper, so we probably shouldn’t waste it this early on. Or

in the ocean. But we have no towels.” He smirks.

“Either I’m a little wet or a lot wet.”

“Wet dove is not a sight I’m opposed to seeing.”

That makes him smile even wider, and now I huff.

I choose option one, sexual innuendo be damned.

Alaric

She is a lot more stubborn than I gave her credit for.

No question.

Here we are alone on an island with no food source, no water, and no shelter, yet she refuses to play nice.

I get it, she hates me. I killed someone she cares about, but the simple truth is, she needs to get over it.

I might have been her enemy on the boat, but here on the rugged terrain, I can be her ally.

Not that she'll do it.

That girl would rather eat worms than talk to me.

I watch as she stands from where she slept last night.

Her body probably aches. I'd offer to give her a hand or maybe a massage, but something tells me she'll reject my offer.

Pity.

She really is something else.

In a different place and different world, I'd like nothing more than to have her naked in my bed.

I really need to stop checking out her ass, but the smirk still comes even as I'm shaking my head while she walks

behind the trees to do her morning business.

Today is another gorgeous day in paradise. It's hot, but the breeze from the ocean makes it bearable.

Where we are going, however, might be different. The options for rescue are slim.

I didn't tell her that, but it's the truth. I can't imagine my men are still alive, and if her father was behind this, he wouldn't know where to look.

It's not good.

Without another water source, I estimate we will run out of what we have in three days.

By then, even with rationing, we will already be severally dehydrated.

I know most of these islands. They're close together. It might be worth trying our luck in the open seas.

The first thing we need to do is see what else is here.

From a few feet away, I can hear Phoenix cursing.

Not happy at all about the fact that she has to pop a squat behind a tree.

But at least I'm giving her privacy.

After a long string of swear words, she steps back into the clearing of the beach.

"Here." I throw her a container of toothpaste that was in the pack. "You still have water?"

"Yes."

"What crawled up your ass?" I ask as I hear her gargling and swishing toothpaste in her mouth.

After she spits, she wipes her mouth with her hand and then walks back over to me to hand it back.

"Other than the fact that we will probably die here?"

"We won't die here."

“How do you know?” she asks, stepping away from me and walking to the pack.

She moves to a kneeling position, but I can't see what she's looking at.

“I just do. Listen, I won't sugarcoat it. It's bad. We have two choices. We can wait here and see if anyone comes. Or ...”

“Or what?” Her eyes are wide. Large and blue like the ocean backdrop behind her.

“Or we can chance it.”

“What does that even mean?”

I lift my hand and point at the raft. “We can take it out and see if we can find help.”

Her mouth opens and shuts, probably trying to figure out a question to ask.

“The problem with that is, I'm not sure it's worth the risk.”

“Either way, there is a chance we will die.”

I think about how to respond to her comment. My jaw tightens as different things to say play in my head. “Yes, but before we can decide, we need to know what we are dealing with. The island might not be a death trap. The sea might not be one either.”

“Do you think anyone is looking for us?”

“Yes. But depending on the supplies on this island, we might not last long enough to find us. There are hundreds of islands in the vicinity.”

“What would we have to do if we left?”

“We would have to gather supplies, food, and water. And then I guess we have to hope.”

“What do you suggest?”

Without realizing, I've begun to pace. I take a deep breath and then blow it out. I turn to face her, our eyes locking.

“I suggest that we search the island for food sources and a water source and collect everything we can find. We give it a few days, and then if no one comes, we chance it.”

Her brow furrows. “We’ll die if we leave,” she whispers, more to herself than to me.

“Maybe.”

“We’ll die if we stay.”

“Maybe.”

She nods, resigned to the fact that, in both cases, we are living on borrowed time.

“Are you ready?” I ask, needing to change the topic.

“Yep. Lead the way.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out a folding knife. “Here.” I hand it to her.

“Aren’t you scared I might stab you with that?”

“No.”

“Why not? Maybe I want you dead.” She smiles coolly at me.

“That might be so, but I’m your best chance at survival. Kill me now, and you might as well slit your wrists right after.”

She stands there quietly for a moment and then moves farther into the brush. “Are you coming?”

I walk after her. She stops a few steps in, gesturing her hands in front of her. “Lead the way.” I do.

Together, we walk into the unknown. We will go farther than I have in the past. I have a gun, my knife, and enough food for a day trip. I mark the trees as we walk, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs back to the beach if need be. Hopefully, we’ll be back before dark, but just in case, I packed the flashlight as well. The palm trees near the beach didn’t have coconuts, but a little farther inland, they might. This is a tropical island, after

all, so I'm sure I'll find fruit. We walk for some time on the trek, and I stop every so often to check for food.

Unfortunately, everything I have found thus far is inedible.

Which only means we have to go deeper into the island.

Who knows what that will bring.

Phoenix

With each step we take, the trees get thicker and thicker. Branches snap at my skin, cutting into the flesh, but I don't allow them to stop my moves.

Even with a minor gash forming on my right arm and a slow trickle of blood escaping, I press on. I have no intention of allowing Alaric to think I can't keep up.

As I huff and puff to keep his pace, I can feel the strain burning in my limbs. We walk for what seems like hours. He's ahead of me, pushing the vegetation back to make a path. I can't even imagine how cut up he must be.

If he is, it doesn't show.

A part of me expected that this being a deserted island would be a lie, but this walk is proving otherwise.

"Need to take a break?" Alaric asks from ahead of me.

"Nope. I'm good."

I'm not good. I'm far from it. Though that thought will never be spoken aloud.

I'd rather die than tell him.

Nothing of value is found during our whole walk. Sure, there are trees, and lots of bugs too, but where is the fruit?

Animals.

Anything.

“Thank fuck,” I hear him say, but I have no idea what he’s talking about.

I push through the branch he holds back, and I see what has him excited.

There in front of us, in the distance, is a large waterfall and clearing and lake. It’s straight out of a movie like *The Blue Lagoon*.

They don’t die in that one. They lived there for years.

As soon as that thought pops in my head, I groan. Yes, they lived there for years, but would I really want to live on the island for that long with him?

As if the wool has been pulled from my eyes, I suddenly realize how grimy I feel. The water looks so refreshing, and I just want to jump in. I could. But then my clothes would get wet. As if he could hear my inner rambling, he turns to me. His face is sun-kissed. I hadn’t noticed it before, but during his walk yesterday, he must’ve gotten more sun than I thought.

“We should go in. Wash off.”

“I—”

“I won’t watch you if you want to get undressed.”

I can feel the heat rising to my face.

“Um. Okay.”

Normally, I’m no blushing schoolgirl, but for some reason, the idea of being naked with this man has my cheeks on fire.

“Turn around,” I say, and when he does, I remove my T-shirt and leggings. I don’t have a towel, so I have to put them back on while I’m still wet, but at least I’ll feel clean.

Once my clothes are off, I make my way into the water. I’m not sure how deep it is, so I carefully walk in. When the water finally covers my breasts, I turn around. Alaric is still not looking, and I’m thankful for that.

“All clear,” I say.

I expect him to say the same to me, to tell me to close my eyes, but as he strips out of his shirt and pulls down his pants, my eyes grow wide. I should look away. I really need to, but it’s as if I’m stuck in quicksand and can’t move. My eyes have been glued open instead of shut.

I physically can’t look away. Instead, I watch him as he strips naked and walks toward the water. He stops, and I’m surprised, but then he reaches into the bag and pulls something out. I don’t want to ask him what it is because then he would know that I’m staring at him.

I pretend not to watch him as he makes his approach. The water shifts and I know he’s moving closer.

My eyes are still closed, and I’m scared to open them.

“Scared, little dove?”

My eyelids jolt open. “Don’t call me that.”

“But it’s what you are.” He smirks.

“You’re annoying. You know that?”

“I might be annoying, but I’m also the guy who has soap.”

He lifts his hand out of the water, and a bar of soap sits in his hand.

“Seriously, is that soap on a rope?”

“What else did you expect in a survival kit?”

“I am in prison, so it makes sense,” I gripe.

He motions his hand around us. “I would hardly call this prison.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Look around you. I have been to prison, and this is not it. This is paradise. Maybe you wouldn’t choose to be here with me, but ...”

I lift my brow. “You think.”

“I’m not that bad.”

I shake my head adamantly. “You most certainly are.”

“Admit it, I’m at least easy on the eyes.” Cue the smirk. That damn smirk.

The first time I saw it, I knew it would be a problem, but now? Now, I realize just how big a problem it will be. He’s smirking at me like that when we’re both naked underneath the water. How easy would it be to just cross the divide and lose myself for a bit? To pretend I’m here on vacation with someone I want and desire. Unfortunately, that’s not the case, and he is not that person for me. No matter how good-looking he is.

“See? Case in point, the arrogance.”

“At least I’ll keep things interesting on this island.”

“Just give me the soap.”

“Say please.”

This man. If I didn’t want the soap so badly, I’d splash him. Or drown him or something. But, alas, I do need that soap. “You’re intolerable.”

“But at least I’m clean.” He chuckles, and just as I’m about to close the distance and throttle him, he reaches his hand out.

I take the soap before he can change his mind.

Then I wipe off the past few days. With each pass, I feel cleaner.

But as he stares at me, hair slicked back, tattoos showing, I fight the urge to bite my lip.

There is no amount of soap to wash away the impure thoughts running through my mind right now.

And that will be a problem.

It isn’t long until we are back at the beach. I’m not sure if we’ll camp out here again, or if we’ll set up camp further inland.

Alaric must read my mind because he unties the raft.

“It’s too heavy to drag it.”

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“If you help me, we can drag it further away.”

“To do what?”

“Sleep on it.”

“You want us to sleep in that ... together?”

“I know I should have thought of it last night, but I was too tired. But seeing as we don’t have any other option, I figured there’s no reason for us to sleep on the sand again.”

I look at him and then at the tree where I rested yesterday.

But as much I want to say okay, I can’t. My damn pride is still getting the best of me.

“I’m okay over here.”

He lifts a brow. “You sure? The wind is picking up. You might get cold.”

“And I’ll be warmed by you?”

His lip tips up. “Body heat. Plus, I do have the blanket,” he teases.

“I’m sure that’s what you tell all the girls you want to lie with on a tiny raft.”

“It’s hardly tiny. It can comfortably fit six.”

“Whatever you say, dude.”

“If you aren’t going to sit with me, then at least take this.” He throws a protein bar at me. By my calculations, we will run out of these bad boys by tomorrow.

As if reading my mind, he opens his mouth. “I’m going to fish tomorrow.”

“You know how to fish?”

He gives me a look that says, *Are you kidding me?*

“Of course, you know how to fish. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“I can’t get you to shut up.”

“Ass.”

At that insult, I turn from him and eat the protein bar. This time, I take tiny bites while drinking the remaining water to get fuller faster.

It's not long before I hear the familiar sound of a fire crackling and the smell filters around me. I wrap my arms tighter around myself. He was right; the temperature is dipping and rather fast. It will be fine. Sooner rather than later, I'll fall asleep, and I won't notice the cold. Or at least that's what I hope as I close my eyes and will myself to bed.

Time must pass, but I'm having no such luck on the sleeping front. I'm still wide-awake and freezing my ass off. I turn toward Alaric, the still roaring fire a foot from where he's lying on the raft. He wasn't lying when he said it wasn't tiny. It's actually pretty big, and I'm not sure why I hadn't thought to sleep in it. If I went over there, he'd probably never know. Maybe I could just sit there long enough to get warm, and then once I am, I can find another tree, maybe one a little closer to sleep under.

I watch him for a minute. The way his chest rises and falls, I'm sure he's asleep. If I go there, he'll never know. I just have to move before he gets up.

That won't be hard. I just won't close my eyes. Making sure I don't make a sound, I stand from where I'm sitting and head over. I step over it, redistributing my weight so as not to wake him, and take a seat closest to the fire. It feels so good. Much better than the other location. My teeth stop chattering, and I want to inhale deeply, but don't dare.

That's when I hear it.

A chuckle.

A chuckle coming from what I thought was a sleeping Alaric.

Goddammit, he tricked me.

I go to stand, but then I feel it. His hand touching my skin. The pads of his fingers warm on my flesh.

“Don’t,” he says, and I look down to where he touches me, a million goosebumps erupting at the contact. “Just sleep.”

I should move, but with the warmth emanating, I can’t help but obey.

Alaric

It's official. She is the most stubborn woman I have ever met in my life. Without a doubt, she is probably the most stubborn person in the world.

Which, if you really think about it, is kind of admirable. To be the best at something. *Even if it's the most annoying thing in the world.*

When I opened my eyes this morning, she had moved from her spot on the opposite side of the raft to right beside me. She had curled up next to me. While asleep, her body must have sought my heat. I watch as she dreams, her breathing soft and peaceful.

She looks gorgeous in the morning. Not that she's not always beautiful, but now, in a deep sleep, her face is peaceful. There are no frowns and scowls present.

When I look at her, I don't see hate, anger, and the many ways she wants to kill me.

I see a girl I have never seen before. A girl in another life. If we were different people, I might be interested in getting to know her.

Unfortunately, that's not the case. She's my enemy's daughter, sent in to infiltrate my life.

Not a woman I can mess around with.

But as my eyes skate across the distance, I realize I can't think of her as that here on this island. Here, we have to be allies. If we ever collect enough supplies to leave, we have to work together.

I'm still hopeful someone will find us, but with each day that passes, that hope diminishes more and more. There is no denying the reality of our situation.

Revenge doesn't seem nearly as important as it once did.

Instead of waking her, I decide to slowly move from where our bodies are touching to start my day.

I'll let her rest.

My movements, however, have the opposite effect because she jumps up, eyes wild as she takes in her proximity to me.

Leg still entwined with mine, she sits up and moves away.

"Morning," I say. She scowls at me, but it just makes me chuckle. Sleeping, her body found mine, but now with her mind awake, she's backpedaling.

"Comfy?" I jest. "You slept well, wrapped in my arms."

I'm not sure why teasing her is so entertaining, but when there's not much else to do, I guess we have to get our excitement somewhere.

She stands abruptly and leaves our makeshift raft bed. I watch as a furious Phoenix rifles through the bag to get the toothpaste, all while glaring at me.

I want to laugh at how absurd this is, but something tells me she will throw that container in my face. Literally.

"Brush your teeth and do your business. We leave once you're done."

"What's on the agenda today? Fancy lunch?" she mocks.

"One, we hunt for food. Two, we are going to look for anything edible."

As it is, we won't last much longer without an alternative food source.

“What about the raft?” she asks, her cheeks pinched in.

“In order for us to get on the raft, we need to have at least enough food and water to last a week. We also need to find wood to make oars. Without a way to push past the tide, we will get nowhere fast.”

She takes a deep, lengthy breath. “Do we really have any chance?”

“There’s always a chance. But we need to get ahead of it while we still have the protein bars. Right now, that’s our only source of energy. We won’t be able to hunt and gather once it’s gone.”

“Then let’s get to it,” I hear her say, and then she’s behind a tree doing what she needs to do.

Unlike her, I don’t need to hide behind a tree to do my business. Instead, like the asshole I am, I whip my shit out and pee on the palm tree.

“Wow. Seriously?”

She sounds annoyed. Which I kind of understand, since I did pee on her tree. “You couldn’t hide that shit.”

“It would take too long.” Once I put myself back in my pants, she walks over to me, reaching her hand out with the toothpaste.

“Here. You stink.”

“I don’t stink. And even if I did, you stink just as bad, so you wouldn’t smell me.”

“Real nice, asshole.”

“Just keeping it real.” I shrug.

I take the container from her and place a small amount on my finger and clean my mouth and gargle and spit. With that out of the way, I point in the direction we will go today. It’s relatively close to the water but in the right direction of the lake, which means there’s a chance some fruit will be there. Together, we walk and don’t go more than a few feet before I notice a few palm trees that might have a coconut.

“Look.” I point up. “This might be our lucky day.”

“Yeah, but how are we going to get them down?”

“Well, that’s easy. I’ll climb.”

She raises her brow. “You can climb a tree?”

“You can’t?” I deadpan.

“Can you ever be nice to me?”

“Oh, that’s rich. Here I am, offering to climb a tree so you don’t starve to death, and you’re saying I’m mean.”

She lets out a long sigh. “Fine. You might be right.”

“What do you suggest?”

She swallows and then bites her lip. “A truce.”

Knowing that it took all her strength to make that suggestion, I push down my need to make an arrogant, sarcastic remark, instead opting for a different approach. “For how long?”

“As long as it takes to get off this island.”

“Deal.”

“Let’s shake on it.”

I reach my hand out, and she hesitates.

“If you want me to climb the tree ...”

Reluctantly, she reaches out her hand.

I take hers in mine, and when I do, I see the way she stares down. My finger gently strokes the skin on her palm, and she shivers, her pupils dilating.

She shakes her head and pulls away. But not before I realize that Phoenix is one hundred percent affected by me.

Good.

Because she affects me too.

Now what to do with that is the real question.

Phoenix

No matter how hard I try, I can't take my eyes off him.

It's annoying.

No man should be able to do that with his body. He's limber in ways that make my imagination go wild.

The worst part? Before he started this ridiculous tree-climbing, he removed his shirt.

So yep.

Here I am, six feet beneath him, watching his heavily tatted arms flex as he lifts himself up. If that isn't bad enough, his back muscles are in full effect.

I can barely breathe. Not just because I'm fairly certain he will fall, but also because he looks like he's a freaking god up there.

Turn around and stop looking.

But as much as I try to pull my attention from him, here I am, just staring.

"Fire in the hole," he shouts, and I'm not quite sure what he says, but then a coconut hits the ground a few feet away from me.

"That could have hit me," I grit out. He lowers his head, and I can see his big blue eyes dancing with mischief.

“I warned you.”

“You warned me as it was falling. That hardly counts.” My own eyes narrow.

His lip tips up on one side of his face. “It counts.”

I shake my head, but instead of saying anything more, I take a step back. That way, any loose coconuts won't hit me.

One by one, they fall. The sound of heavy breathing is present, but other than that, Alaric doesn't seem to care that he's up in a tree.

I'm happy on the ground.

“How much longer?” I ask.

“One. See that one.” He points at one that is way too high for him to get.

“Um, no. Don't you dare get that one!”

“Afraid I might hurt myself?” he chides. “I thought you hated me. This could get me out of the way.”

“You better be careful.”

“If I fall and die, it would probably make you happy.”

I'm ready to respond, but I can't form words as he swings his body to grab the coconut way too far away.

When it's in his hand, I let out a gigantic sigh of relief, but it isn't until he's firmly on the ground, bending down to survey his handiwork, that I realize just how much I didn't want him to get hurt.

I can't do this without him.

Nor would I want to.

“Grab a few, and we can bring them back to camp,” Alaric says as he hands me four.

“Then what?”

“Then we do this again.”

My mouth drops open. “You are going to climb a tree again today.”

“Yep.”

I must go pale or something because he laughs. “You worried about me?”

“Hardly.” I snicker.

“Whatever you say, dove.”

“Phoenix,” I clarify for what must be the millionth time before turning from him and walking away.

We have eight coconuts, which, according to Alaric, is not nearly enough.

I know he’s right, but I have no interest in watching him climb again.

“Can I do something else while you act like Tarzan?”

“Very well, Jane. What are you good at?”

I stare blankly at him.

“Can you hunt?” I shake my head. “Fish?” I continue to shake it. “Can you gather?”

At that question, I nod my head.

“Okay, so gather all the fruit you can find. Eat nothing.”

I take a step back and look at him. “Let me get this straight. Not only can you climb a tree but you also know which fruits won’t kill us?”

“Yes.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Why, because I’m a criminal. Believe it or not, before I became this, my life was quite different.” Without another word, he sets off to where the trees are, leaving me to myself on the beach and wondering what I said wrong.

After a few minutes of waiting for him to come back and maybe explain, he doesn’t. I have two choices, wait or look for fruit. If I want any chance of ever having the option to get off this island, I need to pull my own weight on this escape mission.

But which way to go ...?

The day we found the lake, we went east. Should that be my direction, or should I look west?

I hem and haw over it before I decide to try the path we didn't take.

Hopefully, I'll have better luck that way.

I'm only a few miles in when I realize my mistake. The terrain is rugged, not nearly as smooth as the other direction.

My leg keeps getting scraped, but I need to keep going. There has to be something.

Somewhere.

Anywhere.

My breathing grows choppy from the exertion, and I know I have to take a break. I stop and reach for the bottle of water.

I sure hope Alaric has filtered the lake water because our bottled water is running low.

Add water filtering skills to the lengthy list of things this man can do.

Top it off with being the sexiest man I know, and he's deadly.

It's not fair, to be honest.

No one should have that many talents.

Maybe he sucks in bed?

Dammit.

Why did I let myself think that? Because now, all I'm going to think about is whether he does.

Couple that with the fact that only yesterday I saw what he was packing.

That alone probably means he would rock my world.

Enough.

Head out of the gutter, Phoenix.

You cannot keep thinking about him like that. You're tired, scared, and horny now. You'll probably die in a few days too.

I try to shut off this train of thought by drinking, and as I guzzle the water, I close my eyes. When I open them, I notice something in the distance. Something yellow.

Holy crap.

I set off to check it out, hoping and praying I'm not wrong.

By the time I get to the tree, I might actually cry.

A fruit.

There is freaking fruit here.

This is a dream, right?

I'm not sure what they are, but they must be edible. It looks like an enormous football with pointed ridges. In my head, I try to catalog the fruits I have eaten when I went to the Caribbean. Starfruit? Maybe. Alaric would know.

They're too high for me to grab, but maybe I can be like Alaric.

I should just go get him and bring him back, but my damn stubbornness will be my downfall.

On tiptoes, I raise my body. Not enough.

If I can just put my foot here ...

Lifting again, I try to use the trunk for leverage as my fingers grab the fruit and throw it toward the ground.

Unfortunately, only one comes down. I'm going to have to do this all over again. I move a few feet and try to grab it from a different angle.

This time, I'm not so lucky. As my finger grabs the fruit, my leg loses its hold, and I fall with a thud.

MY ANKLE SCREAMS WITH EACH STEP I TAKE. THIS IS BAD. I hope I didn't break something.

Being stuck on an island with a broken leg or foot would be just my luck. I stop my movements and look down. It's not swollen yet, and the color hasn't changed.

No. I didn't break it. I let out a sigh of relief. But it's definitely twisted.

If that's not bad enough, blood leaks from a small gash on my leg.

Alaric will have a field day with this.

I will never hear the end of it.

Why did you climb the tree?

No part of me is interested in listening to a lecture on what I should and shouldn't have done.

I'm just going to tell him I tripped.

Except for the fruit in my hand, he'd probably believe it.

The damn fruit.

A part of me wonders if I should have left them there, so he wouldn't know what I was up to.

But then my stomach growls, and I know I have no choice. I need to bring them back to camp and hope he doesn't tease me too much.

We're on a truce. Maybe he won't be a complete dick about it.

For someone as brooding as he was when I first met him, he certainly has a sarcastic sense of humor.

If it were anyone else, I'd probably like it.

Who are you kidding? You do.

I try to shoo the thoughts away. The only problem is without my brain occupied with thoughts of Alaric, the pain radiates more intensely.

Think of something else.

Anything else.

I try to imagine anything, but all I can see is Alaric walking naked toward the water. His body looks like it was cut from marble.

Yep.

I have issues.

Each step is harder than the next, and the feeling of blood trickling down my leg has me taking the steps slower.

Finally, I push through into the clearing of the beach.

Alaric must hear me because he turns in my direction and rushes over to me.

“What happened to you?”

“Would you believe me if I said I fell?”

His right eyebrow lifts, and he gives me a look that says no.

“It was worth a try.” I take another step, and now I’m standing directly in front of him.

I lift my hand to show him what I have. “I got fruit, though.” I groan.

Before I know what’s happening, Alaric has lifted me into his arms, pressing me into his chest, and carries me bridal style.

If this couldn’t be any more embarrassing, my body shivers at his warm hands on my skin.

Apparently, my good sense has taken a back seat, and my hormones are driving because I can’t seem to keep myself in check.

With each step he takes, I can feel how his muscles flex and his heart beats. I can feel everything, and I need him to put me down.

“You don’t have to carry me.”

“I do. You looked like you were in pain, and seeing as we are on an island, and I’m not sure how long we will be here, I can’t risk you getting more hurt.”

He's right—I know he's right—but it doesn't make it any easier to admit.

I don't want him to help me.

But unfortunately, I need him to. Which sucks.

Someone tell me this is not my life.

I let out a long, drawn-out sigh. One that tells him I know he's right, and he chuckles.

When we are back to the makeshift raft bed, he sets me down. "Lie down so I can look at it."

"You want me to lie down in there. Where we sleep?"

"Any other suggestions? I have to clean it, and seeing as I don't want any sand getting into the wounds, our locations for this procedure are limited."

Again, he's right. Always the voice of reason. He's freaking perfect and smart, and a giant ass—

"Down," he orders again, and this time, I listen. I get into the raft and recline.

I don't fully lie down; I want to see him when he looks at my ankle.

He steps in and then sits next to me. My breath comes out choppy as he reaches forward and places my leg on his lap.

I swear to God it feels like there is a belt around my chest that tightens with each touch of his fingers.

He lifts my ankle, rotating it slowly. Pain shoots through me, and I cringe.

"What about this?" He does the same movement in the other direction. This time, it doesn't hurt.

"It's just twisted. No breaks. No sprain. But I'm going to wrap it with a bandage for the rest of the day, just in case."

"Can I walk on it?"

"I wouldn't suggest it. Wait until tomorrow."

"Shit."

“Yeah, it sucks, but at least it will heal. I’m not sure what will happen, but we can’t afford for it to get worse, so you’ll have to take it easy and let me take care of you.”

His words shouldn’t warm me. They shouldn’t make butterflies take flight in my stomach, but they do.

I will them to stop, but they have a mind of their own.

“Now let me clean this off, and then I’ll get you something to eat.”

He’s so gentle as he takes my leg and slowly cleans off the cut. When he places a bandage on my cut and then wraps my ankle, I swear I think I might cry. No one has treated me so delicately in my entire life. Not even my father. Sure, I know he loves me, but he was never like this.

He never treated me like I needed taking care of. Maybe it’s because I would never have allowed it. I had to fend for myself for so long.

But I would be lying to myself if I don’t admit Alaric is giving me exactly what I need.

My mind is at war with my body as Alaric sits down beside me after he cracks open a coconut.

He hands me one side and takes the other for himself.

Then he hands me a bottle of water, but what’s inside isn’t water.

“It’s the milk from the coconut. I opened and drained it.”

“Wow. Okay. Thanks,” I say like an idiot.

I don’t know how to handle him being nice. I know we had a truce, but this feels different than that.

It feels strangely intimate, our bodies touching, drinking from the same bottle.

“I’ll make more tomorrow. I was going to do the rest, but then I saw you.”

“It’s okay. This is perfect.”

We settle into a comfortable silence as we both eat the fleshy part.

I groan on the first bite, and he laughs.

“It’s good, right?”

“Not that I want to complain because I’m grateful you had the presence of mind to make the survival kit, but those bars are pretty nasty.”

“That they are. They do the trick, though. But yeah, this is much better.”

I lean back, getting more comfortable.

Alaric had started a fire, and now its blazes warm around us.

“How do you know how to do all this?” I ask.

“I just do.”

“Come on, that’s not really an answer. Climbing. Fires, first aid ...” I look up at him, and he’s staring intensely at me.

“It’s just something I know.”

He’s holding something back. I know it. He knows it. But it’s obvious he’s not willing to tell me his secrets. Not that I would fault him for that. Yes, maybe right now, we are on the same team, but I can understand if he’s still wary.

“If you don’t want to talk about that, then what do you want to talk about?”

“Who says I want to talk at all?” His gaze is penetrating. It’s unnerving.

“What then?”

“We can enjoy the silence together.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk to you, but do you ever feel like it might be nice just to enjoy nothing with someone?”

I cock my head but continue to look at him.

“Yeah,” I whisper back, understanding exactly what he means.

He settles next to me, our bodies still close but not quite touching, with both of our heads tipped back to look at the sky.

I’m not sure how long we stay like this, but it’s exactly what I need right now.

Silence. A moment to calm down, calm my mind, and just stare at the stars.

Tomorrow, I’ll go back to analyzing everything and probably hating him too. But tonight, I’ll just be.

Whatever that means.



BRIGHT SUNLIGHT STREAMS DOWN, MAKING MY LIDS FLUTTER. For a brief second, I forget where I am. Then it all comes crashing down, like an early morning wave beating against the rocks. I’m still here.

I’m living my own version of groundhog’s day. Waking the same way each morning, hoping the outcome will be different, or that maybe none of this is real.

But none of this is a dream.

No one is coming to look for us.

My heart races, and I sit up from where I was lying. Alaric is nowhere to be seen.

I have gotten used to him being missing in the morning, but after the temporary reprieve from our hatred yesterday, I assumed maybe he’d be here.

How ridiculous am I?

Just because we didn’t kill each other yesterday, and he was kind to me, does not wash away the past.

I’m not sure how to move forward from here.

A part of me wants to put the past behind us for now, revisit it once we are off this island. Another part can't.

We might never get off here. Can I live the rest of my life holding onto this in my chest?

The idea of being stuck here forever has me feeling suffocated. I move to stand, but then I remember how tight my ankle is. Removing the bandage, I look at it.

Normal.

There's no swelling. I just need to figure out a way to work out the muscle without hurting myself more.

What would I do if I was back home?

Water.

I remember when Hannah hurt herself back at school, her physical therapist had her do exercises in the water to loosen her tight muscles.

That's what I'll do.

Today, I opt to swim in my bra and panties, not wanting to chance Alaric coming back early and seeing me naked.

I'm surprised how much better my body already feels today. Yes, it's still tight, but I'm sure it will be better soon.

My toes are the first to hit the water. Even though it's summer and the water's warm, it still takes a minute to adjust to the temperature.

Slowly, I walk farther in. Once I'm submerged to my chest, I lift my injured leg up and move my ankle around.

In the water, I don't feel pain. The movements are fluid and easy, and I can feel the muscles loosening.

From where I'm swimming, it's almost as if I'm on vacation. The tropical landscape a picturesque backdrop that one would pay good money to relax in.

It's not the case for us.

No matter how beautiful and lush the palm trees are, there isn't enough food to make this island sustainable for long.

Someone could build here and make it livable, but it feels like a waste.

How do you destroy something so beautiful?

For some unknown reason, Alaric's blue eyes come to mind. The way he laughs, but his gaze always seems so far away.

Beautiful, but broken.

There's more to the story there with him.

I can tell, and although I shouldn't want to hear it, I'm desperate to understand him.

From a distance, a noise startles me. My eyes scan the beach in front of me until I catch Alaric running toward the ocean. His arms are waving in the air, and he's shouting, but I can't make out what he's trying to say.

He looks frantic.

Instantly, I'm on edge and looking around me to what has him scared.

Then I see it. In the distance, a fin. A dark-gray fin peeks ominously out from the choppy waters.

I can't breathe. It feels like hands are wrapped around my neck, and someone is choking me.

Adrenaline flows through my veins, making my heart ping pong around in my chest.

The horror of the situation has me paralyzed as my limbs fail to get the memo that I need to swim.

"Get out of the water," I hear him shout, but still, I can't.

It's getting closer, and I can't move.

The sound of Alaric's screams gets closer and closer, and the next thing I know, his arms wrap around me and are pulling me toward the beach.

We flop onto the sand, our chests both heaving as I glance back to where I was previously swimming.

The fin is there now, circling, but then it pops out more, and a giggle escapes my chest.

“That’s not a shark.” I laugh with the nervous energy that’s pouring out of me. “It’s a dolphin.”

Still in Alaric’s arms, my head turns to face him. The look on his face is scary. His jaw is set tight enough that it could crack. “You were lucky this time,” he mutters through gritted teeth. “Next time you won’t be. Do not go into the ocean alone.” Abruptly, he stands, letting me go and causing me to drop onto the sand. That went well.

Alaric

AFTER THE INCIDENT IN THE WATER, WE DON'T SPEAK. I SPEND the rest of the day acting like a complete douche, but I couldn't face her.

When I thought it was a shark and thought she would die, I thought I had failed her too. Even though I haven't known her long, I feel responsible for her. She might hate me and want me dead, but I can't let anything happen to her.

I fish and cook for us, and then when we finish eating, we both fall asleep.

Now I'm up, and she's not, and I am using my time to fish. *Again.*

As many coconuts as I got, we don't have enough to chance it. As soon as Phoenix is able to, we need to head back to where she fell and collect more fruit. There are probably other things we can eat here. We just have to look.

With the sun low in the sky, I'm hoping to catch something. I'm happy she's asleep. I don't want to leave her when she's awake to do this.

I'm on the beach with a makeshift net. The sun beats down on my head and shoulders.

As I wait for a fish to swim by, I turn to watch her. She's really something. All fire and equal measures of bite.

What's her story?

She's been hidden for a long time. Michael never even said he had a daughter. Hell, I didn't even know he had children at all until recently.

I'm interested in finding out, but she's a nosy one. If I ask, she will want answers of her own. Am I willing to part with my own story to fulfill this crazy desire to know more about hers?

Maybe.

I'm torn.

On the one hand, who knows how long we will be here, so what harm is it?

On the other, I don't like to let people in.

But would I have to?

I could tell her a little about me without telling her anything her father could use against me ... if we ever get out of this mess.

As if she can hear me thinking about her, she moves in her sleep. She inches toward where I was. As if her body is seeking me out.

She would hate to know that she's doing it. A part of me wants to tease her for it, but another part doesn't want to do that at all.

That part finds her fascinating.

That part finds her beautiful. The part that wishes things could be easier, and I could lose myself in her body briefly.

I shake my head and realize I haven't been paying attention to the fish. I need to do that if we are going to eat.

Time has no relevance on this island. But from what I can tell from where the sun sits in the sky, I have been at this for at least an hour, with only one fish to show for it.

Better than nothing, I guess.

Deciding to call it a day, I lift my net and head back to the campsite.

Phoenix is stirring when I finally arrive.

Her hands reach up to wipe the sleep from her eyes.

“What do you have there?” she asks.

“Lunch and maybe dinner.” I laugh.

“You can cook too?”

I nod, and she chuckles. “Of course you can. There is nothing you can’t do.”

“I can’t build a radio out of a coconut,” I respond flatly.

“Few can.”

I place the fish down and then move to sit back next to her.

“How does the ankle feel?” Without waiting for her to speak, I reach my hand out and take her leg in my hands. My fingers trace circles on her skin as I wait for her to answer.

As I make the motion, her cheeks flush.

“I—I don’t know. Fine. I guess.”

“Does this hurt?” I move her ankle, and she shakes her head. “What about this?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, good. I’m sure you’ll be fine. Today, I want you to stay here, though. Do not go into the ocean.”

“But—”

“No buts. One more day of rest and then tomorrow you can go back to whatever you were doing when this happened. But no swimming without me.” I lift my brow. “And I highly discourage you from climbing a tree.”

“I didn’t climb a tree.”

I give her a look that tells her I wasn’t born yesterday and that I know she did.

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes. “I climbed a tree. But did you see what I brought back?”

“Yes, and that’s why I won’t yell at you. But you have to be more careful.”

“Sorry, not everyone can be perfect like you.”

I wink at her before standing. “I am pretty amazing.”

“Where are you going?” she asks as I stride in the other direction.

“I’m going to the lake to see if I can catch more fish.”

“And you are just going to leave me here?”

“Yes.” My one-word answer probably pisses her off, and that thought has me smirking.

“But I feel fine.”

I turn to face her. “That may be the case, but I would feel a lot better if we didn’t press our luck.”

She makes a brief sound of disappointment.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” She pouts her perfect little lips, and I leave.

I need to get away. With the little sounds she makes and the way her lips look, I can’t help but imagine her beneath me. Since that will not happen, I know I have to go, maybe relieve myself too.

That or I’ll probably end up attacking her, which is something I can’t and won’t do.

When I finally make it to the lake, I’m rock hard.

Phoenix will be a problem.

My dick will be a problem.

Before I can think twice, I’m stripping off my clothes and grasping my cock in my hand.

I just need to take the edge off. Then I can fish and go about my business of trying to prepare for us to leave. I

imagine Phoenix's legs wrapped around me. I imagine what it will feel like to slide into her and pound into her flesh.

I stroke myself up and down, climbing toward my release. It doesn't take me long. Much less time than normal, but this girl has me wound tight.

I come hard into my palm, grunting, "Fuck," as I do. My eyes open, and I'm not alone. At the edge of the clearing, watching me come, is Phoenix.

Eyes wide, cheeks flushed, she's watching. She can't pull her gaze away. She's not even swallowing as I tug one last time and milk it out completely. Finally, when every last drop is spent, I let my lips tip up.

Silently asking if she enjoyed the show.

Saying nothing after that, I head toward the water and fully submerge myself. I expect when I resurface, she will be gone. That she will have turned tail to hide from me.

But instead, I find her exactly where I left her, still staring in my direction, still breathless from what she saw.

Phoenix

I need to look away.

I need to look anywhere but at him.

But as he touches himself, eyes closed, I can't. I can't seem to budge at all.

Something about this man is completely mesmerizing. Looking at him is like watching a car accident unfold. You know there is a very good chance you can get hurt in the crossfire, yet you can't seem to pull away.

That's Alaric Prince.

Deadly.

Corrupt.

Yet tarnished in all the right ways.

I can't stop myself from watching him. I'm silently enthralled by the scene playing out and even more secretly wishing I was the one touching him.

With my mouth dropped open and my eyes wide, I watch as he strokes himself, and I'm rooted in place.

Finally, I shake myself out of my haze, and I'm about to move when his eyes open.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He's staring right at me, still stroking himself.

The lust that fills the space between us is heady and makes me warm. The sight makes my body flush, my core growing wet with need.

It would be so easy to walk up to him and put on the façade I gave him at the club only a few weeks ago.

Pretend I'm that girl. The one who takes what she wants.

And what I want right now is him.

So badly it aches.

I want him to touch me. Stroke me. Fill me.

My cheeks warm even more, and I'm sure my face is beet red. I'm probably the color of a cherry tomato by now.

The way his damn lip tips up lets me know that he knows. Yet even with him smirking at me, a tease heavy on his tongue, I don't move. I still can't.

I wait for him to make a witty comment.

For him to say anything, but he heads into the water and dives below.

Now is the moment that I need to leave, yet I can't.

Instead, like the drunk-on-lust idiot I am, I wait with bated breath for him to pop back up so I can see him again.

I'm pathetic.

When he surfaces, I can see the look of surprise on his face. He expected me to be gone, yet here I still stand. Not knowing what to do or say.

Thankfully, he's the one who breaks the silence.

"I thought you were going to take it easy?"

"I got bored," I admit. I don't tell him I missed his company—and that I chanced re-injuring myself to be with him.

I don't need to say those words. They are heavy in the air, regardless.

“Do you want to come in?” His husky voice cuts through the air, making my nipples pebble with the weight of his words.

Do I?

I don't even know anymore. Rather than speak, I stare at him like an idiot.

His words bounce around in my brain until I'm not sure what to do. His stupid chuckle is what finally snaps me out of my lust-filled thoughts.

“It's a natural thing, dove.”

There must be marbles or glue in my mouth because even though I will myself to respond to his ridiculous comment, I can't.

I can't even find it in me to yell at him. I'm flushed. So damn hot, I'm on fire.

But hell no am I getting in that lake. Even if it's what my body wants, there is no way he will get the satisfaction of me admitting it to him.

This isn't me wanting him. I'm just the product of my environment. What woman could be stranded on an island with that man and not want to jump his bones?

It wouldn't matter if I was a nun at this point. Looking at a naked Adonis wears on me.

Finding space, lots and lots of space, to calm my libido is imperative right now. Before I do something I will regret.

Without a second thought, I turn from him, his laughter fading into the distance the farther I walk.

“Where are you going?” he asks in a playful and not welcome tone.

Nope. Not answering.

“I don’t bite. Unless you ask, but you’d have to ask very nicely, and use the word *Sir*.”

Ignore.

Each step I take makes his voice fade more and more until I no longer hear him.

I need to cool down.

The blue water in front of me calls my name.

I know Alaric said not to go in, but he’s being ridiculous. It was a dolphin, not a shark. He’s not my boss. I’ll do what I want to do.

Streams of sunlight brush the surface of the water. It’s beautiful.

It’s the perfect weather for me to take a dip. *Cool off from the erotic show he gave me.*

I strip down completely.

With Alaric in the lake, he won’t bother me.

I’m all alone, so I might as well.

Also, this way, my clothes won’t get wet.

Stepping onto the sand, I curl my toes in bliss.

Yesterday, I hadn’t allowed myself the luxury of relaxing, but right now, that’s what I do. Right now, I’m on a tropical island, relaxing. *That’s what I tell myself, at least.*

If I let the rest settle in, my anxiety will flare, so I shake it off and give myself these brief moments. My feet are now bathed in the warm water. Not as warm as a bath, but not frigid enough to make it uncomfortable.

With each step I take, I submerge my body deeper and deeper.

My head tilts back as I’m fully engulfed, and I look up at the sky.

Here and now, it feels like a dream.

Blue as far as I can see.

It's perfect.

If only the company was ... Nope, not going there. Instead, I think of nothing. Inhaling deeply, I silence my brain.

My chest rises and falling as I relax.

I'm not sure how long I stay there, but soon, the water is pulling harder, and the once blue sky is turning a different shade.

In the distance, the sky is turning gray now, and the waves are growing larger and more vicious.

Is a storm coming?

I turn my attention back toward the beach.

Icy tendrils of fear fill my body as I realize I'm much farther away than I imagined.

The water has been pulling me out to sea.

In my haste to get away, I have done just that.

I start to swim, kicking strongly, but no matter how much I kick, it doesn't seem to make a difference.

I kick harder and harder. But no matter how much I do, it's as if I'm stuck.

Adrenaline floods through my veins at the precarious situation I've placed myself in.

What am I going to do?

As my arms work to push me forward, an endless stream of what ifs plague my brain, making me panic.

I can't freak out.

I have to push these morbid thoughts away.

They won't help me now.

I could call for Alaric, scream for help, but it's no use. He's too far.

He's not here to save you this time.

No, I'll need to save myself.

It wasn't that long ago that I had found myself in a similar position, but a world of change has happened since then.

I don't want to give up.

I don't want to die.

With all the strength I can muster, I push past the riptide. I kick and thrash, and soon, the shore is approaching. By the time my feet hit the sand, I'm done.

My breath comes out in sharp bursts, chest rising frantically to inflate.

I hear the sound of his screams first, but my eyes are closed from the exertion. My naked body now lies on the sand. Strong arms lift me, cradle me to a firm, warm chest.

I should be cold, but the hands touching me set me ablaze.

“What the hell were you doing out there? Are you insane? I told you yesterday not to go into the ocean alone.”

I don't answer, too tired from the fight to make it back to shore.

I know I should tell him to put me down, but I don't. I allow him to hold me. To keep me warm and safe.

He sits by the fire, and I'm happy it's still lit from before.

My teeth chatter, more from nerves than anything.

When he starts to rock me, I can feel the tears forming behind my eyelids.

He's comforting me. This strange and beautiful man, who I should hate and who should hate me in return, is picking up the pieces I broke on the beach and putting them back together.

“You're okay,” he says, and I let out the sob lodged in my throat. “Everything is going to be okay. You're safe.”

More tears pour out of me. This isn't about the water or the riptide. It's about the island, the fear. I haven't allowed myself to stop. Pushing to find food. Pushing to survive. But when it all sinks in, I feel like I'm drowning in my own grief.

“I have you.”

“But who’s got you?” I ask, tipping my head up for our eyes to meet.

“I was hoping you,” he responds, but this time, there is no humor in his tone. I continue to look at him, searching for something, but all I see is loneliness. Fear. Feelings that mirror my own.

Neither one of us speaks as my body dries. Not even when it becomes painfully obvious that I’m naked in his arms.

Not when he places a soft and gentle kiss on my forehead and then on the lids of my eyes that have now closed.

“Rest. I have you.”

Alaric

ONCE SHE'S ASLEEP, I CONTINUE TO HOLD HER IN MY ARMS.

I wait for her breathing to level out, so I know she won't wake up.

With careful precision, I lay her flat on the raft before I stand to get her clothes from the grass beside the sand. When I make my way back over to her, I realize just how hard dressing her will be.

Instead of even trying, I lift my own shirt over my head and move to place that on her body. Because of the size and how tiny she is in comparison, it's easy to maneuver it on her. Then I place the blanket on top of her. She's been difficult about using my blanket, but now, deep in slumber, she has no choice. She can no longer be stubborn.

With her body covered, I take the spot beside her. I spend the next few hours staring out into the horizon and thinking. My thoughts are of the past and what the future will bring. If I'll even have a future.

Before long the sun sets, and when the sky turns dark, I recline back and look up to the stars.

When I saw her, I thought she was hurt again.

But unlike the previous time, my heart stopped.

I don't know when she did it, but Phoenix flew right into my chest, making a nest for herself.

I'm not sure when that happened, but I care about her. It would be easy to say it's just lust. Because let's be honest, she's gorgeous, but it's more than that.

She's been a pain in my ass since the moment I met her, but I think that's what I like about her the most.

She challenges me.

She calls me on my shit.

She's a little spitfire, and yes, it doesn't hurt that she's stunning.

She's an untamable fire. Like a Phoenix, she falls, but every time she gets back up.

I have no doubt that by tomorrow, she'll do just the same, but for now, she nuzzles against me, seeking my warmth, so I pull her closer.

EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT STREAMS DOWN, FORCING MY EYES to open.

As the world around me comes into focus, I see yet again that Phoenix is asleep, nestled against my chest.

Unlike before, I don't rush to move.

Every day since we've been here, I've pushed myself from dusk till dawn to find a way off this island.

Even I deserve to sleep in.

Don't I?

I close my eyes against the glare and will myself back to bed.

But my companion seems to have other plans as she rolls almost completely on top of my body.

She's still asleep.

That much I can tell from the way she breathes.

Now, I'm not sure what to do.

Which is wholly unlike me.

I've never given a shit before about what this girl wants or needs, but now I do.

And the notion doesn't sit well inside me.

I need to squash these feelings.

I can't let myself grow attached to her.

Again, she starts to move, her leg draping over me. If she keeps rubbing up against me like that, she's going to wake something else inside me. I can't cross that line.

Something tells me if I do, one time won't be enough to get this girl out of my system, and I can't go there with her.

My inner debate is cut short when she starts to speak in incoherent sentences, and then as if she got struck by lightning, she bolts up into a sitting position.

"What-What happened?"

Her eyes are wide and crazy from sleep, and it takes everything in me not to burst into laughter.

But something tells me if I do, I'll end up with a black eye.

"You were exhausted and fell asleep."

She looks down and lifts the blanket, then her hand reaches for my shirt that covers her.

"How?" She doesn't finish the question, but there is no need, seeing as I can already tell what it's going to be.

How did I get dressed? Did you do this?

"You were naked." Her cheeks turn a bright red. "I didn't want to wake you, so my shirt seemed an easier task."

She's quiet as she takes in my answer, but eventually, she nods to herself.

"We should get up," I finally say, breaking the silence between us.

“What’s the plan for today?” she asks.

“Other than make coconut phones?” My lip tips up into a smirk, and she shakes her head at my joke.

“Yes, other than that, Gilligan.”

“Gather fruit and fish.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll do it together.”

Her brows knit together as if she is going to react. Maybe she’s perfectly capable of doing it herself, but she must think better of it.

“You can get most of the fruit. I’ll be focusing on seeing if there are any animals for us to catch.”

“How will you do that?”

“Bait.” But the moment I say the word, I realize my mistake. Her body tightens, and she’s up before I can speak, marching off behind the trees.

I would say she has to use the bathroom, but I know better.

If what I said bothered her, she doesn’t act on it, instead opting for a time-out. Hopefully, it’s long enough for her to be okay. A few minutes later, my question is answered when she steps out of the trees with a smile. I’m not sure if she is being serious or merely mocking me, but I don’t really care. Either way, no matter her mood, we are doing this.

“What has you so happy today?” I ask. Her smile brightens, and she points toward where she found the fruit.

“I’m excited to be getting closer to getting off this island.”

Now that I have heard her answer, the excitement she portrays doesn’t sit well with me. It’s not that I want to stay on this island, but the moment I get off, I’ll have to figure out who attacked me and why, and there will be a price to pay. As much as this isn’t a vacation, I’m not looking forward to the idea of having to do all that.

I turn toward Phoenix. “Do you need anything?” I ask before we head off for the day.

“Seeing as there’s really nothing to bring ...” she gestures to the ditch bag and the raft “... no.”

“Make sure you bring the knives.” After I say this, she turns her gaze to meet mine, and then her blue eyes look at me, wide with confusion. “Are you expecting to fight something? Or kill for that matter?”

“Never can tell what we’ll find on our walk.”

I wait for her to object, or say something, but today she’s on her best behavior. She must really want to get off this island.

Not that I blame her, but I don’t have the heart to remind her it’s a long shot. This can’t be easy for her. She basically has to rely on someone she hates for everything. The problem is, we could leave here and die on the raft. The plan is we’ll find another island, one that’s inhabitable, and make our way there. But just in case it takes a while, it’s better safe than sorry.

“Be honest. How many days of fishing until we have enough?”

“You want me to be honest?” I ask.

“Obviously.” She rolls her eyes before she deadpans, “Honesty is the best policy.”

“Ten days.”

Her mouth drops open at my words. “Are you serious? We have to do this for another ten days?”

“Well, we don’t have to do anything, but if we want the best shot, that’s my guess.” I shrug.

“Okay, well, either way, I guess we have to look for something to eat, so let’s go.” She turns and sets off again.

We spend the rest of the day gathering food, and before long, the sky is turning dark. With a fire set, we sit together beside it, letting it warm us.

“How will we know which way to steer?” she asks, picking the conversation back up from hours ago.

I point at my head, tapping on it to show it’s all up there. That my brain will be our map.

“Do you know your way around the Caribbean?”

“For the past four years, I have conducted my business on my yacht. I know how to sail a boat. I know how to captain a yacht. I know how to read the stars. I know how to figure out the location on a map, and after all these years of doing this course, I know where the islands are on the map.” Leaning forward, I throw another log onto the pile and watch as the fire roars to life. Red embers flicker as the smoke consumes the fresh piece.

Phoenix watches me, a small line forming between her brows. “Then how are we here?”

“The thing is ...” What happened that night still pisses me the fuck off, but there is no place for lies on this island. “I fell asleep. I hate myself for it because had I not, even in the black ocean, I would’ve been able to figure out our direction. But I did, and because of that, I might have killed us.” My words come out low, and I can’t believe I said them out loud.

Phoenix does something I don’t expect. She moves to sit closer.

“Tell me about the stars,” she says.

“That can take all night,” I respond, head tilted toward her. She turns toward me with fascination and curiosity written all over her face.

“Where else do I have to be?” She chuckles, and she’s right. There is no place to be and no one else to talk to. Her options for entertainment are limited.

“I might bore you.”

With amusement flashing in her eyes, she shakes her head. “I doubt you could ever bore anyone.”

“You’d be surprised.” I lean back so my head tilts up to the sky, and she follows my lead.

“Do you see that star right over there?”

“The bright one?”

“Yeah, that’s Polaris. The North Star. Sailors use it to guide them home. All I need is that, and I’ll be able to guide us.”

“So why don’t you?”

“I need to know where we started. I have a general understanding of our location, enough I feel confident that eventually we will find help, but we just need—”

“Enough food, just in case it takes longer?” She leans forward to get closer to the fire.

“Exactly. Now you’re learning.” My arm reaches out and grabs another log. I cut enough to last us until we fall asleep. Though we’re on a tropical island, the temperature does drop at night. From where she’s sitting, I hear her giggle, and I turn to see what’s so funny.

“Why are you giggling over there?” I ask.

“Learning from you ... now that’s an interesting concept,” she clarifies.

“How so?”

She cocks her head to the side and gives me a pointed look. “I don’t see you as much of a teacher.”

“You don’t know me very well. Don’t doubt what you can’t see.”

A part of me expects my clipped answer to be ignored, but then I remember this is Phoenix, and my little dove loves conflict.

“Very well. Starting now, I won’t. Tell me more.”

It’s not exactly what I had in mind when I thought of her response, but I can still work with it. “Oh, I will, but not now.”

“Then when?”

“We have at least ten more days together ... might as well make it last before you hate me again.”

She lifts her shoulders. “Maybe I won’t.”

That makes me chuckle. “You most definitely will.”

“If there’s no more lesson ... good night, Alaric.”

“Good night, dove.”

“With this new truce, you can call me Phoenix,” she states.

“But what fun would that be?”

Phoenix

I'M SHOCKED BY HOW RELAXED ALARIC SEEMS. PLAYFUL, even. This is a different side to him.

Without his men around, he's lighter. Funnier. He was always sarcastic, but before, he had a huge chip on his shoulders.

And now, with each day that passes on this tropical paradise, he seems to change.

I wonder if this is the real him. If this is who Alaric Prince truly is and the rest is a front.

Or maybe the actual world is so bad that he had no choice to be any different.

I guess as the saying goes, *Only time will tell.*

For now, we're stuck here. I can't even try to unravel or understand how much I like this unlikely alliance between Alaric and me. But what will happen if we live long enough to be free of this life?

What happens if we make it back home? Will he go after my father again?

I shouldn't think about it. Right now, the chances of us even ... my mind starts to go dark, and then I'm biting down hard on my lower lip.

Maybe I'll think about it later.

Just not now, when we have finally found a level of peace between us.

I lift a berry I found. "What about this one?" I ask.

"Unless we are planning on a joint suicide, that's a no." His words and grim joke have me staring down at the berries in my hand, the ones that look yummy and delicious right now.

The perfect killer. Like Alaric—beautiful to look at but lethal if you take a bite.

But like the glutton for punishment that I am, why do I still want to know this?

"Yeah, I'll pass on that. How do you know so much?" There is a sick need inside me to find out everything about this man.

"Now, that is a long story."

I lift my hand and gesture around us. "Does it look like I have anything better to do?"

"Pick berries." He dismisses my comment with a shrug.

"Since I'm doing such an awful job, you might as well tell me."

He looks up and to the left as if thumbing through files in his memory before his gaze drops back down and into my eyes.

"I guess."

He's quiet for a bit, and when he kneels before another bush, I think he's not going to tell me, but then I hear his voice.

His low timbre.

I should probably continue to look for food, but when he speaks, I'm too enthralled to do anything but listen.

"My knowledge for the great outdoors is all my father's doing. To be a man, he believed you needed to be able to survive on nothing." He looks up, and his eyes scan the

surrounding area. “This isn’t my first time stranded on an island,” he says, and I can feel my eyes widening at his admission.

“What do you mean?” My voice cracks with confusion.

“My father was a strict man. He thought a man needed to be able to survive anything.” He stops talking, and I watch as his Adam’s apple bobs. “*Alone.*”

My stomach muscles tighten, and I can’t even figure out what to say. “How old were you?” I finally squeak.

“The first time he tested me or the first time he dropped me on an island?”

“Both?”

“When I was ten, he left me in the woods alone to find my way. By twelve, I was expected to last a few days. Four, to be exact. By fifteen, I was left for seven days on an island.”

“But why? I don’t understand.”

He stands from where he’s crouched and paces.

“This business was his. To survive in this world—his world—I had to be indestructible.”

“No one is indestructible,” I whisper.

“I know,” he responds, his voice lower and filled with pain. I want to ask him about that pain. Is this about his brother? The brother he thinks my father killed? But at the same time, he’s finally opening up to me, talking to me, and I don’t want to go back to him hating me. If I’m going to probably die in ten days, I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a war.

“What was it like?” I ask, still staring at him. I’m still trying to understand this man and what made him who he is today.

“When I had to find my way home, it was horrifying. Again, I was ten. I vaguely knew where I was. I walked for what seemed like hours, and I didn’t eat because I didn’t know what would kill me.” He looks up from the fruit he’s picking

and begins to list toxic fruit to me. “Like this. At ten, this would have been the first thing I would have eaten. Lucky for me, I hesitated. I fought past the pains in my stomach and didn’t. Later, when I sat down to prepare, I learned that the fruit I had seen in the woods in the European forest he left me in that day would have killed me. I later referred to them as beautiful small red pods of death. If I had eaten them, I would have vomited, become dizzy and disoriented, then died.”

“Holy fuck,” I say, interrupting him.

“Right.” He nods, now looking at the ground. Maybe lost in the memory. “I was starving and severely dehydrated when I finally reached the manor my father had rented when he did business in Europe.”

“What happened?”

“He was impressed, very much so, but it wasn’t enough. I knew it wouldn’t be enough. He would mold me into the man he thought I should be. I watched as my older brother worked with him, but I knew my path wouldn’t be that easy. I spent my time from that moment on preparing for whatever would come next.”

I wait with bated breath for him to continue, and just when I think he won’t, he surprises me again. He sits down, no longer looking at plants.

His face is sullen, and his posture is stiff. “Finding my way home was nothing compared to leaving me on an island. But at least then I was prepared. I knew which fruits not to eat. I knew how to fish. I had taught myself how to start a fire with twigs.”

“And you know how to pack a kick-ass survival bag,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“I do. And I keep that bag with me at all times.”

“Why no radio in it?” I ask.

“Good question. There was one.”

“But?”

“But I had a crazy stowaway on my boat, so I removed it.” He looks up at me again, and now the previous gloom is gone, and it’s replaced with a smirk. He likes the fighting. He likes the banter. To Alaric Prince, it’s foreplay.

For me, well, I don’t know what it is. But what I know is I don’t enjoy seeing him like he was before. Lost in a sad memory he can’t pull himself from.

We aren’t so different. When I was nine, I was alone and thought I had no one in the world. But it wasn’t by choice that my parents left me. It wasn’t their choice. The big difference between Alaric and me is Michael stepped in and saved me.

I will never understand what it’s like for your father to abandon you on an island to see if you’ll live or die.

The thought is sobering, and it makes me wonder what else has happened to this beautifully broken man to make him the devil I know.

I know I shouldn’t try to find out. Everything inside me screams at me not to pursue this.

I just can’t help myself.

My need has become so much more, desire, intrigue, fascination? Maybe it’s all of it, but I have to know more about Alaric Prince.

AFTER HIS CONFESSION, WE SETTLE INTO A COMFORTABLE silence. Maybe it’s because there is nothing more to talk about, or maybe it’s because we both realize what his confession means to us.

He opened up to me.

He showed me there was more to him.

Now the real question is, what do I do with the information?

Before long, we are walking back to the camp. He leads the way, making sure nothing is in our path. I don't need him to coddle me, but I appreciate the thought, nonetheless.

I'm not a porcelain doll, but regardless of that fact, it means something to me that he treats me as such.

By the time we make it back to the campsite alongside the sand, I'm tired and hungry. We've been eating less and less, and my leggings are no longer tight.

Although Alaric is still ripped, he's leaner now. Even with the fish and coconuts, we are both starting to lose weight. We now have enough coconut stored for our rescue attempt, so gathering fruit and fish is next. The fish we bring will have to be freshly cooked. And hopefully, it will stay good because there's no way to preserve it long term. Fruit has been harder to come by; most of what we have found is still inedible.

Collecting water is one more hurdle we must conquer.

Alaric thinks we will be ready to go in ten days.

I think he just isn't ready to set off to our death. There's no question staying here forever is a death sentence, but leaving is one too.

I think the ten days is a way for him to hold on to hope a bit longer.

Maybe someone will find us. Maybe not all his men are dead? They're the only ones who could track us correctly. If they were wounded in the attack, how many days would it take for them to find another ship and look for us?

Maybe that's why we're waiting ten more days because technically, we could scrounge up enough food to leave now. Or we could try to stay here. The thing is, once the two-week mark hits, no one will look for us, and that's why Alaric gave us ten days. It feels as though a weight is pressing down on my chest every time I think of this, so I walk over to where Alaric is gathering sticks and twigs, and I stand beside him.

"For today's lesson," I say.

"Today's lesson?"

“Well, yeah. Yesterday you told me about Polaris, and today, you’ll teach me something else to survive. If we’re stuck here for another ten days, I might as well learn the tricks of the trade.”

“Is that what you want, dove?”

“It is. What else is there to do to pass the time?” I ask, but the moment I do, I realize I have walked right into a trap.

“I can think of better ways to spend our time.”

I can feel the warmth spreading across my face, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say he lit the fire, but seeing as he hasn’t, I know I’m blushing.

I don’t respond to his blatant sexual innuendo. Instead, I let my imagination run wild. I have to stop, but I can’t. I would swat my hand and shoo them away if that didn’t make me look insane. But it would, so I don’t. Instead, I take a deep breath and will my heart that is flip-flopping in my chest to stop so I can look straight at him.

Show no fear, Phoenix Michaels. Show no fear.

“I think my time on this island would be better spent learning how to survive.”

“Whatever you want.”

I continue to stand in place before he motions for me to come closer. I hesitate for a minute before he opens his mouth. “Do you think you can learn all the way from there?”

He’s right. As much as it pains me to admit he is right, from where I am perched, I won’t be learning anything.

I do what he says and move closer. And just out of spite, to show I don’t care, to convince him I’m not affected by him—or maybe to convince myself—I stand so close that I can feel the heat of his body. I want to shiver, but I don’t. I stand perfectly still. Stoic. He turns to face me, his eyes playful and his lip tipped up.

“Let’s get started. I’ll tell you and then demonstrate for you, and then you will try, okay?” he says, and I nod my head.

“Sounds good.” Sort of, anyway.

“You need to build friction where you rub, and it will turn the wood into a hot ember. Once that happens, you will quickly transfer the hot ember to your bundle and blow. This will ignite your tinder. Grab the kindling and use the burning tinder bundle to ignite it. Keep adding more dry sticks until you have the fire you want.”

I watch as he does just what he said he would. Staring at his fingers, his wrists, and up to his forearms, I’m mesmerized by the flexing of one of his tattoos. I want to ask him what they all mean. I will tonight at the fire, but right now, I need to concentrate.

His fire is blazing when he moves behind me.

My breath lodges in my throat as his arms wrap around me and his front presses against my back. Warm hands wrap around my hands, and once he’s secure in his position of my extremities, he starts to turn our hands so the friction builds.

The movement is sensual as he guides me around the wood. It feels like an erotic dance. His breath tickles my skin.

His lips are close enough that I wonder if he’ll kiss me.

I wonder if he wants to.

I turn my head toward him to see what he’s thinking, but just as I do, he jolts.

“You did it. Look!”

He pulls back, letting me go so I’m the only one holding the sticks.

“Blow,” he commands, and although I think the moment is gone, I can see the look of lust heavy in his eyes now.

“Blow,” he says again. “Ignite the flames.”

He’s no longer talking about a stick.

Alaric

THE NEXT FEW DAYS FOLLOW THE SAME PATTERN. I TEACH HER the skills she will need to survive if she ever finds herself alone without me on a deserted island. Today is a bit different.

Today, I lead her toward the lake to the clearing right by the banks of where the water is.

“What are we doing here? Are you going to teach me how to—what swim? I already know how to do that?” She laughs.

“No. Today, I teach you how to protect yourself. How to never find yourself in a bad position again.” The meaning of my words isn’t lost on her. She knows I’m talking about how she’s stuck here with me. “If you really want to work with your father, which I don’t suggest you do, you need to know how to defend yourself and fight back.”

She lifts her brow at me. “I don’t need to learn to fire a gun. It’s not rocket science.” Her hands rest on her hip in defiance, but I don’t miss the way her fists clench to hide their shaking.

“You need to. But at the very least, you need to learn how to fight. If you remember the day you found yourself alone on my boat, guns aren’t always available when we want them.”

A swift shadow of anger slips over her soft features, making her jaw appear tight. She’s not happy with that

memory. "I'll figure it out," she snaps, her voice inflamed with rage.

"Little dove, there's no need to be mad." And this time I mean it. Normally my words drip with sarcasm, but since we have too much time and very little to do, I do want to teach her this. "Let me teach you how to fight."

She stands there for a minute, her expression blank, before she places her hands on her hips, and gives me her signature, yet sexy look of defiance. "Aren't you scared it will give me the upper hand," she draws out, her voice very low, trying to be mischievous.

"Hardly."

That makes her full pink lips turn up into a grin. "Maybe one day I'll get the better of you. What then?"

I step closer to her. I'm close enough that she now needs to crane her neck to see my eyes. "Then I'll count myself lucky to die by the hands of someone so lovely."

The compliment must take her off guard because she swallows. I use the movement and surprise to my advantage, grabbing her by her shoulders. "Defend yourself." I pull her into me, capturing her hands next. "Fight me off."

She tries to squirm, but her movements do the opposite. It's like she stuck in quicksand; the more she moves, the tighter my grip gets.

"With my arms wrapped around you, there is little you can do."

"What's the point, then?" She huffs, still trying to break away.

"Use what you still have at your disposal."

Her movements stop, and I know she's trying to think of a way to defend herself. "Your foot. Stomp down. The movement will make my grip temporarily loosen. Use it to your advantage."

She stomps down.

“Good, but you’re still holding back. Let’s try some more.”

I spend the next few hours running through basic self-defense moves. Moves that one day, with enough practice, could save her life.

I’m not sure what it is about her, but I have a deep-seated desire to protect her. The thought of that, though, makes me laugh. She’s not the kind of girl who would ever let me do that for her. Seeing as I know that won’t happen, I plan on giving her the tools to protect herself.

We fight for a while. She’s a quick study. Again, in my arms, I hold her tightly, my fingers touching her exposed skin. She shivers beneath my touch, and I move in, placing my head closer to the crook of her neck. I breathe out, knowing my breath tickles her skin ... then she strikes.

And believe it or not, takes me completely off guard. I stumble back as her elbow connects with my ribs. Then she swivels around, and her fist connects with my jaw.

It’s my own fault as I step back and wipe the blood from my lip.

“You’re bleeding,” she exclaims, walking toward me. “Are you hurt?”

“I thought you wanted me to die.” I smirk.

“I never said I wanted you to die, just be maimed.”

“Big difference.” I swipe at my lip again, and there is still a trail of blood dripping off it.

“Let’s grab the first-aid kit. I’ll clean that for you.”

“I’m fine.”

Not really. I let this little wisp of a girl get one over on me. Phoenix Michaels is more dangerous to my health than she knows.

Neither of us speaks on the way back, but when we get back, I let her start the fire and then point back to the sky and tell her more about the stars above.

THE NEXT DAY COMES BEFORE I KNOW IT.

She pops up from where she is and smiles.

“What’s on the agenda today?” she asks from beside me. I’m barely up, but it makes me laugh. Ever since yesterday, she’s been in a good mood. Almost like the idea of learning how to survive has given her a purpose here on the island.

I can understand that. At one time in my life, it gave me a purpose too.

“Today, I’ll teach you how to shoot a gun.”

Her eyes go wide, and her face pales. Then I notice her hand is shaking. Uncontrollably.

“No.” Her one-word answer leaves no room for debate.

“How about I teach you how to fish?”

She moves to a sitting position. “Really?” I can hear the gratitude in her voice that I don’t press her.

“Yes, it’s different here than it would be back home, but I can still teach you.”

“How so?” she asks, and I smile.

“Other than the obvious ...”

“Which is?”

“Well, we don’t have a fishing rod.”

She inclines her head. “You mean there is no portable fishing rod in your handy-dandy travel survival kit?”

“Nope,” I respond with a smile.

“What good is this thing”—she motions to the bag—“without a fishing rod?”

I jump up from where I’m lying in the raft and pretend to go to the bag. “You’re right. What was I thinking? I should

just throw it out.”

Her eyes go wide, and I chuckle. I realize I have laughed more with her stranded on this island than I have in years.

Even before I took over the business, I don't ever remember laughing.

“What?” she asks, and her voice pulls me back to the here and now.

I shake my head. “I was just thinking.”

“About?” Sincerity drips from the question. She truly wants to know.

In my actual life, I don't talk about my feelings, and I don't answer to anyone. But it's different here on this island. A part of me wants to tell her, but I don't, but I'm still surprised about my desire to open up to her.

Maybe it's because she is my only companion, but—and I won't admit this to her, although I'm sure she knows—there is a very good chance we will die here.

I'm okay with that.

I made my peace with dying a long time ago.

But even if I'm resigned to my fate, that doesn't mean I want my time left to be spent fighting.

Even if she is my enemy's daughter, that has no bearing here and now.

For whatever time we have left, we'll work together. That's really our best shot at survival. Then if we escape, we can cross the next bridge. I'm sure she knows my vendetta won't end because we went fishing together, but there is no point in thinking about that now.

“Let's go. We'll go fishing in the shallow part of the ocean. I usually go over there.” I point toward the opposite section of the beach. “It's about a twenty-minute walk.”

“Do I need anything?”

“Grab the tape. Also, I have a spear and also a large stick beside that tree.”

“Um, okay.”

“I’m going to use the spear. I’ll stand on the rock over there and try to fish that way.”

“You can do that?”

“Yeah, remember? Years spent training for this,” I respond.

“And the long stick and tape?” she asks, brow raised in question. There was actually supposed to be a net and a hook in the raft, but it must have fallen out—but I don’t tell her that because it’s not important. I can make something for her to fish with.

“That’s for you. It takes years of practice and skill to use a spear to catch a fish, but if we tape the large leaf of the palm tree, you can use that to catch smaller fish.”

“Seriously? You have to be joking.”

I give her a stare that tells her I’m anything but joking. “You said you wanted to learn.” My lip tips up. “If you are a good girl, I’ll even let you touch my spear.”

She rolls her eyes at my blatant attempt at a sexual joke, but I don’t miss the way her pupils widen just before she does it.

Interesting.

It seems my little dove isn’t against the idea at all.

This I can work with.

That certainly would be a better way of spending our time, at least our nights. Maybe then I won’t have to talk about myself anymore.

When it’s obvious I’m not going to say more, she walks over to the tree and grabs the gear I told her to.

“All your stuff. Spear included,” she mocks.

“It’s a big one, right?”

“Lord.” She laughs. A loud and contagious laugh. One that makes me laugh too.

Better be careful, Alaric. If you keep laughing like this, you might grow to like her, and that is not a good plan.

Pushing down the thought circling my head, I grab my knife and place it in the back pocket of my pants that I’ve since cut into shorts.

She walks up to me and reaches out her hand, holding the sticks.

I take my spear, and we both walk.

We’re quiet on the trek. When we finally get to the shallow lagoon, I point at a spot a few feet away from where we stand.

“You’re going to fish over there. And I’m going to be a little deeper on that rock.”

“Am I going to get wet?”

“Where you’re standing? No. But I would recommend if you don’t want to get your pants wet that you take them off,” I say as I remove my shirt and then set it down on the sand,

“You’re just saying that ’cause you want to see me naked.”

I lift my brow. “Maybe. Maybe not. But you won’t even be naked.”

“Practically,” she counters.

“You’ll still have a tank. It will be like you are wearing a bathing suit. And why so modest? I’ve already seen you naked.”

“Fine.” Then she pulls down her pants.

The truth is, she shows no more skin than someone on a family trip to the beach would. But there is still something very enticing about the picture she’s portraying.

Her skin is sun-kissed. Her dark brown hair flows in the sea breeze. She looks like a sea goddess, a siren luring me toward her. I don’t go, though. Instead, I squat down on the sand and tape the leaf to make a net.

Once I'm done, I hand it off to her.

"You go over there. Scream if you catch something."

It's not long until I hear grumbling from where Phoenix stands. She looks flustered. She's screaming at the water. When I hear curses, I can't help but laugh.

"Problem?" I holler across the distance. The look she gives me is so stern I feel like a little child just reprimanded by a parent.

"You can say that."

"Want help?" I ask, but she doesn't answer, so I take it upon myself to go help her.

My foot steps off the rock, and once it's submerged into the warm ocean, I stride toward her. The water is shallow where we are, so only my legs get wet.

When I'm almost upon her, she looks up, an angry grimace still present on her face.

Angry Phoenix is almost as beautiful as a sleeping one. I prefer her peaceful, but this is my second favorite look. Heated eyes.

I wonder what she looks like in the throes of passion.

What her eyes look like as she comes.

I have to use all my strength to stifle a groan as I push back the desire forming inside me. Keep your head in the game, man.

"Let me help you," I say again. This time, I step up behind her.

"You have a spear in your hand. How are you going to help me?" She scoffs.

Wanting to show her I can, I throw the spear like I'm in the Olympics. It flies through the air, landing on the beach.

"Show-off," she mutters, and I have to try everything in my power not to laugh.

“You’re right, I am,” I say in my most asshole voice yet.
“But I sure can throw a stick.”

“You are incorrigible,” she says over her shoulder.

“That might be the case, but I’m also a damn good fisherman. All jokes aside, let me help you.”

“Fine, but I’m telling you, there are no fish here. They must’ve swum away. You won’t have any luck.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“Fine.”

With no more resistance from her, I step closer. My arms reach around her, my hands wrapping around her forearms.

Her body shivers at the contact.

That makes me smile. It’s not cold enough for her to shiver unless she is affected by my touch. Seeing as I can feel the goosebumps that form on her arm, I know she is.

Here we are, dancing around an obvious attraction, but knowing how all this started, I’ll need a verbal confirmation before I ever breach the divide between us.

With my arms around her, I position her in the correct position, and then we drop the net I made into the water.

“Now what?” she asks.

I move her body closer to mine. “Now we wait.”

She squirms at the contact. “For how long?”

“However long it takes for you to feel the net get heavier.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“I rarely joke,” I say, even though that’s not true anymore. With her, it seems I’m always joking, always laughing. Hell, I’m basically a different man on this island. My father would have never appreciated this new me.

My brother would have laughed at me.

But since neither of them is here, I’m fine.

With our bodies still touching, we wait.

Her inhales make me inhale.

When she exhales, I exhale.

It's very peaceful.

I don't think she realizes when she was doing this on her own, she was moving around too much. You can't move when trying to catch fish.

"Why are we just standing like this?" Her voice cuts through the silence.

"Because this is how we catch fish."

"How do you figure?"

"You moved around too much before. You were basically dancing for the fish. They swam away because of it. They saw the threat and left."

"You're full of shit."

"Am I?" I step in even closer, and now my bare chest hits her back. She inhales, and I feel the vibration from where our bodies touch. "Then let's do an experiment."

Time passes slowly as she weighs my words with each pull of oxygen she takes, in each deep breath she expels at my proximity.

"How?" she finally croaks, probably because she thinks if she humors me in this, I'll let her go.

But I don't want to. Even if I wouldn't do this, I like how small she feels in my arms, and I'm not ready for her to leave yet. So instead of just teaching her, I will milk this for all it's worth.

I pull her close, leaning forward so that her head is in the crook of my neck. Her body trembles as my lips softly whisper in her ear to calm down.

"Inhale. Slowly and be still."

She does. Her shoulders rise and fall softly so as not to scare off the fish.

"How much longer?"

“I’ll say this one time, dove. And I know you want to get angry with me, but trust me. Calm your heart. In life, this is an important message to learn. Every action has a consequence. If you are rash, it can have dire consequences.”

The implication hangs in the air. I’m not talking about catching fish. No, rather, when she sneaked onto my boat. Now she is here on an island with me, stranded and having to fish for food.

She lets out a long, drawn-out exhale, finally accepting my advice.

We stand together for a long time with peace and tranquility all around us. It’s odd what a difference a week can make.

Now, as I’m standing here, it brings me back to a time before, when I learned to fish this way. When I learned to survive by myself.

Now, I’ll teach her everything I’ve learned. That way, if we do ever escape this, she can live through any challenge life throws at her.

Phoenix

BREATHING IS OVERRATED, RIGHT? BECAUSE I'M NOT.

It's a modern miracle I'm still standing upright. Well, I guess it's not a modern miracle, seeing as Alaric's holding most of my body weight.

His touch makes me dizzy. Light-headed. He holds me so close that his heat is all around me. I should insist he stop, but I can't. What I really need to do is turn over my shoulder and just kiss the man already. Put us both out of our misery.

I'm going to do it.

Right now.

The attraction is too strong not to. We are opposing pieces of a magnet, and the pull to each other is inevitable. This will happen, but if I kiss him now, it's on my terms.

Before I can second-guess myself, I move to turn my head over my shoulder. I'm in the crook of his neck, but he pulls back, our gazes locking.

I can see his desire.

His eyes read like an open book. They tell me of his wants and needs. We are so close now that his breath fans my lips. My eyes shutter closed, and I'm sure our lips will collide ... when suddenly, I feel a heavy weight in my arm, and then I'm tugged back. Or, well, at least my arms are.

My eyes jolt open, and Alaric is no longer staring at me. The moment is lost.

I turn my head back in the direction.

“There. We got one,” Alaric says excitedly.

He helps me lift it up. The makeshift net is heavy as it comes out of the water. When it’s high enough that I can see inside, an enormous fish is looking back at me, flopping.

A tinge of sadness enters my mind, but I push it away. I’m not a vegetarian or vegan by any means, but I have never hunted or fished before. But this is life and death for Alaric and me, so I continue to lift the net until it stops moving.

“You did it,” Alaric says as he plants a kiss on the top of my head. I’m completely taken aback by the move. It’s like how he kissed my head when I almost drowned. Caring. Proud.

It makes me feel warm inside.

“We did it,” I say, looking back over it at him.

He smiles. No, more like beams. It’s like a bright light in an unlit room. Blinding.

Alaric Prince is beautiful like this.

Like this, I can see an unfamiliar part, a part a woman could fall for.

I turn my attention back to the fish. I can’t look at Alaric like that. I can’t allow myself to believe any of that.

I’m not that girl for him. I can enjoy him, maybe even sleep with him, but I can’t be getting crazy thoughts like that.

Nope.

That is one notion that will never be written in the stars.

AFTER THE FIRST FISH, ALARIC WENT BACK TO HIS ROCK, AND I continued to fish alone. The one thing I have learned in the

past few days is that time has no place on this island. There is only eating, hunting, and living.

We stay for a while until the bright blue sky morphs to a strange green color.

“We need to head back,” he says, looking up at the forming clouds.

“Really, already?”

Alaric points to where he was staring. “See over there. That color?”

“Yeah,” I answer, but I’m not sure why a green sky means we have to go.

“A storm is coming.” He starts to walk.

“How do you know?”

“It looks like you will get survival class 2.0 now. When the sky turns green, a storm is brewing. But it’s more than that. Look at the ocean. You see how it looks like squares are forming?”

“Yeah.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I play along.

“Those squares show the riptide getting stronger. We need to get out of the ocean and back to camp. We need to pull the raft to a secure place, tether it, and then hope the storm doesn’t cause it any damage.”

“Shit.”

“Yep.”

Fear fills my stomach. If the storm is as bad as he’s making it out to be, we could very well lose the only means to get off this island.

Without thinking twice, we are on the beach, grabbing our clothes, dressing, and then hurrying back to where the raft is.

“How long?”

“Could be anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. Maybe longer. Look at the sky in the distance.”

When I do, a strange foreboding feeling sweeps through me. A few miles out to sea, the sky is black. But worse than that is the funnel of clouds in the sky.

I must be lost in my head because I feel Alaric's hands cup my jaw and lift my face. Our eyes meet, and I see actual fear in his.

"I'm going to need you to listen to me. Can you do that?"

I nod, not being able to form words.

"Together, we are going to lift this raft. I will secure our stuff inside. It will be heavy. About sixty pounds of dead weight."

"Where are we going?"

"Toward the lake."

"Is that safe?"

"By the lake, no. But I thought I saw a cave the other day when I was in the water. By the waterfall."

"A cave?"

"If we can get there and if what I saw is correct, we can wait the storm out in there. I'm not going to lie. It will suck. It will be heavy, which is why I didn't attempt this before, but now we have no choice."

"Okay," I mutter.

When the time comes, and Alaric signals me to lift, I do.

Goddamn, that's heavy.

I grunt, my muscles flaring with the exertion.

It's way heavier than I thought, even with Alaric helping.

Alaric counts off, and we are walking. My feet keep slipping at this pace because my gait is much shorter than his.

I keep up even though the pain is immense. Even though my body screams to stop, I keep the pace.

Once we reach the clearing, Alaric stops.

“I’m going to put this down and run up ahead to make sure what I saw is accurate, and most importantly has room for the raft. If it doesn’t, I’ll have to tie it to a nearby tree.”

“Be safe,” I say, but he doesn’t respond. Instead, his Adam’s apple bobs, and then he’s running toward where the waterfall is.

I expect him to run to the area where the water hits the lake, and I expect him to go underwater, but he’s actually a few feet away by the rocks. From where I am standing, it looks like just black rocks and nothing else, but then I realize when he disappears, that’s the cave.

A few minutes later, he comes out and jogs toward me. He’s out of breath when he gets to me, and a thin layer of sweat drips down the side of his face.

“We are good to go. It’s not very large. You might get your feet wet walking in, but once inside, it’s dry.”

“Okay.”

“You ready?”

“Yes.”

He reaches to lift the raft again, and this time, with an end in sight, it’s less daunting. Until I hear the crack and the rumble of thunder. Large pellets of rain start to slap at our bodies. The sound of the water hitting the raft tells me the storm is coming fast. It’s only a matter of minutes before it’s a full monsoon.

“Faster!” Alaric shouts, and we set off into a run. I lose my footing often, but we keep going.

My lungs seize from the oxygen I expel.

Rain beats down on us. The sky is black, but I see the clearing.

Together, we push on, and now the water is higher at the mouth of the cave, but I don’t care. My shoes will eventually dry, but who knows what the storm will bring. We are lucky to have a raft and shelter.

Once inside, I see what Alaric was talking about. In the first few feet of the cave, there is a small puddle of water, but then the rocks step up to dry land—well, stones but same difference.

We are safe.

“Help me flip it. Then we can unpack and start a fire.”

“You want to start a fire in the cave?”

“It’s the only way we will eat tonight. We just can’t start it close to the mouth.”

My mouth drops open. “And why is that?”

“Because if we do that, we risk the fire breaking apart the opening. At the opening of a cave, the rock is thinner.”

Shock must register on my face because he reaches out and takes my hand, and a soft and reassuring squeeze comes next. “It will be fine. I’ll start a small fire a few feet in where the ceiling is high enough that it won’t be a problem. If the airflow is bad, we will know right away, and we will snuff it out if it gets too smoky.”

“Good thing I got stranded on an island with you.” My joke is lame, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“Yeah, anyone else, and you would be eating worms,” he says, and I stick my tongue out at him and then turn away to assess the damage to my clothing. “You okay over there?”

I look down at the clothes that now cling to my body like a second skin. “Just cold. All my clothes are wet.”

“I suggest you strip, and you can wrap yourself up with the blanket.”

“It’s a fantastic thing you have ... What did you call it? A ditch bag?”

“Yep, a ditch bag.”

“Turn away,” I order.

“Seriously, dove. We are stuck in a cave during a tsunami ___”

I lift my hand and cut him off. “It’s a tsunami?”

“No, it’s not a tsunami. I’m just joking with you.”

“Real funny, bro. I don’t think I could handle that right now.”

“Listen to me right now. We obviously didn’t meet in the best of circumstances, but I can tell you without a measure of a doubt that you could survive. You are one of the strongest and most fearless women I have ever met.”

His words stun me. They take me off guard so much that I have no answer for them at all. Instead, I remove my clothes until I’m left in my bra and panties, and then I reach for the blanket. Once I have it completely wrapped around me, I take them off too.

“At least I won’t have to wash them. The rain did the job.”

“See? Tough as nails and always seeing the bright side.”

“Hardly, but what else can I do?”

“Not very much, considering the position we’re in.” He looks around the cave before pointing at a spot in the corner. “I’ll set up the fire there.”

“How are you going to start it? We are in a cave.”

He smiles.

He freaking smiles.

Mister Nature has a plan.

“Okay, Mister I Know Everything About the Wilderness and Being Stranded on an Island, tell me oh, wise one, what’s the plan?”

“I packed wood.”

“Of course, you did.” I roll my eyes. But with the sky so dark and the fire not started, he can’t see.

“Dove, I know you are mocking me. I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“I did no such thing.”

Before I know what's happening, he's shining the flashlight on my face.

"Damn ditch bag," I mutter.

"Damn ditch bag? That ditch bag saved your life. Apologize to it."

"The bag isn't Wilson. I'm not building a friendship with an inanimate object solely because I'm living the '*Castaway*' life."

"Don't insult Ditch." His voice is serious, and if I didn't know better, I would think he's serious. Seeing as Alaric Prince is sarcastic, I play along.

"Ditch? Seriously. You named the bag that?" Cue eye roll.

"Well, what else would you have me name her?"

This man is impossible yet entertaining.

"And now it's a her?" I mock.

Alaric's lips stretch wide across his face, his eyes gleaming with enjoyment. "She is."

"You are ridiculous."

"And she saved your life."

"Just light the damn fire already. Ditch would have been a better bag if she had a VHF radio. Who cares about a blanket or a flashlight? What we really need is a way to call for help." There, I said it.

"We were scared you would find it."

"See what a dumb move that was. The almighty Alaric Prince made a mistake."

With the flashlight now on the floor, illuminating the cave, I can see his face. His face is now serious and no longer playful.

"I did, Phoenix, and I'm sorry."

Phoenix. Not dove.

After that admission, I don't speak. I watch as he turns back to the wood and eventually makes a small but big enough fire. My own head tilts down, looking at the hard, dark earth beneath me. I feel bad for what I said. Alaric would have never done what he had if he knew what the future held. That's the thing I realize now. He's not the man I thought he was. Blinded by rage, he made bad decisions. But deep down, he's not that man. No. He's the man who saved me time and time again. There is no part of me that doesn't think he regrets his decision. It's still his fault we are trapped here, though, no matter how sorry he is.

"Are you hungry?" His voice pulls me from my inner thoughts.

My head lifts. "Not really."

"I'm not either, but we should eat to keep our strength up."

He's right. "As long as it's not the fish."

"Coconut?"

"Sounds amazing. What does your bag think of that?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood. With the future uncertain, there is no place for tension.

"She wants us to make the fish. I have vetoed her."

"Good call."

The fire is now up and running. The red embers drift around, warming the cave.

Alaric was right. It doesn't affect the air quality just like he thought.

We both settle around the heat, our clothes close enough to hopefully dry by the morning.

It's a good thing the cave is big and we could fit the raft inside the mouth. Just barely, though. It will be a bitch to get it out. Heck, it will be a bitch to carry back to the beach. But at least the boat won't tear, and we should be able to get it out to the ocean. Alaric had said it was meant to withstand the open sea. The only thing it can't withstand is thirst and hunger.

It really sucks that he didn't leave the radio in the raft, but I understand why he did it. He couldn't have expected ...

What am I doing? I keep going back and forth on how I feel about this. And now, I'm justifying what happened on his yacht.

The thing is, this all started because of me. Not true. The war started long before me. But this—being on his boat in the first place—all this started because of me.

Because I came up with a stupid and apparently transparent plan, and it backfired.

Royally.

From where I sit, I watch as he takes a knife to open the coconut. Then he collects the milk. I creep closer, not wanting him to spill any.

“Here,” he says as he reaches over to me. The distance isn't far, and his hands touch mine. With the bottle in my hand, I sip—and I also freaking moan. It tastes so good. With all the adrenaline leaving my body, I realize how hungry I am. We hadn't eaten all day. Not since we left to fish.

We were so worried about getting to safety that I had forgotten or merely didn't realize.

“That tastes so good.”

“I can tell.” He chuckles.

“Don't make fun of me. Wait until you try it.”

As if on cue, he lifts it to his mouth too and then swallows. “Fuck,” he groans, and it's my turn to laugh. “You're right. That's fucking amazing right now.”

“It really is.”

When we are done drinking the milk, he cracks open the shell and takes the fatty meat out.

It tastes just as good as the milk. We sit in silence as we eat, other than letting out the occasional moan of pleasure.

“Wow, we are pigs,” I say when there is nothing left.

“Are you still hungry? I know you don’t want fish, but we have some other fruit in the raft.”

“No. I’m good.”

Again, silence falls on us. My gaze is on the fire, wondering what to talk about.

“Since we don’t have stars tonight, there’s no lesson,” he says.

“That’s a shame. Now what will we talk about?”

“We can talk about you.”

“Or we can talk about you?” I counter.

“Didn’t we already do that?”

He’s right.

Maybe it’s my time to open up.

Alaric

“THE MAN YOU KNOW AS MICHAEL IS NOT MY ACTUAL father,” she says out of nowhere. “Hell, my name isn’t really Phoenix. It’s Sarah. We changed it when he adopted me.”

I sit up from where I’m reclined on the raft near the fire.

Phoenix is still sitting across the raft from me, but I feel I need to be closer to her for what she is about to say.

I already knew he wasn’t her biological dad, but I don’t speak. This is her story, and I’m just here to listen.

She moves forward on the raft, closer to the warmth, as though talking about her past makes her cold. I can understand that. It’s what I felt when I unburdened my childhood to her.

“When I was younger, I lived in New York with my family. We traveled a lot—more than most. Often, my father would take us to South America on his business trips. He was an international lawyer, and we went to Argentina during a time of civil unrest. War broke out. I don’t remember much, but I remember that my family was caught in the crossfire. My parents both died. Michael was his client. He saved me that day and took me in when I had no one else. His life was too difficult, and he moved me around too much to keep me with him, so he sent me to boarding school, but he was always there for me.”

I want to argue that doesn't stop him from being a monster—that one good deed doesn't right his wrongs—but this isn't the time or the place for that.

That is a black cloud always hovering over us. If we let it in, it will destroy us.

Eventually, we will cross that bridge, but not now.

We both sit in silence after her story. There are no words to say that will help. We are both orphans who lost our family. We aren't that different.

“How long do you think the rain will last?” she asks, finally breaking the silence.

“A tropical storm like this? Probably a few days.”

“This will set us back.”

“It could,” I admit, my voice dipping low.

It's worse than that. The waters will be unsteady, and although the raft can withstand open water, it can't withstand a storm like this one.

I don't say that.

The mood is already too somber to tell her any chance of us leaving in the next few days will have to be pushed back until we are sure another storm isn't brewing.

“Do you think we will die here?” she whispers.

It's dark in the cave, except from the fire dancing beside us, there's no other light, but I can see the way she trembles.

When I don't answer right away, she turns to look away from the flames and at me instead.

“You don't have to lie to me, Alaric.”

“Probably,” I admit.

“Because of this storm?”

I nod. “The chance that anyone will be looking for us or even know where to look was already slim. But if the weather keeps up like this, it could be days before we can do anything about it.”

“If the storm lasts a few days, do we have enough food to last in here?”

Again, I go quiet. “Alaric.”

“I’ll give it to you straight. We don’t have enough dry wood to last over two days. We have food, but if we eat it all, we’ll basically have to start from scratch before we can leave.”

“We are fucked.”

“Not necessarily. It could end at any minute. It could be a fast, tropical storm.”

She gives me a look that tells me she isn’t buying what I’m selling. Good, because neither am I. By the look of the clouds ...

“It’s a hurricane, isn’t it?” She cuts into my inner thoughts with exactly what I was thinking.

“The clouds looked that way.”

“And how long do hurricanes last?” She levels me with a stare, a hard stare that demands me to be honest.

“If it’s fast-moving, then a day or two, but typically, a week.”

“And if it’s terrible ...?”

“Weeks.” My words hang heavy in the gloomy cave. “I’m going to blow out the fire,” I finally say.

“Why?” But she knows why. Tonight, even with the storm battering outside, it’s not cold. We already used it to dry her clothes, the rest will have to naturally dry, but it’s not worth the risk. Since it’s almost time to sleep, we can’t waste it.

“Okay,” she whispers.

“Come here,” I say, and her mouth forms an O.

“Without the fire, we will have to share the blanket.”

If she wants to object, she doesn’t. Instead, she scoots over to me.

This won’t be the first time we have slept next to each other. Normally, we take separate sides of the raft and

gravitate toward each other in the middle of the night.

When she's beside me, I move to remove my shirt.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"You're naked under there. Let me give you my shirt at least."

She inclines her head and then nods. "That would be smart. Can't really share a blanket if I'm naked."

"I mean, you could ..."

She laughs and reaches for my shirt. When our hands touch, I let my fingers linger longer than I should. She doesn't pull away at first. Instead, she watches where we touch. Then she must snap out of the trance because she's moving away so she can put my shirt on. While she dresses, I put out the fire, and then I'm back in the raft with her.

"Thank you," she says as she lets it drop over the blanket. Once she's fully submerged in it, she lifts up, and the blanket drops away from her once naked body. "We should go to bed." I open the blanket, and she slips in. My arm is around her shoulder, and she is tucked into my chest.

"Sleep," I say as I kiss her hair.

She mumbles something, but I'm not sure what. It sounded like a thank you, but then I hear the soft inhale, and I know she's asleep.

Exhausted from the day.

I'm not faring much better because with Phoenix in my arms, protected, I feel at peace. I listen to her breathing, and before long, my own breaths match hers, and I too succumb.

Phoenix

IT'S DARK.

There are so many people. My hand is in my mother's hand as she walks up to a familiar man. Uncle Michael. He's not my actual uncle, but he's Daddy's friend.

"Sarah." I hear my name, but I'm not sure where it's coming from. My hand drops from my mother's, and suddenly, I can't see anyone. Everyone is too tall. I move to find a higher ground to see.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Rapid sounds over and over. Dust and smoke fill the air.

People scream.

Where's my mom? My dad.

Then I see him.

He's on the floor, gun lifted in the air. His finger keeps moving, but nothing happens. In front of me, on the ground, is my dad's other gun.

He's screaming for me to grab it. To fire. To save my mother. That's when I see her. She's lying on the floor, a man

standing in front of her.

Before I know it, I'm grabbing the gun, my small hands wrapping around it. My mom looks at me, begging me, pleading with me.

I lift it, but I'm so scared.

I can't breathe. I can't move.

Frozen in place from fear.

The man shoots my mom, then my dad, and I do nothing. Nothing but scream.

My eyes open, but I can't see anything. Where am I?

"Shh," I hear from beside me, and that's when I notice the warm body holding me. The arms wrapped around me.

"Where ...?" I croak.

"We're still in the cave. Remember the storm?" he asks.

Suddenly, everything clears in my hazy mind.

The storm. Running for cover. Needing to put out the fire.

Alaric.

Holding me.

Keeping me safe.

Yet again.

He's mumbling something to me. Speaking into my hair as he gently strokes me, kisses me.

The gentleness he has shown me these past few days has my emotions amplifying.

Here I am, someone he thinks he should hate, and time and time again, he has put my needs first and taken care of me before everything else.

"You're okay," he says.

A sob breaks through my lips.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks before kissing my locks again.

“No.”

I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about the dream of the last time I saw my parents. The last time I held my mom's hand. That I could have saved them.

I want to pretend none of it happened and not think about how that one moment shaped the rest of my life.

I want to feel alive. I have been dead inside since they died, but now as I look my own mortality in the eyes, I can't let this be it.

Without allowing me to second-guess myself, I turn my head.

Still in his arms, I stare up at him. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness, and although I can't see him clearly, I can see his shadow.

Maybe this is for the best.

In the dark, I can be anyone I want to be.

Even the woman who finds comfort in Alaric's arms.

I move closer, securing my hands around his neck, and lean in until my lips fan his.

“What are you doing?” He breathes out, and the oxygen he expels tickles my lips.

“Forgetting,” I say in truth, and he doesn't seem to object.

“You sure you want this?” His voice is deep and husky.

I lean in. “I do.”

“Right answer, dove.” Without a second thought, he crushes his lips to mine.

I open to him, allowing him to kiss me with a vigor I have never felt before. We are all teeth and tongue, moaning into each other's mouth. I have never kissed like this before.

It's not like the kiss on the boat. This one is primal.

He drags me on top of him until I'm straddling his lap. His hands run up my body, tugging at the bottom of his shirt. He

pulls it up, never breaking from me, and exposes my breasts to him.

Time has no relevance when we kiss. I get lost in his mouth on mine. Seconds and then minutes pass, but we don't stop. We just get hungrier, more desperate. Until eventually, his hands move from where he's cupping my breast to lift the material.

Once the top is off, he pulls away. It's dark in the cave. I can't see much, but I can feel his desire and lust through each touch of his hands on me. Leaning forward, he presses his lips to the hollow of my neck and then works his way down.

He trails a line across my collarbone, grazing his teeth against my skin until he reaches my nipple.

With a swipe of the tongue, he makes me groan. He licks and tastes, and then a growl emanates from his mouth as he moves toward the other breast.

We continue this wicked dance until I'm grinding myself against him. He's hard and ready for me. The only thought now consuming my mind is what he will feel like.

He licks and sucks until my head falls back in ecstasy, and then I feel his arms bracketing around me, flipping me over until I'm on my back.

He hovers above me, his chest heaving.

"I need to be inside you." He groans, and I want nothing more.

With Alaric's shirt removed from my body, only his pants separate us.

In the dark, my hands search, and when I find the drawstring, I untie it.

It's not elegant as I try to maneuver.

It's hungry kisses. Desperate touches. Primal needs.

It's perfection.

When I feel him lift, I know he's rid himself of the pants.

I wait for him to crawl up my body. Instead, he fumbles more, and I'm not sure what he's doing.

But when the small flashlight illuminates the cave, I look at him.

What I see in his eyes takes my breath away.

"I wanted to see you." Then he's spreading my legs. Leaning up on my elbows, I watch as he crawls up my body but then stops.

His nose touches the inside of my thighs, and he looks up at me from where he's perched. "I wanted to see you when I did this." And then he looks up, a wicked gleam in his eye.

I moan my approval and lift my hips. He lifts my legs over his shoulders, and then he's going in, taking his tongue to my core in one long swipe. I gasp in pleasure.

"I..." I try to form words, but I can't. With me spread out before him like his own personal feast, it's difficult. My entire body quivers, courtesy of his tongue.

I press myself closer to his mouth, and the bastard laughs. His fingers part me, and he is pumping one and then two fingers in and out, causing my body to shake against him.

He mutters something, but I can't understand it. There's too much sensation as he continues to suck me into his mouth at the same time, building the pressure with each moment that passes.

My eyes flutter closed. Tingles run down my spine. Muscles tighten and tremble. My hands fist his hair, and my body starts to shake as I'm about to tip over the edge.

He stops.

"What are you doing?" I groan.

"I want to feel you come." He grows serious for a second, and I can see the giant elephant in the room.

"I'm clean. I don't sleep around," I practically beg.

"Me too."

It might seem reckless, but I'm desperate for the connection only he can give me right now.

"I'll pull out," he adds.

"You don't have to do that. I'm on the shot."

That must be enough for him because he grins at me like the Cheshire cat before starting to tease me where I need him most.

"You like this, dove?" he grits through clenched teeth. He's as desperate as I am.

"Yes," I answer, and then with a slow and steady thrust of his hips, he's inside me. It might be dark, and I might not be able to see anything, but I wish I could. I wish I could watch as he enters me then pulls back out.

He cups my backside and angles my body upward, slamming into me again and entering me fully, reaching deeper than I thought possible. He pulls back out before pounding back in. His strokes grow harder with each new thrust of his hips, and as I moan beneath him, his pace quickens.

I've never felt anything like this before. My nerve endings are on fire, igniting from within me. I feel myself being set ablaze, and then I'm falling over the edge. Alaric grits his teeth as he thrusts once, twice, and on the third pump, he pours himself into me.

Together, we both try to catch our breaths, and when we do, Alaric moves from on top of me. I miss his warmth instantly, but when he lies next to me and pulls me in his arms, my eyes grow heavy.

Once again, he kisses my head.

And once again, he says, "Sleep."

And like every time before, in the arms of my enemy, and the man who saved my life so many times—I do.

A WARM HEAT CAUSES MY EYELIDS TO FLUTTER. I OPEN MY eyes to see that Alaric has started the fire.

I'm still in the raft, covered only by the small blanket.

Naked.

Last night plays in my mind on a loop, over and over again.

My cheeks warm and not from the fire now flaring next to me.

He hasn't noticed me yet, but I see him. He's going through the bag, pulling out a fish to cook.

Eating fish for breakfast might have at one point seemed gross, but now my stomach groans and my mouth waters to eat.

I watch as the muscles in his back flex.

I could watch him all day.

Probably will because there isn't anything else to do here.

Not that I'm complaining. He is rather gorgeous.

The memory of him being inside me has been branded into my brain. I can still feel him wrapped around me.

As if he can hear me thinking about him, he turns around. At first, his face is passive, but when he sees I'm awake, he smirks.

"Good morning," he draws out.

"Morning," I respond.

He puts down the fish and makes his way over to me. I'm shocked when he leans down to where I am and kisses me on the lips.

That wasn't something I expected. It's not that I thought he would go back to being a dick. He hasn't been a dick since we got to the island, but I also didn't think this would be a thing between us again.

I guess what I expected was for him to pretend nothing happened. It would have probably upset me, but I'd

understand. Last night was different. I needed comfort, and he gave it to me, but today, in the light of a new day, I expected nothing.

He pulls back and smiles down at me. No one is more handsome than this man is when he smiles.

Sinful.

My heart beats like a drum, each beat reminding me how dangerous this man is to my health. I would have never thought that before, but now that I see the real him, I know that he's like the sun—beautiful, but if you get too close, deadly.

The problem is, no matter what I know, I still want to get burned.

“I'm going to make fish,” he says, and it's just what I need to pull me out of my wicked thoughts.

“Sounds delicious.” I laugh before looking toward the mouth of the cave. “Is it still raining?”

Please say no. Please say no, I chant over and over. Maybe that will make it come true.

“Unfortunately, I don't have good news.”

I suck my lips into my mouth. That means we are stuck in here longer.

“I kind of need ...”

“To go to the bathroom?”

“Yeah.” I grimace.

“Right outside the cave, it leads to the lake. If you keep close to the rock, you can go in the lake or on the ground beside it. You won't get that wet because of the overhang of rocks. Plus, the trees give a big canopy.”

“Is it safe?”

“For lengthy periods of time, no. But there isn't any lightning right now. It should be safe. The winds are powerful. Also, you can go farther in the cave if that makes you feel

better. We have a little toilet paper left, and you can use some water we collected if you want to rinse.”

“Can we risk the supplies?”

“We still have the lake. If worse comes to worst, I can collect more and purify it.”

“I’ll use the cave,” I decide. No part of me has any desire to trudge through a storm right now. Maybe after, I’ll wash off really quickly.

I grab the large jug of purified water and the flashlight and set off to walk deeper into the cave.

It feels kind of awkward, so I turn around and walk straight back to where he was.

“If this is our home for the next few days, I can’t make it smell like pee,” I admit. “That’s gross.”

“I feel that. Here, I’ll walk you to the grass and then turn around. That way, you aren’t by yourself.”

“You’d do that ... for me?”

Cue smile.

Cue butterflies.

This is not good.

The way he makes me feel can’t possibly be good for my health.

It doesn’t stop the enormous grin from spreading across my face or the way my insides warm as he takes my hand and leads me out of the cave.

It’s still raining, but he’s right. The rocks from the cave opening block most of the rain. Beside the opening to the left, there are rocks and grass. The lake is on the other side, a few feet away.

“You sure it won’t get worse? No lightning?”

“I’m not sure of anything. But right now, the biggest issue is the wind. No lightning.”

“Okay, ground it is. I’ll be back.”

Dropping his hand, I walk over to the grass. No longer under the rocks, the rain beats down on me. I had thrown on my tank and panties before walking out here, but that was stupid. Now, both are drenched, and I'll be spending the rest of the day naked again.

I guess I can think of worse things to do.

I take care of my business, and once I'm done, I head back to Alaric.

"If I have time, I want to jump in really quickly. Do I have time?"

Alaric looks up at the sky.

Dark gray storm clouds hover low in the sky, and the air smells sweet as remnants of the rain linger on the surface of the rocks.

My gaze skims over the distance. The rain seems to be slowing down, but the trees are still fiercely whipping around. But as long as I don't hear thunder, and I don't see lightning, it should be safe.

"You have a few. If we see anything suspicious, we'll get out. If the wind gets too strong ..."

"We'll get out."

"If we stay behind the waterfall, it will be okay. The rocks will cover most of everything."

"Sounds like a plan, but I would like to brush my teeth and get soap."

"Stay here." He walks away and comes back a minute later. "Hand."

I oblige.

He places a slight drop of toothpaste on my finger. Although it's not a lot, I'm happy for this luxury. I rub it on my tongue and teeth before spitting it out. After that, he throws the toothpaste back into the cave and then hands me the soap.

"Strip here. Soap up and then go into the waterfall."

“Here?” My eyes go wide. “You want me to get naked.”

“Dove ... I have already seen you naked.” He steps closer, his body touching mine. His hand reaches out and brackets around me, pulling me flush against him, and I feel the evidence of a now growing erection. “I have seen you, tasted you, and been inside you. I couldn’t be more familiar with your body if I tried, and trust me—I intend to try many, many times. Bathing together hardly seems a problem.”

He’s right, and I’m acting like an idiot.

I lift the tank up and then pull my underwear off. Once I’m fully naked, I rub the soap all over my body before I go to hand it to Alaric, who is now also naked and sporting a very impressive length.

He rubs his body, and I swear it’s the most erotic thing I have ever seen. Okay, that’s not true, watching him wash and then touch himself might have been.

Once he also has soap on his body, he places the soap back and then takes my hand.

“You ready?”

“Yes.”

Together, we walk closely against the stone until we are walking almost directly under the waterfall.

The water soaks us both, and then we are behind the falls in a pool of water. It’s not as deep here, but just being underneath some water feels amazing right now.

I use the spraying water as a makeshift shower, and then I’m scrubbing my body.

It’s only a few minutes later when I feel him. He’s behind me with his hard body pressed against mine.

His lips are the first thing to touch me. They trail across my shoulders, placing small kisses on my skin. Next, his hands reach around me, pulling me flush against his body.

He’s long and hard behind me, his erection resting on my back. He’s leading me as he kisses me, leading me to the rocks

that are no longer underwater.

“Brace yourself,” he says. His hands are all over me now. Touching and teasing me everywhere.

A part of me wonders if this is safe with the storm outside, but where we are behind the waterfall, it’s as if we are in our private grotto.

I lean forward and place my hands on a rock. It’s slippery but no more slippery than if I was bracing myself in a shower.

His hands spread my legs, and then his fingers thrust inside me.

Preparing me to take him again.

He keeps up the pace before he pulls his fingers out, and then I feel him nudging at my entrance.

I’m about to tell him to hurry, that I can’t hold myself like this forever, but then he thrusts inside me and takes all my words away.

I can’t speak.

I can’t think.

All I can do is feel.

He slams in and then pulls out.

The angle is so deep this way, I can feel every inch of him, and it’s delicious.

With each thrust, I feel myself getting closer and closer.

This won’t be long. This is a wicked frenzy. A need we both can’t quench.

He fucks me hard, claiming ownership of my body, and I allow it. I welcome it. I give it to him freely.

I know he’s close, which is good because I’m close too. I feel my legs tremble; I feel my body tightening, and then I’m flying off the side of the waterfall. I’m falling over my own cliff, and as Alaric bites down on my shoulder and tightens his hold, he falls over too.

He stays inside me as I catch my breath, and then he's slipping out and helping me stand.

I'm turned around before I know what's happening, and his mouth is on mine.

It's a tender kiss, soft and passionate, not hurried like before. Not claiming. No, this kiss is more than that. This is the type of kiss that holds promise. But I know deep down it can't. It's another lie we tell ourselves to survive on this island. But I shake those thoughts away. For now, I'll fade into the dream and pretend.

Alaric

AFTER THE IMPROMPTU FUCK AT THE WATERFALL, I PULL HER into my arms and lead her back to the cave.

Since we don't have towels, we sit naked by the fire to dry while we cook the fish.

With the storm still going strong outside, we don't have many options. As we wait for the wind and rain to pass, Phoenix regales me with stories of her life once Michael took her in.

The man she describes does not match the man I know.

But the man Phoenix has gotten to know on this island, the parts I have only shared with her don't match the man the world knows of me.

Here, I'm able to let down my guard. Here, my only responsibility is to keep us alive.

There is nothing else.

A part of me doesn't want to leave.

I'd never admit that, but things are simple here. Peaceful. There is no false pretense; all there is survival.

It's like all those years ago ...

When my father dropped me on an island and told me he'd be back in a week.

There was no room to hate him, to hate anyone, when you just want to live.

It's refreshing.

Ever since my brother was murdered, ever since I got the call that my car was blown up parked outside the back of the building where my brother was, my life has never been simple.

"Am I boring you?" Phoenix asks. Her head is inclined, and her brows knit together.

How long was she talking?

And what the hell did she say?

"No," I respond.

Her lips tip up into a smirk. "Then what did I say, Alaric?" She winks.

Because she knows I wasn't listening.

"You said that I was devastatingly handsome, and that you wanted to f—"

"Now I know you weren't listening," she cuts me off.

"I was, but when you discussed your dorm room in boarding school, you lost me."

Phoenix gives me a timid smile. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay, I want to hear about it. We have nothing else to talk about it, so your dorm room isn't awful ..."

"Why don't you tell me what you were thinking about?" she says, moving closer and taking my hand in hers.

"Because I can't," I admit.

"Why?"

I pull my hand away from hers and look at her—well, stare is more like it. Her eyes go wide with understanding.

"You were thinking about my father."

I nod.

"You were thinking about the war?"

I nod again.

“I know that this might sound strange, but do you want to talk about it?”

I cock my head this time and stare at her, really stare. “You want me to talk about why I want your father dead with you?”

She bites her lower lip. “I mean, if it’s eating you up ...”

“You would do that ... for me?” I ask, not really understanding her at this moment. This is the man who saved her, and she wants me to discuss my feelings about him.

“Do I want you to hate him? No. Do I want to convince you that you shouldn’t? Yes.”

“That will not happen.”

She lifts her hand. “I’m not saying it will. What I’m saying is, if I have my druthers, I would convince you otherwise, but since that’s not going to happen, you can at least talk to me about it and explain.”

“Explain what? That he killed my brother. There’s really not much to explain.”

Her mouth opens and shuts.

Instead of waiting for her to speak, I reach for her and pull her onto my lap.

“Dove, I don’t want to bring that up here. I don’t want to talk about real life here.”

I look down at her. I know it hurts her for me to hate the man she loves so much, but it doesn’t stop it from being true. It doesn’t stop me from wanting revenge.

“But—”

“No buts. We are living in a different reality right now. Why bring the actual world into it? Why tarnish this? Can’t we just live in the moment right now?”

At my words, her shoulders hunch forward, and she remains quiet. The silence stretches before she must mull over my words and decide I’m right because she looks back up at

me. There's no mistaking my words hurt her, but neither of us can do anything on that front right now, so there's no point in talking about it.

"Agree not to mention it again," I say, placing a soft feathery kiss on her lips.

"Okay," she mumbles.

I sweep my tongue over the seam of her mouth.

"I can think of much better ways to spend our time."

"Is that so?" she purrs.

"Yes. If you're bored, I can entertain you ..." My words hang in the air, dripping with innuendo.

"And what exactly can you do to entertain me?" Her hands reach around my body until she holds me closer.

"I can make you forget your name."

"But can you make me forget yours?"

"Never," I rasp, and then I force her mouth open with my tongue and plunge into its warmth.

She moans into the kiss, and I deepen it.

This is a much better use of our time together. There is no need to burden ourselves with the rest. There are too many things outside our control.

This is enough for now.

We kiss for a long time until we are both panting and needing more.

Still naked, I position her on top of me, straddling my lap, and then she slides down onto my cock.

The feeling of being wrapped up in her warmth is perfection.

It makes the world fade away.

She is more potent than any drug. I'm completely intoxicated by her.

With each rise and fall of her hips, I'm lost to her.

Completely and utterly lost.

Phoenix

I STRETCH MY HANDS OVER MY HEAD AND LET OUT A LARGE and probably dramatic yawn.

It's been a few days since the storm hit, and it's still going strong. Whenever the winds die down, we quickly bathe ourselves in the lake. It's not ideal, but we make do.

Thankfully, we had a lot of fish, since we can't go looking for more food. But it also solidifies that once this storm is over, we will have to spend days recouping the food we ate before we can even consider escaping.

It's scary.

A part of me thinks we should stay here.

But this island isn't ideal.

Although the cave is helpful, we can't stay here indefinitely.

Alaric seems confident we'll find another island, as long as we have enough food and water to last ten days. According to him and the map he showed me on the boat, there are plenty of islands near where we are.

He says that even if no one finds us, we should be able to find shelter on another island regardless, and maybe that one will have a better food supply.

Fish and coconuts and the occasional starfruit aren't enough for us to live here long term.

Eventually, we will get sick.

The only option is to try.

There is an actual possibility we will die, but we both agree we would rather die fighting.

Which brings me back to the here and now.

We have spent days wrapped in each other arms, losing ourselves repeatedly in each other's bodies.

I have never felt pleasure like what he has given me.

Since my life is hanging in the balance, I don't think of what any of this means, so I just enjoy him.

Enjoy the comfort I can get from him, even if that means pretending.

It's not really a lie.

I'm just ignoring the truth.

Looking to my side, I see that he's still asleep. After our last romp, we both passed out.

The man certainly has stamina. I don't think I have ever had this much sex in my life.

But when he's inside me, I feel like anything is possible.

I feel like surviving is possible.

Again, with that lie.

Now the only question is, what will happen if we do?

What will it mean for us?

Nothing.

It will mean nothing.

It will just be two people who needed to find peace in Hell.

As if he knows my gaze is on him, he stirs.

A yawn leaves his body, and his arms reach over his head.

He opens his eyes to catch me staring at him.

“You’re up?” he asks as he rubs the sleep from his eyes.

“I am.”

His face grows serious as he watches me where I am. “It’s rare someone gets the drop on me.”

“You’ve taught me well.”

“Yes, your survival skills are really coming along. The fire you started today was good,” he says.

“It was on point,” I fire back before smiling.

“If you say so.”

“I do.” Reaching for my tank top, I move to put it on, but he shoos my hand away. “Don’t you think we need a break?”

His hand reaches out, and his fingers form a circle around my nipple.

“Speak for yourself. I never need a break.” He leans into me until his tongue is tracing the column of my neck.

“Be serious, Alaric.” I push him off and move to an upright position.

“I’m always serious about sex.”

“Sex ... is that all that matters?” I huff as I reach for my tank top again, finally managing to put it on.

“Don’t start that right now.”

“Start what? Having feelings. Not wanting to be used.”

“Cut the shit, dove.”

“Dove. Dove. Dove!” I shout, acting like a petulant child, and I’m not even sure why. I knew that this wasn’t serious, so why am I acting like this? But as much as I tell myself to calm down, I find my emotions are over the place as I say, “Fuck that shit.” I move to a standing position and look down at him and snarl. “I’m not some little dove. I’m a goddamn Phoenix, no matter what happens. No matter who burns me, I’ll rise.”

I pace the little cave, and I'm not sure where my anger is coming from or when Alaric wraps his arms around me. But he does.

“You're right.”

I stop moving.

This seems to be Alaric's favorite way to hold me, my back to his front. He's always holding me like this. Like I am a dove that's trying to fly away.

“You're not a dove. You are a Phoenix. I just like the way it sounds now. Habit.”

“As long as you know what I am.”

He spins me around, his hand reaching beneath my jaw and tilting it up.

“I know exactly who you are, Phoenix, no matter what nickname I call you. This isn't just sex, but I don't know what you want me to say.”

“We talk about everything but the truth.”

“Is it wrong that I don't want to rock the boat?” I glare at him for his comment, and he smirks. “Terrible choice of words.”

“You think?”

“We're taking pleasure in each other, not just physical but also emotional, and to go there would ruin this little ecosystem. Neither of us knows what the future will bring.”

“I know. I know you're right ... But—” I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words to convey why I am upset and what I want. “I can't help but want to talk about it anyway.”

“Fine. But not now.”

“Why not ...?”

“Because we just got into a fight. Our first fight and I want to make up.”

I level him with my stare.

“What?”

Placing my hand on my hip, I shoot him daggers with my eyes. “You know what.”

“Fine.” He leans down and kisses my mouth. It’s a chaste kiss, and it lightens the mood. “Let’s eat something and then venture outside to see about the storm.”

“Do you think it’s safe?”

He walks over to the area where his clothes are, and I watch his ass as he walks.

I shouldn’t judge him for always wanting to have sex. The man is a modern sexual miracle and his ass a work of perfection. Cut from marble. The truth is, I want nothing more than to touch him, but I don’t say that. Instead, I just ogle him longer before turning away.

“It might not be perfectly safe, but the last time we were outside, the winds were much weaker. It’s still raining, but the storm might be passing. If that’s the case, we can safely fish again and replenish everything we’ve eaten.”

“You would feel comfortable leaving this shortly after the storm?”

I turn back to look at him. His face is serious. “No. But I don’t think we have a choice.”

Even though my head nods, I’m not sure how I feel. He’s right. Long term, this island isn’t the right move, but I’m still not sure when to leave.

“Let’s not think about this now. We can decide in a few days.”

“Yeah, probably a smart idea.”

It is. But a part of me still wants to know more about what he thinks my father did. I understand he thinks he killed his brother. My father said as much, but I can’t help but need to know more of that story.

But right now isn’t the time. There might never be a moment that will make sense.

That will just be something I have to deal with.

Alaric

THINGS HAVE BEEN TENSE EVER SINCE THE SHOWDOWN WITH Phoenix yesterday. We went outside. The storm is definitely passing.

I estimate it will be gone by tomorrow, which means today is my last full day with her in this cave before we start to prepare.

Tonight, I'll leave the fire going all night. There's no reason to snuff it when we can gather more wood tomorrow.

I sit down on the floor and get the twigs to ignite. Phoenix sits in front of me.

"Do you ever wish we had marshmallows?" she asks as she takes a seat next to me.

"I never pictured you as a roasting marshmallow type of girl."

"What kind of girl did you picture me as?"

It's a hard question, and now that I know she was raised alone in a boarding school, it's even harder.

"Honestly?"

"Of course. At this point, after everything we have been through together, how can you even ask."

“I picture you as a loner. Not much different from me. But while I was not by myself by choice, you were. In the end, we ended up being similar. You choose to be alone because, in your mind, everyone who you cared about left you. Including Michael.” I say his name even though it’s bitter on my tongue. “Even if he saved you, he left you. So you never tried.”

Her eyes are wide and glassy.

“I-I ...” She seems flustered by my words. “I never thought of it like that. But I guess you’re right.”

“Trust me, I understand. I’ve never really had anyone. I was also left by choice. I trusted no one. My brother, a bit, but not for a long time.”

“Why? What happened there? You seem to really have loved your brother.”

“It’s a long, complicated story.”

“I have time.” She gives me a warm smile. “A lot of time.”

A part of me wants to tell her. Another part wants to push it down and pretend that part of my life never happened.

The thing is, as I look at her large blue eyes, the ones that say I can talk to her, that I can unburden myself to her, I really want to.

“Damian hated me when he died.” Saying the words out loud feels like a giant weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I’ve never admitted that to anyone. Never admitted I knew, or that I cared.

The truth is, I had no one to tell. Besides my brother, I had no one. Ever.

The pain of his death feels like a sucker punch to my heart. It feels like the walls of the cave are closing in.

“Why did he hate you?” she asks, her voice low and unsteady.

“There was this girl.”

“Isn’t there always?” she mumbles.

“We all grew up together. My brother was only one year older, but as I said before, he was the one who was supposed to take over. My father was grooming him. This girl was the daughter of my father’s closet business partner. They had this dream to combine businesses. An agreement was set. The families would join.”

“An arranged marriage.”

“I know it must sound crazy, but that’s the way most families in this line of work handle things. They need to know they can trust the person they bring into the mix. It was understood that Grace would marry my brother, Damian. It was fine when we were children, and the older we got, it was all my brother ever wanted. But for Grace, it wasn’t. She wanted to marry into my family, but—” I stop and take a deep breath. “Just not to him.”

“She loved you.”

“She did. She was relentless. Anytime I was home, she would come find me. She wanted to be with me, but my brother was so in love with her.”

“She only had eyes for you.” I nod at her statement.

“The thing is ...” I swallow through the lump in my throat. “When we were young, after one of the many times I was forced to survive in the wilderness alone, Damian was sent to retrieve me. I was hungry, delusional. I was feral.”

“What happened?”

“I sliced his face with a knife.” Lifting my hands, I cover my face—another thing to feel guilt over. The guilt I have inside me is suffocating.

“You were a kid. That wasn’t your fault.”

“Damian never saw it that way, and after that moment, neither did Grace. She couldn’t look at him. It got worse as we got older. She hated to look at him and wasn’t attracted to him. She only wanted me. I tried my best to let her down easy, but one day it all came to a head. She tried to kiss me, and I pushed her off. I told her she was to marry my brother. She said she would never marry him.”

“I was a dick. I laughed in her face. I didn’t know,” my voice cracks.

“What didn’t you know?”

“She didn’t want him and claimed she only loved me. She didn’t want to live a life married to a man she didn’t love. She didn’t want to marry a monster.”

“That’s what she said?”

“Yeah.”

“What did she do?”

I stand from where I’m sitting and start to pace. I’m surprised when Phoenix rises too, and this time, it’s her hands that wrap around my middle from behind.

“What did she do?” she presses, not letting go. Stubborn, stubborn dove.

“She committed suicide.”

Phoenix inhales sharply. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“No one knows of my rejection. No one knows what happened.”

“But I don’t understand ...”

“She blamed me in her letter. Like an ultimate fuck you for rejecting her. But the problem was, she made it seem like I hurt her, that she couldn’t live with what I did ...”

“And he blamed you.”

“He blamed me for hurting who he saw as his fiancée. For making her take her own life from grief. Damian used to have this quote he would say. ‘*Only the dead have seen the end of war.*’ He was right. Grace was the only one who knew what her death would bring.”

“Why didn’t you explain?”

“At first, I tried, but he wouldn’t hear me, so lost in his grief, and then he hated me, so there was no point. It was my word against his dead love. Nothing I could say would bring

her back. I didn't want to tell him she chose death rather than be with him."

"You played the villain to keep him from getting hurt."

We both fall silent, her arms still wrapped around me. I can feel her heart beating against my back.

"You were right," I whisper after a minute.

"Right about what?"

"When you called it my tarnished empire. It always has been, long before I even made the decision that would ultimately lead to my brother's death, it was broken."

"It wasn't your fault."

"It feels like it."

"You were being a good brother. Through all of this until the end ... you were being a good brother."

When I don't answer, she turns me around.

She places her hands on my shoulders, and I look down at her.

"You are a good man."

"I'm not."

"I beg to differ. Trust me on that, I would love to be in the Hate Alaric camp."

"How can you say that? Look at where we are. You're here because of me."

"I'm here because I got this crazy idea to snoop, and you decided to be a dick and not let me get away with it."

"I'm a dick."

"Yeah, you are. But every now and then, you do something that redeems you ..." She pinches her fingers. "Just a little."

"That's good to know. And here I thought I was a full dick." She lets out a laugh and continues to hold me to her.

I take a deep breath. "He went crazy after that. Drinking. Drugs. He fell off the radar and abandoned us. He went so off

the rails that my father changed his will. When my dad died, he left me everything ...”

Anger rises in my lungs as I think about the next part. I shouldn't tell her the rest and just leave it at that, but I don't.

“He came back. He forgave me ... He wanted to be a part of the business. He wanted to be my brother. He wanted me to give him a chance, to trust him and I did. *I* sent him in my place.”

I turn and look at Phoenix. Her face looks pale, and she's nibbling her lip.

“He went in my place to a meeting with my competitor.”

“My dad—”

“Yes, your dad. Damian went to the meeting in my place, and he never came back. There was a bomb.” My voice cracks and I can't go on. I can't talk about that day anymore.

“I-I ...”

“Don't.” I lift my hand to stop. “There is nothing you can say, so please don't. Not now.”

She surprises me when she finally speaks. “I'm sorry.”

No words leave my mouth.

“I'm so sorry,” she says again, and this time, she raises on her tiptoes and places a kiss on my back. “It might not be the same, but I know what it is to lose your only family. To not have anyone in the world who belongs to you.”

Her words have me turning. When I'm standing in front of her, I look into her large blue eyes. Like the endless ocean, I could get lost in those eyes if I let myself, and right now, that's exactly what I want to do. Get lost in her.

I lean down.

Our mouths meet, but unlike every time before, this isn't rushed. This isn't a frenzy of kisses. No, this is soft. This is me bleeding in front of her. Me finally letting go of the guilt and hurt I have felt over the years, and this is her showing me the light.

She wraps her arms around me and gently pulls me to the ground. Neither one of us even attempts to rid ourselves of our clothes. We just kiss, and somehow, it's exactly what I need.

When I wake up the next day, we are both dressed and still lying entangled with each other.

She moves in my arms and then lifts up to see me. She looks like a goddess looking down from Heaven, and after last night, I'm not sure she isn't. "Hi," she whispers.

I rise and place my lips on hers.

"Morning," I groan against her mouth. "Are you hungry?"

"Has it stopped raining?"

"I'm not sure."

"Should we find out?"

"We should, but first, I want to do what I didn't do last night."

"And what pray tell is that?" she jokes.

"I want to ravish you one more time before we get to work."

She removes her clothes and looks up with sultry eyes, spreading her legs to give me a perfect view.

She's breathtaking, captivating, ethereal.

The need to consume courses through my veins.

A sweet elixir tempting me.

One taste will never be enough.

I don't know how long I devour her, or how long I find peace in her body, but by the time we are both spent, I know it's time for us to both eat food and get dressed.

We don't talk while we nibble on fish, or when we walk out of the cave. Nor do we speak as we head back to the beach.

The landscape around us has changed since the storm. Tipped over trees. Scattered branches. The ground is soft with

mud. We would never have survived this without the cave's protection. We keep walking while I cut through the debris with my knife.

It takes longer than usual to make our way back to the lagoon where I taught her how to fish.

The weather isn't great, and the water is choppy, but we are running out of food, so we have no choice.

Phoenix stays to the shallow parts, and I go deeper.

The sun still isn't out. The sky is still darker than what I would like, but we should be able to leave in the next day or two.

A part of me wants to stay after last night and live in this bubble a little while longer. But it's time to go home.

Across the water, there is a small pile of fish forming near where Phoenix stands. It's a bigger pile than one would imagine for a newer fisherman. Impressive actually. She's right.

She is a phoenix. It doesn't matter what happens to her or what challenges life throws at her, she rises.

The pile of fish is a testament to that.

"You ready?" I shout from my position.

My pile isn't large, but my catch is bigger.

"Yep!" she hollers back.

The fish are still on my stick as I walk over to her.

"Are you done for the day, or do you want to look for fruit?"

"Since we are out, we might as well. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?"

Again, she's right.

The future isn't certain.

We could face a war on the ocean. And as Damien used to always say, "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

I hope that's not the case.

Phoenix

SIX DAYS HAVE GONE BY SINCE THAT NIGHT WITH ALARIC. THE night he told me everything. The night he purged his guilt.

It wasn't his fault that his brother died, but I'll never be able to tell him that.

He would never let me say that.

A part of me doesn't understand the story. My father might be a lot of things, but if he called for a meeting, he is not the type of man to double-cross you.

He reminds me of Alaric in that sense.

Alaric was honest about my part in this from the beginning. He was even honest with my father when he brokered what should have been the trade of my life for his. My father is the same way.

He wouldn't set up a meeting under false pretenses.

There's no way.

I know I can't bring it up, though. With today being the day we leave, I can't risk Alaric's mental state.

We both need to be on our A game.

It's risky. But I trust him. If he believes there is a shot, I know there is.

As much as I have grown to enjoy the moments I've spent in his arms, I know we can't stay here.

These past weeks have been the best in my life. To some, that might sound strange, but that doesn't stop it from being true. It's not just the sex, either. Yes, we've had more sex than I can even count, but it's more than that. We talk. I've opened up to him about myself, and more importantly, he's opened up to me.

Alaric and I aren't much different in the end. We are kindred spirits, each living through a profound loss and growing into the people we are today.

It hurts my heart to leave this place after all we have been through together.

I think it's been at least two weeks since we arrived, but the days have blended, so I'm not sure if it's closer to three. Despite not wanting to go home, I know it's time. No one is looking for us now, so this will be our only shot.

A part of me wants to tell him I've changed my mind, and we should stay. That's not in the cards for us, though.

We wouldn't make it more than a few months. And what if something went wrong? What if one of us got hurt?

Yes, there is a good chance we will die, but at least we are making one last stand.

If we die, we die on our terms.

Or at least that's what I tell myself as I watch Alaric load the raft.

He's arranging the supplies and pulling out the red canopy that comes with it, just in case we head into rain. Better to set it up now than in the middle of a storm.

The paddles that Alaric whittled are in the raft.

I didn't even know what whittling was until I met Alaric. I didn't know how to pick fruit and not die, or how to fish, or even how to start a fire.

In the few short weeks we have been here and the month I have known him, Alaric Prince has changed my life.

And I would like to think he's changed me for the better.

A lot can still happen, but if I die today, I know my life is better because of him.

Some might say I'm crazy.

That he kidnapped me.

He never kidnapped me, though, because I stowed away on his boat. Maybe my brain is messed up, or maybe I'm confusing things, but I don't hate him, and I don't blame him.

He saved my life, and I will forever be in his debt for that.

What will happen to my dad?

I'm not sure. We might not even live long enough to find out.

Our only worry needs to be living.

We will face the rest when we need to.

"You ready?" His deep voice cuts through my thoughts, and I turn to look at him.

"Not yet." His brow lifts in confusion. I take a step up to him, and when I'm close enough to touch him, I reach out. He gives me his hands, and I take a deep breath. This is harder than I thought it would be to say, but I need to do this. "There is one more thing I want, no need, to do before we go."

Now, he looks even more perplexed by my weird rambling. I'm not sure how to explain this to him, but since honesty is our policy, I blurt it out.

"Teach me how to fire a gun."

Alaric's head cocks to the side as he studies me. He's never asked about my previous aversion to learning, and he doesn't ask now. That's the thing about him, he understands what I need, and he gives it to me. No questions asked.

"Come stand here." With my hand still in his, he leads me away from the raft and toward the open sand in the opposite

direction. He's probably worried that I'll accidentally shoot a hole in it. I don't put that past me. Alaric and I haven't had the best of luck.

Once I'm at the correct location, Alaric steps behind my body, and his hand reaches out to guide me.

The air is heavy around us, my untold story lingering between us.

And I decide right then and there that I want to tell him everything, purge my soul, show him my truth.

"Thank you for not asking before." My heart starts to beat at a faster clip as Alaric places the gun in my hand. The cold metal sends a chill up my spine despite the heat.

"You can do this," Alaric says from behind me. His words tickle my ear right before he kisses the nape of my neck.

I'm not sure if he's talking about shooting or finally voicing what happened that day so many years ago.

I choose the latter.

"The day my parents died ..." I pause, trying to find my words.

"You don't have to tell me more."

"That's the thing, I don't have to, but I want to. I want you to know all of me."

His lips place another kiss on my bare skin. "Then I'm listening."

"I could have stopped it. They were being shot at, but I could have stopped it. There was a gun. I-I ..." A sob breaks through me. A cry I have been holding onto since I was a little girl. "I had the gun, and my parents, they begged me to shoot."

"It's not your fault. You were a child."

"I froze. Don't you understand? I froze. I had the gun in my hand, and instead, I watched them die."

His hand lifts and turns my jaw to face him.

"It's not your fault. You need to forgive yourself."

Looking into his eyes, I see his own feeling mirrored in him. He's struggling with the same guilt as me. A deep-seated guilt that leaves a stain on your soul.

A stain that will only go away with forgiveness.

Inhaling deeply, I pull in the oxygen around me. I breathe in the warm salty beach air. Then I exhale. "I'm ready."

"Me too," he whispers, his eyes darker than normal, filled with years of pain begging to be released as well.

With his help, I aim the gun, wrapping my fingers around the trigger.

"Strength is struggling but refusing to surrender. You got this, Phoenix. You are the strongest woman I know."

I allow my eyes to close for a beat, and when they open, I gather all the strength inside me to push past all the resistance.

I shoot.

The moment goes slow. Like a movie scene where the camera fades out and time stops for a beat.

"You're incredible," I hear Alaric say, and as my heart beats frantically against my breastbone, I feel at peace.

Neither of us speaks for the next few minutes as both of us bask in the weight of the moment. Eventually, I step away from where his arms are wrapped around me and turn to face him.

"Now?" he asks.

My eyes linger on him, soaking in every last inch as we prepare for this journey. After I nod, my gaze moves back to the island.

This small but beautiful island.

It's the type of private paradise that if I could, I would buy it and build a house. Plant my own garden and live in peace. And a working boat, of course.

With a soft tug at my heart, I turn away from it and step into the raft and sit.

“We are going to have to paddle to get away from the land.” He hands me the paddles. “I probably won’t need your help. But here, just in case.”

“If you are the one doing the work, do you want the good ones?”

“I’ll be fine. Remember, I can build a coconut radio.” He smirks.

“Wait, a minute ... I thought you couldn’t.” I laugh.

“I only said that to make sure you were stuck with me.”

“And why would you go through all that trouble for little old me?”

“Because you are worth it,” he says, and there is no humor in his voice.

For a second, I’m wondering if I’m imagining his comment, but his face is soft and thoughtful.

Then he turns back toward the island, one more look.

One more glance.

Before we put it all in the past.

“I’m going to miss it,” I admit. “Is that weird?”

“No. Me too.” His voice is so low I think I imagined his comment.

After that, we don’t speak. Alaric is deep in concentration, paddling us out to sea, and I stare into the horizon, a lonely tear dripping down my cheek.

I’m not sure why I’m crying, but I am.

One tear leads to two and three, and then they pour out of my soul.

When we are finally far enough out, he places the paddle down and then pulls me into his arms. He holds me tight as if it might be the last time. It might be.

Together, we hold each other, and with each second that passes, the island becomes one with the sky, lost in the deep blue ocean. A mirage.

If my heart wasn't breaking, I would almost think this was all a dream.

Alaric

IT'S BEEN HOURS SINCE WE LEFT. I HAVE THE CANOPY HALF down to steer, not that I know where I'm going.

If only I knew where I started.

The last time I looked at the map, there were too many tiny islands that I couldn't pinpoint where we ended up.

On the ocean, we are a small speck, like a tiny grain of sand in a never-ending beach.

I'm not sure which way to go.

Even when the sky goes dark with the stars above us to guide, I'm not sure what direction home is in.

It makes me feel useless.

Something I hate.

It's not that I'm a control freak. Okay, I am, which makes being lost in the ocean my biggest nightmare.

At least if I had something to go by ... I'm resourceful, but this is a whole different level of fucked.

Phoenix has been quiet.

Eerily so.

This isn't easy for either of us, but for me, I'm used to having to survive. I spend every day of my life doing so.

She, on the other hand, doesn't.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

There is no way to cook out here, but we cooked all the fish we caught before we left. It will most likely taste like shit, but hopefully, it will be enough to give us a chance to live.

"No, not really."

"You have to eat eventually."

"I know."

There isn't much room in here, but since it's a six-person raft, there's enough that she's on the other side.

"You don't have to sit so far away."

"I'm afraid."

Her words make me tilt my head. "Afraid of what?"

"That the raft will capsize. What if the—"

I shake my hand at her, cutting off her words. "That won't happen. They built this to last. It has weight stabilizers; it won't flip."

"Not even in a storm?"

"Not even in a storm," I say.

The truth is, that's how it was sold to me, that it won't flip in the ocean, but under the right circumstances, it might. I won't tell her as much. I already know how scared she is.

She weighs my words in her head, and then she moves closer.

Not too close, but close enough that she can rest her head on my shoulder.

From the angle, we both have an unobstructed view of the sky.

The stars above twinkle down on us like tiny tea lights.

I point out into the distance.

“You can’t see it now, but did you know there is a constellation called Phoenix?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s a minor constellation in the southern sky.” I pull back and look at her. “It was obviously named after you.”

She laughs, and the sound lightens the thick air. “Or it’s named after a mythical bird.”

“I like the idea that it’s named after you. A mythical creature who brought down the beast.”

“And what beast are you referring to?”

“Me.”

My hand reaches out and lifts her chin. Our eyes meet. There is little light, but enough that we can see into each other eyes.

“You did, you know.”

“Did what?” she asks, her expression confused.

“You brought down the beast. Made me care.”

“About?” she whispers, her voice low and unsure.

“You.”

In the darkness of the night, the words I have held inside me slip out. Normally, I would hold back, but with the future unsure, I don’t have that luxury. If we are to die here, I want her to know that she changed me, so I tell her just that. “You changed me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did. Knowing you. Spending time with you. Surviving with you ... it changed me.”

“You act like we’re going to die out here and these are your last rites ...” She narrows her eyes at me, her jaw tight. She doesn’t want to ask what hangs in the air, but she does. “Are we going to die?”

I answer the best I can. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Together, we stare at the stars, and we both stay silent, the weight of all that's happened sitting heavy on top of us. Through the endless darkness of the night, stars twinkle from above, the vastness humbling. A reminder of how small we are and how fleeting life is. I pull her tighter to me, encasing her in my warmth.

A part of me wishes this moment could last forever, that it could be endless like the glittering sky above us.

I count seconds that pass by the breath she takes, and finally, when her inhales soften, I know she's fallen asleep.

My mind won't shut up, though.

Endless possibilities of where I will steer us tomorrow play on a loop.

If we go north, will we find someone?

South?

Not knowing drives me mad. A part of me just wants to leave it to fate. Don't steer and just hope.

That part of me is foreign. I've left nothing to chance. My upbringing fights with my subconscious over what to do.

In the end, I decide I will try to move us northeast. When the sun peeks out against the horizon, I will use it as my guide.

I remember the islands from the map and better than that, civilization.

It might take a few days, but if we are lucky, we might stumble upon about another boat on the way.

There's no way we won't.

Or at least that's what I tell myself as I close my eyes. I won't sleep long. Just enough to be ready for tomorrow and whatever it will bring.

Phoenix

THE SOFT ROCKING OF MY BODY STIRS ME AWAKE. AS MY EYES open slowly, I don't remember where I am at first. But now that I can see, and all I see are dark skies, I remember.

I'm on the raft.

Adrift at sea. With Alaric.

I turn to find him. He's looking out into the ocean from the opening of the canopy. What he's looking for, I'm not sure, but he seems tense.

His shoulders are tight, and his jaw even tighter.

"What's wrong?" I ask, and that's when he turns around and looks at me.

His face has been on edge.

It's pale. His eyes are large, and they seem hollow.

"What's wrong?" I ask again.

Something isn't right, but then something dawns on me. "What time is it?"

The sky is black, but there are no stars. There's no sun either, just endless black clouds above us.

A storm.

"How long until it hits?"

As if Mother Nature answers us, a bolt of lightning cuts through the sky in the distance.

“Sooner than I had hoped.”

“This is bad, right?”

“This raft can withstand it,” he answers, but the monotone way he says it gives him away. Maybe when I first stowed away on his boat, I wouldn’t have heard it, but after endless hours of getting to know him, I hear in his voice everything he doesn’t say.

This is a very big deal.

“With our track record, it’s going to sink,” I deadpan.

“It won’t sink.” He is tight-lipped again.

“And you know this how?”

“Because I did my research before purchasing it. Just in case something like this happened.”

“And what did you find out?”

“The raft can survive the open sea.”

“Good to know. But for how long?”

“I’m not sure. The longest anyone has been on a raft like this at sea and lived to tell is seventy-five days ... I imagine the rest died.”

“Well, that’s reassuring.” I shudder at the thought. “So ... what you are saying is we should be fine.”

“Hypothetically speaking.”

I groan. “Oh lord, Alaric, just lie to me.”

“Do you really want me to?”

“No.”

We stare at each other, neither of us knowing exactly what to say. This storm changes everything. Although there was a good chance this plan wouldn’t work, the storm makes those chances even higher.

“I’m going to seal this up.” He points to the canopy on top of us, to the hole he unzipped for us to look out of. “It will protect us from the rain that will come.”

He moves to his knees and closes it. Soon, we are bathed in darkness, none of the gray skies showing anymore.

“Now what?” I ask.

“Now we wait. It could be hours, or it could be minutes. The water will get rougher.”

“Great.”

We both sit on opposite sides of the raft as we wait, each needing our own space to come to terms with what is about to happen. As time passes, I can feel the swells of the ocean getting larger.

The sound of raindrops hitting the covering echoes around me.

With each second, the sounds intensify, as does the beating of my heart.

The air in my lungs tightens until it seems it’s becoming nearly impossible to breathe.

Alaric must sense my distress because he’s up and next to me before I can even open my mouth.

“Breathe,” he orders. “Inhale deeply and then exhale. You are having a panic attack.”

I want to scream, *No shit, Sherlock*, but I can’t find it in me to voice those words, let alone find my voice.

“I have you. Breathe.”

He does, I know he does, but it still feels like a weight is sitting on my chest.

“Everything will be okay.”

But how? I want to shout.

How will it be okay?

As if the universe is playing a wicked trick on me, the raft thrashes around, each wave making us sway back and forth.

When a big one hits, I find my voice in the form of a gasp or maybe a scream. I'm not sure what leaves my mouth.

Tears roll down my cheeks, and his fingers wipe them away.

“This isn't just a storm, is it?”

I look up at him, and when he doesn't answer right away, I know what he's not saying. It's not. It's much worse.

“We're going to die.” My limbs shake, and he holds me.

He holds me as I cry, as I tremble in his arms, and he tells me repeatedly that he has me.

All the things I've never done, all the missed opportunities, all the things I will never do play out in my brain.

And then, as my tears dry up because I have nothing left inside me to shed, I look at him.

I look at this beautiful, broken man. This man who has shown me more comfort and compassion in the past couple of weeks than anyone else ever has.

I never questioned my father's love, but even when he took me in, he never took care of me like this.

I'm not ready to say goodbye to Alaric.

At that moment, as the raft hits wave after wave and the sounds of thunder and rain beat around me, I look at him and see a future I'll never have with him.

At that moment, I realize I want that future.

That I want to go back to the island and just be with him.

That I want to love him.

My tearstained eyes look up at him with unshed tears threatening to fall when we lock gazes.

“Alaric ...”

He must see it because he shakes his head. “Not like this.”

“Then when?”

“Dove ...”

I lean forward and place my lips on his. “We *will* die,” I say against his lips.

“We might.”

“I don’t regret it.” His brow pinches at my confession. “I don’t regret any of it. Not one minute of the time I have spent with you.

“Phoenix,” he says my name like it’s a benediction. Then he takes his hands and pulls me closer, his mouth sealing over mine.

He tells me without words that he feels the same way.

No matter what the outcome, we wouldn’t change it. No matter the pain, hurt, lies, and death ... whatever brought us here, we welcome.

He kisses me as if I’m his oxygen. And as if he needs me to survive, I kiss him back. The raft tips to the left then back to the right. It moves like a ball in a pinball machine, bouncing around the ocean with nothing left to hold it steady.

Our outcome is unknown, but if I die in his arms, I’ll be okay.

Neither one of us profess our love, but we don’t need to. It’s written in every touch.

Maybe because saying it would be too final.

Maybe admitting you have fallen in love with your enemy is too much right now.

“Phoenix Michaels, no matter what happens, I will never regret you,” he whispers against my lips.

And then we hold each other.

Silently waiting for the end to come.

Knowing if it does, we will have forever been changed by each other, and that is enough.

Alaric

A SOUND PULLS ME FROM THE DEEP BLACK ABYSS OF MY mind.

It sounds like a motor.

I jolt up, my eyes still hazy from sleep.

“Phoenix ...” I shake her, and her eyes flutter open. “Do you hear that?”

She wipes the sleep from her eyes. “What’s going on?” she asks, and I place my finger to my mouth.

“Listen. Do you hear that?”

We both go quiet, and then I hear the sound of the engine or motor or whatever it is again.

Lifting my body up, I move to open the top.

Rain pours in. The storm still rages, but we didn’t die last night. The ocean is rough, the raft still bouncing around under dark gray clouds, but in the distance, I swear I hear something.

I don’t see anything because the hazy sky is too dark, but I can’t mistake the sound.

Water continues to pour down on us, and I know I need to act fast. If there is anyone out there, we can’t risk losing them, but at the same time, I can’t risk taking on too much water.

“Flare gun,” I shout, and Phoenix grabs it and hands it to me. “Cover your ears,” I say, and then I fire into the distance. As soon as the gun fires, I move to close the top.

“What are you doing?” Phoenix asks as I close it completely.

“I can’t risk too much water coming in.”

“But what about the sound?”

“We have to hope they see the flare. I can’t see where the sound is coming from, so I won’t be able to steer there, regardless.”

“We just wait and see?”

“Yeah.”

The look in her eyes tells me she is thinking what I’m thinking. To have come this far only to be teased with rescue would be a cruel joke.

I don’t want to think about it now. There is no part of me that is ready to let her go, but I have to if they come back for us, which I know they will.

When we are rescued, that’s exactly what I will have to do. I’ll also have to put this all behind me.

No matter what Michael did, my feelings for Phoenix are too intense to act on them.

I’ll need to call off the hit.

When Phoenix slipped into my life, I meant to do it because him dying by another man’s hands didn’t seem right.

When everything first happened all those years ago, I just wanted revenge. I placed a hit on him. In turn, Michael went into hiding.

Now ...

I shake off the thoughts in my head. If this is my last moment with Phoenix, I’m not going to spend it thinking of her father.

My feelings are a storm inside me. It's as if the ocean water is rising, and there is nowhere to escape. It pounds against me, but when she takes my hand, she's the calm. She makes the tide recede.

With our fingers entwined, I grab her and pull her toward me. Her pupils grow large as my hand cups her jaw, and I bring her mouth to mine.

There are so many words I want to say, but I can't. It wouldn't be fair. Instead, I kiss her, telling her with no words what I feel.

Phoenix opens to me. Her small hand unclasping and wrapping around my neck. She kisses me with the same desperation I feel, pouring all her emotions into me.

Time stands still as we kiss, and then it's only when she's panting against my mouth, and her heart is beating against mine, that we pull apart.

“Do you think they will find us?”

“Yes.”

“And if they do ...?” Her voice dips to an inaudible octave. Rescue. Making it out of this. That was never something either of us thought would happen. What does that mean if we do? For us.

Phoenix

I WANT TO ASK HIM.

But then I remember he made no promises for the future.

“Alaric ...”

“Yeah?”

“I know you don’t want to talk about it, but with the chance of—”

“Don’t.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think it was my father who betrayed you,” I say before I can regret it. “And I know that nothing I say will convince you, but the man I know, the man I have come to care for, the man I-I ...” The words I have never said before sit heavy in my chest. I weigh out what to do, what to say, but in the end, I don’t know what will happen. We might have heard a boat, or maybe we were hallucinating; this could be my last chance, so I do it. I cut into my chest and give him my heart. “The man I’m falling in love with would find out the truth.” His eyes are wide. I don’t expect him to say anything back, but it’s as if he can’t speak at all. Then he blinks and swallows.

“And if it was him?” he says through a clenched jaw, words tight ... and a part of me dies. I know he made no promises, but a part of me breaks anyway.

“Then I will understand,” I say, my voice low and sad.

He looks down at his hands, clenching them into fists. He opens and shuts them, and then relaxes, his gaze finding mine. “Dove ...” he says, but then a loud sound has us both jerking upright.

It’s getting closer. The sound is getting closer.

Whatever Alaric would have said is forgotten as he springs into action and pulls down the top. It’s a risk to let this much water in, but it’s a risk worth taking.

As soon as it’s mostly down, and the rains pounds against us again, the sound is clear as day.

In the distance, gaining speed, is a small motorboat.

They found us.

We’re saved.

I fall into Alaric’s arms, fresh tears finding their way out.

We are saved.

THEY BUNDLE ALARIC AND ME UP IN TOWELS ON A FISHING boat. We both shiver as we try to dry off.

It was a whirlwind of activity as we were rescued.

But now, as the boat heads toward land, I can’t help but shake.

I’m not even sure why I’m shaking.

Cold? Nerves? Both.

We don’t speak as we get closer and closer to the land in the distance. I’m not sure how long it’s been since we got on the boat, but Alaric was right. Eventually, we would have found land, but whether we would have lived through the storm had the fishing boat not seen us is a different question.

A question we thankfully will never have to answer.

Other questions linger on my tongue, but I don't have the energy to ask them.

I know that when we were first rescued, they took Alaric to the captain where, I have to assume, he tried to reach his men.

He doesn't tell me what they said.

I don't ask either.

I don't know what will happen when we hit land, but I'm too afraid to find out.

Things happen fast from that moment on. One minute, we are on the boat, and the next we are docking.

Where Alaric's men await.

I'm shocked to see Cristian is one of those men, but I'm not shocked to see he's the only one from the yacht crew.

The rest must all be dead.

If Alaric knew this already, he didn't tell me. Actually, he hasn't said anything at all to me since we got on the boat.

I feel like my tongue is heavy with questions, but none will leave my mouth.

Did he know most of his men died?

Was his yacht ruined? Not that a material item would matter compared to the lives lost, but I still want to know.

Maybe that's why he hasn't spoken to me.

Maybe he still thinks this is my father's fault. Maybe he's blaming this all on me. That his men are dead because I stowed away on his boat.

I still believe my father is innocent in all this, but Alaric doesn't.

It feels like a weight is crushing me. I watch him when he sees his men; it doesn't look like a surprise. He knew who would be here.

The boat edges closer, and then one of the crew members from the fishing boat jumps off to help tie the rope onto the

dock.

I wait for Alaric to say something to me, but he continues to pace the deck, waiting. His shoulders are tense, and for a minute when the boat docks, I think he will get off the boat without saying a word to me.

Him leaving without saying goodbye has my heart thumping rapidly in my chest.

He wouldn't do that. Would he?

Then I get my answer as he walks. I sit in silence as he's off the boat and hugging Cristian.

He ... he left me.

It will be okay.

When I'm off the ship, I'll call my father. I'll figure something out.

I don't even know where I am.

Again, I'm shaking. Again, I feel the tears forming behind my eyelids. But I hold them back. I won't let him see me cry.

I'm about to get up and move to leave when he turns and looks at me. Our eyes lock. Then he's storming back to me.

I'm startled by the ferocity of his movements.

He grabs me forcefully, and his mouth is on mine.

He kisses me with a desperate passion, and I know this is it. This is his way of saying goodbye. The tears I've been holding back pour out of my eyes, and he pulls back. His gaze trails down my face, watching me cry.

He lifts his hand up and wipes one away.

"Your father is on his way," he says

"You called my dad."

"I did." My back goes ramrod straight, and he slides his finger along my jaw. "Don't worry. This isn't a trap. I won't hurt him."

"Why?" I whisper, still against his lips.

“Because of you. Because of what he means to you. I could never hurt you like that, dove.” His breath tickles my mouth, but his words make me go warm.

“I thought you were going to call me Phoenix,” I whisper.

“I lied.” He laughs. “You will always be my dove.” And with that, he pulls away. I want to hold him to me. Beg him not to leave and tell him we can make it work regardless. But as I see a car approaching in the distance, I know who it is, and I know why he’s leaving. My legs grow weak, and as I watch him walk off into the distance without a goodbye, I feel like I might fall.

Nothing about me will ever be the same after my time with Alaric.

That much I’m sure of.

And I’ll be better for it.

When he’s gone, the car stops right in front of where the boat is. It is barely set into park before the door is flying open.

My father comes running out of the car. I have known Michael since I was a little girl. Longer than I can ever imagine. My earliest memories are of him, but never have I seen him like this before.

He grabs me in his arms, emotions playing on his feature. I stay in his arms, hugging him for a few minutes, before he pulls back and looks me up and down, trying to make sure I’m okay. I’m sure I look like a mess. I haven’t bathed since the island days ago. Yes, Alaric and I still brushed our teeth on the raft, but that was the end of personal hygiene because of the storm.

“Are you okay?” he asks, scowling. “What did that bastard do to you?”

“He did nothing.”

“Like hell, he didn’t.”

“Dad ...” I take his hands in mine. “He never hurt me. He saved me, actually.”

“You wouldn’t have had to be saved if it wasn’t for him.”

“Now that’s not true.” My father looks at me like I’m crazy. “I snuck onto his boat, remember? I came with a plan. A malicious one.”

“And he kept you. He could have let you go.”

He’s right there, but I’ve moved past that fact a long time ago. I have made my peace with both Alaric’s and my involvement in what happened to us. Neither one of us were innocent, and there is no point dwelling on the past.

Together, we walk to the car. I’m not sure where we are, what island, but I don’t bother asking anything. I don’t want to know. I just want to go home.

I’m exhausted. I can barely breathe, and the truth is, I’m on the verge of falling apart.

It doesn’t matter because thankfully, I don’t need to do anything or say anything. The car is silent as we drive to wherever we are going, and then we are pulling up to a Gulfstream jet.

I’m in a daze, and maybe he is too, or he understands I’ve been through enough today.

Before I know it, we are on the plane, and then we are landing. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know, my eyes are opening, and the plane is no longer moving.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“New York,” he answers. His answer takes me off guard. Normally, because of business, my father keeps a residence in Miami, so why are we in New York?

He must read my question because the moment we are alone in the back seat of his car, he leans forward, his arms resting on his knees.

“When you disappeared, so did the deal with Alaric.”

The deal that paid off his debt.

“You’ve been hiding in New York this whole time. Did you even try to find me?” My voice cracks.

“Of course. I did, but after a week ...”

“You thought I was dead.” He looks down at my words, distraught. I reach my hand across the car and take his hand in mine. “You couldn’t have known, and you wouldn’t have found us.”

“How?” He shakes his head, and I know he wants to ask how I am alive, but he’s too emotional to do so.

“Alaric. If it wasn’t for Alaric, I would be dead.”

He grits his teeth at my admission. It’s obvious there is still bad blood between them.

Not wanting another confirmation, I turn to look out the window. For the first time since I have been rescued, I let my mind wander, and my thoughts go straight to him.

In my mind, he’s beside me, and it makes the pain spreading through my body more powerful.

Everything hurts.

My father must notice because he turns and says, “The doctor will be waiting at the apartment ... at the hotel.”

“You’ve been staying at a hotel?”

“No, I was somewhere else. Where no one could find me.”

“And now?”

“When you were rescued, one of the men who worked for Alaric told me where you would be and that my problem was taken care of. He would honor the original deal and that what he did to you was enough.”

My father’s fists are clenched, and I can only imagine what he must think. What he must think Alaric did to me.

“Dad—”

“No, I don’t want to know. I don’t think I can live with myself if I knew.”

My teeth bite down into my cheek. I don't say anything, though. The truth is, that's a conversation for a different day. I don't have the energy to go there anyway.

Soon, we are pulling up to the hotel, and I'm being whisked away.

My brain is going a mile a minute, and I can't even take in all that's happening. My father doesn't just have one room for us; he has rented the whole floor. A hotel security guard waits for us as we exit the elevator.

"Is this really necessary?" I ask, but he doesn't respond.

When I'm finally alone in the suite that I'll be staying in, the first thing I do is strip naked and stare at myself in the mirror.

I knew I lost weight, but now looking at myself, I can't believe how much.

I look skeletal. My skin, although sun-kissed from the days fishing in the sun, still looks pale. Like my body was starved of nutrients, which it was. My hair is brittle and no longer shiny, but as I stare at my hip bones, I don't think about anything other than the fact that I lived. Looking at myself, I now see how close I was to dying.

Turning on the shower water, I step in once it's hot. A moan escapes my mouth. After weeks of bathing in a lake, a warm shower feels like heaven.

I let the hot scalding water wash away the past few weeks, and by the time I step out, I feel a little more like myself.

Like a Phoenix.

Reborn after death.

Alaric

IT'S BEEN THIRTEEN DAYS SINCE I'VE SEEN HER, AND I STILL look around as if she is just up the beach from me.

Leaving her was much harder than I thought it would be. But it was also the most necessary thing I have ever done.

Despite what she says, her father killed my brother.

I can't be with her.

Despite what I needed for myself, I put her first and let her father live. Then like the fucking lovestruck pussy that I am, I paid off his debt and let him go free of any consequences.

The only one being that his life was in my hands, and I gave it back to him.

For a man with as much pride as Michael Lawrence, it's almost enough.

But for me, it's not, so I have to stay away.

I'm sitting on my newly refurbished yacht in the port of Miami when Cristian approaches.

"How is she?" I ask because no matter what I say, I have my men checking in on her.

"No one has seen her."

That makes me lift my brow. "What do you mean?"

“She refuses to leave the hotel. Apparently, she stays in her room, and if my contacts are correct ...”

“Yes?”

“She’s been sick.”

My brain thinks of everything she ate while we were on the island when we were together. Could something—or *someone*—have hurt her?

Did she get sick? An infection? She got hurt ... was that what happened? Did I not see it? Is she okay? Maybe it was the starfruit? It can be deadly for people suffering from kidney problems.

Shit. That could be it.

As much as I know I shouldn’t see her, I need to know if she’s okay. I have to see what’s wrong with her.

“Did you call Matteo and tell him to remove the hit on Michael?” I ask, settling back into my chair.

“I wasn’t able to get a hold of him, but I told Lorenzo. I’m sure it will be taken care of.”

Looking away from him, I stare off into the distance. This is where I caught her. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to look at this boat—hell, even the ocean—and not think of her now.

Turning back, I see Cristian staring at me. “Tell the captain we’re sailing to New York,” I say to him.

“I already did,” he says, and I level him with my stare.

“That was a little presumptuous, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but I have been with you for years. I see how you have been since you’ve been back. I knew you would want to see her.”

“You were right. But, Cristian ...”

“I know. I know.”

He walks out of my office, and I look around. This room isn’t any different. Of all the damage that was done to my yacht, it wasn’t completely ruined.

The lives that were lost, though, those lives will haunt me for the rest of my life.

It's become very obvious that someone else was trying to kill me that day.

They weren't after Phoenix, after all. That doesn't mean Michael didn't kill my brother, but it leads me to some questions.

A part of me wonders if there is more to this puzzle I'm not seeing. Like a colossal piece is missing, and I'm just not finding it.

IT TAKES US TEN DAYS TO SAIL FROM MIAMI TO NEW YORK, but instead of staying there, we make the trip a little further, ending up at Cyrus Reed's instead.

On the way to New York, I tried to call Phoenix every day. Every time I did, I was met with a dead end.

Michael has her locked away on the top floor of a posh hotel in the city. Despite my best efforts, my attempts to get in contact with her have been futile. This is why I find myself on a detour. If anyone can help me, it's Cyrus.

When we are docked, I find my host standing on the edge of his property, waiting with his arms crossed.

He really is a prick when he wants to be, but I can trust him, and trust is hard to come by in my business.

“Alaric Prince, to what do I owe this honor? The last time you just stopped by, you unloaded a shit ton of guns and then never picked them up.”

“Hello to you too, man. Aren't you glad I'm alive?”

“As if getting lost at sea could stop you? Now, cut the shit. As much as I like you, and I do, you are kind of interrupting.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Fuck no, but now that I have Ivy, I don’t really like to be bothered with anyone else.”

“Duly noted, but for the amount of money I pay ...” I raise an eyebrow.

“And this is why I haven’t pulled one of your guns from my basement and killed you.”

“And to think we are friends. How do you treat your enemies?”

His lips tip up. “Bullet in the brain.”

“I do remember that.” I chuckle, and then Cyrus does something I don’t expect. He chuckles too.

Sick bastards, the both of us.

We both start to walk toward the house, toward my ... scratch that Michael’s guns.

“So now that you’re here, tell me what exactly I can help you with?”

“The guns.”

He stops walking and turns to face me. “Are you finally taking them?”

“Not exactly.” When I don’t elaborate, he starts to walk again, and so do I.

He leads me toward his office, and once inside, he gestures for me to take a seat. He pours himself a cognac and me a glass of scotch, and then after we both drink, he levels me with his stare, telling me with no words to proceed.

“I need you to give them to Michael Lawrence.”

That makes him put the glass down, the liquid spilling over the rim and onto his desk from the force.

“The fuck? You mean the bastard who killed your brother?” Cyrus asks, his brow furrowed and his jaw tight.

“That’s another thing,” I interrupt. “I need to look into that and into the attack on my yacht.”

“Okay, but I’m confused.”

Leaning back in my seat, I focus my gaze out the window. Although you can't see it clearly, that's where his island is. Where Ivy is. For all intents and purposes, they shouldn't be together, yet they are. Maybe, if what Phoenix says is true, maybe there is a chance. But first, I need to know. I put my cards on the table for Cyrus. "Maybe I was looking at this all wrong. Michael has always claimed his innocence."

"This is about the girl?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." I'm so used to denying it, so it slips out of my mouth, but it sounds like a lie. I can hear it, and by the way Cyrus looks at me, he can hear it too.

"Cut the shit, Prince. You were stranded on an island with his daughter, and then you come back with this bullshit. No way is that a coincidence."

"Shut the fuck up." I grunt.

"That's not a no." He grins, and I'm not sure what Ivy has done to this man, but now he's grinning too. I guess anyone can change. Can I? *I already have*. The fact that Michael isn't dead yet speaks of that, and now I'm here bartering a deal to give the man, who has been my enemy for as long as I can remember, his guns for a girl. Yep. I've changed. It's pretty obvious I also handed in my man card somewhere on that island.

"Can you do that for me?" I ask, needing to get out of my own inner rambling.

"I can. Anything else you need?"

He probably will hate himself for asking that question in five, four, three, two, one.

"Can you throw a masquerade party and invite him and his daughter?" Now that the hit has been called off, Michael will not have to stay in hiding. It's the perfect plan to lure her to me.

The look on his face is worth a thousand words. "What the fuck, Alaric? You know I hate people."

“This is true, but in my plan, this is necessary. He won’t let me anywhere near her. I wouldn’t put it past him to shoot me on the spot if he saw me. This is the only plan I can come up with that allows me to speak to her and not get killed. Trust me, if this wasn’t my last option, I would never ask.” His hand runs through his hair as he thinks about what I’m asking. “Plus, who are you kidding, Reed? As much as you hate everyone, you always have them here, so this time, you just have to make it a little bigger.”

“You’ll owe me.”

“The fuck I will. I helped save your girl’s life.”

“Touché.” He lifts his glass and takes another swig. “Tell me the plan.”

Phoenix

THE DOOR TO MY ROOM FLINGS OPEN, AND MY FATHER STEPS into my room.

“How are you feeling today?” he asks as he crosses the space to get a better look at me.

“Like shit still,” I mumble.

“The doctor said that after what you’ve been through, that would happen. You just need to give it time.”

“It’s been four weeks.” I groan.

Four miserable weeks. Four weeks of a broken heart, and apparently, a parasite I had picked up on the island.

Only me.

When I returned, I was severely malnourished, and my body has been paying the price for it ever since.

I now know without a shadow of a doubt, that if it wasn’t for Alaric, I would have died.

He saved me.

I owe him my life, and I will never see him again to tell him that.

For the first few weeks, I expected Alaric to come for me. Or at the very least call. But after a month, I now know I never

meant as much to him as he did to me.

He never did tell me he loved me.

Here I was, crazy and stupid in love with him, and I was just a way to pass the time.

My heart still hurts when I think of him.

No matter how much time passes and how much I beg my brain and my heart to move on, I can't.

I'm now resigned to the fact that it will never happen, and I'll just die from the apparent parasite I got from my ill-fated trip.

"When do you go back to the doctor?"

"Not for another few weeks. He thought it would pass naturally, but I feel weak."

Luckily, the vomiting stopped, but now I'm tired all the time.

Since I haven't left the hotel, my tan from the island has faded, and now I just look pale and sickly.

A part of me wonders if it's just my broken heart that has made me feel like this.

"I'm happy you are feeling better. That's actually why I came to talk to you—"

I sit up in my bed and raise my brow. "What's going on?"

"I need you to come with me to a fundraiser."

"I thought ... I thought you didn't want to be seen in public with me. That you were afraid of one of your enemies hurting me?"

"The only enemy I had was Alaric Prince, and he's been off the radar."

A sharp pain resonates through my leg as I realize my fingernails are biting into the skin of my thigh under the blanket.

"Off the radar? What do you mean?" I can't help the way my voice rises, and my father doesn't miss it. His eyes narrow

into thin slits.

“No one has seen him. And without him breathing down my neck and ruining my business, my life is better. Both our lives are better without him in it.”

It’s a pointed comment. He has asked me about my time with him and if he hurt me. My answer was never to tell him.

At first, it was to protect and hold dear our time together. Now, I’m embarrassed I meant so little to him.

“What did you want to talk about?” I say, changing the topic, annoyed that I have to think about Alaric at all—and that hearing his name made my heart flutter a little faster.

Damn treacherous heart.

Falling in love is for idiots.

Or, at the very least, masochists.

“A masquerade party. They are raising money for an adoption agency. I thought it would be a good idea for you to come.”

“A political idea.”

He stands quietly, and I wonder what he is thinking. My comment is uncalled for because my adoptive father has never in my life used me for his own gain. He has always protected me, but my wounds over Alaric are still deep.

“You have never been that to me. This is important. Not just because of the topic, but also because of business. I know it might seem like it’s political, but seeing as this is near and dear to our hearts, the host invited you. The money being raised is for children like you. Children whose parents have died. The difference is, they don’t have anyone to take them in. I thought you could use this because you haven’t left this room. I thought that maybe”—he swallows—“that after what you have just been through, you might be feeling alone and miss your parents. I thought this could help, that helping others like you could help, and I thought we could do this together.”

Tears well in my eyes at his words. I feel like a complete ass for attacking him. I was lucky to have Michael, but so many children aren't.

“Okay,” I whisper, but then another thought pops into my head. “I have nothing to wear.”

“Don't worry, I'll make sure that everything is taken care of. I'll hire a stylist and hair and makeup to come to the hotel. You won't have to worry about anything.”

Maybe I need this.

It can give me a purpose.

Which is something I need right now.

Alaric

EVERYTHING IS IN PLACE, INCLUDING THIS GOD-AWFUL MASK.

However, I can't complain because it was the only way this plan would work.

Michael Lawrence has been keeping his daughter on a short leash. She still hasn't left to go anywhere.

Not even to get ready for tonight. Her father hired a team to go to the hotel and get her ready.

Yes, I am keeping tabs.

Phoenix would probably accuse me of being a stalker, which I am.

I don't care what anyone thinks. I need to make sure she's okay. My men give me updates, and I know they want to ask more, but they know better.

Instead, they play their part in this ruse. The ruse that I don't care about her.

It's all a lie, though.

I can finally admit it.

I love that fucking girl.

Now what to do with this information is a completely different matter.

Which brings us to the here and now.

A party to lure a man and his daughter into my world when they are both known to be notorious recluses.

In typical Cyrus fashion, the party in his grand mansion in Connecticut is over the top.

This place is ridiculous, but then again, I have no use for a house, mansion, or even an apartment. I'm happy living on my yacht and moving from port to port. There's only one place that I was ever happier than when on the sea ...

With her.

In the cave.

But this place, Cyrus's place, isn't even where he lives now.

Now, he is only with her.

A spark of jealousy fills my veins. That's what I want.

It's not going to happen, though, not after everything.

Then why the ruse? Why make all this happen if I'm not going to cage the dove?

Because I just need to see her again.

Then I'll let her fly away.

I move around the room, scotch in hand. Even with the masks on, I see familiar faces, and I head over.

"Tobias, James, Matteo, good to see you."

They must not have recognized me at first. My mask covers more than theirs, but for my plan to work, Phoenix can't know it's me right away.

"Likewise, we all thought you were dead?" Matteo says, reaching his hand out, which I shake.

"Did you cry?" I mock.

"Yes. I thought I would have to find someone else to supply me. You know how much I hate negotiating."

"Asshole."

“Good to have you back, mate,” James says, next shaking my hand, followed by Tobias.

I spend the next few minutes talking shop with them before I pull Matteo aside.

“Thank you for taking care of that thing for me.” I’m referring to the hit. Matteo cocks his head in confusion, so I lean closer, so only he will hear me. “The hit on Michael Lawrence. Lorenzo said he’d take care of it.”

“Then it must have been.”

I nod and step away. It’s only a moment longer before I am excusing myself to find Phoenix.

The room is filled with people milling around with drinks, appetizers, and masks covering their faces.

It should be impossible to find her in this mess, but it’s not.

I see her right away.

Like the Red Sea parting, there she is, across the room, standing by herself.

She looks gorgeous. Her long gown is the same color as her eyes and also the same color of the lagoon where we fished.

A part of me wants to believe that’s why she chose it.

It dips low in the front, showcasing her small but pert breasts, the material clinging to her tiny frame.

She looks smaller than when she was on my yacht. It appears she hasn’t gained back any of the weight she lost on the island.

Anger flows through me. She’s still unwell, even after all this time.

I should have been there. I should’ve made sure she was okay.

Guilt spreads through my veins, and before I know what I’m doing, I’m striding toward her.

I’m halfway there before I slow my pace.

She hasn't seen me yet, and here I am, moving like a caveman—no pun intended—toward her. If I go in guns blazing, I'll ruin everything. She will alert her father, and I will never get to speak to her.

As it turns out, even though I know where she is currently, I don't put it past Michael to see me as a threat and hide her away. He did manage to hide her from me for years.

Now walking at a normal clip, I make it appear that I'm looking elsewhere when I make my approach.

I'm not sure if she sees me, but when I finally stand in front of her, she gives no indication that she knows it's me.

Reaching out my hand, I offer it to her.

A silent invitation to dance.

Her large blue eyes find me, and she squints, and I think this is when she figures it out, but with my whole face covered, even most of my eyes, it would be nearly impossible.

She looks around the room, maybe looking for her father to help her.

My game will be over before it starts, but then she inhales deeply and offers me her hand.

Once encased in my own, I walk us toward the dance floor.

I had forgotten how small she was in my arms, and now that I have her in them, I'm not sure I will ever be able to let her go again.

The music changes, and I pull her close.

My hand rests on the small of her back as I lead her around the room.

With the orchestra playing the melody, I move us to the beat, slowly shuffling us closer to the door, to our destination.

Her eyes are closed as she sways.

Probably lost in her own mind, like I am so often.

She doesn't notice when I lead us to the outskirts of the room—or when I step through the open door, still dancing.

She doesn't notice when the door starts to shut because the music continues to play in this room. It isn't until we stop moving, and I place my lips by her ear that she does.

“Did you miss me, little dove?”

Alaric

WHEN SHE DOESN'T ANSWER, I PRESS HER FARTHER INTO THE room.

“How?” she finally asks, her breath coming out in ragged bursts.

“I would know you anywhere, little dove,” I respond.

She steps back.

I step forward.

Trapping her against the dining room table, I continue my advance until my legs press against hers.

“I missed you.” I look down at her, watching as she inhales deeply at my words. “Did you miss me?”

“No. Not one bit,” she hisses.

My hand reaches forward and cups her jaw, my fingers trailing her exposed red lips. “And that’s what I missed the most. Your fiery little mouth.”

“Stop touching me.”

I trace her skin, remembering every delectable thing about her. I’m not supposed to be doing this. I’m supposed to be saying my piece and then walking away, but now that she’s in my grasp, I can’t.

“You can’t do this to me.”

“Do what?”

“Touch me. Pretend you care.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong. I do.” My hands start to lower, trailing down her neck to the hollow of her chest. I follow the line of her dress, dipping low between her breasts. She shivers at the touch.

“You didn’t try to see me.”

“I did.”

She shakes her head in confusion, but she doesn’t say anything as my fingers press against her heart.

“This right here is mine. It beats for me. Only for me.”

Her breath catches at my words. She shakes her head and rights herself. “I’m not yours. You made that clear.”

“I tried to see you, dove.”

Her eyes are darker than normal, hollow, lacking the usual spark. “Then why didn’t you?”

I lean forward and swipe my tongue against the shell of her ear. “Ask your father.”

“I don’t think so, Prince.” Her hand lifts to push me away, but I grab her wrist, encasing her delicate skin in my fingers. “He wouldn’t lie to me.”

“And now I’m Prince?” I ask, her chest heaving angrily at my words.

“Well, you’re certainly not a king ...”

“Oh, so we are back to that again? Do you need me to remind you who you belong to?”

“Funny, and here I thought I belonged to no one.”

“That’s where you were wrong, dove.” I step back, and then with no warning, lift her under her arms and place her on the table, her dress bunching at her hips.

Once she’s where I want her, I rest my hands on her thighs.

I move in, sealing my mouth to hers. I wait for her to push me—and she does put her hands to my chest, but when I sweep my tongue against the seam of her lips, she doesn't. Instead, she opens on a sigh, and being the asshole that I am, I kiss her deeper. Taking full advantage of her, needy and pliant, I let my hands explore her, lifting her dress, touching the scrap of underwear covering her.

My finger strokes the fabric. "I've missed this." With more pressure, I keep up my ministrations until she starts to writhe beneath my touch.

"I want to be inside you." I groan against her lips. "Do you want me? Do you miss this?"

"Yes," she pants as I rip her thong off her body.

"Tell me I can fuck you."

"You can fuck me." She starts to shake, and I know she's close. With my free hand, I move to unzip my pants, and then once I'm free, I place myself at her entrance.

I give her one more second to object, but when she wiggles her ass on the table and pushes herself forward, I'm lost. With one quick thrust, I'm inside.

Being inside Phoenix is like coming home.

At first, my movements are slow and leisurely. We haven't been together for a month.

I allow her to adjust to me, but once I feel her relax around me, I start to move, pulling out and then thrusting back in.

My movements are still slow. A torture we both need after our separation. Slowly, I drag my cock out and then let it hover at her entrance before sliding back in.

I pull out again and then push back in.

My hips circle and thrust as my hand reaches between us.

In. Out. In. Out.

The slower I go, the more she moves her hips, begging me without words to pick up the pace and give her what she needs.

But I can't.

I can't take her fast. I need to savor every minute with her.

As if she knows I'm teasing her, she tilts her hips up and pushes me in deeper.

"Faster," she begs.

I swivel my hips again but don't pick up the pace. Instead, I look down to where our bodies are connected, and now I watch us.

There is nothing better than watching me fuck her, watching her small body take me, watching as she lets me own her. Mind, body, and soul.

I pick up my pace, needing more, needing to see more. My thrusts become harder and deeper. As she begins to tighten around me, her breath coming in short bursts, I know I won't be able to hold on much longer. Brutally intensifying my pace, I fuck her hard enough to imprint me in her soul.

I hope it does.

But as we both come down from our highs, and her blue eyes look up at me—first with lust, then with confusion, and then with anger—I know she's the one letting me go.

I thought I'd be okay, seeing her and saying goodbye, but the longer I stare, the more I know I'll never be done with her.

She seems frazzled as she starts to rearrange her dress.

"Get off me," she says, and her hands reach for my shirt to push me off her.

"Stop." I level her with my stare. "We need to talk. Are you sick?"

Phoenix pushes again, and I step away even though separating our bodies is not something I want to do yet. I'm not ready for her to walk away.

"Wow. Thanks, do I look that bad?" she hisses.

"No. You look beautiful. But we still need to talk," I say again, this time more forcefully.

“There is nothing to talk about.”

I look between us. The evidence of our tryst is still front and center. “I beg to differ. I tried to call you. I tried to see you. Why do you think I put on this whole ruse? I knew your father wouldn’t let me near you, so I had Cyrus Reed throw a masquerade ball. That way, Michael wouldn’t know I was here. I did all of this”—I gesture my hands around the room—“just to see you.”

“See me? Don’t you mean have sex with me? Seems like a lot of work to get laid ...” she snaps “... in a ... what is this? A dining room?”

“Yes.”

She’s quiet for a moment, her eyes narrowing. “When did you try to contact me?”

“Since we left Miami to head to New York.” My vague answer isn’t lost on her as her jaw tightens.

“And before that?”

“Phoenix, it was wrong of me to disappear when we first got off the island.” She lifts a brow at my words. “I wanted to give you space to think, to heal, but now I want to talk.”

“And you thought this was the place. Spoiler alert, it’s not.” She stands, fixes her dress, and starts to walk away. My hand reaches out to stop her, but I think better of it. You don’t try to cage a frightened bird. Her flight-or-fight has kicked in, so I need to give her time.

“You can run away all you want, but you can’t hide from me, little dove. I’ll always be there to catch you.”

Phoenix

“THIS IS ENOUGH ALREADY. I DON’T KNOW WHAT HE DID TO you, but you need to talk to me. If he hurt you ...” my father says, stepping farther into my suite on the top floor of the hotel that he’s rented.

“He didn’t hurt me.” Not a lie, technically. He never hurt me physically. Not emotionally either, if I’m being honest with myself.

“He did something. You have been hiding in your room for a month.”

“Since when is that a problem? Before this, you hid me in a boarding school and then Switzerland.”

His mouth opens and shuts, and I realize I may have gone too far. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

He shakes his head and looks down before lifting his gaze to reach mine. What I see reflected on his face makes me stumble. “I’m sorry. I was wrong to say that. It was never because of you. It was because of that man. Everything that has gone wrong is because of that man.”

“Dad—”

“No. Don’t Dad me. It’s true. You would never have gotten on that boat if it weren’t for what he did to me. And for what?”

His hatred for what? An unwarranted vendetta. The man is garbage, plain and simple.”

If I ever had any bit of doubt about my father’s part in Alaric’s brother’s death, I don’t now. My father is a proud man, an angry man when need be, but never a liar. If he were involved, he would understand Alaric’s need for vengeance.

“If I could, I would have him killed. The world would be a better place without him in it.”

I’m about to object and defend the man who only a few minutes ago, I was hating, but a wave of nausea hits me hard, and I feel my lunch rising up my throat. Without another word, I bolt from the door and into my bathroom. Everything I ate today comes right back up.

I hear his footsteps from behind me.

He hands me a towel, but I’m too weak to say anything.

“Enough of this. I know you didn’t want to go to the doctor, but you are. Now.”

I wipe my mouth before standing up and walking over to the sink. I fill a glass and then spit.

“I’m not going now. I’m going to bed.”

“Like hell, you are, Nix. We are going to the hospital. This parasite or bug or whatever you caught on that island has been going on too long. It’s obvious you need medical attention.”

He doesn’t let me say no. Instead, he’s ushering me to the door.

All I want to do is crawl back into my bed and hide, but apparently, that is not in the cards right now. Because the next thing I know, I’m in the car, and I’m on my way to the hospital.

From that point on, I’m in a daze.

I’m taken to a private room.

I guess money and connections can get anything done. Next, I’m poked and prodded.

It's awful. Not only do I just want to sleep, but they've taken so much blood I'm sure I will pass out.

Now, I'm lying on a gurney with a flimsy gown on, waiting for someone to come in and tell me what the heck is going on. Some doctor I don't know is the one to finally walk into my room.

He's holding a clipboard, and right behind him, a nurse is wheeling in a machine.

What the fuck is going on?

My heart starts to race frantically in my chest.

"Hello, Phoenix. I'm Dr. Reynolds."

"What did you find?" I blurt out, my heart and brain not able to take the wait any longer. "You found something, right?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. We did."

"Just tell me. I can handle it."

"I wanted to ask you, when was your last period?"

My eyes grow wide. Why would that matter? All of a sudden, my limbs feel weak, and I'm sure I will pass out. "I-I ..." The blood in my veins throbs as I try to think back. My periods are less frequent since getting the shot. "I'm on the shot," I say forcefully as if that should make a difference.

"I see that in your records. Were you up to date on your shot?"

It feels like my stomach is hollow as I realize I'm not. I was supposed to get another shot ... but when I got back, I was sick and forgot.

"I know this might come as a shock, but both the urine test as well as your blood sample reveal ... you are pregnant, Phoenix."

He speaks, but I can't hear a word he says because it sounds like I'm in a wind tunnel. My heart hammers in my chest, and the sound is so loud that I can barely make out what he's saying.

“What?” I whisper, shaking my head.

“I’m going to give you an ultrasound. I’m not sure how far along you are, so to make sure I’m thorough, I’ll be doing a transvaginal one. We will measure the baby and see how far along you are. How does that sound?”

I don’t know if I even answer, but then the ultrasound technician walks closer to me, wheeling the machine next to my bed. The sound of the tires is loud against the quiet of the room. Next, she pulls out a wand and places something over it.

“Now just lie back. This might feel a little weird.” With my legs spread open, she places that thing inside me. Tears well in my eyes. I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe I’m pregnant with Alaric’s baby. This has to be a mistake. But as the doctor points at the screen, I know without a measure of a doubt that there is no mistake.

There amongst the dark screen is a little something flickering.

“That’s your baby.”

All the tears I was holding at bay start to fall.

That’s my baby.

SITTING IN MY SUITE, I FEEL SO ALONE. I HAVE NO ONE TO talk to about what is going on. I know I need to tell Alaric, but can I? He’s the father of the baby, but he’s in a war with my father. Another person I can’t talk to. He would never understand.

Standing, I start to pace the large living room with my phone clutched in my hand. I don’t even have a way to reach him.

Even after the party, I never got his number.

What do I do?

Looking down at my phone, I open it and scroll through my contacts.

That's when I realize how selfish I've been. Hannah. My one friend. My best friend. I still haven't called her.

She probably doesn't even know I went missing. I just left when my father called and never looked back.

She probably hates me.

Before I can second-guess myself, I'm dialing her number.

"Where have you been?" she answers, and hearing her voice feels like a warm blanket being draped over me when I'm cold.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt out. I can already feel moisture gathering in my eyes.

"Are you crying?"

A sob breaks through my mouth, confirming that yes, I am, in fact, crying—more like having a nervous breakdown.

"I am," I hiccup.

"Talk to me. Nix, what's going on?"

My hand reaches up and wipes the tears from below my eyes. "My dad needed me."

"And you couldn't call to check in?" There is no mistaking the doubt in her voice.

How do you tell someone that everything they thought they knew about you is a lie? Do you just blurt out, *My father's an arms dealer, just as we always suspected*. I guess that's what you do. "Everything we thought about my dad was true."

The line goes quiet.

"Hannah?"

"Everything?" she whispers into the line as if someone's listening.

"Everything. I left to help him ..."

“What does that mean?”

Taking a deep breath, I sit down on the couch because this might take a while. Over the next thirty minutes, I tell her everything. I tell her about the plan to seduce Alaric to find the guns. I tell her about the island, and then I tell her the last part. The most important part.

“I’m pregnant.”

Once again, she’s silent. I know she’s still on the line because I can hear her breathing.

“Is it his?”

“Yes.” My voice is low, low enough I’m not even sure she hears me, but then she speaks.

“Fuck.”

Her words are exactly how I feel. I hug my knees to my chest, and my body starts to shake. “I know. What do I do?”

“Do you love him?”

“I think I do. Before all this, before we were rescued ...” I swallow hard. “I was falling in love with him.”

“I can’t believe this.” She speaks in a broken whisper, mirroring the emotions inside me.

“You and I both.” My gaze lowers to my belly, to the flat skin. On instinct, my hand reaches down and touches it. Touches the life Alaric and I made. “I have to tell him.”

She inhales deeply before exhaling. “You do.”

“What if he’s not happy? What if this thing between us doesn’t work? He’s the villain in this story, after all. Can you survive loving the villain?”

“We make our own stories. We write our own endings. Only you can decide.”

Her words echo through me. She’s right. I’m not sure how this will turn out, but only we can decide.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For always being there for me. Even when I was a crappy friend.”

She laughs at that. “I love you, Nix. Now go rest. It sounds like you need it.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Just speaking the truth.”

“Love you.”

I hang up the phone a moment later.

I have a lot to think about.

Alaric

IT'S BEEN ONE WEEK SINCE THE PARTY. ONE WEEK SINCE I HAD Phoenix in my arms. I'm driving myself crazy. I sound like a pussy, but I can't get her out of my mind. It's obvious my pacing back and forth is driving my men nuts as well. To make matters worse, Matteo called me the other day. Apparently, he can't get in touch with his man hired to pull off the hit.

Now I'm desperate to make sure she's safe.

Cristian keeps shaking his head.

The thing is, despite my attempts to see her again, she hasn't left the goddamn hotel. That was until today.

Yes, I'm stalking her.

No, I don't give a fuck.

It might make me crazy, but here I am, pacing a room in the hotel where she's staying.

From what my man staking out the front desk has said, she left, went to the hospital, and isn't back yet.

I'm ready to fucking kill someone.

Someone needs to tell me what the fuck is going on.

Cristian, however, is laughing at me. He said it's probably a routine checkup, and I can't just storm her car when she arrives.

Not that Michael is a threat any longer, but I'll never get Phoenix to talk to me if he's around.

The problem is, who knows how much longer she will be?

"You will wear a hole in the carpet," Cristian says, holding back his chuckle.

My hand forms a fist as I turn to face him. "Fuck off, Cristian. If you know what's good for you."

I turn and go back about my business of walking back and forth in the suite I'm staying at.

In the background, I can hear my men talking, but I pay them no mind.

Why is she at a hospital?

I've never felt this helpless in my entire life.

No, that's not true. I felt this helpless when Phoenix and I were on the raft, and the storm hit.

I thought we were going to die. Back then, I was an idiot. Deep down, I knew how I felt about her but didn't say it.

It took me a long time to admit that I can't live without her. Way too long. The truth is, she deserves better.

Another truth: I don't give a fuck.

She's mine.

It takes four hours for my phone to ring, and once I know she's back, I wait until her father is gone.

In my possession is a key to her room, and I plan to make her see me, regardless of what she wants.

It's midnight when I first make my approach. I've paid off the security guard to tell me when Michael has turned in for the night and to let me pass.

The walk from my room to hers isn't far—just one floor up.

Yes, I'm insane enough that I booked the whole floor beneath theirs.

When I'm standing in front of her door, I knock once. If she doesn't answer, I'm still going in.

I can hear the sound of feet walking and then a soft voice. "Yes?" She sounds confused but not asleep.

"Dove."

That's all I say for an announcement.

"Go away, Alaric. I'm not ready to speak to you yet. I need to think."

"I didn't want to have to do this," I warn as I place the key to the pad and then let myself in.

"You're nuts," she says, mouth open and hands on her hips.

"Yes."

"You can't just—"

"Can't just come in? Sure, I can." Standing a few feet away from her in the foyer, I smile. "See?"

"You're such an ass."

She looks beautiful when she's angry, her blue eyes more vibrant. They are the exact color of the lagoon on a clear, sunny day.

Being this close to her brings me back to that time. "I didn't realize how much I would miss it."

Her brow furrows. "Miss what?"

"The island. Being with you on the island. Life was simpler then."

"Yeah, there were no guns to sell."

I move closer to her. "I was happy."

"And now?"

"I'm not."

"That's not my problem. You left. I know at the party I gave you mixed signals, but I'm not in this for a quick screw

on a dining table, island, or whatever you think you're doing in my hotel room at midnight.”

“I'm not here for that.”

She lets out a deep breath before stepping aside and letting me pass.

Once I'm in the living room area of her suite, I look toward the couch, and she nods.

Taking a seat on the couch, she takes the one farther from me as if it will protect her from me. She crosses her arms across her abdomen and sits down. She still looks pale, beautiful but pale.

“Are you okay?” I ask, and she nods, but she no longer looks at me.

She looks tired and scared, and I know I'm supposed to sit my ass on the couch, but instead, I find myself crossing the distance and squatting in front of her.

“What is going on?”

She has tears in her eyes, the water shimmering in her irises, making them look iridescent.

“Talk to me.”

“I can't.” The look reflected back at me is unlike anything I have ever seen. She looks downright petrified, more so than when we were on the raft during the storm.

I remove her hands from where they sit on her belly and start kissing her fingers.

“I didn't tell you before, and I realize now that makes me a coward. But somewhere on that island, I fell in love with you. Not just any love. A heart-stopping love. A devastating love. One that has consumed every fiber of my being. I thought if I left you, you were better off. The war with your father ... My need for revenge. I thought I was being selfless by letting you go.”

“And now?” she whispers, tears still heavy behind her lids.

“You are my peace. Even after the island, I would wake up expecting you beside me, hoping that this was all a nightmare and I was still on the island with you. Because that’s my dream. To be back there, with you. But I walked away, and it might have been for what I thought was the right reason, but I was wrong.”

“You left.”

“I know. I’m selfish. I can’t let you go. I might not have been there then, but I am now. I might be too late, but I couldn’t go without telling you, without demanding you listen.”

“Then say it,” she says.

“I love you. I loved you then, and I love you now. Looking back, I knew on the raft. I knew if I was going to die, if you were in my arms, I would die in peace.”

I lift to place a kiss on her lips, and she doesn’t fight, but she doesn’t kiss me back either.

A sinking feeling settles in my gut. Am I too late?

She won’t look at me. No, instead, she keeps glancing at a table. To her phone, maybe? Without asking, I stand, and she reaches her arm out. “No.”

Anger courses through me. What is she hiding? Without waiting for her to say more, I storm toward the table, where a piece of paper rests, and then I see it.

Everything I think I know comes to a halt. Everything I ever thought was important smashes to the ground because nothing else matters but this.

I don’t hear her as I stare at the paper.

I barely feel her as she places her hand on my shoulder.

But when a tear drops from my eye, I blink. I turn to see her, her own tears now spilling down her beautiful face.

Her lip trembles, and I hold up the paper.

“A baby?”

She nods.

“My baby.”

“Yes.”

“You’re having my baby?”

More tears slip down her cheek as she nods.

And then I’m dropping to the floor. My mouth to her stomach. I lift the hem of her shirt and kiss her flesh. I kiss my baby.

I’m not sure how long I kneel in front of her, but eventually, I stand and walk her to the couch. Once she’s sitting, I don’t sit. I don’t presume to stay either because we still have too much to do before I can.

“I won’t lose you,” I tell her. “I’ll talk to your father.”

“He hates you.”

“You’re mine. That baby in your belly? Mine. Your thoughts and dreams are mine. I will make your father understand, or I will take you from him. Even if I have to tie you up in my boat.”

“You already tried that.” She inclines her head. “How did that work out for you?”

“Pretty well, seeing as you’re having my baby.” I grin back.

“Shh.” She laughs.

I bend down and place a soft kiss on her lips. “This is not where our story ends, little dove. I will fight for you.”

Phoenix

LAST NIGHT, ALARIC TOLD ME HE LOVED ME. WORDS ARE JUST words without action.

Today, I have to speak to my father. Alaric might be calling him to form a truce, but I need to speak with him first.

We've never spoken about the island, and it's time.

It's time for me to tell him everything, including that I'm pregnant.

When I'm standing in front of the room my dad stays in, I knock once before he answers.

He's dressed and ready for the day. Me, on the other hand ... I'm still in my pjs. I didn't want to risk missing him.

"Phoenix, are you okay?"

"I lied to you yesterday."

He moves aside and lets me in. I walk past him and sit down at the table.

"About the hospital?" he asks as he stands behind a chair across from me. His fingers wrap around the top, and I can see his knuckles are white. "What did you lie about?"

"The doctor did tell me what was wrong, or rather—" I stop and take a breath. "I'm pregnant."

As soon as I utter the words, I hear the crash, and the chair is on the floor now.

“The bastard.” He starts to curse and pace. Then he’s reaching into his pocket. The next thing I know, he’s pulling out a gun.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to kill him. I might not have protected you then, but I’m—”

“Stop!” I scream, and he looks up at me in shock. “You will do no such thing. I love him, and he loves me, and it’s about time you listen and hear me. If you touch Alaric, I will no longer be in your life.”

“But—”

“No buts. We haven’t talked about the island, but it’s time. It’s time you know he saved me. Not once, not twice, but three times. I fell in love with him. He’s not the man you know, and for me, you will form a truce. He is the father of my baby. I love him, and you will talk to him. And if you think this is one-sided, it’s not. For four years, he thought you killed his brother—”

“I didn’t.”

I hold my hand up. “I know that, but he doesn’t. I told him, but whether he believes it or not is irrelevant because he still is willing to sit down with you. To talk and to move forward because he loves me that much. Now the question is, do you love me enough to do the same?”

“Of course.”

“Then call him and set it up.”

“I will do this for you because I love you, and you’re my daughter. But that doesn’t mean I will ever trust him. If he so much as lifts a finger wrong where you are involved, I will kill him. Do not ask me not to.”

“Understood.”

MY FATHER DOES AS I ASK. TODAY, WE ARE ALL GOING TO meet. Where, though? Not on Alaric's boat and not here in the hotel. Someplace public, maybe? In the end, we decide against all of that. We are all only as good as our word. If Alaric hurts my father, he won't be in our baby's life and vice versa.

The dock by the yacht is the destination. Alaric has parked his boat at a private one close to the city, so we will meet there.

It's a beautiful day without a cloud in the sky. As soon as we pull the car down toward the boat, I see him.

His hair looks lighter in the sun. I had forgotten that when the sun hits it, he has blond highlights scattered through the brown.

"Are you ready?" my dad says to me, and I nod. Together we walk down to where Alaric has set up a table. There are three chairs. I sit between the two men as a buffer.

It's tense at first.

"I love her," Alaric says, and I'm shocked he starts there. "I'm here for her. For my baby."

"I'm here as well."

"Then I'm going to ask you this, and I need you to be honest—man to man. I will not seek vengeance no matter your answer, but I need to know. Did you order the hit on me four years ago? Did you kill my brother in my place?"

"No," my father says without hesitation.

"Okay."

I look at the two men I love most in the world, and then I focus on Alaric. He has spent years trying to seek justice for a death that should have been his, and he is willing to take my dad at his word.

"Now what?" I ask.

“If your father says he didn’t do it, then I trust you, dove, to know that he wouldn’t lie to me. He wouldn’t risk you. But the question still stands ... who tried to kill me? There have been two attempts on my life, both involving you,” he says to my father.

“I had nothing to do with either attack. But certainly not the one that almost took Nix from me.”

“I’m inclined to believe you there.” He looks off into the distance at the water. His tense shoulders seem to ease. “Someone is trying very hard to make it look like it was you, and I want to know why.”

“Competition,” I blurt out.

Alaric raises a brow. “Your father is my only competition, so how does that make sense?”

“There has to be a third party,” I state. “Someone who must have been just starting out back then. It would make sense. He tried to kill you, his plan failed, but in turn, it still worked.”

“How do you figure? I was alive. My brother was dead. How did that work?”

“Because you were focused on my father. You spent all these years focusing on the wrong person.”

“If what you’re saying is true, I was focusing all my resources in the wrong place, then what was the objective with your father?”

“They probably thought your men would retaliate, which you tried to for years. My father has been in hiding ever since. I was in hiding. But then I stepped out ... Perfect bait.” I use his own words.

“For more than just you ...” my father says, his hand lifting to rub his temples.

“What?”

“This war flushed me out too.”

Everything goes slow from that moment on. I hear Alaric scream. I watch horrified as he jolts from his chair, jumping in front of my father, pushing him out of the way ... and only then do I register the red light that was shining on my father's chest.

Alaric

THE FIRST THING I DO IS MAKE SURE PHOENIX IS OKAY. THEN I scream for Cristian.

The rest of my men are running toward the table.

“You hit?” I ask Michael. His face is pale, clearly in shock.

“No ... you saved me.”

“I did.” My voice is monotone.

This is my fault. Phoenix is here, and there’s been an attempt on Michael’s life because of me.

My stomach turns violent as I realize I might have put my baby and the woman I love in danger.

“You’re bleeding?” Phoenix shouts, and I look at my shoulder, and sure enough, there is blood.

“It’s just a graze.” I look at Cristian. “Get the shooter. He couldn’t have gotten that far.”

I need to find him and make sure there will never be another attempt on Michael’s life.

“Where do you want me to bring him?”

I look around, noting the buildings around me. Although this is private, I can’t run the risk. “The boat.” He nods, knowing exactly where I want him.

Once Cristian runs off, Michael turns to me. “I want in.”

“That can be arranged. He did try to kill you, after all.” I don’t say it was on my authority, but I’ll cross that bridge when I need to.

Phoenix goes to speak, and I lift my hand. “Nope, you will be sitting this one out.”

“But—”

“You need to rest.”

“I’m not helpless.” She groans.

“I know you’re not. Fuck, you are one of the strongest people I know. But you are pregnant with my baby, and even if this is the only time you listen to me, you will listen. You will go to my stateroom and wait for me there.”

She pouts, but she doesn’t object.

After I wash off the blood, I head down to the lower level of the boat. To the room I built especially for this.

For anyone asking, it’s a storage room.

Storage for what ... now, that depends.

Sometimes, I store equipment. Sometimes, it’s guns. Today, it’s a man tied to a chair.

As I’m about to enter, my phone rings ... A text.

Matteo: It was called off.

My movements halt as I stare at the phone.

Me: Are you sure? Because there was just an attempt made on his life.

Matteo: 100% sure.

Fuck. Then who do we have in my storage room? More confused than before, I place the phone back in my pocket and swing the door open and stride inside.

“Do you know this man?” I say to Michael as he follows behind me and then walks to where I am.

“Do you?” he asks.

“Never seen him before.” Moving to where he is, I’m not standing directly in front of him. “Who do you work for?” He smiles but doesn’t answer.

“You think this is funny? You won’t find it funny after I torture you.”

“Do your worst.” He snickers.

I step forward, my fist flying and hitting his face. When I pull back, he spits blood, and this time, when he smirks, his mouth is full of blood.

Stepping back, I signal for Michael. “He tried to kill you. It’s only fitting that you torture him.”

Gun in his hand, Michael steps in and fires a bullet into his shoulder. The man lurches forward, but with his limbs tied, there isn’t anywhere for him to go.

“I have seven more bullets. Something tells me you’ll eventually talk,” Michael says, but by the crazed look in this man’s eyes, I’m starting to think we should just throw him overboard.

Six more bullets. Blood drips from everywhere as I stand beside Michael.

“What’s it going to be ...?” I ask, and Michael lifts the gun. The final bullet. The kill shot.

This man will die if Michael fires again.

“Who do you work for?”

Silence. Just that damn smirk. Like he knows the outcome regardless of the games we play.

“Are you ready to die for this? Is that how this will end?”

“Enough of this shit!” Michaels says, finger on the trigger.

“I am okay with death.” A sick twisted smile spreads across his face as Michael pulls the trigger. “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

The words he utters are cold needles stinging my body. “No!” I shout, rushing over to the man, but as I do, his eyes

flutter closed, and then his head hangs limply. I lift it, his eyes are open, but there is nothing behind them. “No ... Wake up.” I turn to Cristian. “Get the doctor. We need him to live.”

“It’s too late for that.”

My knees give out.

“What the fuck just happened?” I hear from behind me, and I turn to see Michael looking down at me.

“I don’t know,” I mutter because I don’t.

I have no fucking clue what is happening.

Like a zombie, I find my way out of the room and back up to the main deck.

Phoenix is there waiting for me, her eyes wide with fear, and it is only then I realize I am bathed in blood.

“It’s not mine,” I grit out.

“What happened?”

But I have no words to explain it. Nothing makes sense. Nothing at all.

It takes me a while, three glasses of scotch and a few long breaths, to calm the hell down.

After every last drop is gone from my drink, I slam the glass down.

“Can someone tell me what the hell just happened?” Phoenix asks.

Cristian and Michael both look at me, but neither speaks. This is my story. My freak-out. This is on me.

“Did the man tell you who he works for?” she asks.

“No.” The tone of my voice is brash, and Phoenix shivers.

“Did he say anything?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?” Her question is simple, but my answer isn’t.

“Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

Her eyes go wide, and I know she remembers. I know she knows that only one man has said that to me. Only one man used that sentence, over and over again. It was only one man's motto ...

“Your brother.”

“My brother,” I confirm.

“What does this mean?”

“Beats the fuck out of me, but I have every intention of finding out.”

Standing from where I'm sitting, I look over at Cristian.

“Get Cyrus on the phone,” I say.

He nods and sets about doing that. Michael and Phoenix look as confused as I feel.

“Alaric,” Michaels says. “Thank you. I owe you my life.”

“You mean something to Phoenix, and she loves you. That's enough for me.” As I'm about to say more, as I'm about to apologize for everything I did to him for those four years, Cristian comes back and hands me the phone.

“What's going on? I didn't think I would hear from you so soon.”

“That incident with Ivy ...” Out of respect for him, I won't talk about that in front of my men or Michael.

“What about that?” he fires back, angry over it still and rightfully so.

“The guy who helped you ... Jason. Jack—”

“Jaxson?”

“Yeah. I'm going to need you to get me in touch with him.”

“What's this about?” he asks.

“Better you didn't know.”

“Duly noted. I'll get you his contact info.”

I hang up and sit back down. I'm going to need another drink before I make this call.

Two minutes later, I'm on the phone with Jaxson Price and I'm telling him what just went down.

"Can you explain that one more time?" he asks over the line.

"Four years ago, my brother died ... and I have reason to believe ... Fuck. I don't know what I believe."

"A man hired to kill the one man who can confirm he didn't kill your brother is dead. Am I getting this straight?"

"Yes."

"And the one man, he quoted your dead brother?"

"Right again. I'm thinking that when my brother was estranged, he might have worked with whoever is doing this. Maybe for revenge?"

"That sounds plausible. Crazy but plausible."

"Maybe this person wanted our businesses and killed my brother to start the war." That's the explanation that Phoenix came up with, and it seems more plausible now.

"It definitely appears that way. So, you need me to track all your brother's acquaintances before he died, and see if there are any hits?"

"Yeah. I'm going to be sending you a care package. Let me know what you find." I probably should warn him it's a finger. "You're going to want to open it by yourself. That's your warning."

He lets out a chuckle. "Easy enough and duly noted. I'll make sure no one can see whatever you placed in the box. I'll have the information back to you within a few days."

Now to see if the real bastard who killed my brother covered his tracks.

Once I hang the phone up, I walk into my room. Now that I'm alone, it hits me.

It's the same feeling I have felt for years, but different.

Guilt.

An uncontrollable guilt.

For years I have harbored guilt in my soul over my brother's death, a death that should have been mine. The only thing that kept me going was revenge.

Today changed that.

Today changed everything.

In my life, I have done many wrong things. I have done horrible things, but never have I become my father.

Never have I been that cruel, that sick and depraved.

My hands are stained with death, but until today, they were never tainted with a death that did not belong to me.

George.

I killed an innocent man.

He was never meant to die.

I reach for the decanter in the corner of my room, pulling the crystal stopper out and downing the contents.

His life was not mine to take.

Phoenix

IT FEELS LIKE AN ETERNITY AGO THAT I WAS LAST ON THIS yacht. Things have changed epically in only a matter of months, but here I am, back here, and I'm okay with that. The truth is, I'm more than okay. I'm finally happy again.

Today was a hard day for everyone on this boat, but in truth, for Alaric, it is so much more than that—the past four years of his life were a lie. Now, I can't find him on this giant boat. I need to make sure he's okay.

I start to wander through the decks, and then it dawns on me the one place I haven't checked—his stateroom.

It's funny. I was on this boat for two weeks before, and I still can't find my way around it.

As I'm walking, I see Cristian. He must note my confusion because he points behind him.

“He's that way. The door all the way at the end.” As I begin to walk, I feel the boat move.

The last time the boat left port, I was desperate to get off, but this time, I'm not worried about how I'm going to get off. It would be fine with me if I never had to again.

I just need Alaric.

As soon as I open the door to his stateroom, I see him. “Are you okay?” I ask as I approach. Alaric is sitting on the

bed with his back toward me.

But it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know he's stressed out.

I can't even imagine what he must be thinking.

"No. Not really," he admits as he turns to face me.

My tongue feels dry in my mouth as I take in the expression on his face. There are not enough words in the dictionary for me to help him. The only words I can conjure are, "I'm sorry."

He gives me a tight smile, silently thanking me for trying, but knowing it's not enough. Nothing will be. Not until he finds out what happened all those years ago. That day still haunts him, and now, his wounds are open and gaping again. They are old scabs that are bleeding again.

"It's not your fault," he says, and although it's true, it's not my fault, I just want to help him.

"Talk to me."

"I'm a monster. You were right. I don't know how to do this." He buries his head in his hands.

"Do what?"

"Forgive myself. I don't know how you can even look at me."

I stare at him and shake my head. "I don't understand—"

"George," he whispers, and it feels like someone punched me in the chest. I step closer, my legs touching his. "I thought"—he takes a deep inhale—"I thought it was justified." He looks up at me, his blue eyes dull and hollow. "My father, he killed for sport. I vowed to never be like him." His head drops down toward the ground, breaking our stare.

"You're not."

"Aren't I?"

"Listen to me, Alaric." I place my hand under his jaw and make him look up at me. "You are nothing like your father."

“How do you know?”

“Because you feel guilt. Because you feel remorse. Because of this.” I place my hand on his heart. “What can I do to help?”

His hands wrap around my thigh. “Love me.”

I lean down and kiss the top of his head. “I already do. I didn’t tell you because I needed to know you would fight for us ... I should never have doubted you, and for that, I’m sorry. I loved you then. I love you now, and I’ll love you forever.” I place his hand on my belly. “We both will.”

“Let me love you, then,” he says, and I look down at him to meet his gaze.

The color of his eyes reminds me of the ocean on a stormy day, dark and endless. “Okay ...” I take a step back, his hands dropping to his sides, and he watches as I remove my shirt and then my pants. He stares at me without blinking, until I’m naked and then walking to the bed.

Then I’m on it, but he still hasn’t moved. He doesn’t undress, and I wonder if I read this wrong, but when I move to cover myself, he shakes his head.

“Just because I’m still dressed doesn’t mean I don’t want you, but right now, I just want something different,” he says, and I level him with my best fake glare.

“And what would that be? Because I’m not doing anal.”

Alaric breaks out into a boisterous laugh, and the sound warms my heart. Even though my joke is stupid, it’s exactly what Alaric needs to pull him out of the daze he’s in.

“Good to know, but no, that’s not what I meant,” he clarifies.

“What did you mean, then?”

“Here, let me show you.” He crawls onto the bed and lies down beside me, resting his hand on my belly. I’m not showing yet, but it doesn’t matter to him.

“Thank you,” he says.

“For what?”

“For giving me something to look forward to, something to want to live for. I have spent the past few years never caring if I lived or died, but now, because of you, because of the baby ...” He lowers his body and places his lips on my stomach.

My eyes fill with tears.

“I already love you,” he says to my invisible bump. “I will always protect you. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.” He looks up at me, his eyes glassy and full of emotion, and then crawls back up until he’s face-to-face with me. He leans over and kisses me. “After this, I’m done.”

When he pulls back, I look at him. “What do you mean?”

“I’m out. I’ll tell your father. Either he can buy me out or I’ll offer it to Cristian.”

I shake my head in confusion. “Why?”

“There has been too much death. I don’t want you or the baby in the crossfire anymore.”

“What will you do?”

His lip tips up into a smirk. “Maybe Cyrus is hiring?”

“Isn’t his job just as bad?”

“Hardly. Ever since he settled down, he really only focuses on the money aspect. He’s given all the rough shit to Matteo to handle, and the investments now go through Ivy’s brother Trent. Cyrus is just a stern face to keep the assholes in line.”

“Holding the mob’s money still seems pretty rough.”

“True. Fine, I’ll just retire.”

His words take me off guard, and I think I stare at him for five minutes before I blink. “Can you do that—”

His hand reaches up and touches my face. “After this, yes.” Then the movements stop, and his jaw is tight. “Before I figure out who really killed my brother, no.”

“What do you think happened?”

“To be honest, I think after Grace died, Damian was in a bad place. I wouldn’t put past him to have gotten into bed with some bad people over grief.”

“Maybe someone from her family,” I mutter to myself, but his eyes go wide at my suggestion.

“Maybe that’s it. Maybe that’s the piece of the puzzle I’m missing. Maybe he got into bed with her family and convinced them it was my fault. Fuck!” He grunts, his fist hitting the bed beside us. “Why hadn’t I seen it before?” He reaches across the bed and grabs his phone.

“What are you doing?” I ask, lifting my back and resting my weight on my elbows to stare at him.

“I’m telling Jax this new information. It makes the most sense. Her father lost his in when his daughter died. Maybe this was his second shot to get into the family business.”

He leans down and kisses my lips.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“That was for always listening and loving me regardless of what I say.”

I wrap my arms around him and bring him closer.

“Always,” I say against his mouth as I continue to kiss him. Then I tell him with my body just how much I love him.

Alaric

AFTER KILLING THE MAN ON MY YACHT, WE DRIVE OUT TO SEA. Then we weigh the body down and dump it.

When this is all over, Phoenix and I will need to go somewhere no one can find us and just be together. Maybe we can dock by our island.

I'm lost in my own head when Cristian walks into my office.

"We are going to be docking soon."

"Any word from Jaxson?"

"Nothing yet, but it's only been two days. I'm sure as soon as he has anything, he will let us know."

"Phoenix wants to see her dad," I say as I stand from my desk and move past him.

"You sure that's wise? The last time you were all together, there was a near attempt on Michael's life."

"True. No, it's not wise. But at the same time, what will you have me do? Keep her locked up like a prisoner on this boat. I already tried that, and we all know how that ended."

Cristian smiles. "Congratulations, by the way."

I laugh. "Thanks. I'm going to walk away after this," I say.

He nods. “I figured.”

“I’m going to talk to Michael about it today, but if he’s not interested, would you want it?”

“You would trust your business to me?” Shock registers on Cristian’s face.

“I would.”

He nods. “Then yes.”

“I’m going to see if Phoenix is ready. Find a place for us to meet. Someplace safe. If she’s going to be with me—”

He understands.

IT’S A FEW HOURS LATER, AND PHOENIX AND I ARE DRIVING toward the spot where we are going to meet Michael.

My phone rings in my pocket on the way. I look down to see a name.

“Jaxson. What do you have for me?”

“First off”—he pauses—“thanks for the package.” There is no confusing the sarcastic bite to his voice. “However, it was very useful, no matter how unpleasant it was.”

“Go on ...”

“It didn’t take me long to figure out who the finger belonged to. His name was Vincent Keller. And it appears you were right.”

My hands tighten into fists. “How so?” I grit out.

“Before his death, he was employed by Leonard Moreno. Father of Grace Moreno. Business associate of your father and before his death your brother was associated with him as well.”

I was right. I knew that this was a possibility, but it doesn’t lessen the sting. My enemy is someone I once considered family. How the fuck did everything go so wrong.

“I need to catch this bastard. What else do you got?”

“A few addresses.”

I lean forward in my seat, shocked that I might actually be able to find him today.

“You have addresses, plural?”

“I do. In Jersey. A few different buildings. Most look abandoned, but they were all purchased under a shell company. I was able to trace them all back to Moreno.”

“Fuck.” From beside me, Phoenix takes my hand in hers and gives me a reassuring squeeze. It’s exactly what I need right now. It reminds me to calm down.

“Yeah, I thought you might say that.”

“Text me the addresses.” I hang up the phone and take a deep breath.

“What’s going on?” Phoenix asks.

“We were right. It is Grace’s father.” I turn to face her and find her pupils are wide and her mouth is hanging open. “Jaxson has a list of addresses. He’s sending them to me now.”

The phone chimes again, and there it is, the addresses that can potentially lead me to a man I’ve known all my life. I stare at it for a few minutes.

“Are we going?” Phoenix asks.

“You aren’t—”

“Stop right there. I’m not some weak girl you need to hide away in a tower.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

She rolls her eyes. “Be that as it may, we are going to check it out.” Then Phoenix does something I don’t expect. She grabs my phone from my hand, looks at the address, and calls her dad.

“Change of plans. We have a few leads,” she says to him, and after she gives him the list of addresses, she hangs up.

“You will not enter any of the buildings.”

“Fine, but I’m coming. I’ll wait in the car. We can’t risk him finding out if Jaxson ran checks. The longer we wait, the better chance he finds out we are looking for him.”

She’s right. I just hate the fact that she is here with me. Maybe Cristian was right. Maybe I should have kept her locked up.

We sit silently as we pull up to the first building. Michael isn’t here yet, but I don’t wait. Time is of the essence. I leave Cristian in the car with Phoenix, despite his objections. The first building looks vacant. There are no cars in the parking garage, and when I peek in through the window, there is no movement at all. Walking up to the door, I jimmy the lock and then kick it open, gun in hand, ready to fire.

The place is completely empty.

There’s not one piece of furniture, no trash, no sign of life.

It’s a small office space with faded white walls that are now cream, and dark, dingy carpet. This place looks as though it’s been abandoned for years.

The next address is even worse.

At least the first building we went to had carpet. This one looks like it’s been condemned for even longer.

Where the other building was vacant, this one has trash everywhere. The smell is foul. I don’t even bother to look around—as soon as I open the door, I’m closing it.

I probably should suck it up, but if I go in there, no way can I get back in the car with Phoenix. She’s finally not feeling sick; the stench from this place would set her off.

When I step back in the car, Phoenix sniffs me. “What is that smell?”

Her pregnancy nose is on point. She’s like one of those bomb-sniffing dogs.

“Nothing compared to what the inside of that place smelled like,” I say as I gesture to the building. “Cristian, head over to the address on Washington.” I turn to Phoenix. “Tell

your father to meet us there. These have all been dead ends. I'm sure this one will be too."

When we pull the car up to the next location, something is not right about it.

This whole thing feels wrong. Like we are walking into a trap.

But what other choice do I have?

Go back.

Take her someplace far away from all this.

No. I need to know. I need to look the bastard who killed my brother in the eye and understand why. Was it for a part I never played in his daughter's death? Was it just greed?

We park the car, and it's only a few minutes later when Michael's car pulls up.

I take out my phone and call Jaxson back.

"Is there anyone in the building?" I ask.

"From the heat signature ... no. It's empty. But that could be wrong. The building next door has movement."

I look at the building in front of me.

"As long as it's not coming from the building we're searching, we should be okay."

"Be careful, man. This feels almost too easy."

"Like a trap?" I ask.

"Yes."

"I agree, but I have no other choice. This is the only lead we have."

"Understand. Good luck."

I hang up the phone and turn to Phoenix. "No matter what happens, you don't leave this car." Her lips form a thin line. "Dove ... say you understand me."

"I understand you."

“But you didn’t agree?”

“No. I didn’t. If you are in trouble—” She’s about to go on, probably to lecture me, when Michael knocks on the window.

“Stay here,” I say again before swinging the door open.

As soon as I leave the car, I turn to him. “This could be a trap.”

“It’s most definitely a trap. Sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t really have a choice. I need to know who set us up. Phoenix and my baby will never be safe until I do.”

“On that, I agree.” After he speaks, he starts to walk, and I follow. Like the last few, this one is also empty. We search each floor, yet again we find nothing.

“This whole day is a waste.”

“No, not necessarily,” Michael responds. “Now where to?”

“I have to head over to a new property I bought. It’s not too far from here. Got to make sure the construction is coming along. Come with us, and we can talk there. I have some things I need to discuss with you.” He nods and we both head out of the building. “I’ll text you the address.”

“That was fast.” Phoenix smiles when I step into the car a minute later. “Find anything?”

“No. But I felt my phone vibrate, so maybe Jaxson has more intel.”

Pulling out my phone, I find a few more addresses to look at, but those will have to wait until tomorrow. I’m done with this day and still need to talk to Michael about my plans to retire. Closing out Jaxson’s message, I send a text to Phoenix’s dad with where to meet.

It doesn’t take us long to get there, and when we arrive, I turn to face Phoenix.

“I’m not waiting in the car.” She narrows her eyes at me like she means business.

“You are. No objections. It’s a shithole in there. Half the floors are missing. The top floor doesn’t even have walls. You’re staying, and that’s final.”

“Were you always this bossy?”

“Yes,” I deadpan.

“And I still fell in love with you.”

Leaning across the back seat, I seal my lips over hers. “Damn straight, you did. Now be a good little dove and stay put.” With one final kiss, I fling the door open and step out of the car.

Michael is already standing there, waiting for me. We both start to walk, and when we are almost by the door to the building, he stops, turning around to look at me.

“Before I go in there with you, what did you want to talk to me about, Alaric?”

“I’m out,” I say, and his head shakes in confusion. “I’m done. After this, I’m retiring ...”

A myriad of emotions plays across his face, and it almost appears as though he might cry. “After Nix’s parents died—” He stops talking and takes a breath. “Her father was my best friend and business partner. It cost him their lives. I should have put her first.” He nods again. “I-I wish I could have seen that then. Thank you for putting—” His words are cut off by a deafening sound, a gunshot. Someone is firing at us. I turn to look at where the shots are coming from. A building next to mine. “What the fuck?”

Michael is quick to move too, taking out his gun and aiming high. “This is crazy.”

“Get to the car,” I shout. Cristian is running in the direction of where the gunshot rang out, and I’m about to follow when I hear Michael shout something back. I don’t register what’s happening until Michael is pushing me out of the way.

Another series of gunfire.

I turn back to where the car is parked on the side of the building to make sure it's not under fire too. It's bulletproof, but still. Luckily, it's hidden from the war that's currently happening. My ears are ringing, and I try to make out where it was, and then I see him.

Michael.

On the floor, not moving.

I move toward him.

In the distance, I can hear Phoenix yelling. The door is open, and she's running toward us.

"No!"

Even though I know it's not good to move Michael, I pull his body behind the cover of the building away from the gunfire.

When I'm sure that we are safe here, I move to look at Michael's wound.

His shirt is stained red, the spot growing with every second that passes.

"Why?" I ask as I place my hand over the wound.

"Be-because now it is my turn to save you," Michael gurgles.

That bullet was for me. Michael saved me.

Phoenix

EVERYTHING HAPPENS IN SLOW MOTION. FIRST, I SEE ALARIC and my father talking, and then ...

My heart beats heavily in my chest, the blood in my veins running cold.

There's gunfire. Someone is shooting, and then I see my father push Alaric out of the way.

Everything stops.

My world stops as my father, the man who raised and loved me with all his heart, falls to the ground.

I don't think twice before I'm throwing open the car door and running toward them.

The car is parked on the side of the building, so it should be out of range of a gun, but I don't even care. I need to get to my father now.

As I start to run in the direction, I see Alaric is pulling his body toward me, out of the range of the gunfire.

I'm in front of my dad now, and his eyes are barely open, glassy with unshed tears.

"No," I whisper as I take in the large wound on his chest. The wound gapes with blood. "No, you ca-can't—"

He reaches his hand out, smiling a tight and sad smile at me. "It's my time." Blood leaks from his lips, and a sob erupts from my mouth.

"You-You can't leave me." Tears start to pour down my face like a dam burst.

"It's my time. I needed to save him. It's his time to take care of you. To take care of your baby. You allowed me to be your father. You honored me with your love. You taught me how to be selfless. This is my gift to you. For everything. I die happy, knowing you and the baby will live."

I want to cling to him. Beg him not to leave me. Beg him to stay.

But I can see the light fading from his eyes.

He turns to Alaric and raises his hand. "Teach your child better. Do better."

"I will. All of my remaining breaths will be for your daughter, for your unborn grandchild."

"Thank you." His voice has faded to nothing more than a whisper. He lifts my hand that holds his, and I look into his eyes. A tear slips out, his face paler than a moment ago. "You are going to be the best mother," he says. "I love you."

Tears pour from my eyes as he closes his eyes. His chest rises and falls, and then there is nothing.

Falling forward, I clutch him to me. Blood soaks my skin, but I don't care. I just want him back. "I love you, Dad. I love you so much more."

Sobs rack my body, and then I feel Alaric's hand on my back.

"I know you want to stay here, but I need you safe in the car."

"Where are you going?" I hiccup through my sobs.

"I need to end this, dove. I need to know you will be safe."

There is no strength left in me to object. I allow Alaric to lift me, but I look back down to my father. "We have to move

him.”

“When this is over,” he answers as he continues to lead me to the car.

Alaric leans over and places a kiss on my lips.

“Be safe,” I say, and then he’s running into the building and into the unknown.

Alaric

SPRINTING TOWARD THE BUILDING WHERE THE SHOTS WERE fired from, I see Cristian when I enter. He lifts his hand up to his mouth, then motions up.

This building is abandoned too. The stairs are concrete, and they look like a war zone, like it's falling apart.

How the hell did Grace's father know to come here? He must have been following us all day. Waiting for the moment our guard was down. If he wanted to get to me, why shoot from here, why not ambush me inside my own property?

The more I look around, the answer is clear. Now I know more than ever that this was a well-thought-out plan. You can die just stepping foot in here. The floors are broken, and not one part of the stairs is up to code. One last trap and I walked us right into it.

I've been so blinded by my need for revenge that I didn't realize I was walking myself into what will probably be my own death.

No.

I shake my head. There will be no dying today. Not when I have so much to live for. Nothing will take me away from her.

I take the stairs two at a time, doing quick work to see where he might be hiding.

Each floor is worse than the next. Open floor plans of mass chaos are what greet me. Something tells me this fucker is all the way on the top. I motion to Cristian to check the other direction while I continue up to the top floor.

There is nowhere else he can be.

When I make it up to the last floor, I see the shadow of a man in the distance. I don't have a clear shot, so I step closer, getting the angle I need to take him out.

"It's over, old man," I say. I lift my gun and am about to fire when the man speaks.

"It's just like I've always said, Alaric ... Only the dead have seen the end of war." He turns to face me, the scar I gave him so many years ago marring his face. A face I thought I would never see again.

I stumble forward. "Damian."

"Very good, dear brother. Did you miss me?"

"I don't—"

"Understand?" he asks before I can finish speaking, and then I realize my mistake. In my shock, I never noticed the gun now trained on me. He has the advantage. "Yes, I figured it would raise some questions."

"You're alive."

"Look at you. So smart. Maybe Dad was right to leave everything to you." He snickers.

"Is that what this is about? The business?"

"It was never about the business." His voice cuts through the air like a dull knife cutting through meat.

My brother is alive ...

"It was you?"

"Ding. Ding. Ding. You are finally getting it." A sardonic smile on his face. "*How did I escape? With difficulty. How did I plan this moment? With pleasure,*" he says, quoting *The Count Of Monte Cristo*.

“You are no Edmond,” I fire back, but in his sick, twisted mind, he thinks he is. He thinks this is his revenge. For what? And then it hits me. For her.

This is all for Grace.

I lift my hand to him. “It’s not what you think. You never had the full story.”

“I don’t want to hear your lies. I have plotted this moment for years, since her father showed me the note. He helped me, you know. Helped me orchestrate all this.”

“Ask him. He knows the truth.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, knowing the best way to disarm someone is to keep them distracted.

Keep him talking.

“I had no use for Moreno anymore. It wasn’t supposed to take so long, and he was growing on my nerves, so I killed him. But he was the perfect scapegoat, the old fool. This should have been over years ago, maybe he would have lived if the original plan had worked.”

“And what plan was that?”

“I was going to start a war between you and Lawrence, and then while you fought, I would take everything. I wanted you to see what it was like to lose everything you cared about, and since I was all you had, I started with my death. Then I would take my business back. The only snag was Michael went into hiding ...” He looks downright insane now. His smile makes the scar across his face look mangled. “But now I have a better plan. I’m going to take Michael’s daughter. I’m going to take the woman you love.”

Without even thinking, I start to run toward him. I catch him unaware because his eyes go wide as I attack. His gun drops to the floor. I go to raise my own, but he’s too fast, and mine falls as well.

Each of us struggles to get control.

Fists fly.

Blood sprays.

I don't want to kill him. I just want him to understand.

"It's not what you think." He punches me again. "Just listen to me, Damian. Grace committed suicide."

"Yes, because you hurt her," he spits.

"But not the way you think."

"You broke her."

"No!" I shout. "I never touched her. Her father broke her. My father broke her. You broke her."

He shakes his head at my words, and I use the opportunity to tighten my grip and fling him down.

"She didn't want to marry you. She killed herself because —"

"The letter," he fires back, rabid. Out of control. "You're lying."

"I'm not. The marriage was a noose around her neck. She came to me. She didn't love you. She knew she would be forced to marry someone in our family, so she proposed that she marry me instead. She thought she lov—"

"Enough!" he screams, scrambling around to get to me. "You'll say anything."

We circle each other. No weapons, just our hands.

"Think about it. Why would I lie now?"

"Because of your precious little dove. Don't worry, Alaric, I won't leave her in a cage for long, just long enough to clip her wings."

That's all it takes. I'm throwing my body onto his. We twist and turn, the edge of the construction site getting closer and closer.

"Stop!" I shout through our punches, but Damian is a man possessed, and then he's flying through the air, trying to hit

me. I'm quick to step out of the way, but then I hear him scream. He can't stop, and he's going to fall.

I run to grab him, my body sliding across the concrete. Skin rips as I move, but my fingers catch onto his.

"I have you," I say, my torso now hanging over the edge of the building, the only thing keeping my brother from falling is my hand. "Give me your other hand." I'll need both to save him.

Damian looks at me with clear eyes for the first time.

"Why are you trying to save me?" he asks.

"Because I love you," I answer truthfully, and his brows knit together. "Give me your hand." He doesn't, and it gets harder and harder to hold on as my fingers lose their purchase.

"Is it true? Is what you said true?" he asks.

"It is. I'm sorry. Now give me your hand so we can move past this."

He starts to lift his hand up but then stops.

"Goddammit, Damian, give me your hand."

I see the moment it happens ... when his eyes grow wet with unshed tears.

I shake my head. "No, Damian. Please—"

"Too much has happened."

"That's not true. Please give me your hand. Regardless of the past, I love you ..."

"How can you love a monster like me?" he says, and then he lets go.

"No!" I try to grab him, but it's too late. My torso starts to slip, but then someone is tugging my leg.

"I got you," I hear Cristian say as he continues to pull me back until my body is secure on the concrete.

My brother is dead.

This time, for good.

Alaric

AFTER WHAT WE HAVE BOTH HAVE BEEN THROUGH, I DECIDE there is still one more thing we have to do before we can move forward with our lives. Now that I have given the business to Cristian, time is a luxury I have, and I plan to spend every moment with Phoenix and my baby when he or she comes.

Since Phoenix is still fairly early in her pregnancy, this is the safest time for me to take her this far from shore.

We are both still grieving even though it's been a month.

The first few weeks on the yacht were hard. But eventually, we both found a way for our hearts to heal.

I never did tell her where we were going, and when the island comes into focus, I wonder how she will react.

There is a very important question I need to ask her, and I can't imagine another place to ask.

The boat stops, and we drop anchor. Since the island isn't developed yet, we will need a tender to get back there.

"Where are we?" she says from behind me, and I turn to face her.

"You know where we are," I say, moving closer and taking her hand in mine. I lift it up and place a kiss on each knuckle.

"What are we doing here?"

“I thought you might like to see it. With eyes no longer clouded by fear.”

She inclines her head and thinks about it for a minute. At first, I think she might say no. That it’s still too soon or she needs more time, but then she nods.

It doesn’t take us long before the Zodiac pulls up to the beach. I get out first, and then I lift my hand out to grab her.

The island is exactly how we left it. Still uninhabitable and it never will be. That’s the beauty of the island. It’s not meant to sustain life, just give it. And that’s what it did. It gave me life. It gave me Phoenix, and most importantly, it gave me the baby we will have soon. The island will never be a place that we can call home, but it can be a place that we hold in our memories forever.

A place where all my dreams were born.

Together we walk the grounds, remembering every moment we were together, and then we get to the cave.

So right there, in the cave where I first made love to her, I get down on one knee.

Her mouth trembles as she realizes what I’m doing. Then I take her hand and place an oval diamond on her finger.

Tears stream down her face. “I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?” I ask, and then stand.

“Yes,” she says through tears and then lifts up on her tiptoes to kiss me. “Where and when?”

“I was thinking back on the yacht?”

“Like now?” she asks.

“Well, we would have to leave. Are you ready to leave?”

She looks around the cave and then nods. “I’m ready to put this part of our lives behind us and move forward with you, wherever that may be.”

“Good. Let’s start now.”

We don't stay on the island much longer, and before we know it, we are on the deck of the boat.

"Are we really doing this here?" I smile at her question, and she furrows her brow. "What?"

"I actually had another plan." The look of confusion has my lips splitting wider, and she rolls her eyes.

"You're enjoying this way too much." She has a scowl on her face, but I know Phoenix secretly loves this. After everything we've been through, she trusts me completely. I would never give her reason not to. She's the most important person in my life. Her and my baby in her stomach.

I'm still not sure how I got so lucky. Sometimes, I'm afraid this is all a dream because no way after all the shit I've done do I deserve her love.

The guilt sometimes creeps in, but Phoenix reminds me that I need to forgive myself. Sometimes I do, other times it's harder, but she's always there to help me when the shadows of my past creep in and threaten to ruin everything.

I owe her my life.

From our island, we take the Panama Canal then head down the coast until we reach Peru. Phoenix doesn't ask any questions, I'm sure she's dying to, but she knows better.

When we're finally off the boat and heading to our secret location, on a private plane and then by jeep, she's done with my game.

"Tell me where we are." Her hand reaches out and swats me playfully. I catch her by her wrist and turn her palm up, then place a kiss on her pulse.

"What fun would that be?"

Phoenix stares out the window as we drive. The closer we get, the darker it becomes outside. My hope is that by the time we get there, the night sky will be pitch-black except for the stars.

Finally, we reach our destination. I step out of the car first then help Phoenix down. It might be dark, but I can see her

eyes go wide.

“What is this?” she whispers in awe, and I know without turning around what she sees. The stars above reflect off the watery mirror of the land below, creating the illusion that we are walking on stars. There is no telling where the night sky meets the earth.

I wrap my arms around her until my hands rest on her belly. Her back to my front, I lean down and whisper in her ear.

“We are at the El Salar de Uyuni.”

“I don’t—how is it—” I can hear the confusion in her voice. I place a kiss on her hair and explain.

“This was formed by a prehistoric lake that went dry. It’s considered one of the most remarkable places on earth. A thin layer of water is beneath us.” Her head drops down, and she takes it all in. Stars are above us and beneath our feet. “Right there”—I point up to the stars twinkling from above—“That’s the constellation Phoenix. I wanted to bring you here, under the stars you were named after, to marry you.”

I turn her around and place my hand under her chin until she’s looking up into my eyes. “I didn’t just want to marry you under the stars, but I wanted you to stand on them too.”

Her eyes glisten with tears, but not tears of sadness. Tears of joy. They are full of love, an unconditional love that I have been searching for all my life. I never expected to find it—her, but life has a funny way of playing out. Phoenix has taught me that.

You can find love and happiness anywhere, as long as you’re willing to let it in. That and to forgive yourself. I owe my life to this remarkable woman. I will spend the rest of my days proving that, by loving and breathing for her.

“I feel like I’m flying.” Her voice is filled with awe, and it makes me smile.

“You are, my little dove. And from this moment forward, I want to fly with you.” Even in the darkness, I can see her eyes fill with tears, the soft sound of her silent sobs the only noise

in the still of the night. “From the ashes, you rose, Phoenix. Rekindled from a spark. You are fire. You are hope. You are everything I need and everything I love. I’m irrevocably in love with you. Will you marry me here? Now. Be mine forever.”

Her arms wrap around me, and she places her lips on mine. “Yes.”

And there underneath the stars, with just the driver officiating the wedding, we say our vows. Sealing our lives to eternity.

EPILOGUE

Phoenix

One year later ...

IT'S BEEN ONE YEAR SINCE MY FATHER LEFT US. ONE YEAR OF having to figure out a way to live without him in my life.

Alaric has been my rock. He has loved me unconditionally and given me exactly what I've needed.

Even today, as I hold our daughter in my arms, I still need Alaric's strength holding me up.

Together, we walk up the hill to the stone that says his name.

Michael Lawrence.

Beloved Father.

He might not have been my biological father, but he loved me with all his heart, and that's all that matters.

"Hi, Dad," I say. "I'm sorry I've haven't been here in a while. I was having a baby, so I think you'll forgive me."

Alaric places the flowers that I had him pick up on the way to the grave.

"I'm here right now because I want you to meet your granddaughter." I step closer. "Dad, this is Michaela. She is everything that is perfect in this world. She has shown me what true love is. You would have loved her."

Michaela makes a cooing sound, and I know it in my heart that she is saying hello to her grandfather.

We stay at the graveyard for some time. Eventually, Alaric takes Michaela in his arms when she gets fussy and walks back to the car with her. When I'm alone with my dad, I begin to tell him about everything.

I tell him about Damian. I tell him once Damian was dead, I had to bring Alaric back to life. But every day, he got better. We sailed for some time during my pregnancy, and then when I was about to be in my third trimester, we came back to New York so we could be around the best doctors in the world. Alaric was insistent about that.

Life has been calm since Alaric left the business. At first, I thought he would resent me for making him stop, but he never did say anything. In fact, since he's given it up, he seems at peace.

When I'm done talking to my father, I head back to the car. I find Alaric in the back seat, whispering sweet nothings to our baby.

"What are you doing in here? What are you telling her?" I laugh.

Alaric places a kiss on his daughter's head and looks up at me with a large grin on his face. "I'm telling her all about the time her momma stowed away on my yacht."

This man. "You would, wouldn't you?" My eyes roll as I shake my head in mock disgust.

"What?" He shrugs. "It's a great story."

As much as I want to tease him some more about what he tells our daughter, I can't because he's right. "It is, isn't it?"

"The best."

Alaric places Michaela in her car seat, and then we both get into the front seat of the car.

"Where to now?" I ask.

"Home," he responds.

“And then ...?”

“Wherever the tide will take us. As long as we are together, I’m home,” he says.

And it’s true. In Alaric’s arms, I’ve found a home.

We give each other a place we both belong—filled with hope, love, peace—and most of all, a family.

And when you have those things, time holds no meaning, and the possibilities are infinite.

Like the sea.

RUTHLESS MONARCH

EPIGRAPH

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

PROLOGUE

Matteo

I CAN SMELL DEATH IN THE AIR. ITS PUNGENT AROMA THICK and heavy in my nostrils as I amble across the warehouse.

Each step through the crimson terrain reminds me of all I lost and why I am here now.

My father died.

My mother died.

Fuck, even my brother died.

The war to maintain my family's control over the East Coast has been long, bloody, and jam-packed with casualties.

But in the end, I won.

I always do.

I know this reprieve from violence won't last long. Another enemy is always lurking in the shadows.

The underworld is like the Hydra. You cut off one head, and two more grow in its place.

I know this time is no different. I need to prepare for war.

There has been a lull for the past few months.

I pay a great deal of money to be apprised of my cousin's dealings.

There is no question he is coming for me. He's been coming for me for years.

Ever since my father died, and I was put in charge.

He believed he should have been the one to take over.

Deeming me not the rightful heir.

Technically, he's not wrong. Had his father lived, this kingdom would have been his.

But regardless of what could have been, I'm in charge and the best option.

At thirty-five, I have already lived more than most. I had been raised half my life to take over my family's business.

On the books, we own a legitimate enterprise.

Behind that, we own everything.

The door swings open, and in walks my right-hand man and cousin, Lorenzo.

"What do you have for me?" I spit out.

His dark eyes are narrowed. As soon as they look at me, I know something is wrong. The thing about him is that he doesn't just work for me. He's like a brother, which is why I'm already on edge with the rigid, cold stare he gives.

"Nothing good," he states, and the customary humor he once allowed himself to show me is gone.

I lean forward in my chair. "Go on."

"He's moving on Chicago."

"What the fuck does that mean?" I draw in a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, but no amount of oxygen will fix this. I should have killed that fuck when I had a chance. Maybe it's not too late.

"He's got his mitts on every dirty politician. He's got the ear of the governor. We might have won Boston, but he's got the ear of the Irish."

"Fuck."

“What do you think that means for us?”

“It means he’s not done.”

“What do you want to do?”

I lean back in my chair, a bitter smile on my lips.

“We need to take him out before he succeeds.”

Matteo

ONE YEAR LATER ...

DESPITE EVERYTHING I THOUGHT, I LOST CHICAGO.

That was enough to send my ego and bloodthirst spinning. But that wasn't all. Salvatore is rumored to be making another play for the East Coast.

This is where it stops.

The East Coast is *mine*.

I don't give a fuck who he thinks he is. I won't let him take it from me.

The door to my office swings open. The sound of Italian loafers hitting the marble ricochets through the room.

I don't have to look up to know it's Lorenzo, and by the way he stomps in, it's not good.

"What now?" I lift my head from the papers I'm looking over and see his scowl. In the year that has passed, he's grown up a lot, and is no longer the happy-go-lucky bastard he once was.

Lorenzo runs his hands over his face, heaving out a long-suffering sigh. "I'm not going to lie to you, it's bad."

“How bad?”

“Gotta get our shit together, bad. While we were focused on holding ties with the Irish, Salvatore was focusing on our own backyard.”

My knuckles turn white as I grasp my chrome desk, on the verge of fucking bending it completely. “Don’t talk in riddles, Lorenzo. Spit it out.”

“Governor Marino.”

There is a stillness to the room at his words, followed by silence.

My fist slams down on the table, cutting through the heavy tension lingering in the air. Lorenzo doesn’t jump back, but he winces, aware of how thoroughly and mercilessly fucked we are.

Frank Marino, the Governor of New Jersey, has always been a thorn in my side. Ever since he rejected my proposal for port access and I had to go above him and work with the governor of New York, we have not gotten along. That, coupled by the fact I know of his past business dealings with my deceased uncle, leaves no love lost between us. But to know my cousin has anything to do with him is even worse.

“Talk.”

Lorenzo shakes his head, and I know what he’s about to tell me is going to be bad. There is a tenseness to his shoulders, one that’s often not present. No one else would notice, but to me, Lorenzo is an open book. The same goes for him about me. It makes everything much easier in certain situations that we can speak without words.

“Governor Marino is in talks with Salvatore. If what I hear is true, and it always is, Marino is giving him port access.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” He nods.

I motion my hand to the chair. “Sit. But before you do, grab the scotch. We have a lot to discuss.”

Lorenzo moves over to the side table, his hand reaching out to grab the decanter. Once in hand, he grabs two glasses.

“Should I even bother getting ice?”

“The fucking glasses are a stretch.” I use the remainder of my willpower not to spit on the floor.

Normally, I would drink scotch on the rocks, but right now, I just need a drink, and I don’t care if it goes down with a side of cyanide.

When both our glasses are poured, he takes a seat, and like me, I know he needs it. War may be a part of my business, but that doesn’t mean I show up to battle willingly.

But the battle is a necessary evil. To win, one must be cruel.

“So, Salvatore has access to the ports, and there is nothing we can do about it,” Lorenzo grumbles.

“Not necessarily,” I grit out through clenched teeth.

“How do you figure? Marino hates you. He’s been trying to get you out for years. We’ve been doing the same.”

“We need to find something on him.” My voice is rough, making Lorenzo tense. He places his drink down. Right before my eyes, my drinking buddy is gone, in his place is the *underboss*.

“I’ve tried.” He straightens his back, sitting up taller. “I have everyone looking into him. The man is squeaky fucking clean.”

“No one is that clean. Especially no one getting into bed with my cousin. We need to find something. Look into his family. His wife. His daughter. There must be something.”

“Will do.”

“Also, once you do that, I need you to call Cristian and set up a meeting. We are going to be needing a new shipment of guns, and now that Alaric Prince is retired, I need to discuss how business will proceed.”

“On it. Anything else?”

“Get Marco on the phone for me as well. Maybe he knows what Salvatore is up to.”

Lorenzo’s face falls for a nanosecond, before he rearranges it into his usual blank stare. There is no love lost between them. Marco is another cousin of mine. He’s older. Old enough that he was involved with the war between my father and Salvatore’s.

His loyalty falls with me, but Lorenzo doesn’t trust him. To be honest, I don’t either. But like all potential enemies, I keep him close.

The closer he is, the faster I will see if he’s a snake like Salvatore.

With nothing more to say, Lorenzo leaves my office.

I pick up my phone and dial a number I haven’t called in a long time.

“Hello, Matteo. I wondered how long it would take.”

“Cut the shit.”

“If you don’t want me to talk, why are you calling, Cousin?”

“You know exactly why.”

“Why so serious?” He tsks like the Joker, mirth in his voice. “Maybe you need to get laid. Is that it? Get rid of all this pent-up stress. Did you need me to help you find someone ...” My teeth clench at his words, knowing full well what he means. “Francesca is a little old now, but I bet she still can use her—”

“Shut the fuck up!” I bellow, and he chuckles on the phone.

“Did I hit a nerve?”

“Don’t you want to be better than your sadistic father? Haven’t you had enough war? Back off now, and I’ll let you live.”

“Not a chance. I want what’s mine ...” He pauses. “And I’m prepared to do what I need to get it.”

“You realize this is a war declaration,” I say quietly. Smoothly. There is no way back from this. Frankly, I don’t want there to be.

“Guess so.”

I launch the phone in the air, hurling it against the wall. The sound echoes through the air as it smashes through the drywall.

I’ll have to get a new phone, but lucky for me, we go through burners so often we are basically a phone store.

It’s only a few minutes later when Lorenzo walks back in. He looks at me and then at the far wall.

“Problems?” he asks as he points at the phone.

“I called my cousin.”

All emotions other than anger evaporate from his eyes. It reminds me of ice spreading, hardening his features.

“Didn’t go well?”

“What gave that away?” I lift a sarcastic brow.

“Could be the broken glass on the floor.” Lorenzo shrugs, trying to loosen the mood. It works as I lean back in my chair.

“What did you find out?”

“Nothing yet on the Marco front. As for Cristian, I secured more guns for us. We have to meet to go over the numbers and models we want. He wants us to go to his warehouse in New York to look over his inventory. How many are you thinking?”

“Hundreds. We need both the compound and the warehouse stocked and prepared for anything. I don’t just want guns; we also need tear gas and grenades.”

“I’ll let him know when we schedule the meet. Anything else?”

I shake my head. “Come back after you speak to Marco.”

It’s hours later.

I’m staring at a map of locations my men need to collect from this week, and I’m putting together who will go where. I

need to call my men in to discuss what's going on, but I am reluctant to until I have more info.

As if on cue, the door opens again.

Lorenzo is back, and this time, he walks up to my desk. He's holding an iPad.

"What did you find out?"

"A lot," he answers.

"Get everyone in here." I don't specify who I mean, but Lorenzo knows who I want to hear this. My most important men. My underboss, capo, and consigliere.

Lorenzo fires off a text, and a minute later, Roberto and Luka step into the room.

"The first thing we know is this, Marino's wife has been depositing money into the bank account of Ana Checklov's family for over twelve years," Roberto says. He is, for all intents and purposes, what most would refer to as my *consigliere*. He is my advisor and one of the smartest men I know. He studied law before stepping into his role in the business. After Lorenzo, he is the closest person to me.

Lorenzo nods and then hands over the iPad, and I see the documents that Jaxson Price, the computer hacker I keep on retainer, has sent over.

"And who is Ana Checklov?"

His hand reaches out and swipes at the screen. Behind the bank transactions are documents on the woman in question.

"An affair?" I ask, and it's Luka who shakes his head.

"No, according to the records, she was Marino's daughter's nanny," he answers.

"Interesting. Why would the governor be paying the nanny for twelve years?"

"Probably an affair." Lorenzo laughs, agreeing with my earlier assessment.

"What do we have on her?" I ask.

Lorenzo keeps scrolling through the data.

“Not a whole lot.” His finger swipes the screen of the iPad.
“Wait. Lookie here.”

He points at the document on the screen. There, in front, is a death certificate.

“Little Ana Checklov is dead.”

“It appears that way. It looks like she died twelve years ago.”

“And the payments. They’ve been going on for all these years?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Now isn’t that interesting…”

“Let’s get to the bottom of why they are paying her family. Luka, I want you to speak with anyone who knows them, neighbors, old staff members. Find out what Marino is hiding. I don’t care what it costs. I need to know this now.”

“Okay,” he answers before he leaves to start the task I have thrust upon him. I turn to Roberto.

“I need you to get Marco over here.”

“No problem. Also, I spoke to Cyrus.”

“And? Do I still have money?” I laugh, lightening the mood. “Or has my banker stolen everything?”

“He’s a pain the ass. I prefer to deal with Maxwell,” he gripes, and I can’t really blame him. Cyrus Reed, aka the bank to the underworld, is one of the biggest pricks out there, but he’s damn good at his job.

“I’m sure you’ll get your wish soon enough. It’s only a matter of time until he’s completely retired.”

“Is there anything else we can do for you?” Lorenzo asks.

“Nope.”

Both men move to leave the room as I lean back in my chair. This is going to be a long night.

Lorenzo stops at the door and turns to face me. “I forgot to tell you. You’re meeting with Cristian to discuss the incoming shipment of guns this week.”

I nod. “Come back when you have more information for me.”

“Will do.”

They leave me in my office with the iPad still on my desk.

Pulling it closer to me, I swipe the screen.

What are you hiding, Marino?

I look through the images of the governor. My teeth grind together as I stare at the man who has become a thorn in my side. His dark, soulless eyes stare back at me in each picture. He’s probably in his mid-sixties, the age my father would be if he were still alive, with salt-and-pepper hair and an olive complexion. I imagine women must think him to be a handsome man, regardless of the wrinkles lining his weathered face. Power and money will do that.

I continue my perusal. The next image stops me because in this one, he’s not alone.

He stares back at me, sandwiched between his wife and daughter.

His daughter is the one who gives me pause.

She’s gorgeous.

An exotic beauty with long, dark brown hair that flows in loose waves past her breasts.

She’s different than the women I associate with ...

I drag my eyes away from her photo to look at the rest of the file.

Twenty-two years old.

Five feet two.

Well educated.

A whole future ahead of her.

Pity.

Viviana

ONLY ONE MORE WEEK LEFT UNTIL GRADUATION. I CAN'T believe the day is almost here.

Once it comes, I'll finally be able to distance myself.

I'll find a job.

I will get out from under my father's thumb.

I just need to make it through one more week.

Not true.

A job. Paying my bills.

A heavy feeling weighs on my chest. I'll never be able to escape him.

My father will use me as his pawn as he always does. Once I leave school, he'll keep me in line by making me work for him.

And I have no choice...

Maybe one day.

The door to my apartment swings open. I don't need to look up from my computer to know who it is.

It's obviously Julia.

She's the only person—well, besides my parents—who has a key.

“Hey, babe.” I hear her say as the sound of her feet on the floor echoes through the space as she approaches me on the couch.

“Hi.” I lift my gaze from the screen. “Didn't think you'd be here so early.”

“Umm, you should have expected me earlier.” She rolls her eyes, making me laugh. “We're going out, remember? It's pre-gaming time.”

“Pre-gaming. Really, Jules, what am I, still in college?”

“For another week, you are. Don't rush me. You're not ready for the real world. I hear there are work and taxes and all kinds of bullshit out there. Please tell me you're still coming with me tonight and you didn't forget.” She groans loudly, being her completely overdramatic self.

I stare at her for a moment. When she laughs, she reminds me so much of her mother. They have the same light brown hair and blue eyes, but it's the way she smiles. It's the same smile Ana had when she would play with us. When she would move the figurines around the old dollhouse with me.

My heart clenches.

“Viv, where did you go? You're off in la-la land.” Jules snaps her fingers, pulling me from my memories.

What was she saying? Oh yeah, going out tonight.

“How could I forget? You reminded me every day this week.” I pretend to sulk, but really, I love her.

“Well, we have to celebrate you graduating.”

“I haven't graduated *yet*.”

“Semantics.”

I roll my eyes at my friend.

But she is right. Although, technically, I haven't gotten my diploma yet, I am officially done with school.

This is my last weekend living here, and next week, I will have to tell my father I wasn't going to be part of his plan for the future.

My father has considered me a bargaining chip for the longest time. I've been able to put him off for years by going to college, but my father comes from a traditional Sicilian family. In his mind, I should already be married.

Married to a man he's picked for me.

It's just a matter of time before the shoe drops, and he dictates my life.

As crazy as it sounds, I'm expecting a call about my impending doom at any minute.

For some time now, I've known that my father will try to marry me off to whoever he thinks will benefit him.

A future I want no part of.

"When do you go back home?" Julia asks as she walks to the kitchen attached to my living room and swings open the fridge. A minute later, Diet Coke in hand, she sits on the couch adjacent from me.

"Hopefully never," I mumble under my breath.

"Yeah, because Daddy Marino will ever go for that."

"A girl's allowed to dream." I let out a wistful sigh.

"That's not a dream, honey. That's a fantasy. Hell will freeze over before Marino will let you out of his sight. I'm surprised you haven't been summoned before. Isn't he champing at the bit to marry you off?"

"He is." There's a ball of anxiety in my voice, and it is growing impossibly large right now.

"And who is the lucky suitor?" She laughs. This has become a game. I go to dinner with my family, my father tries to arrange a marriage for me, and then I meet up with Julia and tell her all the gruesome details.

"Beats the fuck out of me. But I'm not looking forward to that fight. I need to think of a plan. Every time they do this,

I'm afraid this will be the time they finally make me."

"Do you have enough money saved to break free on your own?"

"No," I admit. And that ball of anxiety? It gets bigger, making it harder to breathe.

"I wish I could help ..."

I lean forward, placing my face in my palms. "I know, and I love you for it."

And I do. Julia and I have been friends since we were kids. Her mother was my nanny, and she and her brother were raised on the estate with me. After her mother passed, we had lost touch.

My father's doing ...

He controlled me and who I spoke to.

But when we ended up at the same college by chance, our friendship quickly reverted to what it was before. The moment I heard from one of the staff members at my parents' house that Jules would be at NYU as well, I had a feeling I would see her. I was right. She sought me out, and when she finally found me, she basically jumped on top of me and vowed never to let me out of her sight again. Seeing her the first time was hard. I hadn't seen her since her mother died. The memories attacked me, making it hard to breathe, but then she laughed like she always did, smiled, and made me promise never to leave her again.

I did.

A promise I'll never regret.

No matter what it costs me, I need her in my life. She is my life raft. The only person who understands my family. Understands the power the "governor" has on me.

In her own way, and unbeknownst to her, she's a part of it.

My need to help her, protect her, and also atone for my past sins, keeps me under my father's thumb.

She doesn't know that part, though. Nor will she ever.

“When do you have to see him?” Her voice dips, her once peppy attitude turning more somber.

“Dinner is tomorrow, I’m sure. Like always,” I deadpan.

As much as I wish it wasn’t the case, my father insists I attend family dinner every Sunday night. He makes sure pictures are always taken, posted, and tweeted.

He wants to portray the picture of the perfect family man.

If only that was the truth.

But that’s my role. To be the perfect daughter. All in the great pursuit of the ultimate goal.

My father has always made it very clear what that would be.

My father has presidential dreams. He also has very powerful friends who will get him there.

The man is cutthroat, ruthless, and to top it off, a real asshole.

There is not one good bone in his whole body.

He is the devil incarnate.

A feeling of dread always overcomes me when I know I have to see him. That I will have to acknowledge his presence at all.

But the worst part about it, the part I dread the most, is that no matter how hard I try to break away, he still has complete control over me. It’s gotten worse too. Every year, it gets worse. My heart lurches again as bile travels up my throat.

I hate the man.

The feeling is mutual, I’m sure.

There is no love lost between us.

As if manifested by a higher power, my cell phone dings on the table. I know it’s him before I even check who’s calling.

Other than Julia, no one calls me.

Not even my mother.

She is the dutiful wife. The perfect politician's accessory.

Too bad she is an awful parent. Even awful is an understatement for what she is.

I grab my phone and look down. Just as I suspected, there on the screen is a message from dear old dad.

Governor asshole: Dinner tomorrow. 6:00 pm. Do not be late, Viviana.

Great. He's scolding me through the phone.

I tip it toward Jules to show her what he wrote. She laughs when she sees it.

"Governor asshole? Not Dad?"

"Lord no. That wouldn't properly depict how I feel every time he calls me. Now would it?" I smile. It's a sugary sweet smile, but one hundred percent laced with venom.

"No." She shakes her head. "It wouldn't."

Julia knows how much I hate my father, but she doesn't truly understand.

She doesn't understand that the money my family pays hers is hush money more than it is to help them. And she doesn't know the secret of why ...

When her mother died in my house, she and her brother were orphaned, left to live with poor relatives. Everything I have ever done that my father has asked of me is to make sure he helps her and Jonathan.

I shake my head. I can't think of that now.

Especially when there is nothing I can do to get out from under his thumb.

He leverages everything on me. Always making sure I behave.

Needing to think about something else, I stand from the chair and turn to face Julia.

"I'm going to get showered. Need to look good for tonight." I smile. The truth is, I don't care what I look like, but

my guilt eats away at me, so I have to leave.

“Yeah, you kind of smell too.” I laugh at her words and shake my head as I walk toward my bedroom, leaving a giggling Julia behind.

Once I’m in my bathroom, I strip off my clothes, turn the shower on, and step under the water.

It’s scalding hot.

Too hot.

Reminding me of a time before. A time when my whole life changed. A time that is still holding me hostage all these years later.

They say that time can heal all wounds.

But what if the wounds are still festering?

What if there is no cure?

What do you do then?

It’s been twelve years, and I still have no answer to that question. It hovers over me like a black hole in the dark universe. I know it will eventually suck me in and eat me alive. The only question is when.

As I stand here, lost in my thoughts, I forget how hot the water is. The bathroom is fogged up, and I can barely see in front of me.

Quickly, I turn the shower knob. The water temperature changes fast. Now it feels like it’s pouring ice over my body.

I shiver against the pellets hitting my skin.

But I welcome it. The job is done. It cools the memories, thrusting them back into the crevices of my mind where I need to keep them.

At least for now.

That maybe won’t be the case soon, but until I can do something about it, I have to make it day by day. I have to survive the torture this man inflicts upon me, even if that means entertaining his friend’s children. Or being paraded

around like a high-priced hooker, one whose virtue is the price of the right political alliance.

I take a deep breath and continue to wash my hair until the water runs clear from the suds, then I turn it off and pull back the curtain to grab my towel.

When I'm done drying my skin, I can't help but stare at myself in the cloudy mirror.

I lean over the bathroom countertop until I'm close enough to touch my reflection. I look exhausted, weary, and above all—like I've seen too much. Although my face is what others might construe as perfect, at twenty-two, to me, it's anything but. Too much emotional weight sits on my shoulders. Eyes that always look haunted by the ghosts of my past.

Will I ever feel young and carefree again?

You will figure it out, Viviana.

Everything will be okay. I must tell myself that, even if it's not true.

I'm almost done with school. I'll get a job.

Yep. That's it. Once I get a job, it will be over. I won't need him anymore.

Pushing my shoulders back, I stand taller, knowing I won't let him win.

Eventually, I will be the victor.

HOURS LATER, WE'RE AT THE BAR.

As much as I pretend I want to be here, I don't. My nerves are too shot for what tomorrow will bring. Carefree hasn't been in my vocabulary since I was ten years old and learned what I was born into.

I know I should get drunk with my friend and not think about it, but I can't.

The black cloud hangs over me. There is no pushing it away. How could I? Every time I see him, there is another demand made of me. Something he needs me to do that I don't want to.

No matter what, though, no matter what is asked, I'll do it.

I will willingly give another piece of my soul for the price of my friends.

The music blares through the space, drowning out some of my thoughts. I can barely hear anything as I feel Julia's hand on my arm.

"Let's grab a drink," she says, pulling me with her to the bar. I take a moment to let my eyes scan the room. Sleek, red velvet booths surround the space, and black crystal chandeliers hang from above.

"Sure!" I yell back.

Together, we make our way across the room. Once we are standing in front of the bartender, we order drinks.

He's quick at making them, smiling at me as he pours the liquid into the glasses.

As I lift it to my mouth, I swear I see someone staring at me from across the bar.

Yes. He's one hundred percent looking at me.

Wow.

He's handsome. Dangerously so. The kind of handsome you read about in romance books.

Mesmerizing eyes. Jet-black hair.

He has the perfect five o'clock shadow, and his cheekbones are so sharp my fingers itch to touch them.

Something is menacing in the way he stares at me, making my back muscles go rigid.

"Viv," I hear Julia say, but I'm transfixed by the man across the bar. "Viv..." she says again, and I finally turn to her. "Everything okay?" she asks.

“I was just ... The man over there,” I respond, gesturing over my shoulder with my head.

A line forms between her brows. “What man?”

“Across the bar.”

“There’s no one—”

“Right there ...” I look over to where he was, and no one is there. The space is completely empty.

I shake my head in confusion.

He was there, wasn’t he?

I lift the drink to my mouth and continue to look around. But there is absolutely no one who even resembles the man anywhere in the bar.

I must have been imagining him.

“Come on, let’s dance,” Jules shouts above the sound of the music, but I shake my head.

“Next song. I want to finish my drink.” She nods with a smile, and then she is off, like her normal, crazy self.

A laugh bubbles up as I see her making her way into the throngs of people. Arms in the air, swaying her hips.

“Why don’t you join her ...?”

I pivot to face the new voice, and when our eyes lock, I freeze in place, my breath stuck in my chest.

It’s him. The man from before.

And he is talking to me.

Although it’s dark in the club, I can make out the outline of his features better now.

If I thought he was beautiful from across the room, that image holds no candle to what he looks like up close.

He looks familiar, but I can’t place him. Hopefully, he’s not someone who knows my family. That would be a shame. A dangerous shame at that. But the way he looks at me, I doubt it. He just must have one of those faces.

A completely gorgeous one.

Even this close, I still can't make out his eye color. If I had to guess, I would say blue or hazel. Either way, they are as I noted before, *mesmerizing*.

It's as though he can hear my thoughts, his lip tipping up into what I can only describe as a wicked smirk.

"I wasn't in the mood," I answer.

"Her loss is my gain." Confidence oozes in his voice, but where it might be a turn-off for some, when he speaks, my body grows warm.

It's not often I'm able to indulge in mindless flirting. Between school and my father trying to pawn me off on every successful politician's son or even worse, politician, I don't often have fun.

I pivot on my heels. Now, no longer looking over my shoulder, I can see his full build.

This man is out of my league.

I reach for my glass and down the last sip.

"Would you like another one?"

Should I?

The more I drink, the worse tomorrow will be.

But now that I'm thinking of tomorrow, liquid courage might be exactly what I need.

"You know what? Yeah, please," I answer, and the man next to me signals the bartender, who is quick to oblige us.

The music switches to a louder and more upbeat song. I can only imagine Jules is probably completely lost to me in the beat.

"Your friend is having fun," the stranger says as he reaches for my drink on the bar and hands it to me.

"Yes. She is good at that," I say.

"At what?"

“Having fun.”

“And you?” He quirks a dark, thick eyebrow. I move my jaw back and forth.

“Not so much,” I admit. “What should we drink to?”

He holds up his glass for a toast. Even his square fingernails are perfect. My stomach dips.

“You pick, Somber Girl.”

“To crazy friends dragging you to a club just to ditch you.” I shrug.

“To strangers at a bar playing hero,” he answers.

“Are you the hero?” I ask playfully, the alcohol making my head fuzzy and freeing me of my normal inhibitions.

“Not often.”

“Then what are you?”

More importantly—*who* are you?

He leans in close, very close, his mouth hovering next to my ear ...

My body becomes hyperaware of our proximity as butterflies erupt in my stomach. This is not good. I shouldn't feel his hands on me before he even touched me.

“I'm the—” he starts to say, but then a hand is wrapped around my bicep. I'm yanked backward, my head swinging around to find a dancing Jules. “You promised the next song!” she screams, flinging her arms in the air.

I turn back to the stranger, about to apologize, about to ask him to join me, but when I do, he's gone.

Again.

And like before, I wonder if I imagined the whole thing.

THE NEXT DAY I WAKE WITH A SLIGHT HEADACHE.

Nothing too awful, but bad enough that I grab two painkillers, so glad that I keep them and a bottle of water on my bedside table, and gulp them down.

Once I have taken it, I reach for my phone to check the time.

It's already 11:00 a.m.

Wow, I must have drunk more than I thought.

In the beginning, I didn't plan to stay out too long, but after being dragged onto the dance floor by Jules, I drank more.

Now, I'm late waking up and have too much to do to catch up before my father beckons to me.

I inhale deeply and check to see if there are any phone calls. Unfortunately, there is.

Governor asshole: Be here at 5 p.m.

Shit.

I lost an hour.

Walking into the living room, I find a passed-out Julia on the couch. Her mouth is open, and I swear she's probably drooling all over my pillow.

"Wake up, lazy," I say as I take a seat on the opposite couch.

"What time is it?" She groans, lifting her hand and swiping at her half-closed lids.

"Eleven."

"And you wake me up. Jeez, Viv, stuck up much?" Regardless of her words, I know she is not angry with me. This is just Julia. Overly dramatic to the extreme. She wears her heart on her sleeve and lets you know all about it too. That's why we get along so well. Not only is she the family I never had, but she's the complete opposite of me. She pushes me to try to enjoy life. Even if that's hard for me. If it wasn't for her, I'd never have any glimmers of peace. "If you are going to wake me, are you at least going to feed me?"

“Of course,” I answer in a mock tone. “What kind of animal do you take me for?”

“Fine. I’ll wake up.” She sits up, and she looks like a mess. Gorgeous but a mess nonetheless. “What are we eating?”

“What do you want?”

“Something obnoxiously greasy. Bacon, egg, and cheese on a bagel.”

I pull out my phone and start to scroll through the food delivery app. “French fries too?”

“Umm, duh.”

I swipe across the screen and place our orders.

“Ugh, Viv. I’m so hungover. I’m never going to drink again.”

“Lies,” I say flatly.

Jules laughs groggily, but stops when she realizes it results in one hell of a headache. I look over at my disheveled friend. I don’t look or feel much better than her. The drink I had with the stranger was not needed.

Speaking of ...

“For someone who wants me to go out and get laid, you certainly were a cockblock last night,” I deadpan.

“What do you mean?” She tilts her head to the side, brows knit together.

“The guy I was talking to.”

“You were talking to a guy?”

“Yes, dick. I was. And he was hot.”

“Oops.”

“Oops is right. Now I have to go to my parents’ tonight and, who knows, that could have been my last chance at a torrid affair. Knowing my father, he’s shipping me off to live with a long-lost family member in Sicily.”

She grimaces at my words.

“I sure hope not.”

“Me too.”

I DREAD SEEING HIM.

All the way into New Jersey, my stomach twists and turns.

As we approach the large monstrosity of the governor’s house, it feels as though a heavy lead weighs me down.

There is no question my father is about to request... demand something of me.

Usually, there is a hefty price to be paid, but I fear the price will be steeper since I have pushed back this moment to go to college. It was inevitable that we would discuss my future, but now that I know it’s time to pay the piper, I’m not ready.

So far in life, I have given in. I have played the dutiful daughter. Smiling and political for his campaign, but now as the car he’s sent for me drives through the gates, I’m truly scared.

I’m done with college.

His requests will be more significant.

No doubt a price I’m not willing to pay.

A price I’ll have to pay.

When the car stops, I wait for the driver to exit the car and open the door.

It’s pretentious, and I hate it. But just in case a camera is flashing somewhere in the distance, I have no choice.

I step out of the car, then place my hand down and flatten my skirt.

My hair is perfectly coifed.

I am the perfect example of a politician’s daughter.

I know my father has lofty goals, and I know he will use me to further them if he can.

I take the few steps, and as if on cue, the large mahogany door swings open.

A member of my father's staff sent to greet me.

You would think I would have the luxury of coming and going in my own house...

I don't.

And let's be honest, this is not my house. Nor was the one before.

I've never truly had a home.

Not true.

Ana gave me a home.

She took care of me, fed me, cleaned my cuts, and played with me for hours.

Well, at least she did before my mistake.

"The governor is in his office."

"And my mother?" I ask as I walk through the foyer.

"She's upstairs."

Not a surprise. She's always been too busy being the perfect wife to care about being a good, hell, *decent* mother.

She never came to my school plays. Nor did she even attend a curriculum night. Always too busy jet-setting. Hobnobbing with someone important, and most probably drunk.

Thankfully, Ana, for the time she was in my life, was there for me.

If only she were here now. She would hold my hand and give me strength. But since she's not, I square my own shoulders and pretend she is whispering in my ear. "*Plato said,*

‘Courage is knowing what not to fear.’ You have no reason to fear your dad. He’s just a man.”

At the time, I didn’t know who Plato was, but I trusted that she was right. I tried to be brave and not fear him, and I’m still trying. Her voice still in my ear.

I continue toward my father’s office and find the door open.

Of course it is.

He’s waiting for me, drinking his scotch and ready to strike. You can see it in his eyes and with his posture. He oozes danger in quantities that should be illegal, and the ball of anxiety in my throat is back again.

“Come in, Viviana.”

His voice takes me by surprise. I’m lurking and didn’t think he knew I was here.

But I shouldn’t be surprised.

My father sees everything

Knows everything.

I tentatively walk inside, taking small, measured steps.

“Hurry up, Viviana. I don’t have all night, and I have something I need to speak to you about.”

My stomach feels heavy, filled with dread.

I can feel the sweat start to bead in the back of my hair, my heart pounding in my chest as I cross the space and take a seat on the chair opposite from where he sits at his desk. His dark and angry eyes stare at me as his lips thin into a sneer.

“What did you have to talk to me about?” I ask, trying desperately to sound strong and confident.

“Your graduation.”

My ears start to ring, making it hard to hear. I take a deep breath.

Show no fear.

Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you squirm.

As my pulse regulates, he speaks.

"I expect now that you have finished, you will do your duty for your family."

"Duty?"

"Yes, Viviana. Your duty. Your mother and I have indulged you for way too long."

"What does that even mean?"

"We allowed you to go to college. Allowed you to get the best education. You are now a well-spoken, educated young lady..."

"And?"

"Now it's time to help us."

I shake my head, not understanding what he's trying to say.

"Help ... how? Like work in your office?"

It wasn't an ideal solution, but I would work there for a bit to get him off my case while I save money to do something else. Of course, I'm stalling. I'm not dumb and optimistic enough to assume that's what he's talking about.

"Come now, Viviana. You know better than that."

"I do?" *Stalling, stalling, stalling.*

"Your place isn't in the office. You are much better served elsewhere."

"And where would that be?" My tone is clipped now.

"Making alliances."

Cold ice fills my veins as I wait for what I know is about to come.

"I think it's time we used your looks, personality, and now education to our advantage."

"Umm. I don't understand."

“As you know, I have goals. Big goals. And in order to achieve these goals, I need to have the right connections. The best way for me to achieve this is to work with certain people.”

“Okay ...”

“But to do this, I need to show a level of commitment. I need to tie myself to them. And you are the perfect way.”

“I’m sorry, Father, but I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“I want you to marry Salvatore Amante.”

My mouth drops open. And that ball of anxiety in my throat? It just blocked my air pipes.

“I ... I can’t marry him. I don’t know him,” I somehow manage to say.

“Viviana, that wasn’t a suggestion. You will marry Salvatore Amante. I need him. He will guarantee we get everything we have always desired.”

“We? Don’t you mean you?”

“You want this too, Viviana. This is what’s best for me, for you, and also for Julia.”

He slides a paper across the desk. “Read that over, and then tell me what you decide.”

The weight of the paper feels like a million pounds of stones in my hand. My head tilts down as my eyes scan it. The words blur under my unshed tears. Old scars from the past open and start to fester, but my stomach bottoms out when I see what it says, and my heart starts to race. My shaking hands drop the piece of evidence that changes everything. What I just read makes no sense. How can this be? If this is true ... Confusion and despair like I have never felt before pulses inside me.

“Is this real?”

“It is.”

“You—”

“Silence!” he bellows. “You will not question me. You will not question what I did. Understand me ... you *will* fall in line.” The threat hangs heavy in the air. “And remember what happened to Ana is your fault. What happens to her children from this moment forward ...” Is on me. He doesn’t say it, but there is no need. Their lives are in my hands, and I’m not sure what that means for any of us.

My reply sticks in my throat, gravelly, heavy, making it impossible to speak.

I won’t do as he says, but I can’t allow him to know. But first, I need to find out if he’s lying to me yet again.

My father is a monster. If he thinks I’m going against him, he will retaliate.

I need to bide my time and figure out a plan.

There has to be some way out of this mess.

I just have to figure out how.

Now, sitting at the table in the formal dining room, I try my best to get out of here unscathed. If there’s no talking at dinner, I’d be a happy camper.

There is nothing to say, so I try to keep my head down the whole time.

Unfortunately, my mother doesn’t agree with my sentiment because as I look down at the table, pushing my salad around the plate, she says my name.

“Viviana. When will you be moving back into the house?”

My head pops up. “What? No one said anything about me moving back in,” I fire at my father. “Why can’t I stay at my apartment?”

“That wouldn’t be proper,” she responds. My father gives me a pointed look. One that clearly says I will not give my parents a hard time about this.

“With you being done with school, I expect you back in the house.”

“I still have graduation ...” I try to argue, grasping at straws. Every day is needed to figure out a way out of this mess.

“Then I expect you home in one week, young lady. I can’t have people talking.”

And there it is. She doesn’t care about me. She only cares about her reputation. Now that I’m done with my studies, living alone in the city would be scandalous to her religious friends.

I’m expected to be a virginal bride. Too late for that, but at least if they have me under their roof, they think they can keep the gossip low. It’s funny how little they know about me. I’m not one for making a spectacle of myself. I have too much to lose already to chance it.

With a sigh, I nod. “Next week then.”

A very long hour later, I’m back in the car, pulling up to my apartment.

I’m not sure what I’m going to do.

My options are limited.

Like always, my father has me. If I don’t do what he wants, more than just me will suffer.

I’ve made too many people suffer already.

I can’t do it again.

With my head down and my heart heavy, I step out of the car. Normally, I would speak to Julia about my issues with my father, but seeing as this concerns her, I can’t burden her. Even though she doesn’t know the truth—that he’s using her future to hang over my head—if I told her, she would still tell me to tell my father to stuff it. Jules isn’t one to take orders. She beats to her own drum. I guess growing up without parents, with relatives you don’t know, makes you strong. Because she is. She’s headstrong, the type of girl to make a rash decision regardless of the consequences.

Nope, I can’t tell her. That’s not an option.

I shake myself out of my thoughts and pull the keys for my apartment out of my bag.

Placing it into the lock, I turn the key and swing the door open.

The apartment is pitch-black.

Hadn't I left the light on?

The small hairs on my neck rise.

Someone is here.

I'm not alone.

The small lamp in the corner of the room flips on.

His eyes.

I know those eyes.

“Hello, Viviana,” a husky voice drawls out, sending a chill down my back. “Let's pick up from where we left off. Why don't you have a seat? We have much to discuss.”

Matteo

“WHY ARE YOU IN MY APARTMENT?” HER VOICE CRACKS, giving away the fear that she is trying to conceal. She holds herself tall, but there is no mistaking the way she sounds. And if that isn’t enough, her eyes keep looking back at the door. She’s nervous, but she tries to hide it. It makes me want to toy with her. But I’m also aware she is a corrupt politician’s daughter through and through when she’s not completely falling over her own feet with shock. Another woman would have cried and fainted long ago.

I lean forward in the chair I’m sitting in and place the gun I’m holding on my knee.

“Come closer. I won’t bite.”

She does the opposite as I say, and instead, she takes a step back, edging toward her escape.

It won’t do her any good. Even if she makes it into the hall, my men are standing outside waiting for her.

Either way, the outcome will be the same.

“Why are you here?” she repeats. There is a false bravado in her voice, and it makes my lips tip up into a smile. I like the way she pretends she’s not terrified. I find something intoxicating about a strong woman who shows no fear.

Regardless of what she portrays, I know the truth, and I will exploit it.

I allow her to move another step, but this time, I shake my head while tsking.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” I lift my hand, displaying the gun that rests upon my lap.

Her eyes go wide.

She looks like a deer caught in headlights. There is no mistaking the fear and shock that crosses her face.

“Sit.” This time I leave no room for objection, and much to my pleasure, she obliges me.

Slowly, she crosses into the room, and then she takes a seat. If I was one to laugh, I would because she picks the farthest chair in the room from me to finally sit.

Not that it will help her.

If I wanted to harm her, it wouldn’t matter the distance between us. I would find a way.

“Viviana Marino ...” I draw out. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

As I suspected, her body stiffens at my addressing her by her full name.

“How do you know who I am?”

That’s when I decide to laugh, but it’s not a real laugh. It’s a sinister one.

Perfect for instilling fear in her. “I know everything about you. I know your name.” I gesture around. “I know where you live, your drink of choice, what you studied, how you like your fucking eggs, and most importantly, I know you are the only daughter of Governor Marino,” I finish, deadpan.

“All public knowledge. You use Google.” She shrugs, but she is shaking. I can see it. “Big deal.”

“You majored in English lit. Graduating with a 4.0 average, and your best friend is Julia Checklov. Should I go

on? Very well. You've been to the hospital two times, once for a broken wrist at the age of fifteen, and the other time from a fire at the age of ten."

The shock on her face from before has nothing on the look she's giving me now. Her normally large eyes are even bigger than usual. They look like they will burst from their sockets. She reminds me of a cartoon character.

I think she might pass out from how worked up she is, but instead, she nibbles on her lip and closes her eyes for a moment. When she finally opens them again, she looks calmer, stronger, with a passion that simmers beneath her surface. It's intriguing, like a perfectly wrapped gift that will be even more enjoyable to tear apart.

"This is about my dad," she states.

"Smart girl." I smirk. "Bet you didn't get that from your daddy."

"Well, then you're wasting your time. I know nothing about his work, and truth be told, he probably wouldn't give you anything for me."

"You think so little of your importance?"

"I have no importance." She tips her chin up, and I can tell she believes what she says. Unfortunately, she is an unreliable narrator in her own story.

"Don't you want to know why I'm here?" I can't help but grin. Fuck, she is gorgeous. And fuck, she'll be fun to play with.

"Honestly, not really."

Her response makes me chuckle, despite the fact that I normally don't. There is something about her. "Interesting answer. But regardless of what you want, I'm going to tell you."

She doesn't speak. Instead, she starts to nibble on her lip again. This must be her tell. She's nervous. I store this information away in my mind.

"Your father wants you to marry Salvatore Amante."

She stops chewing as her mouth drops open.

“How—”

I raise my hand up to silence her. “How do I know that? As I told you before, I know everything.”

Clearly, I have shocked her again, but she will soon learn that it is not often that something gets past me. *My cousin being the exception.*

Even from where I’m sitting across the room, I can still see how her jaw shakes. “W-what do you want from me?” she stutters.

“You’re not marrying him,” I say flatly. And mean it. She won’t.

She narrows her eyes and then shakes her head. “I don’t think you understand. My father—”

“Is the one of no importance in this story. I understand more than you will ever know, Viviana.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she whispers more to herself than to me, but I still answer.

“Yes, you do.” My voice is strong, and it leaves no room for objection. Instead, she studies me, trying to understand why I’m here talking to her.

“Why do you even care?”

This is the part where I get to smile. Well, more like smirk. This is the part where I tell her the future she has yet to figure out. Her role in this chess game between my cousin and me. “I care because you are going to marry me instead.”

I expect her to do something crazy and call me insane or scream at me, but instead, she narrows her eyes and gives me a look I can’t understand.

“Why would I do that?”

“I think you misunderstand. I’m not giving you a choice. I’m telling you. You will marry me.”

“And who are you?”

My mouth splits into a larger smile. “I’m happy you asked... I’m Matteo Amante.”

Cue the shock.

Cue the fear.

“You’re M-Matteo Amante?” she stutters.

“I see my name precedes me.”

Of course, it does. Everyone knows who I am. Not only am I considered one of New York’s most eligible bachelors, but if you travel in my circles, I’m also the deadliest.

Seeing as she’s the governor of New Jersey’s daughter, I’m not shocked that she knows.

“I can’t marry you.”

“You can, and you will. Your choice is my cousin or me. I can tell you I’m the better choice.”

“I’m not marrying anyone.”

“We both know you are out of options. We both know your father has been paying off your debt for years and hanging it over your head.”

Her eyes go wide. “How do you—”

“Know? Again, I know everything. I know all about the accident.”

If she wants to speak, she can’t seem to find the words. Instead, she reminds me of a floundering fish as her mouth opens and closes.

“I know what happened. I know your father hangs it over your head, and I know the guilt.”

It’s a bluff. I don’t know shit yet.

I know vague details but not exactly what happened.

“How could you know this?” she whispers. “No one knows.”

“I’m not everyone.”

“You’re not my future husband, either.”

“Here’s where you’re wrong, *Princess*.”

The room goes silent around us. She’s trying to figure me out. Understand my motive. I can almost hear the wheels turning in her head.

“What will you do with this knowledge? If my father finds out ...”

“You let me worry about your father.”

“And Julia, her brother. What about ...?” she trails off.

“I will handle everything. Everything your father handles will fall on me.”

“Why?”

“Do not have any preconceived notions that I am doing this for you. I’m not a good guy. I’m not the hero. I need something, and you are the key to getting it.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You won’t.” I study her for a moment. I like her bite. I like that she thinks she can refuse me, that she thinks she has a choice.

“You’re confident.”

“I am. Plus, you do not want to deal with my cousin, who is a sadist. My deal will protect you. From him and your father.”

“And you’re not?”

“I am, but a different kind than him. I will handle your father. This will be a marriage in name only. You won’t have to worry about me. You will have your life, and I will have mine...”

My words are clear. This is a means to an end and nothing more.

She goes back to chewing her lip. I want to take my hand and grab it. It’s distracting as all fuck.

“What do you want from him?”

“Control. Revenge. Your father thought he could get in bed with my enemy. He will learn very fast that there is no going against me. My cousin will learn too. If you are his bartering chip, I’ll take it from him.”

“I’m the pawn.”

“Yes.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“That is one thing you will learn about me. I don’t lie.”

“So ... you want to marry me?”

“No, Viviana. I don’t. But this is the course of action I am taking. Have no false illusions. I will never love you. I will never care for you. But if you do this, if you help me, I will take care of you.”

She goes quiet again.

Viviana Marino is beautiful when she’s pensive. Her big brown eyes deep with thought.

“When?”

“As soon as possible,” I answer.

I’m surprised by how fast she comes to a decision. I expected to have to threaten her or hang her secret over her head. But instead, she straightens her back and stands up.

“Okay.”

It’s done.

Viviana

IT DOESN'T TAKE A ROCKET SCIENTIST TO KNOW I'M SCREWED.

Two proposals in one night...

None of them welcome.

My prospects of escaping unscathed are slim to none at this point.

Option number one: Fall in line with my father's wishes. Yet again.

Option number two: Get in bed with his enemy ... literally and figuratively.

My heart begins to race. He did say it would be in name only.

But what does that really mean? I don't really know.

The saying "better the devil you know" rings through my head, but as much as that is the case in most circumstances, in mine, it's the opposite.

Anything is better than doing what my father wishes.

The man hates me.

All my life, he has gone above and beyond to hurt me.

Why would this be any different?

I might not know Matteo, but I know my father.

If I allow myself to be his victim again, he will never take his claws out of me. If I marry Salvatore as he demands, I will never get out from under his thumb.

But the option of saying no to Matteo is also out of my grasp.

Is that really true? There is always another route.

I'm a ping-pong ball.

Bouncing back and forth.

Better yet, my life is a tennis match ...

Eventually, someone would get the point, but no matter who it is, I'm the one getting hit by the racket.

If I had a choice, I would escape.

Thinking of my options is not something I want to do because it feels like I'm stuck in quicksand trying to break free but can't.

No, this is different because I get to choose. Regardless of what Matteo or my father insists, the ball is in my court.

I can smile and pretend to appease this man, not fight him, and then do the opposite.

Or I can say yes and mean it.

I stare at him for a minute, realizing Matteo might very well be the first person to offer me a chance to get out from under my father's thumb. A part of me wonders if it's all an act and if he will actually help me. Normally, I would think no, but something in his stare says otherwise. As strange as it sounds, I feel like I can trust him.

Now that my eyes have adjusted to the light, I can see that they aren't as dark as I once imagined them to be.

No.

They are the opposite. Although I can't tell what color they are, a striking difference exists between the color of his pupils and irises.

Light.

His eyes are light.

But what color?

I step toward the wall, clicking the switch to illuminate the space between us.

I'm not prepared for the man sitting before me. He's leaning back in the chair.

Comfortable. It's as if I invited him in for a drink. Like we were on a date, and I asked if he wanted to come up for a nightcap.

His presence is intimidating. But it's his facial features that make me stop breathing.

When I saw him briefly at the club, he was gorgeous, but now in the light, I realize that word does him no justice.

He's devastating.

His eyes are green. Strikingly so. Like the way grass looks after a rain on the first sunny day. Lush and full.

Crisp.

Dangerous.

They make you want to lose yourself in them.

Not a good scenario to be in.

Ever.

I continue to watch him. Drinking him in. Studying. Searching. Filing things into memory.

His hair is dark, almost black, but it's his sharp jaw with the dusting of hair on his face that makes him exquisite.

Deadly. Not just physically but emotionally.

This man would chew you up and spit you out if you allow him to.

He has more than a five o'clock shadow but less than a beard. It's the kind of scruff that feels sexy as you kiss.

Shit. Don't think about kissing him.

He does have full lips. Dammit, they are kissable. A mouth that would worship the woman beneath him.

I can't marry this man. I can't.

If he wanted to, he would do unthinkable things to me, and I would probably let him.

Not a good combination in this situation.

It might sound backward, but wanting him will make this more challenging.

I'm under no false illusion that no matter what he says about having separate lives, I will have to be with him. At some point, his family business will dictate the need for him to have an heir to carry on his legacy. It wouldn't be a chore but ...

I shake my head and pull my gaze up to meet his stare. I can marry this stranger. I can use him to further my goal.

Make my father pay for all he's done to me over the years.

I'll still be the pawn in their war. But what they both don't know is that I have no intention of being it any longer.

"I have stipulations." I walk farther into the room until I'm standing beside the other chair.

"Oh, of course you do, *Princess*." He sounds beyond amused as though he is talking to a toddler. Not outwardly funny, but as in the light of what we are talking about, he is not taking me seriously. I'm torn between seething and doing what I can to protect my life.

Is he so coldhearted that he doesn't see how all of this hurts me, and if he does, then he is as big of a monster as my dad and just doesn't care.

The thought has goose bumps forming on my skin. I'm abandoning one cage and willingly crawling into another.

One that very well could be more deadly.

“I want a contract,” I blurt out. If I have that, I can make him honor it. It wouldn’t hold up in a court of law probably, but it would give me a sense of security.

“You will get no such thing.” He now sounds bored with me. As if my request is so far beneath him that he won’t even humor the idea of it.

I stand my ground with my hands on my hips.

False bravado.

Inside, I’m quaking, but I throw off the vibe that I’m as tough as nails on the outside.

“You don’t even know what the contract will contain,” I answer, narrowing my eyes.

“It doesn’t matter to me, Viviana. I will not put anything in writing.”

His message comes loud and clear.

My dreams of this going easy crash and burn to the floor.

“I still have things I want from you,” I respond. The chances he’ll give me what I want are small, but I’m still going to try. Through my eavesdropping on Father’s many secret meetings over the years, he taught me how to become a master negotiator.

Ana used to say, “You can’t win a game from the sidelines,” and she was right. Although, when she said it, it had more to do with trying new things and not negotiating with a mob boss, but semantics.

He leans forward, inclines his head, and then gives me what can only be described as a life-altering smirk. Not just because he’s gorgeous but also because it reminds me of every damn fairy tale I have ever read, where the main character enters into a pact with the devil.

“And I’m willing to listen to your requests.”

“Listening is all fine and dandy, but how can I trust you to fulfill them?” I counter.

The smirk drops, and it is replaced by a flat line. “I am a man of my word. I will never lie, and I will always be straightforward. If I give you my word, my word is god.” His voice is full of conviction, and even though I know I shouldn’t trust him, I trust he will honor it.

“It’s a marriage in name only,” I say.

“Agreed.”

“After you get what you want, you will allow me to divorce you.”

“That’s a no.”

“But—”

“There are no buts. There are no objections. Once we get married, you will be my wife.”

My mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water, gulping for air. There is no way I’m going to enter into this pact without an escape plan. “But then how can it be in name only—”

“I won’t love you.”

“But then ...?”

“I expect you to be faithful. I expect you to eventually bear my children, but I will never love you.”

“And you? Will you be faithful?”

He levels me with a look that makes it obvious he thinks I’m an idiot. Of course, he won’t be. I know men like him. Men like my father. They are all cut from the same cloth.

My teeth grind together. There are many not so nice words sitting heavy on my tongue. Instead of shouting them out, I take a long, deep inhale and then blow the air out of my mouth. It does little to calm me. I refuse to be married to a cheating pig. “No.” My head shakes back and forth. “I won’t marry you and be faithful unless you agree too. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Life isn’t fair.”

“You can’t expect me to be one thing and then you don’t follow by the same rules...”

“Again, I think you misunderstand what is happening here. There isn’t a democracy. You don’t get a vote. You will marry me. Regardless of your belief that you have a say in it, you don’t.”

“No,” I say again, and now my voice is higher pitch. But he doesn’t seem swayed at all. Instead, he looks like he’s having fun at my expense. “You’re an asshole.”

“If I was an asshole, I would leave you to my cousin. Do you know the difference between my cousin and me?” I keep quiet, not wanting to hear what he has to say. “The difference is ... I won’t touch you unless you ask. I will take care of you. Once we are married, if you make me happy, I’ll make you happy in return. But he ... let’s just say he will use and abuse you, and after he gets whatever he wants from your father, he’ll get sick of you.” He pauses for a moment. “You’ll probably end up dead or worse.”

He doesn’t say anything more.

“I gave you time to try to make the right decision, but since you obviously can’t and won’t come willingly, I’m making it for you.” He stands. “Let’s go.”

“What? Go?”

“Yes. We have to get stuff ready.”

“Ready for what?” I sound like an idiot. I know this, but I can’t wrap my head around what’s going on.

“We’re getting married.”

My eyes go wide. “*Now?* Like, tonight?”

It feels like my head is spinning, as if I’m on a merry-go-round, and I’ve just stepped off. The world’s out of focus. He’s speaking, but I can’t make out his words over the ringing in my ears. I shake my head, pushing the fog away.

“No, Viviana. We are not getting married today.” His voice is low and condescending. I want to take off my spiked heel

and throw it at him, but something, and not just the gun still pointed at me, makes me think that's a bad idea.

"When are we getting married?" My voice cracks.

"We will be getting married later this week."

The breath I didn't know I was holding escapes my lips in an audible sigh.

"Oh. Okay ... good, and here I thought you were secretly an ordained priest, and we would be hitched by the end of the day," I murmur under my breath, but still loud enough for him to hear me.

I wait for him to make a sarcastic quip of his own, but instead, he nods, looking at me expectantly.

"Now that we have that settled. We have to leave, *Princess.*"

This has me really confused. He just said I have a few days. I take a step back, distancing myself from him.

"Why would I go anywhere with you?" I ask.

"One, I'm your future husband. Two, I wouldn't put it past your father to force your hand just to spite me."

"But why? I really don't understand why everyone wants to marry me so badly. None of this makes sense at all."

He moves a step toward me.

Two pieces on a chessboard.

His height makes me feel small in comparison. He must be six foot two or maybe even six foot three. I'm short, less than average standing at five foot two, but compared to him, I'm tiny.

"You are the key to Salvatore getting what he wants."

"And what exactly is that?"

"Port access."

My eyebrow raises, and I place my hand on my hip, not really understanding or believing my whole future has to do

with docking his boat. It seems a dumb reason to marry someone.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” Matteo’s one-word answer makes me dig my nails into the fleshy part of my palm. This is my life we are talking about. I deserve more than that.

“What you are telling me is that according to my father and your cousin, I’m being bartered to dock a boat?” My teeth clench.

A large exhale leaves his mouth, and I can tell he is already done with this conversation. He looks bored with me. The sentiment is mutual. I want him to leave too.

“It’s not about one boat.”

“Then what more can it be? Why else do you need port access? Why else is my father attempting to pawn me off for port access?”

“Drugs.”

His blunt answer is shocking. Most would tiptoe around these things, but then again, Matteo Amante isn’t like most men.

The room is silent. You could hear the sound of a pin drop if I were inclined to drop it.

The only noise penetrating the space between us comes from beyond the window where the occasional horn can be heard. This time, I’m pissed. I step forward, getting closer to him. I stand tall, steeling my spine.

“Seriously, did you basically tell me my only worth to you is so you can import drugs?”

He shrugs at my attack. I’m like a little gnat he’s shooing away. “Well, it’s better than the alternative.”

“Doubtful,” I mumble back under my breath.

He laughs. But it’s not a funny laugh. It’s a laugh that makes my stomach tighten.

Evil and sinister.

His hand reaches out and tucks the piece of hair behind my ears. “You’re so innocent, dear Viviana. Like a princess locked in a tower, never to have seen the real world for what it is.”

“Hardly. You don’t know me. You might think you do, but you know nothing of what I have seen.”

“Not a whole lot if you think that’s the worst it can be. Let me tell you something ... Princess.” He smiles as he tests the nickname on his tongue. “Many things are much worse than drugs.”

He waits for me to ask, but I feel like the other shoe is about to drop, and I can’t bring myself to say anything else.

There is a pregnant pause. One I fear will change everything when it ends.

“Salvatore might sell drugs, but that’s not why he’s desperate for access. He wants the port so he can bring in women.”

It feels like my heart is about to explode. “Women as in ...?”

“Yes. My cousin traffics women. Or at least that’s the plan once he can convince your father of the alliance.”

Fight or flight kicks in. The need to run out of my apartment and toward safety floods my system, but I can’t. There is no safe place in my life. I have nowhere to go. Nowhere my father won’t find me, so instead, I remain where I am. This is the better option. I can turn a blind eye to drugs, people choose if they want to buy them, but women, that is not something I can ever move past.

What kind of a monster could? Wait ...

“Are you saying my father knows this? That can’t be possible.”

“Not only is it possible but it is exactly what is happening. My cousin has made allies with some very powerful people. Your father is hoping to leverage Salvatore’s connections to get him a ticket into the White House. But your father isn’t a

stupid man. He knows my cousin will sell him out the first chance he gets ... That's where you come in."

"And how exactly does marrying me off help him?"

"Then you become family. He helps your father make the connections he needs, and in return, your father will help my cousin. Having you as Salvatore's wife will help him obtain the goal."

"I can't believe my father would knowingly allow that to happen to the girls."

"Then you don't know your father very well, luckily for you. Men will do a lot of ugly things to maintain power. I assure you."

His words are no longer talking about his cousin. He's talking about our marriage. I am a power piece for him too.

"Now let's go."

He starts to walk toward the door.

"I'm not ready," I say to his back. He looks over his shoulder, his green eyes piercing.

"Pack a bag. Just what you need for tonight. I'll have my people come tomorrow and get the rest."

Before I can say anything else, he turns back around, pulling his phone from his pocket to make a call.

I head into my bedroom to grab pajamas and a change of clothes for tomorrow. Jeans and a sweater. Casual. Next, I head into my bathroom and grab the necessities for one night. When everything is packed in my bag. I walk back out of the room and find him where I left him.

Still in the foyer on the phone.

He must hear me approach because he hangs up and turns toward me. He looks arrogant and strong as he stares at me. Most of all, dangerous. Like with the snap of a finger, he could have me disappear. He very likely could. I should be scared, petrified, but I'm in too much shock to register what is happening.

“Ready?” he asks.

“That’s not the word I would say.”

He chuckles. “I like your fight.”

“Famous last words.”

“Don’t worry, Viviana, as my wife, you will live a long and healthy life, whether you want to or not.”

That’s when it finally hits me. Smashing into my gut. All the air leaves my lungs at his presence and what that means for the future. *The future ... will I have one?*

There is no time to think of that. Instead, I need to sharpen my claws and make it through this, no matter the cost.

I will get in the car with a man who most certainly can kill me.

And worse, I will marry him.

This is bad. Very, very bad.

But he’s right. My father would stop at nothing to get the White House, and if that means aligning himself with less than reputable men, so be it.

The idea I was supposed to marry a man who would hurt women has my stomach churning.

A thought pops into my head...

“You don’t do what your cousin does?” I blurt out. Because never in the conversation before in my apartment did it even dawn on me to ask. “You don’t traffic women?”

He doesn’t answer right away.

Instead, I see him turn his head toward me. He’s too close in the back of the Escalade. And when his pensive stare meets mine, it feels like there is a vacuum in the car that sucks all the oxygen from it.

“Do not ask me such silly questions, Princess.”

“Well, if you won’t tell me, what the hell else am I supposed to believe?” I fire back.

“Viviana.” The way he says my name makes the tiny hairs on my arm stand up. It’s lethal. I know I have gone too far, and I’m afraid of what the consequences will be. “You are not to question me.” He doesn’t say anything more.

Nor does he try to lighten the mood. It’s oppressive.

I can barely breathe.

With each pull of oxygen, it’s as if my chest has a band around it.

It tightens until the point where I can’t breathe.

“Can I open the window?”

“No.”

The one-word answer echoes through the car. He is really fond of one-word answers, I realize.

Even though I can’t open it, I turn to look out into the city night.

The streets are busy. But then again, it is Manhattan.

Even at ten, people walk. Bars are open. Clubs are frequented. I watch as the sea of red and yellow lights whisk by and lose myself in the view. An escape only the city can provide.

This is why I chose to go to college at NYU.

My father would never let me go far, but I fought to come here.

It’s another world.

And now I realize my past few years might have been the only freedom I’ll ever know.

The city flies by, and I wonder where we are going. I’m surprised when his driver pulls up to what appears to be an abandoned warehouse.

I wait as Matteo gets out of the car once we pull into the garage, and when he steps out, I follow him.

The building isn’t what I expect. There are cars, but it’s not your typical garage. This one looks like a garage you see in a

movie about carjackers.

There must be over ten million dollars' worth of merchandise here.

What have I gotten myself into?

All of a sudden, the door across the garage opens, and three men step out. Each tall, dark, and handsome, like they walked off a cover of a magazine, but this magazine is for criminals, with dark eyes and evil sneers on their scruffy faces.

These men are not the type of men you want to bump into while walking down an abandoned street.

They look lethal.

Again, these men appear in action movies and play the villain's role.

When they start to make their way over to me, I'm not surprised.

Scared but not shocked.

They don't say a word, but one of them takes all my bags, and while one rifles through them, another one moves to search me.

As much as I want to object, I know I can't.

I'm used to being searched. I'm used to my things being searched. It's the nature of my family, so I know what they have to do. Instead of objecting, I spread my arms out, and I kick out my legs.

Might as well make it easy for them.

It doesn't take them long. They obviously don't find anything.

One of the guys nods, and then Matteo starts to walk.

He doesn't wait for me, but I follow him regardless.

Like a lost puppy trying to find its way.

Neither of us speaks one word, and I feel as though the silence is oppressive.

Or maybe it's my nerves that are.

Either way, I feel like an athlete with asthma who ran a marathon and realized they forgot their inhaler once they got to the finish line.

My only hope is he doesn't realize how off-kilter I am.

If he does, he at least has the decency not to say anything as he stops and opens the door for me, allowing me to walk through first.

I'm surprised when I step inside.

This warehouse is a fully furnished and functioning house.

"I will show you to your room." He doesn't wait for me to answer before he starts to walk in the direction of a hallway. I watch as he strides in front of me, walking tall and with a purpose. This man is always in complete command of every situation, even something as simple as heading down the hall. I wonder if he can ever relax. Ever smile.

The smirk from the night of the club pops into my head. My cheeks start to warm as the memory of that night, of the way he looked at me, attacks my senses.

No. That was a fantasy; this is reality. Do not remember that smile.

I shut down all the thoughts running wild in my head and follow Matteo until he comes to a stop in front of an elevator.

He pushes the button, and it opens.

I'm not sure how many floors this building has. By the looks from the outside, I'd say five.

Then we get to the sixth floor, and it's bigger than I thought.

He leads me down another hallway, opening the door.

The room is large. It is much bigger than my bedroom in my apartment. It's about the same size as my bedroom in the governor's mansion. But where that room is ornate and over-the-top, this room is bare bones.

Modern.

Sterile.

Almost like an expensive jail cell for the rich and famous. White lines, white pillows, and very white, barren walls. I have never seen a room this void of color. If I didn't know better, I would think he designed this place to perform surgery. However, the 800 thread count Egyptian cotton begs to differ.

“You will be instructed tomorrow with the plans.”

He then steps out and closes the door behind him.

I wait for him to lock it. My mind references every fairy tale, but then I realize there is no need when nothing happens.

He doesn't need to lock the doors. He doesn't need to forbid me to leave.

I have no place to go, and even if I did, I wouldn't be safe.

I don't know if I'll ever be safe.

With a deep inhale, I lock the door and make my way farther into the room.

I noticed on the right side is another door, so I swing it open to find the bathroom. It's fully stocked, and I wonder if it's stocked for me?

I grab a toothbrush and some toothpaste and brush my teeth, and then once I'm done, I wash my face.

When I step back into the room, I finally notice that whoever took my bag earlier must have already swept it for bugs because it now sits on top of the chair in the corner.

The blood in my veins runs cold.

The message is clear ... a lock won't keep me safe. Not wanting to think about it, I'm quick to get out of my clothes and put my pajamas on.

I can barely keep my eyes open after the day I've had. I'm so tired, I go to sit down in the bed. But as much as I want to fall asleep, I don't know if I'll be able to.

An endless loop plays in my brain.

What will tomorrow bring?

The harder and more depressing question being, what will my future bring?

Now lying on my soft bed, nestled in big fluffy pillows, I know I should be sleeping. I'll need all my strength for tomorrow, but instead, a thought pops into my head ...

What will my father do when he finds out I betrayed him?

What will marrying Matteo entail?

Did I make the right choice?

Did I really have any choice *at all*?

I toss and turn, both thoughts at war with each other.

The question is, which enemy is scarier?

Something tells me it's my husband-to-be.

Matteo

I WAKE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. THE BUILDING IS QUIET, and the floor on which I reside is completely empty. I doubt Viviana is awake yet.

Once I head downstairs, I will be met with a team of my men who have yet to sleep.

With the war with my cousin escalating, we spend more time than I wish in the warehouse.

A full team is always on guard.

I know he doesn't know about this location, so it's not like he will launch an attack, but still, I like to be prepared.

I don't bother waiting for the elevator today. Without Viviana, there is no point in taking it. Instead, I head for the stairs, figuring it will be faster.

When I make it to the bottom floor, I find five men in the main room. Two of which are sitting in front of multiple computer monitors, manning the security system.

The other two are sitting around one table and Lorenzo sits at the other by himself. It might appear they aren't working, but they are. Their guns are always drawn, ready for a fight.

Each man reclines in their chair, coffee in front of them, and beside each of their mugs is a walkie-talkie for when they do a perimeter check.

“Hey, Boss,” Lorenzo says, as I take a seat at the table.

It’s early still, and I haven’t had my own coffee, so I reach for the pot and pour myself some. “Where are we at today?” I ask the room. “Anything on the girl? Does her father know she’s gone?”

“No one has come to her apartment,” Luka answers from where he is perched in front of a computer.

“Very good. Let’s hope this is all behind us before they even realize it.”

“Boss?”

I look over at Lorenzo. His brow is furrowed. It’s obvious from the way he looks down rather quickly to his cup and then back at me, he doesn’t want to say what he is about to say. I move my chair until it’s next to his. That way, whatever he needs to say can be said between us.

“Spit it out, Lorenzo.”

“I understand why you took the girl ... but why marry her?”

“It’s the best move. Politically, Marino can’t run the risk of being on the outs with his daughter. He’ll bow down to my every whim.”

“But marrying her?”

I smirk at him. The answer should be clear on my face of my real motive, but I still spell it out for him. “She was meant to marry my cousin... “

“So, this is all a big fuck you to him.”

“Yes,” I answer, and I think that’s the end to this discussion, but he lets out a sigh.

“Matteo.”

I shake my head. He should just stop, but I will indulge him in this. He’s family and my trusted confidant. I just would prefer having this conversation in a more private location, but his voice is low, so I’m sure no one else can hear. “You’re tying yourself to someone.”

“I could do worse.”

He nods, probably realizing he has nothing more that can convince me otherwise. He then grins at me. “Well, she is hot as fuck, so there is that.”

I level him with my stare. “That’s my wife you’re talking about.”

“Future.” The stupid smile on his face spreads wider. Anyone else and my gun would be pulled out, but with Lorenzo, I allow myself to crack a smile. When it’s just us, I can let my guard down, even if it’s only for a moment, which is before I’m back to boss mode.

“Roberto!” I yell across the room. He turns around to look at me. Roberto gets shit done, so he is exactly who I need to take point on this. “Okay, tell me what we need to do to get this ball moving. I can’t wait to see the look on the dick’s face when he realizes I took away his only bargaining chip.”

“One day.”

“Then I need you to send in someone to get her prepared. Tomorrow, I’ll marry her. Make it Giana.”

Giana is my first cousin. She is the daughter of my father’s sister.

With that settled, I stand from the table and head back out of the room. I need to work out before I get started with my day. It keeps my head straight, helps me work out my frustrations. Being me isn’t easy, and this is my only outlet.

A shipment of drugs is coming in later this week, and I need to make sure everything is set up. I can’t have one of my trucks intercepted again.

There is a lot of heat on me because of my cousin. Before he went to war with me, trying to steal my business, I didn’t have to worry about the ports. Nor did I have to worry that I would lose a shipment. Now all I fucking do is deal with the remnants of his attacks. I don’t want to be on the defense. I need to strike first and strike hard on the offense.

I'm hoping by marrying her, I'll keep him distracted as he tries to find another in.

Instead of heading to my room, I head to the state-of-the-art gym I have situated on this floor.

Luka is already there, waiting to spar with me.

I pull off my shirt and throw on my own gloves. When I'm ready to fight, I step into the center of the room to meet him.

Throwing all my weight and frustrations into the next thirty minutes gives me a good workout.

By the time I feel ready to start my day, I'm sweaty and hungry.

"See you in thirty," I say to Luka before I pull my gloves off and head out of the room.

Again, I bypass the elevator and walk up the stairs. When I get to the landing, I turn the corner and am met with Viviana.

She's freshly showered.

In a white cashmere sweater, soft and angelic like her, and the jeans she must have packed.

Her hair is slightly damp, and she is wearing no makeup.

She's different than most of the women I fuck, and that being said, she is completely out of place standing before me. This is my warehouse to do business. I never bring women not in the family here. Like generations of men in my position, I keep a pied-à-terre for my many indulgences.

No one knows about this location, so bringing her here is a risk but a calculated one. And one I still had to take.

"Viviana," I address her coolly.

She's gorgeous. Young and innocent. The kind of woman begging to be tempted and teased.

But I can't think that way right now.

Yes, one day, she will give in to my needs, but by the way she scowls at me, I know that's not in the foreseeable future.

Which is fine. I have too much shit on my plate to deal with a needy wife.

She continues to stare at me, not speaking.

“Is there something I can do for you?”

“No.” She turns back around. It’s as if she left the room to see if she could, and now that she knows she can, she is turning back to hide.

“Your breakfast will be served in thirty minutes. Floor two.”

“Okay.” She starts to walk, mumbling, “*Tyrant*,” under her breath.

“Did you say something, Princess?”

“Nope.”

“You sure? ’Cause I could have sworn you did.” I smirk, not letting her off easy.

“I said take a shower, you smell.”

“That’s unfortunate, seeing as one day you are going to lie beneath me and give me heirs.”

“I will give you something much less pleasant if you try forcing yourself on me.” Her voice barely shakes as she threatens me.

“Feisty. I like that.”

“In that case, I’ll stop.” With that, she hurries down the hall, not allowing me to say anything else. It makes me chuckle as I watch as she makes her way into the room. Once she is out of sight, I go to my own. Throwing off my wet clothes, I turn the shower on.

Fifteen minutes later, I head down to the second floor.

My men aren’t here. No one is. I start to eat, expecting Viviana to come.

But she never does. Throwing my napkin down, I storm up the stairs. My fist hitting her door.

I could open it, but that would certainly start shit off on the wrong note. So instead, I'm acting like a crazed lunatic.

The door flies open.

She stands in front of me. Eyes wide. A mix of fear and stubbornness looking back at me.

"Yes."

"I told you breakfast was being served," I grit out, annoyed with how she ignored me.

"I'm not hungry."

"It wasn't a choice."

"Well then, you should have led with that. 'Good Morning, Viviana. Your presence is ordered at the breakfast table.'"

"Viviana. You will get your ass downstairs. Now! We have things to discuss."

"Jeez. Okay. You don't have to be a *tyrant*."

"Well, it seems I do. Seeing as you have chosen not to listen to me."

"I didn't know." She rolls her eyes at me. Anyone else who did that would most likely get shot. But when she does it, it gives me the reverse feelings. I don't want to shoot her. I want to bend her over and smack her ass instead.

All thoughts I probably shouldn't be having right now. Especially about my soon-to-be wife.

I turn, telling her I'm done, and she is smart enough to follow me.

Once we are in the dining room again, she sits in the chair across from me.

"What do we need to discuss?" she asks.

"Tomorrow," I answer, knowing full well she will be confused. And I'm right as she answers.

"Tomorrow?"

"Our wedding."

Her eyes go wide. It looks like she is trying to process the new information I have thrown at her, and she can't. "Wait," she starts and then stops. "What do you mean? You expect me to marry you that soon?"

"I would do it today." I shrug. "But I have back-to-back meetings, and I have my priorities straight."

She falls silent, seemingly paralyzed. The only way I know she's still breathing is by the slight tremor in her hand that sits on top of the table.

"Viviana ..."

As if pulled out of a hazy fog, she shakes her head, and her eyes focus on me again.

"My cousin Giana will be coming here today to help you with whatever you need. Food will be served shortly." I stand and start to leave.

"You're not staying to eat with me?" This time when she speaks, her voice sounds weaker than normal. As if it's too exhausting for her to pretend to keep her walls up.

"No."

"But I thought we had things to discuss."

"I lied."

"Seriously, Tyrant ... you have nothing to say to me?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, *Princess*, but I don't."

Her mouth opens and shuts, mentally trying to think of a witty reply, but before she can say another word, I'm out the door.

Viviana

HE LEFT ME.

I stare at the empty chair where Matteo was just sitting.

Before I can stew about it, the door opens, and a woman I've never seen before walks in. She doesn't speak, just places a plate of food in front of me.

"Thank you," I say, but she still doesn't answer.

I shrug as my stomach growls.

Just my luck, the first woman, hell, the first person I've seen since getting here who's not one of Matteo's hitmen, and she still won't give me the time of day.

I guess I'll just eat in quiet.

Hunger hasn't been on my mind recently. I wasn't thinking about it at all, but now looking down at the plate filled with food, I realize just how starved I am.

I grab the fork and dig into the eggs in front of me. Next, I take a bite of a pancake.

It's as if Matteo didn't know what I liked to eat and had his cook make me one of every breakfast dish.

I would think it was thoughtful gesture if he wasn't such a dick.

Too bad he has to be so damn good-looking. It would be easier if he wasn't attractive.

I'd be able to come up with a plan without my blood pressure rising. Not just because of his looks but also because he's infuriating.

Earlier today when I left the room and bumped into him, I thought I would stop breathing.

He had no shirt on.

His chest had a light gleam of sweat on it.

And his abs.

Oh Lord ...

There are no words to describe those.

I stuff another bite of food in my mouth.

Yep. This would be so much easier if he was ugly. Then I wouldn't be lusting after my soon-to-be husband in a way that just seems pathetic right now with how big of an asshole he's been.

If only I could find a way out of this mess, then I wouldn't have to worry that I'm going to melt into a puddle every time he is near me.

Even thinking about this now has my cheeks warming.

I feel warm and feverish, which definitely means I'm blushing.

At least no one is here to see me.

I'm almost done with my eggs when I hear the sound of heels.

Shit.

Looking up, I see a beautiful woman approaching me. She has long brown hair and green eyes. Eyes very familiar to Matteo's, so this must be his cousin.

"Viviana, I'm Giana." She reaches her hand out, and I shake it.

“Hi. I’m Viviana.”

“I know.” She laughs as she drops my hand and gestures to the table. “Are you finished?”

I look down at my plate, then back at her and nod.

There’s not very much left, and truth be told, I’m stuffed.

“Okay, good, because my cousin seems to think I’m a miracle worker and can get a wedding together in one day.”

Surprisingly, I laugh at that. I didn’t expect her to talk like that about Matteo, but then I think about her words. I swear I actually gulp when the implication of them hits me.

“What do we have to get ready? It’s just going to be him and me ... right?”

She laughs again. “Oh, God no.”

“What do you mean?”

“The whole family will be there. That’s the hard part. Trying to pull off the impossible. Trying to make it look like this isn’t a spur-of-the-moment event.”

“Why?”

“Matteo Amante doesn’t just marry anyone.”

“But my family won’t be there. Won’t that look strange?”

“No. Most everyone of importance knows why he’s marrying you.”

I want to scream but know I can’t. I don’t know why I even care that everyone knows it’s a sham marriage. I just do.

“I didn’t mean that to be offensive. Sorry if it came out that way, but in this family, no one marries for love. Him marrying a governor’s daughter makes sense.”

My head drops, strands of hair covering my eyes. It’s like a protective shield right now. One I need. “I can’t marry him,” I admit as I look back up at her.

She tilts her head, and her eyes soften. “I don’t think you have a choice. But despite the hard exterior, he’ll be good to you. There are worse men to marry.”

“Like Salvatore,” I mumble back.

“Yes, like Salvatore.”

“Well, since I have no choice, we might as well get this over with.” I move to stand, but before I do, I stop. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you think Matteo would let me invite someone?”

“I don’t know.” She nibbles on her lower lip, unsure. “Lord knows how his mind works. I can ask, though.”

For the first time since this whole debacle started, I smile.

“Thanks.”

GIANA IS A MIRACLE WORKER. NOT ONLY DID SHE FIND ME A dress but she also found me shoes. Apparently, the only thing she couldn’t do was convince Matteo to let me invite Julia. I know my family won’t be there, but I don’t care about that. All I care about is having my friend by my side.

Tears fill my eyes.

I knew it was a long shot, but still, I hoped. Dreamed. But it serves me right.

Giana promised me the location for tomorrow. But apparently, Matteo stomped on that too.

No matter how much I try to find out, I get nowhere.

Giana says he’s probably afraid I would tip off my family.

I wouldn’t.

I don’t want them to stop this wedding.

I know the ship has sailed already, and there is no going back now. So instead of trying to think about it, I tuck myself in the bedroom on the sixth floor and close my eyes, willing sleep to come.

Fortunately for me, it does.

NOW, I'M UP AND DRESSED. THE GOWN GIANA HAD PICKED out on my body. My hair and makeup also done. Giana is apparently a woman of many talents.

I look at myself in the mirror and am taken aback by what I see.

My hair is blown out in soft waves, and my makeup is nothing, merely a light dusting. The best version of my true self she had said as she placed the gloss on my lips earlier. I'm straight out of a fairy tale, ever the princess Matteo says I am. My eyes fill with tears. In this story, I'm not marrying the prince, and I'll never have my happy ending. From here on out, I'll be the property of a mob boss.

It feels like I'm slowly losing myself in a world I'm unfamiliar with. Like I'm walking into the unknown.

I'm scared.

Marrying Matteo is a calculated move, but what if I'm wrong?

What if this is the wrong decision?

What if, in my need to rid myself from my father's grasp, I have damned myself to a worse fate?

My teeth biting into my lip has me shaking myself out of the void I've just entered. I have too much going on right now to think about this.

I head down the elevator because no way in hell am I walking down those stairs in these shoes, and before I know it, I'm being placed in a car to an unknown location.

Thirty minutes later, the car stops, and when I step out, I see Giana.

She's smiling at me, but when I walk up to her, she pulls me into a hug. I am not expecting that, but it's exactly what I

need with all the nerves running through me.

There is no one here for me today, so I welcome the friendship Giana gives me.

“Welcome to your new home.” My new home? This is where Matteo lives? It reminds me of an English manor. A large manicured lawn surrounded by trees keeps it cocooned in privacy, but the house itself makes my mouth drop. With large pillars and a limestone façade, it’s straight out of a fairy tale. “You ready?” she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I nod but cannot bring myself to say yes.

“How come I don’t believe you?” She laughs. Because I don’t even believe me. But I don’t say that. Instead, I just hug her back and pull back with a smile. “You will do great. Everything will be okay. Now, let’s go. It’s time.”

“I don’t know—” I start to admit. My vision clouds from the unshed tears.

“I wish I could say something else.” The look she gives me is insecure. I know she does. “I wish I could say you don’t have to do this, that we can leave ...” She motions around us. Not only do I not know where I am but it also appears we are in a heavily guarded compound. “But you can’t. You need to be strong.” I nod at her words, and she does as well. “Let’s go get you married.”

She pulls me along with her until we are inside. I feel like I’m a little girl whose mom is forcing her to go somewhere she doesn’t want. I’m a rag doll in her grasp.

You can do this.

No matter how much I try to pep talk myself, I’m not prepared.

I’m not prepared for the feeling that takes root in my belly as she leads me to where the ceremony is going to be. The wedding is taking place in the grand ballroom of Matteo’s estate.

I walk toward the aisle in front of me.

I can’t see him yet.

But that doesn't stop the nerves that are running through my blood. My stomach feels like butterflies are swarming inside. My hands shake.

Tremors I can't will myself to contain. My feet can barely walk, and it's not because of the shoes. Although they're high, they're not what's causing me the inability to make progress. No, it's my fear.

I take a deep breath, willing myself.

Suck it up, Viviana.

You need to do this.

I take the step.

There aren't many people here, no more than twenty. They line the aisle, waiting. I have to hand it to Giana. She did a very good job. You would never know she threw this together in twenty-four hours. Large calla lilies adorn the room, crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, and a small scattering of tea candles add a level of ambiance.

To be honest, other than the circumstance of this wedding and the groom, the room is perfect.

It's exactly what I would have picked for myself if I had been given the choice.

I wasn't.

As I take each step, I finally allow my gaze to look at the front of the room, and that's when my breath hitches.

It actually freaking hitches.

As if I am a real bride, and this isn't a sham marriage.

There he is.

Matteo Amante.

My future husband.

My hero or my demise.

The music in the background filters around us.

“Pachelbel's Canon.”

I should walk, I need to walk, but instead, I'm stuck in this spot and staring at *this* man. He must sense my fear because his lip tips up into the damn smirk. The one that should come with a damn warning label. That one that secretly makes me quiver in fear. Stare too long and you'll be transported to hell.

He doesn't do it often.

Usually, there is a scowl on his face, but this look is scarier than his norm.

This one makes him look sinister.

A normal person would see him and think he's smiling at me. I don't even know him, but I'm a good judge of character.

No.

He's not smiling.

He's plotting, and I have a bad feeling about it.

We stare at each other for a bit before I continue to walk.

It's like in one of the movies where everything halts. That's what it feels like when I make my way up to him. Like the world stopped, and it's only the two of us, and my future is in his big, cold hands.

He's standing in front of a priest. Time stops then as if someone put their hand on the second hand and made it. It feels like I'm frozen.

A very long second passes. Then another and another. My chest rises and falls as I will myself not to pass out.

The sounds start to fade in and out. I know what the priest is saying, yet I can't hear the words. It's as if my mind knows I'm tying myself to this evil man, and my heart refuses to hear it.

Matteo is standing close.

Too close.

It feels like his presence is sucking all the oxygen out of the room.

Everything is happening so fast.

My brain not able to comprehend anything.

I nod my head. I whisper words back. Then before I know what's happening, the priest is proclaiming us husband and wife.

I can barely breathe.

The room around me is spinning.

Matteo steps forward, and his arm reaches out to steady me. I didn't realize, but I must have been swaying.

The next thing I know, he's wrapping me in his arms. Then he's lifting my face, his green eyes gleam at me. They are full of emotions I can't bring myself to understand.

He tilts my jaw up.

I can feel his gaze on my lips. I can feel his breath there, too, when he lowers his face to mine.

It feels like an eternity as I wait.

I know if I look up at him, he will be smirking down at me.

He wants to torture me. He wants to draw this out. He wants to make me crazy ...

My brain screams for him to do something, and then he does.

His mouth connects with mine.

The pressure's soft at first, and when I exhale, he takes advantage of the moment. Deepening the kiss, he slips his tongue into my mouth.

My eyes close, and for a moment, I forget why I'm here.

I forget where I am.

I forget who I am.

I allow myself to get lost in the kiss.

As I fall into the dark abyss of Matteo, I know I lose a piece of me to him at the moment.

This man will ruin me.

And if I'm not careful, I'll let him.

Matteo

I HAVE TO HAND IT TO HER ...

She's gorgeous. Even more so now that she's my wife. She's a shiny new trinket to display on my mantel.

My property.

The desire to claim her pulses through my veins.

I do just that. I yank her toward me, seal my mouth over hers, and take the breath from her lungs.

She falls into it.

Pliant in my arms as I manipulate her into giving in.

Her small hands are on my chest, holding on to me for dear life. I allow myself to indulge for a few moments.

Until I hear my family cheering me on.

I had forgotten we had an audience. Now that I remember, I pull away and look down at her. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is swollen from my abuse.

She has the look of a woman who's been freshly fucked, and if I don't get the hell out of here now, I'll do just that, and I won't even care about an audience.

"Let's go, *Princess.*" My voice is cold, and her eyes jut open. The change in her demeanor is immediate. Her back

straightens, and her eyes narrow at me.

“You are such an asshole,” she grits through clenched teeth. I can tell she is about to storm away, so I grab her by the elbow and steer her out of the room.

Once we are back in the hallway, I stop. I can't have her being defiant in front of my family. Although I trust everyone in my line of work, you can never be too careful.

“We will eat dinner, and then we will talk,” I command. My voice is rougher than usual, but then again, I'm more worked up than I usually allow.

She looks stunned by me, which makes me smile. She scowls in return.

“You think it's funny, you being a dick?” she hisses at me.

“Actually, I do. Now let's go.” I continue to pull her until we are in the formal dining room. The table is set. Candles and flowers everywhere. It's not over-the-top.

I lead Viviana to the head of the table, where two chairs are set up. I pat the back and then pull it out for her.

Silently, she sits.

I'm surprised by how quiet she's being. But I guess there isn't much to talk about right now. What can she possibly have to say?

She's stuck.

There are no false illusions here. There was no other choice but to marry me.

I am her best option. She doesn't see it now. But with my cousin, she would have died.

I have no intentions to have her killed, nor do I plan to kill her myself. However, that's as far as this will go with her.

To me, she will always be my pawn. One I will push around my board to gather power.

I'm not that different from Salvatore.

We are both ruthless. But this is my kingdom.

I will do what I need to do to keep my position.

Even if that means using this girl until nothing is left.

Once she is seated, I take the spot beside her. Neither of us speaks as my family files into the room and sits in the empty chairs.

Lorenzo sits beside me on the opposite side of Viviana.

“Aren’t you a lovely bride?” He scans her with an appreciative gaze, wearing a lazy smile on his face.

“Thank ... you.” She hesitates as if she’s unsure of his sincerity.

“She is, isn’t she? Quite the perfect *princess*.”

Her head turns toward me at that word, eyes narrowing. She hates when I call her that, but she must think better of whatever she is about to say because instead of speaking to me, she looks back at Lorenzo.

“No date for the wedding? I would think a handsome man like you would have had one.” Her eyes are soft and teasing when speaking with him, and my own harden at her tone.

“No time.” He shrugs.

“Yes, the *tyrant* didn’t give anyone room to plan.”

At her nickname for me, Lorenzo laughs. “Tyrant. I like that. Very fitting.”

“Don’t even think about it,” I advise him. “And don’t get too familiar, either.” There is no question of what I am speaking about. Viviana might be my wife now, but it’s in name only. There is no reason for him to speak to her. He nods at my comment and leans forward in his chair to look at me.

“When are you going to drop the bomb on them?” he asks as he lifts his filled glass to his mouth. The liquid sloshes over the edge. He’s probably been drinking all day for the celebration. I’m about to say something when, from the corner of my eye, I can see her stiffen. She’s listening and waiting to hear what I’m about to say.

“Tomorrow. Viviana and I are going to visit the in-laws.”

Her shock is audible as she gasps. “We are?”

“We are.”

“I-I ...” Her face is a ghostly white.

“You thought I would give you more time?” I chide, toying with her. Ever since I found out she can give as good as she gets, I enjoy our banter. I enjoy eliciting reactions from her. She’s fun to play with. A new shiny toy in my collection of pretty things.

“I just—Can’t we wait a few days?” she squeaks.

I turn in my chair to face her. Her beautiful lush lips are trembling. I should feel bad for her ...

I don’t.

Yes, she’s gotten stuck in the crossfire of a war she didn’t ask for, but that ship has sailed. There is no point in treating her with kid gloves. She is bound to me now.

Life won’t be easy on her.

The faster she finds out, the better.

“No. We’ll go tomorrow.”

I turn back to Lorenzo, dismissing her.

Giana decides to walk in the door at that exact moment, which is good because she will keep her distracted.

“What’s the plan?” Lorenzo asks me.

“I’ll show up.”

“Unannounced?”

I lift my own glass, take a swig, and then answer. “No better way to show up somewhere.”

“And backup?”

Placing my drink down. “I won’t need it.”

He lifts a brow, and I understand his wanting to object. With everything going on, I know he’s right, but instead of saying it, I level him with my stare. “My men will escort me.

But yes, I'll be going in alone. I can handle myself. Nothing will happen to me in his house."

"I never said you couldn't. Will you tell your cousin?"

Salvatore. Will I tell him I stole his bride?

"No. He can find out with everyone else."

Lorenzo chuckles. "And when will that be?"

"We will leak the story to the press. Let him stew over it."

"He's going to be pissed."

"Probably. But he's a resourceful ass. Just because we took away this opportunity doesn't mean he won't find another way to get port access. I need a meeting with the governor of New York."

The alliance with New York has been a key component to my success over the years.

I can't afford to lose that.

As the servers begin to serve food and more beverages, I study my wife.

She seems more relaxed now. Much more than when she is talking to me. It seems she and my cousin have formed some sort of bond.

I'll allow it for now.

As long as my cousin doesn't try to interfere.

"What time will we be going?" I hear Viviana ask me.

I don't look at her. "Seven."

"Dinnertime?"

"Yes, I want to take them off guard."

I don't know why I divulge that piece of the puzzle, but she shakes her head.

"Then you'll want to do it a bit earlier. My father indulges my mother with a 'family meal'"—she air quotes—"that is before he leaves the house at eight."

“Six it is,” I say.

She turns back to Giana, and I turn back to Lorenzo.

“We will go at 4:30.” My voice is low to make sure she can’t hear me.

“Any reason?” he asks.

“Precaution.”

“Precaution? Do you not trust her?”

“Not even a little.”

In the corner of my eye, I continue to look at her. Although I made her do this, she came too willingly, so you never can be too careful.

When dinner is done, I stand from the chair. My hand reaches out to take Viviana’s in mine.

She allows it, but I can feel her body stiffen at the contact. I have no plans to touch my wife tonight, but she doesn’t know it. I could put her out of her misery already and tell her, but what fun would that be?

Not many things in my life bring me any semblance of joy, yet for some reason, taunting her does.

I like to see the fire in her eyes. I like to see the way she holds herself back. The strength that takes. Most would look at it as weak.

But not my wife.

I can tell there is a spine of steel in that lovely, pale back of hers.

She’s biding her time.

But for what, I’m not sure.

I’m going to find out, and I’m going to have fun while I do.

Viviana

WE WALK TOGETHER, HAND IN HAND. IT'S SURREAL BEING here with him. It's even more nerve-wracking how much my life has changed. Since I don't know my way around this, what one could only call a castle, I allow him to lead me. In my life, I have always lived in beautiful homes. The governor's mansion was my most recent. Even though it wasn't for a long time, I did live there briefly. But that mansion has nothing on Matteo's home.

Being here is like being in a palace.

Okay, maybe not quite as large, but still, this isn't a normal size home for someone.

It feels weird to walk with him, weird to have a fake smile plastered on my face. I want to drop the false pretense, but I'm not sure who knows the truth here, and I can't run the risk of creating more enemies.

It's already hard enough to try to come up with a plan. Giana seems like a good ally. But I can't be sure. For all I know, this is all part of the act.

Maybe Matteo has sent her in as the spy. A babysitter to report back to him. It's okay. Better to keep my guard up. I'm used to it. I have lived the past twelve years protecting myself.

What's another few?

The one thing I do know is I have to find a way to escape, not just from my father now.

The list keeps getting longer and longer.

If I could die of a heart attack, I probably would.

Holy crap.

What the hell am I going to do if he expects me to consummate this marriage?

Die.

I'll probably die. Because with everything going on, and the fact he very well may be the biggest asshole in the world, there is no way I'm going to have sex with him, and I will kill him if he tries.

My head is swimming at ways out of this situation.

It feels like I'm being walked to my death via the guillotine. French Revolution-style. I'm in the right type of palace for it. If I wasn't so scared right now, I might find my inner crazy funny. Hell, I'd probably roll my eyes at myself, but I am scared, and no ridiculous thoughts of the corrupt royals getting their heads chopped off will make me feel any better.

Even if that is exactly who I married.

A ruthless monarch.

A king of death.

A handsome devil who will probably kill me in the end.

The blood rushing in my ears is so loud, I wonder if he can hear. My heart thumps frantically. With each step I take, I try to act like I'm not scared.

No part of me likes to show weakness. Throughout my life, I have tried to master my emotions, but Matteo brings out the worst in me. I barely know him, and I can already tell.

All of these feelings are usually schooled, especially fear, but now they run rampant.

Like a runaway train with no brakes.

It's only a matter of time until I crash and burn.

Stop. I can do this. There is no other choice. I'll do what must be done to survive. My spine turns to steel, and I follow him.

Together, we walk up a grand staircase, down a long hallway, and to a destination I can only imagine will be his bedroom. Or maybe a torture chamber.

It's dark, there are no lights on, it could be because it's an older estate, or maybe that's on purpose. Maybe the staff was instructed to leave it dark to creep me out and scare me into being pliable. Knowing Matteo, this wouldn't surprise me.

It's like one of the estates that belongs on a Regency TV show.

And thinking of my life, apparently I belong on the show, too.

Other than myself ... do marriages of convenience actually happen? I want to laugh at how crazy my life has become.

I'm so lost in my ridiculous train of thought that I don't even notice when he stops. My body collides with his. My front hitting his back.

Quickly, I move back, putting distance between us. Please don't turn around. Please don't make me feel like a bigger idiot.

He doesn't, though. Instead, he swings open the door.

The room, like the hall, is pitch-black. My stomach tightens, but then he does something I don't expect. He turns back around, steps around me, and begins to walk away.

"You're not—" I start and stop myself.

What the hell am I doing?

Shut up, Viviana.

He looks over his shoulder, and even in the dimly lit hallway, I can see that damn smirk that I swear he only uses on me, spreading across his face.

“Coming ...?” His voice is low, purposeful, and most of all, seductive. My eyes must widen because he laughs at me, it’s more like a fucking chuckle, but it still makes me feel small.

Don’t let anyone make you feel this way. I stand taller and wait for the ridicule, something that, after living with my father most of my life, I’m prepared for.

Nothing comes out of his mouth, despite me expecting him to say more. Instead, he completely ignores me, looking back in the opposite direction, and resumes walking, leaving me there standing in the hallway like an idiot.

I watch as his shadow fades, and it’s only then that the breath I am holding escapes.

That was close. Too close.

Then another feeling hits me. One I really don’t want to read into ... disappointment.

It’s not that I wanted to be with him tonight, but he didn’t even want to be with me. For some reason, even though I know I’m his pawn, a part of me liked the idea that maybe a man as dangerous and sexy as Matteo wanted me ...

Stop.

Don’t go there.

You got lucky tonight, and if you keep standing here waiting, your luck might run out.

Not wanting to give him time to change his mind, I scurry into the room, flip the light switch on, and make quick work of shutting and locking the door.

No unwanted guests allowed.

Now alone and safe, I let myself admire the room.

It’s gorgeous.

Straight out of a magazine.

A large four-poster bed sits in the middle of the room. On top of it is the fluffiest pink comforter I have ever seen

adorned with tiny little flowers. But it's the giant pillow and shams that make me want to jump into it and sleep my life away.

Which is exactly what I plan to do.

With the wedding out of the way, I feel more relaxed. Now that I don't have to worry about him spending the night, I'm able to strip down and get into bed. I'm not surprised by how tired I am. It's been insane the past few days.

The problem is, now in my bed, my brain starts to scream at me.

Tomorrow.

What the hell will you do when you have to face your parents?

The scarier question is, how will my father react? He will see this as an act of war. Lines will be drawn in the sand. I have picked the side I'm on, but now the terrifying thought is, what if I chose wrong?

The endless fears of what he will say plague me, but eventually, they lead to exhaustion, my brain too tired to think anymore.

Before I know it, I'm opening my eyes, and the early morning sunlight streams in through the big window.

It illuminates the space and causes me to squint. I forgot to pull back the drapes last night. I'll have to remember for the future.

With a stretch of my arms, I let out a large yawn. After enjoying the comfort of my new bed for a beat, I pull back the blankets and kick my legs out from under them.

When I step out and onto the floor, I regret it a second later. It is cold against my bare skin. My toes curl as if that will warm them, but it won't. The only thing that will help is finding my socks or slippers.

I look around the room, trying to remember if I unpacked last night. I didn't. There in the corner is my open suitcase, and on top of it is half my clothes. Wow, I made a mess last

night looking for my pajamas. After walking over to my suitcase, I take a moment to look around. It's the first time I'm able to really see anything. The room is much larger than I noticed last night. It's also much more intricate than it appeared in the darkness of the night. The walls are white with ornate, detailed molding. There's also a large chandelier over the bed. How did I not notice any of this yesterday?

You were tired, emotionally exhausted, and frightened of your husband. Cut yourself some slack.

This place looks like a hotel, not a residence.

Next, I walk over to the bathroom, again met with a sight I'm not prepared for. The room is large and like nothing I have ever seen. Yes, I have always lived a privileged life, but this is even over-the-top for me. Floor-to-ceiling marble. A beautiful cast-iron, claw-foot tub that beckons to me, but right now, I can't indulge in that. Instead, I make my way over to the shower, and I swing the glass door open to turn the water on. I turn toward the sink and notice that toothbrushes, soap, and shampoo sit on the counter. Obviously, he was prepared.

I'm not sure how I feel about this fact. One the one hand, it was thoughtful, but on

the other ...

He knew you were coming way before you realized. The thought makes chills run down my spine. I hate not having control over my life, and it feels like I'll never gain control, either.

The scalding hot water steams the room. I reach my hand in and make sure it's not too warm. As much as I want out of this hell, I don't want to boil myself alive to get my goal.

I step into the shower despite the temperature, and the heat feels good on my skin. I allow the water to rinse me clean. Clearing away the fog of sleep. Halfway through, I realize I don't know what's in store for me today.

My father is often predictable, but in this case, for all intents and purposes, we are ambushing him. This fact will

make him a loose cannon. I can't rely on how he's acted in the past to gauge how he will react tonight.

My nerves start to bubble up.

This could be bad.

I'm playing with fire ... and I know from the past how bad it feels to get burned.

I hurry to finish, and then I turn off the water, grab a big fluffy towel, and step outside.

The condensation and steam make it impossible to see. With the towel now wrapped around me, I walk. I don't make it far before I step into a wall.

"Careful now, Viviana." His deep baritone voice feels like it's undressing me.

Startled, I try to step back, but the floor is slick, and I lose my footing.

His hand juts out and steadies me.

"What-what are you doing here?" I hiss as I look up at him. The fog from the steam is now starting to fade. His crisp green eyes are visible and staring down at me.

I feel unnerved by the way he looks at me, and when he smirks that damn smirk, my knees wobble.

I know I should move, but I can't help but look at this man.

Today, like yesterday, he looks angry. Even with the smirk, it doesn't reach his mossy eyes.

He stares at me like he wants to undress me, like he wants to pull the towel down and have his way with me. Yet when I look into his eyes, when I study him, all I see is hate.

Is it me he hates? The idea of me? Or my father?

It doesn't matter. He wouldn't answer if I asked him. What matters now is pretending to play along. I've always been a good actress.

“Morning, dear husband,” I grit out, the sarcasm present in my words. It drips like maple syrup on a pancake. Just as decadent but neither of them very good for you.

“Wife,” he answers, letting his hands linger on my skin far longer than necessary. I look down to where he grasps me. “Princess ...”

My teeth grind together at that damn nickname I hate, and by the way he looks at me, he knows I despise it too. “Do you mind?” I ask him, my eyes narrowing at the spot where his touch sears me. Making little tiny goose bumps rise across the surface.

“Not at all,” he answers in a casual and lazy voice as if he has nowhere better to be and enjoys driving me crazy. I hope he’ll let me go soon, but he doesn’t. Instead, he holds on to me.

This is going to be a problem.

Finally, I push him and cross my arms in front of my chest. “Why are you in my bathroom?”

“Well”—his brow lifts—“technically, it’s *my* bathroom.”

If he is going to play that card, so can I. “Oh, since we’re now husband and wife, what’s yours is mine ... so it’s mine.”

“The same could be said for your belongings.”

He has me there, but then not really. “I have nothing of value,” I counter.

“No. That’s not true ...”

“Oh, I forget. I’m the pawn.”

“That you are, and don’t forget it. Now get dressed. Be ready in thirty minutes,” he orders as if he wasn’t just flirting with me a second earlier. This man gives me whiplash as if he’s getting paid to do it, and he’s aiming for the employee of the month.

“Where are we going?”

“I have a personal stylist coming to measure you and bring you some clothes. I can’t have you looking the way you did

when you first came to my house.”

My mouth drops open. “And how exactly did I look?”

He doesn’t answer, instead opting to walk out the door.

“In the closet is an outfit Giana left for you for today.”

“*How did I look?*” I ask again, not letting him off the hook. Screw that. This is a terrible start for our marriage. Whatever we do right now is going to affect our dynamics for life.

He turns over his shoulder. His gaze starts at my feet and lifts until his eyes meet mine.

I feel naked, even despite the towel.

“Beneath me,” he answers, and then he turns and goes.

My stomach bottoms.

I turn to look at myself in the mirror.

Catching my wounded expression staring back.

What a dick.

In my life, I have met plenty of awful people. But never have I met a man who could be a bigger asshole than my husband.

This should be fun.

Matteo

THE FIRST THING I HAVE TO DO IS MEET WITH MY MEN. THERE is a shipment coming in tonight. It's not a big shipment, but it's necessary. Extra guns. Extra ammo. I might not be able to accompany them. It all depends on how tonight goes. I find my man in the surveillance room. All the screens are on on the monitor. Unlike my warehouse in the city, acres of land surround this estate.

No one is getting in unless I want them to.

“What is the ETA on the boat?”

“Cristian says the boat should be docking around one.”

“What time are you meeting the in-laws?” Lorenzo smirks. He is way too entertained by my fresh nuptials.

I give him a look, the type of look that says fuck off. He lifts his hands in surrender.

“Sorry, Boss,” he says. “But, I mean, c'mon.”

“It should be fun...” I trail off. That is the understatement of the year.

It should be fun. I can't think of anything in the world that sounds worse. But the shit deserves it. Fuck, if only I knew where my cousin was hiding. I love to kill two birds with one stone.

However, he'll find out soon enough. The moment the governor realizes I have him by the balls, he will call Salvatore. I'll make sure of it. To think my cousin believes he can go around me to get port access by hitting up the governor of New Jersey.

"I need you to call Tobias," I tell Lorenzo. "We need to reschedule the drugs."

"That's not going to be a problem. With the new guns, are we going to war again?"

"I prefer not to. I prefer we find my cousin's location and kill the son of a bitch before it escalates to that. But seeing as we have no leads ..."

"That's not necessarily true," Lorenzo says.

"What do you mean?"

"We have her."

"And you think my cousin genuinely likes her? My cousin doesn't give a shit about anyone."

"No, but your cousin cares about taking over New York. If he thinks he still has an in, it could work to flush him out."

I cross my arms and think about what he says as I start to pace.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

He might be on to something.

It might be a good idea to use her as some sort of bait. But by the looks of her this morning in her bathroom, I'm not 100% sure she would willingly help.

I can ask her, or I can tell her. I didn't find out exactly what her father was hanging over her head, but I can and then I can use that as a means to get her cooperation. I can even make it seem like she's working with her father. That she is working to take me down and then by doing that she can maybe find out the location of my cousin.

"It's a solid idea." I nod my head.

“Will you tell her?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m going to see what happens tonight. We need to find out about her past. Figure out what happened and why her family is paying a substantial amount of money to her ex-nanny.”

“I will get on it right away. I’ll get in touch with Jaxson Price again. If anyone can find out, it would be him.”

“Offer him double to expedite the request.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Won’t he always expect it?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what he expects. He’s the best, and I want the information now. I have no problem paying if it’s worth it.”

That is the reason I am in charge. I don’t nickel and dime anyone. I pay what something is worth, and into that equation I allocate time too. What your time is worth. My time is priceless, but that’s a whole different story.

“Is there anything else you need?” Lorenzo stands up, ready to leave. He looks around, anxious to start working.

“No. Have most of the men stay here.”

“Are we not going back to the city?”

I shake my head. “I’ll keep a team there too. But I think with the shipment, it will be easier to transport it from here.”

He pulls out his phone and starts typing into it, sending a text. “Anything else I need to tell the men?”

“Nope. We are all set. I’m going to hit the gym, then get ready. If you need anything, I’ll be working out. When Giana and the stylist arrive, show them to Viviana’s room.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to let them spend so much time together?”

“It’s either that or let her talk to her friends.”

“True.”

I walk past him and out into the hallway. I take a few steps before looking over my shoulder. “Until we know what we are dealing with, she’s not to speak to anyone outside of the family.”

“I think that’s a good plan. How do you think she’ll take it?”

“I really don’t give a flying fuck.”

HOURS LATER, I’M DRESSED AND READY TO GO. I MAKE MY way to Viviana’s room. This time, I knock.

I don’t have to, but since I need her on her A game, I don’t want to get her frazzled. My knuckles bang on the door once, twice, and on the third knock, I hear her footsteps.

“Who is it?”

Silly question. As if I would let anyone near my wife’s room without my permission, as if they would even attempt.

“The fucking pope.”

“Sorry, I stopped believing in God when a mobster forced me into marriage.”

“You were always going to be forced into marriage with a mobster. So don’t act like this marriage is coming out of left field.”

Surprisingly, that makes her open the door. I expect her to give a little pushback, but she must realize she has no choice.

There she is.

Her hair is blown out, and she has a light dusting of makeup on her face. She’s wearing a dress, it’s black with tiny rosebuds on it, and she has boots that come above her knee.

My wife—no matter how many times I refer to her that way, it always feels little odd. But that’s who she is, my wife. She’s a gorgeous woman, and if she was anyone else, I would’ve fucked her last night.

Hell, I should have fucked her the first night I saw her at the club. But I've got big plans for Viviana. So, keeping my dick in my pants for now serves me better, then I can serve her up by dangling her on the hook.

Plan or not, it doesn't stop me from admiring how sexy she looks. When all is said and done, I'll have her, but not yet.

"Are you ready?" I ask, and the look on her face is fucking priceless. Her eyes remind me of one of the cartoon characters whose eyes pop out of their sockets. At this point, she looks so scared she might turn into the Road Runner and make a dash for it.

"Are we leaving now?" She takes a step back, now going in the wrong direction.

"Yes."

She turns, and her eyes are no longer visible. I don't like it. Viviana is easy to read because her features give everything away. Without being able to see her, I can't learn every tell of hers. I won't be able to read her lies.

"I thought I had more time."

"Well, you thought wrong."

"Shit," she mumbles under her breath before turning over her shoulder and looking at me.

The fear that was in her eyes only moments ago seems to be replaced with another look. Now her lip is a flat line, and there is a small line between her brows, but it's her shoulders that clue me in to what she is doing. She is putting up her walls.

A façade probably needed to deal with her father.

I watch her for a moment before I move to walk out the door. When I take a step, I speak over my shoulder. "Let's go."

"I'll just grab my bag." She walks over to the corner of the room and grabs her stuff and then steps closer to where I am. "Okay, I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Her back is now ramrod straight.

I like this look.

Making herself appeal regal.

She is the queen that she needs to be to stand by my side.

After silently appraising her, I start to walk down the hall. Viviana trails me. With the house quiet today, the clanking of her heels is the only indicator she's following me.

The air between us is silent as we walk to the garage, and then we get into the G-wagon. Although it is a nice car, that's not why we take it. Despite what it looks like, it's my safest car.

Bulletproof.

Built to withstand almost anything.

Roberto is in the front seat. He will be driving us tonight.

I take a seat in the back beside Viviana.

She won't look at me when I get in beside her, and as we drive, she stares out the window.

To the untrained eye, she's acting unfazed. But I see past her façade.

She's nervous.

Her finger is tapping a pattern on her thigh she doesn't even realize she's doing. I wonder what she's nervous about? Obviously telling her parents that she's married. Is she nervous her father will try something? She must know she's safe with me. But really, why would she know that? I've given her no reason to feel that way.

"Stop tapping. Everything will be okay."

"And how do you know that?" she fires back as she stares out the window.

"Because it always is." I wait for her to turn to face me, but she refuses to budge. It's infuriating talking to her back.

"Easy for you to say," she mumbles under her breath to the window.

“You are with me now, Viviana,” I state by way of explanation.

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“Yes.”

“And why is that?”

“Because he would never fuck with you.”

“Didn’t he fuck with you by trying to barter a deal with your cousin ...?”

She’s too smart for her own good.

“Yes. And see what happened? I married you. Your father knows better. Regardless of his alliance with Salvatore, I am not to be trifled with. Our war precedes us. Your father, if he’s smart—and I have to imagine he is—doesn’t want to get caught in the crossfire. The last time there was a war like this, the collateral damage was heavy. Your father can ask the senator from Boston what the price he had to pay for going against me was. Oh wait, he can’t. There is no speaking to him where he is now ...” My words hang heavy in the space between us. You would have to be living under a rock not to have heard about the senator’s untimely demise.

She finally turns away from the window and looks at me.

“So, what’s the plan now?”

“Don’t worry about the plan. You are just here to sit and look pretty.”

She lets out a laugh. “Wow, sexist much.”

“It’s not sexist when it’s the truth. I married you to prove a point. I married you because you benefitted me strategically. That’s it. Nothing more. The only point you have to make now is sitting there.”

“And if I don’t.”

I lean toward her, my arms reaching out to trap her against the window. Our faces are so close I can feel her breath tickling my lips as she exhales. Her jaw trembles, but it’s the lip that does me in; the way she sucks it in and bites it ever so

gently. If she was anyone else, I'd grab her and fuck her in this car.

"Do not mistake my kindness for weakness, Viviana. I have not hurt you ... but I can."

My words hang in the air like the threat they are.

I have kept my distance.

I have not demanded anything of her.

"You will be obedient. Do you understand?"

She doesn't respond, just continues to nibble on her bottom lip.

"Speak, Viviana."

"Yes, I understand," she grits out through clenched teeth.

"Good."

Now that's settled, I pull my phone out of my pocket and call Lorenzo.

"How are things up ahead?" I ask.

When I travel, I usually bring an army of men. This time I only brought enough to keep us safe during the drive.

Two decoy cars, as well as one to scope out the terrain.

"Clear. No sign of anything out of the ordinary."

It takes us about one hour to leave my family's estate in New York to get to the governor's house.

He doesn't know we are coming, so this should be interesting.

"When we arrive, you are to speak to security. My men will be positioned if anything goes wrong, but we are going in relatively blind."

"Relatively?"

"I have a man inside."

"You do?"

I lift a brow. “I guess it shouldn’t surprise me. You seem to know everything.”

“I am always one step ahead. Remember that.”

Her face pales, but she rights herself.

When we start to pull down the long drive, Roberto rolls down the window so the security guard sees her face.

“Hi.” Her voice sounds friendly, and I have to hand it to her. Although she is nervous, she seems to handle herself well under pressure. “I’m here to see my dad.”

He looks at her and then nods.

“He didn’t seem surprised by your car or that you are being driven.”

“I never drive to see them. I either Uber or they send a car service.” She shrugs.

Roberto pulls the car around to the front of the circular driveway and then kills the engine, then he is out of the car, doing his job of appearing to be merely a driver.

We both exit before the door opens to the house. It swings open, and it appears that her mother is standing there.

“Vivi. I didn’t expect you,” her mother says, clear confusion evident in her voice as it pitches on the last word.

“I had some news I wanted to share with you and Dad.”

That’s when I step out from the car and into view.

Her mother stumbles, her gaze locked on me. She looks me up and down, but there is no recollection. She doesn’t know who I am, which I like. Not that it matters. Regardless, I’m getting in to speak to the governor tonight, but this way, at least, she won’t try to stop me.

“Hello, Mrs. Marino.” I walk up to her and take her hand, kissing the knuckle, and she giggles like a schoolgirl. “I’m Matteo.” It’s like taking candy from a baby.

“Come, let’s find your father,” she says to her daughter, who rolls her eyes at her mother behind her back.

Together, we walk through the foyer and down a hallway.

In the background, I can hear a man on the phone. It's Governor Marino. I can't hear the words, but it's him.

"No. Absolutely not." I hear as his wife opens the door. He hangs up the phone abruptly. Once he's off the phone, she strolls into the room.

"I'm in the middle of something," he barks at her. When Viviana hears him yell at her mom, her body stiffens.

"I'm so sorry. But Viviana is here, and she brought a friend," she whispers, voice weak and full of fear.

Mrs. Marino steps farther into the room so that Viviana and I can walk in.

He can't see me yet, but I can see him as he scowls at his daughter.

"What is the meaning of this?" His voice is almost a shout, making Viviana's shoulders slouch forward.

I watch her and her mother, both of whom are now looking down in defeat.

An irrational urge to throttle him spreads through my limbs. My right hand clenches into a fist.

There is a strong desire to barge inside this office, grab him by the throat, and then kick the shit out of him, but I know that won't bode well for my plan.

I need to calm the fuck down. In this state, this will all be over before it begins.

Taking a deep inhale, I try to calm myself. After I count to five, my blood pressure has dropped enough that I won't do anything stupid, like shoot him.

"The meaning of this, Governor, is that she wants to introduce you to her husband," I respond, my voice bouncing in the silent room as I step out from the shadow to meet his confused stare.

Unlike his wife, Governor Marino knows exactly who I am.

“What—”

“*Husband*,” I say again, allowing my lip to tip up into a smirk. “I’m sure you are familiar with the concept. You are one, too.”

His face goes pale, but then he shakes himself and looks between Viviana and me.

He seems to be at a loss of words, so I step closer, pull Viviana to me, and wrap her in my arms protectively.

I’m surprised how willingly she lets me.

Her shoulders, which were once tight with fear, seem to loosen.

“We got married,” I inform him smugly. My voice, cocky and condescending, the kind of tone that if ever used on me would get someone shot with a bullet in the head.

“Is this true?” he asks his daughter. His face gives away no emotion at all.

“Yes,” she whispers back, tucking herself in closer to me as if she is afraid about how he will react to the news.

She’s small in my arms.

Much smaller than I had imagined.

The need to protect her filters through me, and I’m not sure why or where it came from, but it’s an odd feeling.

One I don’t like.

But regardless of how I feel right now, I have to pretend it doesn’t bother me.

“How?” He narrows his eyes at me. “Why?”

“Why?” I lift my brow. “Do I really need to tell you, Governor, the whys of marriages?”

“Humor me.”

“In my line of work, I don’t have the luxury to marry for love ...” I start. My meaning very clear to him. This is a business deal. One I have made without his knowledge. One he now has to honor. “But looking at Viviana.” I pull back and

smile down at her. “You can see why she is the perfect bride.” Again, my words are not lost on him.

Point to me.

Game. Set. Match.

“How could you?” he hisses at Viviana. Pure venom dripping from his mouth. There is no doubt in my mind that if I was any other man, he would try to kill us both for defying him.

“Easily,” I taunt back, lip tipped up and all.

His face turns an unnatural red. He reminds me of a teakettle, and he is about to explode.

“You will get this marriage annulled.”

“You do not give the orders here, Governor. Viviana is mine now.”

His hand flies down, hitting his desk.

“Do you know what you’ve done, you little twit?”

I step away from Viviana and prowl over to where the governor is standing behind his desk.

Before he can even move, I pull the gun from behind my back and point it straight at his head. “Do not ever speak to my wife that way. Do you understand? Me coming here with Viviana is a courtesy. You will not address her. You will have nothing to do with her unless I deem it so.” I say this more to his wife than to him. Something tells me the governor would be more than happy not to speak to his daughter at all. Especially after this. I lower my gun and give him a pointed stare.

He doesn’t speak at first, seeming at an impasse of what to say.

His hand reaches for the glass on his desk. It’s filled about halfway with melted ice and scotch. He lifts it to his mouth before swallowing.

We all stand in silence as he drinks before placing the glass down on the large wooden desk. The sound echoes through the

quiet of the room.

“How do we move forward?” he asks, breaking the silence. I can tell by the way he clenches his fists that he wants to lash out badly but knows how disastrous that would be for him.

“You welcome me into your family. No questions asked. You cut ties with my cousin.”

I expect him to argue, but instead, he lifts his glass and takes another swig before nodding his head.

“Fine,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Then I guess we shall be going.”

He looks from me to Viviana. “I’d like to speak to my daughter first.”

“Speak.”

“I meant alone.”

I turn to Viviana. Her brow is furrowed, and her arms are crossed in front of her chest protectively. “Are you okay with this?” I ask.

She doesn’t look okay. Her body language tells quite the opposite story. The position in which she stands screams she wants to leave with the way she’s angled toward the door, fists softly clenched. “Yes,” she answers, voice strong.

She’s not okay with this, but she is doing her best to appear that she isn’t scared.

“I will be right outside the door. If you need me—”

“She won’t.”

“You have two minutes.”

I turn on my heel and walk toward the door. Mrs. Marino walks with me and then once we are in the hallway, she closes the door.

I refrain from allowing myself to smile.

This is exactly what I wanted.

Viviana

THIS IS BAD.

No. Beyond bad. Disastrous.

Having to be left alone with my father is basically the definition of hell.

I feel small.

Like I'm a tiny bug on the floor, and my father can smash me with his boot.

I didn't realize how much I relied on Matteo for his strength until he stepped out of the room.

The moment he did, though, I noticed it.

It became cold in the room once his arm pulled away from me.

Now, it feels like there is an arctic chill. One that starts with my father's angry gaze.

The man who raised me steps forward. His hand is clenched at his side. A fist is formed. I'm one hundred percent sure that if Matteo wasn't standing directly outside the door, my father would hit me.

It should be lucky for me, but I know my father. He's going to make me pay in other ways.

Now, I just have to hope whatever the threat is, it is one in which I can convince my new husband to help me out of.

Debatable if he'll care to help me.

"How could you, Viviana?"

I stand taller, trying my hardest to seem strong.

"He asked, and I said yes."

"You were supposed to marry Salvatore Amante."

"I was, wasn't I?" I run a hand over my hair, "I'm sure he will get over it." My father raises his hand to smack me, and I smile. "My husband wouldn't like that." I let my lip tip up to a smile.

"You like this, don't you? Oh, poor, sweet Viviana. You have no idea the monster you crawled into bed with. He makes the devil look nice. You'll regret your decision."

"I doubt that," I mutter.

"Oh, no? You don't think so? Have you thought about Julia? Have you thought about what your impetuous decision will do to her?"

"Yes, Father, I have. And I hope you can see you left me no other choice. You wanted me to marry a man I didn't love."

"Yet you still did."

"But on my terms."

He lifts a brow at my lie. But instead of cowering, I stand prouder.

"Yes, believe it or not, it was on my terms."

He narrows his eyes. "And what of your friend?"

"You won't do anything. I'm still just as important to you. I still can bring you what you need. I am married to Matteo Amante."

I hated myself for saying that, but for Julia, I would make my husband give my father what he wanted.

"So you will help me ...?"

“What do you mean?”

“Take down Matteo. You are in the inside now. Atone for what you did. Help me take him down.”

“What? No, that isn’t what I said. I meant I can convince him to help *you*.”

“That shit will never help me. This is the only way. You need to use your position and find his weakness. I need to take him out.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

Bile crawls up my throat because as much as I say I won’t help him, he will make me. I have no choice. I thought I could spin this somehow in my favor, but the risk of casualties is too high. My heart hammers as I wait for him to drop the threat that I know is coming.

“You will. You know what there is to lose if you cross me.”

And there it is.

I bite my lower lip and hear his words. I don’t say anything else. Instead, I nod. Shaking my head at the same time.

I hate this man.

Hate everything he stands for.

My only way out is to hope Matteo will help me.

The thing is, I’m not sure he will.

“And once I take him out, you will marry Salvatore. That’s the price you have to pay for your disobedience.”

“You think he still wants me?”

“Yes.”

“Are we done here?”

I need to get out of here. The air is getting more and more stale by the minute.

I can barely breathe.

“Yes.”

Without waiting for him to say another word, I turn on my heel and storm toward the door. When I fling the door open, I see Matteo waiting on the far wall. His back is up against it, and his foot is kicked up and resting.

“I’m ready to leave,” I say to Matteo.

He looks past me and into my father’s office. I wonder if he could hear what my father said.

No. Not from where he was standing. Unless he moved right before. But by the way Matteo was relaxed, I doubt it.

“Then let’s go.” He motions his arm out, pointing toward the foyer. I start to walk when I feel his hand rest on my back.

My footsteps stop.

I’m not sure why, but it is like I’m frozen in place.

I know why he supported me in the office, but now that it’s just us alone in the hallway, it doesn’t make sense.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, sorry. I was lost in thought.”

Not wanting to say more, I continue to walk. His hand remains on the small of my back.

It feels like the longest walk of my life.

Each second an eternity stretches out.

It feels good, though.

Exactly what I need to get out of this hellhole.

As we approach the door, one of the members of my parents’ staff opens it. I can’t remember his name; he must be new here. *Is he the inside man?* I’m about to introduce myself when Matteo pulls me through the doorway.

Neither of us speaks, and when we get into the car and wait for Roberto to start the ignition, we still don’t.

Any of the emotions or support he showed before are long gone. For a second, I was actually stupid enough to think maybe he wasn’t such an asshole, but as he taps on his phone

and doesn't acknowledge my presence at all, I know he really is.

It's fine.

I don't know why I thought otherwise.

"Now that I did what you asked, can I have my phone back?"

"I'll consider it."

I roll my eyes. He doesn't see it as I'm positioned looking at the window, but it still makes me feel better.

I'll take anything right now to do that.

Even if it means I'm acting like a petulant child.

Matteo

I AVOID MY WIFE THE NEXT DAY. NOT FOR ANY OTHER REASON than until I find out what when down in that office, I have no reason to talk to her.

I'm sure Marino asked her to betray me. Knowing how he works, what makes him tick, it is almost unthinkable to consider he wouldn't try to take advantage of the situation.

I want to know what she said.

If she said yes, I can spoon feed her false information.

If she said no ...

Well, I'll cross that bridge when we get there.

The plan will be easier if she said yes. Then I can seduce my wife with no feelings and feed her to the sharks.

After I get what I want, I could show her what being disloyal means. I don't revel in killing a woman, but I'll do what I have to do to keep my kingdom. I'm not sure what she's doing. I know that Giana went to visit her, and depending on what I hear, I'll give Giana better instructions on how to handle Viviana.

I find my men where I always find them, in the surveillance room.

It's their favorite place to hang out.

It is state-of-the art, and if you aren't watching the monitors, it's basically a man cave.

“Okay, what do you have for me?”

“I have the audio.” He smiles.

“Is it clear?”

“As a fucking fresh fallen snow. We got both of them.”

“Good.”

Plot twist: What Viviana didn't know last night was that I bugged her.

Not only was I not worried about Marino doing anything to me since I have a man in his house but I also got the benefit of hearing their convo.

That was a nice treat that I hadn't anticipated. Sometimes good things do happen to bad people. In this case, spying on my wife and her dad is a good thing.

“Talk to me. Did you listen?”

“Not yet. So far, the only person who listened was Eddie, but seeing as we haven't spoken to him, he hasn't told us what was said.”

That makes sense.

Eddie was my man inside.

He's newer to the outfit, so he makes an easy fit. He's invaluable. He gives me the insight I need about what goes on behind closed doors. Nothing goes on inside the governor's mansion without me hearing about it from Eddie. That includes and is not limited to the impending marriage of Viviana Marino to my dear cousin, Salvatore Amante.

We don't speak to him often, not unless something big is going down.

“What are you waiting for? Fire it up.”

In the surveillance room, we have a state-of-the-art sound system, so as soon as my men activated the wire I had planted on Viviana, the room goes quiet to listen.

Her father's angry voice booms through the space. Hers seems softer, yet she's holding her own. Hearing her this strong has me smiling to myself.

They keep talking, and he does just as I expected him to do. He asks her to be his spy. Her answer isn't as obvious in the recording. She argues, she objects, she even says no, but it's the lack of words at the end that has my brow arching.

When the recording finishes and turns off, my men look at me.

"Did she agree?" Lorenzo asks.

"It sure did sound like it," I respond. Without eyes in the room, I can't be one hundred percent sure, but the audio evidence is pointing that way.

"I'm not so sure." Lorenzo rubs his chin. "It kind of sounds like she was just trying to appease him."

"No. She is working with him," Luka interjects. "It was clear as day."

"What do you want us to do about that, Boss?" Roberto asks.

"Nothing." He furrows his brow at my one-word answer.

"What do you mean, nothing?" Lorenzo asks, so I turn to him next.

"Exactly what I said. Nothing." The men all look confused now.

"Then what is the plan?"

"The plan is to give them a taste of their own medicine. No one comes into my house and thinks they can get one over on me."

"You will use her?"

My lip twists up into a dark smile. "Oh yes, I will use her. And when I'm done, I'll tuck her away, somewhere she can do no damage, and I'll only pull her out when I need a kid."

They all nod their head, happy with my plan.

“And how do you want us to act?”

“Give her some rope. That way she will hang herself on it eventually. Give her back her phone but have software installed so we can see and hear everything she does. I want to know everything about her, so I’ll install bugs everywhere. If she thinks it, I want to know.”

“Got it. This will be fun.” Luka laughs.

“I want her to think I’m falling for her ruse, and then ...” I slam my hand against the table. The sound loud and bouncing off the walls.

I stand from my chair.

“Now that that’s settled, I have to go.”

“Where to ...?”

“To seduce my wife.” I leave behind a round of laughter as I stalk out of the room. Seducing my wife isn’t something I had planned. But what better way to take her father down than to use his plan and turn it against him?

Her dad wants her to use her proximity to take me down.

I’ll use mine to her.

I will make her fall for me.

Make her believe I care.

And then I’ll feed her the information, not just to kill her dad but to get my cousin as well.

Once that’s over, I’ll decide her fate.

I head down the hall and stop in my office. When I make it inside, I open the top drawer in my desk to grab Viviana’s phone & iPad to give to the team for alteration. After this is done, I’ll be able to hear and see all the communications she makes.

This will be my first step.

A peace offering of sorts. She just won’t know why.

Walking back into the surveillance room, I toss the merchandise to my men. Pacing the room, I wait for it to be

done.

Surprisingly, it takes them no time to install the programs.

Now, with Viviana's gear in hand, I make my way to her room. I knock once, and I'm surprised to hear her tell me to enter.

When I walk in, I find her sitting on the couch in the corner. I expect her to be watching TV, but instead, she is reading.

"What are you reading?" I ask, actually interested to know. She holds up an old copy of a children's book. It's weathered around the edges, and I'm surprised we would have the book, but then I remember my mother reading it to me as a child.

"Beauty and the Beast."

"Interesting choice."

"I thought so. Seemed fitting. I'm surprised you had it. It was slim pickings in this room."

I suppress a chuckle. She isn't wrong about that one. I'm not known for my outstanding literary choices.

"That was my mother's favorite story to read me as a child. Where did you find it?"

"Why are you here?" she says, changing the topic. But I don't need an answer. This is my old bedroom from when I was a child. Although most of the furniture has been changed, the chest in the corner was mine from when I was young. I don't offer that information though. I don't need her to read into why I have it here.

"I came to bring you these." I lift my hand up, and her eyes go wide.

"My stuff." The way her brow arches in speculation has me wanting to laugh. She doesn't trust me at all. Rightfully so, but still, it is rather funny. She wears her emotions on her sleeve. Something that will come in handy in the future.

"You did well with your father," I say, shocking her even more.

Her dark eyes are large, but her jaw is still tight. She is waiting for me to say more. To issue some sort of order, declaration, threat.

“And this is my reward?”

I shrug at her suggestion, trying not to give anything away. “If you would like to see it that way.”

“How else can I see it?”

“A peace offering. I’ve been an asshole.”

“Ya think?”

“You proved your loyalty the other day, and I want to make it up to you.” Her eyes narrow. Clearly, she doesn’t believe me.

I place her objects on the table beside her. Her hand reaches out and grabs her phone, but still, her movements are slower than usual. She’s waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“And I’m allowed to use it?”

“Why else would I give it to you ...” I lead.

“To use a GPS tracker to see where I’m going.” She smiles at me, a sugary sweet smile, one I want to wipe off her face and kiss her at the same time.

“There’s no need to do that.”

Her lips pull back into a flat line.

“How come?” she asks, voice tight again.

“Because now that you’re married to me, you will go everywhere with one of my men.”

“I don’t really need a bodyguard.”

“Unfortunately, we’re going to have to agree to disagree on that fact. You do, in fact, need one. Period. I’m a very powerful man, and I have many enemies. And the moment you married me ... they became your enemies too.”

“Well, that hardly seems fair.”

“Princess, haven’t you learned yet?” I tsk.

“So, from now on, what you’re saying is that someone will be following me?”

“Yes.”

“Life might have been better under my father’s thumb,” she mumbles under her breath.

“Yes, if you want it to be sold to a man who would have no qualms about raping you.”

Her eyes go wide as her face pales, and I realized I took this a step too far. This is not a page in the Seduction 101 handbook.

Moving a step closer, I crowd her. This time when I look down at her, I can see there are small flecks of color in her irises.

Little gold flecks.

Too bad she’s a traitor. Fucking her often wouldn’t be a chore. Now to just get my head out of my ass and do what I need to do.

Seduction won’t be hard, seeing as she is beautiful.

The only problem is, I’m as romantic as the main character in the book she’s reading.

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

“Was that a question or a command?”

I inhale and refrain from barking out that she will come if she knows what’s best. That is not the way to win this game.

“Please have dinner with me today.”

“That wasn’t so hard. Now was it?”

I look at her expectantly. She still hasn’t given me her answer, but I wait for her to speak despite my impatience.

From where she’s sitting, her head is craned up and looking at me. Our eyes are locked. She’s doing that thing where she nibbles on her lower lip. She’s thinking. Although I don’t know what there is to think about. I am her husband, and at some point, she’s going to have to spend time with me.

Especially since her father's plan is to use her to get to me. She can't possibly do that unless she seduces me as well. It's a game of cat and mouse. Both of us trying to be the predator. Unfortunately for her, there can only be one.

There is only ever one winner.

What Viviana doesn't know is, I never lose.

"Okay," she says.

When I reach my hand out, her eyes go wide. She's shocked by the movement. She doesn't expect this.

Good.

I like to keep her on her toes.

She stares at my hand, outstretched and waiting for her.

For a moment, I wonder if she'll reject it. I wonder what is stronger inside her—the fear of her father or her strength. She answers my question when she places her small and delicate palm in mine.

With our fingers interlocked, I pull her up until she's standing.

Then together, we walk out of her room. I lead her down the grand staircase. My steps are slower than normal. Seeing as I'm much taller than her, my gait is longer, so I consciously alter my own to keep pace with her.

When we arrive in the dining room, I drop her hand to pull out the chair. She takes a seat, and then I sit beside her. Looking at her, I realize the last time we sat this close to each other was at our wedding. I'm going to have to change that if I think I could use her. But how does one seduce their own wife, their wife who is attempting to do the same?

If she was any other woman, it wouldn't be this hard. Before this, I didn't really date. Sure, I had a shit ton of sex. But date? Nope.

In my line of work, there is no room for relationships. Relationships are cemented in place solely for alliances.

Which is why I now have a wife. Except, in this case, there's no alliance to be made. If this was a date, I would talk to her about what she wanted in life, what she desired, and what she likes. I'd pretend I care. So that's exactly what I'll do.

"We don't really know each other," I start.

"Well, we did get married after basically a second. That doesn't bode well for getting to know someone."

Her sass is there. Present in every sarcastic quip that leaves her mouth. I like the fire.

"Very true, but I'd like to change that."

Her eyebrows arch. "You do? Why?"

"Why do I want to know my wife?" I ask, to show her that the idea is not so farfetched.

"Yes, that is exactly what I want to find out."

Leaning forward in my chair, I place my forearms on the table. "Believe it or not, I did not enter into this marriage without thinking of what it meant. I have no plans to divorce you. In my world, that doesn't happen. If we are to be together, if eventually you will be the mother of my children, I'd like to get to know you. I know I didn't start that way, but I want to now—"

"And this was all changed because of my father?" Her delicate features are natural, but her voice is lower, trying to determine if I'm telling the truth or feeding her a story.

The latter is the answer, but I'll sell it like a traveling salesman selling snake oil as a miracle cure.

"Yes. Seeing you with him made me realize there is no love lost between you, and because of that, because of the way he treated you, I want to protect you."

For a moment, I wonder if I've come on too strong and she will see through my lies, but the rigid line of her jaw softens.

"Okay," she answers.

“Good. Let’s start with you telling me a little about yourself.”

Her eyes go wide at my statement. “That’s a long answer.” She laughs. “Let’s narrow it down. What exactly do you want to know?”

“From what I gathered, it seems you went to NYU. What were you studying?”

“You already know *this*.” She rolls her eyes. She’s right I do, but I still want to hear it. “I’m studying, or I mean I studied English literature.”

“Hence the reading?”

“Yes, hence the reading.”

“You know, I have a library.”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

“And you just graduated?” I ask. Leaning back in my chair, I lift my elbows off the table.

“I did, actually. However, with everything that happened, I didn’t walk.”

“What does that mean?”

“Honestly? Absolutely nothing. I still have a diploma. I still graduated from college. I just didn’t have one of those moments when I stood on a podium and smiled at my parents.”

“Do you wish you did?”

“You’ve met my parents. What do you think?” she deadpans, and I can’t help but laugh. She cocks her head to the side. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh.”

“Don’t get used to it. I rarely do it.”

“You should do it more often. You have a nice laugh.”

“In my line of work ... well, let’s just say, no one laughs in my line of work. Not often at least.”

“That’s sad.”

“Life can be sad.” We both fall silent, and just as I’m about to open my mouth and ask her more, one of the members of my staff walks into the dining room.

She has a bottle of wine in her hand and then starts to pour us both a glass.

“I hope you drink red.”

“I’ll drink anything.” She laughs. “I’ve gotten used to getting drunk in order to make it through dinner with the parents.”

“I hope you don’t feel that way now.”

She looks taken aback. Maybe I’m coming off too strong. But I don’t have all the time in the world to make her trust me, and she is not stupid.

I need to convince her I’m the real deal, and then I need to take her, her family, and my cousin down.

There is no way she would believe right now that I would be reckless enough to drop confidential information in front of her. However, if I play the game right, if I lead her into a false comfort and then I drop the information, she will play right into my hands.

I’ll be able not to just take down her father but also to find my cousin. It is surprising how elusive he has been. I own New York, I should be able to find him, but seeing as he tried to get into bed with New Jersey, I have to assume that’s where he’s hiding. Although most of Jersey is mine, there are certain jurisdictions where my power is limited.

“So ... NYU? I know you lived in an apartment, was that where you lived throughout college?”

“No. Actually, I always lived in an apartment, but the one I lived in before was like Fort Knox. My father had so much security detail on me, it was pathetic.”

I find it interesting that she says that because one of the things I was shocked about was the lack of security she had.

“Obviously that changed,” I comment.

“Yes, well, I had to prove myself obedient. Once I did, he let out the reins a little bit. Once he was sure I would do anything he wanted and asked ...” she trails off, not finishing the train of thought.

“Agreeing to marry my cousin being one of them.”

“Yes, that he sprung on me right before I met you. He was a tyrant—*but not like you*. One who didn’t believe I needed an education or a diploma, which is why I studied English lit in the end.”

“But you at least love to read?”

“I do, but since I know he would never have let me do anything else. I chose something I loved, even if it meant I’d never have a career with it.”

“Well, that is a luxury most don’t have. Most people go to school to learn something they hate because it makes them money.”

“True. I should be happy I was able to follow my passion. I loved college. I loved learning. And in the end, I will always have the memories and the knowledge.”

In front of me was the opportunity I needed. It was a perfect in to warm her up to me.

“If you could do anything, what would you do?”

“Why? It doesn’t matter.”

I lean forward and place my hand on hers. “It matters to me.”

As the words leave my mouth, I realize there is some truth to them. It’s not that I care necessarily, but I’m curious about her. I want to know all about her. Not just to use her but because something intrigues me, and I would be lying if I said otherwise.

The way she looks at me is almost unnerving; she studies me, trying to understand. With my hand still on hers, I lean forward, closer to her.

Sell the story.

Make her believe.

“I—” she stutters out. “I love to read, as you know. I’ve always wanted to do something in that field. Maybe be a literary agent or an editor. Opening a bookstore would be amazing too.” Her voice comes out whimsical as if she’s lost in a dream. “I’ve always wanted to find the next great book to get lost in.”

“Then do it.”

“You, you would let me work?”

“Believe it or not, Viviana, you are not a prisoner here. Right now, it might be hard for you to start a job, seeing as there are some complications.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah. But it shouldn’t be that long. After.”

It’s a lie. If she does what I think she will do, there is no working where I will put her.

“Can I start looking now ...?” She sounds so hopeful. If I give in to her, it might help her believe more.

“I’ll consider it, depending on the threat, but you would have to take a bodyguard.”

“Okay.” She nods while smiling.

Her lips spread clear across her face.

I never have seen her smile like this before.

It’s truly the most beautiful smile I have ever seen. It’s the type of smile that could start wars.

It already has.

WHEN IT’S OVER, I ESCORT HER TO HER ROOM. AS SHE OPENS the door, she turns around and looks at me.

“Thank you for tonight.”

“It was my pleasure. If you’d like, we can start having dinner together every night that I’m here.”

“Are you not always here?”

“No. Sometimes, I go out.”

For a second, she looks like she might ask more, but instead, she lets her lip tip up.

“I’d like that,” she says.

“Good night, Viviana.”

“Good night, Matteo.”

After she steps into her room and closes the door, I head down the stairs. We have a shipment coming in tonight, and I need to get ready to oversee it.

Normally, I don’t.

But seeing as this is a new route and new drop location, I do.

I decide to have a drink in my office before we leave.

I’m sitting alone, scotch in hand, when Lorenzo walks in.

“How was dinner?” he asks, brow lifted.

“Good.”

The man still acts like we are in high school, expecting me to tell him about the cheerleader I banged under the bleachers.

“Anything else?” he asks.

I lift my brow. “Are we girls?”

“Well, no ...”

“Sit.” I pat the chair.

Lorenzo obliges. I stand and grab a second glass. “Have a drink with me.”

His eyebrow lifts. “What are we drinking to?”

“Laying the groundwork.” And hopefully getting laid with the wife afterward. I am no fucking saint.

“With the missus?”

“Ding, ding, ding. Correct. I anticipate having her under control within two weeks.”

“And then what?” He eyes me curiously.

“Then the fun starts.”

“Do you think we should finalize the details now?”

“No. Not yet. Too many variables can change. But I think we should set her up. Give her small pieces of info to tell her dad, and when we know he trusts her, we strike.”

“Will you be okay killing her when all is said and done?”

“Of course.”

“Interesting.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he responds, but I know he has more to say. The man knows me better than anyone. He knows the kill wouldn’t be easy on me, but I will do what I need to do, regardless of what he thinks.

We continue to drink, and the conversation is lighter after that. No more talk of war or killing my wife.

An hour later, it’s time to leave.

Like always, we take multiple cars. This time, unlike the last time, I’m in the middle one. I like to switch things up. That way, if anything happens, it’s harder to get to me. Seeing as no one knows of this location, I’m sure I’m okay, but you can never be too safe.

When we pull up to the port, we pull into the toy warehouse.

As far as warehouses, this one has never been under any scrutiny.

“Do you ever feel weird that we are stuffing drugs into a teddy bear?”

“No,” I respond to Roberto. It’s a lie. I hate this shit, but until my cousin is out of the picture, I need to keep dealing

this crap. I can't risk my cousin taking over and becoming even more powerful than he already is.

It still sucks to have to hide it in something meant for a kid. Luckily, there is no risk of this getting into the wrong hands.

The toy factory no longer sells stuffed toys to real stores. It's one hundred percent only selling our pieces, so there is no room for confusion with shipments. It's merely a front.

"We sell a product that for all intents and purposes shouldn't even be illegal. In some states, some of the shit we sell isn't. Coke, weed, pills ... if someone wants to get high, let them. Fuck, weed is legal in half the country, even Oregon just decriminalized heroin and cocaine."

"That better not happen here. It will kill our profit margins."

"If it does, we'll be fine." And we will. We have our hands in multiple pots. Drugs are only a small component.

Protection. Gambling. Loans. These are my moneymakers.

Drugs are something I've been trying to get out of for a long time, but until I do, I have to put up with this shit.

Soon.

"Listen, we might be stuffing a teddy with molly, but at least we don't sell women."

That is my argument to myself. I don't like the drug aspect, but it has always been a part of my family business. In order to change that, I would piss a lot of people off within the family from the loss of earnings.

I've spent the past three years since my father's death doing just that.

My goal is to be out within five more.

When the car stops, I get out. "How much longer?"

"Tobias said the boat should be coming in within fifteen minutes."

This location is prime due to its isolation and the toy company's good standing. The only issue I have is, although the governor of New York is on my side, I have to worry that the governor of Jersey would catch on. The Port Authority is headed up by both New York and Jersey.

I make a few calls as I wait, and just as Tobias has said, the boat pulls in at the exact time.

My men start to unload the crates, placing them on the concrete before they are all pried open and checked.

It takes us hours.

I'd much rather be at a club getting my dick sucked right now. But instead, I'm pulling

drugs out of a stuffed lion's head.

By the time we finish, the early morning light starts to slowly seep in from the hazy sky.

I'm back in my car now. The drugs are left behind with Roberto to sort and ship off to the distributors. It's just me, Lorenzo, and my driver on the way back to my estate.

"What did you think of the location?"

"It will work perfectly for now."

"You still want out of dealing?" he asks me.

I give him a brief nod. "I do."

"Think the men will care?"

"Maybe. But I think that when I devise a more viable solution that makes even more money, they won't give a flying fuck."

"And what will that be?"

"No clue. But don't worry, I'll figure it out."

"I know you will. You always do. You remind me of your dad."

His words have me looking over at him, stunned.

Lorenzo has been my friend, cousin, and closest confidant.

His opinion means everything to me. Knowing that I am anything like the man my dad was means everything.

I chose not to speak. Not to thank him. Not to say anything at all.

My emotions are sitting too heavy on my tongue, and I know if I open my mouth, I will say something.

In my line of work and in my family, you don't do that.

Instead, I nod once.

He knows me well enough to know I appreciate it, and then I pull out my phone and text Tobias.

Tobias is more than a business acquaintance. In my line of work, I don't have many friends, but to me, if I had one, it would be him. We met at Cyrus Reed's estate many years ago. Both of us clients of the banker. Over drinks and poker, we formed a bond of sorts, which is uncommon in this life.

Regardless of what he does for a living, I trust him with my life.

Born and raised in New York, his family is from Greece, but a family connection he wouldn't speak of has him directly connected to the Columbian cartel.

Because of that connection, he is my primary source of drugs.

I never asked questions, which is probably why he likes me so much, and since he has always honored the same code, I like him too.

Me: I'm at the restaurant.

It's coded obviously.

I'm here, meaning the drugs are here.

Tobias: Good. Enjoy it.

I place my phone back in my pocket and look out the window.

Guess I won't be sleeping anytime soon. Lucky for me, I don't require a lot. Tonight, I will decide what to do with my

wife.

Something away from the house ...

Or maybe something on the property.

I'm not sure if she will be comfortable going somewhere with me yet.

The weather is starting to get cold.

Although snow hasn't fallen yet, it's just a matter of time.

The trees are barren, so there isn't much to see on the property.

Instead of a walk, I decide I'll take her into the city tomorrow.

We can go shopping.

I can tell by the way she talked about getting a job, she's anxious to get out of the house, so that is what I'll do.

We will spend the day together.

Viviana

A WEEK HAS PASSED. THE DAYS HAVE BLENDED TOGETHER IN this house. The highlight being dinner with Matteo every night, as strange as that sounds.

It's surreal.

Even now as the early morning sunshine streams in from the tall windows it feels like I'm lost in a dream.

My eyes blink open, and for a moment, I almost forget where I am.

Almost.

But when the room comes into focus, beautifully ornate and the opposite of my apartment, I remember everything, and reality crashes down on me.

This isn't a dream.

I'm still here, in this strange sense of purgatory.

No idea what my future will bring, and completely afraid of what my past will.

There is nothing I can do now. I'm at the start of a roller coaster, about to begin moving, with no clue what's in store.

I'll need to suck it up and just go with the flow because I'll have no say in the matter, anyway.

I let out a large yawn.

Now that I'm resigned to my fate in this house, I think about my father.

Even though it has been a week since I spoke to him, I still feel unnerved by the whole encounter.

His words still filter in my mind. I can still see the tightness of his jaw and the way his hand was fisted. The anger was palpable in the room. I am lucky I got out of there unscathed. However, even now, it lingers on my skin. The fear and uncertainty of what the future will bring.

I don't have many choices.

My father left me none.

Matteo is my best option.

Although I don't know if I can trust him with my secrets. If I could, it would change everything. Yesterday he showed me a different side of him, a side that made me think maybe I could. But I'm taking it one day at a time and trying to see what today brings.

For all I know, he'll be a raging asshole yet again.

Even though it's a good possibility, I really hope it's not the case.

Love is not something I expect, but an alliance of sorts could make my life a whole lot easier.

Because the other option is to fall in line with my father.

There is also the choice that I can make to escape both of them. But it is more than just me that I need to consider in this equation. Too many people rely on me, and that's the reason I can't be selfish. I need to really consider my options.

Too much is at stake not to.

So instead of worrying and dwelling, I need to get out of bed. I need to shower. I need to put makeup on, and I need to smile. I need to convince Matteo I'm not the enemy, and that I can be trusted.

As if summoned by my thoughts, there is a knock on my door.

“Viviana.” I hear his voice. It’s husky and deep, like always.

I imagine there is a scowl on his face. Although he’s handsome with a scowl, it’s when he smiles and laughs that he’s truly devastating.

That side of him is scary. Because that side is the part that makes me humanize him.

Not a good thing right now.

“Hold on a second,” I shout back. He can’t come in. I’m barely dressed.

I jump out of bed, my feet hit the cold floor as I run to the closet to throw on clothes, but first I have to pee and brush my teeth. When I look in the mirror, my mouth drops open. I look ridiculous.

There is no saving my hair or face right now.

I have sleep lines from the pillow, and bedhead. It looks like I just had sex. Since I didn’t, it’s not a good look for me.

Quickly, I brush my teeth and run the brush through my hair. Since I still have to shower, I throw a robe on and head to the door. Unlocking it, I open it and poke my head out.

“Hey, I just need to get in the shower real fast.”

His green eyes stare at me, and like usual, it appears there are many words hidden behind them. “I’d like to take you to the city today.”

I must look shocked because he smiles at me, a little lopsided grin that makes my heart stop, even if just for a second.

A damn smile on a damn man I cannot seem to read and who is giving me mixed signals every single day.

I try to tell it to stop, but it’s a damn traitorous muscle, and it won’t listen to me.

Yes, he's attractive, and yes, he's my husband, but I cannot get those two things confused.

I can't catch feelings.

Not when there are so many unknown variables.

"I'd love that. How much time do I have?"

"How much time do you need?"

"Thirty minutes."

His eyes go wide at my answer. "That's fast."

I shrug. "I'm not high maintenance."

"I like that about you."

If it's not bad enough that he is gorgeous, now he has to say stuff like that. Cue the freaking butterflies in my stomach.

Great.

Just freaking great.

I'm attracted to my husband. Hell, by the way my body reacts to him, it's more than that. It feels like I'm sucker punched when I realize it's much more than that.

In the course of only a few days, I realize I actually like him.

I have a crush on my husband.

This is bad.

I need air, so walking the New York City streets might be exactly what is necessary right now. Maybe he will be a huge dick, and these insane flutters will stop.

Or maybe it will be worse.

I shake my head and decide to stop daydreaming about how the day will go and just live.

Thirty minutes later, we sit silently together in the car.

I was mildly surprised when he didn't insist that I cover my eyes while we drove out of the compound.

He didn't, but seeing as though when we were passing through the gates, I noticed the men standing with guns at the checkpoints and from lookout towers; I realize that even if I had directions, no one would make it into this place alive.

It should scare me, but it doesn't. Instead, it makes me feel safe.

I'm not sure what that means for me or about me, but I'm pretty sure it's not normal.

I also realize that, technically, if he wanted to lock me in this place, I would have no way out. Luckily for me, that's not the case.

As much of a monster as he makes himself out to be, in the grand scheme of all the men in my life, he's really not that bad.

It's almost like he's my dark hero.

I won't tell him that. Knowing him, he'd probably shoot one of his men just to prove me wrong.

No, that's not true. I'm being too hard on him.

As rough around the edges as he is, he has proven multiple times that he's not that bad. It's not surprising that we don't speak during the duration of our drive. But once we cross over the bridge that leads into the city, he turns to me.

"What do you want to do first?"

"I have choices?"

"All the choices in the world, sweetheart. This day is about you."

His words stun me. When he said we were going into the city, I assumed we were going to be staying at his other home.

"Can we eat?"

"I'm sorry, I forgot that you didn't eat anything this morning. You must be starving."

His brows pull together. He's clearly upset that he didn't take me into account.

“It’s really not a big deal. In college, I never ate.” That makes him squint at me.

“Really?”

“Yes, didn’t you ever pull an all-nighter studying and forget to eat?” I ask him.

He looks at me like I’m insane, green eyes wide.

“No.”

“Did you ...?” I trail off, not knowing how to broach this topic. “Did you go to college?”

He chuckles. “Of course, I went to college, Viviana.”

“Oh, I just figured ...”

“The School of Hard Knocks.”

I stop. Stare at him. He lets out a roar of a laughter that makes my chest feel fuzzy.

“Yale,” he supplies. “You figured since I run the mafia that I’m an idiot.”

Great, Viviana. Just great. Here he is, offering me an olive branch of peace to make our co-existence better, and I’ve insulted him left and right.

“That was presumptuous of me.”

“No, sweetheart, it was natural of you. I’m not mad. And the truth is, it’s okay. Most of the men in my family didn’t go to school, my father included. But he insisted the world was changing, and I needed to be well-versed in life and books in order to adapt to the change. Adapt or die, he used to say.”

“He sounds like a smart man.”

“He was.”

“Was?”

“Yes, he and my mother passed away a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” I nibble on my lower lip. I want to ask him so many questions, but I can’t find the words in my mouth.

I'm surprised when he smiles at me. It's not a large or infectious smile, but it still makes my heart beat a little faster.

"It's okay to ask me what happened to them."

"I don't want to pry."

"You're my wife now. It is not prying."

I take a deep breath and give him a tight smile. "How did they pass?"

"They were killed."

I let out an audible gasp. Not only am I shocked that his family died in such a horrific manner but I also can't believe how easily he speaks about it. He acts as though his family went to the supermarket when, in fact, they were murdered. Or at least I think they were. He hasn't said that yet, but I can only assume in the line of business he's in, that's what happened.

"How?"

"There was a bomb ... The fire it caused killed them."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, it feels like I've been sucker punched. It feels like a knife twisting in my back. As though I can't breathe through the pain, through my own memories.

"I-I ..." There are no words that make it out of my mouth.

"As I said before, it's okay, Viviana. I have had three years to mourn them, and although I miss them, I have learned to move on."

"Does it hurt to talk about them?"

"Not anymore."

He turns his attention back onto the street.

New York traffic is at a standstill, our car barely moving.

"We'll get out here," Matteo says, shocking me and causing his driver to turn in his seat.

"Here, but—" Through the rearview mirror, I can see the shock on the driver's face as he speaks.

“I said here.” Matteo’s clipped voice leaves no room for objection.

“I’ll tell the men ...”

“No need.”

“But—”

“No one knows we are here. No one followed us. We’re fine. We’ll walk. If I need you, I’ll call.”

With nothing more to add, he throws open the door and steps out. I scoot over across the center of the car to leave from the same door he does.

His hand reaches in, and he takes my hand, helping me out of the car.

I expect him to let me go, but instead, he interlocks our fingers.

His warm hand around mine.

It’s chilly in the city, but with his proximity and the way he makes my heart work faster than normal, I don’t feel the cold at all.

Instead, I feel my cheeks heat, and my pulse roar to life.

“Where are we going?” I squeak above the sound of the cars honking in the distance.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Oh... Okay.”

My stomach chooses that moment to growl, and I’m thankful that it’s noisy in the city so he can’t hear. I am starving, but things are going so well that I don’t want to point it out.

Fifteen minutes pass. I keep expecting him to drop my hand, but he never does.

When he finally stops walking, I see he’s stopped in front of a small Italian restaurant.

“I hope you’re really hungry.”

Now that he said it ...

“I’m starved,” I admit.

“Good. Because they make the best brick oven pizza in the city.”

He lets go of my hand, and instantly, I miss its warmth. But then he places it on the small of my back. I’m not sure why, but something feels so intimate about the move.

I don’t know if it’s because he looks down at me, and it’s as if he can see through me, or if it’s just the feeling of him touching me. I feel shaky, and I have to rid these thoughts from my head. With his free hand, he opens the door to the restaurant.

“After you,” he says.

I take a step forward and walk inside.

The restaurant is not what I would expect from the man who lives in such an immaculate estate.

I notice the walls have old, faded paper on them, but then in certain spots, there’s paint. There are a few tables, not many, probably around ten, but like the rest of the place, they look like they’ve seen better days.

“Follow me.”

He starts to walk, leading me to the far wall. There is a table for two in the corner. He pulls out the chair for me, and I sit.

“As I said before, they have the best pizza, and trust me, I know.”

“How did you find this place?”

“That’s a long story.”

“Well, I have time.” He’s about to open his mouth and start speaking when an older lady walks out from the door in the back of the restaurant that must lead to the kitchen.

“Matteo, it’s so good to see you. It’s been too long,” she says, as he stands and gives the lady a hug. She pulls back,

eyes on me, wearing a large smile on her face. Curiosity playing in her weathered eyes.

“Who’s your friend?”

“Maria, this is actually my wife.”

The lady, who I now know as Maria, lifts her hand to her mouth. “You have a wife? I didn’t know.”

“It all happened rather quickly.”

“Franco, come out here! Matteo Amante is here, and he brought his beautiful wife!” she screams.

A gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and a gray beard comes toward us. He shakes hands with Matteo before they both turn to me.

“Welcome. Matteo is like family,” she says warmly.

They both start to speak in Italian, their voices excited. Since I don’t speak Italian, I just sit there smiling at them. It’s nice to see Matteo like this. He seems like a different man.

Eventually, Matteo sits back down, and Maria and Franco go back to the kitchen to grab us the pizza.

It’s not a moment later when a big, giant pie is placed in front of us.

“Holy crap, that’s big.” I laugh.

“You didn’t eat breakfast.”

“I mean, I’m hungry, but that’s enough to feed an army.”

“Pretty sure an army would require a bit more than that.”

“I mean, I don’t limit what I can eat but this is ridiculous. I can’t believe you bought so much. You have to take home leftovers.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Why, you don’t?”

“I’m not much for leftovers, actually. I prefer fresh food. But it is a lot, and if you want to take it home, we can.”

“Maybe Roberto will want some.”

“That’s kind of you to think of him.”

Matteo serves us each a slice. I fold the middle in half and take a bite.

“Oh, my God. Holy crap. That’s good.”

He smirks and actually looks proud. “Told you.”

I take another bite. The robust flavors bursting in my mouth. After I chew and swallow, I look up from my plate.

Matteo is watching me. My cheeks start to feel warm. I was moaning while I ate my slice. Is it possible to die of embarrassment?

“No.”

“What?”

“You can’t die of embarrassment.”

I lift my hand and cover my eyes groaning. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Afraid so.”

Yep. Mortified.

Kill me now.

I cough and clear my throat.

“You were going to tell me about this place?” I say, trying desperately to change the topic.

“That’s right, I was.”

Matteo leans back in his chair. His green eyes appear lighter, and they look off to the left as if he’s pulling out the memory from a file deep in the back of his subconscious.

“I can’t remember exactly the first time I came here. I must have been four or five. For as long as I remember, I’ve been coming here. Knowing my mother, I was probably here in a stroller. You see, Maria was my mother’s childhood friend. They grew up together. They had both moved here when they were very young. Both of their parents came from the same village in Sicily. The town was called Nicolosi. It was actually my mother’s maiden name. They were the best of friends, and

even when my mom got married, they stayed in touch. Coming here was my mom's haven from the family and from all the drama of my father's business. Sure, my father did come with her every now and then, but this was her place. Hers and mine. I haven't been here much in the past three years. It's been too hard, but I'm happy I'm here now."

My mouth falls open, and I can feel the dampness in my eyes. I don't know why I'm so emotional. I'm not sure if it's because I can imagine him here as a little child with his mother who needed to escape. In my life, I've seen my mom feel the same way, but she didn't have any place to go that my father wasn't. I've also felt that way. I don't know how he feels coming here, but the fact that he showed me this part of him makes me want to cry.

I don't, though. I push back the tears that want to form, and instead, I reached my hand across the table and take his in mine.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For opening up to me. For bringing me here. For showing me a different side of you."

"It's nothing."

I give his hand a little squeeze. "No, Matteo. It's everything."

Matteo

I DIDN'T EXPECT TO OPEN UP LIKE THAT.

It just happened.

For some reason, she's easy to talk to, and that fact doesn't sit well with me. It's like she's weaved a spell, and I had no other choice but to oblige.

It's awful.

Fucking awful.

But on a more positive note, she's playing right into my hands.

Both literally and figuratively. I look down to where our fingers are now entwined.

I would be lying if I didn't admit it to myself, that sitting across from her at this table is comforting.

Her eyes are soft. They look at me as if she wants to save me.

It's a shame really, because had she not agreed to work with her father behind my back, I could see myself falling for her.

It makes no difference, though. What's done is done.

“What about you? Do you have a restaurant your parents ever took you to?”

“You mean other than making me stay home with the nanny?”

As soon as the words slip out of her mouth her shoulders tighten.

The nanny.

The family her father is still paying even now, years later.

What happened to her?

Why are they paying her off?

This is one more thing I need to get to the bottom of. This can be something I can use against the governor.

Maybe when she gets more comfortable, she will open up. Or maybe now that her phone is tapped, when she calls her father to talk about her mission, she will mention it.

Fuck, that will make my life so much easier.

“After we’re done eating lunch, what do you want to do?” I ask, changing the topic.

The haunted look that is in her eyes fades away.

“I get to pick?”

“Well, I picked lunch.”

“And you did such a great job. I’m not sure I can do much better.”

“You don’t have to do much better, you only have to tell me what will make you happy.”

She cocks her head.

Still unsure.

“Viviana, we started on the wrong foot. Yes, I’m a dick. I’m controlling too. But we don’t have to hate each other. We made a promise for forever. Forever is a long time.”

She mulls over my words but eventually nods her head.

“I want to go ice-skating.”

“Is there a rink even open? It’s not cold yet.”

“Yes.”

Her direct and forceful response has me laughing.

“Fine. I’ll take you.”

“Can you skate?” she asks.

“Yes. Can you?”

“No,” she admits on a sigh.

“Then why do you want to go skating so bad?”

“Because my parents never let me. I told myself when I was older, I would go by myself when I finally moved into the city, but between school and everything, I never found time.”

“So you’re telling me in four years of living in the city you never went ice-skating?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“Well, I guess I know the plans for later today. And here I thought we would wind up at Saks or Bergdorf to buy you a new wardrobe.”

“Nope. I’m not much of a shopper.”

I stare at her, transfixed by what she says. “You constantly surprise me.”

“What do you mean?” Her nose wrinkles.

“You really aren’t like most women I know.”

“Stop generalizing then.”

I smile. “Touché.”

“Anyway, is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It’s a good thing. A very good thing.” The truth is, that’s one of the things I begrudgingly like most about her. I like that she’s not like anyone else.

It’s going to fucking suck if I ever have to kill her.

I remind myself that she made a deal with her father to sell me out. No matter how cute she looks smiling at me about ice-skating, it doesn't matter. I need to always remember this is just a game, and she is merely the pawn.

I DECIDE NOT TO TAKE HER ICE-SKATING, BUT I WON'T TELL her now. Instead, I decided to tell her we have other plans. That we should spend the day doing other things, and that ice-skating will be the last.

I'm lying.

Normally, I don't lie.

But seeing as she agreed to sell me out to her father, there is no harm.

I walk us to Fifth Avenue. Viviana growing up, lacked for nothing, so I expect her to look at the stores, but she doesn't even glance. It's very refreshing that she doesn't seem to care very much.

In another life, I could see myself enjoying my time with her. In another life, she would make the perfect wife.

But this life isn't ours to have.

We walk all the way down Fifth Avenue until we reach the New York City Library.

This is what she gets excited about. Not the designer stores. No, Viviana gets excited about the library.

If only I had a bigger library in my house. Mine is small and unkept. I have a few books for the kids who come over who are my family members. Nothing crazy, but still, I will give her access to it after we return from the city.

It will give her something to do.

Plus, it might be my way to get her to trust me more.

I'm sure that reading the fairy tales she loves will make her more open to suggestions.

I think back to the book I found her reading in my old room, and I have to refrain from laughing. When she alluded that I was the beast in the story, she couldn't have been any further from the truth.

If this was a fairy tale, I would not be the beast.

Although I do have some redeemable qualities, none of them are aimed toward her. If anything, I'm Gaston.

The villain.

And in this fairy tale, there are no heroes.

Viviana

I'M OFFICIALLY HAVING THE BEST TIME, WHICH IS NOT something I would've thought I would be saying today. It's certainly not something I thought I'd be saying a week ago. Or two, at that. This is all uncharted territory. Feeling welcome, and interesting, and like I matter. As we step into the New York City Library, my senses go into overdrive. The smell that permeates through the air: old books. It's heaven.

It's nice to have him here. Although normally when I come here, I have Julia in tow.

She knows just how much I love the library. She's the only person who knows how badly I love to get lost in a story.

She and I are connected in that.

Neither one of us had the childhood we deserved.

Hers, however, was not her fault...

Mine.

Nope. Not going there.

I always would sit in my tree house and wish I could escape into my own world.

Now, I want to give that dream to other children. I survived by losing myself in the classics, but how amazing

would it be if I could find a fantastic fantasy and bring it into the world for others to enjoy.

That dream faded a long time ago.

When my father so pointedly told me that my only place was beside my future husband as a prop.

I'm happy to have the dream again. Even if it never comes to be, I'm happy to just dream.

No matter what happens with my father or what he makes me do, this will happen.

I'm surprised when we spend an hour at the library. I assumed we would walk in, and after five minutes, Matteo would get bored and want to leave. But instead, he let me look around, sit down, and read.

Another thing that surprised me was I assumed he would play on his phone the whole time. Obviously not speak on his phone, but I expected him to text. Instead, he spent the whole time watching me.

At first, it was a bit unnerving. Then despite what I thought, I found that I liked it. I liked the way he watched me. His green eyes, usually cold and distant, had a different look to them. This time his pupils were large. They were dilated as he watched me.

But it was the way he watched. He watched me like a predator. He watched me like he wanted to jump across the table, throw me down, and have his way with me. I'd like to pretend that I had no reaction to this. But as I read each word, all I see above the book is him tracking my movements, ready to pounce.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask.

"Don't feel rushed by me. I'm enjoying myself."

"All you've been doing is staring at me."

"Case in point. This is why I've been enjoying myself."

"Well, I'm ready."

“We still have a lot of time before we go to Rockefeller Center. Is there something you want to do beforehand?”

“I was wondering ...” I bite my lower lip.

“You can talk to me. What were you wondering, Viviana?”

“I was wondering if I could see my friend Julia.”

“The same Julia you wanted to invite to the wedding?”

“The very same.”

He mulls over my words, not giving away what he thinks he’s going to do. I wonder if he’ll say yes. Or maybe he’ll say no. Maybe this whole last week of him being nice has just been an illusion in my mind. I sit and wait for him to answer. I close the cover of the book I was reading and stare up at him.

On instinct, I bite my lip harder, a small exhale bursting from my mouth when I nip too hard. I follow the movement of his eyes and can’t be one hundred percent sure but, if I had to harbor a guess on what he is staring at, I would have to say my mouth.

When he still doesn’t answer, I start to fidget uncomfortably in my chair. The silence of the library is deafening right now. He leans forward. His elbows resting on the surface of the table. I lean forward as well, our faces are closer, so he doesn’t have to raise his voice.

“You can see your friend, Viviana. Tell her to meet us for coffee.”

“Shh.” I hear from a patron sitting farther up the table from us.

A laugh wants to escape my mouth. But I hold back from making a sound. Instead, I mouth to Matteo that we should go.

He gives me a nod and stands. I’m putting the book in a pile before I noticed that he’s walked up to me. With one hand, he grabs my pile, and with the other, he takes me.

We return the books back to where we found them and then we walk back out the foyer of the library. Once we’re

back in the busy New York streets, I let out the laugh I was holding.

“We almost got in trouble.”

“If you think that’s trouble, then you’ve never seen trouble.”

“Probably not.”

“Don’t worry, spend enough time with me and you certainly will.”

“Where should I tell her we’re going?”

He prattles off an address, and for some reason, I’m pretty sure that like the pizza restaurant we went to, the owner will be someone he knows. I’m okay with that. Every time he introduces me to someone, I find out a little more about my mysterious husband.

My desire for knowledge is all-encompassing. I want to gather information like one would do before a test. I send a text message to Julia, telling her where we will be, when we will be there, and asking her if she will join us. My phone vibrates in my hands.

Julia: Wow. You’re alive.

Me: Sorry I’ve been MIA.

Julia: MIA? More like dead. You better have a good excuse for why you have dropped off the face of the planet. I was worried SICK about you.

Me: I do. Promise.

Julia: And ... ?

Me: I’ll explain when I see you.

Julia: When/where? Talk to me.

As soon as I put my phone back into my bag, I stop short.

“What’s wrong?”

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath.

“What?”

“I just realized I haven’t spoken to Jules in so long. Even after I got my phone back, I didn’t call her, I didn’t know what to say so I avoided her. Now I realize how bad an idea that was. I haven’t spoken to Julia since the night at the club. She doesn’t know anything. For all she knows, I was buried in a shallow ditch, because I didn’t talk to her.”

“Are you worried how she’ll react to the news of your marriage?”

I give him a look that says are you fucking kidding me. “Yes, Matteo.” My arms start to move dramatically in an animated fashion. “Of course, I’m worried. I got married without my best friend. She’s more than my best friend. She is the closest thing to family I have. And I have two parents who are alive.” Matteo steps up to me and takes my frantic hands in his. My eyes go wide as he lifts them up to his mouth and places a soft kiss on top of each.

“Talk to me.”

I don’t know what to tell him. On the one hand, I want to tell him all about my past. All about how important Julia is to me. About her mother. But until I know if I can trust him, I need to be careful with my words. Too much is at stake.

“Her mother was my nanny. Since my family ...” I bite my lip, nibbling it for a second as I remember all the memories that flood me. “My family was never around. My mother was too busy being a socialite, Julia and her family were my only family. At least for the first ten years of my life. I can’t lose her.”

“She will understand.”

“Will she?”

“Yes. You say she’s family. Tell her a version of the truth. She knows your life is not exactly ordinary.”

“And what exactly is that?”

“That your father wanted to marry you off to a horrible man, and I was your savior.” The right side of his lip curls up into a smirk.

“Do you think you’re funny?”

“No one has ever accused me of being that. But yes, I think I am.”

I give a little chuckle. “Believe what you want. Now, let’s get going.”

The walk to the coffee shop takes us about ten minutes. It’s not far, and since the weather isn’t too cold, it feels nice. Just as I suspected, it’s a small, cozy café. From the Italian word on the banner, I have a feeling when we walk inside, Matteo will know the owner.

As the bell jingles, I am almost immediately correct. Matteo doesn’t even need to take one step inside before a man, who looks to be a little older than Matteo, walks up to us. Again, they speak to each other in Italian. And again, I curse the fact I never learned. He introduces me as his wife. This time when he does, it feels as though swarms of butterflies start to dance in my belly.

My cheeks warm, and I’m sure that I’m blushing, which is stupid because I shouldn’t feel this way. It wasn’t long ago that I hated him, and in a matter of one week, he’s basically turned my body into a traitor.

Once the introductions are made, we sit down at the table.

It’s not a minute later that the same man, who he introduced to me as the owner of the small café, comes back to the table. This time, he places a white envelope on top of the linens. Matteo takes the envelope without checking what’s in it and places it in his pocket. The man says nothing more and just turns and walks away, leaving me still staring at the place on the table where the envelope just sat.

“What was that?”

“Nothing to concern yourself with.”

I want to say bullshit. I want to demand he tells me. For so many years, I was left in the dark. All the time I lived under my father’s roof I was treated like a child, not able to make her own decisions. The thing is, as much as I want to ask him at the same time, I’m not sure I want to know.

I am under no false illusion it's about my husband, but at the same time, do I really want the gritty details?

Matteo

I WATCH HER AS SHE WAITS FOR HER FRIEND TO ARRIVE. HER face is more serious than normal. There is a tiny line that forms between her brows like she is thinking really hard of how she is going to break the news to her friend that she got married.

Then there is the way she nibbles on her lip.

I'm used to seeing her do this move when she is nervous, but now as she chomps on the plump skin, I know she truly cares what her friend thinks.

When the bell on the door finally chimes and a girl who looks to be Viviana's age walks in, she jumps from her chair and barrels into her.

They both seem equally excited to see each other.

As though it's been years and not weeks.

It feels like just yesterday I waited in Viviana's apartment for her to arrive, but seeing these two together makes me understand it's been much longer than it felt.

After a few seconds, they separate.

That's when her friend finally notices me. She narrows her eyes as I stand and approach. She doesn't even need to speak for me to know that she is currently giving me the silent third degree.

Turning back to Viviana, she gives her a pointed look.

“Who is he?” she grits through her teeth. Not even pretending not to be upset.

“About that ... How about you take a seat? I have someone to talk to you about.”

“What’s going on? Viviana, in my whole life of knowing you, you have never randomly shown up with a guy. You’ve barely dated. And here you are, missing in action for almost two weeks, then you bring him here. Tell me what is going on, now.”

For some reason, I find myself stepping up to Viviana’s side and getting close to her. I don’t outwardly touch her, but my hand skims her hand, our fingers making contact. She straightens her back as if my touch gives her strength.

“Please, sit down, Julia, I will explain everything. I promise.”

“Sounds like it’s going to be one heck of a long story,” she says, before striding over to the chair and sitting down. We both also take the seats that we were in before, but I pull my chair a little closer to hers, making a clear statement that we are together.

“Remember that night I went to my father’s?”

“The last time we spoke?” The bitterness in her voice is heavy. Like a jilted lover left at the altar forced to talk to her ex.

“Yes, that’s the night I’m talking about. As you know, it’s never fun going to have dinner with my family, but this night was worse. This night, my father basically took my life away from me. He-he,” she stutters, clearly still affected by his words. “He wanted me to form an alliance for him. I-I was supposed to marry a man named Salvatore Amante. He thought that by marrying me off to him, it would help him politically.”

Julia’s face shows signs of shock. Her mouth open, waiting.

“Matteo”—Viviana looks at me—“is Salvatore’s cousin. Matteo, knowing the type of man Salvatore is, wanted to help me ...”

“And how exactly did he help you?”

It is then that Viviana removes her hand from her lap. She twists the ring on her finger around until it is no longer just a platinum band on her right hand, but now the diamond is showing. She removes the ring and places it on the left hand.

“You’re engaged?” Julia hisses.

“No.” There is a pregnant pause as Julia waits for what she will say next. I’m waiting too, but not because I don’t know the answer, but because I’m curious as to how her friend will react. “I’m actually married.” The silence is deafening after the statement.

Julia stares at her friend, blank and lifelessly.

Finally, Viviana leans across the table closer. “Say something. Please.” Her voice cracks. There is so much emotion wrapped up in the one word. It’s a plea. A frozen panic, unfathomable pain.

She needs her friend to be okay with this, but instead, Julia’s jaw tightens.

“You got married without me,” she states.

“It wasn’t like that.”

Julia stands from her chair. “Yes. It clearly was.”

“Where are you going?” Viviana stands too, but unlike her friend who stands tall with strength, Viviana’s shoulders slump forward. This is a much different version of the girl I saw go head-to-head with her father.

Her friend crosses her arms at her chest. “I need air. I need to think.”

“Please let me explain. We needed to keep it quiet.” Viviana steps closer to her and lifts her hand, but Julia shakes her head.

“Still, I’m not just anyone,” Julia says, and for some unexplainable reason, I feel the need to defend her.

“I don’t know you, Julia, but I know that my wife cares deeply for you. You can’t blame her for this. This was done for her protection, as well as yours. I insisted that she marry me.”

“That’s well and good, but I still can’t deal with this now.”

“Please,” Viviana pleads again, but she’s still not deterred.

“Not now. You are supposed to be family. You are my only family besides my brother, and I wasn’t there with you. Listen, I’ll get over this. But right now, I need to be alone.”

“I understand,” Viviana whispers.

Without another word, she turns back to the door and leaves.

We are both quiet.

From where I’m sitting, I have my head cocked to look at her. Her head is down, facing the floor. She’s staring deeply at it. It’s as though there is something interesting there.

Of course, there isn’t. She is just lost in a train of thought.

Standing, I walk in front of her. Blocking her gaze with my body, I grab her by her hand.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re leaving.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t we have to pay?”

“No,” I tell her.

“Okay ... Can we just go home?”

“No.”

Two thoughts pop into my head.

The first is, I don’t like seeing her like this. That thought gives me pause. She’s nothing to me other than a means to an end, so why do I care?

The second is, justifying why I care. It doesn’t feel genuine, and that thought bothers me.

I can use this to build trust.

For some reason, that idea feels wrong. But I refuse to let that stop me. Instead, I push forward with the plan.

Use her weakness to my advantage.

“Where are we going? I don’t want to ice-skate.”

Good. Thank fucking God because as much as I want to lure her in, ice-skating is not something I want to do.

If this hadn’t happened, I was already trying to formulate a plan on how to get out of it. This way, she thinks she decided.

Which works better for me.

I lead her outside, and then we start walking uptown.

This time, the walk is longer, and the air is getting colder. She pulls her jacket tighter against her chest.

“Do you want to grab a cab?”

“Nah. I’m good. A bit cold but not too bad.”

I shrug off my own coat and place it over her shoulders. She’s so tiny, it’s swimming on her.

Viviana stops walking.

She turns her body, pivoting until she is facing me. Her eyes are wide. She resembles a little girl trying on her father’s clothes. That’s how small she is. I don’t think I ever realized the size difference.

“How tall are you?” I ask, and she looks at me like I’m crazy. My question takes her completely off guard.

“Five foot two. Give or take. Why?” The moment she answers, I realize how dumb the question was. I knew the answer. I was just so preoccupied by her that I forgot all about her file.

“Because my coat is huge on you.”

“Well, it’s not my fault you’re like a giant.” She rolls her eyes at me, and I laugh.

“No. I’m definitely not a giant.”

“Then how tall are you?” Her perfect brow arches.

“Me. I’m six foot two inches.”

“That’s still a foot taller than I am. You didn’t have to give me your coat, by the way. I would have been okay.”

“You were cold, and that’s what a gentleman does.” At my words, she sucks in her cheeks as though she is mocking me.

“And you”—she pauses—“consider yourself a gentleman?”

“What else would you consider me?”

“Not that.” Her eyes look up and to the right as if she is trying to figure out the perfect insult to fling at me. “Maybe the word asshole would better fit.” She grins at her words, clearly proud of herself.

“You are so funny.” At that, she giggles. The sound is refreshing after the past twenty minutes of silence. We start to walk again, and I’m happy I was able to lighten the mood. Thus far, it hasn’t been pleasant to see her sulk. I don’t do drama, and having to watch her spar with her friend is exactly why I don’t do girlfriends.

This time is different because her emotions don’t play into my bigger plan. It’s obvious she’s upset. But I don’t know how to deal with that shit.

I have never had to.

This is a relationship, and I don’t do relationships. An ironic fact, seeing as I’m married now.

Now that the air around us is lighter, I pull her closer to me and wrap my arm around her.

“What are you doing?” she asks, confused.

“I figured since you were cold,” I offer as my completely bullshit excuse.

“Oh. Okay.”

“It’s only a few more minutes anyway.”

“Where are we going now? I can’t possibly eat another piece of food. Or drink anything more.”

“Don’t worry. No more food. Well, at least no more food until dinner.”

The destination is directly in front of us.

“We’re going to the park?”

“Kind of.”

“What do you mean kind of?”

“Well, earlier you mentioned your parents never let you go ice-skating or do any of the fun things tourists do in the city. One of the things my mom used to do with me when I was a small boy was sneak me out of school, not tell my dad, and bring me into the city. She would then take me on a carriage ride.”

“Is that what we are doing?”

“I believe it is, Princess.”

Viviana

PRINCESS.

And for the first time, I feel like one. This is not a nickname to mock or belittle me.

I'm still shocked by his idea. A carriage ride.

If you had asked me if I thought my husband had any romantic bones in his body, the answer would have been no.

But each second I spend with him, I'm starting to think maybe he does after all.

Together, with his arm wrapped around me, we make our way to the horse lineup.

He walks away from me as he talks to the driver. Once they settle the fare, he's grabbing my hand and helping me up.

As we start our journey down the path and into the park, I turn my head toward Matteo. I'm still in awe of him for planning this, but what I'm mainly in shock about is that he opened up to me about his past.

Maybe there is more to him. Maybe this can be more.

I shouldn't indulge myself in these stupid fantasies, but when he looks at me, I can't help it. It is as if he can hear my inner rambling about him because he chooses that exact minute to turn his face toward mine.

Our gazes lock.

His pupils are large and dilated, and the bright streams of sunlight reflect off them. Bouncing around us like a dream come true.

Something is different about the way he looks at me. A hidden secret there. Something primal steals away in his stare, and pulls me in, wraps its tendrils around me, not allowing me to pull my own gaze away. It speaks to me of want, desperation, and most of all need.

Will he cross the imaginary divide?

My heart pounds in my chest as I wait, the passing seconds filling the tense space between.

Kiss me.

The voice in my head is foreign, but it begs him to close the distance. To wrap his arms around me. To bring his body to mine. In my thoughts, I can almost feel his lips. Almost taste his mouth.

They would be firm when they found me.

It would be intoxicating.

A cough brings me out of my haze, and I see Matteo staring at me still, and his eyes are locked on my lips.

While I was fantasizing about him, he had moved closer. Now we were close enough that one small bump of the carriage would have us kissing.

Hit a pothole. *Please.*

I can't believe how much I want this. How much I want him.

It's not just because he's handsome.

Hell, he's drop-dead gorgeous. But it's also because of the way he treated me today. Everything he did.

It was like he was taking care of me.

No one has ever taken care of me.

Not true.

Ana did.

She took care of me.

Look how that turned out.

“Are you okay?” his voice cuts through my thoughts.

I blink, righting myself.

That’s when his hand reaches out, and his warm fingers cradle my jaw.

This is it.

This is the moment when Matteo Amante will kiss me. Really kiss me. Like a husband kisses a wife.

At the wedding, it wasn’t real. I hated him too much to appreciate it. But now, here in the carriage, in New York City, this will be our first.

His body starts to move, and now his face is a mere inch from mine.

Kiss me.

He’s about to. My eyes close of their own accord and my lips part in waiting.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

A phone.

My eyes jut open. No, not mine. It’s Matteo’s phone ringing. He’s pulling away now, his hand reaching into his pocket to grab it.

The moment now lost.

I miss it instantly.

“Speak,” Matteo commands, before he goes silent, a line forming between his brows.

He’s not happy. I swear it looks like he’s going to explode. There is a vein that is pulsating in his temple.

Suddenly the carriage feels like it's closing in.

"I will be there as soon as possible. Have Roberto pick us up at Sixtieth and Fifth. Ten minutes."

He hangs up and won't look at me. Instead, he's breathing heavily and staring off into space.

"Is everything okay?"

He turns back toward me and he doesn't need to say anything for me to know that something is seriously wrong. I don't think he will tell me, but I can't help but ask.

"No." He doesn't offer any clarification about what his answer means. I knew he wouldn't, but I still reach out my hand, place my hand on his thigh and give it a little squeeze.

"You know, if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here."

There's an awkward silence that falls into place, and I hope and pray that he breaks it, but as the carriage grinds slowly to a halt, I know it's too late.

The magical moment is gone.

The Matteo I had the pleasure of glancing at has faded away.

In his place is the ruthless monarch.

The king of the city. The monster.

He has reverted to the villain of the story.

Unlike before, he doesn't help me out of the carriage. He doesn't even acknowledge my existence.

We walk up the block where two black SUVs are waiting at the corner. Standing in front of one is Roberto.

"Go with Roberto," he says with no emotion in his voice.

"Are you not coming with me?"

"No."

"Will—"

"I'll see you later." He turns before I can press. Walking toward the other car, he opens the passenger door, climbs in,

and they are driving away.

I'm left on the sidewalk with my mouth hanging open. Abandoned.

"Mrs. Amante, are you ready?"

"You don't have to call me Mrs. Amante. You don't call Matteo mister."

"It's different."

"No, it's not. Please call me Viviana."

"I'd prefer not to." He opens the back door for me, and once I'm inside, he shuts it.

Despite the heat being on in the car, I feel chilled to the bone. I still have Matteo's coat wrapped around me, so it's not the temperature that's getting to me. It's the way my husband threw up his walls and shut me out so quickly. It's the way, in the matter of a minute, he completely changed. I'm having a hard time reconciling it. Which one is the real Matteo? Is it the gentleman who helped me, who took me on a carriage ride to make me feel better, or is it the other?

The car is silent as we drive back to the estate.

Eventually, I must doze off because I hear Roberto's voice.

"Mrs. Amante, we are here." I blink open my eyes and see the large home in front of us. "I'll come around and get the door."

I know better than to argue. Instead, I wait for him to come around. My hand lifts, wiping away the remainder of sleep.

It feels like I've been hit with a sledgehammer with how tired I am.

This is why napping is never a good idea for me. I'm always cranky afterward.

Now is obviously no exception.

Julia used to say I woke up like a devil in college.

Jules ...

I need to call her.

Make this right.

If I could explain the circumstances, she would understand I had no choice.

It's hard, though. How do you explain that you married the head of the East Coast mafia, and he's at war to keep his title?

You don't.

Not unless you want to put a target on your back.

When the door opens, I step out and walk toward the main entrance of the house. It's already opened, one of the many people who work for my husband standing there letting me pass. I don't bother with pleasantries, nor do I bother taking my coat off and, in this case, also Matteo's coat. Instead, I had straight up to my bedroom.

Once inside, I walk straight to the bathroom, pulling off an article of clothing with each step I take. A shower is necessary, washing away the grime of the last few hours. It's funny how many ups and downs today had.

All in all, I thought I found out a lot about my husband, but now as I step into the warm water, I'm not sure what the truth is. Something tells me he's complex enough for both to be the truth. I stay in the shower until the bathroom is foggy, and my fingers become prunes. Then I step out, grabbing the big white fluffy robe hanging from the hook by the door.

A memory of that first morning when Matteo surprised me in the bathroom. That won't be happening today. I'm sure he's not coming home. I'm not sure how I feel about that. A part of me welcomes the idea of having some peace and quiet to think. Another part I don't like to acknowledge wants to see him again. Wants to pick up where we left off in the carriage. Wants to kiss him.

I decide to ignore that part. I pick up the book beside my bed and crawl in to read. It's funny how similarities between this child's fable and my own life are glaringly obvious. Maybe that's what made me reach out for a book clearly not written for me. I'm still tired, and my eyes continue to blink.

It's still a little early for dinner, but I guess I could fall asleep, then wake up and eat. Maybe Matteo will be here.

Matteo

A FUCKING SHIPMENT.

We lost a whole fucking shipment.

One of my trucks was commandeered on the way to Upstate New York.

So now I'm in the car with Lorenzo trying to figure out who the fuck took it.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize it was Salvatore. However, how Salvatore found out about it is a whole other problem. One: I'm being watched. Two: There is a mole.

Neither option is good.

The only saving grace at this point is that it's not one of the shipments that came from the warehouse. This was a shipment of goods in storage for a few weeks, and we only got around to moving it today.

This means the tight group of people who know about the toy factory are good.

I'm leaning toward the fact that I'm probably being watched.

Of course, it's not unheard of that there could be a mole, but my men have all been with me for years, and before they

were my men, they or someone in their family was with my father.

Knowing we've been compromised, I choose to meet my men at the old warehouse. It could be a trap, but I'm willing to take a chance rather than lead someone to my other location.

"Be diligent," I bark at Lorenzo as we weave through traffic to get to where we need to go.

"We aren't being followed."

"That might be the case, but there's a good chance they know we're coming. There's an even a better chance they're already there."

"You think we're walking into an ambush?" His brows furrow.

"I'm one hundred percent sure we're walking into an ambush," I confirm.

"If that's the case, why are you telling the men to go there?"

"Because in this case, I can dictate the outcome. Call up the men. I want them to know to expect anything. Do we have masks in the car?"

"We do."

"Everyone is to wear a mask. We're going to fumigate the place before anyone steps inside. If anyone is there, we will knock them on their ass. If not, well, then we are one canister short, but at least we know."

"Okay. I'll make the call."

With that conversation done, I turn to look out the window. The sky is gray now, and the sun hides behind a cloud. It looks like a storm will hit soon. How different the sky is now from earlier.

Today was a good day. Then some asshole had to fuck it up for me.

Viviana was finally starting to let down her guard.

Then everything was ruined.

This could derail my plan to seduce my wife.

I could have handled it better. Not only did I lose millions but I also have to figure out if it was my cousin or someone else.

It's bad enough to fight one war.

But having to fight two fronts ...

That never works out well.

Look at Napoleon, for example, he had a hard enough time before the Russian winter kicked his ass.

It takes forty more minutes before we are ready. Half the men pulled up from the back. The other from the side.

I'm coming in from the front.

Lorenzo is ahead of me. He opens the door and throws the tear gas in. My hand lifts as I count off. At one, my signal, we all charge.

The smoke starts to clear a minute later, and three men are on the floor, clutching their faces with machine guns beside them. They're packing some pretty heavy machinery.

"Get the rope." I turn to Lorenzo. "You get chairs."

My men get to work tying up the intruders.

It's not long before the gas wears off, and they start to realized what's happened.

"So, which one of you is going to tell me who you work for?"

None of them answer me.

"Is that how you guys are going to play it?" When no one speaks again, I shrug. "Very well, this is much more fun." I turn behind me to Lorenzo. "Do we have truth serum?"

"Not on us, Boss."

"Okay. You heard him. This is not going to be easy ..."

I'm handed pliers, and I step up to the first man. He's older than me, probably by ten years. His hair is salt-and-pepper, and his face has a beard. I would put him in his late forties. If he works for Salvatore, he's probably a connection his father had made.

"Last chance to speak." Nothing. I give him a sardonic smile. "Let the games begin."

Lorenzo steps up beside me. This is not our first rodeo. He holds the man's head, grips his jaw, and opens it. With the pliers in hand, I lean forward.

"You sure ..." I trail off for emphasis. At this point in the torture, I'm not really asking if he's sure. There's nothing he could do to stop this. His front tooth will be coming out, but I love to toy with my prey first.

I put the metal around his tooth, grip it, and then twist. A bloodcurdling scream echoes through the large cavernous space of my warehouse.

I hold the tooth up to his friends. "Are you sure no one has anything interesting to say to me?"

The man in front of me is now crying. It's hard to hear exactly what he's saying since Lorenzo is still holding his jaw open.

"Let him go. I think he wants to talk." Blood fills his mouth. As he goes to close it, it drips down his chin and onto his shirt.

"Do any of you want to make this easier on yourself?"

"Fuck you," the one guy gargles through the liquid collecting in his mouth.

"Okay, another one?" I yawn, directing this question at my men.

"How about you take out his eye next?" one of my men says from behind me. I turn around to look at which one. I take my finger and point.

"Now that's a good idea. But maybe not an eye. Maybe we should start with a finger."

“No!” the man screams, but I am already moving closer to Lorenzo to grab the blade.

“Anyone want to talk? No? None of you want to save your boy’s ass? Okay, well, I’m going to be honest, I don’t like the loyalty here. If you’re going to let your friend get tortured, I guess I should spread the wealth.”

Instead of walking to the man who’s bleeding all over the floor, I walk up to the man sitting next to him. He looks to be the same age. This one doesn’t have a beard, but he has wrinkles around his eyes.

“You’re up. Anything to say?”

“We were just hired to do the job.” Well, that takes me by surprise. I didn’t actually expect any of them to talk.

“By who?”

“We don’t know.”

“You had me. I almost let you guys go.” I grab his index finger and hold it up, still smiling. I must look like a crazy fucking lunatic. Which at this point, after losing ten million, I am.

“Salvatore. We work for Salvatore Amante.”

“That’s what I thought ... gun.”

“But—”

“But what? You thought I would let you live? You thought that you could sneak into my warehouse, steal my drugs, and then come back to kill me, and I wouldn’t be pissed? You ruined a perfect day. And now you all have to die.”

I lift my gun and fire one, two, three times. And when they all slump forward in their chairs, I place my gun in the back of my pants and turn to walk out the door.

“Clean this up,” I say to all my men in the warehouse. “Lorenzo, let’s go.”

When we make it back outside, head to the car, and start to drive, Lorenzo finally speaks.

“Where we going, Boss?”

I don't answer right away. Instead, I look down at myself. There is blood all over my white shirt.

“Should we go into the city?”

I know what he's asking. If we go into the city, as we do on most nights when I torture a man, I'd find a woman and fuck for hours. It's probably exactly what I need, but for some reason, I'm just not in the mood. Sticking my dick in some nameless whore doesn't seem that appealing.

Now sticking my dick in my wife, on the other hand ...

Fucking Salvatore.

If he hadn't hired those guys to take my truck, I could be balls deep in Viviana by now.

I'm no idiot. It was clearly written all over her face how much she wanted me.

I could have spent a night doing her instead of going home dripping in blood and no pussy.

It's pretty late when we get home. We pull the car into the garage, and I head up the stairs. Before going to my wing, I walk up the opposite stairs, the stairs that lead to her room. Her door is closed, and I consider knocking, but the truth is, she's probably sleeping. I open the door anyway, walking inside, but what I see has my dick going hard.

There, on the pristine white linens, is brown hair splayed across the pillow.

Following the path down, her eyes are closed, her mouth soft, the hollow of her neck bare. She's naked. Her breasts are exposed, and her perky nipples are up and erect, ready for the taking.

I should wake her, finish what we never began, but I'm dripping in blood. My hands are still coated in red filth.

I turn on my heel, walking straight out of her room and down the hall until I make it to the right wing of the house.

I storm inside. I'm all worked up with no outlet. I consider having Lorenzo send a former hookup. It wouldn't be the first time I called one over just to let one suck me off.

It won't do. Only one woman currently occupies space in my mind. Not a good thing either. I walk to the bathroom, turn the knob in the shower, and strip off my clothes.

When I step under the water, the floor starts to turn red as it washes away the sins of the night. While it washes me clean, it does nothing to solve my other problem.

My cock is still ready to fuck.

I grab myself in my hand. It's either this or I wake up my wife. Since that's not going to happen, I stroke myself root to tip. The hot water flows from above, rinsing away the blood on my hands.

It drips off me, clinging to the surface of my skin.

Death and sin.

It's primal and dirty.

It's everything I need right now.

My grip tightens as I think of Viviana lying on the bed.

Naked and ready.

Waiting for me to fuck her.

And I do.

Deep and hard.

Until I fall over the edge.

Viviana

A NOISE COMING FROM OUTSIDE MY ROOM HAS ME STARTLING awake.

What time is it?

That's when I notice that my door is ajar.

Why isn't it closed? It's supposed to be closed.

I'm about to get out of bed when I notice a cold feeling run through my chest. That's when I look down and see that I'm not wearing anything.

I threw off my clothes and fell asleep.

Now the chill that attacks me isn't from my naked body, but from the fact someone was recently inside my room and saw me like this.

I jump up from my bed and grab my robe, tying it tightly before I creep out the door.

No lights are on in the house, but regardless of that, I keep walking toward the stairs. Maybe Matteo is home? Maybe he came to see me? To apologize.

I'm not entirely sure where his room is, but I vaguely remember Giana saying it was in the other wing of the house.

When I get to the stairs, I decide not to go down them. Instead, I head toward the landing that will lead me to the

other side of the house.

This side is dark, too.

I'm surprised.

I know the house has more security guards than a jail, yet no one is up here.

It's eerily quiet. Ghost-like, even.

This is how a horror movie begins ...

The dumb girl walks in the dark to her death. It seems pretty fitting right now. But as my brain starts to run wild with how I might die tonight, I see it. At the farthest point of the hallway, a light is on.

That's where I'll go.

Making my way to the door, I knock once, but when no one answers, I peek inside.

Curiosity killed the cat and all.

There is no one in the large suite, but in the corner, another light is on, and it sounds like water is running.

Maybe Matteo is brushing his teeth.

I only have to take a few steps before I have a perfect vantage point into the bathroom.

The door is swung open, and what I see has me gasping out loud. I quickly cover my mouth, not wanting to be heard

There's Matteo.

I don't know what shocks me more.

The way he has his head thrown back, chasing his ecstasy, or the red liquid I assume is blood pooling at his feet.

Is he hurt?

Should I check on him?

No. Of course not. He's obviously not hurt if he's touching himself.

I harbor another glance at him.

My face feels hot and tingly.

That's not the only part of me that feels alive.

I have to get out of here before he catches me.

The idea of him seeing me here...

If he sees me, I'll end up jumping on top of him and kissing him. I might have wanted that earlier, but now I don't.

Who am I trying to kid? Of course, I want that, even after he left me, but I don't want him to know how affected I am by him.

Slowly, without being heard, I step backward.

When I'm finally back in the hallway, I can breathe. My body is on fire from what I just saw. It feels like I'm a burning inferno, and nothing I do can put out the flames inside me.

Tiptoeing so I'm not caught, I make it back to my room.

With the door closed, I get back in the bed and will myself to go to sleep.

Sleep, however, won't find me.

I can't get the vision of Matteo touching himself out of my head.

No matter how hard I try, I see his hand moving up and down.

I wish it was me he was touching, and I wish I was the hand holding him.

Shit.

Now I'm all hot and bothered.

My nipples harden behind the robe, taunting me to touch them.

So, I do.

I have no choice. I'm a live wire ready to explode.

It's the only thing that will calm me enough that I can find sleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAKE UP IN MY BED, ROBE NOW OFF, buck naked, and the memory of last night hits me like a tsunami.

Oh, dear God.

I saw him, and then ...

How could I do that?

How could I touch myself while thinking of a man who left me alone in the city?

Then he was covered in blood when he got back.

Where did he go?

What did he *do*?

What happened last night?

I'm so confused.

But I'm also mortified with myself.

This is so bad.

My phone starts to ring, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I groan when I see it's my father.

Don't answer. Send him to voicemail.

But I know that's a luxury I don't have.

"Hi, Father," I answer.

"Viviana." The way he says my name makes my eyes water. There is no warmth or comfort. He hates me. If I ever wondered if that was true before, now I most certainly know.

I can't even comprehend why he ever desired to have me.

But then the obvious thing pops into my head. His political aspirations. He needed to look like a family man.

"How is it going with our goal?"

“Umm.”

“Viviana, do not make me keep my promise to you. Remember what I showed you. Remember all you can lose if you don’t play by my rules.”

His words hit their intended mark. They stab me in the heart, making me bleed right into the comforter.

“I will do what you need, Father, but please stop.”

“Only after.”

“I need your reassurance,” I answer with all the strength I can muster.

“And you won’t get it.” Then the line goes quiet, and I know he hung up.

Tears fill my eyes, making it hard for me to see. I let myself cry. I fall into the comforter and cry until I can’t breathe.

I need to figure something out.

I’m not sure how.

But I do.

Maybe I can trust Matteo to help me?

Failing isn’t an option.

I can’t let Julia down.

No matter what happened, how mad she is, she’s family.

I will protect her. I won’t let anything bad happen.

Even if it means losing myself in the process.

Matteo

MY PHONE STARTS TO VIBRATE. LOOKING DOWN, I NOTICE A new text has come through.

Cyrus: Where the fuck are you?

Me: Meaning?

Cyrus: The game. Are you coming or not?

It dawns on me then that I have been so wrapped up in my wife and her father, I haven't stopped by Cyrus's poker game for a hot minute.

Breaking old habits. Not a good look for you, Matteo.

Cyrus Reed might be my banker, but he also holds one of the most exclusive high-stakes poker games on the East Coast. Which also happens to be a perfect way to clean dirty money.

Me: Busy.

Cyrus: Get your BUSY ass over here. I have business to discuss.

My head shakes, knowing full well Cyrus won't stop until I agree. He's a dick, but I trust him, and outside of my men, that's a rare thing.

I turn to Lorenzo and nod.

“We're leaving. Get the helicopter ready.”

His right eyebrow quirks up. “Where we off to, Boss?”

“Stop calling me Boss, Lorenzo. No one is around.”

“Fine, dick. Where to?”

I chuckle at that, smiling at my cousin. “Cyrus.” There is no reason to explain. Lorenzo knows all about what goes on at Cyrus’s estate in Connecticut.

Thirty minutes later, the helicopter is landing on the sprawling grounds of the compound he owns.

Once the blades stop spinning, we exit and step out into the cold winter night, heading straight for the side entrance that will lead us to the room where we will play cards.

I nod to the security stationed outside, and he swings open the door.

Coming here used to be a weekly occurrence, but my trips have become fewer with everything going on with my cousin.

When I step into the room, a cloud of smoke hits me. Tobias is in his usual spot, smoking a Cuban.

I’m surprised to see everyone is here tonight. All the men who have my back in this business—Cyrus, Tobias, Alaric, James, Mathis, Trent. All men I do business with, but also men I call friends.

“I didn’t think you would show,” Cyrus says as I step farther into the room.

Together, we walk toward the table, Lorenzo trailing a step behind.

“You said you wanted to talk, so I’m here.”

“I was lying.”

I cock my head at his candid answer.

“Then why am I here?”

He takes a seat and gives me a pointed look to also sit. “Tobias told me what happened.”

“Did I miss something? Are we a bunch of women who sit down and discuss shit now?”

“You’re at war, Matteo. Your shit was stolen. Talking about this doesn’t make us anything. I’m concerned for my bank.” His voice comes out monotone as if he’s trying not to seem fazed, but I know him. I went to war for him in the past. You don’t go to battle without forming attachments. His battle is mine, and my battle is now his.

“I’m still going to deposit money. I’m not broke,” I deadpan.

“Who’s broke?” Alaric asks as he sits.

“Matteo.” Tobias laughs.

“Fuck you.” I chuckle back.

“Don’t worry, half the money he gives Cyrus is invested with me,” Trent Aldridge chimes in like the condescending, arrogant ass that he is. When I first met Trent, I thought he was a douche, but he has long since proved himself to me.

“Yes, and we all know all your shady-ass Ponzi schemes you have going on,” I respond.

“Yeah, speaking of, what the fuck are you doing with my money?” Cyrus cuts in.

“I’m making you a sick investment. Do you really care how?” He gives us all a pointed look.

One drug dealer.

A corrupt banker.

The head of the mafia.

The former arms dealer.

A crooked nightclub owner.

And the man who runs London ...

Sounds like a particularly decadent start of a joke.

Either way, no one says a word.

INSTEAD, WE ALL SHRUG AS CYRUS RAISES HIS HAND, AND A waitress comes over with our drinks in hand. The beauty of

being a regular means everyone knows what you like.

“Whatever you have going on with Salvatore, we all got your back, man,” Tobias says as the cards are shuffled.

“I know.”

“Just tell me where and when, and I’ll come out of retirement.” I turn to look at Alaric, and I know for me he would.

Who would have ever thought these crazy-ass men would end up being my brothers in arms?

As we drink our drinks and play our hands, I tell them everything that’s happened and what my plan is, and it feels good.

THE NEXT DAY COMES, AND I STILL HAVEN’T SEEN VIVIANA.

It feels like my wife is avoiding me.

It’s been two days since our trip to New York, and she has sequestered herself in her room.

I’ve been too busy with the lost shipment to deal with this, but now that time has passed, I’ve decided I have given her enough time.

Now I’m sick of it.

I storm up the stairs.

When I’m standing in front of her door, I hammer into it with my fist.

“What?” I hear muffled.

“I’m coming in.”

“I’m-I’m ...”

“Open the door, Viviana.”

“I’m doing something.”

“Open the door now, or I’m breaking it in, then the only thing you’ll be doing is giving me answers.”

I hear the sound of rustling and then the soft patter of footsteps. The door swings open. There she is. No makeup on, hair in a messy bun on top of her head. She’s wearing leggings and a sweatshirt.

“Are you sick?”

Her eyes widen. “No ... Do I look sick?” she asks, confused.

“If you’re not sick, why are you hiding in here?”

Her gaze drops down to the floor. “I’m not.”

My hand lifts and tilts her head up until her stare meets mine.

“Why are you avoiding me?” She doesn’t answer. “Is this because I left you in New York?” Her cheeks turn a shade redder. “So that’s not it?” No comment. “Something else then?”

Still no comment.

Her face keeps getting redder and redder until she resembles a cherry tomato.

“Just leave.”

Interesting.

Wonder what has her acting like this.

“Fine. But I expect you at dinner tonight.” I turn around and head straight to the surveillance room in the house. Tony is there in front of the monitors.

“Hey, Boss,” he says as I enter the room.

“I need you to pull all the phone records for the last few days. Also, the surveillance from the past few days.”

“Are we looking for anything in particular?”

“Look at two nights ago. The night of the warehouse.”

That was the last time I spoke to her, and according to Francesca, who went to clean her room, she hasn't left since then. She has taken her meals in there as well.

He starts to go through the film, looking through everything that happened on video that night. In the hallway, you can see me entering my room. I closed the door. I know what I was doing that night.

The video switches to the next movement. It's actually outside of Viviana's room. It's dark in the hall, and the time correlates with when I was arriving home. She creeps around the house, and then surprisingly, she's now on video knocking on my door. I don't remember this, which clearly means I was in the shower. The next thing on the video is peculiar. Viviana walks inside. There's nothing for about thirty seconds, and then Viviana is seen again creeping through the hallways until she went back to her room.

This is the last time she left. Interesting, she came to my room and then went into hiding.

Suddenly, it all becomes clear. My little wife is a peeping Tom, and on top of that, she is too embarrassed to look me in the eye.

A smile spreads across my face. If she likes to watch, I'll let her.

I start to imagine what it would be like if she was in the room. I can't wait until I can watch the footage in private of her room. Although it was a giant breach of privacy, installing that camera in there is now looking like the best idea I have ever had in a long time. I'm about to kick everyone out to watch it now, but then Tony interrupts my thoughts.

"I found something."

"What is it?"

"A call came through to her cell phone."

"*And?*" I hate that my pulse kicks up at that.

"It was less than a minute long." His fingers continue to type on the monitor. "The number is registered to Governor

Marino.”

“Pull up sound from her phone.”

“That might take me a few minutes.”

“Well, I sure as shit am not going anywhere right now, am I?”

First, you see me naked, then you speak to your father.

What are you up to, little wife?

I pace the room as I wait. It only takes about ten minutes before Tony has the audio playing through the room of her phone call.

My fists form as I listen. It’s not that I like my wife, but a part of me enjoyed spending time with her. Part of me hoped that her father would call, and she would tell him where to stuff it. But apparently, I was wrong, and this all is just one big ruse.

This doesn’t change my plan. I will still go ahead with seducing her and then feeding her false information. Viviana is fire. Burning hot but not easily controlled.

I don’t care why she’s choosing to work with him. She didn’t come to me. Regardless of her reasons, a traitor is a traitor.

“Do not tell anyone what you heard on this tape.”

“Obviously, Boss.”

“I plan to deal with this in my own way.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

“I know that, but I wanted you to know anyway that I will not let this go unanswered.”

“Sounds good.”

I walk out of the room and go find Lorenzo. He’s in one of the offices on the phones screaming about God knows what. It seems he’s still looking for the missing cargo. Even though we killed the three men, we found nothing on their bodies to indicate where the drugs went.

Knowing Lorenzo, he won't stop until he finds it, which is okay by me. At the price it fetches on the black market, I appreciate him looking.

When he hangs up the phone, he looks up at me.

His brows are knitted together, and frown marks line his forehead.

“What’s going on?”

“No one knows where our fucking drugs are. Which I find really hard to fucking believe.”

“Breathe.”

“How can you be so fucking calm?”

“I’m not so fucking calm. I just know we have other things that are important, and while we already lost one shipment, we need this war to stop before we lose another.”

“And how are we going to do that?”

“Through my wife.”

“What good is she?”

“She is working with her father.”

“This, we know.”

“But she’s also very much attracted to me, which means I have her right where we want her. As soon as I fuck her, I’m going to start feeding her intel. She won’t know what hit her until it’s too late.”

“Think it will work?”

“How can it not? She’s trying to get info from me. She’s already ready for it. When her father asks how she got it, if she tells him about our relationship, he will eat that shit up. Everyone knows when someone is in love, they get complacent.”

“You want her to think you love her ...”

“It’s the only way it will work.”

“And then what?”

My lip tips up.

“Then I ruin her.”

Viviana

I DREAD GOING TO DINNER.

Dread seeing him.

Dread *seeing* him.

How can I possibly look into his eyes after what I saw?

This morning when he came storming into my bedroom, I thought I would die from embarrassment. I didn't die, but I came close.

Now, I'm in my bathroom. Dressed in a pair of black leggings and an off-the-shoulder blouse. I'm not sure if I'm too casual or if I'm overdressed.

I have to assume I'm just right. Matteo always looks well put together. I just feel stupid going downstairs, having not left the room in two days, and wearing this top, especially since it's snowing outside.

Yep, it's officially winter, and now with the impending cold, I feel like I'm really stuck in this house.

I can't imagine any impromptu trips to the city anytime soon.

I put a light dusting of makeup on. Nothing over the top. Then when I'm finished, I complete the look with a light pink lip gloss.

My hair. Blown out in beachy waves.

I'm not sure why I'm putting such effort into my looks. It's not like anything will happen between us.

But you want it to.

I want to scold myself in the mirror reflection to stop this insanity. To tell myself not to care, but that would be a giant lie.

Pull yourself together.

Also, it's time to leave the room and stop hiding.

For the next ten minutes, I berate myself with reasons to face the music and stop hiding, and then after one final check in the mirror, I gather all my strength and leave my room.

I'm not late, but it appears Matteo is early. He's already sitting at the head of the table. His large presence occupies all the space in the room, and just as I suspected, he dressed in pants, a sport coat, and a button-down. He makes it appear casual by the way he leaves the two top buttons open. Seeing his skin peeking out from the crisp white shirt has me, yet again, ready to blush.

Calm down.

No need to get all hot and bothered.

He's just a man ...

An insanely hot one who touches—

“Everything okay over there, Viviana?” His voice cuts through the graphic image playing through my mind.

“What-what do you mean?” I croak.

“You're staring, and you seem a bit flushed. Is something wrong?”

He gives me a look that I find strange. It's almost wicked the way his lip curls up across the side of his face. It's almost as if he knew I saw him pleasuring himself, but that's not possible.

Or is it?

“What’s wrong?” he asks again, his smile spreading farther across his flawless face.

“Nothing.”

“It looks like you saw something.”

Shit.

No.

How could he know? How could he read me so thoroughly? Like an open book?

But it’s obvious.

By the way he stares at me, it’s so very obvious that he knows what I saw, and what’s more obvious is that he likes it.

I want to crawl into a hole.

However, since that’s not the kind of person I am, I throw my shoulders back, hold my head high, and school my features.

Then when I’m one hundred percent sure my façade is down, I make my way over to my chair. He stands, surprising me, and pulls it out for me.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he says as he sits in the chair directly in front of me, looking into my eyes as he speaks.

Francesca brings the food out. It’s as if they have surveillance cameras telling the staff when we are ready.

And that’s when it hits me.

They do.

There are probably cameras all over the house, and if that’s the case, he knows I saw him.

It had never dawned on me that that could be the case. Which, in hindsight, seems rather naïve, seeing as what he does for a living.

I can play this one of two ways. I can act like a child and hide in my room another day, or I can pretend I’m not bothered by it.

I choose option two.

“So, bringing up the elephant in the room ...” I say, and his eyes go wide because he thinks I’m going to mention it.

“Where did you go when you left me in the city?”

“I had business to attend to.”

“Business so important that you cut our date short?”

“Unfortunately, Viviana, that will happen from time to time. I could apologize. I could lie to you and say it would never happen again, but that’s not the kind of man I am. It will happen again, probably more than you would like, but that’s what you signed on for when you decided to marry me.”

“Decided? As if I had a choice,” I grit out through clenched teeth.

“There are always choices, Viviana. No matter what you think the consequences will be, there are always other options.” His words feel weighted as if he can see into the blackness of my soul, but he’s wrong. Sometimes, we have no choices. Sometimes, we have to do things we’re not proud of, and I’m sure Matteo, more than others, knows that.

“Have you never done something just because you had to?”

“Everything I’ve ever done is because I chose to. Every deal. Every death.”

The words he speaks leave me speechless. They make my tongue feel heavy. They make my heart hammer. He’s openly talking about his work, admitting he’s killed. I know it should make me scared, but for some reason, it does the opposite.

I don’t feel scared.

For the first time in a long time, I feel like there could be another way.

My husband could be the solution to all my problems.

But would he help me?

He already has.

DINNER IS LIKE THE LAST FEW TIMES. WE SPEAK OF MUNDANE topics, nothing important. At some point, we even talk about the weather, which seems ridiculous in the grand scheme, but what else are we supposed to talk about?

I'm not going to ask him if he's put a hit on anybody, and I'm certainly not going to ask him whose blood was on his body. He's not going to talk to me about my father, so we are resigned to speaking about the weather.

"The snow is really coming down."

"It is."

"I didn't expect it to happen so fast. Just the other day was cold but not like this."

"They're calling for a massive snowstorm."

"Really?" I ask. I didn't know that, but seeing as I don't watch the news or read a newspaper here, I guess it makes sense I wouldn't know.

"Yes, while you were sequestered in your room, it was all over the news." There is a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"You watch the news?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You just don't seem the type. I can't imagine you comfortable on a couch with a remote in your hand."

"Truth?" He smirks.

"Yeah."

"I don't watch TV, nor did I watch the news. However, I have my men keep me apprised."

That makes me smile. I wasn't wrong about my assessment of him. I rarely am about people. It comes with the territory of growing up in a dangerous environment.

"Now, that makes a lot more sense."

He leans forward in his chair, his fingers drumming on the surface of the table.

“Why do you not see me as the type of person who can relax?”

Even now as he asks that question, he’s not relaxing. Case in point: the drumming.

“I don’t think you could relax if your life depended on it,” I answer.

“I almost feel like that’s a challenge.”

“Take it any way you want, but you would lose.” He chuckles at my comment, and I think he’s going to accept it when all of a sudden, the lights in the room start to flicker.

“Are we losing power?”

“Probably. The winds are very strong, and this is an old house.”

And then, as if on cue, they go off.

“Shit,” Matteo says as he stands.

“Don’t you have a generator?”

The room around us is pitch-black. There are no lights on anywhere in the large estate.

“I do. But it only has enough power to light up certain parts of this place.”

“The dining room isn’t one of them?”

He lets out a sigh. “No. Unfortunately, not.”

“Then what is?”

“Well, we don’t really need to have the dining room with lights if we have the kitchen lit up. Now do we?”

“You have the kitchen lit?” My voice rises. Clearly, the idea of sitting in the dark with Matteo has my tone rising.

“No.”

“Let me get this straight, you have this big giant generator, and it lights up what? Obviously not the house?”

“The surveillance room. The security system. This place is Fort Knox with or without power.” Now that makes sense. “There’s no generator powerful enough to light up this whole place, but if God forbid something like this happened, the house would be protected, and the people inside the house would be protected.”

“Okay, so we have no lights, but we are safe, but that doesn’t answer the question of what do we do?”

He steps closer to me. It might be dark, but I can feel his presence.

“I’m sure that my staff will light the candles and pass out flashlights.”

“And we wait where?”

“If you’re afraid to be alone, you can stay with me.”

“As in your bedroom?” I squeak.

I feel his hand before I see it. He takes mine in his, pulling me up and closer to him.

I can barely see anything. It’s so dark in the room. The giant windows allow very little of the moonlight to stream in and other than that, nothing.

I can see the reflection in his eyes. They appear darker in this light, reminding me of the first time I saw him watching me.

A shiver runs down my spine.

“Cold?”

“No,” I respond as he pulls me into his side, wrapping his hands around my waist.

He leads us out of the room. There is no question that if I was by myself in these pitch-black hallways, I would fall headfirst onto the ground. Despite the moonlight streaming in through the windows, there is no visibility.

I can hear the branches snapping against the frame of the house. The storm is crazy, and I can’t imagine it letting up anytime soon.

As he pulls me along, I almost feel like a rag doll. The only difference is, in truth, I don't hate it. I feel safer this way.

We step foot into a room, and he leads me farther inside, then lets go of me. I'm not sure what he's doing, but then he pulls a lighter out of his pocket and lights a candle. We are in a room that is probably considered his den or, because this is an estate, maybe a parlor.

"Take a seat. I'll light a few more, and then I'll start a fire."

"No." My voice comes out too forceful, and Matteo stops what he's doing to turn in my direction. I can't see him clearly in the dark, but there is no question he's perplexed by my reaction.

His hand reaches out and touches my shaky limb.

"Shh." It's almost like he's cooing a baby. Soft and strategic, it pools in my chest like warm honey. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

You'd be surprised.

"I-I don't like fires." The wobble in my voice is unmistakable, and I hate myself for it.

"Sit on the couch. I won't light one if you're scared. But Viviana ..."

"Yes."

"There is nothing to be afraid of. It's merely a spark burst into a flame."

"It can't be controlled," I whisper, my voice raspy and tight.

"And that's the beautiful part," he says. "Sit. Nothing will happen."

I can see the shape of the couch, so I make my way over and take a seat. Once Matteo has lit up two more candles, he sits beside me.

"The candles don't bother you?" He's close. Very close.

Too damn close if you ask me. If the candles weren't flickering in the distance, I would think that he robbed the room of oxygen.

"No. Just the—" I can't go on. I can't explain it to him without telling him everything. "Now what do we do?" I ask, changing the topic. He turns to face me, the shadows of the light playing across his features.

His brow lifts. "What did you have in mind?" Even in the dark, I can hear the sexual innuendo in his words.

"We can play a game," I offer lamely.

"What kind of game can we play in the dark?" He smirks, and what a smirk it is.

I'm not sure if it's from the lighting or the baritone of his voice, but I swear my pulse is racing.

"We can play Twenty Questions," I blurt out, and he laughs. I guess it did sound funny how fast I said it. Like I'm excited and completely nervous and tripping all over my words.

This man turns me into a mess when he looks at me the way he does.

"You want to play Twenty Questions?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Okay. Let's play. But first some ground rules."

"Don't ask anything about the business," I say in my best Al Pacino accent. Like I'm some mafia tough guy.

"Exactly. I would hate to have to put—"

"Stop." I raise my hand. "I hate that part."

He laughs again, and the sound is magical. Matteo Amante should laugh more often.

"Okay. You go first. Ask away."

I lean back on the couch and try to think of something.
“What’s your favorite color?”

“That’s the big question you got?”

I shrug.

“Black.”

“That’s not really a color. More like the absence of light.”

“Hence, why I like it.” His voice sounds like warm honey as he speaks. I want to spread it all over and lick it.

Where the hell did that come from?

Jeez.

This is crazy.

“Your turn.”

“What did you want to be when you were a child? I know now you want to be an agent or editor or something to do with books, but what about when you were a child?”

It takes me aback when I realize he remembers what I said to him. It’s like he stored it away, and that thought warms my heart.

“I wanted to be a vet.”

“Did you have pets growing up?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I look down at my hands. “I wasn’t allowed.”

“If you could have any pet, what would you have?”

“It’s my turn to ask the questions.”

“Answer the damn question, Viviana.”

The way he says my name so aggressively should scare me, but it does the opposite. Instead, I can’t help but look at his mouth, wishing I had the courage to cross the space between us and kiss him.

“Viviana ...” He says it again. I think he must know what it does to me.

“I always hoped my parents would surprise me with a puppy.” I look off to the other side of the room. “Every year, I thought this would be the year they did it, but as each year passed, I eventually gave up on the dream.”

“I’m sorry.”

I turn back to him. “I thought you don’t apologize.”

“For my actions, no. But for this ... yes.”

“But-but you had nothing to do with it.”

“I’m still sorry your parents suck.”

I look at him again.

Looking for a lie. Looking for anything to make me think he’s disingenuous, but I see nothing but the truth in his green eyes.

“You’re a better man than you let on, Matteo.”

“Don’t tell my enemies,” he says, and it feels like he hit me in the stomach.

“Next question,” he says before I can think any more about the pain spreading throughout my body.

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. What did you want to be? Did you always know you wanted to do this?” I gesture my hand around the room, not that it really implicates “run the mafia,” but I think he understands my point.

“Yes and no.”

“Elaborate, please.”

“When I was a boy, I looked up to my father. I thought he was a very important man, and I wanted to be just like him. Then, when I was around eleven, I realized what exactly he did ...” He stops speaking for a minute, his hand reaching up and running through his hair. “At the time, my uncle,

Salvatore's dad, was in charge. Things were different then. The business was different."

He doesn't need to say more. He made a comment once implying what Salvatore believed in, and although he's not saying it, I have to imagine the old saying holds true "like father, like son." His eyes are downcast as if the memory hurts him still twenty-seven years later.

For some reason, I want to comfort him. I want to take away the pain he feels. I want him to know he can talk to me. It's strange this feeling that weaves its way through my blood as if I want to protect him, which is ironic.

I don't listen to the objections screaming inside me. Instead, I move closer until our legs touch. I take one hand in mine, holding it, and then I lift it to my mouth, placing a kiss on his knuckle.

"What-what happened?" I stutter, scared to ask, scared of the answer, and most of all, scared of what it will mean if he does tell me.

"It wasn't exactly what happened, but what I saw."

"You can talk to me, Matteo."

His eyes narrow ever so slightly, but then they go back to normal, still hard with the emotions waging inside him.

"I wasn't supposed to go to the basement ..." he starts. "My father always told me not to go to the basement. You see, I grew up in this house. Even when my uncle was in charge. The room you stay in, that was my room. The room I grew up in."

My chest feels constricted under his words. He gave me his childhood room. Why would he do that?

"I couldn't sleep, so I went down to the kitchen. The door to the basement is there. I thought I saw a light ..." His voice seems to drop, and I'm afraid of what he will say.

"You don't have to tell me."

But he doesn't listen to my plea. Instead, he continues, and even though I want to stop him because I don't want to hear

the nightmare he lived, I allow this of him.

“I walked down the stairs ... There were sounds. Horrible sounds. Crying and wailing. I kept walking until I was in the back, and that’s when I saw them.”

“Who’s them?”

“The girls.”

A tear slips down my face. I can’t hear any more. More tears come out.

“Why are you crying?” he asks.

“Because you were only a boy. You didn’t need to see that.”

He reaches his hand out and swipes away a tear that must have landed on my nose.

“What did you do?” I ask.

“I told my dad. That was the day that, for a minute, I didn’t want to be my dad, and then it was also the day I did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When I told him what I saw, I hated him. I thought that he knew. I thought he was the one keeping them like animals, but his rage was palpable. Pure venom poured out of him. He didn’t know. He told me to wait, but I followed. I followed him as he crossed the landing and barged into his brother’s room. I saw what his brother was doing and who he was doing it to. She was so young, only a few years older than me. She didn’t want—” He shakes his head, locked in a horrible memory. I understand all too well what that is like. “My father took out his gun and shot him in the head. Then one by one, he freed the girls. Some of them had no place to go, so he employed them.”

“They worked here for your dad after everything?”

“He saved them.”

“Do they work for you?”

“Some.” He breathes a deep breath. “He single-handedly stopped all the trafficking that was connected to our family. It’s actually something that I helped with as well. That’s how I became friends with Cyrus.”

“Cyrus?”

“He was at the wedding. You probably don’t remember him.”

I try to think back, but the whole day and night are a blur. “I don’t remember much.”

“That’s okay.”

He smiles at me, a small smile, a soft one.

“That’s why you want to be like your father? He’s a hero to you.”

“He was, and yes, I have no false illusion that he didn’t do illegal things, but his argument was that people buy drugs regardless, but at least with him running it, he could make sure it never went too far.”

My brow arches. “Murder is not too far?”

“We never killed the innocent.”

Matteo

I FEEL DRAINED AFTER WHAT I JUST SAID. I DON'T USUALLY talk about such things. I keep my past where it belongs, buried in the backyard with all my emotions and a few bones. But there's something about Viviana.

She's like my own brand of kryptonite. My very own truth serum. No matter how much I try, she finds a way to creep up and install herself in my life. I'm so fucked I don't even need fucking lube.

She's making me feel all kinds of crazy things. She's making me remember even more. It's not good. I know she's part of the plan, but each second that I know her ... No, I can't think of that.

Salvatore is out there. Salvatore wants his place. And she is the means of getting it.

No matter how she bats her eyelashes at me, she's also lied to me, and that can't go unpunished.

It doesn't matter right now. That's a long-term plan. Right now, there is only one thing I need to concentrate on, and by the way she looks at me, I know it worked.

Allowing myself to open up like that and telling her everything was a calculated risk, but a risk worth taking. She now thinks I trust her.

The room is silent again, the air heavy with my past.

Our faces are close. So close, I can feel the way she exhales.

Her eyes are still glistening with unshed tears. I lift my hand again, and this time, I cradle her jaw.

Tilting her head up.

She watches me intently, her chest heaving as I swipe my thumb across her skin. Trailing it up to her lips. And when she parts her mouth on an exhale, I take it as an invitation and close the distance.

My mouth finds her. As my tongue seeks entry, she moans into my mouth.

My arms pull her tighter to me and then grip her close.

Out of nowhere, her hands press against my chest.

“Stop.” She pulls away. “I can’t do this.”

I stare down at her, confused, not really understanding what just happened. I thought I read the situation. I thought she wanted me. I lift my hand, attempting to back away from her, but she grabs me by my wrist. “Stop,” she says again.

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“That’s not what I meant ...”

“You do want to do this?” It might be dark in here, but I can still see her cheeks are red.

“Yes. Yes, Matteo. I want you, but I can’t do this without talking to you first.”

Talking to me about what? We’re already married. It makes no sense.

“I need to tell you something first.”

I narrow my eyes confused.

“Okay.”

“You have to promise to hear me out and listen to everything I say before you do anything.”

Now I'm really confused. I nod my head.

"Matteo ..." she starts, but then she shakes her head, taking a deep breath. "Saying this is so much harder than I thought it would be."

"Just go on with it. I find that works best."

"My father wants me to be his spy." And although I know this already, I'm still shocked she just said it.

"When we went to his house, remember how he asked me to be in the room alone with him to talk?"

Of course, I did. I had her bugged, but I don't say any of it. Instead, I just nod again.

"He wanted me to find out information about you. And- and then to tell him," she stutters.

"And did you?"

"No."

Not a lie.

"But then he called again."

"Why are you telling me this? You do know that by telling me this—"

"You'll probably kill me. I know that, and it's worth the risk. I never wanted to betray you. I was always looking for a way out, but I can't kiss you, I can't be with you unless I tell you."

"Because—"

"Because, Matteo, no matter how much I tried, you've gotten under my skin, and I don't want to hurt you."

"If you don't tell your father, what will he do?"

I know he has something on her. I just don't know what.

"He'll hurt me."

"And still you tell me."

She nibbles her lip.

“Yes,” she whispers, and I do the only thing I can think of. I grab her by her face, pull her to me, and seal my mouth over hers. This time, she kisses me with reckless abandon. She’s pliable in my arms, desperate for my touch, and as the kiss deepens, she claws at my back.

It’s as if she wants to fuse herself to me, and at this moment, under the weight of her confession, I want her to.

I don’t know what that means for us. I don’t know what that means for her father or what it means in my war with Salvatore. All I know is that right now, my wife just passed a test. A test I didn’t even know I was giving.

I need her.

I need her like I need air to breathe. I need to feel her warmth, be inside her. I need to ingrain myself in her until I don’t know where she ends, and I begin.

Tomorrow, the future will probably look different.

Tomorrow, we will both have to deal with the consequences of our actions.

But tonight, I’ll have my wife.

Viviana

“HERE, OR IN THE BEDROOM?” HE ASKS. “PICK FAST, OR I’LL pick for you.” The way he speaks is husky. Desire laced in each word.

But the look in his eyes has me coming undone.

I thought when I told him the truth that he would throw me out, but this ...

He looks at me like I have given him the most precious gift. He looks at me like I’m everything, like he needs to consume me.

It’s primal, and it ignites an ember inside me, making me want to allow him to.

With need coursing through my body, I answer his question by reaching out my arms and pulling him toward me again.

“Here,” I say against his lips.

“Good, because I can’t wait another second to be inside you.” He then shuts me up by placing his mouth on mine and kissing me again. With each swipe of the tongue, the kiss becomes more heated.

“Right here. Right now,” he says. “Undress,” he demands, and I follow his order.

Looking at Matteo right now is like looking at the dark king in all the fables. He's filled with evil but passion too.

I stand from the couch and lift my shirt off, and then start to remove my pants. The whole time I undress, he watches me. Trailing his gaze over my now exposed skin.

No one has ever looked at me like this before.

Now fully naked, standing before him, the hunger in the air is palpable. His eyes are dark and ominous in the soft candlelight of the living room.

I watch through hooded lids as he strips out of his own clothes. Even though I saw him in the shower the other day, this is different. Seeing him naked has my mouth opening, and my tongue going dry.

He's beautiful.

Devastatingly beautiful.

He's cut from marble. Ripped and chiseled to perfection.

He is everything and more. A perfect specimen of a man.

He's a Titan.

"On the couch, Princess," he orders.

I don't hesitate to lie on the couch, waiting as he moves closer to me.

A predator stalking his prey. A lion about to pounce.

As he descends on me, he takes himself in his hand, stroking himself.

"Do you have a condom?" I croak.

His eyes narrow. "You are my wife. I'm not wearing a condom." The gravelly way he says wife has my insides melting. He crawls up over my body, his free hand pushing my thighs apart.

Then I feel him rub himself against me.

He's teasing me.

Toying with me.

He's attempting to drive me insane, and it works. He is.

I thrust my hips up. Trying desperately to put myself out of my misery and get him inside me, already.

With one hard thrust, he gives me what I want. He pushes all the way inside me until he has completely bottomed out.

His grip on my body tightens.

Neither of us moves for a beat.

He allows me to adjust to his size, and when I lean up and kiss his lips, he retracts.

I miss him instantly, kissing him harder, digging my nails into his back to tell him what I want.

He chuckles against my lips, but he gives me what I need. Pushing back until he's fully engulfed again.

He keeps up a slow and steady tempo.

Pulling out and then pushing back in.

His strokes are leisurely.

Each one sending more and more pleasure rippling through my body.

It feels too good.

Intense.

A sensation starts to take root inside me. It's almost there. Close, but not close enough. It's like it's hovering above me, and I can't reach it.

"Harder," I plead. "Faster."

Again, he chuckles but regardless of the humor he finds, he listens and gives in to me.

His slow movements become harder. Until he is fucking me with quick, deep thrusts.

This feeling is beyond anything I have felt before.

We claw at each other.

Both desperate to make the climb.

Our kissing becomes more frenzied, his movements erratic. My nails scrape down his back.

I can feel myself falling over the edge.

My body grips his.

He continues to move inside me, thrusting a few more times before he groans out his own release.

We are both panting heavily as we come down from our own highs.

A few minutes pass before I realize what we just did.

Now what happens?

Yes, obviously we are married, but did that just change everything?

“What are you thinking about?” He lifts his head out of the crook of my neck and looks down at me.

There is a line forming between his brows.

“Nothing,” I lie.

He moves to get off me, and I instantly want to pull him closer. I’m not ready for this to be over. When he stands, he walks a few steps to pick up my clothes.

I feel weird and awkward as I place my shirt on.

What does one say to their husband after what we just did, when they barely know them?

It feels like the end of a one-night stand.

Do I just get dressed and go home or, in this case, go to my room?

Once I’m fully dressed, I look at him as he places his own clothes on.

He really is the most stunning man I have ever seen.

I take a deep breath, and when he looks over at me, I speak.

“I’m going to—”

“Like hell you are.” He walks over to me, more like stalks, and then before I can ask what he means, he’s lifting me bridal style in his arms.

I gasp at the movement. “What are you doing?”

“Something I should have done the day we got married.”

He starts to walk toward the door, and then we are in the hallway, making our way to the stairs.

“And what is that?”

“Carry you over the threshold.”

I’m shocked when he moves toward the stairs and starts to ascend.

He carries me like I’m a bag of feathers, and to him, I probably am. Once we reach the top of the stairs, he heads in the direction of his bedroom.

I don’t say anything. I pretend as though I’ve never been here before. He knows I have, and I know I have, but at least this way, I can keep a little of my own dignity intact.

When he opens the door, I think he’s going to leave me on the bed, but instead, he walks us into the bathroom. My gaze finds the shower. The elusive shower that once ran blood clean. Now, today, the marble is pristine.

He’s still holding me in his arms when he turns the water on, and then he sets me down on my feet. I’m a little stunned by everything, but I’m even more stunned when he lifts my shirt above my head, removes my bra, and then bends down in front of me to remove my pants.

It feels like only a moment ago when we did this. The lights are still off in the estate; the candles flickering around us. Someone from his staff must have lit them.

He takes my hand, and with the other, he opens the door to the shower, and he leads me in.

I’ve never showered with a man before.

I find that he’s staring at me with a look of confusion on his face.

“What?” I ask him as he pulls me under the warm water. It cascades down like rainfall.

“You’re blushing.”

“I’m not.” But my high and nervous pitch gives me away.

“Have you never showered with someone before?”

“No,” I squeak.

A sensual smile spreads across his face. He’s the cat who ate the canary over there.

“What?”

“Wait and see.”

The next thing I know, Matteo is dropping to his knees in front of me.

“What are you doing?”

Matteo’s strong hands spread my legs apart, and then he grins up at me like a Cheshire cat.

“I want to taste you, Wifey.”

“I-I...” It’s hard to find words the closer he gets to my bare skin. I’m standing, spread open before him. I’ve never been looked at like this.

Yes. I’ve had sex before Matteo, but this is different.

It’s decadent.

My legs start to shake with anticipation for the promise of what is to come.

With one hand, he steadies my trembling limbs, and with the other, he opens me for his assault.

Then he leans in and swipes his tongue against my needy body.

His mouth latches on to me as if I’m a banquet ready for him to feast on.

Even with his hand trying to keep me steady, my body shakes against him.

“I could do this all day.” His mouth vibrates around me as he speaks. He continues to suck me into his mouth, the pressure building with each pass of his tongue. The feeling is heaven.

I have died and gone to heaven.

My eyes flutter closed. Tingles run down my spine, and I know I’m about to fall over the edge. My muscles tighten and tremble. But just then, as I’m about to come undone, I feel him pull away, leaving me hot and extremely bothered.

“Only with me inside you. Now that I’ve felt you come, nothing else will do.”

He lifts his body to a standing position.

The water is still raining down on us.

He turns me around and then bends me at the hip.

“Hold onto the bench.”

I do as he says and hold on to the marble bench in the shower. His body is pressed behind me, but I’m too short, so I lift onto my tiptoes so he can position himself perfectly between my legs.

I feel the head teasing me.

With a slow and steady thrust of his hips, he’s inside me. Fully seated to the hilt.

He braces me at the hip and tilts my back farther down. At this angle, he can fuck me deeper. And boy does he ever, slamming into me again and entering me fully, reaching deeper than I thought possible.

His strokes grow harder, more desperate, and with each new thrust of his hips, his pace quickens. He’s fucking me at a punishing speed.

Over and over again.

With a long and almost painful shiver, I fall over the edge.

Matteo gives me one, two, three more thrusts, and on the last, he pours himself into me.

“You’re amazing,” he grits out as he pulls himself out of me. Then he helps me to a standing position.

Once I’m standing, he lets go of me. The room is spinning. The blood must have rushed to my head in the position I was in, and I must wobble because he lets his hands hold me up again.

“You okay?” His voice is laced with concern.

“I’m good. The heat must have gotten to me.”

“Here, let me wash you.”

It’s such a sweet gesture. He grabs the shampoo and lathers it in his hand before putting it on my scalp. It feels amazing as he works it into the threads, and when he’s done, he rinses my hair and goes about washing my body. He’s careful with me, not something I would have assumed, but he is. He takes care of me.

Not many people in my life have done that for me. There certainly haven’t been any men. I find if I’m not careful, Matteo Amante, my husband, is exactly the kind of man I could fall for.

Hell, the more I get to know him, and the more time I spend with him, the more I see and the more I realize I think I might have already fallen for him.

Matteo

I FUCKED MY WIFE TWICE, AND NOW THAT I'VE HAD A TASTE, I fear I'll never get enough.

Fuck kryptonite, the woman is pure crack, the kind I'd like to get my hands on and distribute to achieve world domination.

Even now that we just finished round two in the shower, seeing her bundled up in my robe has my dick springing to action.

Down, boy.

It's not like she's going anywhere.

Not anymore, at least.

The moment she confessed to me was like a light switch was turned on.

This whole time I've been fighting back my attraction for her. Yes, of course, I wanted to have sex with her, but I wasn't allowing myself to think about it. It was mainly a way to get her to fall into my plans. It was almost like I thought of sex with her in a clinical way, but then she told me everything.

Now that I know, everything will change.

All the plans will change.

I can't be using her.

Tomorrow, I'll need to speak to my men. We'll need to brainstorm what this means. Tonight, I do no such thing. Tonight, I'm going to lie next to this woman and probably continue to have my way with her.

She seems to be as insatiable as I am. Innocent but insatiable.

Which, in my opinion, is the perfect combination.

"Come on, let's go to bed."

"You ..." she trails off, and she has this cute little face. I lift my brow and wait for her to continue, although I know what she's going to say. She's like an open book, which is surprising that I didn't realize she would tell me about her father, but maybe she changed her mind, and that's why. She made it sound like it was more than that, but I'm too tired to dwell on it.

"You want me to sleep in here?" In all the weeks I have known her, I have never seen her eyes grow so large.

"Viviana. As my wife, this is your room now."

Her eyes drift across the space in front of her. Then she shakes her head.

"What about the room I was staying in?"

"That was never your room."

"Then why did I stay there?"

"I was waiting for you." My comment makes her smile, not a regular smile though, this one is contagious, and it spreads across her face, touching her eyes.

"You did wait, didn't you?" Her voice is soft.

"I was never going to take you by force. Not in the ways that mattered."

"Do you have something for me to wear? All of my pajamas are in my room ... My old room."

"You won't be wearing pajamas in our bed."

If she's shocked by my declaration, she tries to school her features. However, it's the way she nibbles her lips that I know.

"Drop the robe, Viviana."

Now she lets her mouth open, but I'll give her some credit. She does it.

The big, white, fluffy robe falls to the ground, and a very naked, beautiful, and extremely nervous Viviana gets into the bed.

As soon as she does, she lets out a tiny little moan. My bed is much more comfortable than hers.

"You like that, right?"

"Oh my God, this is the most amazing bed ever."

"You're welcome."

She giggles. "You are such a dick."

"What did you say?" I drop the towel from around my waist and get into the bed, lying on top of her. "Did you say you want my dick?"

"That's not what I said." Her voice hitches as I use my knee to spread her legs.

My cock is now resting on her bare skin.

"I think it's exactly what you wanted to say." I lean forward, trailing kisses along her jaw. She squirms under me, but I keep up my ministrations, my hand snaking between our bodies and opening her to my attack.

She lets out a moan of pleasure, and I take that as an invitation.

This woman will be the death of me.

WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, I ALMOST FORGET where I am, which is strange since this is my bedroom, but I

see brown hair fanning the pillow. There's an arm lying across my stomach. Normally, if I'm going to sleep with a woman, I'll do it in my apartment in the city, not the one that Viviana has been to.

No, I have an apartment that the sole purpose of is just to get me laid. I normally don't trust women enough. They are a liability.

Fuck, until last night, I didn't trust her as well.

Everything looks different in the light of day.

I stretch my arms out and stifle a yawn. I don't want to wake her. She looks too peaceful, and as much as a certain part of my body wants to, she needs to rest.

I barely let her sleep last night. Once we started, I couldn't stop.

I'll leave her here tucked in my bed and go find my men. I need to apprise them of the change in our situation.

Slowly and carefully, I get up. I walk into my closet and throw on gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt, putting on socks and shoes as well. Then I'm out the door. Because of the time, I know I'll find Lorenzo in the kitchen.

"Boss," he says as I walk in.

"What time did the power kick back on?" I ask gruffly.

"It came back on around five."

"Huh. I slept through it."

"Yeah, about that, I heard from Francesca that you had company."

"That's what we need to discuss. I'm going to grab a cup of coffee, and then we can talk in my office."

I make my way to the cabinet and grab a mug, and after I fill it, I head down the hall, open the door, and sit down behind my desk. Lorenzo is quick to follow.

"Do you want me to call Roberto?"

"Yes."

“Anyone else?”

“No.” Although I trust my men, the only two I trust one hundred percent with my life are Roberto and Lorenzo. Luka being a close third.

Lorenzo types out something on his phone, which I imagine is a text to Roberto because within three minutes, the door is opening, and Roberto steps in. He takes his usual seat.

“We were wrong about Viviana.”

“How do you mean? We heard her,” Roberto says.

“Yes, we heard her say what she *had* to. But last night, she told me everything.”

“And you think she was genuine?” This time, it’s Lorenzo who speaks.

“She couldn’t have hidden the lie from me. Not just because I can read people but also ... you should have seen her. She was scared. She knew I would kill her. She thought I would.”

“What did you do?” he asks.

“Well, I fucked her, of course.”

Both my men burst out laughing.

“Of course, you did. And how was it?” Lorenzo falls back into friend mode, the strict underboss disappearing before my eyes.

“I’m not going to talk about fucking my wife. The point is, she wasn’t lying.”

Both men look at me for details, but I’m not going to humor them with that. What I do with my wife is my business. The idea of them knowing more doesn’t sit well with me.

“What do we do now?” Roberto says, breaking through the room. Sending us back to our meeting instead of the coffee date we apparently were on, like a bunch of fucking pussies.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. We need a new plan.”

Lorenzo inclines his head down. “Should we get her involved?”

“You think we should ask her to sell her dad down the river?”

“You did say she appeared scared. There is obviously something he’s holding over her. If we can fix her problem, maybe we can use her against him still, just in a different capacity. Also, from what we can see, it has something to do with her friend’s mother. Maybe it’s about the money? The governor is paying them off, so maybe if we can cover the debt, Viviana will be more apt to help us.”

“It could work.”

“How much are you going to tell her, Boss?”

“I’m not sure yet. I don’t want to spook her. It’s still so new.”

I don’t want her to think I am using her. Even though a day ago it was true, it no longer sits well in my stomach.

“I’m thinking I’m going to spend the next few days with her. Then I’ll broach the topic.”

“And if she says no?”

“If she says no, it won’t change anything. We will have to come up with a new plan, but I’m not going to leave her out to dry. I’ll still fix her problem, whatever that problem may be. It’s obvious her father has been manipulating her for years. Even if nothing comes of it, knowing I stopped that, knowing it’ll piss off the governor, is worth it.”

“What do you need us to do?”

“I only want to keep a skeleton crew here, so up the men at the warehouse. Call Tobias. Set up another order. I want you to run point and make all the collections for next month. Normally, you’re the one to pick up the money.”

He was right. Normally for intimidation, I went to every one of our clients that we provided protection for, and I collected the money, but this time will be different.

“I’m going to be busy for the next week,” I say again more forcefully. “You two will step in for me. If anyone asks, say I have other business to attend to.”

“Aren’t you worried they might not take it seriously? They might not feel pressure to pay?”

“No. You are my eyes and ears. You are an extension of me. Anyone who dares to fuck with you will see the full force of my power. The future is never certain, Lorenzo, as underboss, you need to make these men fear you the way they fear me.”

He nods at my words, knowing my intention. I’m at war with my cousin, I could die, and Lorenzo will take over if that day comes. It’s imperative he has their respect. “Also, it will keep them on their toes. You can use whatever force is necessary, but only if you have to. You know I don’t condone the killing of an innocent.”

“No problem. Do you want Francesca to stay?”

“She can take a vacation as well.”

“You’re going to cook and clean?”

“I’m capable of doing both. I only want surveillance workers in the house, but I only want them to be watching the grounds.”

“Damn, what do you have planned?”

I smile at him, but I don’t tell him I plan to fuck my wife in every single room in the house multiple times.

“Now that we have that settled, I’m going to grab some breakfast and go back to my room. You can access me via text message, but only for emergencies. Understand?”

“Perfectly clear.”

I stand from my chair, head out the door, and make my way into the kitchen. Francesca is there mixing something in a bowl.

“I was preparing breakfast. Pancakes and eggs.”

“Very well. Thank you. As soon as they’re done, I’ll take them up to Viviana.”

I take a seat at the island and wait for her to cook. Then she places the plates on a tray and hands it to me as I stand.

“You can have the rest of the week off, Francesca.”

“What?”

“I’m giving the staff a vacation.”

Her eyes are wide, but she smiles. “I don’t know what to say ... I ... thank you.”

Not used to being thanked or showing anyone mercy, I give her a tight smile and walk out the door.

When I walk into the room, I’m not surprised that she is still sleeping in the same place I left her.

The sheets are draped over her, but it doesn’t cover the top of her chest and face. Placing the tray down on the bedside table, I take a seat on the bed.

“Viviana.” I place a kiss on her forehead. Her nose wiggles in her sleep.

I lean down and kiss her lips.

“Viviana,” I say again as I move to sit back up.

“Mmmm.” Her hand lifts to rub at her eyes. Then she starts to blink as the room comes into focus for her, she looks toward my voice.

“Morning,” she groans.

“It is, indeed.”

She snuggles in closer to me. “What time is it? How late did I sleep?”

“It’s not late at all. It’s only eight thirty.”

She stares at me like I have something on my face.

“And you woke me ...” she trails off, feigning shock.

“I did.”

“But it’s so early.” She’s pretending to whine now, and where normally I wouldn’t like this banter, with her I do.

“You’re lucky I didn’t wake you when I first wanted to.”

“I don’t even want to know what time that was. I would have beat you up.”

“Is that so ...”

I watch as her eyes dilate at my words. Her tongue licks the top of her lip, which she then bites.

“What would you have done about it?” she asks, her voice sexy and sultry.

“I would have tortured you, of course.”

Her chest heaves, and I know if I place my hand between her legs, I’ll find her desperate for me.

“First, I have to feed you.”

That makes her cheeks go red.

“Food, Viviana. I have to feed you food,” I clarify as if she’s a little girl who wants to eat a bar of chocolate.

“Oh.”

I move from where I’m sitting and stand to get the tray. That’s when she finally notices it, and a giant smile spreads across her face.

“You brought me breakfast in bed.”

“I did.”

“Who are you, and what did you do to my husband?”

I inhale deeply, and then I exhale. She’s right. My behavior is not just foreign to her, but it’s foreign to me. It’s like I’ve done a complete one-eighty, and I don’t even recognize myself. That being said, I know our alone time is limited, and I want to enjoy every minute of it, including feeding her. This woman makes me do crazy things.

It’s something about the way she looks, the way she speaks, and how honest she is. Even though I’m sure it’s bad for me, I indulge in it anyway.

“I brought pancakes. I’d like to take credit for making them, but I can’t.”

“Francesca?”

“Who else?” I shrug, and she laughs.

“She’s kind of amazing.”

“Yes, she’s been with me a long time.” I don’t need to say what I mean. I’m sure that my wife can read between the lines. Francesca was one of the girls my uncle kept.

I take the tray and place it on her lap.

“All this is for me? Aren’t you going to have any?”

“I don’t eat very much breakfast, not until after I’ve worked out.”

“You didn’t work out this morning?”

“No, someone kept me up too late.”

“I think you have it backward. You’re the one who kept me up.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

“Do you have to work today?” Her voice is soft and tentative.

I shake my head. “Actually, I’ve taken the week off.”

“You *have*?” Her eyes flare with shock.

“Don’t act so surprised.”

“And what are you planning to do?”

My lip tips into a smirk. “You, of course, all day, every day, for the next seven days.” The sound of her fork dropping on the tray is almost comical.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you a few breaks.”

“You’ll kill me if we don’t have breaks.”

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit. I think you could handle me.”

“So this is our honeymoon of sorts?”

“We aren’t going anywhere. It’s too much of a logistical nightmare, especially with the snow, so instead, I’m sending everyone away. Only the security I need will be staying behind.”

“What will we do?”

“Cook, clean, fuck.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“But that’s what you like about me.”

“It truly is.” She laughs before bringing the fork back up to her mouth and taking another bite. When she does, she closes her eyes and enjoys the taste and aroma that waft up from the pancakes.

“Are you sure you don’t want any? You said you weren’t going to work out again, so you can share my pancakes with me.”

“I’ll only share your pancakes if you let me feed you,” I say to her.

“Okay.”

Viviana

WE SPEND THE BETTER PART OF THE DAY GETTING ACQUAINTED with each other's bodies. I know we did that last night, but yesterday the lights were off. Today, they aren't.

Which means there's a lot more to explore. For a man who touched every inch of my body, it's like he's never done it before to me.

He savors every minute.

It's like he can't get enough of me, but that's okay, because I can't get enough of him either.

It's funny, I don't think I've ever been so comfortable with anyone in my whole life. Obviously, I'm not including Julia in the sentiment, seeing as I'm not having sex with her, but surprisingly enough, I am at ease with Matteo.

It's not just that I feel safe with him. It's not just that he plays my body like an instrument that he adores. It's the fact that even with our differences, even with the manner in which I've come to be here, I feel like he listens to me when I speak.

No man I've ever known in the past has ever really heard me. I mean, it is pretty obvious I have daddy issues, and in the past, I've always picked a bad boy because of said "daddy issues," but this feels different.

I'm not ignorant. I'm not stupid. I know that he is unlike any other man in the world. I know what he does for a living. Hell, I know he's not a good man. But it's like, at this very moment as he trails kisses down my spine, and I can barely comprehend what I'm even thinking, I know he's a good man for me. And isn't that what's important? How I feel when I'm with him.

He kisses a trail, and then he stops right above my shoulder blade.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, hovering over my body.

"That depends on what you're offering," I joke.

"I'm talking about food, Viviana." It doesn't matter how many times he says my name. It always brings a fresh wave of butterflies to take flight in my belly.

"In that case, it depends on what you can cook. Because I guess I should tell you this now ..." I grimace. "I don't cook. Like at all. I can't even make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

Matteo lets out a boisterous laugh.

"Well, then it's your lucky day. Because not only can I cook but I very well may make the best sandwiches ever, and I have a specialty of making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

I look over my shoulder, and I can't help the smile that spreads across my face.

This man is the complete opposite of how he is with everyone else. He's different when he's with me. He's playful and funny. It's hard to reconcile the two versions of him. I have a strong feeling that he doesn't show this side to that many people. Maybe he shows it to Lorenzo.

Maybe he laughs and jokes. But it wouldn't surprise me if he didn't. There are too many variables in his work life for him to show this side. Too many enemies, all eager to take his position. In the little time I've known him, I can tell this. Also after speaking to my father about him, the way my father guns after him, I know, but if my father had a moment in which he

could pull the trigger and take out Matteo without any consequences, he would. That doesn't sit well for me. I do need to start thinking about how I'm going to handle my dad. Seeing as this is my impromptu honeymoon, although more like a staycation, I don't want to ruin this moment. I don't want to tarnish it by bringing up the big elephant in the room.

Instead of saying anything, I don't.

"Is that what we're going to have for dinner?" I ask, staring into his big green eyes. Eyes that I can most certainly get lost in. Actually drowning.

"Since I'm trying to impress you."

"Impress me? Why would you possibly need to impress me? You already married me."

"That is true. Well, as I was saying, I am obviously not going to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich tonight."

"Okay, so then what are you going to make, big shot?" I joke with him.

"Well, since I'm Italian and since you are obviously a failure."

"Not nice."

"Just speaking the truth. An Italian who can't cook Italian food is a failure." I'm about to argue when he places a kiss on my neck.

"I'll just stop talking. I'm going to make us lasagna."

"I can help you do that."

"We have to get up now though, if I'm going to make the noodles."

"When you say make the noodles, what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Viviana. I'm not eating noodles out of a box."

"Someone's fancy." At that, he laughs as he stands from the bed, walks over to the chair, and grabs my robe. Yep, it's my robe now. I have officially stolen it. He comes back to the

bed where I am and hands it to me. I stand and place it around me, tying it tight.

“Let me get dressed, and I’ll be right down.”

“No getting dressed. Wear the robe, and if you complain, I’ll make you cook with me naked.”

“That doesn’t sound so horrible.”

“Only if the oil splatters.” My mouth opens and shuts like a little fish.

“Yeah, let’s not do that.” I grimace.

“Good idea.”

Once my robe is on, we head down to the kitchen.

I’m not used to how quiet the house is. Usually, somebody is walking around or at least Francesca’s in the kitchen. And although I know the security team is here, it’s as if we are the only people in the world, and at this very moment, we are.

It’s only a few minutes before I hear the sounds of pots and pans. Clanking and banging together.

“What are you starting on first?”

He turns to look over his shoulder. Unlike me, who is in a robe, Matteo after our morning romp has opted to have no shirt on and is now wearing only a pair of the infamous gray sweatpants.

The type of sweatpants that all women have deemed should be illegal because of how damn hot some men look in them. None of these women have probably seen Matteo in gray sweatpants, and I hope they never do because this is more than illegal.

He is actually like heaven dropped down to earth. From the back, I can see his muscles as he works with his arms flexing, but it’s when he turns around that I literally can’t collect enough of the drool that’s pouring out of my mouth. The damn V is present.

Mouthwatering, tempting, and everything I have always imagined it would be.

“I have to start with the sauce first.”

“As in you make it?”

“Of course, I make it. I believe my mother would’ve considered it sacrilegious if I didn’t. My father would’ve grabbed the nearest broom and hit me with it. ‘Real Italians don’t use canned sauce, Matteo,’ he would say.”

“Seriously, so nothing from a can at all?”

“The only can you can use is tomato paste, and that’s only if you need to.”

“This is so fascinating. Obviously, in my family we’ve always had someone cook for us, so I’ve never learned. My old nanny, well, the extent of her cooking for me was cookies, so unless you want me to make cookies, I really can’t contribute very much. Also, when I say make cookies, I won’t be able to make it from scratch, but I can open the container.”

He laughs at my joke.

“First thing, we need to grab the meat we are going to use for our sauce. Do you know what kind of meat we use, Viviana?”

“I didn’t realize this was a lesson. Am I going to fail? What’s the punishment?” He smirks at my comment.

“Would you like me to punish you?”

His words do their job seducing me and making me hot. My lip sucks in as soon as I start to nibble it.

“Maybe,” I answer.

“Well, that can be arranged ...” His offer, or better yet threat, hangs in the air, making it hard to breathe for a second. What would that entail? I’d like to find out.

“Well then, you better continue with your lesson.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t.”

I incline my head and then roll my eyes. “Just tell me what’s in the damn sauce.”

“It’s a combination of pork and beef. That’s what makes the flavor so robust.”

“Fancy.”

“It’s like you want me to throw you over my knee.”

My eyes go wide. Even though I’m shocked, I kind of want him to.

He chuckles before going on.

“Next, you can use crushed tomatoes. Normally, we would have to do this, but Francesca usually keeps some in the fridge for me, just in case the urge to cook hits me.”

“Does it often hit you?”

“Often? No. Sometimes.”

“Like when you’re trying to impress a girl?”

“I don’t try to impress anyone. And no women come to my home.”

“What? But then ...”

“Do you really want to talk about this?”

Red-hot jealousy pours through my veins, and I realize that no, I don’t. I shake my head back and forth adamantly. But still, I’m curious if he doesn’t bring women here. I mean, I hope there are no women at this point since he’s with me, but I never did ask him that. Shit, here I am having crazy sex with my husband, yet we never had the talk.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, and I see he’s staring at me from where he’s perched at the stove.

“I mean, I know we’re married and all, but we never discussed things.”

“What kind of things did you want to discuss?”

“We didn’t use protection.”

“One, I trust if you were not clean, you wouldn’t let me. Two, I won’t use protection when I fuck you. You’re different. You’re my wife, and as I said when we first got married, we will eventually need to have children.”

“I had the shot—”

“Oh.”

It’s almost as if he’s disappointed.

“The point is, we’re both clean. I’m not fucking you with a condom.”

“You can’t sleep with anyone else.”

“Viviana. I haven’t so much as looked at another woman since I married you.”

My mouth opens and shuts. Is what he says true? I want him to turn back around so that I can see if he’s telling the truth, but then I remember what he once said to me. He won’t lie. If that’s the case, and I believe it is, why lie now? He wouldn’t.

“Okay,” I croak. I start to fiddle in my seat as I watch him. He’s back to stirring the sauce. I stand from the chair and start to pace.

“Do you want a glass of wine or something?”

“Yeah, you can grab an open bottle in the fridge. The glasses are in the far cabinet.” I realize I’ve been living here for a few weeks, and I don’t know where anything is.

I’ve never had to since Francesca has always been here. And it’s nice to be alone with him to just see what it is like to be domestic with him, see what it’s like to have a life with him. I walk across the room and open the fridge, finding a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

“If you want red, it’s in the back right behind this room in that door, and then there’s some more in the cellar in the basement.”

“Red would go better with tomato sauce, but since we’re not eating for a while, right? I’d like a glass of white.”

“Normally, when I make sauce, I let it simmer all day, but this time, we’re going to do an abbreviated version and only let it simmer for forty minutes.”

“And what will we do while we wait? Are we going to start the lasagna?”

“Francesca left noodles in the fridge, so I’ll just use those. I guess I will have to think of something else to kill time.”

He turns back to the pot, and then he covers it.

“What can we do then ...” he trails off.

I’m about to answer, but then he’s stalking over to me. The moment he approaches, he pulls the string of my robe, and then it’s open and gaping at the front. Before I can say anything else, he lifts me up under my underarms and places me on the kitchen island. And he’s pushing me back down. Everything is happening so fast I barely can comprehend it before I feel the swipe of his tongue.

He has his face buried between my thighs, and he’s worshipping me. He thrusts his fingers into me. One, two, and three and then he’s fucking me with his hand.

I’m so close.

I try to grip the cold marble under my back, but I can’t find anything to hold as I rush toward my high. I think I’m about to crash, but then his tongue stops moving, and his fingers pull out.

I whimper at the empty feeling.

But I don’t have to for long as before I can fully comprehend it, he’s lining himself up with my core and thrusting inside. His hand’s now wrapped around my waist, holding me steady.

Is this slow?

This isn’t slow.

No, this is fast and hard.

An unquenchable appetite.

He can’t get enough of me, and I can’t get enough of him. I lift my hands and wrap them around his neck, bringing his mouth to mine.

He starts to kiss me with reckless abandon, and I kiss him back. Telling him without words how much I want this. How much I need him.

As he thrusts in and out, his tongue mimics his pattern fucking me at the same time.

It starts to build.

The feeling inside me rising to a crescendo.

His movements become more erratic.

The force of his hips is more punishing.

He pulses inside me, and then I fall. We both fall over into a crazy abyss we can only find in each other's arms.

Matteo's head is cradled in my neck as we both try to catch our breath. After a few minutes, we do.

Then he is standing and walking over to the sink to grab a towel. He wets it with warm water, and then he's back to clean me.

That's a sweet gesture I wouldn't expect from him. But I like it. Once I'm clean, I put my robe back on, tying it at my waist, and then I excuse myself to the bathroom. After I do my business, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are rosy, and my hair a disheveled mess. I look like I just had sex on the kitchen island.

I can't help but laugh. Who would've thought that I'd be this girl? I walk back to the kitchen, and I see that although he was going to wait to prepare the lasagna, he started to heat the noodles.

"You never did tell me where you learned this."

"My mother taught me a little, but really, my father taught me everything. He told me the way to my mom's heart is through his stomach."

"That's cute," I tease.

"Not exactly what I was going for, but okay."

“So were you gonna tell me why you sometimes like to cook?”

He stops his movements, and I can tell even by watching the muscles in his back that he tenses. Then he turns around and looks at me. His eyes are soft. Softer than I thought they would be. The color like moss after the rain.

“When I cook, I think of them. I think of my family. Spending time together ...”

He leaves it at that. Not saying more. But I can read between the lines, or maybe in my heart, I'm hoping these are the lines. But in my head, his answer is as follows: I am his family now. And that's why he wants to cook for me.

Matteo

I DON'T KNOW WHY I TELL HER THAT. I DON'T KNOW WHY I open up to her at all. It's crazy. I'm letting her in when I probably shouldn't. The truth is, she's proven her worth to me. She's proven her loyalty, but still, I need to keep a little distance.

Fucking her on the kitchen island was not exactly how I planned my evening, but I have to admit, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Now I'm back to cooking, and she is sitting down drinking wine and enjoying herself. I think she's enjoying the view too because every time I turn around, I catch her gawking at me. It's kind of cute.

It's a good thing Lorenzo and Roberto are nowhere to be found because they would yell that I've given up my man card. I haven't, of course. When the time comes, and I need to be the enforcer, the boss, and the murderer, I will.

But I would be lying if I didn't enjoy this right here, the quiet of it, the peace.

I probably shouldn't have mentioned my family, but she asked, and I found I can't withhold from her for some strange reason. Maybe it's because she didn't withhold from me.

Once the sauce is prepared, I make the lasagna. It doesn't take very long, seeing as most of the food prep was already

accomplished, but still, it'll taste just as good. I sit next to her on the island and grab a glass of red wine instead.

Normally, I drink scotch, but tonight, wine will work.

"If you wanted red, why didn't you tell me? I could've drunk some."

"I remember that you liked white," I say.

"Did you have that bottle in the fridge for me?"

"I did, actually."

She lifts the glass to her mouth and takes a sip.

"Well, it's delicious, so thank you."

We sit in silence for a few minutes before she opens her mouth.

"Well, we never did finish our game of Twenty Questions, so maybe we should do that. We didn't have a typical relationship where we got to know each other before we got married, so this could help."

"Ask away."

"You said you never brought a girl here ..." She nibbles on her lip.

"Is there a question, Viviana? Or do you just want to know about my history?"

"Does that mean you've never been serious with anyone?"

"Yes, Viviana. Before you, I was never serious with anyone." I stress the word anyone. Throughout my life, I have never wanted to marry at all. Even now, my marriage serves a purpose. Yes, Viviana is beautiful. Yes, I love to have sex with her, and eventually, she will be the mother of my children, but as much as I see these things in her, it doesn't mean I will ever love her.

Love is something I can't do in my profession. There is no place for love in the mafia.

"But there were women ..."

That makes me chuckle.

“Of course, there were women, but I don’t think you want to know just how many.”

She shakes her head. I know the feeling. Of wanting to know, but not wanting to, too.

“Nope, don’t wanna know that.”

“And you?”

“Never anything serious. I’ve dated men, but there was never a point in getting serious, none of them would’ve been good enough for my father, and I knew eventually he would try to force my hand onto some political ally. I guess, in this case, he was going to try to force my hand onto your cousin.”

I take a deep breath. My anger is palpable. I can feel it rising up like bile in my chest. Her fucking father. You would think that a man would want to protect his daughter. But he’s a monster just like my cousin, just like my cousin’s father. I’m not a good man, but I would never do what he was trying to do with her. Not to my own flesh and blood.

Needing to change the subject because I’m afraid I’m going to snap, I lift my drink and take a swig. When I’m done, I place it back down on the table and look up at Viviana.

“What’s your favorite movie?”

“Seriously, that’s your next question?”

“If I ask anything else, anything having to do with your father, I’m gonna fucking blow. I refuse for that piece of fucking shit to ruin our night.”

“*Roman Holiday*.”

“Even though it’s not a happy ending?” I ask.

“Not all stories have happy endings.”

“You’re very right.”

“I’m surprised you’ve seen it.”

For some reason, this girl gets me to say things that I don’t say to anyone, yet here I am, opening my mouth.

“I watched it with my parents growing up.”

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Not about this, anyway.

“Tell me about how that happened.”

“Well, to begin with, *Roman Holiday* takes place in Italy, and my parents, missing their homeland, made it a ritual that we would have to watch any and every movie that took place in Italy. My father also, well, I think he loved old movies. They were classic movies he grew up with. Movies he cherished, and he wanted me to experience them with him. It’s kind of funny knowing the type of man he was, but regardless of everything, he was a family man. In this business, people claim to be a family man, people claim that the family is the most important but often, like with my uncle and my cousin, it only goes so far, it’s only as deep as their wallet.”

“What about you? What is your favorite movie?”

“Would it be too cliché to say *The Godfather*?” She giggles at that, and I can tell she wants to ask more. She wants to ask exactly what I mean—if it’s not really my favorite movie and I’m just messing with her. She probably wants to know if my family’s history is anything like it. She probably wants to know if growing up, when I was a kid, if it resembled a world we watched at the cinema.

Not wanting to divulge any more about my past or my family at this very moment, I grab the glass and finish it off before standing and making my way to the bottle and pouring myself another. Viviana’s glass is still full so I sit down next to her.

“Twenty Questions isn’t really working.”

“Well, I guess we don’t have to speak, but I do wanna get to know you.”

“Ask, and I’ll try to answer anything I can.”

“I know I’m not supposed to—” She holds her hands up in air quotes. “The family.”

“That’s only in movies. You’re my wife. This is now your family. I can’t promise I can tell you very much, but I can try.”

“Do you think you will get out?”

“I’m not sure. I think there is a misconception that all we do is sell drugs and kill people. We also help people. We help businesses flourish. We protect the people we care about. I’m sure maybe one day we will get out of the drug trade, but the rest ...”

She nods as if she understands, and a part of me thinks she does.

Although this is all new to her, it’s not as though she lived a life of ignorance. Men like her father are the reason that men like me are in business. Corrupt fucking politicians. And as long as they’re around, I will probably be around too. I let out a long sigh. This night is getting heavier than I hoped.

“I’m gonna check the lasagna.” I stand from the chair and make my way over to the oven. It’s ready, so I pull it out and set it on the stove. Viviana is standing beside me now. She grabs two plates and silverware and waits for me to serve us.

It’s not often that we’re home alone, and I get to do this. Actually, I can’t remember ever doing this. Well, not since my parents died. That was another thing we did, but I don’t tell Viviana that. Some things are better kept to oneself.

Some things make you weak.

I can’t ever show weakness.

I’ve made an exception for Viviana not just because she’s my wife but because I need her to let me in. The plan might have changed. I might not kill her in the end. Since she showed me her loyalty, she can stay untouched, unharmed, safe, and protected, but that doesn’t change the fact I still need her.

This way, though, she will know what she’s getting into, and in order for her to agree to my plan, I need to humanize myself to her. It might sound cold and calculated, but it’s the only way to get what I want.

Maybe she would readily agree without any provocation. But this way is easier. If she considers me to be softer than I am, if she feels a sense of loyalty to me that she doesn't feel for her father, she should be more apt to do what is necessary to bring him down.

That might make me sound like a coldhearted snake, but in my world, there are two types. There's a mouse in the fields, and then there is the serpent that eats it.

That is the only way.

Viviana

WE SPEND DINNER IN COMPANIONABLE SILENCE. THE FOOD IS so good I don't mind the silence, even if it means my thoughts are loud and clear and sometimes overwhelming. The truth is, as much time as we've recently been spending together, it's still odd. We're barely more than strangers, but now we are married, intimate, and getting to know each other. We are doing everything backward.

When I take my last bite, I place my fork down.

“That was the most delicious thing I've ever tasted.”

Matteo places his silverware down on the plate and then turns his head to look at me. He seems happy with my assessment. It's not a large smile that lines his face, but it's a genuine one. It's funny. I haven't known him long, but I can recognize his gestures now. His different smiles. His body language. I've been watching him and studying him, and he has small tells. I don't think he realizes he does. Occasionally, he drums his fingers on the table. He does that when he's uncomfortable or when he wants to talk about something else. Then there is the way he silently clenches his fist on his lap. That's when he's angry. I noticed it the first time before we were married, and then I noticed it during the carriage ride. I'm still trying to figure out if he lies, is there a tell for that? He claims he doesn't, and that there is no need, and a part of

me thinks he might be telling the truth about it. Why would a man in his position ever need to lie?

There's no need. If he doesn't like something, he kills it. If you want something, he takes it.

Look at me, case in point.

I'm not stupid. I know why this marriage happened, but I still want to get to know him. I'm not sure what the future will bring. I'm not sure if I could ever give my heart fully to him. I know for a fact he'll never give his heart to me. He says he's not capable, but I listen to the way he talks about his parents. Matteo is capable of love. I just don't think he's capable of allowing himself to love.

He sees it as a weakness.

Which is ridiculous; it's a strength.

"What's going through that pretty head of yours?" he asks, cutting through my inner rambling.

"Just how good this tastes."

"Well, I'm happy you are so impressed because I have other tricks up my sleeve."

I know he's talking about food, but for some reason, it sounds like there's a sexual innuendo wrapped up in that comment. I playfully narrow my eyes at him.

He laughs, then holds up his hands in surrender. "I was talking about dessert."

That makes me give him another playful look. This one includes an eye roll, telling him I'm not buying what he's selling.

"Okay, I'll bite ..." Now it's my turn to be playful. "What's dessert?" I place my index finger on my lower lip and seductively trace the fleshy skin.

Matteo's pupils dilate, and I know I'm about to win this game.

His gaze traces my movement, and I'm sure he's about to strike. Instead, he stands from the chair.

I'm about to ask where he's going, but he turns to face me.

There is no hiding the desire swimming in his eyes.

His hand is on his gray sweats.

Those damn gray sweats that if I don't throw out will end up being the death of me.

"Open your mouth," he orders, taking a step closer. With where I'm sitting, there is only one reason he wants me to open my mouth.

I'm directly in front of him.

Directly in front of my favorite part of him.

I do as he says, opening my mouth, and I swear as he lowers his sweats, drool collects on my lips.

There is something so sexy about this man.

He fists himself, and then when he's hard and ready, he feeds me my dessert.

I CAN GET USED TO WAKING UP BESIDE MATTEO.

Yesterday morning, he was gone before I woke up. Today, I'm snuggled into his chest. My hair is fanning across his skin.

His soft breathing echoes through the room. It's like a soft, calming fan. This is the first time since I've met Matteo that I've seen him so peaceful. Normally, even when he's laughing, there's a sense that he's holding something back. His jaw is still tight. Or sometimes his eyes don't match his smile. But right here as he quietly snores, he truly looks at peace.

He looks younger.

Without the small wrinkles that line his eyes and the tiny line that forms when he frowns, he looks younger.

He's a beautiful man. Complicated, though.

It's so very hard to figure him out. Last night again, he was insatiable. Like no matter how many times he took me, it was

never enough.

Over and over again, he ravished me as if when he stopped, I would disappear.

It's a strange feeling to be wanted by a man like Matteo.

I could see how someone could get greedy from the way he looks, greedy for the way he touches, greedy for more of him.

It's going to take everything inside me not to give in to it. Not to allow myself to fall into the trap.

Because that's what it is.

It's a trap.

How else can you describe it?

If I give my heart to him, I'll get nothing in return. I'll be stuck in the cage without a way out. But if I don't ... if I accept a loveless marriage, how is my life different from my mother's?

He stirs in his sleep, and then his eyes start to open.

"How long have you been up?" he asks, his voice rough and gravelly.

"Only a minute or so."

"Are you hungry?"

That makes me smile. He's always concerned about my appetite. This time when he says it, I don't think there's any other meaning. I think he truly wants to feed me.

"I can always eat."

"You wouldn't be able to tell."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. You're just tiny."

"Or maybe you're big."

He laughs. "Touché."

He lifts his hands to his face and rubs away the remaining sleep.

Then he's standing from the bed with his naked body on full display. I'm surprised when he doesn't attack me.

We have spent the past three days all over each other. He must notice my confusion because he leans down and kisses my lips.

"I see that look you're giving me, Viviana. If you don't stop, I will take you up on your silent offer. But I imagine you're sore, and you might need a little bit of a rest."

I pout.

"I'm not sore."

His hand reaches out, pulls the blanket back, and then spreads my thighs.

The cold air feels heavenly against my heated skin.

He stares at me for a minute. A war rages inside him as he looks down at where I want him to touch me.

"Viviana, what am I going to do with you?"

"Fuck me," I say, my upper teeth biting my lower lip.

"You will be the death of me," he says as he moves closer to the bed, fingers parting me.

I grimace at the contact, and he laughs.

"I told you."

"I'm fine," I say like a petulant child who thought she was getting ice cream but was just told the store was closed.

"You're not. But I know something that will make you feel better."

I raise my eyebrow in question, and he answers by leaning in and swiping my sensitive skin with his tongue.

Yep.

That will work just fine.

Viviana

THE NEXT FEW DAYS PASS IN BLISS.

We don't do much. We take walks in the snow, cook a lot of meals, and indulge in each other's bodies in what must be every single room in the house.

It's been the most perfect week.

I truly never thought Matteo could be this affectionate, nor did I think he would be willing to spend so much time with me.

Unfortunately, though, our alone time has come to an end.

Lorenzo, Roberto, and a few of his other men are due back within the hour. Matteo is downstairs in the basement working out, and I'm in our room showering and getting ready for the day.

I hate that it has to end, but I know it's necessary.

We cannot live in a bubble forever.

Regardless of how fun that bubble is.

Because bubbles, I've learned, are fragile, thin things. Designed to burst and explode.

As I lather my hair, the glass door swings open. I hadn't heard him come in, but here he is, naked and stepping into the shower.

I move a step back, giving him room, and then he closes the door, encasing us in the steam.

I can feel him hardening beside me, and I have to admit I'm happy about it because when I woke up this morning, he was gone, and I miss waking up to his teasing my body.

“Did you have a good workout?” I ask him.

His eyes appear darker than normal, hungry with lust.

“You really wanna talk about my workout ...?” he drawls.

“No, not really.”

“Then what is it you want, Viviana? You'll have to tell me in order for me to give it to you.”

“Your mouth.”

He leans in and kisses me.

A hungry kiss that tells me he missed our morning session as much as I did.

“What else?”

“Your hands.”

He reaches out and starts to touch me. His hands wrap softly around my throat, then down the hollow of my neck, down between my breasts.

“Here?” he asks, smirk present.

I shake my head.

“Here?” His fingers trace a line around my belly button.

I shake my head again.

His hands lower, tracing across my hip bones.

He stops his movements. “Here?”

Too worked up to care, I grab him and thrust his hand between my thighs.

“There,” I scream above the water, and he laughs. A loud and boisterous one.

One that is only for my ears.

And I love it.

I love every minute of it.

After we take the longest shower in history, we both leave the bathroom dressed and completely satisfied.

He's dressed in a more formal outfit than I'm used to. A gray sport jacket, white button-down, and slacks.

If I hadn't just been completely wrecked by him in the shower, I would ask for round two, so instead, I cock my head. "Where're you off to?"

"I have a meeting in Albany."

"You're going all the way to Albany?"

My heart starts to pound that I won't see him for a few days. I am also concerned about what his business is about. If it has something to do with Dad.

"Just for a few hours. I'm flying up to talk to the governor about some business."

"I'll miss you," I say, my voice weaker than I want it to be.

"I'll be back for dinner ... *and* dessert."

I knew this day was coming. Again, I don't expect we were going to be alone forever, but still, it bothers me.

What am I going to do?

Should I ask about getting a job again?

I can't imagine the timing is any better. He's still at war.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me."

I sometimes forget that he can read me so well.

"I was just wondering what I was going to do."

"Would you like me to call Giana over?"

"I'd rather try to see if Julia will see me."

“Has she called you?”

“No,” I admit.

“Then why bother?”

“She means a lot to me. She’s my family.”

He watches me for a moment before nodding his head.

“Call her, then. If she answers, if she says yes, I’ll have Luka arrange it.”

“I can go to the city?”

“I would rather her come here. Where I know you are safe.”

“Okay. Thank you.” I lean on my tiptoes and kiss his lips. Once he’s gone, I fish out my phone from where I placed it a few days ago.

I haven’t used my phone this past week.

Not wanting anything to tarnish it.

I check to see if I have any missed calls.

There is nothing.

Not even a text message.

It’s a sobering feeling to know no one misses you.

At least I have Matteo.

My thoughts shock me.

How did that happen so fast?

How is it in the course of only a few weeks this man has burrowed himself inside me?

Despite all my efforts, I realize I’m freaking falling for him.

This isn’t good.

I pick up the phone and dial Julia. I’m hoping she answers, praying more like it.

The phone rings once, twice, and on the third ring, I hear her voice.

“Hello.” It’s hard to hear her. She’s speaking low, or maybe her mouth is far from the phone.

“Hey, Jules.” She doesn’t say anything. She stays quiet. “I know you’re mad at me, but I’m sorry. Believe it or not, I wanted to tell you, but there were things beyond my control.”

“I know.”

“You know? Yes ... Jonathan heard your father speaking.” Jonathan, her twin brother, works for my father. I’m actually surprised he has said anything about me that could help me. He hates everything about me.

Not an unfounded hate.

He actually hates everyone in my family.

I’m shocked he even works for my father, but I guess even he couldn’t turn down a cushy job in the governor’s office. Couple that with the complete makeover he apparently decided to give himself and no part of him is recognizable from the little boy I used to play with as a girl.

“What did he hear?”

“That you were forced.”

“It wasn’t exactly like that.”

Again, she is quiet, and I hate that I said that. Now I’ve made it awkward again.

“Julia, I miss you. I wanted to know if you wanted to come over.”

“To where you live with Matteo Amante. The gangster.”

“To where I live, yes.”

“Yeah, I’ll come, but not because of anything more than curiosity,” she says through the phone.

“Curious of what?”

“Oh, the reason you would fight to get out of one cage just to thrust yourself into a different one.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Oh, no ...?” she trails off for emphasis. I could argue this all day with her, but when I don’t respond to her taunt, I can hear her let out a sigh. “Tell me where and when.”

“It’s actually outside the city. I’ll send a car for you.”

“Umm. That works.”

I can hear the judgment in her voice. It’s there clear as day, ringing in each second in which we don’t speak.

“He’ll be there soon. See you soon.”

I hang up before she can say anything else. Knowing I need to tell Matteo, I head down the stairs to look for him. There is a good chance he is already gone, but someone will be able to relay the message.

That’s when it dawns on me that I don’t even have my husband’s cell phone number.

I find Luka in the office I know from my “staycation escapades.”

“Hi, Luka. My friend Julia needs to be picked up.”

“On it, Mrs. Amante.”

Hearing him call me by my married name still sounds strange in my ears.

It feels odd to me, yet feels right.

After I’m done with that, I head to the kitchen to grab some coffee and breakfast.

I find Francesca inside. She freezes at my footsteps.

“Oh. Mrs. Amante. I didn’t know you were up for the day. Please accept my apology. If you go to the dining room—”

“No need to set the table and make it formal. I can eat here.”

Since I’ve spent so much time in this room with Matteo, it would feel weird to be in the formal dining room.

She looks confused and shaken by my decision.

“Mr—”

“It’s fine. I don’t want to get you in trouble. I just didn’t want to be alone,” I admit.

She gives me a small smile and nods. “Okay, I’ll set you up right over there.”

She moves around the room and grabs everything I’ll need, then she sets off to grab my coffee. “What would you like to eat?”

“Whatever is easy. Also, I have a friend coming soon.”

“I’ll make sure to make a nice lunch for two.”

A few minutes later, she brings me over a bowl of Chia pudding with fresh fruits and coconut. It’s perfect.

“Thank you so much...” She goes to turn around, but I don’t want her to leave quite yet. “Francesca.”

She looks back at me. “Matteo said you’ve been with him for years.” Her eyes widen a smidge, and I realize my mistake right away. She’s afraid I know about her past. “I just wanted to know about Matteo.”

“I can’t speak of him.” Her answer is firm.

“No. You misunderstand me. He did a lot for me this past week, and I want to do something nice for him. I figured if anyone knows what he likes.”

“I’m not sure I can help.” I nod and look down. “But I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.”

Francesca then leaves the room, and I’m alone.

The same outcome as if I ate in the dining room, but here I have great memories. Memories that make me blush, but still, they keep me company.

I do want to do something nice for him. Hopefully, she will be able to help. If not, maybe Giana can.

I’ll need to call her one of these days.

Matteo mentioned giving me her number.

She could be a good person to have in my corner. Plus, I need to expand my social circle if I want to make this work here.

Time passes slowly as I eat alone. Soon I'm placing my dish in the sink and heading back into the main part of the house. I can't wait to show Julia around.

This house is gigantic. Larger than the governor's house, and then the estate I grew up in before my father traded our Georgian colonial for an even larger one. One with giant pillars, he can only hope will lead him to the largest one.

IT'S GOOD TO SEE HER. I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW MUCH I MISSED Julia until she was standing in front of me again. I throw my arms around her neck; she lets out a tiny giggle.

As soon as we stop hugging, she finally pulls back, and that's when she looks around.

"This is where you've been living?"

"Yes. This is Matteo's house, and I guess it's now mine."

The foyer around us grows silent. Like a pregnant pause, as I wait for her to say more, but when she doesn't, I decide to speak instead.

"Come on, let's go to the living room. We can talk there, and you can fill me in on what's going on in your life, and I'll do the same."

It must be shock from how big this place is or something because she still has a weird look in her eyes. But when I start to walk, she snaps out of it, following me out of the foyer, down the hall, and into the living room.

"This living room is giant," she finally blurts out, looking wide-eyed. "The whole house is, actually. He's like a billionaire, huh?"

I don't know what to say to that.

The only thing I can do is shrug, not feeling comfortable talking about my husband's finances.

"I think it's a family home. Passed down from generation to generation. I never really asked Matteo. He told me a little bit about it, but I'm not really sure."

"Well, it's magnificent, no matter what. It seems your impromptu decision to marry a mob boss paid off."

My eyes go wide at what she says.

The bite and bitterness to her tone not lost on me.

I have no idea what's crawled up her ass, but I don't like it.

"Listen, I know you are upset with me, but don't you think it's gone too far? Yes. I married Matteo without telling you.

"Yes, I didn't invite you. But there are things you don't understand about the circumstances. I had no choice to do it the way I did. I'm so sorry I hurt you, but I couldn't not ..."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"My father ... he threatened." I shake my head back and forth. Not able to say more.

Although so much of this concerns her, she doesn't know a lot of it, and I don't even know how to tell her. I don't even know where to begin.

"And what of me, you can't trust me?"

"I'm sorry, can we please talk about something else?"

I think she's going to argue. I think she might even sit up, stand, and then demand to be driven somewhere else, but she doesn't, which is slightly shocking to me.

"Can you at least tell me if he's horrible to you? Would you at least be honest about that?"

"Truth?"

"I always want the truth from you." Again, her words hang in the air. The air that now feels oppressive with my lies. But am I really lying? Is withholding information a lie?

Many, many years ago as a little girl too young to understand the ramifications of my actions, I made a promise to a very bad man.

At the time, I didn't realize what I was getting myself into. Had I known then what I know now, I would've dealt with the consequences of my actions instead of making a deal with the devil.

My father.

It's funny how twelve years later, I made a different deal with a different devil. I can only hope this one will turn out better.

"Believe it or not, he's actually been good to me."

Great, if you consider him in bed.

"So is it real now, is it a real marriage? Are you ever coming back to the city?"

"I'm not sure," I admit, running a hand through my dark locks.

"Does he even have a residence in the city?"

"He does. It's nothing like this place."

"What do you mean?"

For some reason, I feel as though I'm not supposed to talk about his apartment in the city. He didn't specifically say anything, but I also didn't tell him I would. I've vaguely remembered him saying people don't know where it is, but telling her where it is and what it looks like are two different entities. We're already fighting so much I can feel the tension in the air. What's the harm?

"He actually owns a warehouse. It's really cool. From the outside, you would think it's a dump, but inside, it's state-of-the-art. The rooms are beautiful. Nothing like this, it's modern contemporary, a bit sterile, but beautiful nonetheless."

"Must be nice."

I lift a brow. "What do you mean?"

“Nothing, I just mean it must be nice to have two beautiful homes. That’s all.”

She gives me a smile ... but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. A part of me thinks she’s jealous.

And from her point of view, I can understand how this all sounds a bit crazy.

Hell, to me, it sounds crazy, and I have all the information.

To her, she has so little of it.

You could tell her.

The dumb insistent voice in my head cuts through, demanding I give it voice.

I can’t, though.

That was the stipulation.

Never tell Julia.

Never tell Jonathan.

The money would stop.

I have done all that I have to take care of the family, all to get so close to finding a way out.

“Tell me what you’ve been up to,” I ask, trying to steer the conversation away from Matteo and me.

By the way she smiles, it appears she’s okay with this segue.

“I met a guy.”

“Oh!” I perk up, happy for the distraction—and for her. “Does he have a name?”

“Nope. I’m going to be as shady as you are. He’s gorgeous. Sexy. He’s got brown hair, green eyes. He’s got that swagger.”

“Okay, where did you meet mystery man?”

“At a club.”

“Think it can get serious?”

“Maybe. You can never tell. Maybe he’ll move me into a great big mansion like this one day.” She laughs.

Hearing her laughter makes me laugh too.

“Other than the hot man you’re banging ... how are you?”

“Who said anything about sex?” Her lip tips up, and I know she’s joking with me. “Of course, we are fucking.”

I like to see her smile. Lord knows she’s had it rough. She deserves it.

All of it.

Matteo

WE TOUCH DOWN IN ALBANY A LITTLE AFTER ONE IN THE afternoon.

This will be a fast trip.

A late lunch with the governor of New York at his mansion.

On the books, I own many companies. I'm a respectable businessman who owns waterfront properties everywhere, so it isn't unheard of for me to meet with him.

But off the record, he was the one who originally tipped me off to Marino on my ass.

As many times in the past as Marino tried to do business with me, I never had to with Governor Thomas. I am able to get most of what I need done.

But my dismissal of the Jersey prick ended up costing me.

I misjudged Salvatore.

It never dawned on me that he would connect with an overly ambitious governor from the neighboring state and convince him that he was the better option.

Marino has tied his political aspirations to the wrong man.

Out of principale, I won't help him.

Not even if he is hanging off the side of a mountain needing a hand.

I'd still walk away.

Now in the car, we make the drive from the private airplane to the governor's mansion. It's not a long trip, and as we pull up to the sprawling estate, not unlike the one in Jersey, I can't help but think of my wife.

Pulling out my phone, I fire off a text.

Me: Are you enjoying your day?

Viviana: Who is this?

That makes me smile. My wife is too feisty for her own good.

Me: Your husband

Viviana: Oh ... sorry. You never gave me your number. So I didn't know.

Me: Who did you think it was?

Viviana: I wasn't sure.

I look down at my phone. Did she think it was an old boyfriend?

The idea of one reaching out to her has my hands clenching into a tight fist.

I won't share my wife with anyone.

Me: No one better be texting you.

Me: You're mine and only mine.

I type before I can stop myself, letting my possessiveness show in my words.

I probably shouldn't have typed it, but it's true.

Viviana: Does that go the same for you?

And there it is. The question she asked the first night in her apartment. One I wasn't prepared to answer, but after all these weeks, and knowing now what it feels like to sink inside her, to get lost in her abyss, the answer isn't so hard.

Me: Yes.

I put my phone back in my pocket. Not wanting to say anything else. It's at the same time as I do that the car rolls to a stop. We're here.

We exit the car, and then my man and I go to the front door, where we are greeted by Governor Thomas's security team. Two of his men search for guns. They know that my security detail has one, my man does have his piece on him, but they all stand close. This isn't my first time coming here, and it won't be my last.

Governor Thomas walks over to me, reaches his hand out, and we shake.

He then leads me to the dining room, where we will eat and speak. As soon as I sit down, a poured glass of scotch is already in front of me. His staff knows me well.

“We have a problem.”

“Yes. Marino is always a thorn in my side. However, I thought that by marrying his daughter, you'd've crushed the opposition.”

“It would seem not yet. My plan is to take him down—” Governor Thomas holds up his hand.

“I don't want to hear about it.”

He takes a deep breath. He looks tired and worn, as though this whole thing is too much for him to handle. I know the feeling. Sometimes I wonder why I bother. But then I think of what a monster my uncle was. I think about what a monster Salvatore will become if given the opportunity. Governor Thomas knows this as well, which is why he's agreed to help me. Doesn't make it any better. I'm sure he wishes he could throw me out, but it behooves him to have me in his corner and to have me in New York.

“I don't have a lot of information for you,” he says. “What I can tell you is that you're on everybody's radar. Governor Marino, is really out to get you. You can't use any of the original routes.”

“This I know.”

“My best advice is don’t store anything in the new one either.”

I lift my brow.

“Marino has been speaking one-on-one to everyone at the Port Authority. He’s also been taking meetings with the dockhands, Coast Guard, etcetera.”

“Busy man.”

“He’s determined to take you down.”

“And get in bed with my cousin,” I grit out.

“We can’t allow that to happen, Matteo.”

“I concur. On both matters, actually.”

He knows as well as I do, if that happens, no one is safe.

Salvatore won’t be happy dealing with just pills and blow.

He only has one thing he wants to deal with ...

A billion-dollar trafficking enterprise left wide open when Cyrus Reed got involved and shut it all down.

No one wants the Italians to take up the void the Russians left.

“My advice, if you choose to take it, is bring it in and transport it right away. Place it someplace no one would think ... until it’s ready for transport again. I don’t want to know anything. I don’t want my name brought up. I don’t like—”

“That part of the business is being phased out. Unfortunately, until my cousin is out of the picture, I can’t jeopardize my men being angry.”

“Move it fast. Off the radar. I’ll do what I can to get Marino off your back.”

I stand from my chair and shake his hand.

“Thank you.”

“You can’t lose, Matteo.”

“I won’t.”

Losing isn’t an option. I will burn everything down to the ground, burn it all if I have to, before I let a sadistic man like Salvatore lead.

Now back on the plane, I face Lorenzo and Roberto.

They’re sitting directly across from me.

“He wants us to move the cargo as soon as it comes into port. He doesn’t think the docks are safe. Governor Marino has been on a rampage ever since I married Viviana. The man will do anything in his power to right the wrong he thinks we did him. Governor Thomas believes the best plan is an obscure location, one with enough storage space but not obvious.”

Each of us goes quiet. Finding a close location that no one will think of is the hard part.

“What about Marco’s family restaurant?”

“You want to store our drugs in a restaurant? Do you plan on putting it with the sugar? Maybe the herbs are more like it?”

I shake my head at the banter between Roberto and Lorenzo.

But that has me thinking. If Lorenzo thinks it’s a silly idea, then maybe it actually holds some merit.

“Okay, when we get back to the compound, I want to talk to Marco. We will give his family a nice incentive if they agree. The bottom level has a tunnel.”

“That’s why I suggested it. It was used to smuggle in booze back in the Prohibition days.”

“That’s right. Roberto, I think you are onto something. The location is perfect and the tunnel is a bonus. We can bring the drugs in and out without anyone being the wiser. Also, I can check in often. It’s a restaurant. It wouldn’t be unheard of for me to take my wife there ... often.”

The more I think about this, the better it sounds. Now that this is settled, I turn my attention away from my men and stare

out the window for the remainder of the forty-five-minute flight back to my home.

I have a lot to work on once back.

It's time I talk to Viviana about her father. It's time we find the location of Salvatore.

I need to see where my next shipment of guns is as well. It feels like my work is endless, and all I want to do is take another day off and have my way with my wife.

I'm not sure when it happened, but I realize Viviana has gotten under my skin despite my best efforts.

She's like an addiction.

One taste will never be enough.

Viviana

WITH JULIA GONE, THERE ISN'T MUCH TO DO. MY LIFE HAS become rather boring. I need to talk to Matteo about it. I need a job and a purpose. I want to make a difference.

There is no way I can spend another day doing nothing.

Without thinking about it, I head down the stairs, all the way to the bottom floor. To the floor where I know Matteo goes to when he is not with me.

I'm not sure if I'm allowed here, but I'm doing it anyway. Flinging open the door to the surveillance room, Luka and Tony look up at me.

They're not shocked that I'm here. How can they be? Right on the giant screen in front of me is the hallway I just came down.

"You shouldn't be in here," Luka says.

I shrug. "I'm bored."

"Boss wouldn't like it." Tony's back is to me again, his hands hitting the keyboard.

"I'll handle Matteo."

"I'm sure you will," Luka laughs. "You certainly have him wrapped around your little finger."

"This one." I hold up my pinky.

“Yep, that’s the one.”

“I promise to tell him, and I promise he won’t get mad. I’m just lonely. Francesca has gone missing and I have nothing to do. Put me to work.”

“Not a good idea,” Tony says to Luka, and I roll my eyes.

“As much as I’m sure we would enjoy your company, I have to agree with Tony. After we get permission from the boss, it’s a different story.”

“Call him.”

Luka looks amused by me. Tony, however, is visibly pissed.

A minute later and with a smile on his face, Luka motions for me to sit down in the chair next to him.

“I’m allowed to only show you certain things.”

“Like what?”

“Like a few of the cameras we have in the house.”

Tony starts to type, and then there in front of me is my old room and my old bed. My face turns warm, and I’m sure I’m beet red.

“I actually have something I need to do,” I say as I rush to leave the room with the very little dignity I have left.

Well played, Matteo. Well played.

After my embarrassing run-in, I hit the gym and worked out. Then I read a little from a book, but now, there is nothing to do as I sit in the living room like a pathetic girl and wait.

The truth is, it’s time I make money anyway. I have debts I’ll need to pay soon.

I’m sitting in the chair, reading, when I hear footsteps. I don’t look up until they are directly in front of me. I crane my neck to see who it is, but by the way my skin pebbles, hyperaware of his presence, I know it’s him.

Our gazes lock, and his eyes are darker than normal.

Neither of us says anything.

Unable to take it anymore, I stand and move until my chest touches him, and then I swear I climb him like a monkey climbing a tree.

My arms wrap around his neck, and my legs wrap around his waist.

Our lips collide next, and his mouth is heaven.

I could kiss him forever.

That thought should scare me, and it actually does a bit, but not for the reasons it did at first.

I'm not scared of my desire for him.

I'm scared for our future and what it brings.

What will I do if I lose him?

It hit me today when we were texting that not only do I not want anyone else, but I don't want him to be with anyone but me.

When he got possessive, so did I.

Our kiss intensifies until he throws me on the couch, and our mouths separate.

"Did you miss me?" He laughs.

"Yes. Even if you're an ass," I hiss back as I swat him lightly on the arm.

There is no point in lying after that display. I might as well own it.

"Good. Because I missed you too."

If my mouth could drop open from shock, it would.

"Did everyone see me?" He leans forward, hovering over me, balancing his weight on his arms.

"No. Only me, I gave him permission to pull up the feed, but only for today."

"But you saw me?"

"Yes, and you saw me. We're even." His mouth grazes my jaw. "I missed this." He kisses me again on the lips. Then he

moves to my neck. His tongue trails down my throat and over my collarbone until he reaches the hollow of my neck.

He then leans up and pulls my shirt open. The buttons rip away from the fabric with a popping sound.

“The door—”

“I don’t care if they see. Let them see me worship you.”

I’m about to object, but then his mouth and tongue shut me up.

No objections left in me.

Sometime later, and after two orgasms, I’m spent.

Still entwined in each other’s arms, I take a deep satisfying breath before speaking.

“Did you have a good trip?” I ask.

He moves to lift his weight off my body before he sits up, leaving me still naked on a couch in his living room. “I got done what I needed to do.”

“What’s that?”

“I was with the governor of New York.”

“Was this about my father?”

“It was.”

I move to sit up, and I rearrange my blouse, although it’s hard to do with half the buttons now missing.

“Is there anything you need to tell me?”

His head tilts down and then back up as he shakes his head.

“Not right now. I’m working on a few things ...”

“You can trust me.”

He leans forward, sucking my lower lip into his. I moan into his mouth like a wanton hussy who didn’t just get laid.

When he pulls back, I groan. This elicits a chuckle from him.

“I need to go work now.”

I want to pout and ask him not to, but I refuse to do that. We aren't there yet. I'm not even sure where we are.

It was only today that he agreed not to be with other women.

I don't want to seem needy, which normally I'm not. In the past, I never cared to be in a relationship.

But for some reason with Matteo, I do care.

And I'm not sure how I feel about it.

Matteo stands from the couch and fixes his pants, zipping and buttoning them up.

With him busy for God knows how long, I make my way back to our bedroom. I need to shower and clean myself off after our impromptu romp.

When I'm out of the shower and clean, my phone chimes.

I walk across the room to where I left my phone on the side table.

There on the screen is a text from Julia.

Julia: I had a lot of fun today. I missed you. I'm sorry if I came off strange. This whole thing has been weird, but I'm happy for you.

I stare at the phone, and an audible exhale escapes my mouth. I didn't realize how badly I needed her to say that.

Me: Thank you! I missed you too. You will always be family to me.

Julia: Can we see each other again?

Me: How about next week?

Julia: I'd love that.

Me: Me too. <3

I place the phone back down and go to get dressed.

Matteo is still not back, but I assume once he is, he'll be hungry, and we'll eat. However, with him, you never can tell.

He's just as likely to tell me we are forgoing dinner and moving straight to dessert.

Either way, I'm happy.

And that's the craziest thing about everything ...

How damn happy I am.

The thought is petrifying.

Matteo

MARCO SITS IN FRONT OF ME AND NODS HIS HEAD AS I SPEAK, but he doesn't say anything.

I can't imagine that he will say no to me, but he could. I highlight all the details, being completely candid about the whole thing. He needs to know all the risks involved, but he also needs to know the rewards.

If he opens the Prohibition room to me to store the drugs, I will pay him a very handsome fee. His loyalty will not be forgotten either.

If he gets caught and something happens to him, his family will always be protected by me.

When I'm done speaking, I signal for him to talk.

"Yes."

"Are there any questions?" I ask, since this is a lot to take in.

"I trust you, Boss."

"I promise you, if anything—"

"I know," he says with a smile. I stand and shake his hand. Marco has been with me for a long time. Before me, he was with my father. He's been out of most of the business these days, but from what Lorenzo told me, his family has been

struggling without the extra money working more for me would have brought in.

With that done, I leave my men and go in search of Viviana. After looking in all the rooms on the main floor, I find her in our bedroom.

The word “our” coming so naturally, it makes my feet stop.

You’re getting too comfortable, Matteo.

She’s in the corner, sitting in front of a vanity that my staff moved into the room for her. She’s placing lipstick on.

“Hi,” she says to me. She doesn’t turn around. Instead, she talks to me through the mirror.

I walk closer until I’m standing behind her and then lean down and place a kiss on her forehead. “Are you ready to go to dinner?”

“Go? Are we leaving?”

Tonight, I have decided to take us to Marco’s restaurant to check out the space.

With Viviana in tow, we head out. This time, to stay under the radar, we go out the back drive.

I can see that Viviana is confused. She’s peering out the window in the back seat. Her whole body isn’t turned, just her face, but as we drive out of the secret back gate, she looks in my direction.

“It’s our secret way out.”

“I can see that, but why do we need to go out this way?” Sometimes, I forget that Viviana isn’t like any other woman I have ever met. She’s well-versed in a public life. And although she probably understands going out the back door because of her father, I can understand why she seems worried.

“Did something happen that I don’t know about?”

I debate whether I should tell her the truth now or if I should wait until another time. I opt to wait. A small part of me still wonders if I can trust her.

“No. Nothing happened. But we can’t be too safe. My cousin has been quiet, but I wouldn’t put it past him to have someone watching the gates. Normally, I wouldn’t care, but since I have you with me, I’d prefer to be more careful.”

Viviana must like my answer because she turns her body fully toward me, unbuckles her seat belt, and scoots over. Now sitting in the middle seat, she refastens and then lays her head on my shoulder.

“So, we’re going to dinner?” she asks.

“We are.”

“Where’re we going?”

I can either tell her or not tell her, but for some reason, toying with her doesn’t hold merit. Maybe it’s because I know she is a dog with a bone when she wants information.

“I have an employee. I’m not sure if you met him. His name is Marco, and his family owns a restaurant. It’s quite good, and I wanted to take you there.”

“That sounds nice.” For the rest of the trip, we don’t speak of anything important. She asks me little questions, not about anything life-changing, and I ask her little questions back. By the time we reach the parking lot, I found out that while living in the city, she volunteered what little spare time she had walking the dogs at a shelter and teaching children how to read.

My wife is a saint. I don’t deserve her, but fuck if I won’t try to keep her.

The car stops, and I swing the door open, reaching my hand out to help her from the car. Marco’s restaurant is the perfect location from the outside. It’s off the beaten path, set higher on a hill but with a view of the water.

I’m surprised I’ve never been here before. It’s quiet and quaint, and knowing it has the cellar gives it a bonus.

No one would think of this place, and since it’s close to the ocean, it’s not a far drive from the port. The less time in transit, the better.

Holding Viviana's hand, I lead us into the restaurant. The sun is starting to set in the distance, and when Viviana steps inside, the view from the windows makes her gasp. I had no idea it would be like this, but now seeing it, I can see why she's staring at me with stars in her eyes.

This place is romantic as fuck. The restaurant is relatively empty. There are a few tables in which people sit. Marco is there to greet us. He leads us to a table right by the large bay window that overlooks the water.

There's a scattering of tea lights already lit. The table is set, and it looks as though I had pre-planned this. I'm going to have to throw in some extra money to thank him.

"Marco, this is my wife, Viviana. Viviana, this is Marco."

I introduce them. Marco reaches his hand out and takes Viviana's small one in his. He places one kiss on the top of her hand. If he wasn't so old, old enough to be my father's age, I would probably kick his teeth in for touching my wife, but I can tell there's no desire there, just respect.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Viviana." His thick Italian accent rolls her name off his tongue like pearls.

She smiles warmly at him. "The pleasure is all mine."

We take our seats, our chairs sitting beside each other. As soon as we are no longer standing, I place my hand on her leg. She's staring out the window, enjoying the view.

"This place is perfect."

"Well, it's the least I can do for leaving you home alone so much."

"About that ..." She sounds ... different. There's an edge to her voice.

"About what?"

"I'm bored." She pouts. "Without you there to distract me, I need something to do."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

“Yes. I don’t think getting a job in the city right now is that doable, but maybe we can find something that will make you happy for the time being.”

“Such as?” Her brow furrows.

“You can help Giana.”

“Help her with what?”

“The family runs many different operations.”

“I don’t think—”

“Not those kinds of operations. Nothing with that part of the business. One of the things that Giana works on is our charity work.”

“You do charity?”

“Of course, I do charity. What kind of man do you think I am? Strike that, don’t answer.”

Viviana reaches across the table and takes my hand in hers.

“I think you are a good man. I think to most people you pretend to be different, but I see you. You aren’t the villain most people say you are.”

“While I appreciate the sentiment, I’m every bit the monster they say I am.”

Her head tilts to the side as if she’s assessing what I’ve said, but instead of appearing shocked or scared, she looks at me with adoring eyes. Eyes that make me think I can tell her everything. Show her everything. Talk to her about everything.

“What is it?” she asks, and it seems she can read me more than I knew. “There’s something you aren’t saying.”

“I need your help.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t know what I’m asking yet.”

“I don’t care. The answer is still okay.”

“I need your help taking down your father.”

There, I've said it. The gauntlet has been thrown, so now to see how she responds.

“Whatever you need, Matteo.” She leans forward, placing her lips on mine. “I'm yours.”

Viviana

I'M TAKEN ABACK BY HIS WORDS, BUT MOST OF ALL, I'M shocked by how willingly I offer to help him.

He hasn't even told me what anything entails, but I don't even care.

I'm all in.

I'll do anything for Matteo.

The thought is eye-opening to me.

I'm not sure when it happened, but somewhere in the last two months, I began to feel a connection to him. A loyalty to him that I've never felt for anyone else. Of course, I feel a loyalty to Julia, but this is different. This feels different.

I'm not ready to put a word to how this feels. I'm still too scared to admit that what is going on here is more than I ever thought would, and I'm too worried something will go wrong.

“Are you sure? Because once you agree, I'm going to start telling you things that I probably shouldn't, and if you ever go against me—”

I lift my hand, knowing full well there's a threat coming next. I would never go against him. He doesn't need to tell me he will kill me because regardless, even if that's the consequence, I wouldn't do it.

“I won’t.”

“I know you won’t, which is why I’m telling you this.”

“Do you think we should wait until we’re home?”

“There aren’t many details. When we have more details, we’ll talk about it at home. For now, I want you to speak to your father. I want you to make him think that you are agreeing with his plan. I want you to feed him false information.”

His plan is not that different than my original plan. Originally, I had hoped to use Matteo as a means of taking down my father, and now he is offering me the same.

I lean closer to him.

“When I first agreed to marry you,” I say, “I was hoping you could help me with my problem.”

“And what problem is that, per se?”

“Like you, my problem is my father.”

At the mention of my father, Matteo’s jaw tightens. “I’m listening.”

“He’s able to control me.”

“Okay.”

“And I don’t want him to anymore.”

He stares at me for a minute before his features soften. “Do you want to tell me so I can help you ...?”

Tears start to fill my eyes. But I refuse to ruin our night.

“Not today.”

He nods in agreement.

“Soon, though,” I say.

“Tell me about what you like to read.”

“Besides fairy tales?”

Matteo laughs. “Besides them.” He smiles at me. “Do you like any other genres?”

“I like all of them. You have to understand that growing up in the family that I grew up in, that’s all I had.”

“Tell me about your family.”

“My mother has always been the woman you met, a sad and lonely woman chasing love, who drank too much. My father has resented me since the day I was born.”

“Why do you say that?”

“As I told you once before, I don’t think he ever wanted me. He knew politically, though, for his aspirations, he had to be a family man. And in public, he’s the perfect husband, the perfect family man, but when the doors close, he’s anything but.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Physically?”

He nods.

“Not really. Emotionally ... yes.”

“What did he do?”

“Emotional blackmail. Everything had a price. Some more steep than others.”

Matteo leans forward and swipes away a lone tear that must have slipped out.

“So remember when I told you how my parents never got me a puppy ...”

“Yeah.”

“There was more to the story. I didn’t tell you all of it.”

“You can tell me now.”

“One year, after I had stopped dreaming and hoping for a dog, my mother bought a puppy for me. I was supposed to be well behaved all the time, but it turns out that was hard for me to do. Apparently it was hard for me to not talk back and act like a proper young lady.”

Matteo laughs. “I never realized,” he deadpans, and I roll my eyes.

“Well, I embarrassed him. And when I came home, the price was obvious.”

“What happened?”

“He gave the puppy back to the dog shelter.”

“That’s awful.”

“It was, but I was happy that the puppy wasn’t hurt. Later, I found out my nanny, Ana, heard what happened and had a friend of hers adopt the puppy. Ana used to bring me pictures.”

Another tear falls, but this wasn’t for the dog. This one is for Ana.

“Look at me. I’m a mess. Here you are, taking me to this amazing restaurant, and I’m ruining it. Quick, tell me something, anything, so I take my mind off the past.”

“This place used to be used during Prohibition to store bootleg booze,” he says, gesturing around the restaurant. The bottom floor is an old cellar.”

I lean forward in my chair, elbows on the table. “That’s so cool.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I’d love to see it.”

“After dinner.”

I nod, excited about the prospect of seeing something like that.

We never order. Instead, Marco tells us he will bring us all the house specials. And like the other places we have visited, Matteo never has to pay.

When the food is done, Matteo stands and takes my hand in his. Together, we make the descent to the hidden basement.

It’s the coolest thing I have ever seen. It’s like every old movie, where there is a lever in the closet that opens to a secret room.

It’s amazing.

They still store the liquor in there because of the temperature.

I feel like I'm transported back in time.

When we are finally ready to leave, I throw my arms around him.

"Thank you."

He smiles down at me as I pull back.

"You never need to thank me, Viviana."

"It doesn't matter that I don't need to. I want to."

And with that last statement, he pulls me close and kisses me firmly, fiercely, and like he will never let me go.

A FEW WEEKS HAVE PASSED.

They've been amazing.

Matteo showed me his library, and although it's not as big and beautiful as the New York Public Library, it's still larger than anything I could have ever hoped for.

It hasn't been touched in years. That much is obvious from the dust collection on the top shelves.

I need a ladder to even see the books up on some of the shelves.

Which is what I'm doing now. I'm on the top rung of one, looking to see what classic novel I'll read as I wait for Julia to arrive.

"Hey." I hear from behind me. I carefully turn my head over my shoulder at the sound of her voice.

"You're here."

"Well, you did send a car to get me."

I giggle at that. It was a pretty silly statement since she's right. Roberto did pick her up today to bring her here to spend

time with me.

“Give me one minute. I’ll be right down.”

I take the book I found out of the wall and then carefully climb back down the rungs until I’m back on solid ground.

“What do you have there?” Julia asks as I step off the ladder and cross the space until I’m standing in front of her in the center of the room.

I lift the book up, turning it in her direction so that she can see the cover.

“*Jane Eyre*.”

“Interesting choice.”

I look from her to the weathered book. Mr. Rochester is a little like Matteo when I first got here, but the more I stare at it, the more I think of Ana, Julia’s mom.

A shiver runs up my back.

I’m quick to put the book down on the small table. Needing to get it as far away from me now that I have made a connection.

It’s stupid, really.

There are no similarities.

Other than Ana was a modern-day governess.

“What do you want to do today?” I ask her.

“We can choose?”

“Of course, we can choose.”

“Oh, and here I thought we were locked away in a castle. What book would that be?” She chides, clearly making fun of my love of literature and the situation I’m in.

There’s a clip to her voice, one that I’ve never heard before.

I wonder what that’s about. Recently, I’ve noticed a different side of her. Since she’s here, it’s obviously not about me. I wonder what’s going on in her life.

“Well, of course not, we would just need to take one of the drivers.”

“Where would we go?”

“Well, there’s this great restaurant Matteo and I have been going to on the water. It used to be like a speakeasy, I think. Maybe we can go there. Or we can sit here and talk. Francesca can bring us lunch.”

“Let’s stay here.”

“Oh, okay.”

I take a seat and gesture for her to join me. “What’s new? I feel like something is going on with you.”

“Nothing really. I’m still looking for a job,” she says. Her brother works for my father, and she can too, but she knows how I feel about him. The idea of that makes me sick.

“I think I will work at the governor’s office.”

I try to school my features and not show how much I hate her life being dictated by my father.

“Do you think that’s smart?”

“Well, there isn’t anyone hiring, plus we’re already so dependent on him.” Her voice is clipped, and there it is.

The unspoken topic neither of us broaches.

The accident that changed all our lives twelve years ago.

The accident that took Ana from me and her mom from her.

“You don’t need to work for him.”

She shakes her head. “The experience and jobs on our résumés are worth it for us.”

Her words are clear. She and her twin brother don’t have the same prospects as I did in life.

She doesn’t realize her imagination is better than the truth.

I never had it. My father’s blackmail, never allowing me the freedom.

A deal made with the devil.

She thinks the grass is greener. She thinks all doors are open to me. She doesn't realize that for her to have the doors open, mine must be shut.

I'm not sure what my father's angle is. Why he's hired both of Ana's children. It's almost as if it's another thing to hang over my head. Another way to control me.

It would've worked too. Especially had I never met Matteo.

But when I come clean to him, when I tell him everything, every sordid detail, he will help me figure out a plan.

I know he will.

There's no other way out for them or for me unless he does.

"Please don't do anything rash. I know it sounds like a dream job, but working for my father, it's never a good idea."

"Some of us don't have the luxury of anything else."

"I-I ..."

"If the bills are to be paid ..."

"Don't worry about that. The bills will be paid."

"And how would you know? You're not there anymore to know."

"Julia." I cross the space and sit on the same couch as her. I grab her hand. "I promise, I will not let anything bad happen."

She stares at me, but her gaze, although on me, appears vacant like she doesn't see me. Like she is not even there.

It takes a second, but eventually, she shakes her head and snaps out of it.

She stands from the couch and gestures toward the door.

"Let's get something to eat. I am famished."

Even though I'm the farthest thing from hungry, I welcome the idea of getting out of this room and away from this conversation.

Standing, I walk past her, then open the shut door and gesture for her to step out.

Once we are both out of the room, I shut the door.

Enclosing Mr. Rochester, Jane, and the ghosts in the room.

Matteo

WE HAVE FALLEN INTO A ROUTINE.

A quite pleasant one at that.

I work during the days, and at night, I indulge in my wife.

Twice a week, we go to Marco's.

I like to go to make sure everything is in place for the shipment. When we arrive, they unpack it, and by the time we leave, it's done.

Tonight.

"You really love Marco's," she says as she buttons up her blouse and then sits in front of her vanity to apply her makeup.

I nod my head, but from her reflection in the mirror, I can see a line on her brow form.

"What is that look for?"

"What look?"

She places her makeup brush down and swivels in her chair to face me.

"Believe it or not, Matteo, I know we've only been married a short time, but I've gotten to know you, and I can tell when you are withholding something from me. What is it?"

“Oh ... you wanna do this? Do you want to exchange secrets?”

“What does that mean?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“I really don’t,” she mumbles.

“Yes, you do, but very well, I’ll go first. I told you about my meeting with the governor.”

“New York.”

“Yes.”

“He wanted me to store my shipment someplace else.”

“And ...?”

“The Prohibition room.” It’s like a light bulb goes off in her pretty little head. “That’s why we went.” My lip turns up. “Isn’t it perfect?”

“I never would have guessed.”

“That’s what makes it perfect.” I smile broadly.

“And we always drive out the back gate.”

Understanding present now.

“Your turn.”

Her eyes go wide. “Do I have to?” I arch my brow. “My story isn’t as fun as yours. If I tell you before dinner ...”

She doesn’t want to ruin the night.

“You promise to tell me all your secrets after?”

“As soon as we get home.”

“Okay. You’re off the hook.” I lean in and kiss her mouth. “For now.”

She drops her head back down, turns in her chair, and goes back to her makeup.

I’m at the mirror by my sink when her phone rings.

I look over at her in question. She turns to face me.

“Julia,” she mouths.

“Hello.” I hear her say as I go about getting ready.

“Yeah. We’re just getting ready.”

It’s quiet.

“Yep. Dinner again.”

Quiet. Julia must be speaking.

“Yes. Twice a week like an old married couple. Always the same.” She laughs. “Matteo is a creature of habit, I guess.”

“Umm. Okay, I’ll talk to you later.”

I walk back up to her. “Everything good?”

“Yeah, she had to go. She’s kind of acting weird. I wonder if she’s mad at me again.” She moves to nibble her lip, but I shake my head at her, stepping closer, closing the space. “Creature of habit?”

“Well, you are.”

I kick open her legs and then drop to the floor in front of her.

“Does this feel like a creature of habit?”

My tongue juts out and swipes at her skin.

“Yes.”

I flatten my tongue and lick her faster. “How about now?” I mumble against her flesh.

“Yep.” I thrust a finger inside her, then two. I pull away, looking up at her as I fuck her with my hand.

“Still boring?”

“Yes.”

“That’s it, you asked for it.” I stand, pulling her with me, and then I move her until she’s in front of my sink and thrust her to lean against the counter.

“Place your hands down,” I order as I place my hand on her back, pushing her down for a better angle. Her body now

bends slightly at the waist, and I bracket my hands around her waist to brace her.

I remove my right hand and thrust it between her thighs.

“Do you want me to fuck you against this sink?” I then dip my finger inside her. Her inner walls clench around me.

“Mmm, is that what you want, wife?” I continue to work my finger in and out, curling them up to hit the sweet spot inside. She starts to quake, and that’s when I finally pull my hand away.

Not wasting another minute, I place myself at her entrance, then start to tease her by dipping just the tip inside. She moans in protest, so I answer her by slamming inside, seating myself deep in her core. Her walls contract instantly. She’s already close to coming. Slowly, very slowly, I pull back out ... then slam back in.

I can feel her, and the feeling is exquisite. The way her body tightens around me has me rushing to release too.

Once she does, she goes limp against my chest. After I come inside her, I kiss her neck, coming down from my own arousal, and then finally pull out from the warmth of her body.

“Am I still a creature of habit?”

“Debatable.”

“For that, I’ll punish you later.”

“Promises, promises.”

I fix myself and then zip up my pants.

“I’ll be downstairs,” I say, as I walk out the door and down the hallway.

When I’m in the foyer, I see Roberto walking my way.

“Everything scheduled.”

“Yes. We are good to go.”

“They will be there for the delivery tonight as planned.”

“Good. When are you going?”

“Any minute.” I hear the sound of her shoes. “Speak of the devil.”

“I’m ready,” Viviana says.

“I see you look gorgeous as always.”

“Front or back?” Roberto’s words pull me back from gawking at my wife openly.

“Either is fine,” I tell him. “The route is secure. We’re going to a restaurant. They already dropped off, right?”

Roberto’s eyes go wide, but then he nods.

I haven’t told him I told Viviana, but now I guess he knows. I walk the few steps to the stairs and take Viviana’s hand in mine, and then I lift it to my mouth, touching my lips to her soft skin.

“Let’s go.”

Roberto opens the front door and leads us to the car we often travel in. Then, with my wife tucked in next to me, we head out for dinner.

As we drive, I stare at my wife, wondering how we got here. How in such a short time, I have grown to care for her.

I pepper kisses on her forehead and whisper all the dirty things I plan to do the moment we are back home. She giggles and smiles, making me wish we didn’t have to go anywhere at all tonight, but we do, and when we go home, we’re supposed to talk. My plans of seducing my wife again might have to wait.

Dinner, as always, is pleasant. We laugh and tell stories of funny things that have happened to us in the past. I notice that most of her stories are from when she’s a girl. When I ask her about her teenage years, Viviana’s mood changes, and she grows more somber. I change the topic back to small talk until it’s time to head home.

On the way home, I notice the closer we get, the worse her mood is.

I know it's because she has to tell me all about her past. Tonight, she will unravel the mystery I have been trying to pull apart from the first time I saw her.

A well-guarded secret I'm still shocked I haven't figured out.

We pull up to the drive. After the car is thrown in park, I step out, and as usual, I open the door wider and take her hand to help her out. She's nibbling her lip.

I'm about to speak when the door flies open, and a frantic Lorenzo storms out. As soon as I see him, my hand drops from hers.

Roberto moves into position too.

"We were hit. Marco's was hit."

The words slash through the air, my brain spinning, as the only conclusion falls over me. It hits Roberto at the same time because he's pulling out the gun and aiming it at my wife's head. I move around, facing her.

She betrayed me.

"It was all a ruse," I spit. "The whole sob story a big fucking ruse." I pounce, pushing her up against the car. Locking her in with a gun to her head...

"I-I didn't do it."

"Like fuck you didn't. You're the only one who knew. No one else knows. I fucking *trusted* you."

"Matteo! Please. I wouldn't. I didn't. I love you!"

I laugh in her face. "Love. You love me?"

With love like that, who needs enemies?

Tears rush out of her eyes. I'll hand it to her. She's a great actress. She acts almost as good as she fucks.

"I didn't do this."

"You want me to believe that on the same day I tell you what we're holding, you didn't tip off your dad?"

"I-I didn't. Please. Please, you have to believe me."

I spin the barrel. A little Russian roulette.

“Matteo—” Luka cuts in.

“Shut the fuck up!” I roar. “Now back to you, *Princess*. A bullet to your brain here, or do I drop you on your father’s step like the trash that you are?”

I spin the cylinder

Pressing the barrel to her skull.

“Anything to say, wife?”

“You have to believe me. We went out the front. They could have followed us ...”

“If that was the case, they would have tried to kill me. But isn’t it convenient they only did it once you were safe?” I watch as the tears fall from her eyes. I feel nothing toward her. Only betrayal. “Nothing more to say? Very well.” She sobs uncomfortably. Her eye makeup is streaking down her face in dark rivulets.

The same kind of tears that in the past would hurt me to see, but the small part of me that was starting to feel has turned to stone.

The betrayal too much.

I pull the trigger.

Viviana

TIME STANDS STILL AS I HEAR THE BARREL SPIN, THEN THE trigger is pulled.

Nothing.

Just a click.

I'm alive.

Even if only barely. My sobs come faster now. Tears streaming down my face.

What happens now? Will he pull the trigger again? Isn't that the game?

My body trembles.

When he pulled the trigger, I was sure I would die. Instead, my body fell to the ground because my legs are no longer able to hold me up.

"Please—"

"Stop speaking," he hisses through clenched teeth. He steps to the side, leaving me lying on the gravel.

"Get her in the car," he orders his men.

"No. You have to believe me."

He steps closer. The tip of his shiny black shoe is dangerously close to my face. "Do you have a death wish?" he

spits out. Then he's stepping back. I have never seen hate before like the way he hates me.

"Please," I whisper through sobs, but it's too late. He's no longer looking at me. He's stalking back to the house. Rough hands grab my arms, and before I can object, I'm being lifted.

Then the doors open, and I'm thrown into the back seat of the car. I move to get out, but I'm stopped.

"Be happy you're not in the trunk. Actually, be happy you're not dead." I don't speak, but I nod. I should be dead. By all intents and purposes, that's what Matteo said he would do to me.

He thinks I'm a traitor. I'm not. We were foolish not to take precautions. It's obvious they followed us.

"We should just kill her," one of his men says to Roberto.

"Boss said to take her back." Take her back? Back to where? It feels like a red-hot poker is being thrust into my chest where my heart should be. However, my heart was already broken before I heard I was being dropped off at my father's. So instead, the stabbing sensation intensifies the closer we get.

The trip feels like it takes an eternity. With every turn, with every mile, I beg for them to listen to me. I cry for them to stop if they hear me, which I know they do, but they make no gestures to show me. Instead, the car eats up the distance the way a beast feasts off a decaying body.

When the car pulls to a stop in front of my father's house, the door is thrown open, and I'm thrust out and onto the driveway.

I hit the ground with a thud. A lone tear drifts down my cheek, like the first raindrop to fall before an impending storm.

There is no question the sky will open. It's just a matter of when.

I try to hold them back. With my head held high, I walk toward the house.

I would go anywhere else if I could, but this is the only place for me now. If I want to keep my loved ones safe, I have no other choice but to stay here and play by my father's rules again. I will have to endure living here again.

That's why Matteo picked this as my punishment.

Matteo knows this is the most painful place for me.

My own personal hell.

He wants me dead.

This is the equivalent.

My father won't rest until I suffer for my insolence.

Well played, husband.

I rub the wet skin and will no more to fall. It's bad enough I'm here. I won't let these people see me fall.

Below my pants, I'm sure my legs are cut from falling to the ground.

With each step I take, my legs scream, but I plaster on a large, fake smile.

Do not show them pain.

My smile is sharp enough to cut glass.

The car skids off, kicking up gravel. The air thick with the smell of burning rubber.

I stand tall and proud. With my shoulders pulled back, I walk with purpose to the giant,

mahogany door.

The door swings open, and my father is standing at the threshold. He looks pleased with himself.

"That didn't take long. I see he grew bored of you already." I refuse to let him see me suffer, so I plaster on a fake smile.

"We had a fight, and since I gave up my apartment, I decided to come here instead. There's nothing to gloat about. I'm sure everything will be back to normal by tomorrow,"

I lie. There is no way I'll fall apart in front of him.

"I doubt that. But believe what you want. I would have preferred you keep him on the hook a little longer, but I'm sure we can find another, more useful, way to use you. Maybe Salvatore will take his cousin's sloppy seconds."

"Why do you hate me so?"

He looks me dead in the eyes. "I don't hate you. You just hold no purpose, and without a purpose, you might as well be dead."

"I'm your daughter."

"Which is why I need you alive, but I'll be damned if your little rebellious act has me losing my chances of something bigger. You will be useful to me." His words leave me feeling cold and empty. I walk past him into the foyer.

I'm not sure where my mother is, but I have to assume she's somewhere with a martini glass in hand. I head up the stairs and into the old room where I used to live before moving to the city for college.

Once I'm in the safety of my room, I fall apart. My soul is bleeding out of my body in warm streams of tears. This is a pain I have never felt before. What I said to Matteo is true. I did fall in love with him.

Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with the villain. And like all evil things, he took me apart piece by piece and then crushed what was left.

He ruined me.

I will never be the same.

Matteo

“YOU LET HER LIVE,” LORENZO BLURTS, AS SHOCKED AS I AM, stepping into my office.

“I didn’t let her do anything. A game of Russian roulette allowed her to breathe air for another day.”

“And who really knows for how long? I’m sure her father is still furious with her for going against his original plan. I’m sure by the end of the week, she will be sold off to Salvatore. Maybe even put on his chopping block.”

Despite my anger at her betrayal, his words cause my fist to clench. I hadn’t thought of that. I might want to kill my wife, but that life, a life of slavery, is not what I want for her.

We are both quiet for a minute, and then Lorenzo takes a seat across from me.

“Why did you let her go?” His voice dips. He’s asking me a question I don’t want to answer.

He’s asking me if I fell for my wife.

Instead of answering, I reach my hand across my desk and grab the glass decanter sitting there. Beside it are empty tumblers.

“Care to drink with me?” When he nods his head, I pour us both a drink. I slide his to him, and I lift mine and take a swig.

“I am not in love with Viviana,” I answer, but I can’t deny there is a weird feeling inside me. It feels as though I am empty. It’s a feeling I’ve never felt before, not even when my parents died. But I don’t say that to him. Instead, I drink another sip. This time when I place it on the table, the liquid sloshes against the glass.

“Killing her would’ve been too easy, and it wouldn’t have helped our cause,” I finally say.

“So, then you do have a reason for keeping her alive?” he asks.

“Her phone is still tapped. Her purse still bugged.”

“You plan to use her.”

“It only seems fair.”

“And then if she’s not helpful. What if her father doesn’t fall into the trap?”

“Well then, maybe we get lucky, and she will end up in Salvatore’s hands after all.”

“And you will be okay knowing what he will most likely do to her?”

“Yes,” I say, but the word feels bitter on my tongue. Chalky. Like dust is settling on it, and I want to cough it up.

“Boss, you’ve never lied to me before. You don’t have to now.”

I’m at a loss of what to say. Is that what she did to me? Do I feel something for her? Did I care? Is that why my words are hollow? Is that why the idea of my cousin having her feels like I’m chewing shards of glass?

“I don’t love her,” I say again, but this time, it sounds like a lie even to me. He nods and lifts his own drink, sitting then in silence. When both our glasses are finished, I set mine on the table and push away to stand.

“Make sure a man is listening to everything going on in that house. I don’t want anything to go over without me knowing. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

I move across the room, exiting and leaving Lorenzo alone. I make my way up the stairs, down the hall, and when I swing the door open, I’m hit with the knowledge that she really is gone. I know she betrayed me. I was prepared for this, but how wrong I was. I wasn’t prepared. I am not prepared. Not for the way the room feels empty.

Or how quiet it is. Not for the lingering smell of her perfume in the air. Or the way her clothes still hang in my closet. It doesn’t matter because I’m going to have to be okay with it. Just like I’m going to have to be okay with however the future plays out. There’s a good chance she’ll end up dead, or worse, but she betrayed me. Only in the quiet of my own room can I admit that yes, my wife had gotten under my skin. It doesn’t matter, though. Her fate is sealed.

The next day, I find myself in my surveillance room, curious to see what the night had in store for my dear wife.

“Any phone calls? Anything of importance?”

“No. Nothing.”

“And the bug in the bag, what was the audio?” My men look at me but don’t speak.

“Tell me.”

“She was crying. She held her own as her father chastised her, but then when the room went silent, she cried. Probably after he left her alone.”

Hearing she cried should make me feel better, but it doesn’t.

We don’t know why she cried. Maybe because her father once again has her under his thumb, which is the truth. We always knew he did. We just didn’t know the interesting thing she was going to tell me the night she decided to betray me. I turn back to Lorenzo.

“You need to find out now what her secret is.”

“Don’t you think our resources are better served by finding your cousin?”

He's right, it is, but I need to know anyway. A small part of me thinks that's the reason she ultimately decided to betray me. Whatever her father is holding over her is the key.

"Do both," I say, and then turn and storm out of the room.

Leaving my men frantically working in my wake.

Viviana

MY EYES ARE SWOLLEN WHEN I WAKE UP. RED AND BLOTCHY, the obvious signs of a night spent crying myself to sleep. It didn't come for a long time. Not until approximately four in the morning, and when I did finally fall into a slumber, it was restless.

Nightmares plagued me.

Over and over again, I saw Matteo standing above me.

Over and over again, he pulled the trigger.

Each time I woke up, I jolted out of bed with tears pouring down my face. I need to talk to him. I need to tell him I didn't betray him.

But the chances of that ever happening are few and far between. One thing I know is, Matteo doesn't forgive.

He won't hear what I have to say, and knowing my father, by the time Matteo has calmed down enough to speak to me, I'll be long gone.

I'm sure he's planning my annulment right now. I'm sure his lawyers are already here drawing up the papers. I'm sure Salvatore is waiting for me.

Salvatore, a man even Matteo says I should fear.

How can my father sell himself to this man? I stand from my bed and make my way over to the dresser, where I threw my bag, grab my phone, then I start searching to see if I have any missed phone calls.

Not that I would think Matteo would call me, but still I check, I hope, I dream, and then like expected, I'm disappointed. No, that's not a strong enough word.

I'm crushed.

A shaky, audible sigh escapes my mouth as I make my way into the bathroom that's attached to my room.

What's staring back at me is frightening.

My dark hair, normally straight, is wavy from the wetness of my tears. My eyes, as I suspected, are bloodshot and puffy. My nose looks swollen, and I know my lip has dried, caked-on blood from where I bit myself.

I turn around and turn the shower water on, then when steam billows around me, I strip off my clothes. I'm still in the same clothes I wore yesterday. Once naked, I step under the scalding water. My skin burns, but I welcome the pain. Everything hurts my skin, but it serves me right.

I never should've fallen in love with him. I never should've trusted him with my heart because now, he's crushed it. Part of me wants to figure it out, figure out a plan, but another part, a much larger part, wants to hide in my bed for the next three weeks.

It takes me a few more minutes to wash out the soap in my hair, and then I throw a towel around myself, get back into bed, and go to sleep.

DAYS PASS.

I spend them doing exactly the same thing every day—I sleep, I wake, I eat, and occasionally, I shower. I haven't heard from Matteo.

I don't have the strength to speak to Julia. I don't want her to say I told you so.

I don't want her to say anything. I avoid my mother. I avoid my father. I walk around the house like a zombie, but I don't speak to anyone.

I see Julia's brother staring at me.

He gives me a nasty look. One that says he's happy I'm down on my luck.

There was a time long ago when we were friends, but ever since he started to work for my father, it's like he hates me.

Maybe he never liked me.

I guess that's what happens when you live in the basement of a house. You resent the woman who lives on top. Regardless of the things I've done to help provide for him, he still hates me. I always thought because of my friendship with Julia, he wouldn't, but he resents me even more for that.

Sometimes, I wonder if he knows the truth about that night, and maybe that's why, but then I remember the only people who know the truth are my father and myself.

Today, I venture downstairs. I can hear my father's voice bellowing through the air, screaming at God knows who. I keep walking, and this time Julia's brother, Jonathan, doesn't even pretend to ignore me.

"You look like shit," he says, and I think he expects me to say something, to argue, to do anything, but I don't. I'm too tired to do that, so I walk past him into the kitchen.

I haven't eaten anything today. My stomach growls at the lack of food I've consumed. It's been so long, I'm sure it has shrunk, so a banana is all I need.

When I take it and walk out of the room, I bump into my father. "You're out of bed."

"I am."

"Good, it's about time."

"Time for what?"

“Time for you to meet Salvatore.”

“Why would I do that?” I’m confused.

“Because the plan will go on as previously planned. I will secure the support of Salvatore. You will play the part you were always meant to play.” I wasn’t wrong. I just thought I had more time. But I guess I was wrong.

My shoulders flop forward.

“Get changed and be presentable. He will be here shortly.” I think that this could have been my chance. I could have told Matteo about this. I rush to my room and call him. He sends me to voicemail.

Me: Please answer me. He’s coming here.

Matteo: As if I would ever fall for your trap again. Be happy I didn’t put a bullet in your head.

I try to call him again, but this time my call doesn’t go through. I’m truly alone. With no help coming from Matteo, I have no choice. I have to brave this by myself.

I fix my hair and pull out an old outfit from the closet, then I grab my purse. Who knows if we are going somewhere. Maybe I’ll get the opportunity to kill him myself, but I highly doubt it.

I walk down the stairs and find my father in his office. In the corner of the room is Salvatore Amante. His eyes are trained on me, focused intensely. He crosses the distance. Eating up the space, like a hungry carnivore in a prairie of sheep.

“Leave us,” he says to my father, and I’m instantly scared. I take a step back. My back hits the now closed door. He steps closer. His large body is looming over me. I look around the room, looking for a way to escape. I could use the door behind me. But the way his arms block me in, I’m not sure if I’d be able to.

“I see why my cousin stole you from me.”

He leans down, his face too close to mine. I can feel his breath against my cheek. I move to turn, but his hand lifts and

grips my jaw.

“Let me go,” I say.

“No. I don’t think I will.” His sardonic smile makes a chill run down my spine. He looks scary, and for the first time, I’m genuinely afraid.

I was never this scared of Matteo.

His grip on my jaw is tight, but it loosens as it slides down my neck.

“From what I hear, my cousin was quite fond of you. I can see the appeal,” he says as he continues to trail his touch down the column of my neck.

“Please don’t touch me.”

He licks his lips, and the fear inside me multiplies. Will my father really let him do this to me? Will he let him hurt me?

As if reading my mind, he smirks but lets go.

“Pity. I promised your father I wouldn’t touch you, not until I kill my cousin and marry you. Apparently, he doesn’t take me at my word that I will help him.”

“Would you?”

He smiles again, the words he doesn’t say as clear as day ... no.

“Why me? Why am I important to this deal?”

“Other than the obvious, the deal with your father for full control of every port in New York and New Jersey?”

“Yes.”

“Because Matteo took you, because he fell for you, and because of that”—his hand touches me again—“I will enjoy myself immensely.”

“He left me. He doesn’t care for me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. If he didn’t, you’d already be dead.”

His words spark the little bit of strength I have, and I push him off me.

“I said, don’t touch me.”

He laughs then, a sadistic laugh, his eyes glinting with the depth of evil I have never seen before.

“I will enjoy breaking you. And once I do that, I’ll give you to my men.”

“My father—”

“You will still be alive. You’ll still be the woman on my arm. I’ll make sure all your bruises can’t be seen.” I smack him against his face, and he just laughs. “Run away, little girl. I enjoy the chase.”

And that is exactly what I do.

I run.

Matteo

WAR IS IN THE AIR.

All my men and I are staying in the city compound. It makes more sense. Salvatore doesn't know of its existence. It however hasn't been as easy to make pick-ups.

Which isn't good for business.

They have blown up all the old warehouses I have kept. The original ones that date back to my father's time. Thankfully, they haven't found the one we currently use.

But we still need to make drops.

My men are anxious. Fuck, at this point, so am I.

There has been no word from any of the bugs on Viviana. It's like she's a ghost.

She doesn't try to call me again. Not that her call will come through if she tried, but still. She doesn't even try to call her friend. As for the bug on her bag, she hasn't gone anywhere at all. Even the GPS tracker shows she hasn't left the mansion in all the time she has been there.

The phone rings in the surveillance room. Roberto takes the call. I hear him speaking, but I don't make out very much. Then he hangs up.

"We were right."

“About?”

“Marino is going after his original plan,” he clarifies.

I arch my brow.

“Salvatore was at the house a few days ago.”

My fist hits the table. “Why am I only finding out about this now?”

But you did know. She told you. She warned you he would be there.

“Eddie couldn’t get the word out to us.”

“And Viviana?” My mouth dries as I say her name. “Is she —” I stop myself. What do I want to say: okay, hurt, dead? Fuck. I don’t even know how I feel about all the options.

“Eddie says Salvatore was alone with her.” My fist clenches. “But it wasn’t for long, and he didn’t hear anything.”

It doesn’t make me feel good, regardless. Who knows what happened behind a closed door?

“Was she carrying her bag?” I ask, and Tony turns to me.

“He didn’t say, but I can check the bug.”

The room around us goes quiet as everyone waits.

Then her voice pierces through the air. Her scared voice.

It feels like I’m being stabbed. The men around me are tense. Luka’s jaw locked. Hearing her makes me remember, and I don’t want to remember.

The more she talks, the harder it gets to listen, but it’s my cousin’s words that have my fist clenching, and my stomach feels like there are boulders inside me.

“Turn it off.”

I can’t hear any more.

Why do you fucking care? She’s a traitor. Regardless of what I want to feel, the sound of her voice, the way she begged, pleaded, cried ... I shake my head to myself. No.

She's the one who ratted me out. This was all a ploy. But she tried to tell you that Salvatore would be there. You could've been set up. It most probably was a setup. But wouldn't Eddie have known if it was and told us about it? Especially now, after the fact, that we didn't fall for it.

A sinking feeling barrels its way inside me. Maybe I didn't look at this right.

No.

I refuse to believe that. The timing was too perfect.

"What do you want to do?" Lorenzo asks.

He wants to know if I want to take back my wife.

"What do you think?" I ask. His eyes go wide. It's not often I ask an opinion from anyone, especially on something like this.

"We can grab her. Or we can leave her. She betrayed you. Who knows what else she will say? She can tell them about this place ..."

I never even thought about that. Shit, are my men safe? Maybe she doesn't remember.

"I think we need to figure out a way to get her back. It's the only way to ensure this place stays safe. Once we get her back, you have to kill her." I nod my head. He's not wrong. She's a liability. She knows all the locations. She's been there, so she'll be able to tell them. I'm not sure why she hasn't yet, but I still don't trust her.

"How do we get her out?"

"We use Eddie. It's the only way."

"Call him up and arrange it. Have him bring her to a point near the estate."

Eddie doesn't know about this location yet.

It's not something I can put in writing, so the estate seems like a better idea.

“Okay. On it.” Most of my men leave the room, but Lorenzo stays.

“What’s up? You have something you want to say?” I level him with my stare.

“When the time comes, Boss, I can do it.” Now I look at him like I have no idea what he’s saying. “I can kill Viviana for you, Matteo.” His voice lowers as he clarifies what he means.

He thinks I fell for her. He’s not wrong, but what he is wrong about is he thinks I’m too weak to kill the woman I love.

Yes. I love her. I figured that out after I pulled the trigger that night and didn’t kill her.

When the barrel clicked, the feeling was not disappointment. No, instead, it was a feeling of relief. That’s when I knew.

The fact still remains, she went against the family. Love or not, I’ll pull the trigger this time.

I am not weak.

Viviana

LUCKILY, I HAVE HAD NO RECENT RUN-INS WITH SALVATORE.

He hasn't been here. His presence, just a memory now, like a mirage that fades away and you wish you never saw. It reminds you of how close you came to escaping a fate worse than death, but as soon as you were saved, none of it was real.

I was close to tasting freedom.

If I had only done something about it sooner. Confided in Matteo sooner. But unfortunately, I didn't, and now I'm stuck here, biding my time.

The door to my bedroom opens, and I jump back, expecting to see Salvatore. It's not him, and I'm surprised to see this man standing in my room. He's never been anywhere near me. He's never spoken to me.

"What do you want?" I hiss.

"I'm taking you out of here." He narrows his eyes.

"I don't understand."

His eyes are dark and unreadable. Why is he helping me?

"I spoke to Matteo. He wants me to get you out of here." My heart starts to flip-flop around in my chest. He finally believes me.

"Okay."

“Do you need anything?” he asks.

I look around the room, searching for anything I would want to grab. I take my purse and throw my phone in it.

“Anything else?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Okay, let’s go. We have to go out the back, so no one sees us.”

“Why are you helping me?” I ask again, not understanding.

“I’m working for Matteo,” he clarifies. I squint my eyes but having a spy inside the house is something Matteo would do. Together, we take the back staircase and go down a long, narrow hall.

Eventually, it leads to the kitchen. It’s completely empty, and I wonder if it’s planned or just a stroke of luck. He swings open the back door and parked right past it is a black SUV.

“You’ll need to duck down while we pass security.”

I nod my head, getting into the back, and crawling on the floor until I’m almost tucked as close as I can under the seat in front.

Good thing I’m short, or this plan would never have worked. I can hear him speaking on the phone, but with my ears pressed against the carpet, I’m not sure who it is.

The car swerves and makes a quick right, and I’m pretty sure he’s getting directions from Matteo and trying to confirm no one is following us at the same time.

We drive in silence, other than the occasional phone call he gets. He never speaks to me. He never says anything. My mind is going a mile a minute, wondering what will happen once I’m with Matteo again. Does this mean he believes me? Does this mean he forgives me, or does this mean something else completely? Either way, I’m happy that he got me out because I was pretty sure my father was going to try to use me as bait, eventually.

I think he hoped, at least.

That's what Salvatore implied, anyway. Maybe this way we can come up with a plan together. All cards on the table. It's time there are no secrets, which means I'll need to tell Matteo everything. I'll have to tell Julia and Jonathan too. But first, we need to get to Matteo, then I can worry about the rest.

The car starts to slow down, and I'm impatient to get up from where I'm crouched.

Surely, no one is following us now.

Not after the way we were driving. I move to my knees, and then I lift until I'm on the back bench of the car. I don't see anything. It's empty.

It's like it's an abandoned parking lot.

Is someone coming?

Is it Matteo?

Then I see the car pull up, as our car slows almost to a stop.

It's him.

As soon as it stops moving. I throw open the car door before he even hits the brakes. When I'm outside, standing directly in front of the hood of the other car, I hear two doors open.

One comes from behind me. From my car, the other in front.

Matteo steps out. He's standing close but not close enough. His eyes meet mine, but I feel as though I've been sucker punched. The look he gives me is the same look from the last time I saw him.

Still hatred.

Still pain.

Still his desire to see me dead.

And then I know the truth.

He is not here to save me. He's here to kill me.

I turn around swiftly, looking toward dark eyes that are narrowed. Pleading for him to save me. To take me back.

“Thank you, Eddie, for helping me get her back.” Matteo laughs from behind me.

Dark and menacing. I should be scared. I should turn around and plead for my life, but I can't. Then something else hits me, and I'm frozen in place at the name he said.

Eddie ...

I look at the dark eyes, dark like before, still menacing. For the first time, the eyes smile at me.

Fear, an unnatural fear, pours through my blood. My stomach feels as though it's being dropped to the floor. Now I know what this is. This isn't my trap.

It's Matteo's.

This man is not named Eddie ...

This man is Jonathan.

My father's inside man.

Julia's brother ...

And he's the traitor.

“No!” I scream, springing into action, turning to face Matteo. “It's a trap!” Everything happens so fast, and before I can stop myself or think better of it, I'm running, more like jumping, in front of Matteo.

That's when the world stops, and like a movie where the director switches to slow motion, everything halts ...

Everything moves slowly.

Jonathan reaches behind him.

My heart beats in my chest as he pulls out his gun.

Thump.

He points.

Thump.

His finger pulls back.

That's when time catches up.

There's a click.

A shot rings through the air. A sharp bite of pain. And then

...

Silence.

Matteo

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FAST. FIRST, I SEE MY WIFE RUNNING toward me.

Something changes in her. The change was striking.

A look of understanding dropped over her features, and then she was diving in front of me.

The sound of the trigger, of a gun firing and a bullet traveling through the air echoes in my ears.

I brace for the impact.

But it never comes.

That's when I feel her. I can do nothing but watch. She's standing there, directly in front of me, and then she's not.

In the distance, I can see my men running toward Eddie. His gun is still in his hand, trained on me.

Lorenzo fires a shot, and he goes down.

I'm not sure if he is alive. I can't be bothered with any of it when I see Viviana fall to the ground.

Dropping to my knees, I move beside her. Turning her carefully onto her back.

My world stops when I see her usually blushed skin, now pale, pasty, and lacking life.

Her eyes are closed. I search her body, and that's when I see it. The red spreading across her stomach.

It soaks through her shirt, pooling on the white material. Her blood coats my hands as I try to stop the flow. It pours through my fingers. I press down, but no matter how hard I do, the current refuses to stop.

Her eyes refuse to open.

The puddle beneath her continues to spread. My heart pounds as I watch the scarlet pool that forms beneath her.

She isn't moving.

Why isn't she fucking moving, goddammit?

In the background, I hear shouts, fists connecting to flesh, but I can't see that now.

Not when she jumped in front of a bullet.

She saved me.

The sound of footsteps can be heard, and then Lorenzo is beside me.

"Is she dead?" he asks.

"I-I don't know," I answer, my voice low, my tone cracked.

Everything inside me cracks as I see the woman I love on the ground.

Lorenzo moves over her, leaning in.

I can't find the strength to check.

Normally strong, she has robbed me of my strength.

When she moved in front of me, everything changed.

"She's alive."

Like a button pressed on my heart, his words kick me back to life.

"We need to get out of here. We need to get her help."

"I'll call the doctor."

He doesn't need to clarify. We have a state-of-the-art facility in the compound. She'll be safer and more comfortable in the hospital I have. My doctor and the team he will bring with him will make sure she's okay.

"We need to move her," he says. "Carefully." Together, Lorenzo and I take Viviana and place her inside the back of the SUV. I get in with her, holding her head. She's unconscious. I press my finger to her neck, making sure she's alive.

For now, she is. But with each second that passes, her heartbeat's softer and softer. The good thing is, the compound is less than a mile away. It's one of the reasons we chose this location. It feels as though an eternity passes as we drive the distance.

Each second hammers on longer and longer.

I can't stop seeing her jumping. I can't stop hearing her scream. This whole time, I thought it was her, when, in truth, it was me. My man was the traitor. The trust I put in my man is the reason Viviana is lying in my arms bleeding out.

It should be me.

I should be the one shot.

I will never forgive myself if she dies. I know that with every ounce of my life.

And after this is done, I will burn everything down to the ground to stop my cousin, to stop Marino.

To seek vengeance.

Not just for what they have done to me, but because of this.

I should have trusted her, but I didn't.

I will spend the rest of my life trying to prove to her that I love her. Trying to be a better man for her.

I place a kiss on her lips.

Her head is resting on my lap. She doesn't move, but for now, she's still alive.

My finger still feeling the pulse that keeps her breathing. Even if it's slight, it's there.

Soon we are pulling into the gates, and then we are on the driveway.

My doctor is already there.

There's a gurney ready to whisk her away.

"Throw in an IV," he shouts. "Move! Move! Move!"

Everything happens so fast from that moment on. One minute she's lying in my arms with her head on my lap, and the next, she's in the house, and I am standing there on the circular driveway wondering how the fuck this happened. Lorenzo walks up to me.

"She's going to be okay, Boss."

"She better be, or there will be hell to pay. How did this happen? How didn't we know ... and how did she?"

There are huge gaps in the story here. Ones I need to find out.

"Where is he?"

When we left the field, we left all the other men behind with the traitor.

"On their way. Should be a few minutes behind us."

There was no time to wait before.

"I want him in the basement."

"In a cell? Or in the room ..."

He doesn't clarify which room, but we both know which room, the torture room.

Yes, I kept my uncle's room in the basement intact.

As did my father.

But only for the guilty.

And Eddie ...

Is that ...?

The car pulls up then, kicking gravel up.

The piece of shit is lugged out of the car once it pulls to a stop. His face bleeding, his shoulder bleeding from what I can only presume is a gunshot wound from when he tried, unsuccessfully, to fire another shot to kill me.

Lorenzo signals my men to take him to the basement. “Tie him up.”

That’s all he says. They know the orders now. I start toward the house, walking in the door, and heading to the opposite end of the building.

I don’t need to tell anyone where I’m going. It’s written all over my face.

When I throw open the doors, I see the glass that protects the room.

I can see the doctor already pulling away her clothes and starting to work on her.

There are chairs in the room, but I can’t sit.

How can I? There is too much energy coursing through me.

I pace back and forth.

I want to punch someone. I want to punch the shit out of the fuck in my basement, but I need to make sure my wife is going to be okay first.

“Any news, Boss? What’s going on?” Lorenzo walks up behind me.

“The doc hasn’t come out yet or updated me, but it looks like she’s in surgery.”

I start to pace. There is too much nervous energy inside me to stand still.

“Matteo, you can talk to me,” Lorenzo says, and I turn to look at him.

Like me, Viviana’s blood is all over his clothes. I shake my head. I can’t talk. I can’t find words. My throat feels like it is

closing up, like it is filled with cement, and no matter how hard I try, I can't break free.

"I know you're my boss—" he starts to say, his eyes heavy and thick with pain. He's afraid too. He cares for her too. "But you're my friend first."

My chest expands as I take a deep breath, forcing the words out of my dry lips. "I can't lose her."

"You won't."

"How do you know that?" I fire back, not angry with him, but angry with myself. I could lose her, and it's all my fault. "I don't deserve her," I mutter.

"Who says who deserves who?"

"I'm the devil. The tyrant. I'm what her nightmares are made of. She would be better off if I took the bullet and was out of her life."

Lorenzo steps up to me, his hand reaching out and touching my shoulder. It's a strange move between boss and employee, but as my friend, as my family, I welcome the comfort right now.

"Who told you that?" he asks. "Not her. She loves you, man. She stepped in front of a bullet for you." He breathes in deeply. "We were all wrong."

"Most of all, me."

"It wasn't just you. It was me, Roberto, and it was Luka too. We all felt betrayed. We all thought—"

"It doesn't matter, she trusted me, and I let her down," I cut in, not willing to hear anything but voice my own pain, my own guilt.

"Well then, you spend the rest of your life making it up to her."

"I will."

"She'll be okay."

"I hope so."

Because I don't want to live in a world where she doesn't.

WE SPEND THE NEXT FEW HOURS IN THE SAME STATE. DRIED blood on our clothes, pacing the room. Then the door swings open, and my doctor walks toward me.

“She’s out of surgery. Thankfully, there were no complications. We got the bullet out, and we stopped the bleeding. We were able to get her all stitched up and close the wound, but she needs to rest.”

“She’ll be okay?”

He nods. “She’ll be okay.”

I continue to pace back and forth. I’m not sure how long I pace, but eventually, the door opens, and one of the nurses pops her head out this time.

“You can come in and sit with her now, Mr. Amante.”

Making my way into the room, I take the seat beside her bed.

“Viviana.”

Beep.

“Please wake up.”

Beep.

“I’m sorry.”

Beep.

“Please open your eyes.”

Beep.

“I don’t know how to do this.”

Beep.

“I don’t know how to live without you.”

Beep.

“I’m so sorry,” I choke out. “I should have listened to you. I should have let you explain. This is all my fault. It should have been me. I should be dead... You saved me.”

Viviana

BEEP.

Beep.

Beep.

The sound of a machine plays through my dream, beckoning me to wake up.

I try to open my eyes. I try to push through the pain, but my lids are too heavy.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Mustering all the energy in my body, I try again. This time my eyelids flutter open.

“Matteo ...” They flutter open, and Matteo comes into focus.

I have never seen him look like this. He looks devastated and completely distraught. “I ...” The words I want to say won’t leave my mouth. Instead, my voice cracks, my throat burning in pain.

“Shh. You don’t have to speak. Rest. You need to rest.”

I blink my eyes at him. What happened? One minute, I could see my fate, he wanted me dead and the next ... Jonathan.

“A-a-re you h-hurt?”

Matteo leans forward and places a kiss on my lips. “No, baby, I’m not hurt. You saved me.”

Everything comes rushing back.

Panic starts to engulf me.

Is he here?

Did he die?

I can’t breathe. It feels like someone is stomping on my chest.

“You need to calm down. Breathe, Viviana.”

His hand touches my cheek, and I try to move away.

Matteo wanted to kill me. He was taking me back to kill me.

“What’s wrong?”

My head shakes back and forth. My heart pounds in my chest, causing the sound of the machine to go crazy.

“Please calm down. This isn’t good for you. No one will hurt you again.”

“You hurt me,” I whisper. “You were going to kill me.” Tears pour down my face. “Why am I here?”

He reaches out and takes my hand in his. “You’re here because you saved me. You’re here because you were right. You’re here because I love you.” I must look stunned because he lifts my hand to his mouth. “I do. I love you. It took me a long time to realize, but you are everything to me, Viviana.”

“But you wanted to kill me.”

“I didn’t truly. I thought I could. But when I pulled the trigger, I realized I loved you. I was too scared to admit the feelings I had. Too scared to allow myself this, but when I saw

you lying on the ground, I realized I would do anything to protect you.”

The room goes silent. His confession heavy in the air. My own declaration weighs heavily on my tongue, but I’m not sure if I can tell him. If I can trust him with my heart again.

“You don’t have to say it again. I heard you. I was an asshole, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t. It doesn’t mean that your words are not forever engraved on my heart.” Sometimes I forget that Matteo can see through me. He sees everything. The only time he was blind, it was because he thought I betrayed him.

Can I forgive him?

Can I give us another chance?

After what he did to me and put me through. Can I move past that?

Should I move past that?

I stare up into his green eyes. Eyes I have allowed myself to get lost in time and time again.

All I see looking back at me is truth.

His truth.

He loves me.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you too. Can you forgive me?”

I let my lips tip up into a smile. “It will cost you.”

His own mouth parts in a smirk. “I’ll be happy to pay the price. Whatever price you deem fit.”

“Groveling ...”

Our mouths connect, and he kisses me as if I’m his oxygen.

We stay entwined for a few more moments, but eventually, Matteo pulls back and looks down at me.

“How did you know?”

“About what?”

“That it was a trap.”

What does he mean ... didn't he already know this? I furrow my brow. “You don't know?”

“My men are still interrogating Eddie. Did you hear something when he was working in your father's house?”

“Who do you think *Eddie* is?”

“What do you mean? He worked for me. He was my inside guy.”

My eyes widen, and I grab his hand. “Matteo. That's not who he is. He was never your guy. He's my father's.”

“What?”

“His name isn't even Eddie. The man who brought me to you, his name ... it's Jonathan. He's Julia's brother.”

“This whole time—fuck.” His hand lifts and pulls at the roots of his hair. “How didn't I see it? I even looked into Ana's family, but no—I never recognized him. He got through my security checks.”

“When he first started working for my father, his appearance changed drastically. I thought it was because of the new job, but now I see it was to change his appearance to deceive you. My father really did think of everything. But what I don't understand is why try to kill you? Why would he do anything for my father like that? Unless my father told him the truth. Unless he's blackmailing him too.”

“Blackmail? Truth? What aren't you telling me?”

I have put this off long enough. It's time I told him everything.

“When I was a child, I had a nanny. She started to work for my parents when I was a little girl. She lived in our house. Back then we lived on a large estate, similar to this. It belonged to my mother's family. My mother had the money. I grew up with Jonathan and Julia. They were the closest thing I had to siblings. When I was ten years old, I had a crazy idea. I

wanted to bring Ana a cake for her birthday. I didn't have a cake, so I took one of my cupcakes and put a candle on it. Ana wasn't in her room when I went. I looked for her, and that's when I saw the light in the playroom on. I heard her voice because she was talking to someone. I left the cupcake there on a table next to the playroom. It was an accident. There were papers on the table, the whole thing went up in flames. I don't know how but Ana was stuck in the room, the door was blocked. I don't remember anything. I don't remember how any of it happened."

My tears come out faster now. My words a hiccup. "All I know is once she was gone, my father told me I had killed Ana. I didn't understand then. My father told me I would be sent to jail. That worse than that, her family would have nothing. At ten, I didn't realize it, but I made a deal with the devil. He agreed to always take care of her family, pay the bills, and all I had to do was keep my mouth shut about my part. I didn't know then that the plan was to hold it over my head. Forever. And I didn't know the worst part ..." I sob harder.

"What he's holding over your head?"

"First, the secret. He told me I would go to jail. I would be taken away from my home. When I got older, I realized he lied, that they couldn't take me away for that... That's when he threatened to stop paying for Julia and Jonathan. See, I knew they were poor. My father had a private detective take pictures of them. They were only kept together because of the money my father gave their new guardians. He was able to hang this over me. Showing me images, making me bend to his will. When they finally graduated from high school, I thought I could get out, but I was wrong again. They couldn't afford college, and so I did what he asked, always, and the worst part was what I found out ..."

With my head down, I whisper the rest of my secret. All of it. Every detail I know. When I finally stop crying, I sit quietly for a minute, wondering if he will say anything, but he doesn't.

“Do you think Jonathan knows the truth? Do you think that’s why he did this? Because of his mother.”

“I don’t know, but when you’re up for it, why don’t you come downstairs and find out yourself.”

Matteo

AS SOON AS VIVIANA FALLS ASLEEP, I FEATHER A KISS ON HER cheek, and then I tell the nurse I'll be back.

I don't like leaving her here by herself, but I know she'll be okay.

When I'm downstairs, I let myself into the room where we are holding the bastard I now know as Jonathan.

Flinging the door open, I step inside.

He's been tied to the chair since he arrived.

He's fully dressed still, but blood soaks the shirt.

I'm sure my men already patched his gunshot wound, but the wound could still be fun to play with if he doesn't answer my questions.

"Jonathan."

"Guess she's not dead," he chides.

I have to hold back from taking out his tongue. Unfortunately, he can't talk without it. Instead, I'll have to come up with some other means of torture.

I settle on a punch across his face.

Hard enough that he spits out blood, now there is more on his shirt.

He's a fucking mess.

"Were you working for him the whole time?" He looks up at me, blood pouring from his mouth now. "I take it the answer is yes, seeing as who you are." Jonathan's eyes go wide. "Yes, she told me everything about you. And yes, to answer the question you haven't asked, she's fine. Perfectly fine. You're a lousy shot."

"I wasn't aiming for you."

"Why?"

"Why not?" He shrugs. He's not going to talk, at least not yet. He needs more time to stew.

"I'll be back."

That was a waste of time.

I head back up the stairs and into my makeshift hospital.

Viviana is still attached to all the machines and resting. Her eyes flutter open when she hears me come in.

"Everything good?" Her voice is drained of all energy. Raspy like she needs water.

I move to the side of the room and do just that, filling a cup and bringing it to her.

"Here. Drink this."

I place a straw in the cup and tilt it so she can take a sip. When she's done, I place it back down and then move to sit next to her in the chair.

"Can you sit with me?"

"I already was planning to stay here with you all night."

"Can you sit here, I mean." She pats the bed beside her.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Please."

I can't say no to this woman. Not now. Not ever.

I give her a small incline of my head and then get into the bed beside her.

“You’re lucky this isn’t a real hospital.”

“We’d never fit in those beds.”

She’s right. This bed is a full size, which although a tight squeeze it’s at least doable.

“Sleep.” I place a kiss on her temple.

“What happened to Jonathan?”

“Don’t worry about him, right now. You need your rest.”

When her breath grows shallow, and she finally falls asleep, I allow myself to finally breathe.

I don’t think any more about Jonathan, Marino, or Salvatore.

I’m just happy to have her in my arms again.

The next morning comes before I know it.

When I open my eyes, I see that hers are still closed. She looks peaceful while she rests. I don’t want to wake her. She needs to gather her strength. We don’t have the luxury of not retaliating soon. This means the next few days are key to taking down my opponents. If she’s up for it, she’s going to need to come with me to talk to Jonathan. It’s all tied together. Her father, my cousin, and this would-be killer I have locked in a cage in my basement.

“Morning,” she says.

“Morning.” I gently pull her closer to me, careful not to hurt her.

“How are you feeling? Are you in pain?”

“No. I’m okay.” She sighs into my chest, and I know, for now, she is.

Regardless of that, I also know now more than ever, I need to take care of the threat once and for all.

Viviana will never be safe in a world where her father walks free, nor in a world where my cousin breathes.

I need to kill them.

Viviana

TIME MOVES RATHER SLOWLY WHEN YOU ARE CONFINED TO A hospital bed and can't get up. But as the days pass, Matteo never leaves my side.

He reads to me, too.

Beside my bed is a stack of the classics.

All the books I grew up reading.

If there wasn't a hole in my stomach from where a bullet was ripped out, I would say the time we've spent together in this room have been perfect.

There is one thing, though, and in the back of my mind, even as Matteo cares for me, there is also the issue of Jonathan.

He's somewhere in this house.

Locked up.

For all I know, he's being tortured.

The thing is, I should hate him. He shot me, but something tells me there is more to this story.

Lots more.

Beside me, Matteo stirs, and then he is moving his body until he hovers over mine. He is careful not to rest his weight

on me, although for a little pain, it would be worth it. I've been home for days, and other than a small peck on the lips, he hasn't touched me.

"Don't even think about it," he says, his early morning voice rough and husky.

"Think about what?" Mine is coy.

"You know what. You're still healing." He scolds me as though I have just been summoned to the principal's office.

"Fine, but you're no fun." I pout, and he shuts me up with another damn kiss.

He laughs against my lips, and the sound is heavenly. It also reminds me that we can't live in this bubble for long.

We do have to deal with the mess in the basement first.

"I'm ready," I blurt out, and the confused look in his eyes is cute.

It's funny how much he's changed over the course of this week. I saw glimpses of this man before, sweet and caring, but now that he's admitted he loves me, it's so much more.

"Ready for ..." he trails off. "Sex? I thought I just said no."

I playfully swing at him. "Not sex, perv. I'm ready to go down to the basement and talk to Jonathan."

His mischievous stare from only a second ago is now long gone. It's replaced by narrow eyes and a line between his brow.

A deep scowl across his face.

"Are you sure?" Even his voice has changed. There is no lightness at all. This is all mob boss. The playful and dutiful husband replaced by a killer.

"Yes. Help me up."

He stands from the bed and pulls me up to be beside him.

Although the doctors have had me walk each day, it still feels weird to be on my legs. Like a fawn learning their first

steps, I'm wobbly and unsteady.

Matteo helps me into the bathroom, and as I get ready to go downstairs, so does he.

It takes me a good hour to get myself pulled together. I might have miscalculated the extent of my injuries.

"You sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. I need too. I need to know what he knows."

The truth is, that's the scary part. I'm not sure if my father told him anything, and I'm not sure how he will react if he doesn't know the truth.

My stomach churns with nerves.

"You okay?"

I nod my head, but Matteo places his finger on my lip, the lip I'm currently biting, my tell.

"Talk to me."

"What if he doesn't know the truth? What if my father finds out I told?"

"Do not worry about your father," he scolds. "I'll handle him, and I will take care of everything. You will never have to worry about being under your father's thumb again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, let's go."

Each step we take seems harder than the last. Heading toward the basement feels like I'm a prisoner walking to death row. I'm scared, but I keep my head held high.

After we walk down the stairs and turn the corner, I see him.

He's in a cell.

Tied up.

He's dressed, his clothes ripped and shredded.

His hair is dirty, filled with grease from the days he's been kept here.

There is a stink in the air.

In the corner of his cell is a toilet, a bucket of water, and an old tray of food.

At least they are feeding him.

"Look what the cat dragged in," he chides from behind bars.

"Jonathan," I say, stepping closer. "Why?"

"As if you really have to ask," he fires back.

"I think we need to talk."

"The time to talk was twelve years ago, don't you think?" he bites out.

If I ever wondered why he had such animosity toward me, now I know.

"Are you ready to talk?" Matteo asks, throwing the gate open. At first, I'm afraid he will spring out and attack us, but that's when I see that in the corner of the cell a metal chain is attached to his foot.

Bile collects in my stomach as I remember the story Matteo told me.

Seeing this place, I realize how important it is that we don't let Salvatore succeed.

Not being able to look at his smug face, I step up to Jonathan and slap him across the face.

"How could you work with him?" I hiss. "Look around you ... do you have any idea what he wants to do? My father is willing to turn a blind eye to Salvatore's desires ... but you. How would you feel if Julia was traded like sheep? Locked in here like an animal."

"And it's okay, what your precious husband is doing? I'm trapped here like a 'sheep.'"

It hurts when I cross my arms at my chest, but the move makes me feel safer, tougher as I fire back at him.

“You are an animal who tried to kill him. You deserve everything coming to you. But the innocent women you wish to hurt ...” I take a deep breath in, trying to calm the emotions inside me. “They don’t deserve that. Are you really willing to give them that fate?”

“Like you care about the innocent.”

“Whatever my father told you ...” My eyes fill with unshed tears at the memory, at all the lies I have told. “There is more to it. Let me explain.”

“I don’t want to hear anything from you.”

“Then you will hear from me.” Matteo steps up, and something is gleaming in his hand. A knife. Not just any knife at that, this one looks like a kitchen cleaver.

I’m about to say something to him, object to this form of torture. No matter what Jonathan did to me, he’s still my best friend’s brother. But Matteo shakes his head at me, knowing full well what I was about to do.

“Were you always working for my cousin?” Matteo asks.

Jonathan refuses to answer.

“Fine. You want to play it that way, that’s cool, but I’ll get you to talk ... eventually. Tell me this, before the fun starts. What was the plan? Or did you even have a plan? Was it just to kill me?”

“I was going to kill both of you, actually.”

“Jonathan—” I start, but then I don’t know what to say. He just admitted to wanting to kill me. How do I even explain everything I have ever done was to protect him and his sister? I step closer to him, ready to say more. To tell him everything I’m sure my father didn’t when I hear a scuffle and footsteps.

Jonathan’s eyes go wide, looking over my shoulder to where the sound is coming from.

There, walking with tape over her mouth, is Julia. I bolt out of the cell and toward my friend. My hands lift as I push Roberto off her. The moment I make the movement, I realize my mistake, and pain radiates through me from the gunshot wound.

“What the hell are you doing, Roberto?” I turn to face Matteo. “Why is she here?” I scream at my husband. There better be a good reason, or he will be my soon-to-be ex-husband.

“What the fuck are you doing with her?” I say again, and this time, Matteo approaches me, hands raised, like he’s an animal trainer trying to wrangle in a wild beast.

“You thought she was innocent?” Matteo asks, clearly perplexed by me, and when he realizes I did, his eyes soften in sympathy. I really have no one but him who cares about me. He reaches his hand out and takes mine in his, then he squeezes it gently. “She’s been working with her brother the whole time.” His voice is lower than normal, treating me like a wounded bird that might fly away.

“Is that true?” I ask my friend, a woman who has basically been my sister.

Roberto rips the tape off. “It’s true.” Julia smirks. The betrayal stabbing me in the heart.

“But—” A lone tear betrays me by falling down my cheek. “Why are you doing this?”

“You took my life. You took my mom. You killed her. You are the reason she is dead. Your father told us everything. Every day for twelve years, you betrayed me. You looked in my eyes and betrayed me. You are despicable, and I only wish I knew sooner. Because then I would never have allowed myself to love you.”

Every emotion I thought I would feel at this revelation is completely wrong. The pain I feel of hurting her morphed by the anger and hatred I feel toward my father right now.

In the end, he used them.

He used my friend in a convoluted plot to kill my husband and get back at me for going against him.

“He lied to you.”

“Cut the shit, Viviana. Why else would you be at his beck and call? It’s because you killed my mother, and he was covering up your secret.”

“Because your mom isn’t dead.”

Viviana

“W-WHAT DO YOU MEAN?” JULIA STUTTERS, HER VOICE WEAK, and her lips pale, teeth rattling.

“She is alive. He’s been lying for years.”

“But then, how do you know?” Jonathan spits out from behind me, and I turn to face him.

“My father told me. He threatened me and showed me the papers to prove it.”

“How long? How long did you know my mother was alive and not told me?”

“Not long. I found out by chance. I don’t think he planned to tell me. But when I told him I wouldn’t marry Salvatore, he did. That’s when things got bad. Really bad. My father—I had no choice but to agree to his terms. If I helped him in his plot, he wouldn’t hurt her. He has been blackmailing me for years. For different things. But this was the worst. He threatened to stop her treatment. Threatened to put her out of her misery. Threatened to stop supporting you. I didn’t know what to do. I had no one.”

“You had me.”

“But don’t you see? That’s the catch-22. If I told you, he would have killed her.”

I take a step closer to Matteo. To my husband, who has promised to help. “When Matteo came to me, I thought this could be it. He would have the power to stop this. It took me a long time to trust him, but when I was finally ready to ask him for help, Marco’s place was raided. Was that you?” I ask Julia.

For the first time since she has been brought down here, she looks down at the floor. She is finally starting to understand what her actions cost her.

I understand what mine have cost. I will always feel the pain in my heart.

“Why?” the soft voice sounds foreign coming from Jonathan. It reminds me of the little boy I once knew. The one who used to play with me and Julia, my once friend. “Why would he lie? Why would he keep her there? It doesn’t make sense.” He starts to ramble to himself. I can’t make out most of it, but one thing is clear. I have always wondered the same question.

I turn to Jonathan. “This has plagued me for months. This same question. When I found out he lied to me and that she wasn’t dead, I asked myself why. What good was it to spin this web of lies? What did he have to gain?”

“What did you find out?” Julia asks.

Even though it hurts, I start to pace.

“Nothing. I couldn’t find out anything. I wasn’t sure if what I had read was true. The moment I saw the intake papers he had, I should have come to you guys, but by that time—”

“He was blackmailing you?” she asks.

“I wish you would have told me,” Matteo says.

I nod. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. I just—” Matteo steps up to me, tilts my head up, and places a kiss on my lips.

“I didn’t deserve your trust. I would have used her against you too.”

I shake my head. “You wouldn’t have.”

His brow arches, and I know he doesn't see the man I do. The man I love.

"I'm sorry," Julia says from behind me, and I move to face her. "I-I." Her eyes are focused at my stomach, and where the bulky bandage is clearly visible through my shirt. "You could have died. Jonathan and I—"

I lift my hand to silence her. "This isn't your fault. It's mine."

"Like fuck it isn't," Matteo interjects. His voice rough with anger. "They tried to kill you."

"I do believe we were actually trying to kill him."

"Speak for yourself. I was trying to kill both of them." We all turn around to face Jonathan. He shrugs from his cell. "No reason to lie. I was. Now that I know the truth, I obviously feel like shit, but it's the truth nonetheless."

Everything feels so confusing, my legs start to sway under me.

Matteo catches me in his arms, and before I know it, Roberto is pulling a chair under me to sit in.

"Are you okay?" Matteo is now eye level with me. Staring at me like he's afraid I'm going to die.

"I'm fine." I reach my hand out and touch his jaw. "Let Jonathan go." My words shock even me, but in truth, now that the truth is out there, I'm not afraid of him. If anyone should be afraid, it's my father.

"Are you insane?" I level my eyes on him. "Viviana, I can't let him go."

I look over Matteo's shoulder, staring directly at Jonathan now. "Can he let you go? Are you going to kill us?"

Jonathan looks tired—not just physically but also mentally.

"I'm not going to hurt either of you."

"No." Matteo's voice is louder than I expect. "He hurt you."

“Look at it from his side. He thought I killed his mother. What would you do if you had a chance to kill the person who killed yours?”

Matteo’s hand wraps around my arm and pulls me out, away from everyone.

“It doesn’t stop me from wanting to kill him for hurting you.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t know!” His anger no longer sizzles on the surface. Now, it’s a raging inferno, one I’m not sure how to douse. “I thought I lost you. I thought you died. You are everything to me. You are my life. Do you hear me? You are my life.”

I lift my hand up and touch his jaw. His rigid jaw that I think will snap in half. “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

His head hangs down. “You could have died, and it was because of me. I didn’t protect you.”

“I forgive you, Matteo. Now it’s time you forgive yourself. I love you. You can’t hold this inside you.” Taking his hand, I walk us back to stand in front of the cage.

“I can’t let him go. I can’t get over that he tried to take you from me.”

“But I can. I forgive him. Do this for me. Trust me. Please ...”

Matteo lets out a long-drawn-out sigh and then nods his head to Roberto. He clearly looks as shocked as Matteo that I would even ask this of them.

“If you so much as look at my wife, or even me for that matter, I don’t care what she says, you are dead.”

“It was never against you,” Jonathan says.

“It sure felt that way when you had a gun pointed at my head.”

“Marino said he had more information about my mother. He promised if I took care of the problem, he would tell me.”

An audible gasp escapes my mouth. “He was blackmailing you too. Do you think he was going to tell you she was alive?”

“At this point, no. I think he was using Julia and me to do his dirty work. Once Matteo was out of the picture, I have no doubt that he wouldn’t have.”

“I don’t know,” I mumble under my breath.

“What don’t you know?” Matteo asks me.

I stand from the chair and walk to Jonathan’s cell. His chains drop to the floor, the clanking sound of the metal echoing off the concrete.

“Why go through all this trouble to tell you anything?” I ask Jonathan. “When did he tell you about your mother?”

“After you married Matteo.”

“And before that, why were you working for him?”

“He approached me about the job. I was going to move away, and he told me to stay. At first, I did odds and ends. Then he approached me to work undercover with Matteo, to sell myself as someone he could trust. He did tell me a lot, but seeing as he had always supported me, I thought I owed it to him.” His fists clench at his side.

“So many things don’t add up.”

“No, they don’t.”

“I think there is only one solution,” Julia says from beside me. “You need to take us to our mother.”

“She’s at a hospital that my father runs. Can you get us in?” I ask my husband. If anyone has the connections, it’s him.

“I can.”

“Good, then let’s go.”

“There’s only one thing,” I say. “Where does Salvatore tie into this? None of that makes sense.”

“It could be as simple as money. The port access is a billion-dollar profit as is. Add in the women he plans to bring in. Triple it.”

“This is all about money for him?”

“And to get back at me. I think Marino and Salvatore also are doing this as an opportunity to combine forces, so that they can kill two birds at the same time. Help each other out in a mutually beneficial way.”

“There is something I have to tell you,” Julia whispers.

“At this point, just spit it out,” Jonathan says to his sister. “She will find out, eventually. Obviously, everything is a big giant ploy, and we were the fucking pawns.” The anger and venom are not lost on any of us.

“The man I was dating ...”

I vaguely remember her telling me she met a man at a club.

Oh my God.

“No.”

She nods her head.

“It was Salvatore.”

Matteo

EACH PIECE OF THE PUZZLE STARTS TO FALL INTO PLACE. SO many variables we were all blind to.

Now that I know the part my cousin had in this whole mess, I'm not surprised. He used false information Marino gave the twins and then sweetened the deal to get them to play right into his hands.

It almost worked too.

If Viviana hadn't stepped in front of a bullet for me, we would all be dead. Then to think of the countless women who would have been hurt.

I pull my wife toward me and hug her. Puzzled by my move, she looks at me. "What was that for?"

"For saving me."

I'm not just talking about the bullet this time.

"Always."

After I place a kiss on her mouth, I pull back.

"Let's go." I turn to Lorenzo. "Have Price hack into the facility. I want no eyes on us."

"Got it, Boss."

From there, everything moves rather fast.

We make it from the compound to our destination in less than an hour.

Instructed by Jaxson Price through an earpiece, we are able to avoid security using a back door and a security code he hacked.

I'm going to need to give this boy a raise, that or convince him to work only with me.

Once inside, we are led through the hallways. We walk as though we belong, even though we don't.

No one stops us.

A part of me wonders if this is too easy or a trap, but then it dawns on me. Marino probably thinks his daughter is dead. He probably thinks I'm dead.

Or he thinks Jonathan is, and seeing as I'm quick-tempered, we were never able to get to the bottom of this.

When we open the door to the room, Julia falls to the floor. There, in the corner, is a woman who looks like her. Except instead of blond hair, it's gray and oily. Her eyes are dull and lifeless.

There is a large burn mark across her face, leaving her disfigured.

I look further and see that her arms are badly burned as well. The fire was real.

Now everything that happened after that is still a mystery.

"Mom." Julia runs to her. Beside me, Viviana is quietly sobbing. I brace my arms around her, letting her cry into my chest.

"She's alive. I know he told me ... but he wouldn't let me see her."

Ana, the twin's mom, looks heavily sedated.

She doesn't look at her children, but she does start to speak.

Her words make no sense.

Just repeats them over and over again.

I'm not sure if it's from her medication or if it's from the accident that happened so long ago, but it's obvious that the woman they know and love is long since gone. If she will ever return is the question.

"What are you doing here?" the nurse barks at us, but then when she sees Julia on the floor beside her mother crying, she understands.

"She's my mother," Jonathan says, stepping up from behind to walk up to his sister. He places his hand on her.

"She can't have visitors."

"Please, she's my mother." Julia weeps. "Don't make me go."

"He won't let her have visitors. You can't be here. If he finds out ..." Her face is pale, and she doesn't need to tell us who she is talking about.

Marino.

"He won't know we are here. Please tell us anything you can about her case."

As if on cue, Ana starts to babble again.

"Does she speak?"

"I don't really know. I'm new here, but for as long as I've been here ... no."

"Is it from the fire?" Viviana asks, clearly devastated by what her actions might have caused.

"I don't know," the nurse admits.

"So, it could be from the drugs?"

"Maybe. I'm new, I don't want to get into trouble. I only hand out the medicine the doctor provides."

I nod my head, knowing she is scared. "We are going to fix this," I tell everyone in the room, and I mean it. No matter what happens, I will make sure Ana is no longer in this hellhole. "Is there anything more you can tell us? Anything

that could help?” She shakes her head. Ana starts babbling again. “What is she saying?”

“Doll.”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I think doll.”

“You have to go. They are starting rounds again. I only came in because I heard you. If I can hear you ...”

I turn back to Julia, who is now holding her mother’s hand. “Julia, I promise I will do everything in my power to get her out, but first, we have to get out of here.”

“Okay,” she whispers before leaning in and kissing her mother. Jonathan is next, followed by Viviana, who tells her she’s sorry.

HOURS LATER, WE ARE ALL BACK AT THE COMPOUND.

It’s funny how only earlier today, I was sure I would be killing both of them, and now, as I sit in my chair, scotch in hand, I watch them all cry together over what we just found.

But the question still stands, why did Marino have her?

“What was to gain from keeping her?”

“That’s my question too. Why would he go through all this trouble to keep her hidden?”

We all go silent as the question lingers in the air.

Why?

“An insurance policy. She knows something, and by keeping her in the state she is in, she can’t talk.”

A myriad of emotions play over everyone’s faces.

Anger. Sadness, and then relief.

Because if this is the case, then maybe Ana will come back to us.

“You think she is in there, still?”

“There is no way to know,” I tell the group. “Years of medication ... but maybe. She did speak, so maybe.”

“What was she saying?” Julia asks.

“The nurse said she always babble the same thing ... doll. Maybe dollhouse.”

“Oh, my God.”

“What?” everyone asks Viviana at the same time.

“That’s from when I was a child.”

“What do you think it means? Do you think that was her way of telling us she knew we were there?”

Viviana shakes her head. “No. The nurse said the staff was trying to figure out what it meant for years. That it’s the only thing she says.”

“We need to find it. Maybe it means something.”

“Where is it Viviana?”

“With my stuff.”

“And where would that be?”

“In the governor’s mansion.”

Viviana

STEP ONE, TAKE DOWN MY FATHER. STEP TWO, DEAL WITH Salvatore. In that order.

I'm not sure how we are going to find the dollhouse, but we have to try. Even if it means dying.

I turn to Jonathan.

"You have to take me back."

He inclines his head and gives me a look like he thinks I'm batshit crazy.

"And how exactly do you suppose I do that?"

"Tell my father I escaped. Say I got shot. Say anything, but sell it. I need in that house."

"Do you honestly think your mother still has it?"

"You don't understand. Of course, she does. This dollhouse isn't any dollhouse. It's passed down from generation to generation. I guarantee she does. It's symbolic of her family."

"And where would she keep it?"

"If it was me, it would be in the basement or the attic."

"Hope it's not either. Those places are creepy," Julia interjects.

We're still in the car. This time instead of going home, we are headed to the governor's mansion.

"Maybe we should just break in? It would be easier."

"Better idea," Matteo announces to the car. "We are walking in the front door. I will tell him you tried to run away. Jonathan went after you, and I decided I didn't want you. I shot you ... and now 'cause I don't want your death on my doorstep, I'm dropping you off."

"There is no way he will believe that."

"Well, I guess you better sell it then, baby."

I look between Jonathan, who is all bruised, and my bandaged lump in my shirt, and nod, and then I rip off the bandage.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Matteo hisses.

"Selling it." I wink. "Someone give me a knife."

"Fuck no."

"I need blood on my shirt for him to believe it."

Matteo growls, but he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a knife, and slices his own arm. My eyes bug out of my head, but before I can object, he's rubbing the blood all over me.

"I guess that works too." I roll my eyes.

Twenty more minutes pass before we are at the house, then Matteo whispers an, "I'm sorry," before he's forcefully pulling me out of the car. Lorenzo has the whole gang in tow.

Security must have tipped off my father because when we make it to the front door, it flies open, and he's there. My mother gasps and tells us to come in.

She's hemming over the blood not to get on anything.

I hate her. She has condoned his behavior, and maybe she wasn't directly involved, but she condoned it. She is just as culpable.

"I need to speak to you now, Marino."

My father looks back and forth and then follows Lorenzo, Roberto, and Matteo out.

“Mom. Where is the dollhouse?”

“What?” she asks, her voice giving way to confusion.

“The dollhouse, Mom. The one Ana and I played with. Tell me where it is!” I whisper-shout.

“Basement. Storage room.”

“Let’s go,” I tell Jonathan and Julia, and then we are taking off in that direction. The stairs that lead down are pitch-black. We look for the lights, but when we can’t find them, Jonathan uses his phone flashlight.

We take the stairs faster than I should in my condition, and then we are basically running to the storage room.

There it is.

In the corner. Exactly how I remember it.

“Quickly, is there anything there?”

The dollhouse is old, probably in my family since the 1920s at least. We search each room with a flashlight. Then we start to turn over the furniture. The kitchen, the bathroom ... when we get to the bedroom, I pull out the bed and flip it over.

My breath leaves my body in a gasp.

Taped to the bottom of the bed is a USB drive.

“Holy crap. I found it. Quick, let’s go.”

This time as I run, I can feel the immense pain in every step I take, but I power on. Needing to get out of here and find out what’s on the USB.

Sending a call to Matteo, I tell him we have to leave now.

I’m not sure how we are going to pull this off, but for some reason, I think I’m stuck here.

The sound of my father’s footsteps is all I can hear now. There is no way for us to leave this house unscathed. Not without him knowing we are up to something.

Matteo is walking with his men beside him.

“I didn’t kill her out of courtesy,” Matteo says. “I didn’t kill your little errand boy either. I expect you to consider this a peace offering. Consider my deal. Let me know your answer.”

Matteo’s done speaking. He walks up beside me, caging me in against the wall.

“Your father has convinced me to grant you an annulment and not kill you. Do not attempt to come back to me. I don’t want you.” His tone is wicked, but I know what this is. I know Matteo better than anyone.

“No.” I play along, throwing my arms around him. “Please.” I place the USB in his hand.

“You were such a disappointment,” he spits, and then like the evil mob boss he is, he walks away from me ...

USB in hand.

Matteo

“YOU THINK HE BOUGHT IT?” ROBERTO ASKS WHEN WE GET into the car.

“Let’s hope so. I left my fucking wife in that house,” I grit out, not happy about it at all.

“She’ll be okay.”

“She better be because if I lose her ...”

“You won’t.”

This plan isn’t ideal. I have the USB, and Jonathan and Julia both want to know what’s on it.

They’ll have to wait, though. Marino would have known if I took them with us. And seeing as Viviana is hurt, I need her to have Julia with her.

As soon as we make it back to the compound, we head into the surveillance room and fire up the monitors.

Document after document is pulled up.

My eyes go wide.

Holy fucking shit.

Marino will no longer be a problem.

Thanks to Ana, I now have the governor by his balls.

Now, how to handle it is another question.

The first thing I have to do is tell Julia and Jonathan what I found. But there is no easy way to do that.

Not without hurting them. Not without hurting Viviana.

I have made this trip more than I should. But after today, I'll never have to do this again.

They announce my presence. Then I'm waiting in the foyer.

The need to see her is all-consuming, and when she does take the stairs down, I know I'll want to cross over to her and take her in my arms.

I don't have the time for that.

The cops will be here soon. The evidence scheduled to hit the detective on my payroll's inbox any minute.

We will be long gone before I allow myself to be tied to this mess. This needs to be done in private, but time is not on our side. We no longer have the luxury of waiting, so even though it's not ideal, I will do this now. Because with each moment that passes, there is a bigger chance Marino will do something drastic, and I can't risk leaving Viviana here any longer.

The first person I see is Jonathan. His sister is on his heels behind him.

"What was on the USB drive?"

I take a deep breath and hand him the printout copies. He starts to rummage through them. I can see the way his pupils widen as he reads through the words. The way his fist clenches every now and then.

I see when he comes across it.

When the vein in his forehead looks like it's going to explode.

The moment he realizes who he really is. How his presence really hits into everything. Julia is next to look at the reason her mother is locked in the purgatory of her mind.

The sobs can't be mistaken.

The way she falls to the floor ...

It's not every day you find out a truth like this.

It's not every day you find out you are the illegitimate daughter of a monster.

It took me a while to comprehend what Ana had saved. From the evidence gathered, Marino and Ana had an affair. She was his mistress when she became pregnant, and it was decided she couldn't tell.

Political dreams and all. I'm not sure if he threatened her, or if she stayed out of love ...

Only Ana can tell that story, but what I do know is somewhere along the line, she found out a secret about her lover, about the father of her children.

The secret so big, I'm not sure if Viviana ever had anything to do with the fire.

In the documents is all the proof we will ever need to keep Marino behind bars for life, and if my cousin ever found out, Marino would be dead.

There, documented, were all the crimes.

All the women.

Somehow, Marino had gotten his hands on incriminating evidence about Salvatore's father's human trafficking operation. There were pictures of both the girls taken and the men who purchased them. All the records of years of abuse were saved.

He wanted to keep the mob boss in his pocket. But with the files he received, he forgot to remove the ones on himself. The ones that proved his knowledge and his own participation in the operation. *He was apparently a very loyal client.*

"Holy crap," Jules says, as she finally pulls herself together.

"Fuck." Jonathan's voice cuts in next. "He's our father," he whispers. "Our fucking father."

“We need to tell Viviana first. Where is she?” I ask.

“I’ll go get her.” Julia walks off, heading up the stairs.

“What are you doing here, Amante? I thought I made my position perfectly clear. When I didn’t answer, I didn’t want your deal.”

“Deal’s off the table, anyway. The only deal you should be considering right now is with the DA.”

“What the fuck are you going on about? I own this state. No one is coming for me.”

“Are you sure about that?” I collect the papers and toss the file at him nonchalantly.

His nostrils flare, his eyes going wide with anger.

“Where the fuck did you get this?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“I should have killed the bitch when I had a chance.”

And then the other shoe finally drops. A gasp reverberates through the space as understanding hits Jonathan.

“You ... You did this to her?” There is no need to clarify. “You put her in that place, and you let us all believe that— holy fuck. You let us believe our sister did it. You were going to have us hurt our sister. Fuck. I almost killed her.” Jonathan now falls to the floor, devastated by everything that transpired.

From behind me, I hear footsteps. I turn to see Viviana, but it’s only Julia.

“Where is she?” I ask her.

“She wasn’t there.”

I turn to Marino. “Where the fuck is my wife?”

“You’re too late.”

I step forward, my hands circling his throat. “Speak.”

“Salvatore has her, and knowing him ...”

Viviana

HIS EYES ARE VOID OF EMOTION. DARK AND SINISTER.

He had come to my father's house and took me. My father offered me up to him like a prize pig ready for the slaughter.

Now I'm in what seems to be an abandoned warehouse.

Alone, waiting for him to tell me what he wants from me.

The shackle around my ankle makes chills run up the back of my neck. But it's the bed in the corner that truly terrifies me. I would rather die than be this monster's plaything.

Kill me.

But not before he hurts me, not before he makes me pay for defying him.

I knew when this plan was set in motion that this could happen. I had hoped we would be able to pull it off.

But now, in the darkness of this dank space, I know I was just fooling myself. This was always the outcome.

Regardless if I had never married Matteo, this was my fate.

I don't regret a minute.

Not one if it brought me to Matteo.

The sound of heavy footsteps has me scooting back and trying to hide. But there is nowhere to go.

His sinister laughter echoes through the air, and my gaze flies toward him. He's stalking toward me, large and menacing.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“If you're worried I'm going to rape you, don't. You're more trouble than you're worth.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Come on, Viviana, you're smarter than that.”

“Bait.”

“Ding. Ding. One point for the mafia queen.”

“He won't come for me. He doesn't care.”

He laughs again. “You better hope he does. If not, I'll have to send you to him piece by piece until he has no choice but to pick up your scraps.”

“You assume too much,” I choke out, even though I know I'm lying. I just hope he doesn't come. I would gladly die to protect him.

“My cousin loves you. And he will come for you. When he does, I'll be here to kill him. And after, if you give me trouble ...” He lets the threat hang in the air. “I'm going to call him soon. Is there anything you want me to tell him for you?” His lips tip up into a smirk.

“Go fuck yourself.”

His smile broadens, and he looks downright sinister in this light.

“With a mouth like that, I hope Matteo doesn't come. I'll make a shitload of money on you. Ironic with who your father is.”

My confusion must play across my face. “Oh, you don't know? Didn't you ever wonder why I got into business with him? Why I knew he wouldn't be against my ideas for expansion?”

It hits me in the gut, and the wind is knocked out of my lungs at his declaration.

I always knew my father was evil, but this ...

Tears fill my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

I can't show him my sadness or my fear. He will consume it like a succubus prays on the weak.

"How sweet, you didn't know."

I'm frozen in place at his words as my mind spins frantically.

Strange pieces I didn't know of a puzzle falling into place.

My body is twisted around, no longer able to look at him.

I can't.

He's the harbinger of death.

It's only a matter of time.

Matteo

SHIT IS TENSE IN THE CAR ON THE WAY BACK TO THE compound. We have no idea when he grabbed her or where he took her. When we get back, we stand in the foyer with no direction on how to proceed. The only option now is to call my cousin. I know this. My men know this.

We have to sacrifice the king to save the queen.

Lorenzo finally breaks the silence, saying, “What do we do?”

“We have to figure out where she is, and then we have to go in and get her.”

“It’s not that simple.” Lorenzo starts to pace back and forth. “You can’t surrender. That’s what he wants.”

“If that’s the way I save her, that’s exactly what needs to be done.”

“I know where she is.” We all turn to where Julia is standing. No one speaks, just stares at her. “I know.” This time her voice is stronger and full of conviction. “Let me help.”

“This smells like a trap.”

“It’s not. She is my best friend. She-she’s my sister. I would never do anything to hurt her.”

Lorenzo steps forward, essentially caging her in. He looks like a beast next to her. “You already did,” he sneers.

“And I apologized. I feel awful. It’s my fault she was hurt, but I’ll never make that mistake again. You have to believe me.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Lorenzo mutters. Clearly, he does not trust Julia at all. I don’t trust her, either. But it’s beside the point.

“I think it’s the only one we have,” Jonathan says. “And trust me, I don’t say that lightly. There’s a good chance Salvatore will call you. When he does, you’re walking into a trap. The only thing we have going for us is the element of surprise.” Jonathan points at his sister. “She brings that element.”

“No.” I shake my head. “There are too many unknown variables. Just tell us where she is, and we will take him out.”

Jonathan interjects. “And risk her getting hurt?”

I’m about to say more when Julia walks over to me and places her hand on my arm.

“I’m going. You have no other choice. Please ... trust me.” It’s true, we don’t. “Use me as bait. Then kill Salvatore once and for all.”

“Matteo, can I speak to you ... alone?” Lorenzo says to me, and I nod my head and then turn to Roberto. “Stay with them.”

Once we are alone, he crosses his arms at his chest. “You’re going to work with them?” I nod. “It will make you look weak.”

“It’s not weak to admit you need help. They are our in. Our only in, and before you argue about the past, I get it. I don’t blame them. I would have done the same thing to find out about my parents.”

IF WE ARE GOING TO LET HER GO IN, WE WILL MAKE SURE IT'S not a trap.

“Get Jaxson Price on the phone.”

The phone rings through the car speakers.

“Matteo. I’m starting to think I should up my prices. What can I do for you now?”

“Salvatore has my wife.”

There is a pregnant pause at my words, followed by a cough. “Fuck, man. I’m sorry. What do you need?”

“We have a location, but I need to know if it’s legit,” I tell him.

“You want me to check if there are people?”

“I want you to tell me exactly where they are, so I’m not blindsided.”

“No problem.”

I feed him the location, and in the background, I can hear him typing furiously on the phone.

“Okay, I hacked into a satellite. There are two men outside in the front and two in the back. Once you get inside, there are only two more.”

“You sure about this?”

“One hundred percent. Unless your cousin is wearing an ice suit, the heat index won’t lie.”

“You sure you don’t want to come work for me directly, Price?”

“I’m not for sale.”

“Everyone has a price.”

“You couldn’t afford me.”

“Debatable, but right now I have to get my girl, so let’s table the discussion.” I turn to my men. “You guys ready?” I ask.

“What’s the plan?” Lorenzo asks.

“If Julia isn’t lying, and she’s been here before, his men should know her,” Roberto says, obviously still not trusting her.

“I’m not lying. I understand why you don’t believe me, but I’m not.”

“As Roberto was saying, we send in Julia ... when she is distracting Salvatore, we take out the men on the outside. But we have to do it quietly. Let’s put on an earpiece. That way, she can hear us, and we can hear her. Once we signal that everyone is dead, we come in guns blazing.” I turn to Julia. “Can you handle this?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s go. Pull the car over a block outside the factory. We go on foot.

“Roger that.”

Roberto pulls to the side of the abandoned road before the turn that will lead to where Viviana is.

When we are all out of the car, Julia gets in the driver’s seat.

“Can you hear me?” she whispers.

“Loud and clear.”

“Okay, I’m pulling up.”

The line goes silent, the only sound coming from her rapid breathing.

“Calm down, Julia,” her brother says through the earpieces we are all wearing.

“Sorry,” she mumbles so low we can almost not hear it.

The sound of the car door opening is the only indication of what is happening.

“What are you doing here?”

“Here to check in with Salvatore.” It’s obvious she was deeply ingrained in this plot as there is no objection. Instead, we hear the sound of the heavy, metal door opening.

Then the sound of her footsteps on the concrete.

“The bitch is still alive.”

“Julia?” Viviana says, her voice clearly shocked. I wonder if she knows this is all a part of the plan, or if somewhere inside her, she fears her friend has gone against her one more time. She doesn’t know yet about what we found on the USB drive.

“Yep, it’s me. Although I have to say I’m rather disappointed that you’re here, and to be honest, you don’t even look hurt,” she snarls, but now we know Viviana isn’t hurt.

“What are you doing here?” Salvatore’s voice booms through the earpiece.

The sound of footsteps echo again. “I missed you.”

When we hear the sound of Julia kissing Salvatore, I lift my hand, signaling my men.

“Let’s go.”

At the same time, with silencers on our guns, we launch a synchronized attack.

Guns lift.

“On three.”

“One. Two. Three.”

Pop. Pop. Pop.

The men drop like dominos falling.

“We’re coming in,” I announce into the mic, letting Julia know to take cover.

At that, we bust open the door, guns raised. But as soon as we do, Salvatore moves too fast. His gun is now aimed at Julia’s head.

“Let go of the girl,” I hiss.

“And lose my own bargaining tool?”

“She’s not some tool, you shit,” Jonathan steps up, gun raised.

Salvatore looks at all of us. There are more of us than him, so there is no way he can get out of this alive. However, he doesn't seem upset at all.

It's almost like he knows something we don't. Then I hear it, and I know it's because he does.

Cars screeching to a halt, doors slamming, heavy boots moving our way. It's a fucking ambush.

His lip tips up, and then he laughs. "The moment you hit Marino's, I knew you were coming. Julia showing up alone was the icing on the cake."

"You let us kill your men outside?"

"Casualties of war."

The crazy motherfucker allowed his men to be bait so we would come in here, essentially trapping us.

"Spread out. Protect the girls!" I scream, but with Salvatore holding Julia hostage, that will be harder.

It takes a moment to realize what's happening, but then like a flash of lightning, Julia thrusts her head back, and at the same time, Jonathan charges.

All hell breaks loose.

It's complete pandemonium.

Salvatore lifts his gun and fires. Jonathan flops to the floor. He didn't even make it two steps before he was hit.

However, it was enough time for his sister to escape and run for Viviana and enough time for me to lose focus and almost get knocked out by my cousin. Luckily, I right myself as he comes barreling into me, and only my gun drops to the floor.

All around me, a war is waging. Guns fire.

My men are taking cover and firing back.

From the corner of my eye as I stand, I can see Julia flipping the bed over to give her and a chained-up Viviana protection from the gunfire.

“I should have killed you too.” He throws the first punch. I block and jab back.

“Too?”

An evil smirk and dark eyes tell me all the answers I need to know. He chuckles to himself, clearly amused. “Seriously, you really don’t know?”

“You killed my parents.”

“Of course, I did. Your father killed my father. He took away my legacy. He stole my throne, and you put yourself on it. You never belonged there. It was always mine. I let you warm it for a few years, but I’m taking it back.”

“Like fuck you are.”

Even without my gun, I’m going to kill him.

I charge him again. This time, I allow the full weight of my body to collide with his.

We struggle on the floor.

Blood splays between us. He grabs my head, attempting to bash it into the concrete, I brace for impact, but as he moves, I headbutt him, busting his nose and flipping us over. Now straddling him, my hands wrap around his neck.

I hold tighter and tighter.

His life slipping through my fingers.

It’s almost over.

From the corner of my eye, I can see his gaze change, his arm reaching out. I follow his line of sight. His fingers are now dangerously close to the discarded gun.

If he gets it, I’m dead.

If that happens, my wife will meet a fate worse than me. I know it. She knows it. Salvatore knows it. No matter what happens, I can’t let that happen, even if I have to die to protect her. Letting him go is a calculated move as my hands slip from his neck. Oxygen rushes into him, and it’s enough to give me the leverage I need. I jump.

He's quick to follow.
My fingers feel the metal.
My hand wrapping around it.
I grab the gun, and then I aim.

Bang.

The sound rings through the air.
Thunderous.
Right in the head.
I've killed my cousin.
I've avenged my parents.

Most of all, I've saved the love of my life.

With his body now on the floor, lying in a pool of his blood, I move to stand so that I can make my way over to Viviana.

His men are all subdued, some dead. Julia is grasping keys from one of the bodies and is working on freeing my wife.

I'm tired, so very fucking tired, but then I see her running, and despite her healing injuries, she's barreling toward me. Throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me as if she was sure I had died.

It was close.

But in the end, we prevailed.

"I love you. Don't ever do that again."

"I can't say never."

And that's the honest truth. I can't. Not in my line of work.

Can I give it up?

Could I walk away?

She looks at me like I'm her salvation, not her damnation, and I know right then and there I can.

For this woman, I can give it all up.

Maybe not today.

Or tomorrow.

But soon.

EPILOGUE

Viviana

IT'S ONLY BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE EVERYTHING WENT down. Things were crazy at first. They arrested my father. It was an open and shut case. The proof Ana had collected of his involvement with Matteo's uncle's human trafficking ring was substantial. He won't be getting out of jail soon. I haven't spoken to my mother since Salvatore took me, and I don't plan to. Last I heard, she left the country, and is living with some family we have in Sicily, far away from any scandal regarding my father.

Matteo and I have settled into a comfortable routine, whatever comfortable can be when you're married to the mob.

We spent the first few weeks making sure we got Ana the best care available. Now that she's in a good place, a safe place, I have been brainstorming what I want to do with the rest of my life.

As much as I love lazy days with my husband, I need to work.

Julia often brainstorms with me, and we come up with some great ideas, but nothing concrete yet.

I hear the footsteps before I see him.

Turning over my shoulder, I smile up at him as he walks into the room.

“Is he potty trained yet?” he asks, looking down into my lap. Snuggling against me is the rescue puppy we adopted last month. We aren’t exactly sure what breed he is, but if I had to harbor a guess, I would say he’s a mix of a cavalier and a poodle. Matteo claims we needed a big scary dog, but when I saw Bruce, I knew he was for me.

According to the shelter, someone left Bruce on the side of the road.

The moment I heard the story, I felt an instant connection. Not that I was left on the side of the road, but I knew what it was like not to be wanted by your family.

Since then, I have spent almost every waking hour with the tiny bundle of fur. Matteo, however, has been slower to warm up, not appreciating the fact that Bruce doesn’t like to pee outside. Instead, he prefers to pee on furniture and carpet ... and well anywhere that drives my husband crazy.

“He’s getting better,” I offer as my answer.

“So, he’s still shitting everywhere?”

“He’s not shitting everywhere,” I mumble under my breath.

His right eyebrow lifts, challenging me.

“Fine. He had an accident ... or three today.” Matteo’s eyes go wide at my words. “But he’s totally trying.”

“Whatever you say.” Matteo walks farther into the room before stopping closer to me. My jaw chooses that moment to rattle from the chilly air. “Are you cold?”

The blanket wrapped around me and the puppy sitting on my lap do little to warm me.

“A bit.”

“Let me start a fire.”

“That’s okay ...” I trail off, looking down at the floor. His hand touches my jaw and lifts it, so I’m once again looking into his eyes.

“Viviana.” His voice is powerful yet comforting as he says my name.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Do you think I would ever hurt you?”

My head shakes back and forth. “Of course not.”

“Do you think I would let anything hurt you ...” He leads, and I know exactly what he’s implying. My irrational fear of fire.

“Well, no. But—”

“No buts. I won’t. So right now. Right here. In our house, I’m going to teach you how to light a fire. I’m going to show you how to keep it controlled.”

He reaches his hand out to me to take and I stare at him blankly. I know my fear is stupid. I haven’t even allowed myself to light a candle, or fire since. Even when we lost power so many months ago and Matteo lit them, I couldn’t control how my heart raced.

“It’s stupid. I don’t know why I can’t.”

He grasps me and pulls me up, Bruce stepping off me and curling into a ball, watching us from where he now rests as Matteo pulls me toward the fireplace. Beside it are logs.

“We are going to start by placing two pieces of wood on the grate.” He moves to grab it, doing the work for me. I’m relieved by it, but something tells me he’s going to make me light it. Once he sets the logs down, he grabs a few pieces of newspaper that he has resting on the table, ready for this exact moment. He crumples it up. Once it’s ready, he turns to me. “Are you ready to light the kindling?”

“No.”

“You can do this. You went up against my cousin, you took a bullet for me, you can light it.” His voice leaves no room for objection.

I look down at the match, and the paper now stuffed between wood.

Taking the match in my hand, I stare at it. How can something so little be so scary?

That's when I realize to think how, sometimes, Ana would say different quotes to me.

What had she said about fear?

A quote from Aristotle ... "*He who overcomes his fear will truly be free.*" That was it.

Right now, I realize the truth to those words. No matter how far I have come, how amazing my life now is, I'll never be able to move forward until I conquer my fear.

Without a second thought, I strike the match and place it in the fireplace.

It comes alive.

Breathing life into flames.

I watch as it dances before me, Matteo's hand takes mine, and together, we feel the warmth.

The heat that no longer burns.

MATTEO

Nine months later ...

THINGS HAVE CALMED DOWN SINCE THE CRAZY NIGHT IN WHICH I got my wife back.

Since then, I have been a tyrant. *The* tyrant.

I never let her out of my sight. Every now and then, she complains, but I know she secretly loves it.

She loves it when I'm a possessive ass.

The only time she's alone is when I go to work, but soon that will change too.

Viviana spends those times with her sister. That came as a shock, but now that time has passed, it's the most natural thing in the world for her.

Today, when I arrive home, I find her in the library. Viviana is pulling books to donate to the free library she and Julia have started.

It started off as a little project, but now, by the looks of what's going on in the room, it's going to take up her time.

"Hi." She smiles up at me from the floor.

"Looks like you have your hands full."

She laughs. It's a beautiful laugh, one that I can, and will, spend the rest of my life listening to.

Placing the books down, she stands up and places a kiss on my lips.

"How was your day, dear?" she jokes. It's her new favorite way to greet me, as if we were just a normal couple, and I didn't run the mafia.

I pull her closer, deepening the kiss, and she giggles against my lips. "That good."

"I have something to talk to you about," I say as I pull away.

"That sounds serious." I walk over to the couch, and she follows suit.

"It's done."

"What's done?"

"I stepped down. Lorenzo is taking over for me."

Her mouth hangs open. "What ... are you sure you're okay with this?"

"I am. I'm not going to stop working. I'll run the legitimate parts of the business. This is what my father always wanted too. He just never had the opportunity because of his brother. But now that Salvatore is dead, I can live his dream."

Viviana jumps from where she is sitting into my lap.

“I’m so happy for you.” She lets out a sigh of relief, and now I’m sure I made the right decision.

Every day that I left her these past few months, I could see the fear in her eyes. Now it’s gone.

“I have one more surprise.”

“Another? Eeep,” she squeals. “I love surprises!”

I stand from the couch and hold out my hand for her to take.

Now, together, we walk out of the library. I lead her to the foyer.

That’s where Julia and Jonathan are waiting with the surprise.

When she turns the corner, a gasp leaves her mouth.

It was a long road, a long year, but all the hard work was worth it.

“Ana ...” A sob breaks through her lips, and tears flow down her cheeks.

The woman who raised my wife stands in the doorway.

She’s still frail, and sometimes her mind gets jumbled from the years of medication, but every day, she gets a little better with the help of the best doctors in the world. A part of her once lost is restored.

“My girl, my Vivi.” The term of endearment makes my wife cry harder.

Slowly, she walks up to her, and they embrace.

They hug for a minute before we escort Viviana and the family into the den. Tonight, a dinner will be prepared to celebrate family.

Lorenzo will be joining us too, as well as Roberto. My family.

Life has changed for me over the past year, but I realize now, power is not important. Neither is money and fame.

All that matters is this ...

Having people to cherish, people to love.
That's when you are finally complete.

Sneak Peak:

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SNEAK PEAK OF SHATTERED DYNASTY

AN HONEST-TO-GOD, full-on moan escapes her mouth this time.

Dammit all to hell.

That moan.

That will haunt me for the rest of the night.

Then she fucking licks her lips. I watch the movement. Track it with hungry eyes.

Great. Just fucking great.

I find myself taking a step closer, a moth to a flame.

She has ice cream on her lip, and I need to taste it.

I know I shouldn't.

I can't help it.

Before I can stop myself, my hand reaches forward.

I close the distance.

My body is almost touching hers.

I lean closer, my hand touching her lips.

She stops breathing for a second.

Then I wipe the ice cream.

She exhales, her chest heaving, and she moves a step closer.

I want to kiss her.

My lips hover over hers.

We are so close I can feel her exhale.

“Why are you making a mess in my kitchen?” Chef shouts.

And just like that, the moment is ruined.

I remember who I’m standing with.

I remember why I shouldn’t do this.

I remember both our sins.

And I internally scold myself for thinking with my dick when it comes to her once again.

This won’t end well, I remind myself.

No shit.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Harrison is a USA Today and Amazon bestselling author. When she's not journaling her life, you can find her window shopping, cooking dinner for her family, or curled up on her couch reading a book.



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