



the
MONSTER
and the
DOLL

usa today bestselling author

JADE WEST

THE MONSTER AND THE
DOLL

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HEARTLESS



CHAPTER ONE

Lucian

THE DOSSIER WAITED in an outstretched hand. The hand belonged to my secretary, judging by the pink polka dots decorating her nails. I took it as I slid into my seat beside the head analyst. Across the corner from me was a guy from media relations.

They had names, of course. I knew what they were, just like I knew how much was in each of their bank accounts and what their overall GPA was.

Those were facts. Attributes. To me, these people were their function, and that function was communication. They were oversized iPhones, really. They sent me information from my various networks and disseminated my commands.

Another source of information—the folder. I opened it and looked through it. This was all digitized, sitting on some uber-secure server, but I preferred hard copies. They were easier to destroy.

The first page contained daily numbers for Morelli Holdings. Our family had a rich portfolio of real estate, media, and manufacturing. It started with elevators. My grandfather had contracts with major development companies throughout the city. He built a respectable fortune. It's my father who expanded the company into other verticals. He loved the negotiation. The chase. The win. He didn't love management nearly as much. Which was a problem. Numbers ran down the page in bold. Our stock prices. Our gross revenue. Our expenses.

We were in the red. Normally, that's a bad thing. But for me, today, it was fucking perfect. It's exactly what I needed.

I flipped the page for more specifics from the various departments. Another page. This one delved into personal details. Best to have leverage before you need it. For instance, here was a photo of our Vice President sleeping with a girl half his age. I wondered what Mrs. Vice President would think about it. Something I filed away for another day.

“You.”

My secretary jumped in her seat. “Yes, sir?”

Christ. She always used that breathy sex kitten voice. *Yes, sir*; as if she thought I was going to fuck her. As if she thought I'd order her to get to her knees while I was in the middle of a conference call or a limo ride through New York City. She was beautiful, but I had more discerning taste.

“Everyone's there?” I asked.

She knew what I meant. Behind those big blue eyes was a Mensa-level mind. It's why she was my secretary. “Yes,” she confirmed. “Every single one of our yeses arrived, and two of the nos are staying home.”

The sweet taste of victory flooded my mouth. More physical sensation than anything else. I didn't feel much of anything in the way of actual emotion, but this was almost too easy.

Our limo turned a corner and the Morelli Holdings building came into view. Even nestled among the other NYC skyscrapers, this one stood above. Tall. Dark. Imposing. This building bore my name. My father's name, technically, but that was going to change in about thirty minutes. I was one takeover away from being in charge.

I turned to the analyst without a word and raised my eyebrows.

“The estimates are stronger than ever,” he said.

Perfect. I glanced at the woman who ran my private media division. She had a good sense for how the public would react. More useful still, she had connections to every major business network. If I played my cards right, I could be on the cover of Forbes in a matter of months.

She nodded back. “Everything’s ready to go.”

The announcement, she meant. She’d been working on it for weeks. That probably seems like a long time, but I’d been working on it for years. I watched my father succeed with this business through a combination of brute force and privilege. He made my family a fortune, even as he lost several more.

I’ve been waiting for this moment.

It was here.

Any CEO can experience bad months, but my father didn’t like to explain himself. He told the board to go fuck themselves. Since it’s Morelli Holdings, they couldn’t say anything until I came to them. Lucian Morelli, CEO. It had a nice ring to it.

An even larger entourage was waiting outside the building as the limo pulled up. Everyone with their battle faces on. You don’t play a multi-billion-dollar hostile takeover without accumulating a goddamn army.

And my army was everywhere. My people worked all the way down in the mailroom and all the way up in the boardroom. I’d been recruiting allies for the ten years I’d been working here. Now we’d strike.

There was only one elevator to take us all the way to the top. Standing in the elevator, I could see the boardroom with its windows looking out over the city. I could see the silhouettes of men inside. Some of those men would oppose this takeover. More of them would support it. And my father? Well, he was too smart to truly be shocked.

The elevator opened silently, without a *ding* to herald our arrival. My shoes clicked across the marble floor. One of the men in my entourage reached forward and opened the

boardroom door. I walked through with a grim smile. I didn't take any pleasure from beating my father, no matter how much he beat me and my siblings as children. My siblings more so than me, of course. But the company? The company was my birthright. I'd take care of it better than he ever did.

Mr. Ohanian gave me a nervous smile from across the room. Light glistened on his sweaty forehead. He needed to get it the fuck together. Open displays of fear would only tip off my father. He was good at reading people. I didn't show him any fear. I've never been afraid of him. Not like my siblings were. I walked over to give Mr. Ohanian a handshake and gripped him just a little too hard so his eyes met mine.

"Everything going according to plan?" I asked him.

He chuckled, the sound thin with anxiety. I didn't fucking like that. "Now, Lucian. I've always known you were a smart boy, but your father...your father is smart, too."

"Son." My father's voice came from behind me. I turned. We embraced. It's a strange relationship, a grown child with their parent. Even stranger when that parent used to be abusive. There were many reasons my father didn't use his fists with me, but one of them is that if he did, I would hit back. And I wouldn't stop. Not ever. They'd have to drag me off his lifeless body.

And yet we were both Morellis. Both part of an institution that, in its way, had protected our family for years. We could feel nothing for each other in private. In public, we behaved. So there I was, giving him a one-armed hug, patting him on the back, pretending to be jovial here in this corporate jungle.

"I'm glad you could come," my father said, as if I hadn't run the board meetings for the last two years while he was off golfing or fucking his latest mistress. "The board has something important they want to discuss with us." He winked. None of this was good. Clearly my father had caught wind of the coup. Clearly he'd got some power play planned. However, I wasn't overly concerned. This was all part of battle. I nodded and took my seat at one end of the table.

Bryant Morelli took his seat at the other end. He was a strong man, despite being in his sixties. Powerful. Healthy. With the signature dark hair and tanned skin that marked all of his children. A long row of men. Everyone filled in between us. Just like the people in my limo, they had names and hopes and dreams, but I didn't care about those things. They're just tools. Functions. Little apps on a computer screen that I could use to make things happen.

My father was the only person sitting at this fifteen-foot table with me.

The chairman called the meeting to order along with the secretary, who read the minutes. They might as well have been Alexa speaking for all we took notice of them. I locked my eyes on my father's. Bryant Morelli. Patriarch of our family. General abuser. Asshole. Villain. My boss, for now.

We got to article two and my pulse sped up.

This was it.

This was the moment.

Outwardly, nothing changed. I didn't have a tell. No one beat me at poker. Not even my father. I didn't tap my fingers, but I also didn't become unnaturally still. I didn't blink too fast or too slow. My breathing didn't change.

I knew every word before they left Mr. Ohanian's lips. After all, I wrote them.

"The board is grateful for the long and fruitful leadership of Bryant Morelli. Morelli Holdings continues to be a powerhouse in international real estate. Even the great rulers must eventually rest. So with utmost respect, the board will vote on removing Bryant Morelli as the CEO and appointing his son, Lucian Morelli, to replace him."

Someone seconded the motion. And then we went around the table.

"Aye." "Aye." "Aye." "Aye."

The vote went according to plan. One of the nos, one of the oldest people on the board, gave me a disapproving glare before casting his vote against me.

Then we arrived at Leonard Hart.

He was technically a no, but not out of any loyalty to my father or any love for the old guard. He was a no because I wouldn't promise to make him the chief of operations. He was a slimy bastard. I don't mind paying for my position in corporate favors, but I'm not about to put someone as useless as Hart in such a high position. He gave me a look with a glint in his eyes, faintly reptilian. It meant he was voting no, but more than that, it meant he had something up his sleeve.

Before I continued, he said, "Before I allow this vote to proceed, I feel there's something the board should know. I've had this information for a while, but with Bryant Morelli at the helm, able to control his son's impulses, it seemed less important. But now that might not be the case..."

He trailed off, looking faintly worried. What the fuck.

O'Hanian slapped the table, a nervous gesture. "See here," he said. "this isn't the proper procedure. We're in a vote. The only thing you can do now is cast yours. The time for discussion has passed."

Another board member, one of my yeses, but one of the less enthusiastic yeses frowned. I wanted to hear him out. Fuck procedure. Morelli Holdings didn't get to where it is now by following the rules. A general murmur of ascent ran through the room. The meeting was getting out of hand.

Hart pulled out the remote for the projector, which should have been assigned to anyone else. How unspontaneous this moment really was. A coup. Technically, it was a coup of a coup, but whatever you called it, it meant I wasn't not going to be the fucking CEO when this meeting was over. That much I could sense in the air. I don't show weakness. I don't let my frustration near the surface, but of course my father still knew it was there. He gave me a slight knowing smile.

A slim screen unfolded from the ceiling. The lights dimmed. The conference room was massive and primarily surrounded by glass. The windows that faced the office were an expensive privacy shield. So we could see out, but they were tinted too much for the people on the floor to see in. On the other side, we had an expansive view of New York City's skyline. It was through that opening that the conference table, a single large half-ton slab of petrified wood, was lifted via a crane into the room. Each chair, ergonomically crafted and made of rare leather, cost five grand. The audio visual system was state-of-the-art.

It was in this room that a photograph flashed across the 100-inch screen of me, bare chested, holding a whip. I was standing behind a pretty little sub beating her ass bloody. And what a beautiful ass it was, already striped from my blows, red and swelling, a few breaks in the skin where droplets of blood trickled down. I remember her ass. I don't remember her name. We were in a highly exclusive club, a place where privacy is valued above all else, a place where a man with my power and wealth and infamy can play, but obviously someone found me there. Someone filmed me there.

There was a faint click and the slide changed. The same woman, but this time we could see her face. Agony was written across her pretty features, tears streamed down her face, mascara streaked her cheeks. She was in agony. Someone who didn't know about pain sluts might not realize she was also about to come. She'd come so hard that she squirted arousal down the inside of her legs. She screamed my name and continued calling me for weeks after that encounter, begging for another night. No, thank you. I didn't do repeats.

There were gasps around the room. They were scandalized by my behavior. As if each of those men didn't have 21-year-old influencers tucked away in Tribeca for them to visit. I didn't bother explaining their hypocrisy. It wouldn't help. I also didn't bother defending my kink. It didn't matter.

But I did stand up.

At my nod, one of my men flipped a switch on the wall. The screen rolled back up, removing the offending image, and the lights turned up again.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “and ladies.” I nodded toward the one woman in the room. Ironically, she was the only one who didn’t appear scandalized. Instead, her cheeks were flushed and her pupils were dilated. Sixty years old or not, someone had just seen something for the first time that was probably going to infiltrate her fantasies from now on.

“I have a private life,” I said. “I have sex. These things shouldn’t come as a surprise. And they don’t affect my performance here at Morelli Holdings. Since when do we parade private pictures in the boardroom? Who among us is a saint?” Most people looked away from me. They couldn’t meet my eyes, except for Hart. He felt very proud of himself. And my father, who simply looked amused. I had to give credit to the old man where it’s due. He didn’t become this rich and powerful by showing up unprepared.

Mr. O’Hanian cleared his throat. “I agree that our private lives aren’t usually open for discussion.” He gave Hart a censorious look. “However, now that this has been brought to our attention, it would be remiss of us to ignore it. The truth is, your actions do reflect on the company.”

“Hear! Hear!” said one of the men who was opposed to this takeover from the beginning. He was deeply in my father’s pocket, but at least he was there of his own conviction, unlike Hart, who went to the highest bidder. “Bryant Morelli is a married man, a family man, a God-fearing man.”

Is that what this company needs? A God-fearing man? My lips twitched, but I managed not to laugh. Bryant Morelli feared nothing and no one. He certainly didn’t fear retribution when he beat me and my brothers bloody. Or when he stepped out on my mother for the millionth time. Bryant Morelli was not a man of high morality, but I understood what they were really saying. He had the appearance of it. He had the image.

And the fact is, I don't. My sexual predilections aside, I was cold, unfeeling, arrogant. Nothing about me said family man.

The room burst into rapid discussion. My father's supporters spoke loudly, demanding a new vote. Some of my supporters spoke out in my defense, but even to my own ears, it sounded feeble. It sounded like we'd already lost. If we took another vote right now, I'd lose. And that would be a hard blow to recover from. I'd eventually have this coup again, but it would take longer and I'd have to give up more to slick assholes like Hart.

No. We'd finish this now.

"Six weeks," I said to the room, my voice loud and commanding enough that everyone fell silent. "I have devoted my time to building this company, to growing it. When you look at my division's numbers compared to the company as a whole, it proves what I can do. But I also see that image matters to you. And I value your opinions." That was a lie, but I could play the goddamn game. "Therefore, I'm asking for six weeks. Give me six weeks to improve it. Give me six weeks to become a regular on the society pages for the right reasons. And then we'll vote."

They deliberate for a moment amid anxious murmurs.

"Six weeks?" my father asked. "For what? You won't change your stripes, boy. You'll just hide it better... and then once you're CEO, you'll keep doing it. Keep ruining the family name with your predilections. No, if you want the board to believe you, you need something more than that. You need a wife."



CHAPTER TWO

Lucian

I'D ALWAYS BEEN a monster for seeking out the forbidden.

The exclusive BDSM club was my usual hunting ground. That was where I found women who begged for what I had to offer—sex with pain instead of romance.

My father was fucking with me. So was the board, for that matter. It was a final hurdle to jump before taking control of Morelli Holdings. A test, to see if I could play their little games of diplomacy and class warfare.

Two could play that game.

A nice, docile woman. That's what the board wants me to find. Someone well bred. Someone well-mannered, as if I were buying a horse. And so I had to go shopping where well-bred wives were sold—at a party thrown by the Constantine family.

Disguised by nothing more than a black leather mask covering half my face, I mingled my way through the guests. I was right at the heart of it—pompous bullshit, all of it fake. Fake pretenses. Fake smiles. Everything I'd have expected from the Constantines.

And the little bride I hunted.

“Champagne, sir?”

I shook my head and fixed the waitress in my stare.
“Mineral water.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

She scuttled away, rattling her tray of glasses as she went.

Tinsley Constantine's coming-of-age masked ball was bursting at the seams. Hundreds of rich people chattering in costumes, and I was twisting amongst them like a vine with invisible thorns.

They didn't know a Morelli walked among them.

Constantines swarmed the place, billowing through the masses with their beautiful, blonde bullshit. Vivian, Keaton, and Tinsley herself were prancing around as though they were on a film set, but not nearly so much as Caroline. The matriarch was dressed up like an ice queen in a diamanté mask, smiling at everyone she passed.

It wasn't Caroline who caught my attention.

No. It was the much younger woman in gold. She was beautiful, but there were plenty of beautiful women. There was something else about her. She was twice as alive as anyone else. Vibrant. Animated. Full of feeling, which is something I severely lacked.

She owned the room without even trying.

Elaine Constantine.

She wore a Venetian mask that covered so much of her face I could barely make out her features, but that didn't matter. I didn't need to see her face.

The visible parts of her were enough to drive me wild. Hair like silk and gold. I wanted my fingers in it—why? No explanation came to mind. I wanted to run my thumb over the soft pout of her lips while she watched me with eyes so big and blue they reminded me of a song. *Me*. A song. It was ludicrous, but that didn't make it any less true.

I watched her from guest to guest, swigging back the fizz and laughing at each one like they were the most hilarious person she'd ever met. Her laugh was sexy and flirty, with enough husky lower notes to make me hard beneath my tux.

I wasn't in the business of deep emotions. Didn't allow them. Abhorred them. But the woman made me feel something. A pressure in my chest. A sharp curiosity. I wanted more than the usual pain and tears. I wanted more.

I couldn't stop looking at her.

The gold silk of her ballgown was a perfect fit on a perfect body.

Sloping curves in a delicious hourglass—a gorgeous pedestal of glamor to highlight the elegance of her slender neck. Oh, how I'd love to feel her pulse there as I fucked her how she liked it. As I *showed* her how she liked it.

Rough.

Because, of course, in my head, Elaine Constantine was not well-mannered or well-bred. If she was to be my wife, she would learn to love kink. I'd make sure of that.

Her blonde curls were held up in twists that glittered with diamonds. Her fingers were perfectly manicured and glittering to match, sparkling under the chandelier lights every time she reached out a hand for some nobody to kiss it.

Lust had my cock throbbing.

Lust—and something else. I wanted to take her body.

Slowly.

Deeply.

Painfully.

I wanted to see her hurt. I wanted to hear her cry. I wanted to feel her body fight me as she begged me to stop, even though her pussy was screaming for more.

“Lucian? I wasn't expecting to see you here!”

I turned to face the voice at my side and pasted on a grim smile.

It was Baron Rawlings, his red face still recognizable under his opera mask. Jesus Christ, even the British

aristocracy had flown in for this. A teenager's birthday party turned into the social event of the season. I wondered how Tinsley felt about that, before remembering she was a Constantine. I didn't care how they felt.

I shook his sweaty hand. "Good evening, Baron. A pleasure to see you. I'm incognito, if you don't mind. It would be better if people don't know a Morelli crashed the party."

"Your secret's safe with me," he assured me. "I loved your latest interview. About the Windleys and their investment changes. Excellent points. I called my broker right away."

"Why, thank you. I'm very pleased *Forbes* called me. Again."

The waitress delivered my mineral water and scurried away again with another *thank you, sir, thank you*. She was pretty. A tight ass. Maybe on another night, I might bring her to the club. Then again, this was no ordinary night.

I half-listened to Baron Rawlings's small talk. He tried to convince me to write an article on him and his heritage. Even a Constantine would have rolled his eyes at that one.

When Joseph Eddington came cruising up with a "*Rawlings!*" I used the moment to make my exit, and there she was again, waiting to transfix me, the woman in gold.

She brushed by me on her way to the next little cluster of guests, close enough that I could smell her. Orchids and plum. Rich. Posh. *Fake*.

I had to remember that about her. She was playing a part. So was I.

The woman was definitely tipsy. Laughing a touch too loud. Swaying in that sexy manner. Champagne? Yes. Cocaine? Possibly. I could virtually taste it in the air around her as I heard the click of her heels against the polished floor. But there was more.

Something...darker...

Secrets. I could see them inside her, burning deep. A chasm in her façade that people were failing to see. I could see right to the heart of her.

The wild child of the whole Constantine family.

I knew of her, everyone did, the party girl with desperate eyes. Always on the raucous outskirts of Bishop's Landing, hitting the clubs in NYC and getting pictured in tabloids. It was the behavior that spoke of some personal pain, some secret demons haunting her.

It only made my cock throb harder.

I brushed up behind her, and she twisted her head to me; that's when I first fixed her in my stare. Cruel. Bold. Dangerous.

Someone was chattering away to her, and Elaine wore a half-smile. Her gaze, however, wandered the room. It caught mine. She swallowed hard as our stares fixed and held, and I didn't need to see the rest of her face. I saw enough in her gaze to know she was a doe in headlights. Her eyes were pools of blue, broken and lonely, captured by the chill of mine.

I didn't smile back. I didn't blink. I could feel it. Her curiosity.

There were five hundred people at this masquerade ball, and she knew every single one of them. Except for me. My gaze was cold; hers, wondering.

There was chatter all around us, neither of us were listening.

She should have learned her lesson as a baby girl long ago, that curiosity killed the cat. Clearly, she hadn't. She kept advancing, trying her best to keep her cool, but failing.

Mine was, too.

I didn't let it show.

The *Happy Birthday* song blared out as the charade of a celebration reached its peak. The whole gang of Constantine

siblings assembled around the birthday girl as a massive cake appeared in a procession, all proud of the little princess as she jumped up and down.

Elaine joined her siblings with a forced smile, mouthing the words with no heart.

When the candles were blown out and the cake whisked away to be cut in the kitchen, she made her retreat toward the rear exit. No one looked at her. Not as closely as I did. But every move she made was coated in sadness.

It may've been a happy birthday for Tinsley, but in reality, the Constantine kids weren't a happy, well-adjusted bunch. Neither were the Morellis, come to think of it.

We had that in common, despite being enemies.

My cock made me follow her far more than my brain did. I was snaking in her wake as people cheered for Tinsley. I really was a monster for chasing the forbidden.

Elaine's deft fingers already tapped away on her phone when I reached the hallway to join her. I caught a glimpse of the rideshare app and knew she was only minutes away from escaping. "Going somewhere?" I ask.

Her eyes went wide as she faced me. "Who are you?"

"Lucian Morelli, at your service."

Shock turned her face white. "A Morelli? Here? You have to go. You have to leave. Mom will freak the fuck out if she finds out you're here. Even I won't be able to save you."

Amusement rose in my throat. "Would you save me, Elaine?"

She frowned. "I'm being serious. You can't be here."

"Who's going to stop me?"

"Security, for one thing."

"I paid them far too much to let me in for them to kick me back out. Enough talking about me, sweetheart. I want to

know where you were going. Home? Or somewhere more interesting? A club? Are you going to dance the night away?"

Her eyes narrowed. "It's really none of your business."

"I'm making it my business." I leaned into her, a hard press against the wall that had her gasping. It wasn't polite. It was rude and brutish and everything the Morellis were rumored to be. She had probably been told stories about how terrible we were, like cautionary tales. Well, the Morellis were told the same stories about the glittering, golden Constantines.

She tried to push me away, but I wouldn't budge. Her blue eyes were saucers through her mask. "Don't you know who I am?" She gave a quick glance down the hall and lowered her voice. "Don't you know what they'll do to you if they see you with me?"

The hallway was empty around us, everyone firmly consumed by Tinsley Constantine's birthday celebration. Cake. There would be cake. And endless fountains of champagne.

"I know exactly who you are, *Elaine*." I pushed my thigh between hers.

Her eyes widened even more through the glitter of her mask. I wasn't afraid of her family, but her words confirmed how isolated they kept her. She could mingle in public, but they would cut the dick off any man who dared touch their little princess.

She was well-bred. That was why I wanted a woman like her.

Of course, that was before I saw her. Then I wanted her for an entirely different reason.

"Then you really are crazy," she said, her head shaking, her voice wavering. Is it fear? Arousal? That's the problem with a twisted sadist like me. I don't care much about the distinction. They're both fucking hot. "My mother wouldn't have you thrown out. She'd have you..."

“Killed?”

She gritted her teeth. “I could scream, and everyone would see you.”

“You won’t.” I gripped a hand around her neck and pressed my lips to hers. *Insanity.*

She was so sweet. So soft. It was a shock to the system, though I’d been picturing it since I saw her in the ballroom. The antithesis of everything I was.

My mouth was rough, and my hands were rougher. My thigh pressed hard against her pussy, hitting just the right spot to make her shiver.

She should’ve fought. Screamed. Battled. But no. At the height of her sister’s birthday party, the gorgeous woman in gold kissed me back. Forbidden doesn’t even come close.

She dropped her clutch to the floor, gasping into my kiss. The way she danced her tongue with mine was a far different experience than I’d have imagined. She was messy and nervous—everything I’d never expect from a billionaire heiress.

Inexperienced.

That was when I realized it. Right there and then. Elaine Constantine wasn’t a young woman who’d fucked her way through every cock on the eastern seaboard. Nothing like the tabloids and the gossip blogs would have you believe.

She was a young woman who didn’t know what the hell she was doing. An untouched doll, cracked on the inside yet still smiling beautifully through the window of her pristine box.

“We should stop this,” she moaned into the kiss. “This is madness.”

“I never stop for anyone,” I told her and slipped my hand between her thighs.

Her golden silk dress and lace panties underneath were a thin veil over her wet slit. I could feel the heat of her. Delicious. She spread her legs and wrapped her arms around my neck, grinding against my hand like she couldn't stop herself.

I forced her along the hall and shoved her into an ornate bathroom. The door made one hell of a slam as I pushed her inside and kept pushing until we were shut in the water closet, but I didn't care. I hitched her dress up, biting her neck as my fingers circled hard around her clit.

"Take it like a good little doll or I'll make it hurt," I growled, and I could feel the shock bristling right through her. Shock and something more. Something deeper.

Her eyes were searching mine as I finger-fucked her. Seeking. Needing.

"Why are you doing this?" she panted.

"Because you're mine," I said and forced two fingers inside her. "You just don't know it yet."

She was so tight it made my mouth water. The golden goddess moaned for me. "Nobody touches me. Ever. They wouldn't dare. My mother would—"

I laughed. "I take whoever I want, whenever I want."

That's when she pushed me away hard enough to tug my mask off. "You're a bastard."

I was still laughing. "Oh, I am, sweetheart. I am. You'd better believe it."



CHAPTER THREE

Elaine

IT DIDN'T MAKE sense. It couldn't make sense.

Lucian Morelli had his fingers inside me at my sister's masked ball. And I liked it. More than liked it. Wanted it. Needed it. How did I end up in this situation?

He was dead, once my mother found out. Fuck. *Fuck.*

"How the hell did you get in here?" I asked against his mouth, but even at the height of the deadliest storm I'd ever known, my body didn't care about the answer. My body only cared about him. My flesh was a law of its own, bucking against him for more. My senses were screaming, needing him. Needing a man who would finally make me his. Finally.

But it couldn't be him.

It couldn't be Lucian Morelli, of all people.

He pushed my thighs further apart and hitched me higher against the wall, and he wasn't even slightly concerned. Not even a little scared of my mother. That would make him the only person at this masquerade ball who wasn't afraid of her. Maybe the only person in the world. Even in that moment, even knowing exactly what I was capable of in this place with security all around us, he didn't flinch. Didn't shy away. Didn't give a shit for what she could do.

Lucian Morelli wasn't scared of anything. The man was the devil, reigning over hell.

“I walked right through the front door,” he told me, and I didn’t doubt it.

I panted on my bravado. “If I tell one single person you’re in here, you’ll never make it out alive. You know that, right? You’re a fool if you don’t realize the danger you’re in.”

He answered in a beat. “I’m not the one in danger, sweetheart. You are.”

He was probably right about that. He was the wolf in a pasture of sheep. That’s me, a sheep. I should have been petrified. A sheep in the jaws of Lucian Morelli—oldest son of Bryant Morelli, poised to take over Morelli Holdings one day.

I was torn between screaming for help or accepting the inevitability of this. Because maybe, just maybe, I could finally know what it was like having a real man fight for me.

I spread my legs even wider for the devil between them, and I kissed him. I kissed him, and I hoped he’d make it hurt. I hoped he’d make my first time something that would mark me.

The monster pinned my wrists above my head.

Yes. Do it.

I gave him a half smile. “Do you think you’re such a badass, Morelli?”

He twisted his fingers even deeper. His smile was evil enough to burn the sun. “More of a badass than you,” he said. “I never imagined Elaine Constantine would be a virgin.”

My belly lurched.

How did he know that? How the fuck *could* he know that? Was it really so obvious that I was a naive little girl who’d never been with a man before? Maybe it was. One thing was for sure—if he hadn’t known before, the flush of my cheeks would have told him he was right.

I was a virgin.

A virgin aching to be touched. To be used. To be fucked hard enough to hurt. The one thing that would save me from

hurting myself was finding someone else to do it for me.

“Do it,” I said. “Show me what a cruel man you are and fuck me, Morelli.”

He would have done it. I know he would. I could see the raw lust in his eyes, fixed on mine as he tugged my panties down my thighs. I’d have lost my virginity against a bathroom wall with my dress hitched up around my waist, and I’d have wanted it.

He didn’t get the chance.

We were both jolted to our senses by the thump of the bathroom door, and there were footsteps. Heavy footsteps. Getting closer.

“Elaine? Are you in here? Your mother’s looking for you.”

Lucian was silent, and so was I. Faces just an inch apart, breaths ragged.

“Elaine? You in here? Seriously, what the fuck are you thinking? Your mom is going to lose her shit. At least take your damn clutch with you when you hide in the bathroom.”

Oh no.

No.

It was Silas Roosevelt. My cousin, and one of the few I considered almost a friend.

My cousin burst straight into the water closet without a second’s pause, catching me right in the grip of our family’s nemesis. Even being pinned by the guy wouldn’t have hidden the fact that I was aroused for him. It was obvious. Shame piled on top of the rest of my frazzled emotions as Silas lurched backwards, mouth open wide.

Lucian dropped me back to my feet and stared at him, still not even flustered.

“You’ll be dead,” Silas snarled. “You’ll be fucking dead, Morelli. You’ll wish you never laid a finger on her when Caroline gets ahold of you.”

Lucian fixed his mask into place. “I don’t think that’s going to happen. No one wants word getting out that mommy’s little princess was defiled in a bathroom.”

Silas didn’t speak, because he knew the monster was telling the truth. As much as he would have hated to admit it—Lucian Morelli was right. I’m the eldest daughter in the Constantine family. If I were found compromised in the bathroom, I’d be the one who suffered.

I snapped to my senses. “Go. Seriously, you need to leave.”

Our family had been up against his for decades, billionaires out to fight for the thrill as long as we were spilling the blood of the other. The Constantines were better at hiding our corruption from the world—smarter and more cultured—but that didn’t matter. We were bound in a pit of cruelty and criminality, pursuing wealth and power at any cost.

Sure, we had legitimate businesses. But we had secrets, too. Drugs, arms, trafficking, fraud...it didn’t matter. We were up to our necks.

It made no difference to anyone but us, of course—the police and the courts were so tightly in our back pockets that they’d have rolled over and shown us their bellies if we asked.

“Get the fuck out of here, Morelli!” Silas snarled again.

“I’ll see you again soon,” the monster told my cousin and slapped his shoulder on the way past. “Elaine and I are far from finished.”

“You’re wrong,” I told him. Even though the man was Lucian Morelli, and I hated him with every scrap of my soul, he was seriously damn beautiful. His features were preened but rugged. His jaw was firm, sculpted like a statue.

He was the opposite of me and of all of us Constantines. Dark to our fair. His hair was styled in thick dark sweeps away from his forehead, and his eyes were deadly black. His shoulders were huge, but he was toned all the way down to

slim hips. The tuxedo he wore fit perfectly to his insanely hot frame.

Lucian Morelli was a god.

An evil god.

“Never come back,” I told him. “I mean it, Morelli.”

He gave me a mild smile of refusal. It was a promise to return. The door closed behind him before Silas grabbed my arm and yanked me over.

He shoved my clutch to my chest and shook his head at me. “Be careful before you get us all fucking killed. He gets three minutes before I tell security he’s on the grounds, then I’m done with it. And I’m done with you, too.”

“He grabbed me and pinned me,” I told him, but Silas snorted.

“I saw the way you were looking at him, Elaine. You wanted him. You wanted that scum to touch you. You don’t deserve to call yourself a Constantine.”

The cousin I’d been so close to through my childhood stared at me with disgust in his eyes. Almost as much disgust as he’d had for Morelli.

Betrayal and shame burned through me.

Silas didn’t hang around to make sure I was okay, just stalked out of there without a goodbye. Yeah, it was definite. The one final member of my family who didn’t wish I’d rot in hell, besides my cousin Harriet who loved everything with a pulse, had written me off. Silas was now on team *hate Elaine* with the rest of them. Great. What an achievement.

With shaking hands, I took my phone back out of my clutch and ordered an Uber. Ironically I wasn’t planning on hitting any clubs tonight. Wasn’t planning on dancing. Instead I would curl up with the Real Housewives of Wherever the Fuck and a pint of ice cream. It didn’t make any difference. I could’ve partied at every club in New York City, and it

wouldn't have meant shit to the self-loathing in my eyes as I stared in the mirror.

If only everyone knew the truth.

If only they knew the filth that had turned me into the woman I'd grown up to be.

But it was too late for that.

It was too late for anything other than to destroy myself as quickly as possible. Maybe one day I'd finally pluck up enough courage to change things.

Maybe not.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lucian

I SHOULD'VE GONE straight to Violent Delights and found a woman to scene with. That's the beauty of having your own personal BDSM club—you treat it like one. Everyone in there was mine. They belonged to me, just like the building they were playing filthy games in.

They just didn't know it.

It was the perfect addition to my portfolio. I didn't have to lift a finger to oversee the place. Clark Ventana did all the grunt work, and I cashed in on the profits. It was my kind of team.

It meant nothing to me that night.

My chauffeur pulled up at the rear of the Constantine compound and opened the back door for me. My right-hand man, Trenton Alto, answered on the first ring as I dropped into the leather.

“I want one of Rex's girls. Now.” I breathed in Elaine's scent on my fingers, imagining I was still with her. “Blonde. Blue eyes. Young.”

He cleared his throat. “Where do you want her?”

The sweep of Bishop's Landing was outside the windows when I gave my answer. I'd had enough of it. I needed the hub of the city. “Manhattan.”

“Sure thing. I'll have her over within the hour.”

I ended the call and leaned back in the seat, thinking of Elaine's mouth on mine. Her hot little moans. I would fuck some nameless, faceless woman and pretend she was Elaine.

Without missing a beat, the chauffeur changed the route.

It was the third of my properties, positioned right at the heart of New York. At least the blonde would get a nice skyline view while I played with her.

I pulled my mask off and dumped it out the window long before the car pulled up outside the main entrance. I took a deep breath of city air before I reached the doors and stepped inside. I loved the city. I loved the buzz; I loved the life; I loved the thrill. Sure, I'd traveled the globe plenty through my thirty-five years on this planet, but nowhere had ever captured me like this place.

The team at reception tipped their heads as I walked on by. I held up a hand and paced through to the elevator.

I reached level thirty-two in a flash after giving a nod to the overhead camera as I passed level thirty-one. My security team is on constant high alert. Anyone trying to get to my suite would never make it without being stopped and shot. My drug dealer and erstwhile pimp Rex Hallway would be plenty safe with the whore I ordered in his grip, but very few people could say the same. No one had access. Family only.

I was standing at my main suite windows, surveying the city lights, when the buzz of my door sounded. Rex arrived well within the hour. Excellent service. So it should be, since I was paying a fortune for this. He gave me a nod and gestured at the girl for my approval.

She was small. Pretty.

And scared.

Something was wrong. She kept her eyes on the floor as Rex prodded her inside.

"She's a real sweet one. New to the business, if you know what I mean."

The girl didn't know what to do. She was wearing a slip of lace, white and sweet, and trembling like the apartment was freezing. "Leave us alone."

Rex left.

There's fun to be had in directing some pain and punishment. But this one—she looked like she'd already had enough. She'd be no substitute for Elaine. Elaine had wanted me, kissed me like she'd needed me. There was no hope of even an initiation from Rex's girl.

Change of plans.

"What's your name?" I asked her, and her voice was a delicate quiver when she answered.

"Natalie, sir."

"Come sit down."

I strode back through to the main living room, then turned back. She stood by the door, uncertainty in her eyes.

"Sit *here*."

She came across the room, her steps light and dainty. She looked relieved to sit, but it was short-lived. Her eyes latched onto a throw blanket that hung over the back of the sofa. I picked it up and dropped it over her lap.

Confusion.

Natalie looked from the blanket to me. "This isn't what Rex said would happen."

"How old are you?" I asked, and her eyes stayed fixed on mine.

"Eighteen, sir."

"And this is your first night out."

"Yes." She clenched her jaw tight to keep from crying. I'd seen that expression on some of the girls at Violent Delights. It was a big, flashing sign. Crying was to be expected at a

BDSM club. Trying not to cry before the play had even started?

Irritating. On the surface I was annoyed that Rex had brought me someone this breakable. But underneath, I was... pissed. That I wasn't with Elaine, doing what rich people do after events like Tinsley's birthday. Fucking in a hotel room. Going to drive-throughs in formal wear.

Wanting to do those things with Elaine was against everything I stood for.

Natalie's presence in my apartment became a distraction in an instant. I couldn't let my mind wander over Elaine's body with Natalie clutching at the blanket on my sofa.

"What do you owe?"

She blinked, shrinking down under the blanket, pulling it up to shield herself. "I don't think I'm supposed to talk about that."

"You're in my apartment now. Tell me."

Natalie's shoulders let down a fraction. Lots of the girls were like that. Relieved not to have a choice. "Ten thousand dollars."

The amount was nothing to me. Less than nothing. Like a ripped-up dollar bill. But Natalie's face went pink, then red, and she looked down into her lap to disguise the tears gathering in her eyes.

"How'd you end up owing that much money, Natalie?"

Her eyes met mine again, and she took a determined breath. "I was trying to save for college. A guy in my neighborhood said I could earn some money delivering packages." Jesus, the innocence. "One night I got mugged, and —"

"And now you have to pay for lost merchandise."

"Yeah."

She looked so fucking mortified.

“And if you pay it off?”

The corners of Natalie’s mouth turned down. “I won’t be able to do that any time soon.”

“Play along.”

A little sigh. “If I paid it off, I could go back home.”

There was actual longing in her eyes. Longing for home. If I didn’t want her gone, I’d have asked her about it. I wouldn’t know what it’s like to miss the place you grew up. “Your parents don’t know where you are?”

Laughter burst out of her. “No. I said I was at college. I said I didn’t want to see them anymore.” Natalie straightened her back. Shook her head like it would wake her up from a nightmare. “One of the girls said you made it hurt, but you made it good, so if you wanted to start, we could—”

“No.”

She jumped at the word, her face paling. “But—”

“I’m not going to fuck you tonight. What I’m going to do is settle your debt so you can go home. Go to college. Whatever.” I could feel her watching as I went to the small safe set into a panel next to the TV. One of quite a few I had in the apartment. This one held emergency cash. I pulled out two of the bundles.

Natalie couldn’t take her eyes off it.

“This one is for you.” I handed her the smaller bundle. Five thousand dollars. “For *school*. Not for fucking around. Do you understand?”

She nodded, cradling it in her hands like it was a fortune.

“And *this* one is going with my driver. So are you.”

“What?” New fear washed over her face. “Your driver? I thought—”

“You thought you were doing a job. You’re done with this job. You don’t go back to Rex.” I wasn’t having the chauffeur

take her anywhere. This was a job for the security team. I took out my phone and tapped out a message. “You give the driver the address. He’ll settle the debt and take you home.”

Natalie took in a steady breath.

And burst out crying.

Fucking great.

She cried like she’d been delivered from the gates of hell back to earth. Her tears landed on the money in her hands. Natalie couldn’t let go of it. Wouldn’t put it down.

Cried and cried and cried.

I patted her on the shoulder.

What the fuck else was I going to do?

She kept crying.

I gave her another cursory pat and went into the bedroom. My clothes were going to be enormous on her, but she couldn’t go home the way she was. I went back out into the living room and put a pair of joggers and a plain sweatshirt on the sofa next to her. Natalie hiccuped. “What are those?”

“Do you want to show up at your parents’ doorstep looking like a whore? They’re clothes. You’re in fucking lingerie.”

“Right.” She scrambled up off the sofa and threw the clothes on. Natalie swam in them. She bent to roll up the ankles of the pants, then did her sleeves. She never let go of the money. Not for a second. “So when—”

The elevator tone sounded, and the door opened. Mark, a guy from my security team, stepped inside.

Natalie froze in place, her mouth working. “Are you—” She glanced up at me. “Would you come with me?”

“Jesus, no.”

Her face fell.

“I’m busy.” I forced the edge out of my voice, but it was fucking difficult. “Mark will drop you off at home. Mark, how much do I pay you?”

“Three hundred thousand a year,” he said.

“Are you going to fuck around and not take Natalie where she needs to go?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “No. I will not fuck around.”

“See?” I put a hand between Natalie’s shoulder blades and took her to the door. Then I put a hand under her chin and tipped her face up. “Do not. Ever. Go back to Rex’s.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

“You can thank me by getting out.”

They went.

And I was alone with my thoughts. No idea who I was, this person who sent whores home to their parents.

I laughed out loud. Elaine Constantine wasn’t going to change me in a single night. No. She was just going to spoil me for everyone else. I shucked off my clothes from the party.

But Elaine’s scent followed me to the master bath.

In the shower I stroked my cock, working myself fast as I thought of Elaine. That young woman had stared up with pretty eyes, blue and wide. But they weren’t the eyes I wanted. Not the ones that kept haunting every one of my black heartbeats.

I gritted my teeth and stroked faster.

Nobody would ever understand me.

Nobody could ever understand my body, so tainted in its strengths, and my mind to match.

Not even Elaine fucking Constantine.



CHAPTER FIVE

Elaine

“**A**RE YOU OUT of your mind?”

Tristan’s face was a picture, hands in his hair as he paced my lounge.

“He didn’t tell anyone,” I told him. “Even Silas had more sense than that.”

“Yeah, but he *could* have. He could have gone straight out of there and told the whole ball that Lucian Morelli was in the building. You wouldn’t be standing here, Elaine. There’s no way your mom would let you sleep at night knowing you’d messed around with him.”

“Plenty of things *could* have happened. Lucian Morelli *could* have stolen me. But he didn’t.”

“Oh, that’s a comforting thought.” Tristan Fields had been my best friend and most trusted ear in this world since I was twelve years old. He’d seen me do plenty of wild things in the past thirteen years, but nothing had ever made him stare at me like this.

I sipped my wine. “It’s not like I’m ever going to see him again.”

“I’d fucking hope not. Believe me, baby, I’d be telling your mom myself if I thought that was gonna happen. You’d stand more of a chance of making it out alive with her on your case than him. Close call, but I know where I’d put my cash.”

I closed my eyes to ease off my thump of a hangover, but it made no difference. My brain was jammed plenty by Tristan carrying on his speech.

“You do know he was playing you, right? He wants something from you. If he didn’t think he could trick you into giving him what he needs, he’d have hurt you the second he had you alone.”

Something about that offended me. It may not have made any sense that it did, because he was probably right. Tristan’s words made perfect sense. Still, it offended me. Something about that concept twisted my heart and made it hurt.

I was naive to want to believe there was anything other than hate behind Lucian grabbing me at Tinsley’s party...but I wanted there to be. Some twisted part of me wanted there to be.

I shrugged. “Yeah, he was probably playing me.”

“Definitely. He was definitely playing you.”

“Yeah, he was playing me. Like I said, I’m never going to see him again. What does it matter?”

He tipped his head and matched my stare. His eyes were cold, green pools of disapproval, and I hated that. Tristan was always on my side.

“If you see him again, Lainey, you have to scream and run, understand? No matter how slick he is, no matter what he says, you have to scream and run.”

“Of course I will,” I told him, telling myself at the same time. “I might have been reckless, but it’s never going to happen. I won’t even see him again.”

The way he shook his head showed me he didn’t believe me. In that moment, he thought I was as flighty as the rest of the world did. I felt offended all over again, but I didn’t say anything. I deserved this. I always did.

“Have you told Harriet yet?” he asked.

“No.”

“Hopefully Silas doesn’t tell her before you do.”

“Silas doesn’t tell Harriet anything. He may be her brother, but they have about as much in common as a swan and a rhino.”

He grinned at that. “I’m not sure Silas would like the analogy.”

I smiled back, even through my hangover. “He can be a rhinoceros.”

“True enough.”

He sat down alongside me and took hold of my hand. His fingers were strong. It was the kind of strength I’d enjoyed for years, him sitting next to me as we whispered through our fears and struggles.

I knew what suggestion was coming before he spoke.

“Can you go back to Dr. Karlin again? I think you need it.”

“Therapy makes no difference. It’s never made any difference.”

He squeezed my fingers. “You have to try again.” He gestured to the glass in my other hand. “It stands a shit ton more chance of working than wine or champagne or playing around with coke.”

My defenses came up. “I’m not doing it anymore.”

I felt his eyes on me. Again, I could feel the disapproval. “That’s not what Harriet said. I saw her at the Aegean last week, and she said Jonesy was telling her you’ve been partying as hard as ever.”

My cheeks burned. “Jonesy shouldn’t be telling Harriet anything. It’s not her business.”

“Even he is worried.”

“He shouldn’t be.” It’s true that I’ve been a party girl. Drinking and clubbing. Doing coke to run away from the dark

memories in my past. I'm trying to reform.

"I'm worried, Lainey. Really fucking worried." He took the drink from my hand.

I groaned. "Quit it, will you? I'm fine."

I'd always been a liar—I'd needed to be—but even I was pushing it. I was less fine than I'd ever been in my life, and again, that was a high mountain to climb. Or more like a deep swamp to sink to the bottom of.

Sometimes I wished I could find the voice to say what I truly needed to say. I wished I could summon up the words to confess just how broken I was inside and why. *Secrets, secrets, shhh, little girl.* I wished I could spit it out and live with the consequences rather than reaching the end with the secrets still stabbing me in silence. *So, so many secrets...*

I couldn't.

I could never tell my secrets.

With that thought, I grabbed the gin back from Tristan and took another swig.

He sighed. "Please go back to Dr. Karlin."

I couldn't stand Dr. Karlin and his probing questions. The condescension as he asked me about what happened...he thinks he knows. He doesn't. "Let's talk about something else. Anything." Tristan met this with silence. "How did it go with that musician? What was his name? Indigo Something?"

"Blue Hawk."

"Nice. Is he one of those rocker types?"

He laughed along. "No. He's one of those not-sure-if-he-really-wants-dick-or-not types."

"Sounds like you just a few years ago."

Tristan had taken a whole lot of time to finally accept that he was bisexual. I'd been there through the journey, knowing way earlier than he did that he had a fixation for hot guys as

well as women. His parents had been...tough. Especially tough on a son who lived his life outside of their trailer park status quo. I still remembered his scars.

Scars had been the very first thing we'd had in common.

I loved his smile as he looked at me. "I don't have years to wait until he works out if he wants to take dick. There are plenty of dicks out there ready and willing."

"And pussies."

He leaned his head against my shoulder. "And pussies."

"You're lucky. You can have all the dick and pussy you want," I said and felt that horrible flare of hurt inside. Just like I always did.

Tristan's smile disappeared. "They can't hold you back forever, Lainey. If you meet someone fitting, and you talk to your mom about it..."

I pulled my hand from his and held it up. "Stop. You know that's bullshit as much as I do. Mom will never let anyone lay a hand on me. Not unless she picks him for me."

He wrenched my hand back down and squeezed it all over again. "She'll never let anyone *you* think's good enough lay a hand on you. Your taste is bad."

"My taste doesn't fit their criteria of *acceptable*."

"Just as well, or their criteria of acceptable would be acceptably fucked up."

I let out a sigh and leaned against him, loving the way his arms wrapped me up, even though he thought I was an idiot today. He was the only one who would do it, give me his genuine warmth and not the fake kisses and smiles people all around me gave.

I tried to steer the conversation back to him and not me.

"Are you seeing this Blue Hawk guy again, then?"

“Next Saturday. He’s playing a gig at Cyrus Bar, an intimate little show. Looks great.” He paused. “You could come if you wanted.”

“Where’s Cyrus Bar?”

“NYC. Meatpacking District. About as far as you could get from Bishop’s Landing.”

It sure sounded a world away from Bishop’s Landing. Bishop’s Landing looked down its nose at anyone without a billion dollars in their pocket.

Yeah. I liked the sound of Cyrus Bar in the Meatpacking District.

I pulled up my calendar on my phone. I had some crappy charity affair on Saturday night, but I could ditch it. Fuck it, I *would* ditch it. I wanted to check out this Blue Hawk guy for myself. Tristan was the only friend I had in the world; I wanted to make sure this guy wasn’t toying with him.

“You coming?” Tristan pushed. “I’ll need to get you on the guest list. It’s sold out.”

“Yeah, I’m coming. Who knows, maybe I’ll meet a hot rocker guy for myself.”

“Give him the benefit of the doubt.” Vulnerability lit Tristan’s eyes.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

He nudged me with an elbow. “I know how you get about me. Protective,” he teased.

“You love it.”

“I love *you*, Lainey.”

“I know.”

He leaned close, peering into my eyes. “I mean it.”

“I *know*.” I pushed him back, but when Tristan righted himself, his face was serious.

His next words were a whisper. A whisper with a chill.
“Promise me one thing. Swear on your heart you won’t ever fall for Lucian Morelli.”

“I won’t,” I told him.

“So promise me.”

I looked into his eyes and summoned up the fire inside. Because I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t ever fall for Lucian Morelli.
“Swear on my heart and hope to die,” I told him.

That appeased him. He was smiling as he hooked my pinky finger in his.



CHAPTER SIX

Lucian

“**T**RENTON ALTO IS here for you,” my secretary said, poking her head around the door.

I waved at her to let him in.

“Not like you to come here,” I grunted as he walked on through and sat himself down across my desk from me.

“Not like you to ask for something so blacklisted.” He leaned back in his seat. “This was expensive. And risky.”

“I’m well aware of both,” I told him. “Is it comprehensive?”

“It’s comprehensive. Changeable, but comprehensive.”

He handed the business card across the desk, and I took it. “This is accurate?”

“From a reputable source.”

“Good.” I stared at the encrypted web address.

“How the hell do you think you’re gonna get into these places? They’ll shoot you dead on sight.”

“I have methods.”

“A method to the madness,” he said.

“Fuck off,” I said without heat. Trenton Alto was useful. Useful enough that I ignored his comments. The risks I took were my own problem.

“Got too much to talk to you about before I fuck off.”

I put a pause on official business to hear him out about the shifting tides of secrets behind the scenes. He was right. He had plenty to be talking to me about. My life was a web of dealings. Veins of darkness running under the surface of the world all around us.

We were into everything. Everywhere.

Every industry, every trade, every corrupt investment scheme.

Still, I was sitting in my tailored suit behind my desk, living out my facade of corporate godliness. People wouldn't ever dare challenge me.

They may as well carve out their own gravestone if they tried.

Trenton Alto was my right-hand man on the underside of my existence, and had been for years, far more nefarious than even the most thuggish of criminals could ever know. Usually I'd be interested in hearing what he had to say, but I was restless, itching for something I couldn't scratch. Calls and meetings had felt strangely dull, nothing spiking my interest. The bustling city around me seemed plain and flat.

"What's going on with you today?" he asked me and raised an eyebrow.

I raised one back. "In what sense?"

He shrugged. "Just seem a bit...distracted. Even for you."

"I'm doing just fine," I said with a glare. "Carry on."

He carried on talking about business. Shipments and payments.

His words didn't get any more engaging. I was frustrated, bristling with boredom, wishing he'd fuck off and be done with it. My concentration was weak, jaded, and faded until the very second he spoke her name.

"This Elaine Constantine stuff, you gonna use it to fuck around with her?"

Elaine Constantine.

I snapped back to focus. Fast.

The woman's name should've given me rage, not a prickle in my balls. It gave me both.

My eyebrow raised. "Does it matter?"

"Shit's really gonna hit the fan if you go near her, you know."

My stare must have been dark. "You aren't my personal security, Alto, and you sure as fuck aren't my personal advisor. If I need a fixer, I'll call Declan. Not you. Get on with your business and stop irritating me."

He held up his hands. "Sure thing, boss. Just saying. She may be the black sheep of the Constantine family, but it's still gonna start a war if you hurt her."

I leaned forward in my seat. "We've been at war for decades."

"Yeah, but not a war like that one would be. Your dad would blow his fuse."

"Like I said, you aren't my fucking advisor. Get back to your business."

He shrugged again, looking at me like I was an idiot. "Sure. No prob. Whatever you want."

And that's where the problem was. Despite what every rational part of my head was screaming, I wanted Elaine Constantine. I wanted her pretty wet slit around my fingers, and her sweet little bullet of a clit against my thumb. I wanted her eager wet tongue in my mouth, seeking more. I wanted her curious eyes pulling at mine.

I wanted to fuck her up. Hard.

I wanted to take her virginity and make her beg for more.

It was more than wanting to fuck with my father or fuck with the board. This was personal.

I should have thought about my own calendar and my own social schedule, handshakes and glamor and illusions. Trade deals, and company takeovers and guffawing with the billionaire crew at Regent Country Club. Not about which clubs Elaine Constantine was going to be dancing in over the coming weeks.

Marriage. Sex. Those were on the table. Nothing more. I couldn't want a single scrap of that woman other than her pain. I could use her, destroy her, and infuriate a whole vein of her family line along with her.

I could be calculated and controlled, making my way in closer and closer. Learning about the woman and who she was, weaknesses on top of weaknesses.

And then, when she was too fucked to fight me, she would become mine.

Time to take the Morelli-Constantine feud to the next level. I was done with the simmering hatred underneath the fake social sheen we'd come to paste on it.

It was time to act.

She could be my road to the action.

She could be the naive young woman to give me my power. It was a beautiful plan. I could use her to satisfy the board's concerns. No matter her party girl reputation, no one could deny that a Constantine was high society. And as a bonus, it would infuriate my father.

I would have my cake and eat it, too.

I used the business card link to click into the data, and there it was, just as Alto said it would be. Elaine Constantine's calendar.

Parties, magazine appearances, and family gatherings. Everything. She even had her damn periods mapped out on it. It gave me a strange thrill to think of her inputting her life into the thing, so private, and so out of bounds.

She was at three social events that week. One at Halcyon building—the Constantine’s main NYC business hub. One at Petra Constantine’s dumbass charity fundraiser gig on Thursday, and one listed as *Tristan, Blue Hawk show*.

I’d never heard of a Tristan or Blue Hawk, but given how casual her listing was, I imagined she knew them pretty well.

I put the search term into my browser and up came some pictures of a rocker with piercings along his cheeks. I wondered if she liked his music or whether she knew him personally.

How close were they?

He’d be suicidal for going anywhere near a Constantine without Caroline’s approval, but even so, the thought of him trying gave me a bizarre territorial feeling right in my gut. I didn’t want him to go near that particular Constantine. I didn’t want anyone to.

I wanted to be the asshole to tear her apart.

I carried on scrolling through the Blue Hawk website until I came to his show listings for the coming weekend. Saturday night. Blue Hawk, live at Cyrus Bar. Meatpacking District.

The times tallied up nicely with Elaine’s calendar entry.

I dialed the number for the *Cyrus Bar*. “I want tickets for Blue Hawk,” I told him. “Saturday night. The best seats.”

“It’s sold out,” he replied.

“Nothing’s sold out when you have enough money. Name your price.”

He named a ridiculous price.

“Done.”

“I’ll make sure you’re on the list.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Elaine

I WAS SICK when I woke up on Saturday morning, insides struggling against the champagne from the social night before. I'd been on a party high, stretching out from Petra's charity gala on Thursday until I passed out late on Friday.

One long round of intoxication that had slammed me into the weekend.

So much for my plan to reform. I looked a mess in the bathroom mirror. My eyes had dark shadows. My skin was pale, crying out for a layer of blush. My lips were dry and cracked, and I felt sick.

I stumbled through to the kitchen and made myself a coffee, but it hit my stomach hard, making the nausea worse. I'd missed a call from Tristan so I called him back as soon as I'd forced myself to throw back the caffeine, hoping I wouldn't retch with him on the line.

His tone was fresh enough to hurt my ears when he answered. "Hey, baby. You still on for tonight? Please say you're still coming."

If I had any sense I'd call it off and say I was busy with Constantine stuff, but I didn't want to. Our bond of friendship was way too deep, and I was way too curious. Curious to meet the weird piece of cock who had blatantly worked Tristan up into a lather. "Yeah, I'm still on for tonight."

He let out a whoop, and I managed a smile, even through my shitty hangover. I was still smiling when I spoke again,

ignoring the pulse of my headache.

“I’d better wear something good. Don’t want to stand out like a Constantine beacon, do I?”

“No diamonds,” he said, laughing.

“No diamonds.”

“Shit, I gotta go,” he said. “I’m meeting up with Kayleigh-Jane for a park run. Almost there.”

My heart dropped a little at the thought. His life was so light against my darkness. He had so many people who cared about him. So many people who welcomed him with arms wide open. But that figured. He was a careable-about kind of guy.

Part of me wished I could ditch being a Constantine forever and start again. Somewhere I could be free, where people had no idea who I was, or who I was surrounded by. Where the world wasn’t governed by what I should be doing, and what I was failing at.

Failure should’ve been my middle name. I was the queen of failure. Still, it hurt when people pointed it out constantly.

Cyrus Bar was as close to freedom as I was likely to get anytime this century.

I hadn’t told anyone where I was going. I’d ditched one of my regular charity events, and nobody had really pushed me for explanations. I didn’t want security buzzing about the place, or a chauffeur waiting outside, or scowls from my family members if they realized I was heading to see a performer who didn’t have a billion-dollar record deal.

No. This could be my one night off.

The one night I could mingle without anyone even looking my way.

I didn’t have any clothes in my wardrobe that weren’t designer, so I improvised. I took a tight little black dress and tore some black tights, then checked myself out in the mirror.

Yeah, that could do it. I would usually style my hair to perfection before I went anywhere, but I paused as I reached for my hairbrush. No. Messy suited me fine.

It was strange calling a cab to my apartment later that night instead of pressing the buzzer for a chauffeur. It was stranger still to meet them at the rear of the complex, not risking security catching me on my way out and alerting my mom to my disappearance.

I settled down into the back seat and tugged my gloves up higher on my arms. My eyeliner was a sweeping black, giving me an emo-goth look at total odds to the woman I was. I liked it.

The cab pulled in front of Cyrus Bar.

The line of people on the sidewalk by the main doors was about as opposite to events in Bishop's Landing as you could possibly get. Emo types in messy, torn t-shirts, black lace, and boots. They looked like fun people. Interesting people.

Real people, unlike the Constantines.

I strolled down the line in my stilettos. Tristan was waiting for me there, right by the main doors. He looked seriously damn good. Tight black jeans with a leather jacket over a fitted black tee, and his mahogany hair swept back from his forehead like a guy from the '70s.

If Blue Hawk was in any way still wobbling over his sexuality status, then seeing Tristan Fields tonight would surely seal the deal.

He whistled when he saw me. "Hell, baby. You sure look fucking good."

I gave him a twirl and grinned, because I felt it too. I felt really fucking good. It was a sensation I wasn't all that used to.

I stayed quiet as Tristan waved us through security and past the entrance desk. Hell knows what he'd listed me as, but it sure wasn't Elaine Constantine.

They barely even looked my way as I stepped on by.

I could already hear the opening act's bass as we climbed the stairs, thumping right through the floor. Loud. It was loud. Loud and wild.

Wild and free.

Tristan took my hand and we stepped through to the main stage area, and it was intimate, just like he'd said it would be. There was a huddle of people on the dancefloor moving along to the music, and another huddle gathering at the bar, ordering drinks. We pushed our way through to join them, holding back in the crowd. That in itself was a novelty.

The Constantines never had to wait for anything, ever. I walked straight through a line wherever I saw one. I liked having to be patient without people staring at me wherever I went.

"What do you want to drink?" Tristan asked, right into my ear over the bass.

"Champagne," I said, and he pulled a face at me.

"Champagne doesn't really work in this place. How about a beer?"

I shrugged at him. "Sure, yeah. A beer. Whatever. Just make sure it's got alcohol in it."

I heard his sigh, even over the music. "You always want to get trashed, Lainey. Maybe one day you'll break the mold and try having fun sober."

Even amongst the weirdness, I never believed life would ever get *that* weird. Sober and I didn't really work well together. Even the thought made me churn inside. When I'm sober I have to think. I have to remember. I have to be sad, and I much prefer to laugh and be tipsy.

The music had swept me up in its grip by the time we made it to the front of the bar. The guitar was thrashing loud, and I could feel it, all the way through me. The guy's vocals were savage, but filled with so much passion I couldn't ignore

it. I stared at him as Tristan ordered the drinks, and my heart did a strange flip as I saw how dark his features were—especially under the spotlights. He was tall, and broad, and his eyes were fierce. Deep, like burning ashes. His jaw was firm, and even though he looked like some kind of heavy metal pinup, there was something about him that excited me.

I took the beer from Tristan with a *thanks*, but still I couldn't stop looking at the singer from the opening act. Tristan noticed my interest as we made it to the edge of the dancefloor and gave me a nudge.

“Blue knows him, the singer. He told me.”

“Yeah? He's got quite a voice.”

“Quite a body, too.” He paused. “His name is Stephen. He's Australian.”

I could imagine his accent, and it gave me shivers and chills. That's when it hit me—just where the fixation was coming from.

It was coming from Lucian Morelli. He reminded me of Lucian Morelli.

His darkness. His strength. His fierce eyes.

The rawness of Stephen's voice reminded me of the malice in Lucian's, just enough to make my tummy flutter, and the thought of his Australian accent was enough to make me tremble.

Yeah. This was about Lucian Morelli.

Tristan nudged me again. “You could talk to hot-guy-Stephen after the gig, maybe? I mean, you can't touch him, but you can have a good time imagining it.”

I flashed him a scowl. “Yeah, don't need to keep rubbing it in. I can't touch him. Fuck life, and fuck my fucking family.”

He looked around us, and I saw the fear in his eyes. “Just as well there's none of your crowd in here to hear you say that shit.”

I shrugged. “Sometimes I wouldn’t care if they were. I could give them the middle finger before they made me pay for my sins.”

Stephen started up another track, and I felt a wave of tears pricking. I choked them down, because I hated them. I hated ever having to cry.

If only people knew...if only people knew just how much I was suffering like a bad girl, just by trying to be good.

But nobody knew that. Nobody but my mother. My mother and the Power brothers, who were chasing me down for my black market debts—most of them not even mine.

Luckily, clubs and alcohol were friends enough to blank the whole sorry mess from my mind. Speaking of. “I’m going to the bathroom,” I told Tristan and gestured toward the signs overhead.

He rolled his eyes, and there was disapproval in them again as I handed him my beer. He thought I wasn’t headed there for a pee.

And maybe he was right.

I was already in my clutch before I reached the women’s, fingers sifting through my cosmetics to the bottom. There it was. Just what I needed, buried deep inside the satin lining.

My head was already spinning. I wanted to snort back a fresh line. Hell, I needed it.

The Power brothers were nasty, and they were coming for me. Anytime now, they were coming for me. My debts were getting too damn big for them to accept my smiles and promises.

It wouldn’t have been quite so bad if they were coming after my own debts, but they weren’t. They were coming for everyone else’s along with them. A whole sea of gambling and addict debts owed by people I’d met along my own desperate road.

I couldn't let them die for it. I couldn't let the Power brothers destroy people I'd come to care about along the way, even if just in passing. Again, just as well I didn't really care about my own fate. Not about how much I owed and not about how much I'd suffer for it. The Power brothers could take what they liked; I'd be almost glad to say my final goodbyes.

There was another line to wait in before I got into the bathroom stall. The place was filling up, bustling with laughter and chatter and people having a good time. Good for them.

I was desperate for release as I dropped myself down at the side of the toilet, pulling out my bank card and bills along with my stash. I held up the little tin. I opened the lid. White powder stared back at me, promising oblivion.

I wanted a hit, but I didn't take one.

Somewhere I found the willpower.

With trembling hands I put the lid back on and shoved it into my purse.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Lucian

“**L**UCIAN MORELLI,” I said to the girl at the entrance desk.

“ID, please.”

I handed over my license. My hair was styled in its usual swept-back wave. I felt strange in jeans and boots with a button-up shirt, but I’d stand out like a sore thumb if I’d worn a suit. She gestured me through with a smile, and I nodded my response.

Cyrus Bar was lively for a downtown dive. People stepped aside to let me climb the main stairwell, and I was up and amongst it, into the main bar area. The music was loud, screaming into my ears. I scanned the room, weaving my way through the crowd toward getting served a drink in this hovel, but my pretty blonde prey was nowhere to be seen.

I ordered a mineral water and made my way back to the side of the dancefloor to look around. People were jumping up at the stage, trashed, or tapping their foot to the beat all around the edges, letting out screams. Still, there was no sign of her.

Did I read the calendar entry wrong? Did she change her mind? If she was in the building, I’d have surely seen her from a distance, recognizing the shimmer of blonde curls from a mile away, but no. She was nowhere to be seen.

I didn’t understand why the thought of failure frustrated me so badly. It was a rotten twist in my gut, my heart beating fast as I continued my scanning and mingling. It shouldn’t matter. It would be only a single attempt to track her down, not

even worth breaking a sweat over. I had no idea why it felt like so much more.

I'd find her.

Some way, sometime soon, I'd hunt her down and find her. I just hoped damn fucking hard that it would be tonight. I was slavering over the thought of it.

I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to make her beg and shiver and cry.

I'd sipped my way through most of my mineral water when I saw a flash of perfect blonde on the other side of the dancefloor. My stomach did a twist, and the rage burned behind my eyes.

Yes.

Fuck, yes.

I knew it was her, even without a clear view. I knew it by instinct—by the hatred rushing through my veins. Or was that lust? It was getting harder to tell.

I made my way closer, keeping in the shadows.

She was standing next to a tall guy who looked like a hipster. Elaine was close to him, pressed up tight, but I knew he hadn't laid a single dirty hand on her, not in any way that counted. It was another flash of instinct in my gut.

She was staring up at the stage, gazing at the guy bellowing into the mic up there. Yes, it was Elaine Constantine, but she looked...different. She'd almost have passed for a normal person, for anyone other than a Constantine. Almost.

Her dress was tight, and clearly expensive, but her makeup was...cat-like.

Hot.

Fuck, she was a hot little piece. Even hotter than she'd been at the masked ball.

She was swigging beer from a bottle, chugging it back nice and hard. It reinforced what I already knew—her alcoholic cravings must have been pretty damn desperate for her to be drinking the cheap shit. And there was more.

I only needed to watch her sway to the music to know she was lonely.

I couldn't get any closer, not without catching her eye. I hovered just out of view, soaking her up as I bristled and boiled, imagining all the things I wanted to do with her.

I wanted to do so much to her that my mouth was watering.

Lust. Hate. Contempt. All of it simmering deep.

Her family had been fighting mine for decades. They'd torn us down once, but never again. We'd all bleed to death before we gave them a single inch of our wealth, or our pride.

I wondered how pretty Elaine Constantine would look with red marks on her perfect skin. I wondered how her eyes would glisten with tears as she stared up into the malice in mine. I wondered how much I could make her pussy stretch for me before she screamed.

It was funny, looking around me at all the people in the room, just how evil a monster I was amongst them. They had no idea such a sadist was in their midst.

A girl with pink hair banged into me as she swung herself to the beat, slamming hard into my chest and spilling the last of my water over my shirt. She spun around with a *sorry*.

I tipped my head and forced a smile, and she smiled back, then kept her eyes on me.

“Hey,” she said. “Can I get you another drink?”

“No, thank you.”

Still her eyes stayed fixed on mine. “You sure? I'd really like to. Water, right?”

Her earrings were cheap. Metal painted with fake gold.

Sometimes I liked cheap. I liked tempting it with cash and demanding whatever I wanted. I'd learned at a very early age that there is nothing on this planet that is unobtainable.

Everything has a price. *Everyone* has a price.

I glanced back over at Elaine, and she was still gazing at the prick on stage like a cat in heat.

"Sure," I told the pink-haired girl. "I'll have another water."

"Cheap date." She laughed and took my empty bottle from me.

Oh, the irony.

She headed over to the bar, and I waited, my stare still hard on Elaine. I was so focused on her that Pink Hair had to nudge my side before I realized she was back. She handed me my fresh water, a smile bright on her face. "You from here?"

I nodded. "Bishop's Landing."

"Ooh, fancy. Come here often?"

My answer was short and simple. "No."

It was right then that the band on stage finished up their song and took a bow for the crowd. Done. Finished. The throng of revelers didn't get the chance to disappear from the dancefloor before the main act came up onto the stage.

That's when I recognized him—the Blue Hawk guy I'd checked out online.

He looked like a cocky performer with a decent ripple of muscle through his frame. Hardly a surprise the room was cheering for him. Especially not when his voice started up and flowed right through the venue.

He was good.

I looked across at Elaine. The man at her side was air punching and whooping. He ducked down to Elaine, and she was laughing as they cheered.

The crowd thrust forward as another song started up and removed me from her view. I wasted no time and slipped away, weaving my way between the bodies, ignoring the way Pink Hair called out for me. I had eyes for no one but Elaine.

Closer.

Closer to the temptress across the floor with every breath and every step.

My cock was swollen in my pants, and it wasn't for the woman I'd left behind. It was for the woman in front of me, the beautiful virgin, who I would turn into a whore. I would debauch a pretty Constantine princess and win Morelli Holdings at the same time.

She was swaying on her feet, holding her beer up high, and the man at her side was swaying along with her, nodding his head to the beat.

I wanted to see her pain with my reflection in her eyes. Slowly. Oh, so slowly.

I wanted to take her as mine as she moaned and murmured and begged.

It was a dark thrill in my gut as I stepped up behind her, close enough to catch her scent. Orchids and plums were wafting from her perfume, just like at Tinsley's ball. It only added to the zing inside me as it brought the memories pounding back. The feeling of her body, so willing against mine. Her mouth, so wet and eager. Her pussy, so wet and so needy.

I wanted that again. I wanted *her* again.

I stayed in position behind her, feeling her heat as she moved. So close. So fucking close.

The song finished and the prick by her side leaned down to her, and the silence between the tracks was enough that I could hear his words.

"I can't wait to get my hands on him later," he said, and Elaine laughed.

“Let’s hope he wants your hands on him, then,” she replied.

I couldn’t deny the relief at affirming the guy really had no road into her pussy. I saw no lust in her eyes as he smiled down at her, nothing but...friendship. Genuine friendship, so I made a note of him as a potential leverage. *Tristan*. He must be the Tristan from the calendar listing.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, and it was in the way she melted into him that showed me affection between them.

It was insane, just how the sight of that flared up in me.

How the way she touched him made me hungry for her to touch *me* like that. I didn’t understand her impact on me, and I didn’t want to. There was nothing I wanted other than the thrill of breaking her and staring into the hate in her eyes, burning as brightly as mine ever would. The very thought of wanting more than that gave me shivers.

The bass started up again, and the two of them started swaying along with it, waving their arms above their heads. That’s when I did it. That’s when I made the move to close that final sliver of distance. I pressed up tight behind my blonde Constantine prey, letting out one single breath against her cheek as I put my hands on her waist and pushed on by.

It was fast. One tiny heartbeat in the thrum of the room. But it was enough.

It was enough that she tensed. Enough that she turned. Enough that I felt her eyes searching after me as I disappeared into the darkness of the crowd.

I waited until there were a number of people between us before I turned back to face her, far enough away that she could never be quite certain who I was. Not amongst the dancing, and the cheering, and the flashing of the club lights all around.

It was just enough.

She saw me.

I felt it. Sensed it. Wanted it.

I met her eyes through the shadows and the flashes of neon, and I held her gaze in mine.

Yes. She saw me.

She stopped moving. Dead in her tracks. Eyes open wide.

The guy at her side stopped moving and turned toward her, trying to work out what she was staring at.

But no.

He'd never manage it.

I was already walking away.



CHAPTER NINE

Elaine

MY HEART WAS pounding, and my breath caught in my throat, and I couldn't stop staring. Couldn't stop the waves of panic flying through my veins.

“What is it?” Tristan barked into my ear, and I didn't move. Couldn't move. “What is it, Lainey?” he asked again, but the figure was gone.

I struggled to keep sight of him, but the crowd was too dark. I could feel Tristan staring, too.

“What the hell are you looking at, Lainey? What is it?” he asked, and I took a deep breath before I turned to face him.

“It was Lucian Morelli. He's here.”

His eyes widened, his mouth dropping to match, and then he shook his head and fixed me in a gaze that said I was crazy.

Yep, he was joining the Elaine-is-crazy club. He'd better get in line.

“Lucian Morelli isn't in this place,” he told me. “No fucking way.”

I shrugged, knowing full well my eyes weren't deceiving me. I pointed into the crowd. “He was over there, and before that he was right behind me, grabbing hold of my waist.”

My words had to be shouts above the music, but that didn't matter. He heard me loud and clear.

His eyebrows were pitted as he shook his head again, then leaned in close. “You have to stop this. Whatever this damn fucking obsession with Lucian Morelli is, you have to damn well stop it.”

“It’s not an obsession. He was right here.” I nodded in contrast to his shaking head. “I mean it, Tristan. He was here.”

“And I mean it, Lainey. How high are you? You’re probably hallucinating.”

My head was swirling from the beer, but it wasn’t a hallucination. There was no way it was a hallucination. He’d been wearing casual clothes, not a tux or even a suit. But I knew his touch, and I knew his stare, and I knew his breath—all of him seared into my soul in a few short minutes just days before.

Tristan leaned in close again. “Did you tell anyone about this? About you coming here tonight?” I heard him groan. “Please tell me you didn’t...”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t. I didn’t tell anyone. And I didn’t do any coke.”

“So, how did it happen, then?” he asked. “How the fuck would Lucian Morelli know to come here if nobody in the world knew you were coming? I sure as hell didn’t tell anyone you’d be here. Not anyone except Blue Hawk.”

“Maybe he told someone.”

He sighed. “I didn’t tell him your name, Lainey. There’s no way he could have told anyone, even if he’d wanted to.”

He had a point. Even though my heart was racing, I knew he had a point.

He squeezed my arm. “I guess it was someone who looked like him. Must’ve been hard to see.”

“Maybe,” I said, but I didn’t believe it. My heart wouldn’t let me.

“Maybe you’re crapping yourself about seeing him again. Maybe that’s what this is. Some crazy freak-out.”

Crazy me, yeah. I wished I believed that, but no. There was no way I was imagining him out of fear. My heart was still thumping as my mind churned. No. There was also no way it was some look-alike. Not with that touch, not with that scent, not with that look in his eyes.

I was still scanning the room with my breath catching in my throat when Blue Hawk let out a *good night* and lifted his arms to the sky.

Tristan grabbed hold of my shoulders as the crowd began to bustle, and I jumped, hard enough that he sighed at me.

“You’re freaking yourself out.”

I forced myself into some kind of rationality. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

I could hear the relief in his voice. “Good. Like I said, maybe you could go back to Dr. Karlin. Seems like it would have to help now, more than ever.”

My tummy flipped at the thought. No. It wouldn’t help me. Nobody digging into the pits of my soul would help me. It was untouchable. It needed to be untouchable.

Secrets. Scary, dirty secrets.

As usual, I forced a smile and changed the subject. “Let’s get to your conquest backstage, then. Don’t want to miss out on a congratulatory kiss, do you?”

Tristan rolled his eyes. “His dick isn’t worth watching you fuck yourself up over the biggest asshole on the planet.”

I felt the rage burning up in my ribs. “I wouldn’t. I told you, I won’t go near him!”

He didn’t believe me. I could feel it. I could see it.

“I mean it. I pinky promised.”

The crowd bustled around us, people heading to either the bar or the main entrance. Tristan took hold of me again, to stop me getting caught up in the movement.

“Well, promise me that a pinky promise isn’t the only thing holding you back from him.”

I laughed in his face. “Even you can’t think I’m that insane. Even *I* can’t believe I’m that insane.”

He seemed to take my assurance as solid enough to laugh back. “Thank fuck for that.”

With that, he grabbed my hand and started making his move toward the door at the side of the stage, and I tried to believe my certainty as much as he had. I mean, I had to be slightly rational, even through the madness of my mind.

Because he was right. He had to be right.

There was no way Lucian Morelli could possibly be in this place, no way, no chance. Plus, there was no way I could ever want him, not with any part of me. Not ever.

I was forcing my racing heart to slow down, even amongst the pulse of adrenaline through my veins. I was telling myself I was a hallucinating idiot, who had imagined a load of bullshit out of nowhere. Maybe just a guy with dark hair and eyes who reminded me of the beast at the ball. I mean, Stephen on stage reminded me of Lucian Morelli, right? Surely there were plenty more guys who would remind me of the monster.

We were almost at the side of the stage when I flashed one final look around the dancefloor, scanning the jostle of bodies one last time before Tristan raised his hand to the security man guarding the back rooms. The guy waved us through and Tristan was tugging me, rattling me on my stilettos as he raced us on our way to Blue Hawk.

And there he was again. The monster, at the far side of the stage, with his dark gaze fixed on me. Yes. I knew it. My soul cried out. My whole body tensed and tingled. Because it was him.

It was truly him.

Lucian Morelli stared back at me.

“Wait!” I called to Tristan. “Please look. He’s right there.”

But no.

It’d been years since Tristan had used the force of his frame against me, looming so tall over mine. He tugged me along with him, and I tried to yank him back, but his motion was too intense, jolting me straight into his chest and along with him through the backstage doorway.

“Enough,” he said, and held me tight. “I mean it, Elaine. Just fucking enough. Stop losing your head over Lucian fucking Morelli, or I’ll have to do something. I’ll have to warn someone, just to make sure you stay far away from him, to make sure you stay safe.”

His words were enough to stop me in my tracks, and I gulped in one hell of a breath at the thought. He was scared for me, his arms tense. Petrified for my life, desperate to keep me safe, even if it cost me an ocean of hell all around me.

And he was right.

He was right to be petrified for me. If Lucian Morelli was committed to chasing me down enough to head into the Meatpacking District, an area of the city he’d normally turn his nose up at, then there was no way I’d make it out of his hunt alive.

I needed champagne. Lots of it. At least there was a chance Blue Hawk would have a decent damn bottle of fizz backstage.

I made myself laugh, pasting on as happy a smile as I could manage. “You’re right,” I told him and made a crazy motion around my head. “Let’s go in and check out your conquest. At least I can gaze at the other Morelli look-alike up close this time.”

Tristan sighed and wrapped his arm around me, then led us to the dressing rooms.

“Gaze at that one as much as you like, just keep your damn head away from the real one.”



CHAPTER TEN

Lucian

I'D BEEN A ghostly shadow that leapt out to bite her, her eyes open wide as Tristan tugged her away. She'd known it was me.

The thrill inside me was magnificent, my mouth watering as I pictured her shock and horror—and something else. I'd felt something else in her stare.

She wanted me.

Just like she had when she was a plaything in my grip at the Constantine ball, she wanted me.

Holy fuck, I despised myself for it, but I wanted her too. I wanted her tight little slit.

This was about more than her being my wife. It should be about taking over Morelli Holdings. It should be about a big old *fuck you* to my father. But more than that, it was about sex. Base. Feral. Elemental.

I pulled myself together as I headed for the exit, talking some damn fucking sense into myself. I wanted to destroy her little body. *That's* what I wanted. *That's* the *only* thing I wanted.

There were drunken clusters of people outside the bar when I stepped out onto the sidewalk. I ignored the line of people hailing cabs, and instead found an empty few feet of shadows to wait for her. The front entrance finally swung open almost an hour later.

There she was, stumbling, almost taking a fall before Tristan grabbed hold of her and held her tight. She was swaying and gesturing him away, and I smiled to myself inside.

The Blue Hawk guy came out after them, and her friend was practically drooling in adoration.

I knew Tristan had somewhere he wanted to be going, and it sure as fuck didn't involve Elaine Constantine screwing his chances of getting dick tonight.

Sure enough, she pulled away from him, shrugging as she stumbled and pointed at an approaching cab down the street. He called her back to him, gesturing, but she waved him away, clearly insisting she'd be fine as the cab pulled up next to her.

Tristan stared, torn. His musician friend was determined to pull him along in his direction, just as much as Elaine was determined to leave.

Her good friend Tristan hovered. Stalled. And then he gave in to them.

He held up a hand, signaling he'd call her, before heading down the street after a promise of dick, leaving Elaine alone with just a cab to protect her. I knew it. There was no damn way the Constantines would have ever let her head downtown, let alone with no damn security cover.

I hailed a cab quickly and shoved a few hundreds through the window. "Follow them," I grunted at the driver, and again, he spun in his seat to face me.

"The cab?"

"Yes," I said, gesturing to the red taillights. "The fucking cab."

We stayed close behind her, and I strained to watch her silhouette in the rear window. I could barely see her, but my mouth was watering at the thought that she was almost in my grasp, just a few short breaths away.

She could have easily been headed to the Constantine compound, and if that were the case I'd have ordered my driver to overtake them on the long straight before Bishop's Landing, just to get my hands on her. But no. She wasn't heading to the Constantine compound. She wasn't heading to anywhere uptown, in fact, let alone anywhere in the billionaire district.

My interest was piqued as she headed for one of the dregs, her cab rolling through blocks of cheap apartments before finally pulling up at the sidewalk amongst some rancid, mediocre housing blocks.

For a moment, I had a flash of frustration that maybe I'd read her journey wrong, and that by some fuck up I'd been following a random person. But no. It was the same blonde beauty that swung her legs out of the cab ahead of us, walking on her stilettos toward the entrance.

I checked out the street sign. Not a nice part of the city.

"Thanks," I told my driver and tossed him another handful of hundreds before bailing out of there. He sure as fuck didn't hang around for me to answer any questions, just raced away with a screech of tires along with the rumble of Elaine's ride.

I was lucky she was a clumsy mess as she fished in her clutch for some keys under a flickering orange light. I was close enough to hear her curse as she dropped them to the ground and struggled to feel around on the concrete to find them.

"Well, well, well," I said. "I never expected to find you here."

She lurched back to her feet without the keys in her hand, then backed away toward the door. "What the fuck? It can't be...It can't be..."

I gave her a smile. "Oh yes, darling. It most certainly can be."

Even in her fear, I saw the anger burning on her cheeks. "I said it was you. I told Tristan it was you, and he wouldn't

believe me. Told me I was crazy for thinking you'd lower yourself to check out that club. Hmm, I guess we can both say we didn't expect to find each other in this part of town, then, can't we?"

"Why are you here, by the way?"

"None of your fucking business, Lucian Morelli."

"Watch your mouth." I couldn't take my gaze from the beautiful siren's eyes. Interesting didn't cut it. Not for a second. Not about her. I felt my gut churning, my mind trying to untangle the knots of her and fathom just what the fuck the girl was made up of.

She was a whirlpool of chaos, flashing colors melding as one.

A mess of them, splashing and clashing, so consumed by their own momentum that I didn't stand a chance of understanding the taste.

She was a mass of confusion and rage.

Rage and want.

Rage and fascination.

Rage and being so fucking butchered by her own pain that she was a pool of risk, waiting for anyone around her to step up and take what they wanted from her.

Money. Or blood. Or pussy.

Somehow, it was the thought of people taking her pussy that made me grit my teeth.

My words were quiet and cold. "What are you doing here, Elaine?"

"You tell me. You're the one who's supposed to be the genius, aren't you?"

"Among other things," I said.

She pressed into the wall, flinching as another sweep of fear flashed through her eyes. I reached down and picked up

her keys, jangling them in my fingers.

She was quiet as I carried on speaking. Silent as her whirlpool kept on spinning.

“Among other things like the fact I’m a sadist who pushes so fucking hard that people never come back from the pain. The fact that my family owes yours so much torment that none of you would make it through alive.”

“I know, I know. We hate you, you hate us. La la la. Like I give a fuck about that.”

I took another step closer, and this time she didn’t flinch. Didn’t even drop her stare. The whirlwind was speeding up inside her, sure as fuck not slowing down. I could taste her as I closed the distance, my mouth watering at the orchids and plums.

“You’ll give a fuck when I punish you for being a Constantine,” I told her, but again, the whirlwind inside her kept on spinning. I could feel it pulsing from her. Fear. Rage. Hate. Confusion.

But more.

I could feel so much more.

She took a breath and slumped her shoulders, casting a glance up at the shitty night sky.

“What makes you think I’d give a damn about anything?” she asked me. “Just get on with it, or get the fuck away from me, will you?”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elaine

I REALLY WAS done with it. I was done with caring. Done with feeling. Done with living. Maybe Lucian Morelli would be the monster that liberated me from this painful existence.

To the outside world I had it all. Money. Designer clothes. Bentleys.

But inside, my world was pain. Pain I'd been breathing through in agonizing little gasps since I was a little girl trying to be *good* for Reverend Lynch and his sick friends. Fucked up, and used, and twisted. Hurt by so much of the life I'd held dear.

Seeing Tristan gazing so adoringly at Blue Hawk tonight, and knowing Blue Hawk's dick was coming to him, had only compounded the obvious inside me.

I'd never feel like that about anyone, even if I was allowed to.

My family had already destroyed that for me.

Shh, more secrets. More secrets.

More champagne and more dancing. Drown it out. Drown it out.

I let out a sigh and slumped against the wall.

No one would stand a chance of knowing Lucian Morelli had broken me down in this part of town. Not unless he wanted to gloat about it. I was his to do as he wanted with.

He'd barely have to let me send out a scream before he silenced me forever.

"Go on," I goaded him. "Do it, or go. I'm done with your crap."

I felt the heat from him as he stepped even closer, his breaths warm on my face, his eyes boring down into mine. "Tell me how you would like to be fucked," he said, "Nice and slow, or hard and fast?"

His tone made me shudder. I tried to hide my terror when I replied. "Please, just make it a quick one. I'm bored of this already."

I was lying, as usual. I wasn't getting bored already. Even through my abject fear, there was a strange calmness soothing me deep underneath at the thought of giving myself up as done, and more...there was still a tingle of more I couldn't shake. That want. That *need*.

I knew the need I was feeling. The need I'd felt with his hands on me in the bathroom at Tinsley's ball. The need I'd felt rippling through me at the first glimpse of him in Cyrus Bar.

Fuck, I hated that need.

Lucian Morelli was a monster in an angelic body...and I was craving that angel's touch.

"Do it," I whispered. "Please, just do it."

"I'll do what the fuck I want, whenever I want to fucking do it," he said, and there was something new in his voice. A need I hadn't heard before. Control. Command. He jangled the keys in his hand, holding them up to the entrance light. Jemma's keyring was on there, a leather fob with the number seven printed on it.

Number seven, lucky for some.

Not for me, it seemed.

I guess Lucian Morelli read something in me I didn't want to admit to reading in myself. He didn't bother wrestling me alongside him when he stepped up to the door and slipped the key into the lock, just left me there, staring after him.

Part of me begged me to run and at least give it a shot at escaping, but no. I found myself locked in position by nothing but my own mind, my arms wrapped tight around my chest.

He pushed the door open and looked back over his shoulder, and the hate in his eyes was tinged with something more. Something I felt all the way through to my core.

“Come and meet your fate, little doll,” he said, and it was insane, just how much of a little doll I felt under his stare. Docile and somehow innocent, despite what had been done to me.

I should never have considered it, not even for a heartbeat, but he beckoned me with his finger, and I found myself moving. My feet took on a life of their own as I stepped forward, my clutch still gripped tightly under my arm. I was shaking, from too much crappy beer as much as anything else, but shaking nonetheless.

I watched him swallow as he realized just how hard I was trembling.

He liked that.

I walked past him and into the hallway of the apartment building—my cheap escape from my expensive life. Jemma was away for the month, chasing down some environmental peace on some ocean liner somewhere, just as she had been doing on and off since we were teenagers.

I should've been with her.

Once upon a time, I believed I would be. We'd planned to fix the oceans, and save the whales, and help anyone who needed helping, but I couldn't do it. My life wouldn't let me.

My *family* wouldn't let me.

No, that wasn't quite true. It was my secrets that truly broke me.

I didn't bother letting Lucian find the way upstairs to Jemma's apartment, just snatched the keys from his hand and led the way. The other doors were all closed tight, no doubt their occupants holed up in bed. The door to number seven was right at the end of the upstairs corridor.

I pushed the key into the lock, opening the door and stepping in ahead of Lucian. I didn't even attempt to shut the door in his face, only led the way in for him to follow.

He found the light switch as soon as he was in after me, his eyes checking out the neat little hallway around us. Jemma really was a sweet soul in her eccentricity. She had a handmade tapestry of a whale by a boat hanging proudly above my head and a picture of her charity friends by the kitchen doorway. Cheerful compared to the darkness of the moment.

I could see the questioning glance on Lucian's face as he wondered about our surroundings. I answered him before he spoke.

"It's my friend Jemma's place. She's away saving the world. Please don't leave bloodstains on her carpet for her to come home to."

He didn't reply, just stepped in after me as I headed through to the kitchen. Jemma's coffee machine was waiting ready on the counter, just like always, and I got it fired up without a word.

I dumped my clutch on the side and grabbed a mug from the cupboard, then held another up for the monster. "Hey, asshole. How about a coffee before you hurt me?"

I must have pushed him too far. He was on me in seconds, slamming me into the countertop as the mugs went crashing to the floor with a smash. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

But it wasn't Lucian Morelli's hands that attacked me next...it was his mouth. His lips. His breaths. His desire. He

was fierce as he ripped my coat from my shoulders and flung it aside. His fingers were savage as they tore at my dress, ripping it clean open, revealing my lace bra.

Kisses. Hot kisses. Deep kisses.

I wanted them. Oh, fuck, I wanted them.

“Don’t fucking speak to me like that again,” he said, squeezing my face in one big hand. “Or I’ll wash your mouth out with soap.”

I don’t know what consumed me as I wrapped my arms around his neck. I didn’t know what depths of insanity were possible until I panted into the next round of kisses and rode the pang of desperation for more.

This was doomed. Forbidden. Madness on every level.

With another deep kiss, the beautiful monster yanked me away from the countertop and pushed me backwards into the hallway, charging us both through into the darkness of the living room. He threw me down onto the floor so hard I tumbled onto my knees, but that didn’t matter.

He got the light and was down on me in a heartbeat.

A feral animal.

The fabric tore right open. He was strong. So damn strong I was just a doll in his arms. I closed my eyes and let him strip me, knowing full well what would be coming. *Wanting* what was coming.

I heard him groan under his breath as he tugged my tits free from my bra, seeing just how hard my nipples were for his touch. His fingers were savage as they gripped and twisted my flesh, but they didn’t stop there. They slid right down my ribs and over my stomach, hooking into my tattered tights to pull them down.

Oh fuck. My thighs. He’d see my thighs. He’d see the scars.

I bit my lip before he tugged the tights down to my knees, feeling the self-consciousness brewing under the harsh glow of the bulb, even in the face of the mortal terror I should be racked with.

Sure enough, he saw them. Brutal under the overhead light, he saw them.

The cuts were fresh, painful lines over scars. So many scars, my thighs were a dance of them. Always high, out of view. Always deep enough to bleed nice and hard.

I'd been hurting myself since I was young, and I needed it. I needed the hurt in my body to free me from the hurt in my head.

“What the fuck—” Lucian began, but he knew when he looked into my eyes. He knew exactly what the fuck was going on with me.

I took hold of my tights and tried to pull them back up, but he wouldn't let me.

“Why the fuck would you cut yourself?” he asked, and I should've given him a shrug and kept my silence, since it was none of his damn business, but again, I guess I had the alcohol to thank for my loose tongue. The words flowed from my mouth like they'd never done in my life, gushing free with no restraint before I could try to stop them.

“It was a long time ago.”

“You're not that old, Elaine.”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

My heart twists at the words. “Maybe I cut myself because I need alcohol and drugs to numb the pain. Maybe it's because nobody will ever love me. Because they wouldn't, would they? No man would ever fall in love with a freak like me, even if my family would let them.”

His eyes widened on mine, and I saw more than hate. Worse than hate.

Pity.

I saw damn pity.

“You need to get some fucking therapy,” he said, his hands still gripped tight on my wrists.

“Yeah, so I keep hearing. Therapy, therapy, therapy. I’ve had years of it, you know. From expensive therapists. Take deep breaths. Positive self-talk. It’s never helped.”

He stared at my cuts, and I felt ashamed of them, so fierce in my pain. I was wearing a lace thong, but he barely even noticed. His attention was fixed on my flaws and not my strengths, just like the rest of the world’s always seemed to be.

Even the people who gave a shit.

“Do it,” I said again. “Just do it.”

His stare tightened on mine. “Do what, exactly? Fuck you? I’m not here to service you, sweetheart. You’re the one who needs to serve me, but you don’t even know how.”

“Yeah, well maybe I’m a failure at that, too.”

I knew the tears were pricking at my eyes, and I despised myself for it. I forced my jaw up in the air, trying to look as proud as I could manage, even though my bottom lip was trembling.

Shhh, secrets. Secrets.

Never tell your secrets.

He dropped my wrists and pulled away from me, and the pity was worse, his eyes still struggling to take it in. I pulled my tights up, but didn’t attempt to squirm away, just gathered my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

Lucian got to his feet and brushed himself down, clearly feeling as though anywhere with less than a million-dollar decor value was obviously infested with cockroaches.

“Hurt me,” I said, and I meant it. I truly meant it.

He cocked his head, looking at me like I was a bug under a magnifying glass, curious but detached. “So you can use me like a knife? So you can earn another scar on your pretty little thighs? I don’t take orders from Constantines.”

We glared at each other with more spite than you could put into words, both of us seething on waves of malice built up over decades. But it wasn’t spite that was making my heart race.

“Do it,” I rasped through his grip on my neck.

His eyes were slick with evil, and I saw it. Felt it. Sadism...cruelty...brutality...just like I’d known from so many men, so many times.

I felt like that again. I felt it deep. I felt it in him. In the monster in front of me.

But this monster was different.

This monster made me flutter in a way no other man had ever done.

Lucian Morelli wanted to hurt me, and it wasn’t just because of my bloodline. It was because he wanted it. He wanted to see me suffer. He wanted to see me lose myself in my pain.

Oh God, please, I wanted to lose myself in my pain too.

I wanted the perfect monster to make me hurt for him.

Please, give it to me. Please.

But no.

Like a switch had flicked inside him, his fire turned to ice.

“Enjoy your last moments of freedom, little doll,” he said. “I’ll be coming for you one day. And when I do, you’ll be mine. For good.”

I wanted to beg him to stay, even though it was insanity piled on top of insanity, and made no sense to my soul. I didn’t

beg him for anything. I summoned enough pride from the scrappy little pits of my heart and stayed silent as he walked away, watching him leave with my sobs battling in my chest. He didn't even look back.

I flinched as the front door slammed closed behind him, and then the sobs burst their way free from my lungs.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Lucian

THE WOMAN HAD twisted me up inside, so tight I didn't even know my own mind as I left that slum of a building. I marched out into the street, hoping that a random lowlife would come chasing after me, just so I could slam my fist into someone's flesh.

They didn't. It was me, alone, wandering through downtown in the early hours of the morning, barely aware of my surroundings as I paced through the city.

It was all on her. Her lonely soul begging mine for peace. Her burning heart flaring up to lash out, even in her weakest moments. Her fear, so pretty. Her eyes, so wide and hurt.

Her need for touch and pain, blurring together to take her to the heights.

She was a masochist, and I knew it, even if she didn't truly know it herself.

She put her need for release through pain down to whatever traumas she'd pushed into her depths, but she was wrong. I'd seen enough pain sluts to know what she was. She was one of them. I'd put every ounce of my fortune on it.

It was the swell in my pants that told me just how desperate a pain slut she really was. She had potential to be the best of the best, and I felt it with every single beat of my filthy heart.

No. She was a Constantine. Her pain had to be about my pleasure, not hers.

I knew Violent Delights would be empty, and even if it wasn't, it wouldn't have scratched the itch that Elaine Constantine had raised in me. I could've summoned up a fresh girl to hurt, picking a gorgeous woman of my choosing, but that wouldn't have scratched it either.

I could've even picked up a woman from the street and played my cash purchase game with a total stranger, but I didn't.

I did nothing, just kept walking through the night until the sun finally poked its head above the skyscrapers, thinking about Elaine Constantine and making her my wife.

NYC was bustling with Sunday morning life when I finally came to my senses and called Elliot Morelli up on my phone. He was still in bed when he answered, his voice slurred with a clear hangover from the night before. I could read him a mile off.

I wasn't particularly close to anyone in my family. My father and my "condition" had seen to that. However, I stayed in touch with my cousin. He was the closest thing I had to a friend.

I heard a woman's voice next to him, moaning out a *who is it?* and realized it must be a repeat conquest considering that she was asking the question with such a groan. Familiarity. Hardly a usual occurrence for a playboy. He rarely fucked the same pussy twice.

"I'm coming over," I told him, and he grunted a sigh.

"What the fuck, Lucian? It's barely eight a.m."

"I'm coming over now," I said. "Get that random out of your bed, will you?"

"Sure thing, whatever," he said, and hung up.

I hailed a cab, knowing full well the woman would be gone from his apartment by the time I got there. Sure enough, Elliot was padding around his living room, dressed in nothing but some low-slung pants as I stepped across his threshold.

I dropped myself onto his sofa and let out a breath as he rubbed his eyes.

“What the fuck brings you here on a Sunday morning?” he asked, and I spat it out before I came to my senses.

“Elaine fucking Constantine.”

He looked at me like I’d taken a blow to the head since he’d last seen me.

“Why the holy crap would Elaine Constantine do *anything* to you? Please tell me you’ve stayed away from her. Your dad will lose his shit. Her family will start a war.”

Predictably for Elliot, my one friend in the world, he read my mind.

“You fucked her, didn’t you?”

“Not quite,” I told him, and cursed myself under my breath.

He crouched down in front of me, eyes searching for signs I’d taken a battering to my brain. “Not quite as in what? What the hell’s going on?”

I shouldn’t have told him any of it. I should’ve put it to bed in my mind and turned my back on it for all time. But I didn’t. I was still twisted up enough from her bullshit ways that I didn’t. “Tinsley Constantine’s masked ball,” I said, and he pulled a face.

“Yeah, what about it? Everyone’s been raving about it. Tabloids have been lapping it up.”

“I was there,” I told him, and he laughed at me. Actually laughed at me.

“What in the living fuck were you doing at Tinsley Constantine’s ball?”

“Finding a wife.”

He scoffed. “Right. Sure. Next thing you’ll tell me you’re going to be a father. And what the fuck has that got to do with

Elaine?”

I wished I was a smoker, just to take a drag on a cigarette and break up my own damn mood. “You can guess.”

“The whole world knows she’s a fucking party girl. I heard she was in debt to the Power brothers last time the Constantine gossip was going around the Regent.”

That pricked my interest—one small sliver of Constantine intelligence that had slipped my ears. “The Power brothers?”

“Big time, apparently. They say her mother is coming down hard on her.”

I was mulling over this new information when he spoke again.

“So, what happened when you saw Elaine Constantine at the ball?”

I despised the shame and humiliation brewing in me. Elliot had been a trusted ear for decades, but I was struggling to voice this confession to him.

He saved me the battle. “You grabbed her, didn’t you? You let your dick rule your hate, and you grabbed her?”

“That isn’t quite how it went—” I began, but he was already grinning at me.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Lucian,” he said. “I’ve seen her. She’s hot, even by Constantine standards. I mean, they’re all hot, but she’s something else. I doubt there are many guys in that position who wouldn’t want to fuck her if they had the chance.” He thrust his hips to demonstrate. It felt cheap to hear it framed that way.

“It wasn’t anything to do with her pussy.”

He was still grinning. “Yeah, but it became about pussy, right? Believe me, I know you well enough to know she’s got you all fucked up over that tight little body of hers.”

“Forget it,” I said and made a move to leave.

He pushed me back down in my seat, dropping his humor. “Jesus Christ, Lucian. You’ve got feelings for her. Are you out of your mind?”

“I don’t have fucking feelings for anyone.”

“Nah, I’m serious. This isn’t you, pal. She’s done something to you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, but he wasn’t believing me. I could see it in his stare.

I wanted to believe myself, and I should have. The concept was absurd. Never once in my life had I had feelings for anyone, let alone anyone with even the hint of a Constantine connection. I didn’t do emotions, let alone the fluffy bullshit of *falling in love* and all that crap. It was weakness. Nothing but weakness. People were tools for me to use. Nothing more.

“It’s all right, you know,” Elliot carried on. “Seriously, just spit it out. Whatever needs saying.”

“You’re not a goddamn counselor, Elliot. Nothing needs saying,” I countered, but he gestured to the clock above his fireplace.

“Not quite what you showing up here before nine on a Sunday morning is telling me.” He smiled. “I kicked Melissa out for this, you know. I was planning on at least one fresh round of fucking her ass before she left today.”

“Melissa?” I asked. “The girl behind the bar at the Aegean?”

“Don’t change the subject,” he said, and joined me on the sofa, kicking back with his hands behind his head.

I forced myself to speak, for my own sanity. At least if Elliot knew about my bullshit choices then he stood a chance of keeping tabs on me if I lost my head again.

I told him about Tinsley’s ball, and about how I’d grabbed Elaine in the bathroom. I told him how she’d wanted me, even through her fear. I told him how I’d liked it, even if I hadn’t wanted to admit it to myself.

“So, what happened next?” he pushed when I was done with the ball recounting. “Did she call you for a date night?” He laughed at the prospect.

That’s when it got awkward. That’s when I should have shut my mouth for good and bailed on out of there.

“I got access to her calendar through Alto. Her personal calendar.”

“What the fuck?” His whole body spun in the seat to stare at me. “You got access to her personal calendar? They’ll skin you for that, your side as well as hers. If they find out—”

I cut him off at that. “It’s a fucking calendar. Nothing more.”

“Yeah, and a swipe at an inroad into the heart of the Constantine world. They’ll come after you with full fucking force.”

He was pointing out things I already knew. It was redundant speech but still he kept on telling me how raging mad my father would be, and just how attacked the Constantines would feel through something so concrete in its intentions.

I’d wanted to track her down and destroy her. They’d know it. They’d react to it. It was a big statement, and I’d known it. I’d known the risks.

It wasn’t anywhere near the severity of me sneaking into the Constantines’ private party, but that didn’t seem to matter shit to Elliot. There was more concern than that in his tone... he was too astute for his own good.

“You tracked her down already,” he said, and there was no question in it.

“Yeah, I tracked her down already. I was intending to marry her.”

He shook his head. “Nah, you weren’t. Tell yourself that all you like, but you were intending to do a shit ton more to her than marry her.”

“I did fuck all to her in actuality,” I told him. “I tracked her down to some shithole bar and stalked her from the sidelines, enjoying every little sniff of her ignorance. Then it gets even better.” I paused to soak in his expression of crazy. “I followed her to some shitty apartment of some friend of hers. It seemed the perfect backdrop to fuck her, slowly.”

“And marry her.”

I finally admitted the obvious. “Yes, and to marry her.”

“Why?”

I still wasn’t quite sure of the answer to that, so I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I want to toy with her a little more before I do.”

“Don’t do it,” he said, and his voice was tighter with dread than I’d ever heard. “Seriously, Lucian, for the life of you, don’t do it. Don’t go anywhere near the Constantines again. It’s not worth it. She’s not worth it.”

The fire in me said otherwise, burning bright with the need for her pain and destruction.

“I fucking mean it,” Elliot said. “Don’t go anywhere near her again. Go after Tinsley if you have to. Or even that Haley chick, or whoever, none of it matters. Just not Elaine Constantine. Please God, not Elaine Constantine.”

I sneered at him, because his words made no sense. His logic made no fucking sense. “Why not Elaine?” I said. “Her mother would be crying harder about losing any of the others than that of her black sheep. Taking out any of them would be a much more dramatic swipe at their heritage than the one they want to disown.”

He was shaking his head, and I could read it in his eyes, something that made my blood freeze. “This is nothing to do with the Constantines and who they’d cry hardest about,” he told me. “It’s about you.”

“Me?” I scoffed. “What the hell has it got to do with me? Why the fuck does it matter which of the Constantines I fuck

with? I'll be firing a nice fucking shot into the heart of them, regardless. It's about damn time one of us did."

"It's got *everything* to do with you," he said, and he meant it. He really fucking meant it. "It's got *everything* to do with which of the Constantines you opt to go after next."

"So tell me," I snapped at him. "Tell me what catastrophe you think is gonna happen when I go after Elaine Constantine and fuck her."

Elliot Morelli looked at me like the best friend I'd known for decades, all summed up in that one short moment. "I don't *think*. I *know* what catastrophe is gonna happen," he said. "You're not just gonna marry Elaine Constantine. You're gonna fall in love with her."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elaine

MONDAY FOUND ME sitting with Harriet, Grace, and Vivian in the Regent Country Club. The girls were chatting and laughing, sipping away on coffees like a group of regular BFFs. We were four blondes, all made up to the nines, amongst a whole load of golfers and suited gentlemen and their high-styled wives around the edges. The other girls were glowing fresh from a morning gym session, but I was barely steady on my feet, still muggy-headed from my weekend on the rocks.

My thighs were itching under my dress, fresh with cuts from the night before, deep enough to remind me of my failings.

The others went through their usual crappy small talk. *How was your weekend? Did you see Amy-Ann's dress on Saturday night? Hemmings Vintage, right?*

I sipped my black coffee, hoping that the gathering would disband as soon as possible. I barely said a word, just smiled my fake smile as everyone spoke, playing at being vaguely interested.

But I couldn't be vaguely interested.

Not with Lucian Morelli racing through my mind.

I should've known it was inevitable that the questioning would turn in my direction. *Manners cost nothing*, so our au pairs and housekeepers had instilled from a young age.

It was Grace who spoke. My cousin was a picture as she grinned across the table at me, eyes fluttering under fake lashes.

“Hey, Lainey. How was your weekend, then? How come you bailed on the Longley fundraiser? Someone said you were busy...”

The other two were staring along with her. Harriet—my closest cousin of them all—was trying to look optimistic, like she didn’t know the answer would be something *unacceptable* to Constantine standards.

My sister, Vivian, wasn’t even trying to look optimistic. Her smile was paper-thin, knowing full well that I was likely coked up and barely conscious the whole while since she’d seen me last.

I nearly let loose an unhinged laugh—dark humor as I imagined what expressions they’d be pulling if they knew the truth of it. They’d be retching all over the table.

I was downtown with Tristan, watching some rocker guy he wanted a piece of dick from. I got tipsy with no security in sight...and then I was hoping to get fucked by Lucian Morelli. As it turns out, he didn't, just wound me up with his hands and mouth.

I shrugged. “Yeah, it was good, thanks. Just took some time out.”

Three blank expressions looked across at me, paper smiles not even cutting it.

I summoned up a smile of my own and poked the conversation back to some regular numb chatter.

“Tell me about Amy-Ann’s Hemmings Vintage gown, then.”

Grace leaped up and into it, sliding her hands down her ribs as she bleated on about teal satin and diamonds. Same old crap.

I knew Harriet's eyes were on me as I played with my coffee mug. I could feel them.

I loved Harriet Roosevelt. Not just because she'd been my closest cousin for forever, but because she was a really sweet soul and I wished I could learn something from her. She was on the straight and narrow with everything she ever did, and it wasn't because the Constantines were dictators who demanded we all did what we were told—it was because that's who she was as a person.

She didn't fill her calendar with hundreds of different charity events because it looked good in the tabloids. She did it because she wanted to be there with her heart of gold.

Maybe we had more in common than I'd ever let myself believe, but my heart wasn't gold like hers. Mine was tattered, dead.

Secrets. More secrets.

I'd have paired her up as besties with downtown Jemma if I thought they'd be able to spend any time together under the Constantine umbrella, but my mother would have blown a fuse to even catch sight of Jemma on Bishop's Landing turf with her moral crusading and dreadlocks in her hair.

When lunch was over, we did air kisses, same as usual. I didn't even bother downing the rest of my coffee before I gathered my coat up, ready to go.

I was at the front doorway when Harriet grabbed my arm. I leaped out of my skin, eyes opening wide on hers on instinct as she pulled her usual confused face, trying to make sense of just what the hell was going on with me.

“Come for a walk around the grounds?” she asked, and the flare up in my stomach was a fresh quest for cocaine, but I managed to contain myself enough to resist snorting a line at the Regent Country Club on a Monday lunchtime.

“Sure, yeah.”

She linked her arm through mine as we walked, waving the others away with the chauffeurs. I didn't know where to begin with speaking, so I didn't bother, just stared numbly ahead with the paces.

“Seriously, Lainey,” she whispered. “What’s happening with you? Please tell me.”

“The usual,” I said back. “I don’t know why you bother asking.”

I wasn't expecting her to grab my shoulders and twist me toward her. I wasn't expecting the sheer hurt and fear in her eyes as they met with mine. “Don't do this,” she said. “Don't shut me out like this. When have you ever shut me out like this?”

Plenty of times, but I couldn't say that. I could never say that to anyone.

In her mind we were kids kicking our legs out under the tree house in the grounds of her mansion, talking about life and boys. Until we weren't. Until we were talking about Constantine customs and business and trying to make our way in this crazy world.

I used to hold her tight when she got scared, even though I was festering with fear myself under the surface. I'd pick her up when she fell down and promise her it would always be fine.

I'd loved her, and she'd loved me. Until she didn't know me anymore, not enough to love me for real. As me. As the real Elaine Constantine beneath the makeup.

Harriet would get married. One day, she would get married. Maybe it would be to someone nice, someone she was compatible with, but regardless, a girl like Harriet could be a happy one, whoever she was hooked up with. She would always see the best in everyone, even in some rich asshole my family forced her to be with.

I wished I could be living in that bubble-gum sweet cloud she was living in.

She was still gripping my shoulders. “Were you out with Tristan? Didn’t you say he had some guy he was interested in?”

It was a decent enough confession to keep her occupied, so I used it. “He is all caught up in this guy. A rocker. Blue Hawk.”

She tipped her head. “Don’t think I’ve heard of him.”

“You wouldn’t have,” I told her. “He’s small time. It was in the Meatpacking District.”

Her mouth dropped open, just a little. “You went to the Meatpacking District? With Tristan?”

“No big deal.”

She let out a sigh. “Without security? Your mom would go wild.”

“I was with Tristan.”

“Yeah, but Tristan isn’t going to be much use to your safety from people who really mean you harm, is he? Especially not while he’s chasing after some rocker dick.”

I shrugged, even in her grip. “Yeah, well I made it through alive, didn’t I?”

It seemed my confession wasn’t quite enough. Her eyes stayed fixed on mine. “Have you been hurting yourself again?”

I pulled away from her. “What the hell does that matter?”

She followed me as I walked away. “It always matters to me how you’re treating yourself. If you won’t let yourself love yourself, then how are you ever supposed to be happy?”

“I should get therapy, right?”

She was more forceful than usual as she squeezed my arm again. “You should do *something*, Elaine. Talk to *someone*. Why won’t you please just let it be me? Please?”

Her eyes were pleading. Genuine. At odds with the fake surroundings.

“Please, Lainey,” she went on. “Please, will you just let it be me? I would never tell anyone...”

I believed her. So far in my life she hadn't betrayed me to anyone. If only I'd have spilled my truths to her in the early days, maybe she'd have given me the strength to act on them. Maybe she'd have held me just as tightly as I'd held her. No point reflecting on that now.

I looked at her again. I looked at the way she was looking at me and knew I should do it. I knew I should speak to her, at least about some of it.

“You swear on it, Harriet. For real? Keep your damn mouth shut, no matter what?”

Little miss lovely showed her face again. She held her hand to her heart, like some Girl Guide promise. “I swear on it. Harriet Roosevelt's honor.”

Seriously, I loved how she was still such an innocent little doll, even behind her super styled beauty highlights.

I waited until we were out of sight of the Regents Country Club building before I even dared to sit myself down on the grass. A double confession would be dangerous. Spilling my Lucian Morelli truths to Harriet as well as Tristan would only make them more real. My heart was thumping as I cleared my throat to talk, and it wasn't just from the disgust at my own confession.

It was from the disgust at just how much I wanted it to happen all over again.

I wanted Lucian Morelli.

I wanted his touch, and his hurt, and his hate.

It was weird. Hardly believable, because I wanted something I hadn't wanted since I was a little girl wishing on a fairy tale life ahead, with a noble prince on a noble steed charging into my world to claim me.

This wasn't a noble prince on a noble steed, he was an evil beast, charging into my world to destroy me, but that didn't seem to matter. Not to me.

I couldn't want it. But I did. I wanted it with every little tingle in my veins.

I wanted Lucian Morelli to fall in love with me.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lucian

MONDAY WAS USUALLY one of my favorite days of the week. I was in my usual role, in my usual empire, lording it over every lowly person at my feet.

I loved the ruthlessness of corporate business, takeovers and pursuit of official worldwide presence, laying so powerfully over our underworld presence below. But I didn't love it today. The thrill was lost to me, underneath that same damn itch for some other pleasure.

Jesus Christ, that damn itch could get the fuck away from me.

Trenton Alto had been pushing for a meeting, eager to catch up with me. I'd satisfied him with nothing more than a grunt of approval over the phone when he'd called.

I was in meetings all through the afternoon, playing the role of good little almost-CEO. Putting on a good face for the board as if any of this mattered. I was the one making our numbers skyrocket. And I would have my goddamn promotion, soon enough.

It was late into the evening when I finally gave in to the inevitable temptation and called up Elaine's calendar for the week ahead. She'd refreshed it, with a listing of *Harriet* in front of almost every activity that week. There was another ridiculously glossy charity gig on Wednesday for some low paid workers education fundraiser, and some Roosevelt social

dinner on Thursday. Friday had a stylist's appointment with some overpriced Hemmings designer shop.

Then Saturday was simple. Simple but vague.

Tristan.

I had plenty of social events of my own to be attending. We had a Morellis casino night scheduled for Thursday. Me, Carter, Elliot, and Kit. I had a bullshit meal arranged with Elliot and his university friends, showing my face with fake handshakes as though I gave two shits for his social circle, and I had an evening with my parents on Saturday.

I didn't want to do any of them.

Elliot sent me a text as I finally left the office that night. A simple text, *news?* Nothing more.

I knew exactly what he was referring to.

My response was a one-worder. *None.*

His reply was instant. *Thank fuck for that.*

I opted for some sensibility at least, and went straight from Morelli Holdings to another of my business places. One I should've been attending more often, in an attempt to quell some of my spiking base level urges.

Clark wasn't around when I stepped into the bar at Violent Delights, but I didn't head through to the back office to track him down. I went straight to a table overlooking the main stage and clicked my fingers for service.

The woman on serving duties didn't need to ask what I was drinking. She presented my mineral water on a tray, bending down low enough that I caught sight of her cleavage in her lacy little bra. I could bend her over the table and fuck her right now. She wouldn't fight me. No, she'd enjoy herself.

First I would make her cry.

Then I would make her orgasm so hard she passed out.

And then I'd stuff a handful of hundred dollar bills into her bra.

Elaine.

I wanted Elaine. I imagined my little blonde Constantine toy, trussed up in chains as she took my fury. I imagined her poor scarred thighs being nothing compared to the unleashing of my torment as I drew pretty lace patterns on her flesh with my whip and crop.

My pretty toy Elaine would like it, too—masochistic little fuck doll with beautiful, scared eyes.

The server batted her eyes. Brown.

The eyes staring up at me didn't belong to Elaine Constantine.

The tremble of her lip wasn't Constantine fear.

My cock was straining but didn't want the woman at my feet. My mouth was watering, but it wasn't for the girl ready to give me hers.

“More mineral water,” I barked, and she squirmed for a few seconds, gathering her breath.

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Sorry for dropping your drink, Mr. Morelli, sir.”

Fuck, it was *her, her, her*. Always *her, her, her*, slamming through my filthy skull.

I downed the mineral water, struggling to focus on the bodies in the room around me. Surely I wanted one of them. I tried to concentrate on the cracks of whips and the wails of pain around them. I tried to stare at the submissives bound up in chains and feel even a shiver of desire to see them writhing in agony in my hands.

But no. No, no, fucking no.

There was only one blonde sub I wanted in chains in front of me. There was only one woman's wails I wanted to hear.

I was a man who always took what I wanted from life, whenever I wanted it. I knew nothing but my own success, no matter what the cost. I climbed any mountain, no matter how steep or how tough, no matter how fucked up the mountain climb could be.

I wanted to climb Elaine Constantine and tear her apart on the descent.

I wanted to own her. Hurt her. Destroy her.

That precious woman belonged to me. I needed to see her again. Soon.

I didn't even wait to see Clark before I left Violent Delights for the night. I was on the phone to Trenton before I was even out through the door and onto the sidewalk.

"What, boss?" he asked, and I told him.

"I need two keys, and I need them right now."

"What kind of locks?"

"An outer apartment door and an inner apartment door."

"No problem. Where?"

"Meet me downtown, at the backstreet apartment block at the rear of Gaol Street, under the shitty overhead light."

"Are you serious?"

"Just fucking get there," I said.

"On my way, boss."

My chauffeur was waiting outside the club, but I didn't want to arrive at that dive in a car that didn't belong there. I summoned a cab, getting far too accustomed to the cheap, stinking leather as we headed to the shitty side of town.

Trenton was already waiting when I got there. I slammed the cab door shut behind me, and my fixer didn't wait for my approach, just met me on the sidewalk.

"What the hell are you doing here in this dive, Lucian? Just let me know who owes what, and I'll chase it down for

you. You don't need to muddy your hands.”

“This isn't about money,” I said, “I just want those two keys.”

He looked at me blankly. “Why the fuck would you want keys for this shithole?”

My stare must have been bristling with malice to mask my humiliated shame. “Why the fuck would you question my business? Just get me the fucking keys.”

He came to his senses, backing down with a *sure, sorry, yeah*, before stepping right up to the main door.

Trenton had many useful skills. Picking locks was something he majored in. And when you've been picking locks for decades, you tend to amass a neat collection of skeleton keys. Trenton had bunches of the things.

“Looks like a sixteen,” he said before pulling a ring of keys from his pocket. He selected one, slid it in the lock and the door was open. Just like that. Once inside, he worked the key free from the ring and dropped it in my palm.

“Next?” he asked, a smile of satisfaction on his face.

I led him upstairs and down the hallway to apartment seven.

“A number three, no doubt about that,” he said and twisted the key free from its ring and dropped it into my hand without even trying it.

I slipped the key into the lock and it turned with silent ease. My skin prickled and so did my balls as I pushed the door open, hoping with some twisted little part of me that Elaine was in there, curled up in bed.

Of course she wouldn't be in there. She was probably in her own sad little part of the Constantine compound, passed out with an empty glass of champagne in her hand.

I stepped inside and sure enough, the apartment was empty. Dark. Pathetic.

Desperate.

I flicked on the light and remembered the suicide blonde standing there in the hallway amongst her friend's tacky little trinkets, looking so damn stunning in her fear.

Trenton was still hovering when I turned back to face him, no doubt still trying to gauge what the fuck was going on.

"You can go now," I said.

He stared at me, tipping his head. "How long have I been working with you now, boss?" he asked. "Twelve years, right? At least twelve years."

"Long enough for me to know you need to keep your thoughts where they belong. In that thick skull of yours before I crack the fucker open."

He knew I wouldn't do it without severe motivation, not like I'd have done with anyone else standing in his place. We'd been acquainted for long enough to know each other's traits and ways. I relied on Trenton Alto, even if I didn't want to. He knew that. "Twelve years, and I still know fuck all about just how you work. You're one hell of a mystery, Lucian Morelli. Even by Morelli standards."

I managed to smile. "Stop trying to figure it out. You'll be better off for it in the long run."

"No doubt," he said, and walked away.

The door swung closed behind him, and I stood in silence as I breathed in the space.

There was the shitty tapestry opposite me, in its garish blues and its cartoon whale by a ship. The picture of grinning hippies was on the far wall by the kitchen doorway, and I stepped closer, wondering which of them was the friend of Elaine's.

The kitchen floor was cleared, broken mugs cleaned up nicely into the trash can. There was no sign of blood on the carpet from another self-harm attempt in the aftermath of me walking away.

I sat myself down on the couch in the living room where I'd ripped her dress from her, staring at the empty space on the floor.

I wondered how often she was in here, drowning out whatever bullshit in her life she was so determined to bail out on. Then I wondered about that, too.

What was it about Elaine Constantine that she despised so much? What had made her so fucked up in the head?

It was none of my business, not worth my time. I could use her to win over the board and send a *fuck you* to my father without caring about her.

It was well into the early morning hours when that twisted part of me gave up for the night. I wasn't even aware I was waiting for her, until I realized she really wasn't coming.

Of course she wouldn't be coming.

Why the fuck would she be coming to that hovel of a place when she had Bishop's Landing to float around in? Fuck knows why she was there in the first place.

I flicked off the light and headed on out of there.

I hated myself for my excuses for wanting her pussy, because that's what I was doing. Lying to myself. Lying to myself about just how much I wanted her pretty little slit.

Fuck it. Fuck it all.

Fuck my own fucking bullshit.

I called up her calendar all over again as I waited for another stinking cab to pick me up. Wednesday night. The education fundraiser was glaring out at me from my phone screen. *Fucking hell.*

It was listed in a whole host of local media reports as I searched the location, *Work Truths Inc.* and their quarterly auction.

Fuck!

My fingers moved quickly, running ahead of me on the screen, giving a fuck about nothing but hunting down my Constantine prey. I checked in for a gala seat, at a table in the center of the venue, keying in the name I was coming to know so well.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elaine

MAYBE HARRIET WOULD save me from myself.

I sat there alongside her at Work Truths' quarterly fundraiser and stared across at the tables around us. Faces I knew. Bishop's Landing faces and Regent Country Club faces and celebrities hitching along for the tabloid ride. I was wearing a tight burgundy dress that showed off my cleavage, determined to at least make it as a family success in one paltry area.

Better make the most of it. This was the only way I'd ever please them. With my pale hair and pale skin, I looked like a Constantine. That was the only thing we had in common.

Harriet kept shooting me kind glances, knowing just how much I was struggling. I hadn't told her the full extent of the Lucian Morelli story, but I'd told her enough. Enough for her to know that I was on dangerous ground, and it wasn't the Morellis themselves that were the main threat. It was me, losing my crazy mind over the evil prince at the heart of them.

I hadn't had a single sip of alcohol since the weekend. No clubs. No dancing.

There were a few seats still empty at our table, and my stomach was jittery from nerves. Sure enough, I looked across the room to see my mother air kissing the surrounding tables and waving to all her friends as she made her way closer. My heart shriveled in my chest as she looked at me, coldness glaring out from her eyes under her smile.

She hated me. She was ashamed of me. She'd given me up as worthless.

The little girl part of me wanted to leap up and run to her and beg her to hold me tight. I wanted to tell her I was trying to be a good girl for her. I promise, I promise.

Please, Mom. Please love me. Please.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't run to her.

It would hurt too damn much when she pushed me away.

She sat herself in the seat opposite Harriet and me at our round table, placing her champagne glass down in front of her. I knew who was going to be joining her. Lionel Constantine. My uncle. My father's brother.

The uncle that wanted my mother. It was clear in his eyes.

The uncle who made his marks on me, when I was too young to know what marks were.

Shh. Secrets.

Our family was built on secrets. Secrets and lies.

Even the very sight of him gave me shudders. He gave me a nod as he dropped himself into the seat beside her, and I felt my jaw tense.

He was wearing a tuxedo with a navy-blue bow tie, and his brows were heavy and laced with gray. He was attractive even though he was fading fast. I just wished he'd fade a whole lot faster and say his farewells for all time.

I was almost considering giving up my efforts at being polite, but Harriet gripped my hand under the table before I could move. Her eyes spoke more than her words ever could. She shook her head, just a little, and I took a breath, forcing myself to stay in my seat.

I barely had a second to gather myself together before I heard Mom's voice lashing out in its usual iciness, quiet enough to keep her spite to our table alone.

“Nice to see you actually turn up for something, Elaine.”

“I’ve been busy,” I told her, praying that the event started up soon.

I could read exactly what she was thinking. She was thinking I was a disgrace and wishing I would fuck off and die quietly somewhere to save any more humiliation to the family name. That’s the thing about my mother—she was determined to keep the Constantine glitter over the drudge of our slimy ways. It was more important to her than any of us could ever be.

I didn’t dare cast my eyes at Lionel again. It always made me feel sick, especially when I let thoughts of him creep inside me.

Please, Uncle Lionel. No. No. Don’t let them in. Don’t let them hurt me.

I kept my attention firmly on the other chattering tables and the man taking up his position onstage. I wanted to enjoy it. I wanted to love being there, and love being away from the clubs and the partying, just for one night. I wanted to love the people around me and believe, for just a second, that they truly loved me back.

Tonight’s list of auction items were the same usual fanciness. Gowns and designer sessions and diamonds and pearls. Vacations to some of the top venues in the world and a personalized song from one of the most A-list pop singers.

People lapped it up. My mother raised her hand to several of them, grinning away like a sugar plum fairy when she beat off the competition.

“For you,” she said to Lionel, once she’d won the trip to an Australian boudoir hotel.

“What a darling sister-in-law I’m blessed with,” he said with a dark twinkle in his eye. “My brother was a lucky soul.”

That’s when my tongue burst free from my mouth. “Your brother is a dead soul,” I spat, barely audible under my breath.

“Your brother was a *lucky soul* enough to be murdered by someone who wanted what was his. If only we knew who that was. Hey, Uncle Lionel, do you know who that was?”

“Enough!” Mom said, then realized just how loudly she’d snapped. She pasted on that smile of hers all the brighter, waiting a few long seconds before leaning into the table to give me more. “You’re not a child anymore, Elaine. Whatever it is you need to get over about your father’s death, it’s about time you did it. Grow up and stop being rude to your Uncle Lionel.”

I hated it when she spoke to me like that. I could feel our Constantine table all sinking inside, each one of us fully aware of the bristling tension.

Grace, Vivian, and Tinsley lined the table to my left, and Kingston and Harlow, on Lionel’s side, were on the right. Yeah. Everyone knew about the tension.

“Leave her alone, Mom,” Tinsley said in a soft, pleading tone.

It would only make my mother turn on her, too, so I said, “Don’t worry about me, Tins.”

Everyone knew I was a failure. A compulsive, worthless failure. Why not just join in with the pitiful joke of the whole damn thing? So, I did. Just like usual, I did. I pasted on my own fake smile, and then I summoned up my finest bravado for the room.

I did it for me. I did it in the face of Uncle Lionel and all the shit he made me feel inside. I did it because I didn’t know what else to cling to, other than my own spectacle of glorifying myself somehow in this hell of a room.

I put my hand in the air to bid on a penguin adoption at the local zoo, ignoring the pounding in my chest, knowing plenty fine that I was in too much debt already to give a shit about a few more thousand dollars. I could win this. I could win this and win the applause that went along with it. Just a small

smattering of applause for the small little soul who couldn't do any better than adopt a fucking penguin.

But it wasn't a few thousand dollars I was bidding, not after the first few seconds.

Five thousand...eight thousand...twelve...

Mom was scowling at me, but I was past it, downing more champagne and keeping my hand in the air. I wasn't going to lose this. I got an allowance like any good heiress, but not enough to cover this. She knew I was broke. She just didn't realize how broke.

Harriet squeezed my knee under the table, but I took no notice.

Eighteen thousand dollars! Eighteen!

"Elaine," Mom began, but I didn't listen, just kept my hand up high.

I don't know why I wanted this so bad.

Lionel laughed at me, trying to brush aside my efforts as nothing, and that made it burn all the harder in my chest, keeping my hand right on up there.

I didn't have eighteen thousand dollars. I barely had anything left anymore. I'd used it running up debt in places I shouldn't...in *people* I shouldn't. Places and people I could never share with my family without them scoffing at me. The Power brothers were after me and my debts, charging interest at an unbelievable rate knowing full well I was broke.

Twenty thousand dollars!

My mind was swimming in the fear and the shame and the insanity of not knowing my own heart anymore. It was swimming in the need to win, just to be someone, even if it was just for a few short moments of getting the cheers from the crowd.

"Elaine!" Mom tried again, but I didn't listen.

Harriet squeezed my knee even tighter, but I didn't listen.

Twenty-two thousand dollars!

The woman battling me was a celebrity wrestler's daughter who dabbled in modeling. I guess she was trying to prove herself to the room and the tabloids as much as I was.

Twenty-four thousand dollars!

Mom was scowling, even through her false whoops of cheer.

Twenty-seven thousand dollars!

Zelda Hart. The wrestler's daughter was Zelda Hart.

Twenty-eight thousand dollars!

"Seriously," Harriet whispered. "Please, Elaine, what are you doing? I didn't think you had the..."

Her voice trailed off. My hand stayed high in the air.

Twenty-nine thousand dollars!

I felt sick. Hungry for attention. Fit to throw myself from the chair and give up on everything. But it was about the applause. It was about drowning out my own inner demons, just for that one short minute. It was about drowning out the demons of Uncle Lionel and his shadowy friends with their shadowy secrets in the corners of mine.

And drowning out the demon that was Lucian Morelli.

Holy fuck, Lucian Morelli was a demon.

A demon I wanted to possess me and my worthless soul.

Thirty! Thirty thousand dollars!

Somehow, I had to stop thinking about Lucian Morelli.

It knocked me back when Zelda's hand dropped at the other table. She clapped her hands and let out a cheer for me across the room, and it was on me. Every iota of attention in that whole ballroom was all on me. I'd done it. I'd won some random penguin when I didn't have enough cash to buy my soul an escape from hell.

My eyes felt glassy. The applause meant nothing when it came. Mom's disgust still rang loud through my veins, even though she wore a fake smile along with the rest of the crowd.

But then a voice sounded out. A voice that made no sense to me.

"Fifty-thousand dollars," the man said.

No.

It couldn't be.

I saw his darkness. I saw the solidity of his stance. I saw the broadness of his shoulders as he held his hand up to the auctioneer like he was the calmest guy on the planet.

Lucian Morelli. My own personal demon.

Unlike Tinsley's birthday party, he would have been invited to this charity auction. The Morelli family was much like the Constantines, though my mother would throw a fit if I ever said that out loud. We were both rich and amoral. They were as powerful as we were.

That was what made the feud last forever.

My mother's face had gone stone hard. Lionel was muttering something in her ear. They didn't like me bidding on the penguin, but they hate even more that a Constantine was bested by a Morelli. It will feel like losing a battle for them.

I couldn't stop staring.

My hand was trembling as I dropped it back to the table top, because I had to be wrong. I had to be losing my mind.

"And the penguin goes to the gentleman at table five!" the guy on stage called out, and the applause struck up even louder, all for the monster in our midst. "Your name?"

"Lucian Morelli."

A soft gasp runs through the room. People who couldn't see him now know exactly who's in their midst. The Morellis

may be a lot like the Constantines, but they're different in one way. They're known to be more dangerous.

The applause starts again, louder this time.

It was Harriet who leaned in to my side when the applause started up again, her giggle a surprise enough to jar my senses.

“Is that him?” Harriet whispers into my ear. “He looks *intense*.”

Yes. Intense is a good word to describe him. His dark gaze met mine, and all that intensity was directed at me.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lucian

SO MANY PEOPLE, cheering and clapping.

I raised my glass to the stage and made a small bow.

Fuck knows how my insanity had sunk low enough that I'd paid fifty thousand dollars just to enjoy the look on that little girl's face when she saw me stealing her applause.

That's what it was, of course. It was stealing her applause and seeing the shock and fear on her face when she realized it was me.

It definitely wasn't me saving her from her own goddamn self.

Though, what was she doing bidding thousands when she had the fucking Power brothers on her back? The head of the family was modest in her applause, pasting on her regal smile as she clapped for me. Her brother-in-law was already half drunk at her side.

Her eyes were on me, and her breaths were ragged, but she didn't say a fucking word.

I sat myself back down and kicked back, sipping on another mineral water while the table of reality TV stars around me did their best to be caught by the cameras. I hated charity events; they were the very epitome of arrogance, everyone patting themselves on the back for being such selfless saints in their overblown lifestyles.

At least I knew I was an evil piece of shit. My path to hell was already paved in sin. Soon it would be paved in Elaine Constantine's pain, too.

There were another twenty lots auctioned off by the time the ass of a presenter on stage fucked off and left people in peace. The majority of people got straight up from their tables, doing their usual socializing and gossip.

Elaine was sitting at the table alongside the rest of her family, her big blue eyes honed right in on me. My smile spoke volumes as I stepped away from her mother. I made sure to brush by her seat, close enough that she could feel me. I wasn't expecting her to up and follow me as I headed to the next round of morons to chat shit to.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered before I arrived at the next table.

My gaze must have been cold and vile when it pounded into hers. "Being a saint to the world, of course. Be thankful I saved you a fortune. Maybe it'll save your ass a few extra days from the Power brothers."

She flinched. "What do you know about me and the Power brothers?"

I leaned into her so closely that I could almost taste her neck. "I know you're in danger."

She shrugged. "I'm in danger from a lot of people. They can join the club, can't they?"

I found myself gripping her arm before she could move away. "Who the fuck else is after you?"

She turned her face to me, and she was close, so fucking close that her lips were just an inch away from mine. She was wearing a rich dark red lipstick. It contrasted against her blonde so well that it was a haven of temptation. Her cleavage was rising and falling with her breaths. Her words were a whisper when she spoke. "Why do you care who is after me? Just leave me alone if I bother you so much."

My reply was a growl in a crowded room of giggles and gossip. “I said, who the fuck else is after you, Elaine?”

Her eyes were pools of pain, underneath her bravado. “And *I* said, why do you care?”

With that, some loudmouth prick slapped my back, and this one was from London, wanting to talk about his investments. Elaine wasted no time in slipping away.

I managed five seconds of conversation before I excused myself and tracked her down. She was weaving her way through standing guests, pitching her route to the rear double doors with her perfect blonde hair bouncing on her shoulders.

The corridor outside the hall wasn't empty when I caught up with her, but I didn't care. I took her elbow and steered her to the side, pushing us down into some staff catering alley.

“Stay away from me!” she snapped, and this time around she tried to pull away. She lashed out with her hands and knees, a look of rage on her face as she tried to fight me.

She barely even managed to touch me before I pinned her, wrists high. Her clutch tumbled to the floor and the contents fell out onto the carpet. Makeup and phone and purse. She was panting, scared, hating me with every breath, but still she couldn't fight it. She couldn't hide the truth under the lies and the lashing out.

She wanted me.

And I wanted her.

Right there and then, beyond all doubt, I knew it. We were both crazy fucking freaks in a crazy fucking world.

“Stop stalking me,” she said as her breath calmed. “Your family would laugh at you if they could see you right now. That or break your kneecaps.”

“What makes you think my attendance is about you?”

She ground her stomach against my swollen cock in my pants, and she laughed at me. Somewhere, summoned from a

deep little surge of spirit inside her, she laughed at me. “This,” she said. “This tells me you’re here for me.”

“This has nothing to do with my cock,” I told her. “It’s something much less interesting than sex. It’s about marriage. I need a wife.”

She gasps. “Are you insane?”

“I’m dead serious. And anything that has to do with my fiancée has to do with me. Who the fuck else is after you, Elaine?”

“I don’t care,” she said. “They can come after me. I don’t care anymore. And we are most definitely not getting married, you psychopath.”

It was beyond fucked up that I was seemingly more bothered about her survival than she was. Her legs were still spread and she was still grinding, her breath hot on my lips. “You’ll let me fuck you in a shitty apartment, but you won’t let me put a ring on your finger? You hurt my feelings.”

“You don’t have feelings.”

A slow smile spreads across my face. “That’s right. I don’t.”

“Please,” she repeated. “Please, Lucian, just use me. Make it hurt all you like, but please show me what it’s like to be taken.”

Elaine Constantine wasn’t drunk. Or even tipsy. She wanted this.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because I’m useless. Disgusting. I’m an embarrassment to my family.” She squirms against my knee, even through the pain. “God gave up on me a long time ago.”

“There’s always redemption,” I replied, though the words sounded strange coming from me.

Her surprise was genuine. “Redemption? Wow. Didn’t have you down as the religious type.”

I ground my knee against that sweet pussy some more. “The Morellis are Catholic, sweetheart. The strict kind. Religious enough to hear your sins and deliver your salvation.”

“You’d be here a long time,” she said. “Hearing my sins would take a lifetime. Like you’d ever understand them.”

Jesus Christ, how I wanted them. I wanted to hear every single one of them from her quick little breaths.

Thank fuck my senses picked that point to come back to me. I broke the tension, dropping her to the floor with a curse.

“Forget it,” I spat and crouched down to her strewn belongings. I looked through her purse, digging my fingers into the lining until I found her cocaine. I slipped it into my inside pocket as she stared.

What she didn’t notice was me gathering the slick little item I’d chosen to replace it. I forced the tracker inside the lining in a heartbeat, deep enough that she’d never find it without a pair of damn scissors.

I handed it back over with a smile. “Make sure you don’t bid on any more penguins now. Be a responsible little doll for half the night at least.”

“That’s it, is it?” she asked. “You’re really going to steal my coke and fuck off again?”

My silence was answer enough as I walked away.

I was out of sight of her when I pulled my phone from my pocket and fired up the app through encryption. I was out of the venue and in the parking lot when the first bleep of her location showed up on my screen.

Yes. Perfect. Absolutely damn perfect. Just as I’d been planning, and just as I’d been craving.

The pretty Constantine was at my fingertips.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Elaine

I WOULD HAVE probably snorted a fresh round of coke if he hadn't stolen it from me. I was trembling as I gathered my things together and headed back through to the sea of people in the gala room. My heartbeat was fast, and my legs felt like weak little twigs.

This has nothing to do with my cock.

Harriet was still her amazing self as I sat back down at our table. She gave me her usual supportive smile and reached out to pull me close.

"You're doing great," she encouraged, but I felt anything but great. I felt like every bit the broken mirror—a flawed Constantine blonde, at odds with all the others.

Harriet seemed blind to the fear in my eyes, no doubt putting my shivers down to coke withdrawal and little else.

It's something much less interesting than sex. It's about marriage. I need a wife.

"I know it messed you up to see Lucian Morelli. Caroline is still flipping out, though of course she looks so calm and collected, no one outside the family can tell. But you handled it great."

"Don't worry about me," I whispered. "No one else does."

Harriet didn't even bother attempting to argue with me; she knew I was right.

I'm dead serious. And anything that has to do with my fiancée has to do with me.

I drank more champagne, but didn't feel the thrill or the release, just piled into the car with my chauffeur when it was acceptably late enough to bail on the shitshow. I opted for my apartment in the city, barely looking out the car window as it took me home, but there was something weird about the journey. An odd shiver down my spine.

It felt like I was being watched. That strange intuition when you know there are eyes on you.

I scoffed at myself. More withdrawal. I guess paranoia was a sensible addition to the list.

Or maybe I should be adding the Power brothers.

The chauffeur opened the door for me when I got to my building, and I glanced around before I headed up to my apartment. I was still feeling it. Still feeling those eyes on me.

I dropped my clutch on the table when I got inside, not bothering to restock the lining with more cocaine. I really was done with it this time.

I was done with Lucian Morelli, too. For good.

He was absolutely insane. Marriage? No.

I got in bed and slept until late, waking up with a muggy head and a pounding heart to go along with it. I trembled and craved more drugs, but I ignored it, eating ice cream for breakfast, even though it made me retch. I watched some of my favorite movies from my childhood, knowing the words by heart. I remembered being a little girl who still believed in the world. I thought about the dreams I'd believed in when I still thought they could be real.

And I thought about Lucian Morelli. Even though I'd sworn to my heart I was over him, I still thought about Lucian Morelli.

I ignored my phone. I ignored everything. I ignored my heart, and my hurt, and the scalpel blade screaming to me from

my bedside table.

But I couldn't ignore my thoughts about Lucian damn Morelli.

I had a Roosevelt dinner scheduled that night, on the lawn at my Uncle Geoffrey's mansion with Harriet, Silas, and Newton. Mom would be there, and so would Winston, Vivian, and Tinsley too.

I didn't want to go.

I had to.

I got dressed up, fresh under a new round of makeup. I styled my hair so it looked decent and put on some jeans and pumps. Casual. At least it could be casual.

I shouldn't have done it, but I did, as a safety net. I slipped more coke into the lining of my clutch where I always kept it safe, even though I cursed myself for doing it.

The chauffeur picked me up at seven outside the apartment block, and there it was again—the paranoia as soon as I stepped outdoors. That feeling of eyes on me was burning bright, making me shudder with every step. I was twitchy, looking out of the windows, trying to convince myself I was safe, but it only made it worse. A car was following us to Geoffrey's place, and I was convinced the eyes were from that. Paranoia fresh over paranoia. The Power brothers would never follow me onto my family's home turf. They weren't dumbass enough to risk the backlash. So, who was it? Who would be stalking me across New York and out into the suburbs?

As it turned out, the car wasn't following me. It kept on going down the street as we pulled into Geoffrey's driveway, carrying on quite innocently through Bishop's Landing.

Damn my muddled mind. Damn it.

The event stretched through the night. Laughter was a thin guise over the dirty business conversations Mom was having with Geoffrey and Newton, and it didn't distract me from any of them. I knew what they were talking about. I knew they

were talking about causing harm to anyone they wanted to destroy for the sake of their profits.

Once again, I bailed as soon as it wasn't going to cause any shit from the others. They were trying to keep a sheen over Mom's blatant disowning of me, but it was a poor show. She barely looked at me that evening, and when she did, it was like I was a piece of crap on her shoe.

Harriet tried to keep me talking. She failed.

Silas tried to talk with me about what happened with Lucian Morelli at Tinsley's ball. He failed.

I was in the car and heading back to the city with barely a wave of goodbye to them all, letting out a sigh of relief as I slumped into the back seat.

But there it was again.

That paranoia.

I glanced through the back window, just to assure myself how safe I really was...but it was there again. That same car was following us back towards the city.

It was then that I realized the truth. The Power brothers were coming for me, for real this time. My days of giving them the brush off were coming to an end, and I was done for. This time I'd be truly done for.

I should be relieved. Who cared if I lived or died? That's what I told Lucian.

But I was terrified instead.

I dashed out of the car as soon as the driver pulled up outside my building, not even giving him the time to open the door for me. I was inside and in the elevator up to my suite, barely catching a breath before I was through my front door.

The Power brothers wouldn't get me in here. Nobody could get me in here, not with all the security on the ground floor.

I checked my calendar, and the rest of my week was mostly with Harriet. The Power brothers wouldn't come after me around Harriet, that would be striking too much of a blow against my family to risk the comeback on that score.

I was so churned up thinking about the Power brothers that I jumped in my seat when my phone sounded out with a ping. Tristan. It was Tristan.

Still coming on Saturday night? Blue Hawk was great in bed, you know. Hope you can meet him again. Want your approval.

I hadn't actually liked Blue Hawk that much. He was an arrogant little shit, dangling Tristan by a thread. But I wanted to keep tabs on him to protect Tristan. *Is Stephen going to be there?*

The response came within seconds.

Sure is. Hopefully he can keep you distracted from your Morelli fantasies.

He shouldn't have put that in text form. I deleted it before I replied, *I'll be there.*

At least it was something to look forward to. I had no idea if or when I'd ever see Lucian again before I got taken out by the host of other assholes after my blood, so at least I could enjoy staring at a guy who reminded me of him.

Tristan sent me a reminder of where I was going, and I put it in my calendar before I could forget it. Spirit Club. Another dive downtown. Another place I wouldn't be telling anyone I was going to. At least the Power brothers wouldn't think to find me there.

I got into bed, managing another night with no alcohol. The scalpel was calling me, the craving for the release of slicing my skin was almost harder to resist than the craving of drugs in my veins. Hell knows how, but I managed to resist them both.

Just a shame I wouldn't be able to resist Lucian Morelli if he ever came for me again.

I hated myself more than ever as I realized I was praying that he did.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lucian

SLIPPING THE TRACKER inside Elaine's purse was a bad decision. She was preoccupying me through every minute. I should've been satisfied with having her whereabouts at my fingertips, but I wasn't. I wanted to be hunting her. Taunting her. Scaring her until she hurt.

It had been a lie, what I told her. I may have found her looking for a wife, but what I want from her now has nothing to do with the board of Morelli Holdings.

I'd been stalking Elaine from the moment she stepped outside the auction that night, tempting myself with fantasies of her pain and fear. I hadn't so much as ventured close to the Morelli Holdings headquarters on that Thursday morning, staring up at her apartment block like a fool, just outside of her security radar while my chauffeur tried to sleep in the front seat.

It was fucking ridiculous. I wasn't some Romeo. She wasn't Juliet.

And I wasn't going to be made CEO if I didn't make our engagement public.

She left her place on Thursday evening to dash out to the waiting limousine and head off for her Roosevelt social function. My own chauffeur had been moving in seconds, screeching tires as we pulled away. I'd followed her from her city apartment through to Bishop's Landing, keeping her in my sight until she'd pulled left into her uncle's driveway—the

asshole called Geoffrey that I'd heard plenty of rumors about over the years. By all accounts, her mother relied on her brother for some of the more nefarious parts of her business. Maybe Elaine's attendance was a token social event to coast along on top of a more lucrative one.

I'd been hovering around the streets for hours, driving in circles with my exhausted chauffeur until her tracker finally told me she was leaving Geoffrey's place. I followed her back into the city just to watch her dash from the car through to her apartment building.

One thing the pretty fool couldn't hide—she was moving damn fast wherever she went. It brought a smile to my face. There was no doubt in my mind that she knew she was being followed. Instinct. She knew she was being chased by a monster.

My lack of attendance at Morelli Holdings on Friday morning was alien to everyone.

I had VPs calling my phone on constant loop. I barked out instructions, barely more than one-liner answers to complex situations, but I didn't care.

I didn't have time for any of them, not a fucking peep of it.

Who the hell was I?

Trenton was trying to chase me down for approval of another cross-border arms deal, but I didn't have time for him either. I couldn't give a shit who was delivering what and when. It was when he called me late that morning for a final okay that I found myself asking a whole load more from him in return. Much more than should ever have been on my radar.

“I want to know what's happening between Elaine Constantine and the Power brothers,” I told him. “I want to know what the fuck she owes them and what the fuck they are planning to do about it.”

Trenton paused. “Sorry, what?”

“You heard me.”

I could hear the confusion in his voice. “Yeah, but. I just... if I track them down, they’re gonna know it’s coming from you.”

He was right. I knew he was right. Every scrap of common sense in my head was screaming out about my insanity, but still, I didn’t back down. “I want everything. I want to know everything,” I insisted, and he sighed.

I knew he thought I was as crazy as I did, but he knew better than to challenge me again. *Sure thing, boss* was the answer he gave me, and with that he was gone.

Friday morning was a bore and a slow burn. Elaine didn’t move until the sun was up high in the sky, walking on foot through New York City with her cousin Harriet.

I was a true damn stalker as I ditched my chauffeur in a city parking lot and followed her through the streets. I kept my distance, far enough behind that she didn’t stand any chance of catching my face, but again, her instincts were still pricking strong.

So many times she cast a glance behind her, wide eyes searching for her hunter.

So many times I dipped away out of her view.

It was when she was getting a dress fitting at one of the premier boutiques in the city that I finally opted to poke her fear some more. It wasn’t right. None of this was right, but I didn’t care. It turned me on. I thought it turned her on, too. That was the game we played.

I stepped up to the window, just close enough that she’d catch a glimpse of me. Then I waited. Waited until she stopped in the middle of a twirl, an instant halt which had the stylists as surprised as she was. My pretty blonde minx blinked and took a step forward, her shock so palpable that I could taste it in the air.

She rushed for the door toward me, but that didn’t matter. I was gone in a flash, just out of view as she dashed out onto the sidewalk.

I loved the self-fucking-doubt on her face as she stepped back inside. So much self-fucking-doubt she must have thought she was losing her mind.

I did it again when she was having a coffee with Harriet in one of the bars on East Street. I hovered on the other side of the street, my eyes firmly fixed on hers until she turned her head and caught a glimpse. This time she visibly flinched, getting up from her seat to rush in my direction, but again, I was gone.

Over and over I played my game through the streets. Chasing her. Teasing her. Watching the paranoia rise higher and higher. Cat and mouse had always been my favorite game, ever since I was a child. It gave me thrills all the way through my veins.

Here pussy, pussy.

So many times I gave her a glimpse. So many times she was rushing to find me.

Every single time she was a failure.

The evening drew in with both girls swinging a collection of designer bags along with them, Elaine laughing a little too brittle. She headed back to her apartment as soon as they were finished, hugging her farewell to Harriet before dashing inside.

I was still hovering outside her place when Elliot began trying to get hold of me. He called three times straight before my reality came crashing back in like a hammerblow. Fuck. Of course he was calling me. I was supposed to be out with him for his social meal.

I pressed to receive the damn call.

“Hey, finally,” he said with a groan. “You coming? We’re waiting on you before we order our main courses.”

I could hear the thrum of the restaurant in the background, and should’ve been heading right on over there, but I wasn’t. One look at the light on in the top windows of Elaine

Constantine's apartment building was enough to keep me in my seat.

"I'm not coming," I said. "Enjoy your night."

"Not coming? For real? What the hell?"

"For real," I said. "Greater priorities."

"Shit with Trenton?"

I didn't lie. I never lie. "Other shit that needs sorting."

He knew me so fucking well. I heard it in his voice as he sighed. "You still caught up with that Constantine girl? Please tell me you're not caught up with Elaine."

"Enjoy your night," I told him again, then hung up.

I didn't answer when he called back, just put my phone on mute and stared up at that window. I wanted to see her. I wanted to hear her short breaths and feel her fear. Surely she'd leave. Surely she'd head on out somewhere on a Friday evening and allow the cat another tease with his paws, but no. My time was wasted. She didn't leave her place again that night.

Elliot called me again on Saturday morning, when I'd finally gathered enough sanity to head back to my own apartment for a shower. I tried to keep my tone regular as I answered him.

"Early damn call," I said. "Calling to give me an update on your pussy exploits?"

"Don't even try to change the subject," he barked, and this time his voice was tense as hell.

"What subject?" I asked. "You haven't even said anything."

"You know exactly why the fuck I'm calling."

I laughed. "And you know it's none of your fucking business," I said, and he scoffed at me.

“Sure. Call me when you want some sense pushed into that skull of yours.” He hung up.

I doubted I’d be calling him anytime soon.

Elaine didn’t move through Saturday. I kept my eye on her tracker location, but this time it was from my office at Morelli Holdings, fighting back my own sweep of paranoia that she’d headed out without her clutch.

I forced myself to stay away from her, checking up on the business shit with that tracker beeping in the same place like a lodestone.

That evening I had a dinner with my parents. It would be the perfect time to parade some heiress in front of them, to show my father that he would lose.

But I canceled our evening together. One simple text.

Working tonight. Dinner another day.

I didn’t bother checking the replies. I wasn’t interested in what they had to say.

There was only one thing I was interested in. Elaine Constantine’s calendar. I knew what was brewing for her tonight. *Tristan*.

I knew where the venue was. Spirit Club—another downtown dive and another shitty Blue Hawk gig with Tristan chasing dick, no doubt.

I didn’t use my chauffeur for the journey this time.

My cab pulled up at Spirit Club when the gig was barely started. I’d known what was coming. This time I needed no guest list pass to get past the doormen, but I did need to go through a security sweep for signs of firearms or weapons. It felt damn fucking strange to be patted down by loser doormen, their hands so damn close to my flesh.

I already knew my plan for being there and found myself a position deep in the shadows at the sidelines, safely out of view of my pretty blonde mouse when she arrived.

It was a good thirty minutes later when I first saw her on the opposite side of the dancefloor, hanging off Tristan's arm with a smile on her face. The big, bright smile of hers was superficial enough to make me smile. She was flinching every time someone brushed up close, spinning to face them with wide open eyes.

She was scared. Really fucking scared.

My stare was firmly on her as the gig started up and her gaze shot up to the stage. It was that jerk up there again, the brute with a roar of a voice that sounded like shit, only it wasn't his voice that I hated tonight. It was him.

It was the way my sweet little mouse was staring up at him.

Nothing could deny it, even though she was getting drunk on beer, and gin, and whatever the fuck else Tristan was delivering to her. There was no way to avoid seeing the obvious.

The guy was huge, a trunk of a man with muscles rippling under his metal-loving tee. His hair was dark and slick, and his eyes were as deep as mine were. Almost.

It was enough. Enough for her to want a piece of him. She wanted the asshole on that stage.

I wanted to kill him for it.

It made no sense, not a bit. It should mean fuck all to me whose dick one of the Constantines were chasing after. I should be convinced this was the right location to finish her off, wipe her out and be done with it, never to think about the needy princess again, but I knew it wouldn't happen.

Jesus Christ, I needed to get a fucking grip.

I shouldn't be in this damn club, with her damn tracker beeping on my phone. I shouldn't be anywhere near her. Shouldn't be thinking about her. Shouldn't be wanting anything to fucking do with her other than her demise. But still, I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop myself.

All through his set she was cheering for the bastard on stage, and all through his set I was gritting my teeth at the sight of it. I was wound up all the more when I caught sight of worse, a whole load fucking worse—the way he looked back across the room at her when he lifted his hands in the air and said his *see you later* to the crowd. He was gazing after her as hard as she was gazing after him. I could have slit his throat if I hadn't been barren of blades to slice him up with.

Elaine had on her party girl persona, holding a beer and shaking to the music. The Blue Hawk prick was up next, and she was trashed enough to bop around on the dancefloor, past giving a shit for who the fuck was hunting her down.

She should only dance for *me*.

Tristan was dancing next to her, both of them leaping around to dickhead's punk rock shit as I weaved my way closer. She didn't even know I was looming. Didn't care.

That only made me want her even more.

I was planning on leaping out and grabbing her as soon as she was off that dancefloor, just as soon as that Hawk prick said his good night to the crowd, but I didn't get the chance. No sooner had the stage cleared when Tristan took hold of Elaine's hand and raced her through the doors backstage, and the two of them were gone. Gone and out of sight.

No fucking way. I'd missed my moment.

I should've walked away rather than using my name to clear my route to my prey, but I didn't. I was straight on after her, slamming into the security bouncers as I pushed my way backstage.

“Get off me,” I said, but they didn't move, just took my arms in theirs and pinned me back against the brickwork.

They should've known who I was. They should have seen it in my fucking eyes, but they didn't. They were fucking fools who fucking didn't.

“Backstage is off-limits,” the one fool grunted, and I lashed out at him, kneeing him hard enough in the groin to watch him fall.

“I’m Lucian fucking Morelli,” I snarled, with my foot on his chest as he squirmed. “And you’ll let me through backstage or regret it for the rest of your sorry life.”

I knew my name would spread. There was no way word of my attendance at this dive wouldn’t make its way uptown as well as downtown, and it was the last thing I needed, shit from my father on top of the shit from my dinner cancellation.

The doormen weren’t fools enough to challenge me. The guy on the floor kept on squirming, letting out another groan as I planted my boot in his ribs on my way over him. The other guy swung the door backstage wide open, tipping his head down low as I passed.

I paced through, head turning frantically back and forth to find the temptress I was hunting, but I couldn’t hear her. I couldn’t hear shit. No backstage voices, or backstage anything down the corridor ahead of me, there was nothing but a round of empty bottles in the dressing room.

That’s when I heard her laughter—just one small breathy sound through the rear door to the parking lot, and the sound of a car door slamming shut.

I caught one glimpse of her in the cab as it pulled away. She was sitting in the back seat next to her brutish prick from onstage, with Tristan and his rock star piled in along with them.

I pulled up the tracker, and then I called a fucking cab.

My Constantine toy didn’t have long left to play with strangers. I was on my way to hunt her down. It was time to claim her once and for all.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Elaine

“**R**EMIND ME, BABY girl. What’s your name?” the guy asked me in the back seat.

He was Stephen. Stephen. My head was lolling against his shoulder as we drove through the streets. I knew I was tired and tipsy. I knew I shouldn’t be in a car with a strange man, even if he was hot. Even if he reminded me of Lucian.

Especially because he reminded me of Lucian.

“I’m Lainey. Lainey...Marsh.” The lie was to protect him as much as me.

“Lainey Marsh,” he repeated. “I want a piece of your pussy, Lainey.”

I looked at him, illuminated by the flashing lights of the city through the windows. This was wrong. He wasn’t the right man.

Lucian.

Lucian Morelli could never be the right man. There were a million reasons that we didn’t belong together. My dark secrets and his cruelty. But the most compelling reason of all was our last names. The way our families hated each other. Something like that could never be overcome. My mother would never allow it. His parents wouldn’t either. They might be motivated by money, but they had their pride. I could never want him.

Tristan was all over Blue, both of them hands on and heated. I was jealous. Just like always, I was jealous. I wanted to feel hands on me. I wanted to be touched. Wanted.

I wanted to feel alive.

Stephen lowered his head and kissed my neck. Wet, warm lips that tickled. His hand slipped down my arm, and his fingers pushed their way inside my dress, squeezing. Squeezing my breasts hard enough to make me wince.

Lucian.

I found my back arching, seeking more. I wanted rougher. I wanted to hurt.

Why wouldn't Lucian hurt me? I knew he wanted to. I could see the thinly veiled violence in his eyes. And I'd heard the rumors about his sexual predilections. The whips and chains. BDSM shit. Except he hadn't hurt me. He's only made me come.

Was it because of my scars? Of course it was.

He saw me as a broken girl... and he was right about that.

The cab pulled up outside some house in the middle of a backwater city hovel, and there were lights on inside. Lights and open doors and bass thumping loud.

"House party, let's rock!" Blue shouted, and both him and Tristan bailed out of the cab.

"Let's go," Stephen whispered, and tugged me out by my hand, offering me another swig of vodka as we went. "Can't wait to show you off at this party, Lainey," he told me. "You're one hot little piece, you know that?"

Yeah, I did know that. It was my only skill in life. It had always been my only skill in life.

Even in my hazy state I felt the shiver of shame inside me, of wanting something dirty and cheap and forbidden, but there was more tension building along with the shame. That first

tingle of knowing you don't want something, even when your body is going along for the ride.

My body wanted Lucian Morelli. My heart wanted him, too.

Even though we were destined never to be together. We were star-crossed lovers, but I had no interest in a double suicide situation. That's why I was here, at this party, pretending I could move on, pretending I could live without Lucian.

Pretending I could lose my virginity to someone that isn't him.

The hallways were crowded with partying punks. People were getting it on everywhere I looked, that or dancing around to the beat or playing drinking games with ping pong balls and plastic cups. Stephen led me along after Tristan and Blue, right through a cluttered kitchen at the back of the building, where someone handed me a fresh beer.

I didn't want it, but my body did. I downed it in one and took hold of another.

"Check out this song, Lainey," Stephen ordered me, his voice in my ear. "This is me on vocals. *Slay the rich, feed the poor*, it's called."

I smiled to myself at that. It was a nice idea, but the rich controlled the world.

Stephen hadn't noticed the diamonds in the ears he was talking to. He hadn't noticed the designer dress I'd torn slashes into or the one-off stilettos on my feet. He hadn't noticed the value of the clutch next to me on the sideboard, or the cosmetic sheen of my teeth, or the way I was as suited to punk rock as a feather was suited to a volcano.

My ear prickled when he spoke next, another growl right into my mind. "Come with me. I want that pussy. I wanna get my hands on you. And my cock inside you."

I didn't speak. I couldn't find an answer.

“You want that, don’t you?” he said. “You want a piece of Stephen Fucking Cannon?”

I should tell the truth. I should tell him I didn’t want a piece of Stephen Fucking Cannon, that I hadn’t even known his last name until he said it.

No, I wanted a piece of Lucian Morelli.

That’s all I wanted.

That’s all I needed.

I turned to find Tristan, but he was in the darkest corner of the room, his hands on Blue. I felt Stephen’s fingers squeezing mine, and he pulled me with him.

“I’m staying at Blue’s drummer’s place a few blocks down. We’ll walk.”

I reached back for something, but my mind was dazed as he tugged me. What was I reaching for? He answered me.

“Another beer for the road,” he said and shoved a bottle in my hand. “Cheers,” he added and clinked his drink against mine.

“Cheers,” I said as he dragged me outside.

It was cold, and my stilettos were noisy on the sidewalk. He didn’t care. He kept on tugging me, kept on telling me about how amazing he was, and how damn amazing his songs were. He sang one to me as we crossed the street at the end of the block, and I remembered his voice from the club, looking up at him and seeing the darkness in his eyes all over again.

Lucian.

He stopped us next to a late-night store and ran inside to get some cigarettes. He lit one up as soon as we left, offering it over. “Want a smoke?”

I wanted a line of coke. I was done with the denial. I wanted a damn line of coke.

I reached under my arm for my clutch, but it wasn't there. Crap, I lost my clutch. I stopped in my tracks and cast the cigarette to the ground. Where the fuck did I leave my clutch?

I patted myself down, even though there was no way it could be anywhere on me. I glanced back at the street behind us, but it was nowhere in sight on the sidewalk.

"I've lost my clutch," I told Stephen, and he laughed.

"I've lost my cigarette, so I guess we're even."

I tried to pull backwards up the street, but he held me firm.

"My clutch..." I said, but he didn't move.

"You don't need your clutch, Lainey," he told me. "You need my cock."

I did need my clutch, and the cocaine that was inside it. Lucian Morelli took it, but I'd replaced it. I need it now. I need something to take away this strange sensation.

Stephen pulled me along again, holding me tight. "You need some good cock, Lainey. And that's what I have. You know? The best fucking cock."

His muscles were solid against my side, and his eyes were dark with want as he lit up a fresh cigarette. I waved away his offer of a drag.

Lucian.

I had no idea where we were headed, other than some drummer's place in some street downtown. My footsteps obeyed the man at my side, my stilettos still loud underneath me. His hand moved to my ass and squeezed, and it made me flinch.

He laughed. "I hope you know my dick takes every hole I want."

I didn't laugh back, but my footsteps stumbled forward. I couldn't seem to stop.

“Drink up,” he said and tipped my beer back against my mouth. It dribbled down my chin, even though I swallowed as fast as I could. “Almost there,” he told me.

The jangle of keys in his hand told me we were there. We climbed some metal stairs, which were dangerous for me with my heels. My heart raced, but I kept on moving.

He opened the door at the top, and the drummer’s apartment was a shithole, bottles and duvets strewn all over the floor. It stank of cigarette smoke, just like Stephen did.

“Now give me that pussy,” he said and slammed me into the nearest wall.

His mouth was hot on my neck. Frantic.

His body was hot against my chest. Wanting.

My legs spread, letting him grind into me. It didn’t feel like I was inside my body anymore. It was like I’d gone far away, the same as when the men touched me.

Lucian.

I pushed him off me, hard, and Stephen stared at me with shock on his face. “What the fuck? You looking for a johnny? Don’t worry, baby, I got one right here.”

I wasn’t looking for a condom. I was looking for an exit.

I shoved him away again when he leaned back in.

“Sorry,” I managed, “I have to go.”

“Go?” he asked and didn’t move a muscle. “Where the hell do you need to go to right now?”

I didn’t have an answer, so I didn’t give him one, just pushed my way to the side.

That’s when he grabbed me, and his voice turned darker. “I left the fucking party for you. I could’ve had any fucking snatch in that place.”

“I’m sure the party’s still rocking,” I said, and I was slurring, feeling strange. “Sorry, Stephen. Didn’t mean to

waste your time.”

“You aren’t wasting it,” he replied. “I’m not gonna let you.”

He pushed me back up hard against the wall. That’s when his mouth met with mine, and his tongue forced its way inside. That’s when he kissed me deep enough that my drunken haze disappeared under the adrenaline rush.

He was rough. I should’ve liked it.

His cock was hard against me, grinding through my dress. I should’ve liked that too.

Lucian.

Stephen didn’t look like Lucian Morelli up close. His kiss was sloppy, and his brows were far messier. His cheekbones were less sculpted, and his jaw was weaker.

He didn’t taste like Lucian Morelli either. He tasted of cheap beer and cigarettes.

I pushed him away again. “Let me go, and get back to the fucking party.”

He sneered at me. “I’m not going fucking anywhere except inside that pussy of yours,” he whispered, and I knew it then. I knew it in that moment. I saw it in his eyes.

Stephen wasn’t a nice man.

“No,” I said, but his mouth was back on my neck.

My hands were weak against him. My stilettos were unsteady. “No,” I said again, but he didn’t listen. “I mean it,” I said. “Get back to that fucking party and get some other girl.”

His eyes were darker than ever when they met mine, his breaths were fast, and his cock was hard. “After you give it up for me.”

“I’m Elaine Constantine,” I told him. “Lainey damn Marsh is a lie.”

“I don’t give a fuck who you are,” he sneered. “Tonight, you’re mine.”

He didn’t know who I was. He didn’t know he was signing his death sentence if anyone in my world found out about this, and my threats wouldn’t make any difference to him.

“Let me go,” I begged. “My family... they won’t let this go...” But that’s one thing about the girl who always lies... nobody ever believes her when she tells the truth.

A sneer. I’d pushed him too far. I’d pushed him hard enough that he was losing his shit rough enough to hurt me. He slammed me harder into the wall, and this time it really hurt. “Shut the fuck up,” he snarled. “Believe me, baby, you’ve cost me enough time already. You’d better buckle up. I’ll be fucking you hard to make up for it.”

“No,” I said. “Please no.”

“It’s gonna be a long, dirty, slow fucking ride, baby girl,” he said. “Just as well the drummer ain’t back until morning.”



CHAPTER TWENTY

Lucian

I WAS PACING like a madman when the cab finally showed up on the street outside Spirit Club. I was a charging bull when I leapt forward in my seat and told the driver who I was.

As soon as he heard the name Morelli, he put his foot on the gas.

Every second felt like a year on that journey. The tracker was in some house down on the west side. Another hovel on top of a hovel.

The tracker didn't move a meter the whole journey.

"Come on," I snarled at the driver. "Faster."

He couldn't go any faster. There were drunken assholes in the street singing and swaying across the road when we tried to pass them. So I did it. I used the Morelli title to get me what I wanted, regardless of the cost. I ordered the cab driver to run the assholes down, but he was a statue in his damn seat until I barked at him.

"Drive, you bastard. Drive even if you have to run them over."

The cab screeched forward, and the men bailed out of the way. *Good call, asshole.*

"Faster!" I snapped again, and the driver nodded.

He pulled up outside the house so fast that the brakes slammed and sent me lurching forward. I didn't care. I was

already scrambling out of there. I threw some money into the front of the cab, and it pulled away at full acceleration.

It was a house party, and I went straight up to the front door of the shithole, elbowing my way past fools and storming my way toward Elaine.

Because that's what she was.

She was *my* Elaine. *My* Elaine Constantine.

I barged my way through the final few partiers, plowing into a mess of a kitchen space, but she wasn't there. There was a green-haired woman standing where the tracker was pointing me, and one shove of her aside told me all I needed to know.

Elaine's clutch bag was on the sideboard amongst the beer bottles.

My blood froze in my veins.

I grabbed it and looked inside. Everything was still in there—phone, keys, and cash.

Where the hell was she?

I gripped that clutch tight and charged around that place like a maniac, looking in every single damn space and shadow on the ground floor. I grabbed people and barked out the questions, *where is she? Where the fuck is she?* until the whole place was on edge, looking at me. I didn't fucking care. All I cared about was that pretty little fool.

I climbed the stairs, leaping over people fondling each other on the landing, shoving some of them aside. If she was up there...if she was up there and sucking his cock...my blood boiled at the thought.

The first bedroom I burst into had girls giggling on the bed with a wine bottle being slugged between them. The second had couples littered all over it, grunting and fucking. The third bedroom was in darkness, and I pawed for the light. No sign of my pretty fool, but Tristan was in there with his mouth around his loverboy's dick.

He recognized me.

Tristan recognized me.

The Blue Hawk freak rocker let out a groan of a *fuck you, fuck off out of here*, but I was already on him, shoving him down onto the floor.

I was on Tristan in a heartbeat, my face right up to his as I held her clutch up high.

“Where the fuck is she?”

He knew who I was talking about. He swallowed hard but he shook his head. “Stay away from her. She can’t be around you.”

Turns out Tristan had bigger balls than I thought. “I’m not asking you again. Where is Elaine Constnatine?”

It was the Blue prick who answered. He answered in no time at all. “That little blonde is Elaine Constantine? Whoa, shit. She’s downstairs with Stephen Cannon.”

My teeth clenched. “If she was downstairs, I’d have found her. Where the fuck has she gone?”

“Don’t tell him,” Tristan said, but the Blue prick was staring at him with saucer eyes.

“That’s Lucian Morelli, of course I’m fucking telling him!” The guy shot his stare back to me, and he was shitting himself. He tossed me some keys from his jeans pocket. “She’s on Fifth Avenue, top floor of block twelve.”

The bass was still booming and people were still drinking when I charged back down into the kitchen. I tore my way through the drawers until I found what I needed. One hell of a knife slipped straight into my jacket, and then I pushed and shoved my way out of that hovel onto the sidewalk.

I didn’t have time to order a cab.

I didn’t have time to risk the cops showing up—even my Lucian Morelli get-out-of-shit-free card would take some time under this much commotion. Time I didn’t have.

I checked out my phone and looked up Fifth Avenue. A few blocks over. I could make it at a sprint, but it would take minutes at best. I just hoped Elaine Constantine's pussy had minutes left to spare with a prick like that trying to get his hands on it. Even at a push it would be unlikely. Not if she was spreading her legs for him. And why wouldn't she be?

Why wouldn't she be spreading her legs for that asshole?

My stomach did a monster of a twist at the thought, and again I didn't get it. I didn't fucking get it. Why the fuck would I give a shit about Elaine Constantine spreading her legs for anyone?

The truth was there waiting.

I was desperate for her. Truly fucking desperate for her.

She sure as fuck didn't belong to that loser, and if he'd taken her...if he'd taken what was mine...

The knife in my jacket was already crying out for his blood. Just a shame it wasn't crying out for hers, too. Not anymore. Not until I'd taken every scrap of her soul and made it mine.

I set off at full speed, her clutch still clasped tight in my hand. I turned the corner at the bottom of the street, crashing into a couple walking up the other way, clearly ready to hit the party.

"Have you seen a girl with blonde hair? With some rocker asshole?"

They shook their heads, and the guy answered. "Nah, sorry, man. Ain't seen anyone much this way."

I was off without so much as a blink, scanning the street signs as I made my way closer. Fifth Avenue. Fifth fucking Avenue. I nearly got myself killed when a car came speeding the other way on Fourth Avenue, but it managed to brake just in time with a blare of the horn.

"Fucking asshole!" the driver yelled through the window.

My phone was directing me fast and clear, and my legs were carrying me with everything they had. My breaths were ragged, but not just from the sprint, it was from the rage. The challenge. And I hated to admit it. I hated to admit it with every piece of myself that I had. But it was fear.

I was scared to find Elaine Constantine taking another man's cock.

When I turned the corner onto Fifth Avenue my blood was pounding in my ears. Block Twelve was down at the bottom end, and I was cursing all the way, still gripping that damn clutch under my arm as my damn knife bayed for his blood.

Block Twelve was a dive. The top floor had lights on in murky orange. I checked the main entrance but the keys didn't fit the lock, and that's when I saw it—the glimpse of a metal railing up by the top floor. The entrance doorway was up there.

I raced around to that staircase. I leaped up the rusty metal steps three at a time, and I could hear her. I could hear my Elaine inside there, and she was crying out.

Holy fuck, she was crying out. Crying out loud, crying out hard, crying out for help. My Elaine was crying out for help.

I'd never felt anything like the protective cesspit of rage inside me. It was scorching. Burning. Ready for the kill.

I didn't need the key, just barged my way right in, and there she was, up against the wall with that asshole up against her, her dress hitched up high around her waist. He turned to face me with a sneer, but I wasn't interested in his face, I was interested in hers. There were tears running down her beautiful cheeks, her eyes big and glassy as they saw me there...and the rage in me exploded. It exploded in liquid hate.

Maybe I could have let him live, if she'd been willing. *Maybe.*

But she looked high on something that wasn't even cocaine. Had he drugged her? The fear in her eyes was unmistakable. He was forcing her. There was a reason I had a

reputation that inspired obedience. I protected what was mine. And she was mine.

“What the—?” the fucker began, but he didn’t get the chance to finish.

In the quickest flash of my life I was up against him, slamming against him hard as my hand reached inside my jacket.

And in that flicker of a heartbeat the blade went into his guts.

Take it.

Once. Twice. Three times. I twisted that blade and fucked up his insides like the mess of a man he was.

His mouth opened, and he paled, and he knew it, even as he stumbled away with his hands to his stomach, he knew it. He was dying. He collapsed, and I stared down at him with a sneer of my own. The knife hung limp in my hand, blood splattered everywhere, including over my beautiful Constantine’s dress.

And that’s when she truly started crying.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Elaine

I COULD HEAR my tears. Loud sobs from my chest as it heaved and lurched. I could hear them, but I couldn't feel them. I couldn't feel anything, just the buzz in my ears as I stared over at the man with the knife in his hand.

Lucian.

Lucian Morelli was really there. Really standing there with a bloody knife in his hand, staring at the man he'd just butchered. He'd just butchered Stephen. He'd just butchered Stephen for *me*. To save *me*.

There was blood on me too, splattered all over my dress. The fabric was still hitched up above my thighs, my panties still torn at the seam where Stephen was trying to get inside me.

He didn't get inside me. Thank God, he didn't get inside me.

Lucian didn't speak, just stared. His jaw was gritted as he looked over at me, and that's when it all came crashing in, the vivid colors, and the sounds, and the smells.

Stephen was still gurgling as he took his last breaths. I could see the blood bubbling from his mouth, dripping down the side of his face, and his hands were still trying to clasp the wound in his stomach. He was failing.

Stephen was dying, and Lucian didn't show even a flutter of regret. There was nothing in him, nothing but righteous fury.

I pressed tighter against the wall as he gestured the knife at me, and that's when I realized just how badly I was shaking.

"Did he fuck you?"

"What?" I asked, in barely more than a breath.

"I said, did he fuck you?"

I shook my head. "No. He...he couldn't...I didn't let him..."

He didn't reply to that, just stepped closer to the man on the floor and kicked aside his hands from his wound. "What the fuck were you doing here?" the Morelli monster snapped at me, and I tried to answer that, but my voice was still stunted.

"I...I..."

The monster was on me in a flash, pressing me tight to the wall, his breaths fierce. This time his voice was a snarl. "I said, what the fuck were you doing here with that bastard, Elaine?"

"I don't know!" I blurted out, and the sobs were so hard they were hurting. "I don't know...I just wanted...I just wanted..."

"What?" he said, right in my face. "What did you want?"

He pointed to Stephen as he gulped his final breath, and I looked over. I looked over at the body, and I couldn't find any words.

"You wanted that, did you?" he said. "You wanted that worthless piece of shit?"

He took hold of my neck and shoved me toward the body. I was whimpering, trembling, scared, and I couldn't speak. "I'm asking you again," he said, and his voice was an evil rasp. Evil and...

Hurt.

Lucian Morelli was hurt. By me. He was hurt by me. He was hurt by me being here with that man on the floor.

And I shouldn't understand it. I shouldn't want to understand it. But I did.

I did understand it.

I was feeling it too. That connection. That crazy connection between us. A forbidden want that made no sense, that had no place in this world.

He turned me to face him, and he dropped the knife on the floor, onto the blood-soaked carpet as he took my arms and shook me. He shook me so hard my legs were nothing but Jell-O.

“What the fuck did you want?” he asked, and he was scary. His voice was scary, and harsh, and angry, and beautiful. Lucian's voice was beautiful. So beautiful he set my heart on fire.

My eyes were on his. Crying. Crying so hard I could barely see.

“You!” I cried. “I wanted you!”

He stopped at that. He stopped shaking me and stared, and those dark eyes of his flashed with something raw.

It took a few long moments before he spoke again.

“How the fuck would he ever be a substitute for me?”

I didn't have an answer for that because there wasn't one. Stephen could never have been a substitute for the monster in front of me. Lucian Morelli was the leader of my heaven and my hell both at once. His touch was gold and sin, both at once.

He was my love and hate, both at once.

He let go of me, and I sank to my knees with another round of tears.

I tried to catch my breath, watching Lucian pace up and down alongside the body without even casting it a glance. He

didn't give a fuck about it. Didn't give a shit about committing murder.

Of course he didn't give a shit about committing murder... no doubt he'd done it before.

But why here? Why now? How did he even know where I was?

I closed my eyes and forced myself into some kind of rational thought, just to speak out loud.

"What the fuck did *you* want?" I asked him. "What the fuck did *you* want here?"

The hate in his stare was still there when it met with mine, and he didn't answer, just kept on pacing.

"Tell me," I said. "What the fuck did *you* want, Lucian? Why the hell are you here, saving me?"

"I wasn't here to save *you*," he told me. "I was here to save your pussy."

"That's why you're here, is it?" I pushed. "For my pussy?"

He sighed, his limited patience wearing out. "I can't believe you thought he'd be anything like me. You don't know the first goddamn thing about sex, do you?"

I was still a virgin. Still a virgin with the darkest Morelli in the world.

"You just killed a man," I said, like I wasn't stating the obvious. "A celebrity. They'll know you killed him. They would have seen you...at the party..."

"A celebrity." His sarcasm left me cold. "Hardly."

My gaze was pulled to the body so close to me. I'd never seen a dead body before, let alone seen someone stabbed and taking their last breaths. I let out another sob and put my hands to my face, and that's when I heard Lucian sighing again.

"Don't play the fucking innocent, Little Miss Constantine," he said. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? The

white knight coming to the rescue? Now you've got it."

He must have seen the blankness on my face.

He smiled at me, even in that room with the stench of death and blood on the air, he smiled at me. "Well, well. Now what are you going to do to show your gratitude?"

Deep inside me, even amongst the shadows, and the violations, and the loss I felt in my soul, I still believed in good things. I didn't want to see anyone die. Hell, that was the reason I was in so much shit with the Power brothers after all...I didn't want to see anyone die...

Lucian was busy tapping on his phone when I finally dragged myself together enough to get to my feet. I was shaky on my heels, barely able to bend down steadily enough to grab my clutch. Even that was blood-soaked; stained forever.

It was when I was standing there, eyes open wide and lip still trembling, that Lucian stopped looking at his phone and turned to me. We stood there, in silence, so much unspoken between us that it made my heart thump to a whole other tune.

It was a stupid thing to say, but I couldn't help it. "Thank you," I said in a whisper. "Thank you for saving me."

My thanks was genuine. Even though it was weak and ridiculous in a room where a man had just killed another, I truly meant it. Lucian Morelli really had saved me.

He didn't respond in words, just tipped his head.

I was stumbling toward the door when he grabbed my wrist and pulled me back to him. My body responded quicker than my brain, turning into him and pressing up tight. He slammed me into the wall, and even though it was the same spot I'd been fighting another man, I did anything but fight the monster before me. I was desperate for the beast I'd just seen murder someone.

His breaths were rasps, hot on my lips. I smelled the metallic hint of blood. Underneath the red iron scent he smelled of him. Musk, and sex, and power.

It was *me* who kissed *him* this time.

It was my mouth that pressed to his first and opened wide.

His tongue was a serpent god, owning mine. His hands were heavy, grabbing me tight as mine snaked up around his shoulders.

It was frantic, just how hard I kissed him. He was my destroyer and savior both at once, and I wanted it that way. I wanted to feel both the love and the hate on his hands. I wanted him to take me to hell then raise me from the depths again.

“You’re mine now,” he said against my lips. “I’m never letting you go again.”

I wanted to stay in his arms for all damn time, so help me God.

He took hold of my neck and pinned me even harder as his mouth conquered me to a whole new level. My tongue was nothing against his, and I didn’t want it to be. I wanted to be under his command.

My thighs spread as wide as they would go under my dress as I offered myself to him. I moaned as he ground against me, rubbing myself against his knee.

It should have been revolting and shameful, offering my body to the Morelli heir with a dead body at our feet. But it wasn’t. It was anything but revolting, and it didn’t feel shameful.

It felt right.

Being with the monster felt right.

“Take me,” I whispered. “Please, Lucian. Please take me, because we’ll never get the chance again...not after tonight...”

Even the thought of being without my nemesis was enough to feel the pain in my heart, and that’s when it struck me, just how futile this connection was.

It didn't matter how much I wanted Lucian Morelli. Nobody would ever let me have him. Not anyone in our world.

His eyes were the beautiful burning ashes of hell I was falling in love with. Because that was the truth of it. I was falling in love with the demon who wanted to destroy me.

Lucian tugged my bra down. His mouth was fierce and painful as he dipped his head to my chest, and I couldn't hold back the smile, arching myself for more as he bit down on my nipple and sucked it into his hot mouth.

"Fuck yes..." I whispered. "That's nice. So damn nice..."

He ripped my panties and tore them free, and I stepped out of my heels, unsteady. I was trembling as he circled his thumb against my clit, aching for more.

"Yes..." I breathed. "Please..."

But it wasn't my pussy he forced two fingers inside in one thrust. It was my ass.

I cried out because I wasn't expecting it, and he bit my nipple harder. Sucked harder.

Three fingers made me cry out louder, and he was a beast as he slammed them deep.

It hurt. Really fucking hurt. But I liked it. Liked taking the pain for him.

Even though it reminded me of so many horrors...so many people who'd played games with me...so many sick fucks who used me for their pleasure without ever taking my true innocence...

Sick fucks who were supposed to be people I could trust...

His lips were glistening wet as he raised his mouth to mine.

"I'm gonna use you one step at a time," he told me as he twisted his fingers in my ass. "One sweet little pleasure at a time, Elaine. I'm gonna take what I want."

I yelped as he yanked his fingers free, a wonderful pain that made my pussy pulse as he unbuckled his belt.

His cock was as much a monster as he was. I'd seen so many. So many sad little cocks used by their sad sicko owners...but never one like his. Veined and thick as he worked it in his fingers. Fingers that had been buried inside me. Fingers that had killed a man to protect me.

He forced me to my knees, his filthy fingers in my filthy hair, and my mouth was already open, wanting what was coming for the first time in my life.

"Make sure you make it nice and wet before I fuck you," he grunted.

And I did. I made sure it was nice and wet. I sucked him deep, and my tongue lapped at him as I stared into his eyes, and he knew in that moment.

He knew I wasn't new to sucking cock.

I may have been shit at kissing, but I wasn't shit at sucking cock.

"Dirty," he said and pushed right to the back of my throat. "Who fucked your mouth, little doll?"

I sucked him harder to avoid speaking, because I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to tell a soul who the fuck had destroyed mine.

"I'll tear those truths out of you," he snarled. "One day, little fool, I'll tear those truths from your throat. For now I want to keep fucking it."

I kept lapping at him. Kept twirling my tongue around his thick, veiny cock, making it nice and slick as he used my mouth.

I let out a squeal as he pulled out and threw me backwards. I landed against Stephen's body and squealed again, scurrying away on my hands, but Lucian didn't let me get that far.

He was on me in seconds, his weight crushing mine into the carpet. He lifted himself high enough that my fingers took on a life of their own and tried to unbutton his shirt. I wanted his skin. I wanted his flesh against mine.

He helped me and crushed right back on top, skin to skin.

He ground against me, his cock tight to my clit. It was heaven, and I bucked, and begged, grabbing him for more. I wanted him inside me so badly.

“Please,” I said on a breath, “please take me, Lucian.”

He hitched my legs up high, thighs to my chest, a smile on his face as he took hold of his cock and pressed it against my clit. Christ how I moaned for him. How I moaned as he drew that cock down through my pussy lips.

“Please,” I said, “fuck me.”

“My fucking pleasure,” he said and pushed hard in one savage thrust.

I cried out at the pain. Cried out at the shock as he rammed into me. Because he wasn't fucking my pussy...

The monster was fucking my ass. The bastard wasn't in my desperate pussy, he was slamming my ass.

But I was begging for more.

I couldn't stop myself begging for more.

Please...harder...harder...

He gave me harder. He gave it to me so hard I was crying out with every slam of his hips.

“I'm not the fucking first, am I?” he snarled, and I met his eyes as I shook my head.

I could see the rage in him as he used my ass.

I loved the fury on his face as he hurt me.

His voice was so low. “They were bold enough to take your asshole but not your virginity, were they? Pussies. Pathetic fucking pussies.”

They hadn't seemed like pussies to me. Not when I was pinned under them, night after night, after night...

But now...under him...under the true, beautiful monster...

Under Lucian Morelli, anyone would seem like a pussy.

"They'll pay for taking you. You're my toy, Elaine. *Mine*. They should never have laid a finger on you. I'll make them suffer for it."

I hated the glow inside me...hoping...just *hoping* that he was telling the truth.

Maybe the monster would hurt the bad men...

He changed his angle, and I cried out again. We lost all track of words, and grunted, and thrust, writhing in blood, and heat, and sin.

He worked his fingers against my clit as he fucked me, and even through the pain I felt the shudders as my breath quickened.

My God. Lucian Morelli was making me come...

And he was coming himself...

Lucian Morelli was coming in my ass...

Coming in my ass and kissing me...

He was kissing me...

My hands were in his hair as I kissed him back. My legs wrapped around his waist and gripped him tight, and I was his.

I was his.

My God. I was his as he pumped his filthy seed into me.

He caught his breath with my legs still holding him, staring down at me with a mixture of hate, and shock, and...love.

It was true. In that moment, Lucian Morelli stared down at me with love. I was sure of it...until he pulled away from me and tugged up his pants.

“You need to go,” he said and threw my dress at me from the floor. “People will be coming.”

He was so cold as he stepped away from me, and it was like shutters had slammed down inside him. His passion dulled to icy gray steel.

My nerves were spiking fresh as the shutters came down inside me to match. I was in a dirty room with a dead body, hungry for the man who wanted to wipe out my whole family line. Hungry for the man whose cum was leaking from my asshole. It was crazy. The whole fucking lot of it was insane.

“Come here,” he said and clicked his fingers.

I followed him without question as he opened door after door, shunting me inside the bathroom as soon as he found it. He turned on the shower and pushed me inside, not waiting until the water heated. It was freezing cold as it drenched me, and he scrubbed at me with his hands.

He tossed me a towel when the water ran clear, and I was shivering as I stepped out, dabbing myself dry before he strode back out to the main hall.

I was a wreck as I grabbed for my things, rushing to put my dress back on, my ass hurting with every move I made. I made my way to the door as soon as I could, heart pounding as I pushed it open and saw the metal steps down to the ground.

Lucian cleared his throat before I stepped out of there, and his stare was as evil as I’d ever seen it when he spoke again.

“You’ll be punished for all of this,” he told me. “Believe me, Elaine, I’ll make you pay for it. It’ll be painful, little doll. I promise you, it’ll be painful.”

My eyes were wide on his as I nodded at him.

“But it won’t just be you who pays for their filth,” he snarled and tossed my clutch at me. Forgotten again. “I’ll make them pay. Every piece of shit who took you before I did.”

I had no doubt of it in my heart as I walked away.

I was glowing for it.

Glowing and scared, both at once.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lucian

WHEN TRENTON ARRIVED on the scene, I was leaning against the wall, staring at the fucker I'd killed, twirling the bloodied knife in my hand, my cock still throbbing from Elaine's perfect asshole. My right-hand man burst through the door with a *Jesus Christ* and glanced around the place in horror. I didn't blame him. It really was a shitstorm he was stepping into.

A shitstorm I was proud of.

"What the fuck happened here? Fuck, Lucian, who is he?"

I kept twirling the blade in my fingers, barely even shooting him a glance. "That doesn't matter. Just get it cleaned up."

I allowed him a minute while he was pacing around, trying to fathom just what the fuck had gone down in this place. "Fucking hell," he cursed, then pulled out his phone and started making the call to the cleanup team.

"Bury him deep."

"So, who the fuck is that?" he asked between calls, gesturing to the dead body like it made any damn difference who it was.

"Nobody to concern yourself with."

"This is back alley as fuck. Does anyone know you're here?"

"Like I said, it's not your concern."

He kicked out at the guy's legs, just to make sure he was really gone, then looked at me, eyebrow raised as he lit up a cigarette. "Haven't seen you get hands-on for a long time. Must've been something quite urgent to put that knife in your hands."

"Urgent enough."

"Fine," he said. "Just give me a bit more damn time to sort this shit out next time, will you? Preferably some damn fucking warning."

I twirled the knife one last time before casting it onto the floor. Trenton would dispose of it along with the body. "Am I done here?"

He nodded as he took another drag. "Yeah, you can go. The team will be here soon enough."

I turned away to leave.

"Wait, Lucian," he called.

I spun back to face him. "What?"

He headed closer and kept on smoking. "The Power brothers. You wanted to know what was going down between them and the Constantines."

My flesh surged with life as he said the words, a shiver of want right up my spine.

"*Elaine* Constantine," I said, and closed the distance between us. "I wanted to know what was going down between them and *Elaine* Constantine."

"Yeah, *Elaine* Constantine," he repeated. "Well, I found out what's going down. It ain't pretty."

I fixed my attention on his face. "Tell me."

"She's in deep. Got in debt for drugs, same old story. But there's more."

"Spit it out."

He took another drag on his cigarette before he answered. “It’s not just her own debt they’re chasing her down for. She took on a load of other debt with it. *Other* people’s debt.”

“Other people’s? What the fuck?”

He tipped his head. “Seems little miss stuck up isn’t quite the selfish little princess she appears to be. She’s been pitying a whole world of drug addict losers and bailing them out.”

The words grate when they come out of his mouth.

He continues on, oblivious, “She deserves everything coming to her. Taking debt on with the Powers sure ain’t a charity gig. She should have kept to the rich girl charity bullshit.”

I tried to find the logic in her moves. But there wasn’t any logic in it.

Trenton was right—she shouldn’t have gotten tangled up with the Powers. But she was a Constantine...queen Caroline Constantine would surely clear her debts.

Trenton read my mind. “Caroline’s washed her hands of it, so they say. Apparently, Elaine’s done it before, over and over. Last few times her mom’s bought her out of it, but not this time. This time the stakes are higher, and her mom has said no fucking way. She’s on her own. She’s been enough of an embarrassment to the family name already, so the whispers say. Mommy’s done with her.” He flicked his cigarette butt onto the body. “Elaine’s on her own, and they’re coming after her. Soon.”

“And what exactly are they going to do about it?” I snapped, but I knew the answer. I could see it in his eyes.

He gestured to the dead fool on the floor before he answered me, and I knew what was coming. Trenton Alto had questions of his own brewing fast. Questions I sure as hell didn’t want to be answering. “What’s the deal with Elaine Constantine?”

“What the fuck does it matter?” I said to him. “Tell me exactly what the damn Power brothers are planning to do to her and when.”

“Holy fuck, Lucian,” he said. “What the fuck is happening to you? Of course it matters. The very fact you’ve been breathing in the same air space as that Constantine matters, and you know it.”

His eyes were bold and cold. Hard and disbelieving.

He didn’t recognize me, and I didn’t recognize myself, either. I was swimming in shit, and all because of her. All because of the woman I should be hating with every evil sliver of my soul.

Trenton was correct, and I hated him for it.

He cleared his throat. “There are rumors already flying around, you know? Rumors about you not being in Morelli Holdings last week, rumors that something is going down... rumors about you chasing a pretty little blonde...”

“Rumors can fly all they like. I’m not obligated to answer to any of them. My business is my fucking business, and mine only.”

He looked guilty, shifting from foot to foot. “Not when the questions are coming from the board.”

“Fuck the board.”

“And Bryant Morelli? Fuck him, too?”

Jesus Christ. I could see it in his eyes. Trenton Alto’s loyalty didn’t belong to me anymore. The motherfucker had been in discussions with my father. Discussions about me.

“He asked me,” he said, as though that excused it. “I had to, Lucian. He asked me.”

“Well, well. Does he know you’re here?” I pushed with a sneer.

He shook his head and took out another cigarette. “Not yet. The mess tonight happened pretty damn quickly, don’t you

think? I wouldn't have been able to snitch to your dad if I'd have wanted to." He lit up. "But he asked me what you've been doing. He asked me about Elaine Constantine. I didn't start it, not at all. Seems the chauffeur has been reporting back."

He'd pay for that.

Trenton carried on talking, like I needed to hear his advice. "You're getting yourself in crazy waters. Don't think I'm gonna be drowning there with you. Leave it alone. Leave her the fuck alone. Please, boss. Just leave her alone."

Even though my mouth was dry with rage, I couldn't say I blamed him.

He was right. I was in crazy waters.

I was in the shit. I could feel it all the way through my skin. My father would only have to sniff a hint of the truth in me chasing down Elaine, and the whole damn world would feel my damnation along with me. He would tear me apart alive with the whole family cheering.

"He's been talking to the board while you've been gone. Whispering in their ears."

I cursed. What a shitshow. With my father losing power and the board losing faith in me...

"I'll try not to tell him," he said. "But you know I won't be able to hold off for long, Lucian."

Even in my best of a mood, I couldn't blame him. They'd tear his spleen out inch by inch until he confessed whatever the fuck they wanted from him. They'd get one hell of a confession, too. Trenton Alto knew my business from the inside out. I should've seen it coming.

I hadn't wanted to. Somewhere down deep he meant something to me.

Trust is always your greatest weakness. Never trust a soul but your own.

How the fuck had I managed to forget my own mantra?

“You’re a piece of shit for telling him anything,” I said to the man who’d been at my right hand for years. The man who was my link to the underworld and all its profits. The man who did the dirty while I did the deeds.

“I *had* to be a piece of shit this time,” he told me. “I’m not going down on that ship with you, Lucian. I’ll end up at the bottom of the ocean when your dad blows up the whole damn boat along with you.”

“Never had you down as a pussy,” I said, and he smiled at me.

“Never had you down as such a goddamn psychopath,” he replied.

I stepped up closer to him. “What exactly did you snitch to my father?”

He kept his eyes on mine as he answered. “I told him that you’ve seen her. Been stalking her around the place. I had to.” He paused. “Doesn’t know you’re digging her secrets out from the Power brothers. That’s a whole other league.”

“You’d better keep it that way if you want to keep your tongue in your mouth.”

“Whatever you say, *boss*. It’s not just my tongue you wanna be worried about, though. Whispers are whispering right through the back alleys.”

As much as I’d have enjoyed slitting Trenton Alto’s throat in that instant, I had too much I needed from him. “Let’s get back to my question,” I said. “What are the Power brothers planning to do with Elaine Constantine?”

He sighed. “They’ve already sent the orders down. She’s a walking target.”

“Fuckers.”

He sighed again. “They’d be fools if they didn’t. If they let that rich girl off with what’s due, then every fucker would

think they could leverage their connections to write their debts off. The Powers can't allow that. Pride if not the practicalities." He paused as he stared at me. "Why? What the hell are you planning to do about it? Please say you aren't going to reason with them to save her ass. Please do not fucking say that."

He was right. I shouldn't save her. She wasn't the well-bred girl I could use to prove myself to the board. Even for a Constantine this was too far. It would mean losing the coup. It would mean giving up being CEO for now... and maybe forever.

"You ain't gonna do it, right?" Trenton pushed, and it snapped me out of my headspin.

I glared at him, and he gulped down a breath. "Clean this up, like I pay you for, and stay the fuck away from me. You'd better stay the fuck away from my father too, or you'll regret it."

"Stuck between a rock and a hard place," he groaned. "Fuck off, then. Leave me to it."

The first thing I did was check the tracker on my phone, feeling a flood of relief to see my toy arriving back to her building. She was home.

Home with her asshole still bleeding from taking my cock, no doubt.

The thought had me hard all over again.

It's a strange thing how walking alone can allow your thoughts to speak to each other so well. I found myself wondering just what the hell it was that made Elaine so irresistible to me. What the fuck was it that made that little princess so damn special?

I remembered her skin pressed close to mine. Remembered the look in her eyes whenever they caught sight of me. I remembered her needy flesh, trembling for more pain, even when she was begging me to stop.

Hurting her asshole was only a tiny taste of what was teasing me. I wanted the rest of her. Every filthy scrap of her.

I wanted her to be my toy.

Elaine Constantine was a dirty little flower in a filthy world. She was tainted innocence in the face of debauchery. She was an unopened book with deep dark secrets, handwritten pages of beautiful hurt and shame and darkness in the half light.

She was a good girl who thought she was bad. A sweet little angel, begging to be punished.

I'd punish her for her family's sins as well as her own, and I'd love her for it. I'd love her to be a pretty little canvas in my basement, ready to be scarred with my evil.

There was a strange twinge of fear right down in my guts as I headed back to my apartment that night. I wasn't the only evil man planning to hurt Elaine Constantine. The sweet little angel was running out of time for salvation...and I was running out of time to save her from her sins.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elaine

THE APARTMENT BLOCK felt like a beacon of hope as the cab pulled into the parking lot.

I was still damp from Lucian's cold dousing as I raced on up through the main reception, still hurting from his assault on my asshole, too.

The monster.

I loved Lucian Morelli. And I hated him.

The little girl in me was crying out. If only Lucian had been there to save me from all the other evil assholes I'd known in my lifetime...maybe then I wouldn't be so scared and broken. But it was too late for that.

I'd never have believed it possible that one of the Morellis could have ever, ever saved me from my own sordid family, not in a million years, but there I was, considering it as a *maybe* as my heart thumped wild.

The Morellis were supposed to be demons clawing at the gates of Constantine heaven. That's what we were taught. Indoctrinated with, really. It had been a lesson I'd learned since I was old enough to understand words. The Morellis were bad people. I'd never once held up their bloodstained souls and compared them to ours.

My phone rang, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Tristan.

Thank fuck it was Tristan.

My fingers were shaking worse than ever as I answered him, and my voice was as shaky to match. “Hello? Tristan? Hello?”

His voice was as jagged as mine was, gasping breaths as he found the words. “Is he there? Lucian? Is he there? He’s coming after you, Lainey! He’s coming!”

Tristan’s call was way too late to warn me of the devil’s appearance, but I couldn’t tell him that. “Lucian isn’t here. I’m, um...I’m at home...”

“What? You’re home? Is Stephen there? Are you with Stephen?”

More than anything I wanted to tell Tristan the truth; that Stephen had tried to rape me, and Lucian had saved me from his grasp. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t tell him that Stephen was dead, and I’d been ass-fucked in his blood and loved every second of it.

“I’m not with Stephen, either,” I said. “He didn’t come with me.”

“Holy shit, Lainey. Morelli was looking for you.” He paused. “Coming for you and Stephen...so where’s Stephen? Where the fuck is Stephen, Laine? He wouldn’t have let you go that easy.”

“I dunno...” I said, but my voice let me down. Tristan knew that. He knew me well enough to read my tone, even through my lies.

I felt his senses sharpen. “You do know. Where is Stephen?”

I heard a sob in my words, and I hated it. I hated slipping my mask down, always, even to my very best friend. “I can’t tell you...I don’t know...”

“Bullshit!” he snapped. “This is all total bullshit. Morelli was looking for you. Stephen was there with you...” He paused, and I closed my eyes, praying that this whole world of a mess was nothing but a nightmare. “What happened?”

I didn't answer. I couldn't find my voice.

"You'd better start talking," he said. "I'm coming over there. I'm coming over to you right now, so help me, God. I don't give a fuck if Lucian Morelli is there or not, I'm coming over."

"Please...no!" I screamed, but he was already gone.

I tried calling back, but he wouldn't answer me. I cursed as I dashed about the apartment, shedding my ruined clothes and scrubbing myself down in my own shower. I dumped my clutch in my wash basket, and tugged on some PJs, looking ghostly as all shit in the bathroom mirror. I paced, waiting, hoping. I paced, praying. I paced, begging my heart to lose this infatuation with a demon and come to my damn senses for once in my goddamn life.

Tristan was alone when he arrived at my front door. His face was swollen and darkening on one side, his steps sore as he pushed past me with his phone held up high.

"I've got security on the line!" he yelled into the empty suite. "I swear it, motherfucker! I have security on the line and waiting! They'll come for you!"

"He's not here!" I insisted, and finally, with one final charge around the place, Tristan believed me.

He threw me down onto the couch, hard. I cried out as I landed, still trembling. "Talk to me," he said, and his eyes were wild. "For once in your life, Elaine, just talk to me."

I put my face in my hands. "I can't. Believe me, Tristan, you don't want to know."

"Oh yeah?" He crouched down in front of me. "I think you'll find I do. I think you'll find I want to know just what the fuck that bastard did to you. And to Stephen. Did he kick his ass?"

I didn't shake my head, but I didn't answer him either.

"Fuck," he said, getting to his feet and kicking out at the couch. "Fucking hell, just fuck."

“Stay out of it,” I told him, and my voice sounded like the sad little girl I’d come to know so well through the years. “Really, Tristan, stay out of it. You need to.”

“I can’t,” he snapped. “Even if I wanted to, I can’t! Blue is trying to find Stephen right now, and he knows what Morelli did to us and where he was going. The whole party knows, even if they don’t know who he is yet. They’ll find out, Elaine! Your whole family is gonna know it soon enough! You won’t be able to keep that shit away from them!”

I could feel my heartbeat in my ears, the sickness swimming around my belly, and the beer, and the spirits, and the fizz didn’t matter; my head was stone-cold sober and plunging into the pits of despair. He was right. Of course he was. My family would be finding out about this. They had to.

And so would his. So would Lucian Morelli’s.

We were both fucked, both of us beyond redemption in a world made of sinners.

“I’ll find a way out of it,” I said to myself more than Tristan. “I’ll hide it, say something different, I’ll find a way.”

He was shaking his head as I spoke. “A way out of them finding out that you were at a backstreet party with Lucian Morelli knocking people out cold? Good luck with that.”

“I’ll find a way,” I insisted, but I could feel the sobs bubbling back up. “He’ll find a way.”

Tristan’s eyes were cold as ice when they met with mine. “Is Stephen...alive?”

I let out another sob.

“Christ, Lainey. He’s a monster.”

I wiped my eyes, and he could read it in my stare right back at him.

“Holy fuck,” he snarled. “You’ve gone and done it, haven’t you? You’ve fallen for the asshole monster. You’ve fallen for one of the damn Morellis. The worst one.”

I could only answer with another sob and another wipe of my eyes, because even I couldn't lie that strongly, not anymore. I couldn't deny I'd fallen for Lucian Morelli. Not to the man who knew me better than anyone else ever had.

Tristan carried on pushing, striding around with his hands in his hair.

“He killed Stephen Cannon, didn't he? Just tell me!”

So I did. I did tell him. I looked him square in the eye, and I gritted my teeth and I told him. “Yes, Tristan, he killed Stephen Cannon. He stabbed him in the gut and watched him bleed to death on the floor, and I wanted that. I wanted it, too.”

His jaw dropped, and he paled, and he staggered away from me. “You wanted him to? Why the fuck would you want him to?”

I forced the words. “He was trying to rape me. He was hurting me, and I was begging him to stop, but he wouldn't listen, and Lucian saved me. Lucian Morelli saved me.”

Tristan was shaking his head. “No. It can't be. No, Elaine. Don't you dare lie to me.”

I kept my stare hard on his. “I'm not lying. Stephen Cannon was trying to rape me, and the monster saved me from him.”

My best friend cursed and put his head in his hands, and then he cursed to himself, over and over, because he knew it as well as I did. The whole damn situation was shit.

“My family can't find out about this, Tristan,” I said. “If there's any way in the whole damn world it's possible, they can't find out about this. You have to help me.”

“Holy fuck,” he yelled, but he didn't say no. He couldn't say no.

“Please! Please, Tristan! I have to find a way out of this. They can't know Lucian Morelli saved me from Stephen by butchering him in a city dive while I watched.” I couldn't tell him he fucked me in the ass. Even I couldn't share that truth.

“People will know! Not unless he kills the whole damn party.”

He was right, but there was no way I could give up, not without trying. I’d be signing my own death warrant if I did.

But that wasn’t why I was doing it. That wasn’t why I was trying.

I wasn’t trying to find a way out of this mess to counter my own death warrant. My death warrant was already signed over to the Power brothers. I was expecting it.

I was doing it to counter Lucian Morelli’s.

Tristan was churning things over just like I was; I could see the cogs whirring in his brain.

“Blue knows,” he said after a few minutes. “Blue was there when Morelli came looking for you.”

“So if we shut Blue up...that would help, right?”

Tristan shook his head, jabbing a finger at me. “Nah, Elaine. Don’t you dare. Don’t you fucking dare. If anything happens to Blue, I swear to God, I’ll tell your family myself.”

I forced a smile, black humor in the despair. “Seems you’re falling for him then. Who’d have thought it? Both of us losing our hearts to our lovers in the same crazy whirlwind.” I managed to laugh. A bitter laugh. “I wasn’t thinking about killing him. I was thinking of you talking to him.”

He didn’t force a smile right back, and he sure as fuck didn’t laugh. “This isn’t the same crazy whirlwind, and Lucian Morelli isn’t your lover. He’s the man who wants to destroy you and your whole damn bloodline. The man who wants to use you.”

I didn’t argue with him, because what would be the point? There was no reason that could possibly counter the fact that the Morellis despised the Constantines, and destroying us all meant more to them than a mountain of joy ever could.

Even so, with my ass still hurting, and my pulse still racing, I couldn't believe Lucian Morelli wanted nothing more than sex.

It wasn't my head that wouldn't believe it...it was my heart.

It was my heart that believed Lucian wanted more from me than destroying every sliver of life in my body and my soul to match.

It was my heart that believed Lucian had saved me for a reason...more of a reason than saving my pain all for himself, which he did—he wanted my pain all for himself—but it was more than that.

It was my heart that believed that maybe, just maybe, Lucian Morelli could love me back. One day, in a whole other world, in a whole other time, maybe, just maybe, Lucian Morelli could love me back.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lucian

MY PARENTS WERE eating when I sat myself down at the dining table. My mother gave me her patented Sarah Morelli serene smile. My father barely looked at me, placing his cutlery down neatly at the sides of his plate as he cleared his throat.

“Leave us,” he said to the butler, and old man Michael scurried away with a bow.

It was then that he met my eyes, and they were as savage as I’d ever seen, even sheened with the chill of calm I’d come to know so well. “It doesn’t seem like you even want the company.”

I returned his calm with a chill of my own as I pulled a foot up onto my knee and leaned back in my seat. “I’m back in the office tomorrow,” I said. “I had some unexpected events to attend to.”

My father wiped his fingers on his napkin, then dabbed his lips. The pause in him spoke volumes, and I looked at him afresh after years of barely registering the appearance of the man before me. Bryant Morelli was still a strong man, and I was the eldest in his footsteps. His dark features were deep enough to swallow everything around him, and his demands on those in his life were hard enough to cripple. They always had been. He’d taught me to be every part the monster I’d grown to be. And there was more. He knew the full extent of my icy coldness in a way that nobody else had ever seen.

He knew me. All of me. Even the deepest secrets. The deepest strengths and weaknesses, both entwined.

Secrets snake through the depths of every family bond, and ours was the very depths of the hiss and snare.

My mother looked unsteady as she picked at the food on her plate, caught up in our unspoken tension while struggling with her loyalty for both sides.

I was her son, but my father was her husband.

Besides, Sarah Morelli hated the Constantines almost as much as he did. Almost.

“You had some unexpected events to attend to, did you?” he repeated with a scowl. “Unexpected events such as Elaine Constantine by any chance?”

I didn’t lower my stare. “I know you’ve been speaking with Trenton.”

“Just as well. Trenton is concerned about family business and reputation. It appears that you haven’t been that smart.”

“Smart enough to double our profit margin in the past six months.”

That’s when my father got to his feet and cast his plate aside with a crash. He jabbed a finger at me across the tabletop, and his face was pure fucking spite. “With my resources. With my company. With my money. You would have been nothing without me.”

“Stop,” my mother said, but father gestured her away.

“This isn’t for you, Sarah. Leave. Now.”

She hovered, a maternal fear in her eyes as she looked at me across the table. Still, it didn’t stop her bowing to my father’s will when he cursed and pointed to the doorway a second time.

“Leave!”

I watched my mother's exit and wished that I could somehow feel something inside me.

I wished I could feel more. I wished I could embrace a hint of love, or warmth for the woman who'd given birth to me and raised me to my place in this world. I wished I could look over at my father and his rage and feel the true belt of shame gripping me tight. But I didn't.

I didn't feel a thing...and Father knew it. I never had.

He walked around the table and kicked out a chair at my side. He turned it to face him and dropped himself down to straddle the seat.

"Believe me, Lucian, if violence were an option to knock some sense into you, I'd be taking it now. You'd be feeling my wrath with your skin and bones."

I didn't react, just kept my eyes on his until he spoke again.

"Trenton told me you've been asking questions about Elaine Constantine. He said that you met with her. That you've been fucking her."

"You should know better than to believe someone who takes bribes."

"Tell me now, boy. Have you fucked Elaine Constantine?"

I tipped my head to the side. "I met Elaine Constantine at Tinsley Constantine's masked coming-of-age ball. I went there to find a wife. Something to make the board calm down."

"A wife," he says, his lips tight. "A wife at the Constantine compound."

I give him a lazy smile. "As you say, I would be nothing without you."

"I'm telling you now though, boy, you go anywhere near that Constantine again, and you'll be dead to me. Do you understand?"

“What will you do now? Disown me? Fire me?” I snort.
“Kill me?”

He smiled back, coldly, and for once inside I felt something. I felt a shiver of fear. “It’s not yourself you need to worry about. It’s that pretty little Elaine Constantine. If you go near the Constantines again, I’ll make sure she pays for your disloyalty.”

“You won’t touch her. Understand? Fuck you. And fuck Trenton Alto.”

“I can have you fired. Don’t ever doubt it. The board may play with you the way a cat plays with a mouse, but I’m the tomcat who fucks the cat every night.”

“Really, Dad?”

“You get the idea.”

“You were the one showing off a picture of Violent Delights in the goddamn boardroom.”

My father pulled his knife from across the table and offered it to me. “Swear it, then. Swear that you care more about the Morelli family than pussy. Swear to God and the Virgin Mother above.”

The Morelli oath meant less to me than ever. It was a means to an end. *It was a lie.*

I ran the blade down my palm, slicing deep and true. The blood dripped, running a vein of a river as I squeezed my fingers closed tight. I would do it to protect Elaine. My father was unpredictable. And violent. Would he hurt her? Would he hurt her in order to block the board from voting me in? Or would he simply hurt her because of spite, because he hated the Constantines? Because he wanted to hurt things that I cared about? “I swear to God above, on the Morelli name, I care more about Morelli Holdings than pussy.”

My father nodded at that and took the knife away. He cast a glance at my oath cut and tossed the knife on the table. “You

cut too deeply with that,” he said, but I shrugged as I wrapped a napkin around the wound.

“I always cut too deeply. Greater blood makes a stronger promise.”

He stood up from his chair and went back to his side of the table. “You need to be more careful who you demonstrate that to,” he said. “If people for a second thought you were the man you are...”

I’d heard this before, so many times that I shrugged again. “I don’t make oaths very often. Not anymore. Nobody is going to see me for what I am. Not from one tiny slice on my palm.”

I was right on that. Nobody had ever seen my body for the beast it was, not even my mother. The secret was bound deep between me and the man who raised me to be his heir.

“Our empire was built on oaths,” he told me. “And so was the strength of our lives. Never forget that, and never stop investing in our family’s promises to the Lord.”

I looked at the painting of Jesus above his head at the rear of the dining hall, and I wondered just what it must be like to live in families built without the constant pursuit of godliness, tainted in a world based on lies and corruption.

Our past lineage was evil, and our present hierarchy never faltered from the same, so again, I didn’t understand why my father was so desperate to avoid conflict.

“I’ll be back at Morelli Holdings tomorrow,” I assured him and got to my feet.

I didn’t hang around to see my mother appear back in the room, just made my exit with the napkin still wrapped tight around my bleeding hand. I wished my palm was spitting in pain, just to keep my oath in my mind, but my promise was already lost to me as I left the mansion.

It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered, and I knew it. I knew it right there and then.

There was only one thing on my mind.

Elaine Constantine.

Her tracker was useless to me now.

I had only one thing left to use. Her calendar.

I called it up on my phone before I'd even left the grounds.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Elaine

I DON'T KNOW how I made it through the night, shaking and crying, knowing my heart was lost to the monster.

I don't know how the fuck I got ready for family time on Sunday. I don't know how I managed to style my hair with trembling fingers and get myself prepared for the facade.

I was trying to avoid my mother on the front lawn, but I knew it would be pointless. There was no way she'd leave me alone through the afternoon.

I weaved my way through my cousins, making nothing but small talk, battling the chaos of fears in my head. It didn't work. I was shaking like a leaf in the bathroom as I splashed cold water on my face, determined for once in my life to avoid the drinks on the lawn. No champagne for me.

No champagne. No champagne. No champagne.

I couldn't risk it, not even a glass. I couldn't risk the loosening of my tongue to anyone in the world. I couldn't risk the loss of control, ever since that night with Stephen.

Harriet was trying to take hold of me and guide me to the edges of the garden party whenever she got the chance, but I didn't let her. I couldn't stand a string of her questions, not today, not with blood still fresh in my mind and on my hands to match.

Not with my ass still burning sore from Lucian Morelli's cock.

I felt an instinctive shudder as I reached for a cupcake from the buffet. I knew it. I felt it. I sensed in one single flutter that it was Uncle Lionel stepping up behind me and pressing tight.

I hated his body. I'd always hated his body.

I hated him with every part of my soul.

"Your mother is pissed," he whispered, and his voice had that sheen of venom and filth I'd come to know so well.

I couldn't hold back my tongue. "Yeah, well maybe I'm mad at her, too."

His fingers jabbed my ribs before claspng my arm. "If you have any sense in that empty skull of yours, you'll go and speak with your mother. She's losing her patience with you."

I turned to face him, hating his breath in my face. My eyes must have been bristling with hate, and my heart was overflowing to match. It would have been my greatest pleasure to take a knife from the buffet table and stab him deep in his stomach, just like I'd seen Lucian do to Stephen. It would have sent my soul soaring to the sky to watch his pain.

He wasted no time before speaking again.

"She knows you've been socializing with druggie downtown losers again, Elaine. She knows you're fresh from another round of bailouts." He tutted. "Debts you can't afford to pay. Such a silly little girl. If you have any sense, you'll take her offer when you hear it."

"Offer?" I asked, with no idea what he was talking about.

"Yes," he said. "An offer. She has an offer for you. One I've created. You can thank me later."

"An offer to bail me out of bailing out people downtown? I'm such a criminal, aren't I?"

I found I was smiling, laughing to myself at the crazy disparity between my real crimes and their imagined ones. If only they knew the truth.

It seemed they'd heard nothing about me fraternizing with the Morelli bloodline. Not yet.

"You're right, you know," I told him. "Yes, I have been saving people again. I enjoy the company of druggie downtown losers a lot more than the hypocrites like you."

"Watch your mouth," he muttered under his breath, and even though my gut was twisting scared, I didn't let myself back away from him. Not today. Not anymore.

"You know something, Uncle," I whispered. "Can you imagine what would happen if I shouted out your sins right here and now for all the idiots to hear?"

His breath caught, but he didn't move, just stayed pressed tight to me. "I can imagine," he told me. "I can imagine just how everyone would condemn you as mad. They'd laugh in your face. They're your vile fantasies."

He ran his fingers down my spine, and I tensed as they reached my ass crack through the fabric of my dress. If only he knew who'd been inside me.

"I can teach you some more lessons about behavior whenever I choose," he said. "Be very aware who you are speaking with. I still have a whole host of *teachers* ready to instruct you."

"I'm long done with your lessons. You disgust me."

"You are always so ready to lie," he replied. "You were never long done with your lessons, darling. If that were so, you wouldn't have kept being such a naughty girl for more. I still remember just how pleased you were when your teachers came calling."

I should've rushed away from him, but I didn't. My whole body was rooted to the spot.

His mouth leaned right into my ear, and I shuddered but didn't flinch.

"Can you remember how wet you were, Elaine?" he asked me. "I've told you before, good girls don't get wet when they

are trying to learn their lessons. I had plenty of men to teach you yours, but still you didn't listen."

"Stop," I said, but he didn't stop. He never did.

He tipped his head at the garden party around us, and I felt everything spinning, the world unsteady under my feet.

"Colonel Hardwick is joining us shortly," he said. "So is Baron Rawlings. Shall I tell them how naughty you've been, muddying our family name, hanging out with cokeheads? Or maybe we could call up Reverend Lynch. I'm sure he has a whole load of new lessons for you."

"Don't," I spat. "I hate them. I'd slit their throats one by one if I could."

"There she is," he tutted. "Lying again. Such a liar, Elaine. Always such a liar. You've always liked your lessons, even when you were a sweet little girl who should've known better."

"No," I said, but I could hear it in my voice. That confusion. Always such confusion, even down in the depths of pain and hurt and hate.

"As I told you, your mother wants to speak with you," he said again, and his voice was nothing but monotone, bored. "If you have any sense in you, you'll speak to her before you leave. The offer won't be on the table forever."

He walked away from me without a backwards glance, and I hated myself inside all over again. I hated everything about myself. I hated everything about them. I hated the garden party I was a part of, and I hated everything in my life that was so fake and so filthy both at once.

I couldn't catch my breath properly. I didn't want to eat, and I didn't want to drink, and I didn't want to speak to anyone, let alone my mother, so I did what I'd always done.

I retreated as gently as I could, brushing past the bathrooms in the hallway and slipping my way upstairs to my suite on the top floor of the compound.

Hide. Hide. Hide.

Hide and hurt.

It was my hiding room at the far corner of the landing that I retreated to. I opened the door to the storage room as softly as I could, then slipped inside. I dropped down and pulled my legs to my chest against the old armoire, rocking and crying and trying to hold my breath until I stopped swimming in the hurt.

I needed this.

I needed the remedy I'd used since I was too small to know better.

I lifted the edge of the carpet in the corner and pulled up the loose piece of floorboard I'd been using since I'd first discovered it was there. Sure enough, it was waiting for me—my stash of wipes, tissues, bandages, Band-Aids, and a little roll of scalpel blades. I unrolled the felt bundle, already feeling the first hints of calm as I saw the blades there.

I tugged my dress up around my thighs and stared at my scarred skin through glassy eyes, letting out a gasp as I made the first slit in my flesh.

Oh yes.

Oh how I needed that.

How I needed the slice of pain and the tingling release of blood.

I thought of Stephen, dying on the floor, and I thought of Lucian Morelli's tongue dancing around mine, and I did it again, another nick of the blade.

God yes.

I thought of how much I'd wanted the monster inside me and how much I'd loved it when he hurt me, and I did it again. Another nick of the blade.

I thought of how wet and needy I was when I thought of Lucian bringing me pain and making me want it, and I did it

again. Another nick of the blade that made me hiss out a sigh.

I was bleeding. The blood was hot and dripping. And I wanted more.

Another nick of the blade that brought a rush through me that was better than any coke.

I thought of Baron Rawlings and his swollen red cheeks as he called me a naughty girl with his fat fingers groping at me. I thought of how he'd made me pay, hurting me so hard over his knees as I sobbed and told him I'd be better. I promised I'd be better.

Another nick of the blade.

I thought of Colonel Hardwick and how his naked body was so heavy over mine.

Another nick of the blade.

I thought about all the things my mother had said to me, so many times she'd called me a liar when I'd tried to tell her the truth. Another nick of the blade.

I thought about Lucian. I thought about the care in his eyes along with the hate and the rage when he killed another man for me.

And then I thought of him killing Colonel Hardwick and Baron Rawlings, too. I thought of him killing the men who'd hurt me when I was too small to know better.

I thought of him killing Reverend Lynch.

I thought about him killing Uncle Lionel for giving me away to the sinners.

I found myself wishing I could tell him the truth. Wishing I could tell Lucian Morelli the truth before I was gone.

Another nick of the damn blade.

The calmness found me, deep and dark. I loved the pain in my legs as they tingled from the cuts. I loved the way my blood trickled and dripped down my thighs.

Lucian Morelli wasn't going to save me. He wasn't going to hurt any of the men who'd hurt me, because even if I could tell him, I wouldn't. I'd never tell a soul as long as I lived.

I smiled to myself at that.

As long as I lived. That wouldn't be long.

The Power brothers were coming for me.

I wiped the blood from my legs, pressed a wad of tissues to the cuts and relaxed back against the wall, sinking into the soothing calm, riding the ebb and flow of it as my body tried to make sense of my actions, until finally, the sobs and the trembling had stopped. I caught my breath, patched up my wounds and hid my stash away, then forced myself into some kind of walkable state, even without a few lines of cocaine to see me through it.

Mom wanted to speak with me. No shit. I knew she'd have plenty to say. Who knew what her *offer* would be, but I was damn sure it wouldn't be a good one.

I made sure my cheeks weren't wet before I made my way back downstairs.

My heart stuttered as I realized my mother was already a floor down by the main staircase. Waiting. As always, her face was one of utter disgust when she saw me there, her lip nothing but a snarl of disdain.

I tried to think of words, but I didn't have to worry about that.

Her welcome to me was a slap across the face, hard enough that I cried out in a gasp.

"If you ever so much as step foot downtown, Elaine Beatrice Constantine, I swear to God, it'll be the *very* last thing you do. This time I'm serious."

My heart was racing, but nothing more came, just a jab of a finger in my face as she reiterated her stance. "I'm sorry," I whispered, because it was true. I was sorry that I couldn't be who she wanted. It might seem weak, to people who've never

been abused. But I was never able to grow up. That's something the therapist had told me for the bargain price of \$500 an hour. When you're abused, you stop growing up. You stay that age forever.

My mother's voice has turned pleading. "You don't belong in that seedy hovel of a place. You've never belonged in it. You belong here, with us, with your family."

I didn't belong there with the rest of them. I never had. Not since meeting Reverend Lynch.

"Family?" I asked. "I thought you were disowning me."

She sighed. "No gratitude. So it's just as well that I have a solution for us."

"Uncle Lionel told me. An *offer*."

"Yes," she spat. "An *offer*."

"Tell me, then," I said, trying my best to sound strong. "What is this offer?"

I knew it was going to be a bad one before she started speaking. I could see it in her stare.

"Christopher Rawlings," she announced. "He wants you as his bride. Baron Rawlings suggests you are to be the latest addition to the Rawlings name and the British aristocracy."

No.

Not Baron Rawlings...

I was shaking my head before she was even done speaking.

She sighed, folding her arms across her chest. "Don't try my patience any more than you already have, Elaine. This is a good opportunity for you. And a good opportunity for the Constantine name. Do something for the family, for a change."

Constantines and Rawlings...it made my skin crawl.

"The tabloids would love it," she said. "It would be the wedding of the decade."

“No,” I said. “I don’t want to marry Christopher Rawlings.”

She scoffed at me. “You don’t have to like him. That’s hardly the point of a good marriage. What I would expect is that you would see the value in my proposition. A fresh start, in England, with a good family name and a ring on your finger.”

Mom was still talking, rattling off the benefits.

“I’ll finish your debts with the Powers one last time. You’ll be out of the cycle. No drugs in your life, no losers to hole up in the pits of shit with. Baron Rawlings was very clear on that. Nobody would come within a mile of you. Nobody they didn’t approve of.”

I was still shaking my head. “Baron Rawlings is a sick fuck.”

“Watch your mouth!” she said. “Baron Rawlings is a fine man, from a fine family lineage.”

I did watch my mouth. It shut tight. Just as I always had done.

I was already walking away from her as she cursed under her breath.

“I mean it, Elaine,” she said. “Accept Christopher’s proposal or you’re on your own. I’m not digging you out ever again.”

I didn’t want her to. Not anymore. The sails of hope in me died their death for the last time. I was lost to everything. Even myself.

I’d never marry Christopher Rawlings. *Never.*

My legs were still tingling from the cuts, and my cheek was tingling from the cold hard slap of my mother. My ass was still hurting from Lucian’s cock, and my heart was shrinking from years of disgrace and fear and self-hate, and I was ready.

I could never be with Lucian. I should never want to be. I could never dig myself out of the life I'd created, amongst the people who'd created me.

I let out a sigh as I took the final staircase back down to the garden party, leaving my mother upstairs with folded arms, cursing my name.

I had the answer.

This time, for myself, I had the answer.

If the Power brothers, or Lucian Morelli, or Reverend Lynch weren't coming for me pretty soon, I'd be taking myself and saving them the trouble.

With the first shred of self-respect I'd allowed myself in years, I smiled. Fuck the Power brothers, and fuck the Morellis, and fuck the whole host of people aching to be a part of my demise.

My final breath belonged to one person only.

Me.

My end would be on my own terms, and soon.

Really damn soon.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lucian

IT WAS A foreign feeling to me. Failure.

I'd succeeded at every task and every mission that had been thrown at me in my life. But not this one. Not writing off Elaine Constantine as history.

Not taking over Morelli Holdings.

I should've left her to the Power brothers and focused on finally gaining my position in check as head of the Morelli empire. I should've heeded the oath carved into my palm and knuckled myself down to my roles, both criminal and corporate.

I didn't.

I couldn't.

I didn't even bother heading back to city life, just headed over to the Constantine compound and stayed at the safest distance I could manage with a chauffeur.

I was a fool risking it all for a woman I should despise. I was a beast craving a filthy little goddess and her innocent soul.

Trenton tried to reach me on my phone, but I wanted nothing to do with him.

Morelli Holdings and keeping my position intact should be the only thing that mattered to me.

It wasn't.

The board would vote, and with my absences lately, they would vote for my father. Again, I should've been determined to change that.

I wasn't. I was far too determined in pursuing Elaine and her beauty and her fears.

Elaine's chauffeur left the Constantine compound early on Sunday evening. Just the smallest glimpse of her bouncing blonde hair as she slipped into the limo made my cock hard. I followed her back into the city, bailing out of my limo a block away from her apartment to make my way closer on foot.

I stood next to the building and stared up at her suite windows on the top floor, and I wondered what she was doing up there, and how chewed up inside she was over everything.

I pictured her wide eyes, and her nervous shivers, and the abject terror in her stare whenever I looked at her.

I wanted more.

My phone was pinging, but I didn't care enough to look at the screen. My gaze was fixed up high, watching the lights turning on in the top floor windows as the evening turned to dusk. I didn't move. I didn't have anywhere I wanted to go.

I didn't want Violent Delights and the club house full of games and filth. I didn't want to summon any other women and tear them apart for my whims.

I wanted Elaine Constantine. Even though my palm was still sliced ragged, begging me to hold true to my oath, I wanted Elaine Constantine.

It was the most insane move I'd ever made when I took the pair of glasses from my inside jacket pocket and took off my tie to loosen the top few buttons of my shirt. It was the most risky thing I'd ever contemplated to walk straight into Elaine's building foyer and up to the security reception with a cold hard smile on my face.

Let them find out. Let them find out that Lucian Morelli was here to see Elaine Constantine. Her family was surely

monitoring her. I rang the bell and waited, half expecting her to ignore it.

After a moment, the lock clicked open.

Interesting.

Interesting and thrilling, right to the dark depths of me.

The elevator ride was long and slow. My mouth was dry as I stepped out and walked right on up to Elaine Constantine's front door. I rapped my knuckles three times, my fist still held up in the air as my pretty little fool Elaine answered.

She'd been crying.

The tracks of her tears were fresh down her cheeks.

"You're insane," she said as she swung the door open. "What the hell are you doing here? Have you lost your mind?"

I pushed past her without a word, taking a look at the opulence of the apartment around me. It was huge, cream, and sparse. Hardly a trace of personality in the place.

"Are you worried your parents will find out? Mine already have? Who gives a fuck? We're grown ups, even if our parents are psychos who might kill us."

Just as expected, those pretty blue saucer eyes of hers widened. "You really are insane," she said again. "You nearly got us both killed then, and that was bad enough, but if anyone knew you were here...now..."

She seemed different.

Elaine seemed different.

Scared to a whole new tune. One I hadn't seen in her before.

It was then that I looked beyond her to the coffee table next to her designer leather couch. It was then that I saw the concoction of sleeping pills and other bottles of meds waiting in a row next to a half-empty bottle of champagne.

And more...

A scrawled letter, complete with the fountain pen cast down at the side...

I headed close enough to investigate and picked up one of the bottles. Diazepam. A whole jar full of them that I shook in my hand.

“Going to bail out, were you?” I asked her. “This is how you’re planning on ditching your life, to save the Power brothers the effort?”

“It’s got fuck all to do with the Power brothers,” she said in a hard voice, folding her arms across her chest. “I’m doing what I want, because I want to.”

But she was lying. Just like always.

If she’d really, truly wanted to kill herself tonight she’d have done it instead of letting me up.

She didn’t want to kill herself. She wanted me.

She’d wanted me since she’d first set eyes on me at Tinsley Constantine’s ball.

We stared at each other, both of us sizzling with generations of family hate and vitriol. Both of us despising everything the other one stood for. Both of us knowing that anything other than malice between us was at odds with everything we stood for as human beings.

“Leave,” she told me, and this time her eyes flared with a new round of shame. “You can sleep happily tonight, knowing there’s one less Constantine in the world.”

“Very dramatic.”

“Thanks for that.” It was then that she noticed my bandaged hand. “What’s that? Get into a fight with some boardroom member. Is that it?”

I stepped up closer to her and breathed in her scent. “Why are you such a little fool?”

Her eyes were brimming with tears, even though her jaw was gritted tight. “Fuck you, Lucian. Fuck you, and fuck off. I

don't want anything the fuck to do with you, and never have."

I backed her up into the wall, pinning her tight.

"Such a liar," I snarled. "Such a dirty little liar. You can't resist me. You've not been able to resist me since the first moment you laid eyes on me at your sister's sad party."

"Interesting accusation," she said. "Considering *you're* the one standing in *my* apartment, even though you'd be dead if anyone so much as got a sniff you were here." I saw that flash of need in her eyes, and it was the one that set me on fire. The one that always set me on fire.

It was her masochistic need for hurt. The woman who wanted to suffer at my hands.

"Seriously," she whispered. "Fuck off."

"You're really going to overdose over a debt to the Power brothers?"

She shrugged, squirming her body tight against mine. Her breaths were in my face, and her eyes were still glassy. Hurt. "I'm going to overdose because I want to. I'm done with the whole sorry state of my existence. What's the point of it?"

I tugged her nightdress up around her thighs, and swallowed as I saw the beauty of the fresh slashes on her flesh. "An overdose would be such a waste."

"Great, so I shouldn't die because you want to fuck me?"

"Why not?" I asked with a cold laugh. "It's as good a reason as any? But I can think of a better one. Stay alive because *you* want to fuck *me*."

She shakes her head, half laughing, half crying. "You're such a bastard."

And that's when I knew it, above anything else. The one thing I should've known right from the beginning when I'd very first caught sight of the woman in gold and that mysterious, irrational web of want she'd snared me with.

She wasn't going to be slashing herself to pieces. I was going to be destroying her, one tiny petal at a time.

"You won't be slashing yourself anywhere," I told her and took her throat in my hands. "You're coming with me tonight. Whether you want to or not."

"You're planning on kidnapping me from my city center apartment, sneaking me down past the eons of security staff and right onto the main street outside while the world is watching you? Good luck with that."

I grinned right back at her. A grin that chilled her right to the bones. "I won't be kidnapping you. You'll be joining me very willingly. One last fuck before I let you go."

That sparked something in her, some final flare of self-respect in that battered little heart of hers. "You're an asshole. A motherfucker." The word comes out tumbled from her lips. She isn't used to insulting people. It's almost endearing. "A goddamn terrible person."

I kissed her once. Deeply. Nipping and tugging at her lips with my teeth.

I nipped her lower lip so hard she whimpered, even though she was struggling for air. I tasted her blood in my mouth as I pulled away.

It tasted fucking divine. Her blood. A delicacy I'd been hungry to taste for a long time.

"You're coming with me," I said.

I cast her aside and she fell to the floor, gasping for breath as I freed her throat. I strolled over to the table without giving a shit about the medication bottles. What I wanted was right next to them, the scrawled remnants of the letter she was in the midst of writing.

Tristan.

I should've known it would be Tristan featuring in her last goodbye.

“You’re good friends, huh?” I ask her.

“Fuck you.”

“He really likes you too, you know,” I told her. “He was prepared to stick his neck well and truly on the line to save you from my grasp the other night. He wouldn’t tell me where you were, not even if it cost him his life.”

“Good thing I was leaving him a letter then.”

I slipped it into my jacket pocket, and her eyes widened in the way I was coming to love too damn much to ignore.

“He’ll be getting a load more than a goodbye letter from you if you don’t join me down at the back of this building in fifteen minutes,” I told her. “If you take your own life up here, I’ll be taking his. If you tell anyone I’ve been here, I’ll be sure to make sure he’s dead within the hour.”

Oh, those pretty eyes of hers. Widening even further. “You can’t.”

But yes. Yes. This was the answer. This had always been the answer. Taking her as mine with no exit and no limits was the prize I’d been chasing right from the start, without even knowing it.

She was mine.

She’d always been mine, from the very moment I’d set my eyes on her, the woman in gold. “I’ll be outside,” I told her. “In the shadows to the right of the parking lot, under the rear awning. You’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“No,” she tried again, but it was weak. I didn’t even look behind me, just made my way out of her suite and back through her domain.

I still had a smile on my face when I took a turn right at the foyer and followed the signs down for the rear parking lot. The security guards were around, and I could sense them, but I didn’t slow down in my paces, just kept my head up high.

And then I waited.

I waited in the shadows for Elaine Constantine with a strangely hypnotic thrill rising up in my veins.

I checked my watch, ticking slowly. I looked up at the building, counting the seconds.

Waiting. Wanting. Planning.

Planning all the filthy painful things I was going to do to that pretty little temptress as I made her mine.

I was going to bind her, and brand her, and tear her apart.

I was going to take her soul, and her heart, and her secrets. Every little last one of them until she was bleeding her sins on the floor and begging me to end her life.

Elaine Beatrice Constantine was my little virgin, giving me my every breath.

And there she was. A flighty shadow in the shadows.

Her wide blue eyes looked more scared than ever as she joined me under that awning with her arms wrapped tight around her chest.

She was skittish. Terrified.

Perfect.

“Don’t hurt Tristan,” she said as she stepped up close. “Please, don’t hurt Tristan.”

“You’d better be a good little doll for me, then,” I said, and took her by the hand. “I gave up my company for you. My family. My pride. I gave up everything to keep you, and I’m going to make you pay it back to me in pain and tears and red marks on your skin.”

SOULLESS



CHAPTER ONE

Elaine

I USED TO dream about it late at night—being kidnapped by a monster.

There was a strange dread and fascination with being taken. Owned. It was no different in real life, walking away from my apartment complex at the side of Lucian Morelli.

He didn't speak to me, because no words were needed. I knew he was my god from here on in. I was nothing more than a little doll in his sadist show.

That's what he was. A sadist. A sadist who wanted my blood.

I had no doubt he'd be taking it, slowly and painfully.

I was the one who broke the silence. "Where are we going?"

He could have told me it was none of my business, and I would've still followed him. I had no choice. Not while my best friend in the world was being held for ransom if I didn't obey. Tristan's life was worth more to me than mine.

"We're going to get a cab," the monster said, just like that.

We could have called a car on his phone easily enough, but I guess he didn't want to. The anonymity of a taxi must have been a more appealing option. It made sense.

A Morelli with a Constantine in any form would be remarkable in our world.

Lucian's eyes were fixed ahead of us, glittering in their darkness. His jaw looked as firm as ever from my angle, looking up at the beast. It occurred to me for just that second, trotting alongside him on the sidewalk, that he was as unsure of how things were panning out as I was.

It seemed odd that he was acting on impulse, totally out of character with the way he usually reeked of control and structure.

Yeah, he was out of his comfort zone. The thought made me smile a little, even in my fear.

It happened to be the moment he chose to fix me in his stare. "What's funny, sweetheart?" he asks with a taunt in his voice. "Share with the class."

It didn't stop me from smiling. Even now, with the mind-spinning promise of fate ripping me out of this world, there was a beautiful sense of relief in my soul. "Why shouldn't I smile?" I countered. "Maybe I'll be happy when you hurt me. I was about to end my own life, after all."

I thought back to the bottles of pills I'd left behind and how he'd disturbed me from them by turning up at my apartment door. He still had the *Tristan* suicide note I'd written in his inside pocket. It was typical that he'd used it to work out just how important Tristan is to me.

"You've had plenty of chances to end your life. You didn't. Even tonight you were waiting for the big bad wolf to come and take you. You're lying to yourself."

That offended me.

I stopped walking and folded my arms across my chest.

"I wanted to be the one to take my own life," I told him. "It's my life. That was my right."

My heart leapt a little as he turned to face me and stepped close. He loomed tall. His voice was barely more than a hiss when he spoke. "It's not your right anymore, Miss

Constantine. You can wave that freedom goodbye. Your life belongs to me now.”

I belonged to Lucian Morelli. “Ha!” I couldn’t help laughing in his face.

He didn’t even flinch. He held out a hand, and I looked down at his outstretched fingers, so big and firm. *He* was so big and firm. It felt weird to take his hand in mine. The power in his grip was...intense...

My heart leapt again as he pulled me along with him.

In that moment, hand in hand on the sidewalk, we must have looked like any regular couple enjoying their evening. If only we were. If only we’d been two people meeting each other at a party and wanting to fuck. If only we’d been two people drawn together without our family war gripping us tight. It was a bizarre truth how instinctively I hated the man holding my hand, and I had since I was old enough to understand his name.

Constantines versus Morellis. Enemies over generations. Malice to the death.

I’d long forgotten even half of what was so terrible that their family had done to ours. More than our family had done to theirs though, that was for sure. That was a mantra I’d learned since I was a toddler. *The Morellis are bad people.*

“You’d better behave in the cab,” the monster told me as the stand came into view. “Even so much as a squeak for help will lead to nothing but the death of your friend.”

Part of me doesn’t want to believe him. It’s one thing to defend your family and your territory. Another thing to hurt an innocent like Tristan. I think Lucian is just bluffing...but he might not be. “Don’t insult my intelligence by thinking you have to tell me that. I’m well aware what an evil piece of shit you are, Lucian Morelli.”

His mouth pressed up to my ear. “I’m well aware of what a little liar you are too, Elaine Constantine. And I’m going to make you suffer for it.”

I shivered as we stepped up to the first cab in the line. Lucian held the door open for me. What a gentleman. I shuffled climbed into the back seat as he joined me. I stared out of the window on the other side, looking anywhere but at the man setting out to destroy me.

You wanted him to take you, murmured a low, raspy voice in my head. *You've always been a slut. You've always wanted men to hurt you.*

I shivered in the cool leather seat. There was a strange bond between us. Attraction. Lust. Or maybe something far more base—an exchange of power.

We were like two poles of a magnet, drawn together.

And I couldn't deny that I would have fought harder, would have used my teeth and nails to escape another man bent on kidnapping me. With Lucian Morelli, I was willingly going along.

He leaned forward to the driver, keeping himself as low-key as possible, no doubt, as he cleared his throat and pasted on a sad little smile.

“Bishop's Landing,” he said, and my stomach lurched.

The seat of my family's power. And the seat of his. The Morellis and the Constantines had both occupied the affluent town for generations. Why two warring families would choose to live so close together, I would never understand. There was even a joke sometimes, whispered among those feeling particularly brave, that the massive feud had once started over a neighborly dispute. They would take something regular neighbors fight about and make it something extravagant. *They must have been fighting over their diamond encrusted fence. Or, their exotic tiger probably ate the miniature chihuahua who lived alone in the pool house next door.*

It was the place my kidnapper was driving me to, a place where he would be at risk for discovery, a place where he had allies all around him.

It was a place of contradiction. Of risk.

Of an almost self-destructive form of courage.

Farewell, New York City.

Hello, hometown.



CHAPTER TWO

Lucian

ELAINE CONSTANTINE WAS a little blonde butterfly driving me insane in that back seat. Her pursed lips were still holding onto her spite, trying to be a little firebrand in my grip. It only made me even more desperate to toy with her.

I knew I was playing with fire, taking things to the next level when I told the cab driver Bishop's Landing. It was almost an hour from New York City. I could've caged Elaine in my Manhattan apartment for a few long days safely enough without any questioning, and that's what I should have been going for—a few long days with the butterfly before I ripped her wings off one by one. But I didn't. My filthy heart wouldn't let me give up my dirty little plaything so soon. I wanted every damn fucking second with her I could claim.

Bishop's Landing was the answer.

It was the heart of both the Constantines and the Morellis. A fitting place for me to consummate my obsession. Despite the fact that it was our family seat, I rarely spent time here. My time was usually torn heavily between Morelli Holdings and Violent Delights. Now I drove us to the elaborate estate I owned, far enough away that we could have our privacy. No one would hear her when she screams my name.

She was watching the mansions rolling past outside, trying her best to feign disinterest.

Her blonde hair was alive under the glow of the passing streetlights. Her slim delicacy made her look like a porcelain

puppet ready to be worked by the puppet master. I was glad that I was proving to be the puppet master, not the fucking Power brothers.

I approached them and confirmed her debt. Over three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Not her own money spent on drugs or gambling. She was paying off the debt of men and women who had children. She was, in her own twisted, party girl way, trying to make the world a better place.

“I know you’re looking at me, Lucian,” she said. “I can feel the lust in your eyes.”

She wasn’t wrong.

I didn’t reply.

Even afraid, she wanted me.

We were opposites, drawn together inexorably. Both of us, transfixed by the black magic of our flesh. Not to mention she had an incredible body.

I could still feel her tight ass milking my cock dry from where I’d claimed her. Still feel the mix of rage and desire in her. Rage because she thought she was going to get a good fucking for the first time in her sorry life. Desire because she loved it. Loved *me* fucking her dirty little asshole. I’d been reliving the thrill over and over.

The memory was burned into me—fucking her Constantine ass in a pool of another man’s blood. I’d butchered him for touching her. I knew it would be burnt into her, too.

We were both snared with our own mutual hate and filth intertwined.

We were both well into the depths of the forbidden from both fucking families. I’d crossed the line the very first moment I’d kissed her at Tinsley Constantine’s ball.

May as well get my twisted thrill from her.

The streets turned into stretches of open road surprisingly quick. The silence grew heavy as we grew closer to our destination. The cab driver said nothing, just kept his eyes ahead.

I only hoped we were doing a decent enough job at feigning a regular life in a regular world. “Up here on the left,” I told him, and directed him up the driveway to my place.

My Bishop’s Landing house was one of the smallest in the town. It was also one of the most expensive. Every piece of marble was hand selected from India. The cloths used to wrap each large plate cost more than most people made in a year.

Yes, the Morelli family had money.

Old money. New money. We had all the fucking money we needed.

The fight over the company was never really about money. My father and I both had enough to play with private jets as if they were toy cars. This was about power. The power to support the family and control its pursestrings. The power to help my siblings the way I never did as a child. The fates of tens of thousands of employees, whose livelihoods hung in the balance.

And I’d failed. Given up. Were those the right words?

Perhaps it would be more correct to say I’d traded that in for Elaine Constantine. The woman I shouldn’t want. The woman my body couldn’t live without.

Of course, the smallest house in Bishop’s Landing was still 8,000 square feet. And I had over an acre of land. We pulled down the white-gravel road and rolled to a stop at the front of the door. *A contemporary monstrosity*, my mother had said when she saw the architect’s designs. *In Bishop’s Landing? Darling, think of its illustrious history.* It wasn’t contemporary actually. It was mid-century modern, but my mother didn’t understand style that didn’t include gilt scrolls. She thought mid-century modern was one of those California hippie things. Like feng shui. Or pot.

“Here,” I said, and the cab pulled up at the top of the driveway. The place was pitch dark. Massive glass panes rose above us, looming in a perfect, jagged edge. Imported white quartz bricks gleamed faintly in the moonlight. A few military-straight bushes lined the front.

It gave me a little shiver of lust to see Elaine trying so hard to see our destination in the shadows. Here we were, at the cage of her torment. I was the big bad wolf waiting to tear open his prey. It was a civilized lair, but there was nothing civilized about the way I wanted her.

“Keep the change,” I told the driver and handed over just a sliver more than the right amount. Nothing too obvious or notable. Nothing for him to remember if he’s questioned.

Elaine didn’t have a last-minute freak-out as I opened her door for her. She didn’t have a burst of *save me!* for the driver. She didn’t try to run off into the night.

No. She was a good girl. She stepped out of the cab and resigned herself to her fate like a sweet little lamb to the slaughter.

I watched the cab rumble away down the driveway before I dug the keys out of my pocket. I’d barely used them over the past year, too caught up in Morelli Holdings and business life to scrape even a scrap of time away from the city.

I left Elaine standing on the spot as I headed up to the front door. Even with my back to her, I knew she was staring intently over at me with her heart in her throat as I pushed the key into the lock and opened the door, ready and waiting.

“Come on in and meet your fate,” I said and led the way inside.



CHAPTER THREE

Elaine

IT WASN'T WHAT I was expecting from him. Not in the slightest.

The house was small and strangely cozy, despite the metals and woods and glass used in the design. It somehow worked together in harmony, making me feel at ease.

It wasn't exactly the billion dollar bachelor pad I would've pictured for the Morelli heir.

He must've seen the surprise in my eyes as I crossed the threshold and stepped into the hall. My gaze was flitting around the place, checking out the decor. Artwork on the wall. Paintings? No, they were made out of wood and other materials. They were a cross between a picture and a sculpture, with geometric designs and stark contrasts. A rich cherry wood traced through a matte black canvas, with streaks of burnished gold.

"What does it mean?" I asked, forgetting for one moment that he was my enemy.

"It's pain," he said. "At least the way I imagine it would feel."

I gave him a disbelieving look. "You don't know what pain feels like? Is that some sort of weird rich boy flex, like nothing has ever hurt you in your two-thousand thread count sheets?"

"Not quite," he murmured, though he didn't sound offended. More like amused.

"Whatever, Lucian."

All this talk about imagined pain. He probably just wanted to fuck with me. It didn't matter, anyway. He had money and power and fame. He had a disturbingly handsome face. A lean body.

And the absolute surety that the world was made to please him.

He stepped through to the kitchen, and again it had beautiful smooth spaces. The coffee machine looked like the most expensive item in the building. It had so many silver pipes and steam holes that it reminded me of a luxe Dr. Seuss instrument.

“Are you going to fuck me tonight, then?” I asked him, pasting on my bravest face.

“I'll fuck you whenever it suits me,” he told me, and he meant it.

I looked at him fresh in these new surroundings, as though I was seeing him for the very first time. His darkness was radiating. His strength was brilliant—muscular and sculpted with biological precision. It was a strange thing, just how opposite our family lines were, in every sense of the word.

His hands were like magicians whenever they moved, his fingers beautiful in their dances. His hair was perfect in his styling. I guess it was the intensity of the surroundings, but Lucian Morelli looked even more of a god in this place. His opulence and class was obvious against the planed backdrop.

I leaned against the counter and watched him.

“You're going to really make me suffer, aren't you?” I asked.

“Yes, sweetheart,” he said with an evil smile. “I'm going to make you suffer. I'm going to enjoy every second of it. Morelli versus Constantine in the most intimate of ways.”

Somehow, even through the dread and the fear churning inside me, intimacy with Lucian Morelli gave me a shudder of something different.

I expected him to fire up the coffee machine, but he didn't. He crossed the room to the refrigerator and pulled out two mineral waters, pouring them into glasses from the shelf.

"Drink," he ordered, and handed one over.

I did what he told me, because I was thirsty, not because I was his meek little servant. Not yet, anyway. He watched me while he sipped at his.

It was another clear light and dark between us both. Another polarity in our souls. He drank mineral water while I drank champagne. I'd never seen him overindulge, let alone have a dependency on it.

Control. He was all about control.

I was all about losing control.

"I hope your ass is still hurting," he said. "I've got plenty of pain to add to it."

I laughed. "It's had worse. I'm not quite so virginal as you think I am. My life hasn't been all that sheltered, asshole."

"You'll tell me all about who's been ass-fucking you, Elaine. Soon enough, I'll know every one of your dirty little secrets."

He was wrong.

I wouldn't tell him anything I didn't want to. He could tear me apart, and I'd still keep my mouth closed tight.

He tipped my face up to his. "I know there are plenty of dirty little secrets behind those pretty blue eyes."

He wasn't wrong on that front. I had enough dirty little secrets to fill a bookshelf.

His fingers slid down my throat, squeezing just a little before slipping my coat from my shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. I didn't fight him.

"Such a pretty little Constantine," he whispered.

I felt like a pretty little Constantine. It was a beautiful darkness, to be wanted by such a demon.

My words were out of my throat before I even realized they were coming, nothing but a breath from my lips.

“Hurt me, monster. Show me what you really are.”

I couldn't hold back a gasp as he raised his hand to my face. I was expecting pain, but I didn't get it. No. I got anything but pain. With a slip of his fingers as he gripped my face, Lucian Morelli pushed his thumb inside my mouth.

It was the strangest thing to have the monster's thumb so intimately between my lips, probing so gently. I'd been touched and groped and abused in the most intense of ways through my life, but nothing had ever made me feel as vulnerable as the way he invaded me. His thumb was strong as it explored my mouth, commanding me in the most intimate way. I tried to pull back from him but he pinned me to the counter, making me moan as he petted my tongue.

“Suck,” he said, but I didn't suck.

I moved my tongue in nothing more than a flicker, tasting him. I wanted to taste him. I wanted to taste the monster's thumb.

“Suck,” he said again, but I still didn't.

He swapped his thumb for two thick fingers, and I tasted him, fresh. Flickering, flickering, flickering with my tongue.

He liked it. I could see it in his eyes. The monster liked it.

“Dirty girl,” he growled, and I loved the dark tone in his voice. “Show me that hungry little tongue, I want to see it.”

I opened my mouth nice and wide and showed the beast my tongue, still brushing against his fingers as he pulled them free.

I wasn't prepared for him to lower his head so quickly. I wasn't prepared for the way he nipped his teeth around my tongue hard enough to make me squeal. I tried to pull away,

but he grabbed my hair in his fist, held me still as he sucked on my tongue.

I tasted blood at the same time he did.

He let out a moan. I knew he was smiling.

Lucian Morelli really was a monster.

His lips were red as he pulled away.

“You’re fucked up,” I told him. “Did you know that, Morelli? You’re a fuck-up.”

I thought he’d take offense, but he didn’t. He smirked at me.

“Yes, I know that,” he told me. “I’ve been a fuck-up since the day I was born. I enjoy it. Regular life is so fucking dull.”

That made me smirk right back at him. It was one of the few things we had in common. I too had been a fuck-up since the day I was born.

Everyone else in my family had been in their billionaire childhood dreams, and I’d been drifting along the sidelines, focused on the shadows at the edges. Maybe that’s why the evil men had picked me out of the Constantine girls for their sick thrills. Maybe I was asking for it with my weird little ways right from the start.

My bleeding tongue was throbbing. I rubbed my mouth on the back of my hand and there was a smear of red. Still, I didn’t care. I really was crazy with all my parts jarred together.

I would’ve happily stayed there for a sick, twisted lifetime, pinned by the filthy fuck-up at the countertop, but no. He had other plans.

His grip was firm on the back of my hair as he spun me around and shoved me back through to the hallway.

“Let the games begin,” he said.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lucian

HER BLOOD WAS still beautifully metallic in my mouth as I shunted her through to the hallway and onwards, right through to the small library on the property. I almost regretted bringing her here, because it felt as though her eyes were peering inside me somehow.

I switched on a lamp, illuminating her just enough to give her a sweet golden sheen.

“Strip,” I told her, and she spun to face me, fixing me in that pretty gaze of hers.

This time she didn’t attempt to argue with me. She slipped her dress straps from her shoulders with her lips tight, trying to hold the *fuck you* in her stare. She failed to hide the truth of it, even though her whole body was lying. She was scared.

Really fucking scared.

My mouth watered at the thought of her stomach fluttering, nervous.

I wanted to feel her breaths quick and hot against me as I played with her, but I held back, stoic and firm as I folded my arms across my chest.

“Strip for me,” I told her again.

She let the dress slip down to show her bra, perfect in its lacy white sweetness. Her hips held barely any resistance, letting the fabric slide right down her legs to the floor.

White panties. Sweet little white panties.

Jesus Christ, I was going to enjoy her body.

She was already reaching around for her bra clip when I clipped out a *no* to her.

She paused, eyes wide.

“Not yet,” I growled. “Stand still like a good girl.”

She stood still, but her expression wasn't anything like a good girl. There was a mist of rebellion about her, along with her fear. Fear and want. She wanted me, but hated it.

Just like I wanted her. How I hated that I wanted her.

She was a Constantine.

Not even a useful one. I couldn't use her to regain my company. I couldn't even have her while I completed the coup that had been years in the making. No, I'd had to make a choice. I resented her for making me choose her. For being so beautiful, so broken, so strong that I had to take her for myself. I resented her, even though it hadn't been her choice.

I made her stand for long slow minutes, loving how she shuffled more and more as I stared at her. She was getting agitated along with nervous, until she finally wrapped her arms around herself and found her voice. “Well, are you going to do something to me then or what?”

“Not yet, little doll. I'm going to savor every second.”

She sighed at me, feigning a whole new flash of confidence. “Boring, then. Great. May as well have popped the pills and fucked off out of life before you showed up.”

I had a sick adoration of these different sides to the butterfly, so many colors on her wings flashing bright. Her fears, her secrets, her need to be a good little girl. Her self-hate, her self-harm, her sad little desire to move on from her upbringing and its bullshit—saving those addicts from the Power brothers. Her mother wouldn't piss on any of them if they were burning, much less allow her daughter to vouch for their debts.

Elaine knew that, too. She knew it and went against her family's will.

I was fascinated by her. "Spread your legs," I told her, and my voice was laced with malice.

"No."

"Spread your legs," I told her again, but she shook her head.

"Make me. I'm not just a little doll who's going to dance to your beat."

I closed the distance between us, loving how she flinched as I stepped up to her. "Oh, you're a little doll, Elaine. You're going to dance nice and hard to my beat."

My cock was straining in my pants, and my mouth was watering. Her breaths were every bit as shallow and fast as I imagined. I could almost hear her heartbeat thumping.

My words were growls, and the dynamic shifted between us.

"Spread your fucking legs."

She shuddered, wanting. She couldn't help but want me.

"Do it," I muttered.

She liked that. Fuck, she liked that. I could feel it.

My cock liked it too. My cock liked it when Elaine Constantine shifted her legs apart.

I crept my fingers up her thigh nice and slowly, tickling. She flinched as my thumb brushed her slit through her wet panties, breaths growing more shallow as I teased.

"I'm going to hurt your pussy," I told her. "I'm going to hurt your pussy so fucking bad you're going to cry for me."

"At least fuck me first."

"You'll have to earn that," I said. "Earn my cock like a good little doll."

There was something about my words that were resonating. I could feel her tension.

“Rub your slit on my fingers,” I told her. “Make yourself come.”

I teased her, coaxed her, tickling her pussy enough to make her tense up.

I don't know how we did it, descended into such a natural dance of flesh. The dam broke in my dirty girl as she braced herself on me, arms wrapping around my shoulders as she let her hips do the work.

She rubbed her slit on my fingers, fast. She was desperate, walls breaking as her butterfly colors shimmered.

I wouldn't help her. My fingers were strong and still against her as she worked for her thrill.

“Put them inside me,” she whispered. “Please.”

But no. I wouldn't put them inside her. “Rub your slit,” I said. “Come for me.”

“Help me,” she said, whimpering, rubbing fiercely. “Help me come.”

But no. I wouldn't help her come. I wanted the little doll to do it all on her own. “What do you think about when you touch your clit at night?” I asked her with a growl. “What makes you wet?”

The question made her rub harder, putting more weight against my fingers.

“Tell me,” I snarled. “What makes you wet, Elaine?”

“Help me,” she whispered. “Help me come...please...”

“What makes you wet, Elaine?”

Her rhythm became faster, harder. “Please, Lucian...help me...”

“What makes you touch your clit at night?”

She was shivering, desperate. Her arms were gripping me tight. “Please, Lucian...”

I knew she’d done it before. I knew she’d come for people. “Did they make you touch yourself?” I asked her. “Did they make you touch yourself as they hurt you?”

She tensed, even as she rubbed against me.

Yes. They made her touch herself as they hurt her. I knew it. I knew they hurt her, and I knew they made her like it.

The thought made me hard and full of hate, both at once.

Who the fuck had hurt Elaine Constantine?

“They did it, didn’t they?” I whispered. “They made you want it?”

It tipped her over the edge. Her shudder was intense, her bucks so frantic as she cried out. The doll’s back arched as she broke herself and came for me. She was lost, her body giving up the fight. Elaine Constantine came against my fingers.

And then I lost her. She came to her senses with a frown, pulling herself away from me with eyes full of spite. She grabbed her scrap of a dress up from the floor and held it tight.

“Fuck you, Lucian! I didn’t want it! They could never make me want it. They were repulsive pieces of shit. I hated everything they did to me. And I hate everything you’re doing to me.”

“If only your clit believed you.”

That’s when I saw the crack into her soul, right into the depths of her broken heart.

It was absolutely fucking beautiful.

“Do me a favor and get it over with already. Fuck me. Hurt me. Bash my head open, I don’t care!”

I make a *tut-tut* sound. “And ruin something so beautiful? I don’t think so.”



CHAPTER FIVE

Elaine

IHATED THE monster in front of me, playing me so hard for his sick thrills. I should never have let my guard down enough to show him even a snippet of my soul.

The beasts had been playing with me for years since I was a girl, holding tight to my innocence while they twisted and twisted. My family wanted my purity. They barely let me grow up, keeping me in a casket of little girl ways, even when my body was changing. Hell, the men exploited that and used it for what they wanted.

I was seventeen years old when the beasts finally changed their games and used me and my flesh in a whole new way, teasing me in a way I didn't understand.

"I mean it," I told Lucian. "I'm done with your bullshit. I'm done with everyone's bullshit."

I hated so much in life, both big and small. I hated the very fact I was holed up here with a Morelli who hated me. I hated how small and weak I felt in my own pit of fears. I hated the undeniable tingles running from my clit through my body.

Fuck knows what the hell was truly going on here, but I was done with it.

I sat myself down on the floor and pulled my knees to my chest. I wouldn't cry for him. No way would I cry for him. I choked back the tears and thought about all the assholes in the world who'd wanted to see me cry. Fuck them. Fuck him. Fuck Lucian Morelli.

“You’re a pretty little thing,” he told me. “You really are.”

I didn’t reply. I didn’t have anything to say.

“Look at me,” he said, but I didn’t.

I looked anywhere but at him. I looked at the hand-scraped wooden floor underneath us and at the smooth leather couch in the room. I looked at the gorgeous art above the fireplace.

“I told you to look at me.”

I gave him the middle finger, fuck the consequences.

The consequences were instant. He dragged me to my feet and threw me onto the couch, pinning me down with his hand at my throat hard enough to choke me. “Watch it, sweetheart. Rudeness will make your pain all the slower. All the sweeter.”

Even now, the scent and the heat of him drove me wild. I was lost to everything, so twisted up and confused by the whole sorry mess of my existence that I didn’t have a clue who I was or what I wanted anymore.

Even as I gasped for breath, I couldn’t stop myself rocking against him, legs wrapping around his waist. My body knew what I wanted. My body wanted a cock inside me.

My body wanted *Lucian Morelli’s* cock inside me.

He could do it...please...he could fucking do it...

I tried to tempt him. My hips were a whole fresh rhythm of grinding and my panties were still wet from me coming against his fingers. It was louder than words.

“You’re a pretty little doll,” he told me. “Such a temptress. It would be so easy to fuck your virgin hole right now. You’re already wet for me. I can feel it. Smell it”

I coaxed him some more, bucking, writhing.

“Did you tempt them like this?” he asked. “Did they make you want it this much?”

He let go of my throat enough that I could speak. “No. They fucking didn’t.”

“I’m going to make you tell me all about it,” he said, and a distant little part of me wanted him to. That desperate little girl in me wanted to finally speak the truth and have it believed.

But no. No. “You won’t make me tell you. I’ll be taking my secrets to my grave, not giving them to a Morelli piece of shit.”

“Who did this to you, Elaine?” he asked, and even the question gave me a sick pang in my stomach. “Who were the dirty men who broke you?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I said. “Fuck you, Lucian.”

I could feel his cock, hard against me. It would have been so easy to fuck my tight little virgin hole, he was right.

Just a shame Lucian Morelli doesn’t take the easy road.

“This is going to hurt,” he told me, and pulled away enough to raise his hand.

My legs were still spread open wide when his palm landed hard on my pussy.

It hurt. It hurt enough that I clenched my thighs as tight as they would go and rolled over onto my side, but I was smiling. Somehow, I was smiling. Laughing.

“You’re fucked up,” he said, stating the obvious. “Seriously, you’ve got problems.”

I caught my breath enough to speak, pussy still hurting. “Yeah, well that makes two of us then, doesn’t it? Because I like being hurt. And you like hurting me.”

I had no real idea about the monster above me or who the hell or what the hell he really was. I had no real idea who I was, not with all my shattered pieces jarred together, and I didn’t want to know.

I didn’t want to know anything.

That’s when he pressed himself back down onto me, his breaths hot on my face. “I loved pulling the wings from

butterflies when I was a boy,” he said. “I’ll enjoy pulling yours from you.”

“I’m not a butterfly,” I told him. “I’m a caterpillar in a cocoon who’s never been free, rotting from the inside.”

“*I’m* rotten from the inside,” he whispered, then licked his tongue flat and wet up my cheek.

I felt him shuffling, and I knew what was coming. He was going to do it, positioning himself between my legs just right. Holy shit, my clit was still hurting from his slap.

His fingers squirmed against my panties, tugging them to the side. I heard him unbuckle his pants, shuffling some more to pull them down.

Lucian Morelli’s hips were bare against mine. His cock was hot and hard. He was going to do it...Lucian Morelli was going to take my virginity...

“Yes...” I managed to gasp. “Do it...be the man who truly makes me his...”

“You’re mine, Elaine Constantine,” he snarled. “Believe me, I’ll be the man who truly makes you his. I own every dirty little scrap of your soul.”

I braced myself. I held my breath. My body was ready. Ready. Ready.

Yes...

But no.

Just like that, the moment was shattered by the blaring ring of his phone from the other room.

He paused, bracing himself, staring down at me like I was a piece of meat he was ready to butcher.

It was clearly someone important to be calling Lucian Morelli at midnight on his personal phone.

It seems he came to the same conclusion.

“Stay still for me,” he said and raised himself back up.

He pulled up his pants and headed away. My breaths were ragged as I watched him leave.

Predictably, I didn't stay still. I got to my feet and inched closer to the doorway, stepping up to the hall. I could hear him pacing around in the other room, barking out one side of a conversation.

“What the fuck? Now? It can wait until morning. I mean it, Alto. It can wait until morning...”

The front door stood tall before me. I guess it was basic human instinct that wanted me to make a dash for it. I nearly did it. I nearly opened that door and ran.

I heard Lucian curse as he stomped his way back down the hall. He looked frustrated, raging at something that wasn't a Constantine. Wow. It was a bizarre phenomenon.

“I need to go,” he told me.

My breath caught as the potential reality truly dawned. I was spared. For a while, at least.

He led the way upstairs without so much as a look behind him. I was still hovering at the bottom of the staircase when he shot me an aggravated stare.

“One of the most basic fundamentals of being a servant is following the fucking master,” he barked, and for once his rage was spitting in a way that wasn't at me.

“I'm not your servant.”

“Oh, that's right. You're my little doll. I take you out to play with you. And then I put you away when I'm done. Now go inside your little box.”

I didn't bother arguing with him, not this time, just followed him upstairs meekly with barely more than a scowl.

There was no point in arguing.

He was holding the door open at the far end of the landing. Inside was a room with a bed and a bedside table and very little else.

I already knew the door had a lock on it when I stepped over the threshold. I already knew this was going to be my prison until he showed up again as he set me in his evil stare one more time.

“Enjoy your box,” he told me, then left me in the dark.

I heard the key in the lock.

Being alone in this room scared me just as much as he did.

Once his footsteps had left me behind, I finally let myself cry.



CHAPTER SIX

Lucian

I LOVED DRIVING, but it rarely happened anymore. I was always too busy, with drivers waiting on my command. It was a surreal thing to start my car from the garage and head back into New York City. The world was usually a blur of city life to me outside the windows, removed from my engagement, but not tonight. Tonight I was amongst it, senses tuned in to the thrill.

Alto was waiting for me at my penthouse. I pulled into the underground parking lot and headed right on up to level thirty-two, giving my nod to security on level thirty-one via the security cameras in the elevator.

Alto raised his eyebrows as I met him at the doorway.

I opened the door and stepped in, not looking back as I stepped on through to the lounge and the glow of the city lights through the windows. “What the fuck is so important that you want to see me at half one in the morning?”

“News. I didn’t want to tell you on your phone, but there’s been some pretty crazy shit going down. About Elaine Constantine.”

I turned to face him, keeping my expression deadpan. “News?”

I waited for the tornado of accusations and questions, but they didn’t come.

“Yeah. The Power brothers. Looks like they’ve taken her. Shit’s going down.”

“The Power brothers?”

“Fucked up, huh? I mean, people were saying they were gonna make her pay, but nobody really believed it, you know? Apparently, her mother’s making threats. There’s going to be a war if we’re not careful.”

Oh the thrill. I could feel it in my veins, my filthy love of the battle about to go down between our families. Surely the Power brothers couldn’t be sitting back and taking that kind of accusation. I looked back out at the city lights. “How do they know it was the Power brothers?”

“Don’t know,” he said. “I’ve got feelers out for the details.”

“You seriously dragged me back here after midnight just to tell me that the Power brothers have grabbed Elaine Constantine from her apartment? It could have waited until morning.”

“Thought it was pretty major news. You’ve been hunting her down like some kind of stalker. Thought you’d want in on the action as it happened.” His mind worked as he stared up at me.

“If that’s all, you can fuck off,” I told him and gestured him away.

“Your dad already spoke to me,” he told me without moving. “He’s very interested to know what’s going on with Elaine Constantine. More interested than you are, it seems.”

The thought flared in me. Of course he would have been interested—trying to rule me out of the Constantine bullshit no doubt. “What did you tell him?”

“Same as I told you. Not a lot, just that the Power brothers have taken her.” His mind was still ticking. I could almost fucking hear it.

“Good for you,” I said. “I’m sure he’s grateful for your double-crossing.” My sarcasm was laced with spite. Spite

Trenton Alto was well used to, having been my fixer for twelve years.

“Double-crossing?” he asked. “Nah. It’s public knowledge on the street that she’s been taken. I didn’t tell him anything secret. Not who might have really kidnapped her.”

“And who would that be?”

He tipped his head, thinking, thinking. “How did you know they took her from her apartment?”

“What?”

“You said the Power brothers grabbed Elaine Constantine from her apartment. They could have taken her from anywhere. How did you know where they took her from?”

I kept my eyes cool and calm. “A lucky guess.”

He didn’t believe me. He knew me too well for that. Once again I realized I should have killed the fucker a long time ago. His knowledge was my weakness. “She’s rarely there,” he said. “One hell of a lucky guess, ain’t it?”

“If you have something to say to me, then say it.”

I stared at my fixer, so much shorter than me with his tough little scowl. I could kill him and be done with it, but I didn’t. It seems that every single one of us has our idiocies. Mine was a selfish desire to keep Alto alive to serve me.

He gestured to my suit. “Lucian Morelli, out for the night, knows Elaine Constantine has been snatched from her apartment...some people might ask questions.”

“Not people who had any sense in them.”

He held up his hands. “Sure thing, Lucian. Sure thing. Just saying. People will be asking a lot of questions about Elaine Constantine and what the fuck happened to her.”

“You’d better keep me informed of them. Me before my father. He can wait in line for the news.”

“You before Bryant. I’ll be back with news as soon as I get it.” He saw himself out without even an attempt at a goodbye. No point making niceties with a bastard like me.

He’d learnt that well enough over the last decade.

It was unlike me to feel any sense of relief or nervousness. It was unlike me to feel *anything* in my psychopathic mind. Feelings were a novelty. Still, I felt them both in that moment. A clash that had my insides tense.

I should’ve learnt from my own bullshit and the chaos about to kick off in the world around me. I should’ve taken over Morelli Holdings and left her to die. But I didn’t.

Fuck that temptress and her filthy fucking ways, but I didn’t.

I barely gave Alto any time to leave the complex before I was straight back down to the parking lot and slipping back into my car. Elaine Constantine was going to get me at my best.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Elaine

THE DARKNESS HAD me wrapped up tight. The light wasn't working overhead. There was a bed in the room, but I didn't want to use it. I was pressed up against the wall opposite the door with my arms around my knees, hugging myself tight.

So many nights I'd been scared in the darkness staring at a locked door. Waiting. Waiting for people. *Men*.

Now I was waiting for one man. Was he really a man? Or was he a monster?

It was hard to tell them apart sometimes.

I was thirsty and cold. Alone.

I was the broken girl I'd been running away from for years, only now I had no cocaine or alcohol to help me escape her. Fuck, I needed it. I needed the escape.

The irony was that no one would think to look for me, not in Lucian Morelli's home. They would check my apartment. Then ask Tristan. He would worry about me. No one would connect me with Lucian Morelli, and even if they did, no one had enough power to compel a search warrant for his home. It was both an obvious and a perfect place to stash a captive. Like hiding the incriminating letters in plain sight.

I really was at Lucian Morelli's mercy now. He could leave me here to shrivel and die and nobody would ever know it. As much as I wanted to be dead, the thought of dying like that was enough to bring tears to my eyes. Please God, don't let Lucian Morelli be that evil.

Even Lucian Morelli couldn't be that evil.

Only he *could* be. Lucian Morelli could be the most evil monster I'd ever known.

I nearly cried with relief when I heard a car pull up the driveway and into the garage. I rushed up to the window but couldn't see anything, just pitch black outside. Nothing until the porch light came on and lit up the figure heading up to the front door.

I stepped back and pressed myself up against the wall, braced and ready. The front door slammed downstairs, and I heard footsteps. I heard movement.

It was him. I knew it was him.

I don't know whether I was more scared or more relieved as I waited for his entry. Only it didn't come. Nothing came.

More movement sounded downstairs but still nothing. Still no footsteps on the stairs.

It felt like I was waiting a lifetime, standing there with my heart thumping hard. When his footsteps finally did sound out on the stairs, I was almost grateful he was coming. Anything would be better than fading away alone.

The key was heavy in the lock. The door swung open slow and steady, and there he was. The huge frame of him was lit up by the light from downstairs.

He didn't speak to me, just stood there, leaning against the frame, even more sinister in his ease.

I didn't speak to him, because my throat was dry and I didn't know what the hell to say.

"It's late," he told me. "I don't have time for disobedience. And I sure as hell don't have the patience. Punishment will be severe if it's required."

I nodded, and he stepped back onto the landing, heading downstairs. My legs felt like jelly as I followed him. I really did feel like the little doll he expected me to be.

He was in the kitchen when I joined him. My eyes were blinking against the harshness of the light as they focused on the man before me. Yeah, he was Lucian Morelli at his finest. He was beautiful enough to take my breath away.

I didn't want to ask him for anything just in case that provoked him to deny it. I forced myself to stand there, waiting and hoping.

As it turns out, the monster had at least a sliver of kindness in his bones.

He handed me a mineral water, and I gulped it down in one.

"Thanks," I said, more bothered about basic necessities than the fact I was naked in some gleaming kitchen in front of a man who wanted to kill me.

I had no idea what time it was, but I knew it was late. The monster actually looked tired. Maybe even a little resigned. I'd never imagined seeing him like this.

He always looked so immortal.

I found my voice. "Guess something pretty urgent dragged you away."

"Not your business," he said back, deadpan.

We had another minute of silence. Heavy.

I wondered what he was planning on doing to me. Whether he'd make the pain harsh and hard, or slow and sensual. Maybe both.

I wondered whether he would finally get around to taking my virginity, and whether it would be as good as my fantasies promised before he tore me apart.

"Did you miss me?" he asked, his voice almost soft. Musical.

"No." But I was cold enough that my nipples were hard. His stare almost heated them as he looked me up and down.

My thighs clenched tight together. He noticed. He could see plenty.

“I’m bored,” he told me. “Time for you to entertain me.”

I shrugged. “I’m bored too. Maybe it’s time for you to entertain me right back.”

I was coming to know his evil smirk so well. It made me shiver. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’ll be entertained.”

He gestured through to the hallway, and I didn’t argue. I stepped out ahead of him, turning instinctively into the lounge.

I didn’t realize how close behind me he was until he pressed up against me and wrapped his arm around my neck.

“I want your pain, little doll.”

I knew what was coming when he forced me down over the arm of the couch and took his belt from his pants. I didn’t need to look at him behind me. I’d been in this position plenty of times before...waiting for the belt...the pain...the punishment.

I yelled out the hurt as the first lash landed, right across my ass cheeks.

He was skilled enough that he hit the same spot twice. Then three times. Then four.

I was skilled enough at taking it that my skin began to burn in the most amazing of ways, hips rocking as the pain morphed and turned into the strangest of pleasures.

Release.

It was release.

“This is your punishment for being disrespectful earlier,” he told me, and I didn’t protest, just took it. “You’re going to have to learn to watch that pretty little mouth of yours.”

Five. Six. Seven.

I was gasping, crying out with every lash.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

Tingling.

Eleven. Twelve.

Hurting.

Yes. I was hurting.

I wanted to be hurting.

I needed to be hurting.

I was still rocking from the pain when Lucian Morelli's thumb plunged deep inside my asshole, so dry and tight it hurt like hell. I cried out over and over again. He pulled out and circled my asshole. And then he fucked me with it, rough enough that I whimpered.

He replaced the belt with his palm, slapping me fast. The slaps were loud in the room, masking my cries. I felt like his doll now.

I was his doll now.

My breaths were gasping when he twisted me over and forced me onto my knees. His cock was waiting, my mouth was open.

I sucked Lucian Morelli's cock, staring up at him with wide eyes as he forced his way deep. He choked me, and I took it like a good girl. He made me retch over and over, but it didn't stop me from sucking him.

"Someone's taught you well," he said with a grunt.

He was right on that. I'd been taught well. Only it wasn't someone who'd taught me, it was many. I'd had many cocks forced down my throat in my life.

I felt the throbbing in his cock and knew what was coming.

He pulled out of my mouth and worked his length above me, and I opened my mouth.

The first spurt of cum landed across my face. The rest was a perfect stream on my tongue. I didn't swallow, just stared up at him as he caught his breath.

That's when he saw them...my fingers between my legs.

"You're a horny little doll, aren't you, Elaine?"

I didn't stop rubbing my clit. My mouth was still open with his cum glistening on my tongue, and I rubbed my clit so fast I shuddered.

My ass was on fire, my nipples were straining, and my clit lit up like a flare, sparking.

I came on my knees with my monster's cum across my tongue, and he watched me. He watched me with his dark, evil eyes.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Lucian

I DIDN'T SLEEP, just sat and watched the girl curled up naked on the couch. She was dreaming, exhausted. She was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen.

Just a shame she was a fucking Constantine.

I knew the city would shake as the war over Elaine began. Constantines against the Power brothers would be quite a spectacle. I'd be an avid spectator.

Just so long as they didn't find out the kidnapper was me.

Then it would bring the Constantine wrath down on my family. I wasn't worried about myself, but my mother and sisters would be in danger. I could walk away from Morelli Holdings...maybe. But I couldn't live with myself if I brought actual harm to my family.

The sun was rising through the window when my phone started its usual round of bleeps and pings for the day. The Morelli empire was already awake, deals and trades galore springing up for their usual rounds. And for once in my life I wasn't among them.

I wasn't emailing or calling or reading papers in manila folders.

It was a strange and foreign peace.

It was light outside when I finally moved from my seat. The coffee machine was live and active when my little doll presented herself in the kitchen doorway.

She was scared and tired, a beautiful combination.

She didn't bother to ask for a coffee. No doubt she knew better than that.

I made myself one as she watched me, the sadistic part of me set to enjoy her thirst as she watched me drinking mine. I felt insane as I realized the sadistic part of me wasn't winning the battle. I already had a mug out for my little doll before I stopped myself. Fuck it. I made her one anyway. I didn't give her options, just handed one over, black, to match mine.

"Thanks," she said, and flashed me a rare, meek smile.

Fuck. She was such a natural temptress. "Turn around," I said.

She looked at me blankly before she realized what I wanted to see. She turned her back to me, her ass so beautifully marked, faint lines of bruising.

The sight made my cock twitch. I stepped up to her just as she was raising her coffee mug to her lips. My hot breath on her neck made her shudder.

"I'm going back to the city," I told her, like she deserved an explanation. "Don't even think about trying to escape this place. You'll get nowhere. I'm locking you up tight, and even if you did get out, I'm barely a few minutes from wiping out that friend of yours. You'd never save him in time."

She turned to me and pulled a scowl. "Yeah, I know. I do have a brain you know. You don't need to keep pointing out the obvious every thirty seconds."

My hand was on her tit in a flash, squeezing hard. "Are you going to behave yourself?"

She winced as I twisted her flesh. "That depends on what *behave myself* means."

I didn't actually know what behave meant in that instance. Part of me wanted her tied up naked to the bedframe upstairs, another part wanted to think of her drifting around the place, curious and needy. "I'm going to have so much fun leaving

bruises on you,” I told her, letting go of her flesh and hating how I was telling myself just as much as her. “I love to make you cry, because it’s like I can feel something through you.”

She stared at me. “You’re absolutely fucking insane.”

That made me smirk, and it made her smirk back.

I straightened myself up in the hallway mirror before taking my keys from the table. Elaine was sassy as she stood in front of me, hand on hip as she flashed me a grin despite the fresh marks on her tit. “Enjoy your day at the office, *honey*.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” I told her, then stepped outside.

I’d make her pay for that later.



CHAPTER NINE

Elaine

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN a sneak as well as a liar.

Curious, my mother used to say, before she hated me. I would wander around the family home like a little wisp, exploring places when other people weren't looking.

I found my sister Vivian's diary under her bed when she was fifteen. I read about her crush on Roberto Henley from drama group and how he'd grope her after class. I read how she'd talk about naughty things with Rachel Weston at their sleepovers and how they'd plan who they would marry one day. I crept into my mom's room once and found she had... things in her bedside table drawer. I went through Tinsley's makeup collection and found she'd *borrowed* some of Mom's secret toys.

When Lucian left for a few hours to get supplies, it was time to assuage my curiosity.

I scoped the place out a little when I was sure he'd be well on the road back into New York City. I checked the external doors first. Both locked. Then the windows. Every window had a lock on it. Of course, I could have found something to smash my way through. But I didn't. I stared out of the window, checking out the shadows in the distance.

I felt like an invader as I made my way upstairs. I kept to the edge of the black metal staircase on tiptoes, like some kind of criminal. It didn't make a tiny bit of sense since the owner knew full well I'd be snooping my way around.

The landing made a creak that sounded loud. My room, or my *box* as Lucian put it, was small and dark, even with the daylight shining in. The bathroom was nice, but also small. There were barely any toiletries in the shower unit—just an expensive body wash and shampoo. I was surprised when I opened the mirrored cupboard above the sink. One solitary toothbrush and toothpaste in the holder. It was more casual than I was expecting, propped there neatly.

It was weird to think of it being in Lucian's mouth. It was weird to think of Lucian using it in his mouth. I couldn't imagine it—the Morelli monster doing something so basic.

The woman in me wanted to overstep my boundaries in this space when he wasn't looking, so I did it. I took Lucian Morelli's toothbrush and ran my tongue over the bristles. It gave me strange shivers. *Naughty*. It felt a lot less naughty when I used his toothbrush for what it was intended for, then stepped into the shower. The heat was a beautiful relief.

There was a towel over the rack. I wrapped myself up in it snug then headed back out onto the landing. I knew what was waiting for me—the ultimate for a curious girl like me.

Lucian Morelli's door was the one at the far end. Even his door felt more sinister somehow. More imposing.

It wasn't locked.

Perhaps that made him a fool, but it wasn't locked.

His bed was huge in the space. His wardrobe was plain wood but stocked at odds with the rest of the place. It was brimming with clothes, suits that looked insane against such a mediocre backdrop. They smelled of him. Grand. Imposing.

He had an old leather watch in his bedside drawer with some initials on the strap. His handwriting was cursive but masculine, almost calligraphic. It suited him. His pen was fountain and jet black. I scrawled a sample of the ink across my hand. I used to love writing when I was a little girl. At least the handwriting told me something about the man, because the text didn't. They were stock abbreviations and

numbers, scribbled graphs, aborted sentences. It was the shorthand of a very intelligent, very calculating mind.

I felt bizarrely at home in Lucian's bedroom. I guess because it felt like a home, even in its sparse decor. I wondered just how much time he really spent here and whether anyone knew he ever came. I doubted that somehow.

I didn't put my panties or my dress back on from the night before.

Instead I pulled one of Lucian's designer shirts from the hanger. The black richness made me look pale in the mirror when I slipped it on. I liked wearing his shirt; it felt private. I felt close to him in the most mundane of ways. That felt bizarrely close—closer than I'd ever have imagined. In some ways even closer than having his cock in my ass or his breath in my face.

I wondered when I'd see him again. The thought was both terrifying and exciting, a combination I was fast becoming accustomed to. People adapt quickly, don't they?

I helped myself to some soup, it's far from a fancy restaurant up in Maine. I made myself a coffee and settled down to a mindless show on the sleek TV that rolled down from the ceiling. I couldn't focus on it. I was on hyper-alert, heart racing at the thought of a car pulling up in the driveway.

When a car did pull up in the driveway, I leapt up from my seat, a wreck as the nerves ate me up alive.

The monster was silent as he stepped inside and cast his eyes on me. His eyes were as dark as I'd ever seen them. His jaw was as firm as I'd ever known. It was barely dark outside, so he must have come straight here, perhaps leaving before the customary five o'clock. Surprising. I'm sure my expression must have told him so.

“Enjoying my shirt, are you? Taking liberties already.”

I ran my hands down the fabric as he watched me. “Better than an unwashed dress, thank you very much. Some liberties

are there to be taken.” I paused, holding my hands on my hips. “Did you expect me to wander around naked all day?”

His answer was simple and straight. “Yes.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. “Sure thing, right. Think this is a fairy tale?”

His smirk was right back. “Hardly. There’s no happy ever after here. More like a tragedy. You’re the innocent girl who falls victim to the monster in human form.”

“A monster who has a decent body wash in his shower at least. Thank you.”

He was on the edge of laughing. I could see it. He didn’t. He cast his jacket on the sofa and headed to the kitchen. I followed him in time to see him flick on the coffee machine. I hoped I’d get one. Manners, at least before he fucked me up for his pleasure.

I felt strangely human in his presence, which was ridiculous given that he was the greatest enemy I’d ever known, right from the day I was born.

“Show me your ass,” he told me. “I want to see the marks.”

I spun for him and lifted the shirt, and then my cheeky side found its strength some more. I shook my butt for him, shooting him a glance over my shoulder.

He was on me in seconds, arm around my throat as he slapped me hard on the ass. “There’s a very fine line between a girl who finds her voice to amuse me and one who is asking for a fucking beating, Elaine.”

I knew that. I managed to nod, and he dropped me.

My cheeky side shriveled to nothing as he returned to the coffee machine. This man was going to be the end of me, I needed to remember that. His amusement was nothing to me. *He* was nothing to me. Lucian Morelli was fuck all to my Constantine soul, he never would be. Not in the rest of my sorry lifetime.

“Get on your knees,” he said.



CHAPTER TEN

Lucian

THE LITTLE DOLL on the floor transfixed me.

Her blue eyes were pools, deep with their secrets. The different shades of her butterfly beauty were siren calls, even in the sterile surroundings. She seemed at home here, even more than she'd seemed at home in opulence. It shouldn't have surprised me.

She was even more beautiful from that angle, staring up at me. I stepped up close enough to enjoy it. "Take my shirt off. Now."

Her fingers fumbled, impudence forgotten. She was visibly nervous.

I wanted to see her slip her hand between her thighs again without permission, but she didn't. She was silent and still. "You're lucky you're so pretty," I told her.

She stayed silent. It frustrated me how much I wanted her attitude. Because I did. Part of me wanted her attitude. Part of me even *liked* it. Disgusting.

I punished her for it, dragging her up to her feet and slamming her down onto the counter, her tits pressed tight to the wood. I reached into the drawer and pulled out the metal spatula. I ran it up her thighs, teasing her before striking.

She whimpered. I loved her pain.

I made her squeal again and again and again. I yanked her head back by her silky blonde curls, hungry to see tears

streaming down her pretty cheeks, but there were none. She wasn't crying.

"I'll make you sob for me," I snarled, but she smiled.

"Don't count on it, sir." Her smile wasn't rude. It was genuine. It lit up the pain in her eyes.

I knew it. She was a masochist as desperate for my wrath as she was for my mercy.

My cock was a beast in my pants, lost to the siren even more than the rest of me.

Her virginity was the biggest temptation of all, there for the taking. I was used to taking whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it. I had been since I was a young boy learning from his father. I always clicked my fingers and got whatever I summoned. I cast my eyes on anything I desired and it arrived at my feet. People, possessions, places. So why didn't I take her?

Why hadn't I taken her tight little pussy yet?

Fuck knows.

I hit her some more, and she moved with me, rocking those hips as she gasped. The endorphins flooded her—I could sense it. Gasps turned to moans, taking it. Wanting it.

She wanted it. Elaine Constantine wanted me to hurt her.

I forced her thighs apart and curled my fingers around to her pussy. Her clit was a toy in my grip. I twisted. It hurt to a whole different tune.

I wondered what it felt like.

I wondered what her ass felt like, already reddening in a beautiful shade.

"I know you like it," I told her.

I turned her to face me, giving her no warning before I slapped her tits hard enough to make her bite her lip and whimper. I loved the way they pinked.

“The men who played with you, did they teach you to be a true little masochist?”

She didn't answer, just stared.

“I asked you a question,” I said. “The men who played with you, did they teach you to be a true masochist?”

“I'm not talking about it,” she whispered. “I don't tell my secrets.”

I twisted her tits, so rough she cried out.

Under normal circumstances, I would've taken what I wanted and hurt her until she spat those secrets right out at me, but there was a strange desire in me.

Something I hadn't felt before.

I didn't want her spilling those secrets when I was beating her so bad she couldn't resist me. I wanted her whispering in the darkness with tears streaming down her cheeks, broken right down to the soul. I wanted her whispering her secrets like a good girl because she wanted to. Right to the core of her. Because she wanted to whisper them to *me*.

My brain was fucking me up, and I knew it. Sirens drown sailors for a fucking reason.

“You'll pay for your denial,” I growled, and I meant it.

She knew it. She arched her back, presenting those perfect tits for more punishment.

She got it. Twists and slaps that had her eyes closed tight, struggling not to buckle and cry. Her struggling worked. She was resilient.

I guess she'd learnt to be. I guess they taught her to be. The thought of men teaching her to be resilient both enraged me and excited me in one, and always had done...only now the balance was shifting. Slowly, it was shifting. The rage was rising like venom behind my eyes.

“Please, Lucian, will you fuck me?” she asked. “Please fuck me.”

I forced her onto her knees so hard she cried out. “I’ll fuck your impudent little mouth until you vomit on my cock,” I snarled. “I’ll fuck your throat until you’re nothing but a gasping little wreck on the floor. Is that what you want? That’s what you’re going to get.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elaine

I'VE NEVER HAD much praise for being a good girl.

My father was nice enough, but he rarely had time for me.

My mother was cold, always focusing on criticism.

My sisters were better behaved than me. I was the black sheep.

I blamed myself for all the dirty attention I got. *You've been bad*, they used to tell me, *take your punishment like a good girl*. Maybe even from a young age, I believed them. Maybe they knew I would. *Maybe, maybe, maybe*. None of that mattered anymore.

I guess that's why I was proud that Lucian Morelli wanted me to suck his cock. He might hate me, but he didn't hate the way I flicked my tongue so perfectly up and down the length of him. His curses under his breath were anything but full of rage, and his fingers in my hair were desperate and not full of spite.

Yes, I was proud. I was proud of being such a good girl at sucking cock.

My tits were still hurting, but there was a tenderness about them that lit me up all the way through my body. My ass was still smarting, but that didn't make a difference to how good my clit was feeling as I stared up at the monster and how much he was enjoying my throat.

I should hate every single vein in his body, retching at the Morelli name as much as I was retching with his thrusts. But I wasn't hating it. I was tingling so hard I couldn't stop it.

"Take it," he growled, and I knew exactly what he wanted.

I opened my mouth nice and wide and stared up at him. Only this time he didn't give me his cum in my mouth. He wrenched my head back and spurted his load over my pinked tits, splattering them in thick cream.

He looked for long moments before casting me down onto my back. "Don't even think of hiding yourself," he told me. "You'll keep those filthy tits on display as long as I want them."

I didn't bother arguing, just remained kneeling as his cum cooled on my heated skin.

Lucian Morelli surprised me in no time as he got himself busy in the refrigerator. I was still gazing up at him as he assembled cheeses and salami and pasta from the cupboard. The beast of the Morelli family was preparing food. I'd never have pictured the beast of the Morelli family making food.

He must have caught sight of my shock.

"Don't be dumb and think this is kindness on my part. If I trusted you for a second to make me anything even vaguely passable, I'd be using you as my chef as well as my sex doll."

"I can cook spaghetti," I scoffed, offended. "And grilled cheese."

He didn't punish me for my attitude, not this time. Strangely I supposed we were getting used to each other somehow—two mortal enemies holed up in a small space who didn't seem to be all that different in many ways, despite our world of opposites.

He didn't protest when I got to my feet, cum still splattered thick on my tits. I propped against the counter, watching him. His hands were surprisingly skilled with the meal preparation, and I knew even more of his familiarity in the space by the

way he was so at ease with the kitchen. Not only could Lucian Morelli cook a meal, but he seemed to be plenty accustomed to it. Definitely more accustomed to it than I was. He was right on that front.

“You’d better be grateful and eat what’s put in front of you,” he told me. “I’m feeding you to keep that body of yours fit for my playtime, not because I give a fuck about your hunger.”

A tiny part of me didn’t believe him. That tiny part of me was probably a fool, but I didn’t believe him. He wasn’t just feeding my body, he was feeding me, too.

It didn’t take him long to spoon pasta into a bowl and hand it over. He stalked on through to the dining room and set himself down at the table. I didn’t say a word as I sat down alongside him and picked at the meal with my fork. It was good, actually.

The monster could cook.

I couldn’t hold back my sarcasm, not giving a fuck for how my ass was throbbing against the wood of my chair. “So, how was your day, sweetheart?” I asked him with a sarcastic tone.

He shot me a glare that made my heart leap. “It was made all the better for hearing about the wreck your disappearance has caused. Your family’s going to war with the Power brothers. I can’t wait to see the bloodshed and the pain when they truly come to battle.”

I got a flutter in my chest. Guilt as well as curiosity. Why would my family go to war with the Power brothers? My mother had already refused to bail me out. Then again, maybe it was for show. A thing about Constantine pride. I never understood pride.

“Everyone seems convinced it’s the Power brothers. I suppose your deep, dark secrets of a large debt weren’t exactly secret.”

If only he knew.

If only he knew just how many secrets naughty little Elaine really kept from the world.

I didn't say a word about them, just used the opportunity for more criticism.

“You won't be so cocky when the world comes to realize just what you've done here. Even your own family will destroy you. There's no way Bryant Morelli is going to tolerate you being with me.”

“You know fuck all about the Morelli family.”

In that moment, I came to regret just how my frantic action to point the finger at the Power brothers saved the monster's skin, at least for the time being.

I only hoped he'd never find out before they killed him. That, or before he killed me.

I'd never want to handle that shame and embarrassment in front of him, to have to explain why I saved him instead of turning him over to my family's wrath.

“Push the fucking boundaries all you like. I'll make you suffer for all of them. But believe me, you choose to use your pretty little tongue against the Morelli name, and I'll cut the snark right out of you.”

I shut my mouth with a nod and carried on eating, but Lucian Morelli was lying to himself. There's no way he'd cut my tongue from my mouth before he killed me—not when it played his cock so well. His defense of the Morelli family name felt different this time. More strained. As if he had bigger priorities than a feud that had consumed our families for decades.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Lucian

ELAINÉ WAS SHAKY as I forced her into her box that night. She was still naked, with those sweet tits on display. She was the perfect doll. She shot me a look from inside the room, big eyes fixing on mine with a *please* she didn't say. *Please don't leave me here.*

She didn't want to be alone.

Part of me didn't want to leave her alone. I wanted her next to me, subject to my every whim, whenever I wanted it. Still, I couldn't share a bed with a Constantine. Or with my little doll. I couldn't stoop that low, even by my current standards of jackass insanity.

"Make sure you sleep," I told her. "I want that body perfect for me tomorrow."

She didn't reply, and no doubt the exhaustion won out in her. She slipped into bed and pulled the covers up high. She curled into a fetal position before I closed the door on her, and it was...strange. It gave me a weird feeling I couldn't place. Almost like pain.

I shut the door firmly and headed away.

My bed was a large floating structure in the center of a large bedroom. I wanted Elaine to entertain me, but instead I made plans for her. Plans to hurt, stretch, push to the ultimate limit, and I jerked off to the thrill of all the good things to come.

Sleep found me then, as always, it found me.

Elaine was already awake when I set foot outside my room, showered and dressed the next morning. She was in the kitchen making herself a coffee like she owned the damn place. It gave me another one of those weird pricks of a feeling to see she had another mug waiting on the counter, ready to pour. One for me.

“Uncomfortable bed?” I asked her. “Be grateful I gave you one at all.”

“Most beds are uncomfortable to me,” she said, “I’ve had a lifetime of bad experiences, staring at the door, scared of who’s going to come in and climb on my bed.”

“I’ll be the one climbing on your damn bed.”

She cast a glance at my suit and the keys already in my hand. “Heading into the office? Should I be a good 1950s wife and cook green bean casserole while you’re gone?”

“No, sweetheart. You’re my little doll. And good little dolls move their limbs back and forth, they brush their hair, they shave the hair from their bodies so they’re smooth and ready.”

“Gross.” She poured me a coffee and held it out to me. “At least drink this before you hit the road. You hardly want to be driving without any caffeine in you.”

I stared at her puzzled, nothing short of shocked, because it couldn’t possibly...it couldn’t possibly be Elaine Constantine *caring*.

She seemed to register my confusion; it hit her as strangely as it hit me. Her justification was instant.

“It’s about your body, not you,” she said. “What’s going to happen to me if you get in a car crash and don’t come back? I’ll starve after a while. Fuck you, by the way.”

She went to take the coffee back, but I grabbed it from her. I’d been raised with solid manners, and they couldn’t hold back. The words were out of me before I could stop them. “Thank you.”

Elaine was taken aback by that too. I knew she was fighting the response, but we couldn't stop it. Even in our hate, we couldn't stop it. "You're welcome," she said with another shrug, then added the obligatory, "You're welcome, asshole."

"Have you any damn idea how ridiculously immature you sound when you use that term?" I asked her. "You sound like a rebellious child." I downed my coffee. She'd done a good job of it.

"I'll be wearing one of your shirts today," she told me. "You can punish me for it when you get home all you want, but I'll still be wearing it."

There it was again, another ridiculous statement. *Home*. When you get *home*.

"When you get *back*," she followed up, but it was too late.

"This isn't my fucking *home*," I said. "It's a dungeon where I'm torturing you until you scream. Don't for a second think I'm *home* here."

"Torturing me until I scream? That's all? What about blood and despair? What about torturing me until I black out? Don't tell me you're going soft in your old age." She lifted her smirking jaw to me. My free hand shot to her exposed throat and fucking squeezed.

"Maybe you don't deserve to black out."

"Do it," she choked out.

I let go of her throat and forced my fingers into her gasping mouth, shunted her backwards as she gargled her own spit and retched against me. Retched until it ran down her nostrils and her eyes watered as I twisted my fingers into her throat.

When I pulled my hand free, she doubled over, gasping as her drool puddled on the floor.

"Get that shit cleaned up before I get back," I told her, only just resisting the urge to fuck her up some more.

“Whatever,” she said as I walked away and caught sight of the time on the clock above the counter, her voice hoarse.

Fucking hell, I was later than even I’d expected.

I was never late...not before Elaine Constantine became my little doll.

The car was waiting in the garage and so was the road ahead, all damn sixty minutes of it.

I knew what was looming—Seamus and Duncan and their lowlife attempts at kissing Father’s backside. They could go fuck themselves.

Sure enough they were hovering when I arrived in my office at Morelli Holdings. Seamus was on his phone trying to sound as slick and professional as possible, and Duncan was flicking through paperwork he had no right to be flicking through. I snatched it from him as soon as I was in reaching distance.

“Get the fuck out of my office.”

The man had the audacity to laugh at me. “It’s not your office. It’s your *daddy’s*. He knows we’re here this morning. He also knows you weren’t.”

Fuck’s sake.

“I’ll be handling my father,” I told them both with a snarl. “Believe me, you have no place here, and you’ll be getting the fuck out of my building.”

It was Seamus who laughed this time, dropping his phone onto my desk.

“You’d better go handle him then, shouldn’t you? He’s downstairs on floor nine.” He tutted like a prick. “Believe *me*, he’s not a happy daddy this morning.”

Somehow I knew the assholes were telling the goddamn truth and it was a ball ache. Under any normal circumstances I would’ve put it down to my own fucking around in Bishop’s

Landing and not at Holdings where I belonged. And nothing else. My fucking bad.

My gut knew a whole lot more than that when I headed downstairs to floor nine, though. My gut had more sense than my goddamn fucking brain. Father's presence in the office wasn't just about fucking around in Bishop's Landing and slacking at Holdings—this was about Elaine fucking Constantine. I knew it in my veins. The whole world was going Elaine Constantine crazy, not just me. I'd heard it all over the news on the way in.

Kidnapped. Somehow the whole damn world knew she'd been kidnapped.

I arrived on floor nine, and I almost regretted taking her from her sorry apartment in the first place. I almost wished I would've left her to the Power brothers and her own pitiful family to fuck up, that or kill herself and save everyone else the bother.

Almost. Jesus Christ, I only registered my thoughts as I stepped into the meeting room. *Almost* wished I'd left her? What the fuck was happening to me?

One thing was for sure, Father would be damned certain he was going to find out.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elaine

TURNING ON THE TV in the morning and seeing your face staring out at you from every channel is a weird experience— weird enough to make you jump from your seat. There I was, staring out at me from the screen in Lucian Morelli's countryside shack, featuring on every news broadcast.

Elaine Constantine kidnapped!

How the hell did the news stations know I'd been kidnapped?

Wow, I was getting good coverage. It was official, I'd been kidnapped. Hello there, media shitstorm. The police were involved. If only they knew I was kidnapped by a Morelli, news would reach a whole new stratosphere.

People were speculating on every station, talking about sicko freaks in the world who may have taken me. That's when it was getting crazy. There were random people talking about how they'd seen me places—dingy nightclubs alongside Tristan. *Fuck.*

Maybe they might start talking about Lucian being in those places too.

I almost enjoyed sitting on the couch in Lucian's shirt watching my drama unfold on the screen. It was bizarrely exciting somehow, feeling so important to the world outside.

Tinsley was there, crying and asking for anyone to give information. No doubt Mom had drafted her in to play the part of the heartbroken sister after a heinous kidnapping.

There was no mention of the Power brothers or my debt, at least in the media. But in the Constantine universe it was undoubtedly them who'd taken me. They'd have figured that out regardless, but not to the same extent as they would have done once they'd barged into my room that night and looked for the answers. I can't believe I really supported the fact that the Power brothers had taken me. I was embarrassed at the thought Lucian would find out about that...about the note... the note I'd...I'd scribbled...

Fuck.

I stepped away from the TV as I made myself a coffee and soup, feeling more at home in that smooth space than I ever felt in my own apartment. I wished in some ways that Lucian would just bail out on me for good and leave me to enjoy my life here without everyone around me. Hell, I was almost wishing I could stay *alive*, despite the constant regular shit of wanting my days to end I'd been carrying around with me for years.

But no.

No.

Lucian Morelli wasn't my friend. And this wasn't a sanctuary.

It was a clue as to just how fucked up my head was when I started looking at the clock, wondering when Lucian would be back, if at all. That broken girl in me was almost hoping he would come back soon and shove more than his fingers down her throat. That broken girl needed to hurt. Needed her damn punishment.

That broken girl was too messed up for a reason.

Lunchtime came and went slowly, and even the TV stations stopped holding my interest. Hearing about what a lovely girl I was on screen was a joke when I'd been hearing what a bad one I was for decades. I switched it off with a curse, and then I sat there, bored.

I tried again and watched another load of random speakers speculating where I was on the TV, and still I was bored.

That's when the boredom turned, just like it always did. Boredom turned into mind-wandering memories, and they turned dark quickly without cocaine or alcohol to numb me. Memories that chewed me up inside.

I could feel them brewing, just like always. Feel them reaching out at me from the pits of my own fucked-up soul, just like always.

I heard them, felt them, feared them.

No, please. I'll be a good girl. I promise I'll be a good girl.

Don't touch me again. Please, don't touch me like that. Don't make it hurt.

It hurts, Uncle Lionel, please don't let them in tonight. Please!

My desperate sense of desire drove me back to the kitchen. I opened the drawer with trembling fingers, knowing what was coming, knowing what I needed, knowing what I *always* needed.

The knives were sharp.

I picked the one Lucian had used so well for the salami the night before. I ran it over my thumb to check it, and it was good enough. Sharp enough. It would cut me just fine.

Dear Lord, if only those memories would fuck off and die instead of me. I sat down with my back to the cupboard, taking deep breaths as I prepared myself. There was no point denying the obvious, those memories kept on coming. Eating me up.

Please, don't touch me like that!

I nicked my thigh, just enough to feel the sting.

Please, Uncle Lionel, please. Don't let them!

The next cut was longer, deeper.

Please, no. No. Not there!

Blood. Enough blood that I could feel the release.

I'll be a good girl, just don't hurt me, please!

My thighs were dripping. The rush of pain and relief soothed me.

I'll be a good girl and put you in my mouth. I'll be a good girl and put my hand between my legs.

I tipped my head back against the cupboard and enjoyed the sensation. Fresh cuts on scars. Lucian would punish me for them, but I didn't care. I would welcome that punishment, remember my manners and thank him for it.

If only I was brave enough to slit my wrists and set myself free, but I wasn't. I'd never been brave enough to do that. If I would've been brave enough to do that I would've already been dead when Lucian Morelli came for me that night.

If only I'd been sane enough to want to damn Lucian Morelli to a hell of his own, then I'd never have left the note about the Power brothers on my kitchen counter.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lucian

ELAINE WAS A butterfly with wings of so many wonderful fucked-up colors they could blind a man if he looked too deep. I didn't understand her. I shouldn't want to.

She shouldn't transfix me.

I was back in the car like a man possessed before I could stop myself as the day reached its close, heading out alongside everyone with a regular day job, even though I'd already faced the wrath from my father.

“What the fuck is happening to you, Lucian? Why are you abandoning Holdings?”

Ironic, to get a call from my father.

He was worried. I could hear it in his voice. He liked to play the game. The power struggle. The coup. He enjoyed it, but he never thought I'd stop playing.

It was *his* truth to share with me that had my senses reeling beyond all recognition.

Elaine Constantine told her family directly that it was the Power brothers waiting for her outside. By letter. She told them by letter. A hand scrawled letter on her kitchen counter.

So I know you didn't do this. I'm relieved, because I know you had a...well, a fascination with her. But let me tell you, father to son, man to man, that you're better off without her. Forget her. Come back to the company. You won't be the CEO, but you were never going to win.

My course of action was clear and determined as I pulled up into my driveway at Bishop's Landing. I was going to find out what the fuck Elaine was thinking with that letter. I was going to take that sweet little virgin pussy of hers as mine while she confessed her secrets.

I was expecting a presentation of her usual impudence as soon as I stepped over the threshold, but she wasn't parading around the place. She wasn't in the hallway and she wasn't in the living room, even though the TV was still blaring out with her face on the screen. I had a flash of panic that she'd smashed a window and gotten away.

But she was in the kitchen, and the sight of her caught my breath—sitting down on the floor with her knees up to her chest, lost to the world around her.

That sharp prick got me again, in the gut this time. The one I hated, the one that made no sense to me, the one that was all about Elaine Constantine.

I yanked her up to her feet, slamming her into the counter like a piece of meat ready for the slaughter. Only that's when she caught my breath again, that's when I finally saw the streaks of tears down her pretty cheeks and realized what they were for.

The blood was crusty on her thighs, cuts still raw from where she'd butchered herself. I should've loved it, her pain, her blood, her tears, but I didn't. The thought of anyone hurting her flesh that wasn't me, even herself, was enough to slam me with rage.

“What the fuck is this? What the fuck do you think you were doing?”

This time there wasn't even a spark of spite in her as she stared up at me. She was a broken girl, lost to every hurt and fear in the world.

I bent down to retrieve the knife from the floor. She'd picked the best, clearly determined for the cleanest slices. She flinched as I slammed it down onto the counter.

“If you’d left me alcohol, I wouldn’t need to.” She was shaking, clearly wallowing in her own shit and unable to get a grip of it. There they were, peeping through the surface—those intoxicating little butterfly secrets. The colors of pain and rage and grief that intoxicated me.

“Or maybe I’ll just lock up the knives.”

Her eyes got their venom back at that point. Her jaw tightened. “Fuck you, Morelli! You have no fucking idea how damaged I am. Go fuck yourself!”

“No, I don’t,” I said. “But I’ll find out. Those secrets inside you will be mine for the taking. I can’t wait to find out just how damaged you really are.”

“Don’t count on it,” she said. “I’m not telling you shit.”

She tried to pull away, but I wouldn’t let her. I pressed up against her with my hands on either side of the countertop. She was pinned. Contained. *Mine*.

I laughed. “Clearly, you don’t hate me nearly so much as you hate your own family, sweetheart. Them or the Power brothers it seems. You must have a secret dirty liking for the Morellis, seeing how you set the Power brothers up for *my* crime.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, asshole.” She was lying. We both knew it.

“It seems you wrote a damning little letter, didn’t you?” I whispered with spite. “A scrawled little note to tell the world you’d been taken by the Power brothers.”

She tried to lie some more. “I just wanted them to take some shit for all the hell they put me through. I just wanted them to suffer.”

I gave her an evil smile. “Oh, really? You hate the Power brothers more than the Morellis?”

She didn’t try to lie again. She just stared, hating me.

I leaned even closer to taunt her. “I’d even dare to say you hate your own family more than the Morellis, don’t you? Maybe you aren’t worthy of the Constantine name.”

“I’m damn well worthy of the fucking Constantine name,” she snarled at me, and then she found a flare of life in the depths of her. She twisted between my arms like a snake, scrabbling against the counter to reach for the blade, and then she grabbed it. She grabbed it and let out a screech as she plunged it straight through my hand. “Fuck you, Morelli.”

That’s when she should have run like a crazy thing and tried to get the fuck out of there. She tried to, really she did. She made to run, but I was still holding her tight.

I was smiling. Smirking. Loving just how horrified she was when she saw I didn’t flinch in the slightest. My hand was bound to the wood of the counter, and I didn’t even let out a curse.

Elaine was so shocked that she drained white when I pulled the blade free of my hand and cast it straight back onto the counter.

“What the fuck?!” she spat. “What the fuck is wrong with you? I just sliced right through your fucking hand, Lucian! Are you out of your mind?”

My laugh was every bit as evil as she’d ever known.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elaine

I COULDN'T MOVE, staring in shock and horror at the way Lucian pulled the knife out of his hand. He didn't flinch, didn't falter, didn't express even a moment of pain. I stared at him as he wrapped his bleeding hand in a towel. He'd said the words, but I didn't believe them, not until I saw it with my own eyes. Not until I felt his flesh give way, skin and tendon sliced, even while I looked into his eyes. He didn't even flinch.

"What the fuck," I managed to whisper.

A chuckle. "What the fuck is right with me, more like it."

I still didn't fathom it. I couldn't. His hand was already bleeding through the towel but he didn't give a fuck. "Is this the pain thing you were talking about?"

His eyes were as dark as ever as he answered me. "Congenital insensitivity to pain. Nothing you ever do will hurt me. If you have any sense in that pretty head of yours, you'll abandon all hopes of it now and do whatever the fuck you're told."

"Nothing will hurt you? For real? Nothing?"

"That's the side effect of my little disorder. I can't feel it. If I have my hand on the stove, it will burn to a crisp. I won't feel a thing. Only the smell will make me notice."

This was huge. Everyone would know if the Morelli heir couldn't feel pain. It would be part of the gossip. Part of the

jokes. Part of the oeuvre of being rich and powerful in New York.

“I’m supposed to be able to feel emotional pain, but I never have. So in that way I’ve never felt pain at all. Which is quite ironic. Quite unfair. Proof that there isn’t a just God. Because I can feel pleasure just fine. I can fuck and enjoy myself just fine.”

He couldn’t feel pain? Not physical, he said. Not even emotional pain. Not yet anyway. I hoped some woman would eventually stomp his heart to pieces. But he could feel pleasure. No wonder he stormed through life, taking everything he wanted, throwing everything else back.

The monster’s eyes were so cold, but there was a hint of something else in his gaze, some kind of unlikely vulnerability in his darkness. People would have talked about Lucian Morelli having congenital insensitivity to pain if they had known.

How had they kept this a secret? Who in the family knew about it?

“Is this why you hurt people so much?” I asked him. “Because you have no idea what it feels like? Maybe if you did, you wouldn’t be such a bastard to people.”

“I don’t need an excuse to be a bastard to people, don’t try to make one for me.”

I leaned back against the counter. “I wasn’t going to. You can’t excuse being that much of a sadistic asshole with a damn illness.”

We stood staring, eye to eye, both of us hating each other, both of us curious, both of us in so much of a fucked-up state we must have been in some surreal dimension in Constantine-Morelli hell.

I guess my tone was genuine when it sounded out next, because I saw his eyes lighten just a touch. “What do the doctors say about it? Can it be fixed?”

“I didn’t want to be fixed.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because pain is a weakness, Elaine. I’m free of it. I’m stronger for it.”

I didn’t believe him. Pain was a truth and a connection to yourself. Pain was something that made us stronger, not weaker. “Is it something you’ve had your whole life?”

“From when I was young enough to scrape my knees and not cry along with it.”

I could only begin to imagine the little toddler Lucian with bleeding legs, not needing to cry for his mom. “Who else knows?” I pushed. “People must know, right?”

“None of your business,” he told me, but I shook my head.

“Seriously, Lucian. You can’t tell me it’s none of my business. I just stabbed you through the hand, and you’re telling me you didn’t feel it. How could that never have come up before?”

“People see what they want to see. You should know that. They look at you and see a party girl. They don’t know that you’re a virgin. Or that you’re absolutely terrified.”

“You are an interesting piece of shit, Lucian Morelli, even if I can’t stand you.”

I knew he was trying to hide a laugh at my bold words. Sometimes I definitely made him laugh inside, no matter how much he wanted to hate me. “Forget about it,” he said. “Believe me, you’ll be paying for your actions badly enough already.”

I didn’t give a shit about that. I was more interested in the weird creature in front of me than I was in what he was going to do with me.

I wondered if the rest of his family had it too. The question was out of my mouth before I’d even realized I was saying it.

“Who else around you has it? Nobody talks about you guys having it.”

He walked away far enough to flick the coffee machine on, the intensity of the mood broken. His sigh felt casual, almost affectionate. “Stop asking questions, little doll.”

I didn’t want to shut my mouth, I wanted to know every little bit of his secrets. I was like the sneaky little girl tiptoeing through everyone else’s mysteries all over again, *curious*. “I can hear your brain ticking,” he told me. “Forget it.”

My brain sure was ticking. “Even the Morellis don’t know, do they? You didn’t tell anyone?”

He poured a coffee, and I waited quietly as he took a sip of his drink, wondering just what other secrets his body was holding tight. Maybe we were both creatures of secrets. Maybe there was more in common between us than I would’ve ever believed.

I watched him, trying to understand. I tried to imagine what it must be like in a body like his, so perfect but so oblivious to pain. What must it be like to watch everyone around you crying out when things hurt them, but not having a clue how on earth that could feel?

I got a shiver as I began to realize just what that might mean for a man like Lucian...just what that could lead to... such natural sadism...this natural need to hurt people...

“So that’s why, isn’t it? That’s why you’re such a fucking psycho?”

Another sigh. “Shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you.”

He sounded tired.

He was fixated on causing people pain...and he would be...of course, he would be...he’d be fixated on causing people pain because he had none of his own...

“It makes you a sadist, doesn’t it?”

“Sadism doesn’t need a reason, sweetheart. We aren’t broken men for you to fix. I hurt you because I’m a bastard who likes seeing you in pain. What does it matter, the reason why?”

His stare made me shudder when it landed on me again—a whole load of layers glistening through the surface, like a moth in the darkness with the faintest of color in his pitch black wings.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lucian

I WAS A private person by nature. Having to keep my secret made it worse.

And being the son of Bryant Morelli... well, that sealed the deal. Any weaknesses as a boy were chased out of me by my father. The Morelli heir had to be a monster of utter perfection.

Still, despite my lifetime of privacy, part of me wanted to tell Elaine my history. I wanted to see the shock in her pretty eyes as I told her the complete Lucian Morelli story.

I wanted to see her open mouth as I told her about the very early days when Father noticed my insensitivity to pain, and how he'd tested my limits with his gritted jaw.

“Can you feel this, boy? Tell me when it hurts...”

His hand, then his belt, then the nasty cuts. The way he twisted my flesh and held me down and thumped me hard enough that it sent me flying.

I didn't feel a thing.

Part of me wanted to. I wanted to know what it felt like to have my body so abused and broken.

He took me to the doctor, and then a specialist after him, with the threat of death if they so much as recorded my results. Their reply was quick and definite. Congenital insensitivity to pain.

My body had no concept of what hurting meant.

Father told me that it would be a sin against the Morelli name to tell a soul about my condition, even my mother. He told me that he'd be ashamed of me forever if I breathed a word of it to anyone in this world. So I didn't tell them. I didn't tell my mother, or my brothers and sisters, or any of my *friends* at school. I didn't tell my teachers, didn't explain a word to them why I didn't ever cry out in sports matches when somebody crashed right into me.

It was none of their business. Nothing about me was anyone's business.

I don't remember how old I was when other people's pain began to fascinate me.

Everyone's pain began to fascinate me, but I had a particularly strong taste for pretty girls with big, crying eyes. Maybe I was twelve or thirteen. I'd long grown to rule the schoolyard by slamming my punishment out on anyone I chose, but that was mainly on other boys—rivals and losers alike. Big for my age, I enjoyed going after older boys and making them suffer.

The first girl I hurt was Bethany Fryers. I was fourteen years old. She was walking through the park after art class one day with a spring in her step, blonde hair swinging as she walked. I'd noticed her before, her gaze on me. Curious. A little intimidated.

My mouth watered at the sight of her, and my cock hardened like I'd known it to do at night for years. I had such a strong need to see her beg me to stop that it took my breath away. So I asked her to take a walk with me. And there in the bathroom of the school, I fucked her in a dirty stall. She didn't mind spreading her legs but her eyes got wide when I covered her mouth. She squirmed in pain when I twisted her nipples. But she was wet and bucking against me. She wanted it.

I hurt her where nobody else would see it. I unbuttoned her blouse and saw her pretty nipples there, and something made me want to hurt them worse than anything else. I did hurt them. I twisted them so hard in my fingers that she

whimpered, and her whimper thrilled me. It felt private somehow. Her shallow little breaths made me feel like more of a god than I'd ever known.

Instinct takes over, even at that age. Biting her felt like the most natural thing in the world. I loved the marks I left on her, so pink against her skin. I knew they would bruise and hurt her later as well as in the moment. I wanted to hurt her over and over again just to keep those marks alive on her skin.

She was older than me, probably fifteen. Her tits were a lovely shape that jiggled just right when I slapped them. It was my first fuck, and I didn't hold back.

"Ahhh, owwww. Owwww. Lucian, please..."

Only it wasn't just a cry of pain as I squeezed her and pulled her nipples. There was more in her eyes as she arched her back for me, even as she was whimpering...and then that whimpering changed to a different type of whimper.

She came from nothing more than my violence on her skin, her mouth open as she moaned for me. That was power.

"You come back here next week," I said, referring to our next art class. "I want to see what these bruises look like. And I'm going to fuck you again."

She knew that I'd be waiting for her, in exactly the same spot at exactly the same time.

She didn't fight me, because she knew there would be no point. What's more, she wanted what I dished out, wanted it so badly she never strayed from that exact path. She was meek as she followed me down the bank to our usual spot, spreading herself wide open so I could hurt her however I wanted.

Bethany Fryers was the first girl I fucked.

She was the first girl I fucked so hard it hurt her, and that thrilled me more than ever.

I was like a demon possessed as I hunted down other pretty girls I wanted to be inside of, and I found them. Found the ones who craved the sort of pain I dished out, needed it so

much they'd beg me for it. I found so many of them, I lost count through the years.

Father knew about it. I think eventually one of the girls' daddies found out about what I was doing and confronted him at Morelli Holdings.

I was scared shitless as he walked into my room one evening with that dangerous look in his eyes. I knew he knew. I could see it before he said a word.

I wondered what he was going to do to punish me, seeing as his belt would make no difference whatsoever, not like it did with my brothers. As it turns out, he didn't punish me. He sat down on the bed next to me with a strange smile on his face.

"I always knew you'd be a strong boy," he said to me. "Believe me, Lucian, it's a good thing. You need to be strong in this family. I'm proud of you, Son."

With that he was gone, and he never mentioned it again.

It didn't matter how many people I hurt, or how many girls I touched, or how many boys I beat up until I was their ruler—he never mentioned it again.

Neither had I. Other than forging the Violent Delights club with Clark Ventana and signing Rex Holloway up for my virgin purchases, and Trenton Alto knowing way more about me than he should, I hadn't spilled my truths to anyone.

So why the holy fuck was I tempted to spill my truths to Elaine Constantine?



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Elaine

MY INSIDES WERE going crazy with nerves and flutters. That curiosity I knew so well was going wild inside me, desperate to know just what Lucian Morelli was hiding from the world.

He was quiet and brooding as he made another coffee, his hand still bleeding into the towel. I wondered if he needed a doctor for stitches, but he didn't seem bothered in the slightest, and his hand seemed to be working just fine.

I didn't push him, didn't speak, just let him churn in his darkness. The thrill and hope was already burning deep inside me that maybe, just maybe, he'd tell me something. Anything. Just something to give my curiosity one little tickle.

"If you stab anyone in the hand again," he finally said, "you want to make sure you do it more centrally. You barely cut more than skin."

If. If I stab anyone in the hand. Like I was ever going to see anyone. I nodded at him. "Sure thing. I guess I'm a crappy hand stabber. My bad."

He smirked, unable to hide the amusement, even though I'd just sliced him open. "You have such an impudent little tongue on you, Elaine," he said. "Some people might even find it funny."

Some people like *him*, even if he didn't want to admit it.

Still I kept quiet, letting him churn, letting him think. I couldn't even imagine what went on inside a mind like Lucian's. He was such a different creature to me that the very

idea of the life inside of him must be like an alien planet. Or maybe the depths of hell.

I pretended not to care so much about what he might tell me, but it was a pointless exercise, I'm sure it was blatantly obvious that I was desperate to know. My thighs were still sore from the places I'd sliced them, but I didn't give a crap about that anymore. I didn't feel the need for that anymore. All I needed was the words of the monster in front of me as he sipped his coffee.

"It's a power," he told me after another minute of pure silence. "I'm immune to every pain that people want to dish out to me. I don't have to worry about anything they might dish out. They either kill me or mean nothing."

That's an interesting thought. *They either kill me or mean nothing*. I could see how that was a form of power. I wished I could feel that way. "You must wonder about pain though."

I thought he was going to tell me to *mind my own fucking business*, but he didn't. He fixed me with that piercing stare of his and put his mug on the counter. "Of course. I enjoy the thrill of watching people in pain. Especially you."

"I guess I would too," I said with a shrug, and he pulled a face at me.

"You think you'd be a sadist, do you, if you didn't know pain?"

I pulled a face right back at him. "No, probably not. I'd probably not be a sick fuck like you, but I'm sure I would be curious. I'm curious about everything."

Another smirk from him. "Clearly you're curious. If you weren't overly curious you'd have the sense to shut your mouth."

I dared to push him, just a little. "When did you find out? You must have been young."

I wasn't expecting him to actually answer me. The facts were simple enough. The pain tolerance. But I was in shock

when he told me just how much of a little boy he was and how his father had pushed his body for the truth. No wonder Lucian Morelli was so twisted, he'd been fucked up from one hell of an early age.

He pulled another face when he registered how my mind was working. "He didn't fucking abuse me, Elaine. He was finding out who I was."

I didn't agree with him but didn't voice it.

"You have no idea how much power it gave me, knowing just how immune I was to hurt."

"I have an idea how much power it gave you," I told him. "Considering just how much you've used it to get your own way and bully people into submission every moment of your life. It's just a shame you've never actually done things with people because they want to, not because you bully them."

"That's not true in the slightest. I've done plenty of things with people because they want to."

I could see him thinking about it, trying to work out when that was, and it made me smile at him. "Don't worry, Lucian, you don't have to justify yourself to me. Bully people all you want. It's just a shame. I'm *sure* plenty of people would do things with you just because they wanted to." I couldn't resist turning the knife even though he couldn't feel it.

He still hated me, I could see it all over him. I still hated him, my eyes must have told him right back. "You don't have a clue what you're fucking talking about," he told me. "Plenty of people have done things with me because they want to."

I stared straight at him. "Who? Tell me."

My heart was racing, preparing myself for the end, but the end didn't come. His eyes were fierce as he propped himself against the counter, wrapping his hand up in a fresh towel. "Right from the beginning people have done things with me because they want to," he said, and then he told me.

Lucian Morelli stood against his kitchen counter, and he told me about Bethany Fryers, the very first girl he punished and how she cried out for him in pleasure as well as in pain. It gave me tingles where it shouldn't, and my heart was still racing as fast at his descriptions, and that was about more than what he did to her. It was about the dirty sparkle in his eyes as he relived the memories.

He'd had feelings for Bethany Fryers.

Even if he didn't want to admit feelings for anyone or anything in this world, Lucian Morelli once had feelings for Bethany Fryers.

I found myself wondering what she looked like, and what she sounded like and just what it was about her that drove him so wild. Because she did. She drove him wild. Beneath his evil walls, and his callous ways, and his not giving a shit for anyone, that woman drove him wild.

"There you go," he told me when he'd finished recounting her story. "She fucking wanted it."

I had flutters when I spoke next. "So if you liked her wanting it so much, why did you stop choosing people who wanted to enjoy it?"

His voice turned to spite. "Because I like power. Because I take whatever I fucking want. It's about my fucking pleasure, I don't give a shit about anyone else's."

"Good for you, Mr. Selfish," I said and knew as soon as the words left my mouth that I'd pushed the attitude too far. He was on me in one of my frantic heartbeats, his bloodied hand tight around my throat, towel cast aside.

I felt his blood on me, still hot. It gave me chills, picturing how it would be my blood feeling like that if he chose to cut me. "I like power," he said. "Remember that."

He forced my thighs apart enough to press himself against me, and even in my choked state I found I was moving against him.

I wanted to be Bethany Fryers. *I* wanted to be the little blonde girl who drove him wild.

His eyes were evil, but there was depth in them, a curiosity that danced with mine.

“You look like her, you know,” he told me, and it gave me a whole new wave of shivers. “At that masked fucking ball, you looked like her. I should’ve known you were fucking trouble then.”

I tried to speak, but his choke hold wouldn’t let me. He freed me enough to take in breath, and I sucked in a decent lungful before I found my voice. “You didn’t realize it, did you?” I asked. “You hadn’t thought about me looking like that girl, not until tonight. I can see it.”

“Fuck you,” he said. “You can’t see shit about me.”

But he was wrong. I could. I was getting to know him and his monster ways, even if he didn’t want me to. Just as he was getting to know me and my crazy ways right back.

I was still moving against him when he spoke next, still desperate as he pressed his mouth to my ear.

“Now then,” he whispered. “Seeing as you know some of my filthy secrets, it’s time you told me some of yours.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lucian

I FELT LIKE someone had scraped my insides out and laid them on a platter on the counter. I'd never felt like it before. Exposed, like parts of me had been spewed from my center.

The realization that Elaine had reminded me of Bethany Fryers from the very first sight of her at Tinsley Constantine's masked ball was a hammer. Was that where the fixation had come from? Or did I simply have a type, regardless of the trauma surrounding these women.

The curve of her pretty little chin. The slope of her neck. The blonde waves cascading from her, and those pretty blue eyes. Yes, she reminded me of Bethany. They were both beautiful young women. But they were also drastically different.

Were the comparisons between them simply happenstance?

Was I trying to atone for past sins?

I'd done my best to blank out my early memories of Bethany. Somehow, I knew she was a weakness in my perfect strength. I'd long since lost track of the girl who'd first captivated my fetishes, and I'd wanted to. I didn't want even a hint of her in my life.

I was uncomfortable with the swing of the balance—her knowing more about my past than I knew about hers. I didn't tolerate any form of weakness in myself, and that's what it felt like.

I felt weak. It made my words lash out at her as they came. “I’m serious, Elaine. It’s time for you to reveal your dirty secrets. I want to know every filthy little part of you.”

She shifted on her feet, nervous. Still, she couldn’t hide that addictive curiosity in her stare. “I don’t have to tell you anything, Lucian,” she said, but again there was no venom in it. She couldn’t have mustered any if she’d tried. I could smell her temptation to talk to me. It was ripe in her shallow little breaths. She wanted to share.

“You owe me your fucking life,” I said, knowing cruelty would compel her more than kindness. “The Power brothers would have killed you by now if I hadn’t taken you.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” she said, but again, there was no venom in it.

The standoff arced between us, laced with a concoction I didn’t understand. Hate, disgust, retribution, want, *need*. I hated needing anything. Need was something I could usually snuff out with a click of my fingers, getting whatever I wanted in a flash, but not with her. Not with Elaine.

“You’d better start using that tongue of yours,” I said to her, “or I really will make you pay back the debt. I’ll make you pay in ways so vile, you could never imagine.”

She raised her chin at me, proud, even though she was a wreck, standing in my kitchen, with crusty bloodied thighs, swamped in my shirt. “You would get off on my secrets,” she told me. “You’d do nothing but laugh in my face. You’d like them.”

I would’ve usually agreed with her. Her stories should give me nothing but inspiration for how I wanted to make her suffer in my grip, but I wasn’t feeling it. The twist in my gut was another one of those crazy sensations that made me want to retch. Feelings? Emotional pain? *What they did to me*, she said. Who hurt you, little doll? The thought made me clench with rage.

“Who did things to you?” I asked her, and her chin dropped, eyes on the floor.

“It’s none of your business,” she said, her impudence nowhere to be seen. “I’m not having you laugh at me like that. Fuck me up all you want, but I’m not having it.”

I stepped closer and tipped her face up to mine. “You know I’ve got congenital insensitivity to pain. You know things that nobody else on this planet knows about me. You’d better start talking to fix the imbalance. Secrets or pain, Elaine. Your fucking choice, but make it now.”

Her eyes were so sad when they met mine. “Yeah, well at least I get a choice for once in my life. I didn’t think it would be Lucian damn Morelli who’d be giving me one.”

My stare was solid on hers. “Who hurt you, little doll?”

She took a breath and the strength in her shoulders collapsed, leaving her just a tiny slip of a creature against the counter. Her fight was leaving her in the most beautiful of ways. Her butterfly wings were deathly still as she gave up her flickering attempts to fly away.

She was calm in a way that surprised me, and it was strangely attractive.

A sigh. “Seriously, Lucian. I don’t want you laughing at me.”

“I’m waiting.”

My gaze was firm. Her resolve was breaking. Those butterfly wings parted for me, just wide enough for me to see that the caterpillar between them was an innocent little baby of a bug who’d never been seen before.

Nobody had seen Elaine Constantine before. Not the real, true broken core of her beauty.

“It’s a long story,” she told me and I didn’t doubt it. “It’s a long fucked-up story that’s never been told. I tried, when I was young enough to think my words actually meant something to the people around me, only to be called a liar.”

I was disgusted by the way her words meant *something* to *me*.

“I believe you,” I said.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Elaine

OF ALL THE people in my life I could have told my secrets to, I would've never believed for a second it would be one of the Morellis. If you'd have asked me to put money on the *least* likely person I would've ever told my secrets to, Lucian Morelli would have been pretty high on the list.

He was my enemy. He was a monster. *My monster.*

I should never have been standing there in his gleaming kitchen contemplating telling him my story, not even one tiny little part of it. I hated myself for even thinking about it.

My mind was spinning through the memories, and my stomach was in knots, physically painful without the haze of drink and drugs to blot them out. I didn't want to relive them. I'd spent almost every waking moment of my life trying to run away, trying to bury it all underneath my bullshit world of escaping. I wanted to escape, at any cost—even if that meant losing my life.

So why the fuck was I about to spill my soul to my nemesis and live those memories all over again?

Holy hell, those memories came roaring when they called as I began to tell my story.

I'd long lost track of exactly when my hellhole of an existence sprang from the picture perfect life I had been living. I had everything that a child should love. Toys and games and clothes, green fields and palomino ponies and brothers and sisters bickering all around me.

Dad was way too busy with Halcyon to give me all that much of his time. He'd see us at dinnertime, but it was barely more than a snippet of family life. And I had to share it with my brothers and sisters. I spent much more time around nannies and teachers than him.

Mom was rigid with her expectations. She told me I could never behave.

I guess it was natural for her to agree with Uncle Lionel when he first suggested I have tutoring. Religious tutoring, he said. There's no one better than Reverend Lynch, he said.

Uncle Lionel dropped me off outside the manor church in the rain one day, leaving me staring up at the towers on the driveway. It was Margaret, his maid, who came outside to collect me. She was as stern as the rest of the people I'd come to know—taking hold of my hand and rushing me inside like I was already due a punishment.

The hallways were filled with huge sprawling paintings of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I felt tiny and inferior as she marched me upstairs to my dorm room at the end of the corridor. The door was huge and made of oak, it made a deep, dark creak as she opened it.

“This is where you'll be staying,” she said, her voice shrill.

My bed was a tiny single with a wrought iron headboard and footboard. There was a bedside table with a plain white lamp, and a tapestry on the wall over it. *The Lord's purpose will prevail*. I found myself wondering what the Lord's purpose would be for me in this place.

They left me alone until dinnertime.

Margaret came for me. She led the way downstairs to the dining hall, and I expected there to be many other girls like me there, but there were only two.

Neither of them looked at me.

I sat in the seat Margaret pointed me to, feeling edgy and scared. The other girls leaped to their feet and bowed their

heads as a man joined us at the head of the table. I jumped up to join them, not quite sure what I was doing.

“You may be seated,” he said.

His voice was so firm it gave me shivers. He was an older man—much older than my father. He had gray hair and a beard and small eyes, and had a religious collar on, in a deep, dark burgundy.

He looked strict. Really strict.

I was given soup and ate it slowly, watching the way the other girls were so neat with theirs. I patted my mouth with a napkin and sat up straight in my chair when I was done, and tried to be like them, even though they looked nothing like me. Neither of them looked anything like me, they were both so quiet. So ladylike, as my mother would say.

I guess that’s what they wanted me to be like—*ladylike*.

But I wasn’t ladylike. I was Elaine.

The other two girls were dismissed and scuttled away after dinner was done, but I was still sitting in my seat. The man at the head of the table cleared his throat and stared at me, and then he spoke. “Hello, Elaine. I’m Reverend Lynch. I’m here to be your teacher and mentor. But most of all, I’m your connection to our Lord.”

I found myself nodding, but I was too scared to smile, even a polite smile the way my mother would have wanted. And definitely too scared to speak.

He seemed satisfied by my silence. “You’ll most certainly learn to be a good girl here.”

I didn’t want to spend another minute in that place. The very last thing I wanted was to be like the other two girls.

Reverend Lynch held out his hand to me, and he had a big golden ring on one of his fingers. “Kiss me,” he said, and I felt weird doing it. I didn’t usually kiss people’s hands.

His fingers were thick and warm. I didn't like the way they felt against my lips, so I pulled away as quickly as I could. I felt strangely icky as he kept his eyes on me, like he was soaking into me somehow. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"You're excused now," he told me, and I mumbled *thanks*.

He called Margaret in, and she led me back upstairs. I tried to ask her questions, like who the other girls were and who else would be staying with us, and where I could go in the building outside of my room.

"You'll go wherever you're told," she said, and I didn't ask her again, just headed back to my room and sat on the edge of my bed.

She clasped her hands behind her back as she spoke.

"There are rules," she told me. "You only speak when you are spoken to, and you do whatever you are told. And you must always try your very best in your lessons."

I nodded, but I didn't take it seriously. Grown ups always said stuff like that.

"Good night, Elaine," she said, and I heard the key click in the lock as she left.

I was locked in.

I tried the door handle, but it didn't open. I banged on the door, but nobody came.

I'd never been locked in anywhere, and I was already scared of a night alone with no way out.

There was a nightgown in the wardrobe, but I didn't want to wear it. There was a glass of water on the bedside table, but I didn't want to drink it. I wanted to go home, to my own bed in my own room. I thought it was a nightmare as I stared up at the ceiling that night and tried to sleep in that bed. I was nearly crying like a little baby as I thought about more nights in here, and how Uncle Lionel had promised that I would learn so much. I didn't want to learn. I wanted to go home.

I fell into an uneasy sleep. I was still exhausted when Margaret came through the door the next morning and swore at me for not putting on the nightgown.

I ate oatmeal for breakfast and tried to tell myself it was only one night, and I'm sure it would get a bit easier—meeting some other girls and not being so locked up when they knew I could behave enough not to run away.

I thought the first night was a nightmare. I thought it couldn't get worse.

I was wrong.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Lucian

I'D NEVER HEARD of Reverend Lynch, but he made my hackles rise as soon as Elaine spoke his name. Her stance shifted, scared even after all these years.

“He touched you, didn’t he?”

She looked away from me as she answered with a nod of her head. It took her a few long seconds to speak again. “First, it was punishment. I had to write lines out for him in my best handwriting. He let the other girls leave when they were done, but he made me stay, saying I hadn’t done well enough.” She took a breath before she continued. “I was writing them until late, until I was falling asleep in my chair. That’s when he came up behind me.”

My heart was pounding as I waited for her to continue, and not in a good way.

Her voice was so gentle as she carried on talking. “He tore up the pages.”

“He spanked you, didn’t he?”

She nodded, and her cheeks were pinking up. “Yeah, he spanked me. He lifted my skirt up and spanked me over my panties. I was so embarrassed. Humiliated, really—tears streaming down my face. I begged him to stop but he told me to shut up. I didn’t know priests used words like that. *Shut up*. It was the worst word I knew at the time.”

I thought I would delight in her misery. Maybe that sounds fucked up, but when you’ve lived a life of jaded hedonism as

long as I have, you *are* fucked up. I didn't feel delighted. I felt deeply, starkly horrified at her quiet recounting. "And then what happened?"

"He called Margaret back. I tried to tell her that he'd hurt me. I told her I wanted to call my mother, but she wouldn't listen to me. *Reverend Lynch is a good man. A godly man. Spoiled little girls like you have no business making up lies about him.*"

I tipped my head to the side and tried to act nonchalant, but it was hard. I felt anything but calm at her words. My fists clenched at my sides. "How often did he punish you?"

"I was sent there every weekend in the beginning, even though I begged not to go. Uncle Lionel told Mom it was good for me, and I think she was just relieved to have me out of the house."

"Fuck," I said, the word a sharp bark in the air.

"It was strange. Most of the time he was mean. But sometimes...sometimes he would smile at me as if he was proud. Sometimes he'd tell me that I was a good girl. That I was one of God's beautiful angels. He told me those things, and the worst part is, I'd be so glad. I'd be glad that he thought I was a good girl. Even though I hated him."

"He was a fucking predator. He wanted you to feel that way."

"It was a few months in when I first tried to tell my mother what was happening. She said I'd already whined so much about going. She couldn't believe me anymore, because she thought I was just trying to get out of going. She said I was lazy."

I could imagine Caroline Constantine being an absolute cunt. "How long were you going to Reverend Lynch before his punishments got worse than spankings?"

She struggled with speaking, and I could see it in her eyes. She was shuffling, uncomfortable. It only made me more determined to hear her speak.

I was ready to push her, but I didn't need to. She took another deep breath then carried on talking.

“A long time. So long that I was getting well used to the spankings.”

“And then?”

Her pause was profound as that little caterpillar lived through her memories. “He came into my room at night and asked me to thank him. I was already sore from a punishment. He told me to kiss his hand. That's how it started. I had to kiss his hand and tell him thank you.”

I wanted to tell her to stop. It made me feel sick to even hear it, but then, she had to do more than listen. She had to live through it. “Elaine.”

“Every night I'd watch the bedroom door. Every night I'd pray that it wouldn't open.” Her cheeks were pinked up so beautifully I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

Oh, the little Elaine Constantine kissing that bastard's cock on her knees. I could have slit his throat right there and then, just by laying eyes on the piece of shit. “He was preparing you, you know that? Right from the beginning, he was preparing you.”

“I know,” she said. “It's easy to see that when you get a bit older. I'm sure other people would have seen that if they'd have believed me.”

“Did you try to tell them again?”

“Yeah, I tried to tell them, but every time I did they'd say I was a liar.”

“And none of your sisters went to him?”

She shook her head. “No. I was always the naughty one who needed extra lessons. I felt like a bad person. And it made me act like one. If everyone already believed I was a liar, then what was the point of telling the truth? If everyone already believed I was bad, then I would act like it. Parties. Alcohol. Drugs. None of it matters.”

“You matter, little doll.”

Her eyes were tearful when they next met mine, and it hit me in the gut, just how beautiful and broken my little butterfly truly was.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Elaine

I STILL COULDN'T believe I was telling Lucian my past. I felt sick and vulnerable as I stood there, but it wasn't because of the man who had promised to destroy me, it was because of the men who'd already destroyed me. The man before me was doing anything but laughing at me like I thought he would. He looked pissed off on my behalf, which I wouldn't have expected at all.

The sickness was bubbling inside me as I carried on speaking. I lost track of my own train of thought as I let the words flow free. They just came, unbarred in a way they'd never been allowed to be.

Lucian's eyes were so firm on mine as he digested everything I was saying.

I told him about how Reverend Lynch's *kisses* became *sucks*, and about how he'd tell me I was a good girl as I dropped to my knees and gave him what he wanted.

He'd still spank me, harder and harder.

I got so desperate to get away from Reverend Lynch that I tried to sneak out of the place in the middle of the night. That's when he started using my escape antics as an excuse to shackle me to the wrought iron bed frame at night. He'd say it was because I looked like I was planning to be a bad girl. That was when other men started coming at night.

I should've known what was coming, but I tried not to think about that. My behavior was getting worse and worse at

home because I was so angry every minute of the day.

Uncle Lionel told Mom that he would start overseeing my education there. He said he owed it to me as my uncle. But he wasn't anything like my uncle when he was in Reverend Lynch's place.

He would be the one to open the door at night when a man stepped inside. I was already used to kissing Reverend Lynch, but not a few different men at once. Sometimes they would punish me. Sometimes they would praise me. Sometimes they would make me pray.

"Your uncle fucking watched this?" Lucian asked me once I took a pause to breathe.

"He shook their hands as they came inside."

"They were paying him," he told me, and I nodded.

"Probably."

"Definitely," he said. "I've heard of some depraved things, but this is fucking sick. And to think the board wanted to confirm *my* character. Meanwhile, there's men like your uncle and this reverend. An underhanded allegiance of filth between men who think they are something noble."

I retched when I thought of the men who'd come to me at night.

I knew their names. I knew their position in the world. I knew just who they were.

Sometimes, I still came into contact with them. Drink and drugs were my very best friends of all time at those parties.

"They didn't fuck you, did they?" he asked me, and I shook my head.

"Not the regular way. They didn't take my virginity, no. I always thought they might, but they didn't. Nobody has ever done that." I give him a small, sad smile. "Not even you."

"Even their allegiance doesn't warrant the risk of taking the virginity of a Constantine girl."

I felt my cheeks burning as I faced up to telling him another bout of truth. “They took me...in other ways.”

His eyes narrowed, and his anger wasn't at me. It was a refreshing thing to see. “They fucked your ass.”

It was a statement not a question. My fingers twisted in front of me. “It hurt a lot at first.”

“They took turns.” Another statement.

“They were long nights.”

“When did they start fucking you like that?”

“I'd just turned eighteen,” I said. “Old enough to consent. Old enough to refuse. But it didn't matter, because they had already conditioned me to accept them.”

“Your parents never suspected?”

“They believed my uncle.”

I pictured Uncle Lionel's face when I saw him at our house, and the looks he gave me when nobody else was watching. I hated him so bad I wished I could see him die.

“They always believed him about everything. Every little thing that he said I did. Every lie that came from his rotten mouth.”

“And what is he like to you now?”

My response was instant. “An evil piece of shit.”

He nodded, but didn't speak. He looked like he was battling with words of his own.

There was a whole load more I wanted to tell him but couldn't; even then I couldn't find the strength to voice it aloud. I couldn't tell him how they confused me by touching me in places that felt good. I couldn't tell him that they'd started rewarding me with alcohol.

I always said thank you to them.

Thank you for hurting me, thank you for hitting me, thank you for making me do what I'm told.

That's when I got so confused that I started hurting myself when I wasn't around them.

Lucian seemed to see where my mind was going, even though he didn't speak to me. He moved in close, looked down at my legs. I flinched when he touched me then ran his fingers over my cuts nice and slowly. A loud breath escaped me. I expected him to slide his fingers between my thighs and make me come, but he didn't.

His hands stayed focused on my legs.

"How about that for my secrets?" I asked him. "I guess we're about even now."

"Bound in secrets much stronger than blood," he said.

I was sure I saw pity in his eyes as he stared down at me, and I hated it. I hated pity from the monster. "Go on," I whispered. "I guess it's about time you made me suffer now."

He pulled back from me with a puzzled look on his face. "How the fuck does that work, Elaine? You think I'm going to hurt you for telling me that a group of sick fuckers hurt you first?"

I shrugged, because I didn't know. I never knew how these things worked—punishment and rewards, pain and pleasure. I knew he wasn't a nice guy in any sense of the word. I'd heard plenty of stories about just how fucked up he was and all the girls he'd been with. The ones he'd hurt. He liked pain. And I liked receiving pain.

That's when I got the weirdest pang inside me. I didn't want disgusting pity from a Morelli monster, I wanted some form of respect, even at the end of my life, even if he didn't want to show it.

But that wasn't it, was it?

Even now, kidnapped in this gorgeous place with the promise of my demise ahead of me, I still wanted the Morelli monster to want me. "Take it. Take what you want."

That's when he stepped away from me, taking his attention right back to his coffee machine.

His next words were enough to hurt me, in a way that was alien to any kind of physical pain.

He wasn't looking at me, just stirring his mug.

“Right now, I want nothing at all.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lucian

I WAS GETTING used to the bizarre sensation known as feelings.

But even so, refusing to fuck a vulnerable Elaine Constantine was something I'd never have expected in this lifetime. I didn't want to touch her, and I definitely didn't want to hurt her. It was something I was unaccustomed to, not wanting another person's pain at my hands.

Fucking hell, what the fuck was wrong with me?

She looked bizarrely annoyed, shifting around on the spot like I'd just insulted her, even though it was the kindest thing I'd ever done. "Are you for real? You don't want to touch me now?"

"I don't want to touch you now."

She laughed a snooty laugh. "I didn't put you down as that much of a saint, Lucian."

"A saint? Hardly." I pulled another mug down and made her a fucking coffee. Her eyes were still burning as she took it from me with a *thanks*.

The strange, perverted fellowship should mean nothing to me. They were just a depraved group of rich pricks. Evil? Yes. But there was plenty of evil in the world.

Elaine Constantine would have been a particularly attractive prospect to men like them. Lionel had been risking his life beyond any kind of rationale to even entertain her involvement with Reverend Lynch and his hellhole.

I hadn't come across that sick fucker, but I was already thinking about who in our extended circle played his game. I knew some of the aristocrats and their secret handshakes. Their names were on the tip of my tongue, but she let out a sigh before I spoke.

"I ran away from home once, when I didn't think I could handle it anymore. I ended up running through this trailer park. I met a boy who was running away too."

"Both of you having picture perfect childhoods, I'm sure."

"He had a black eye. His stepdad was belting him every time his mom wasn't there. Not that she'd have stopped him if she was."

"Very different sides of the spectrum from each other. One rich, one poor. You came from different stratospheres but still ended up in the same situation."

"Rich people like to hurt kids, too. We didn't actually talk about our families much, just walked together, finding some kind of weird friendship in our hell."

I could imagine it as she told me. Two fucked-up teenagers finding solace in each other's company. "You went home, though? You must have."

"Sun came up, and we were freezing cold. I couldn't imagine life outside Bishop's Landing. He went back to his trailer, to the belt and his stepdad. I went back to the Constantine compound, where the cops had been called. My feet were bloody, but all my parents could do was yell at me. They called a child psychiatrist who told them I was a lost cause."

"And that's how you met Tristan."

"We tried to blank out our misery, you know? Tried to find something different from all the shit we were used to, even if we didn't share the details."

"Weren't you tempted to move away?"

She let out a sigh. “Yeah, but Tristan’s mom was sick, and I had everyone around me, and we didn’t know where the fuck we would go. We always meant to. We always planned it. When I was almost nineteen Reverend Lynch’s school stopped for me, though, and I managed to get Tristan some money for a place of his own.”

Nineteen years old. I finished my coffee and put the mug down. “When did you get involved with the Power brothers?”

She sipped her coffee. “A couple years ago. I needed coke.”

“When did you get into debt with them?”

“When I ran into them and there was a kid like Tristan there, begging them to give him more time for his debts. I didn’t hold off for a second, just said I would pay them for him and got them to let him leave.”

Elaine really was naive. I knew exactly what the Powers would have been doing after that point. They’d have made sure she knew about every fuck-up coming to them, knowing full well she’d bail them out with Constantine cash—even when that Constantine cash stopped coming. Her mother would have dried it up like a fucking desert when she’d seen what was happening.

“You kept on doing it, didn’t you? Giving cash for the addicts, even when you didn’t have any. You racked up debt. It was like suicide by cop, except you wanted suicide by loanshark.”

She shrugged. “Not that it matters now. At least then a whole load of people go free.”

“They’re going to war, you know,” I told her. “Your family and the Power brothers are edging up closer on the battlefield.”

She scowled at me. “Yeah, well more fool me for giving your family a shot at coming out on top of the whole thing. Not that they will. Your family has nothing on mine.”

“Fuck off,” I said. “My family has everything on yours.”

“Better than being a bunch of assholes.”

“Your own fucking uncle sold you out to the sickos.”

That shut her up, and she wasn't happy about it. She put her drink down on the counter and tore her gaze away from me, finding the impudence in her gritted jaw all over again.

Even after the secret sharing we still hated each other.

You could never deny it, just how ingrained our loathing for each other really was. My family hated hers and hers hated mine. There was so much crossfire and so much instinct brewing over such a long time that it wasn't even obvious anymore just why or how I hated the woman in front of me as much as I did. I just did. I hated her.

She hated me just as much. I could see it in her folded arms and her scowl.

Fuck it. She could have a fucking night of peace for once in her pathetic excuse for a life.

“You can put the pasta on tonight,” I told her. “Let's see just how competent you Constantines are at basic life skills, shall we? Let's see if you can boil water.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elaine

I DIDN'T THINK he could possibly be serious, but he was. Even with that raging scowl on his face, he grabbed the packet of pasta from the cupboard and threw it over at me.

I managed to catch it. "You want me to make dinner?"

He pulled a face. "No, I thought I'd throw you a packet of pasta for the hell of it."

"No, I thought I'd throw you a packet of pasta for the hell of it." I almost poked my tongue out, almost. I'm sure he almost gave me some punishment for my attitude, almost. He didn't though. He pulled out a load of cheese and other stuff from the fridge and dropped it on the counter.

"Show me what you can do, little doll," he said, his tone sarcastic.

I had an undeniable urge to show him just how capable I really was. I could make damn pasta. "Do you like spices?" I asked him.

"Is that what you do, is it? Spicy pasta?"

I grabbed the pan from the drawer. "Yeah, I like spices."

"So do I," he said.

I chalked it up as one other crazy little thing I had in common with the monster. I only hoped I remembered just what spices to use. I hadn't cooked in a long time.

He opened one of the cupboard doors up high and pointed the spice rack out to me. I pulled out the paprika and the oregano and the chili pepper. And the cayenne powder.

“The Power brothers want my family to team up with theirs,” he said to me, and it hardly surprised me, even though it gave me a fresh surge of resentment.

“Yeah, well. Two sets of assholes together.”

His gaze was piercing from across the kitchen, his stance more casual than normal as he slouched back against the counter with folded arms. “Why do you hold on so tightly to the fact that your family are somehow the good guys? You must know they’re just as bad.”

I did know that, but I hadn’t seen it. Not really. I still held my dad up as some kind of idol in both the media spotlight and our personal life. He was always so steadfast and so strong and managed our empire so perfectly. Or so I believed.

“We’re definitely the good guys compared to you,” I said. “I’ve heard plenty of stories about your family and how bad you are.”

“Ditto,” he told me. “I’ve heard plenty of stories about yours, too.”

I put the pasta in the pan and began to stir. I knew we were both churning and festering with a whole mess of stuff between us. Shared secrets, and rage, and hate, and this weird new sense of casual somehow. It was fucked up, just like we were. We were two peas of fucked-up in a very fucked-up pod.

I was still trying to digest the secrets. I couldn’t help but wonder what the hell it must be like in Lucian Morelli’s body without even a vague idea of pain. He must be so curious about it. I would be—little miss curious. I was already curious enough about how curious he must be, let alone be that curious for myself.

I wondered if he was wondering what my wreck of a past was like. Maybe he was curious too. Maybe he was wondering

the things I had wondered, like just why Uncle Lionel was so cruel to his own flesh and blood.

As it turns out, he *was* wondering that. His next question was right on the mark. “Did your father never suspect your uncle was an utter piece of shit?”

“No,” I said, pure and simple. “He wasn’t really that involved with Uncle Lionel. Mom and Uncle Lionel had quite a close relationship. I guess she assured Dad that I really did need the lessons and Uncle Lionel really was telling the truth.”

“Your uncle is a vile piece of fucking shit,” Lucian said, and it took me aback. He actually insulted someone for hurting me. I thought he’d be singing their praises.

“They’re still close, Mom and Lionel,” I told him. “It’s not like I could ever have another attempt at telling her what really happened now that I’m older. She’s ashamed to call me her daughter.”

I would have usually expected him to laugh and say it’s not surprising she would be ashamed of me, considering I was Elaine the fuck-up, but it turned out that expectation of mine was instinct and nothing else. He didn’t laugh or say a word like that, just kept on watching me from the other side of the kitchen.

I sighed before I spoke again. “The reason my family are after the Power brothers likely doesn’t have anything to do with me, you know? It’s probably just from embarrassment and distaste at the Powers thinking they could kidnap one of us.”

“The Power brothers would have been crazy to think about striking at your family. They aren’t strong enough. That’s why they want us to join up with them.”

I didn’t like the nasty flutter I got at that. I didn’t like the thought of the Morellis and the Powers hurting the people I loved. I did love a lot of them. I loved some members of my family enough that I’d be absolutely devastated in grief if

anything happened to them—even if my emotions were usually too fucked up by hate to register shit about love.

“Do you think you’ll team up with them?” I asked him.

His eyes were cold. “None of your business.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I scoffed and moved over to the cutting board. “None of my business, whatever. We’ve shared plenty that’s none of each other’s business this evening, don’t you think?”

He cursed under his breath at me, and I suspected it would be at my chatter, but no. “You’re not slicing that fucking salami right, it’s too thick to cook properly.”

Even through the hatred and the confusion of what the hell was truly going on between us, I couldn’t help but smile. “Alright then, Chef Morelli. Why don’t you show me just how it’s done?”

He didn’t reply, just took the knife off me and got to work.

I watched his hands moving so firmly. His fingers so strong.

I watched him.

His stance, his height, his power.

His beauty. Because he was beautiful.

Lucian Morelli was beautiful enough to take my breath away, no matter how many times I truly looked at him like that. “Look at the salami and learn your damn lesson,” he told me, and I laughed out loud.

“That’s one damn lesson I never thought I’d be having,” I said. “I’ll take that over the ones from my past any day, thanks.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lucian

PASTA CAME QUICKLY. We headed to the dining table, looking surprisingly like two regular people enjoying their dinner. It was probably the closest I'd ever been to a regular person enjoying their dinner—especially with a little doll to enjoy it with.

I told myself I didn't like it. I watched Elaine picking at her food and told myself that I was going to take pleasure in wrecking her, but it was bullshit.

My mind was all on the sick fucks who'd messed with her.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake off the rage in me. I wanted to take them down. I wanted to look Lionel Constantine in his lecherous eyes and tell him I was there for his niece and then stab him in the gut and twist the blade.

It would be an action that could only be by my own hand. I could never get Alto involved in that, not now that he was a snake to my father. There's no way I could get the cleanup team involved either; it would never stay silent. Which only left me.

My plan and my outcome. I'd be a fool for even considering it, so why was I planning on checking out the calendar for Constantine engagements? I had no fucking idea.

Elaine made casual conversation with me as we ate. I should have told her to shut her mouth and ignored her completely, but I didn't. She was filled with questions about

my life in Bishop's Landing and what my life was like as a boy, through to what damn TV shows I liked.

"I don't have time for TV. Never have."

"Is that all you do?" she asked me. "Work constantly?"

"Work and fuck women."

"Great. Clearly that relaxes you."

It was the sass in her smile that I found so damn impossible to raise my hackles to. I was becoming used to her impudence, seeing it for the shield it truly was. I couldn't help but wonder what woman she would have become if it wasn't for the pieces of shit who'd spent years using her for their sick thrills. If she'd managed to take all that and still made it to this much of a vibrant version of Elaine, then who the fuck would she have been if she'd been allowed to grow in her own sunny garden without the sick fuck gardeners?

Still, that wasn't my consideration and should never even enter my brain space. Elaine was my enemy. My enemy. She'd always be my enemy.

I cut through her bullshit small talk with a fresh question. "Who else did that shit to you?"

She was visibly shocked by my outburst. "Why does it matter?"

My scowl was instant. "Who gives a shit about why it matters? Just open your mouth and give me an answer."

It seems she was becoming used to my ways too. She didn't scowl or frown at my tone. "You must know who it was, Lucian. You know who's in the *fellowship*. You said so."

"Tell me then," I said to her. "Just fucking say it."

She picked at the last of her pasta then put her fork down. "Baron Rawlings," she said. "He was one of them."

I pictured the old man, parading his status. "Who else?"

She started picking at her pasta again. "Lord Eddington."

I knew it. Eddington was a snide piece of shit. “Keep going.”

It took her a minute, and I let her have one, chewing over her answer until she was ready to spit it out. “Colonel Hardwick,” she whispered, and I knew why it had taken her a while. Colonel Hardwick was particularly close to her family.

I knew those socialite pricks were regular attendees at social engagements throughout the year. Lord Eddington and Baron Rawlings were from across the Atlantic, but visited often. I imagined they would use Reverend Lynch’s place as a stop-off point along with their bullshit social stays.

I also knew that Colonel Hardwick lived out on a rural estate past Bishop’s Landing.

Elaine laughed one of her sassy laughs at me as I pondered.

“What are you going to do, Lucian?” she asked. “Hurt them for me?”

I should have laughed right back at her. I tried. I managed a pathetic smirk and little else. I shouldn’t kill these bastards. Especially not as retribution for a Constantine.

Fuck knows why I headed to the bathroom once I’d finished my pasta and called up the Bishop’s Landing social event scene on my phone. Fuck knows why I looked up the charity presence of them over the next few fundraising events. I checked out the attendee list.

Lord Eddington was at the next one, in just a few days.

I was still brewing on it as I stepped back into the living room and found Elaine curled up on the sofa like she was right at home. Fuck knows why I hovered without cursing her for her ease, then sat down opposite her in the battered old armchair. I didn’t have the energy to do anything else. For once in my life my legs were tired, and my brain was tired to match. I had a whole load of spinning thoughts and deadlines and sensibilities I should be focused on—not on who started fucking Elaine Constantine in the ass when she was legal

enough to technically invite them to. That's what they'd been doing, of course. Coercing her to the point it would have been *consensual*, and she'd believe it so.

"Are you not heading back into the city, then?" she asked me, her voice tired.

"I will be."

She shrugged. "It's quite a way, back and forth every day. Aren't you at least going to take some thrill out of being here? I'll bare my ass for you, if you like."

I shook my head at her. "Is that how you flirt?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "You're Lucian Morelli. Lucian Morelli doesn't need offers. Lucian Morelli takes whatever the fuck he wants. And you want my ass again, right?"

I wanted nothing more than my bed upstairs. Fuck heading back into New York City; it would have to wait until morning. I looked at the clock and it was already far later than I'd imagined. The Elaine effect, no doubt, turning the minutes into hours with her chatter. "Get up to bed," I told her, and gestured to the doorway. "Fuck off and take your snarky mouth with you."

She hovered in her seat. I stared at her from across the room.

"I mean it," I said. "Don't hang around until I change my mind. My temper is fucking short."

I guess she came to her senses. She was up like a shot and straight on past me, only stopping to turn around in the doorway and fix me with those pretty blue eyes. "Thanks," she said, and walked away.

I didn't know quite what the fuck she was thanking me for, but it didn't matter. The way my stomach did a lurch at her smile was all I needed to know.

Elaine Constantine was no fucking good for me. I should stay the damn hell away from her and drive back into New York City where I belonged.

Fuck knows why I climbed the stairs anyway.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Elaine

I HEARD LUCIAN walk past my room on the way to his.

I heard the way he paused outside mine.

My heart raced like a train—two conflicting emotions at once. On one hand the instinctive fear of having a man outside my room was enough to make me feel sick and pull the covers up higher, and on the other...on the other...

I shouldn't even face it. There's no way I should be feeling what was on the other.

He continued on, and a fresh wave of goddamn *something* bloomed up in me.

Hurt. Rejection. Who knows.

One thing I did know was that I wanted Lucian Morelli to want me. I couldn't lie about that to myself anymore. No matter how many times I tried to deny it. I wanted Lucian Morelli to want me. I *needed* Lucian Morelli to want me.

I heard his door close at the end of the landing, and I felt so alone that I pulled the covers up over my head. I knew it would happen. It had to. I'd been revisiting memories I'd been running away from for years. I had no cocaine or alcohol to block it out, and that began to take its toll on me. I felt sick and desperate for the substances I relied on...and more ...I felt sick for more than that. I *needed* more than that. God help me, I needed more than that.

Life inside here was messing me up in ways I'd never known. I wasn't even thinking about life outside anymore. I wasn't thinking about the inter-family conflict that was brewing because of me, or how frantic people like Tristan and Harriet would be to bring me back. There were a few of them at least. I hadn't thought about the news reports that might be running on the TV or how Lucian was keeping me away from them this evening. Who knows what they'd be saying now?

Beyond all that, I was torn between thinking about the monsters from my past and the monster down the hall. There it was in the balance—monsters from my past, or the monster down the hall...

I chose the monster down the hall.

I'd spent years believing that touching myself where it felt good was a bad thing, but I couldn't stop my fingers slipping down between my legs as I thought about Lucian. I was thinking about the ferocity in his eyes, and how strong he'd been in the kitchen, and how angry he'd looked as I told him about the men who'd fucked me up. I was thinking about the curse in his tone, and how powerful that was, and how his fingers were so firm as he sliced the salami.

I was thinking about simple things mixed with his beastly soul.

If he even had a soul. He was a Morelli, after all.

I shouldn't have touched myself and thought about him, but I couldn't stop. I thought right back to Tinsley's masked ball where he'd first laid his hands on me and just how much that had swept me away. I thought back to the fear I'd felt in Jemma's apartment when he'd cornered me there, and just how different I was feeling now to the drugged-up mess who'd wanted to die at his hands—because that was the other thing that was changing...I wasn't so sure I wanted to die anymore. For real, I wasn't sure if I wanted to die.

My fingers were fast and light between my legs, teasing me as my breaths quickened. The memories blurred and grew

more intense, until I was back next to Stephen Cannon's body with Lucian on top of me, taking my ass. I shouldn't be thinking about that. I shouldn't be thinking about how Lucian had stabbed a man to death who'd been trying to rape me. Because that's what he'd done. My enemy had saved me. Oh fuck, Lucian Morelli had saved me...

My fingers pressed harder to my clit, faster, faster. My breaths were hitching, needy. *Lucian*. My fingers danced, desperate, and my thoughts were tumbling, more and more. More of the monster. More of his hate and his spite.

More of what he could do to me...because I wanted it.

I couldn't help but want it. I wanted him to be rough with me, and control me, and show me his strength and his power. I wanted him to be the first one to fuck my pussy and make me truly his. I wanted him to make me truly his.

Holy fuck, I wanted Lucian Morelli to truly make me his.

And then I wanted to stay that way.

I wanted to belong to Lucian Morelli.

Please no. Please.

My fingers were circling hard enough that I held my breath and raised my hips from the bed. I tried to slow my breathing but I couldn't, I was too lost in my thrills. My clit was alive and screaming, my body was desperate for the man who was out to tear me apart, and I couldn't stop myself from coming. I couldn't. I couldn't.

I came to the fantasy of belonging to Lucian Morelli for all time.

It was the most bad girl thing I'd ever done. I should never have the fantasy of belonging to Lucian Morelli for all time. He was a Morelli. An enemy I should be out to destroy, just as he was out to destroy me. They'd always been out to ruin our family, and now they might do it. The Morellis might team up with the Power brothers and hurt my family...because of me.

I rolled over in bed and caught my breath, my mind churning.

I had so many questions and fears and guilty thoughts and needs.

This should've been a simple case of kidnapping. I thought I'd be bound up and punished until I was nothing but a broken shell of the woman. How the holy fuck was I eating pasta and talking about hobbies? How was it *me* trying to push him into hurting me? Were we in some kind of surreal dimension where I'd been thumped on the head and woken up in cuckoo land?

Jesus, Lucian had been the one person in my life to hear my story. I'd told him that. I'd told him all my secrets, and he'd listened to them all without so much as a smile at my suffering.

This really was cuckoo land.

I was still lying on my side under the covers when I pulled my knees up to my chest and tried to settle down to some sleep. I needed to stop my whirring mind, but it wouldn't slow down, churning, churning. That's when it started churning over the things I'd told the Morelli heir—all of the nasty nights I'd spent afraid of who was coming and what they were going to do to me. Once again I was back in my own pool of fear, once again craving the drink and drugs to block it out of me. Once again there was no coke and champagne to bail me out.

The night was quiet and cold, what little was left of it. The closed door was an ominous shadow in the corner of the room, and the covers over my head didn't stop me peering out at it, like I'd learned to do so many times in my past. I started shaking, like always. My mouth turned dry, like always. I gripped my knees tighter to my chest, like always.

As always, it didn't work. I was just the broken girl shaking in the dark.

I switched the light on, but it didn't make the slightest difference, just seemed to make the closed door more

ominous. It should have been ominous given the beast that was down the hall, and how he may come for me. But it wasn't. The beast down the hall wasn't ominous at all. Strange but true. The beast down the hall felt like my safety, not my fear.

I threw back my covers and swung my feet down onto the floor. I had no idea what the hell I was thinking as I crept my way across the room and pressed my ear to the closed door.

I couldn't hear him out there. He was definitely still in his room. Definitely still down the hall, probably deep in slumber since he undoubtedly had a trip into New York City in the morning...the *early* morning...

My crazy took on a fresh level of insane when I eased the door handle down and peeked my way out onto the landing. It was dark, and empty. Lucian's door was closed at the end, I could just about see it in the shadows.

I held my breath as I stepped out. I still had his damn shirt on, and it felt floaty against my thighs, still sore from where I'd cut them earlier. I ghosted my way closer to his room with my heart pounding and my nerves on fire, and I should've raced back to my shitty bed in the other shitty room, but I didn't. I pressed myself up against his door and placed my hand on the handle.

Please, God, what the fuck am I doing?

I turned the handle as gently as I could, and I was shaking. I was a wreck. I was insane as I slowly opened the door.

I was fully expecting Lucian to sit stark upright in bed, then come charging after me, dragging me back down the hallway and belting me at the very least before locking me back in my room. But no. He didn't.

Lucian Morelli was asleep in his bed, fast asleep to the world.

I should've stolen his keys and got the hell out of there—driving his car back into the city and condemning him for good, but I didn't. Hell knows why, but I didn't.

I waited a full minute at least before I dared to ease the covers back just enough to slip myself inside of them. I stayed right on the edge of the mattress, trying not to disturb him, keeping as far away as I could. Still, I couldn't help myself. His warmth was too inviting. Bizarrely enough, I felt safer next to the monster than I had anywhere else in the whole damn world. Nobody would ever get to me in this place... nobody but the monster himself.

It was sad but fucking true that the monster was fast becoming the one man I *wanted* to get me, only this time it wasn't about him wiping me out and freeing me from my pitiful misery...

This time it was about becoming the monster's prey in a whole other way...

I couldn't deny it...I wanted the monster to love me enough to keep me safe...

It was true...

Oh my God, it was true...

I wanted the monster to love me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lucian

IHAD NEVER overslept in my life, not like I did that morning. I awoke from my bed with the daylight fast streaming through the window, cursing myself...only to find Elaine Constantine in my bed next to me.

My little doll was in my bed next to me.

I stared in shock at the figure at my side, curled up tight with her knees to her chest, sleeping as soundly as I had been. My first instinct was to shake her the fuck awake and drag her the fuck out of there, but I didn't. I fucking didn't. I just stared at her like a fucking fool.

Elaine Constantine was in my bed.

In my fucking bed.

Nobody was ever in my bed, let alone a fucking Constantine.

It was when I twisted and reached for my phone on the bedside table that she stirred beside me. It was when she stretched out her arms, still dressed in my shirt, that I realized just how fast asleep she had been. It appears she was going as damn fucking crazy as I was, choosing to sneak into her soon-to-be destroyer's bed in the middle of the night.

She rolled over, and that's when she tensed and leaped up in bed. She was terrified in that moment, eyes wide as she registered just how hard I was staring at her.

"I, um..." she began. "The room down there was..."

“Was what?” I asked, my voice gruff with sleep.

“It was, um...”

I pointed a finger at her. “We’re not having a fucking sleepover, Elaine.”

She looked annoyed at that, throwing the covers off and moving to get out of there, but I took hold of her arm before she managed it. “I’m *sorry*, alright?” she said in her usual snarky tone, then tried to wrench away from me, but I wouldn’t let her.

I yanked her back around until she was facing me, and I couldn’t work out what she was thinking as I met her eyes, still trying to squirm her way from my grip. “You must be insane,” I said. “Climbing in bed with me. Absolutely fucking insane.”

“Yeah, well, I probably am,” she said, and gave up the fight.

She slumped down and let out a sigh, and I found myself staring at her in a whole new way. Brave woman. She had climbed into bed with me. Next to me. Because she wanted to, not because she was dragged there. She really did have some fire in her.

My phone vibrating on the bedside table pulled me back to my senses. Crap. Eleven missed calls from various people at Morelli Holdings...and one of them was my father.

“We’ll talk about this when I get back,” I growled at her.

“Why don’t you drop me off in the city on your way there?”

I scoffed at her. “Like I’m ever going to drop you back in the fucking city, Elaine. I’m not letting you go. Ever. So get that idea out of your head. Nothing’s changed because we had a bit of a chat in the kitchen last night.”

“And ate some pasta,” she added, and there it fucking was again, that cheeky smile. “Don’t forget the wonders of slicing salami just right, Lucian. We’re almost besties now.”

“Fuck you,” I said and pulled my pants on.

I left her cross-legged on my bed, in my damn shirt, with her messy blonde curls, looking like a conquest, even though I’d never had one. Elliot Morelli would make fun of me if he knew.

I didn’t say goodbye and neither did she.

Traffic was insane as I made my way into the city, and I tried to play it cool as I returned the calls on my phone. All except my father’s. I didn’t return the call from my father.

My gut was twisted up as I neared Morelli Holdings. I had no idea what the hell I was going to say to my father when he started asking questions.

As it turned out, I didn’t have all that long to think about it.

He was already waiting for me when I arrived.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Elaine

I STAYED IN Lucian's bed for a long while after I heard him disappear. His bed was much more comfortable than the one he'd given me—no surprise there—but it was about more than that. It smelled like him. The covers smelled like my monster. I was engulfed by the scent of him.

I could've stayed there for days like a schoolgirl with a crush.

I finally dragged myself downstairs when the morning was truly underway, dropping myself onto the sofa and switching on the TV. The news channels blared out about my disappearance. People I'd never met before were being interviewed, commenting and speculating on what had happened to me. There was a police helpline to call with any information.

My family was all over the channels with tearful requests for people to find me. It ate me up inside to think Harriet or Vivian were crying for me.

Part of me expected to see Tristan talking about my disappearance. There was a big chunk of me that thought maybe he would be all guns blazing to let the world know about my interactions with Lucian, but there was nothing. Not a peep from him. I hoped he was doing okay. Just as long as nobody had reached him, or worse, silenced him.

I turned my mind away from that as best as I could.

Lucian wouldn't have needed to silence him because he had nothing to say that would have any real weight to it. I left a note on my counter. I blamed it on the Power brothers in my own handwriting. Tristan would have believed my note. Not that I expected him to believe everything I said, but this was beyond my usual level of lying, for sure.

I got a weird tickle inside me as I pulled myself away from the TV to grab some breakfast. It was a rush of something in my stomach. *Instinct*. I stopped on the spot in the hallway and turned to the front door, and there was something about it, an impulse to check the handle. I reached out and didn't expect to get anywhere, because surely not. I'd heard it slam when Lucian was on his way out, and he'd always lock it, of course he would, only this morning he was rushing.

Maybe...just maybe...

My heart leapt a mile when the door swung open with a creak.

Oh my God, I was free! Free!

It felt so weird stepping onto the porch, because I could run. There were lanes and tracks and roads stretching back out toward the city. No doubt I could find someone, *anyone* to hear my pleas and screams and efforts to get heard. I could have Lucian Morelli condemned before he'd ever make it back out of Morelli Holdings. I could destroy him. I *could*.

I grabbed my discarded shoes from behind the door and slipped them on with shaking hands. The world outside was fresh and cold, and the sun was up bright in the sky. Yeah, I could run from here. The driveway was long, sure, but it was doable. I could wrap up in warm clothes and make my dash for it. I could see the back of Lucian Morelli for all time, and cause an inter-family battle that would stand one hell of a good chance of swinging in the Constantines favor, just so long as I could shake off this damn craziness about wanting him...

I could do it. Surely, I could. I should be able to. I should definitely be able to. He was nothing but an enemy of mine

who wanted to see me torn apart, and I needed to remember that. I should damn well remember that with every breath in my body. *Yes*.

Fuck. I cursed myself out loud when I felt the pang of *no* in my belly. *No*. What the fuck was *no*? But it *was* *no*. I couldn't do it. Fuck my life, I couldn't. There was no damn way I could shake off the damn craziness about wanting him. Not in a million damn years.

Fuck it.

I wandered around the yard, still hoping to talk some sense into myself. The grounds around the house looked pretty wild, compared to the sleek modernity of the interior. I doubted Lucian was nearly as good a gardener as he was a pasta maker. I couldn't imagine him ever taking active care of the space. I'd never really had a garden, not of my own.

I stepped out onto a patch of grass and spun myself around, truly soaking it all in. There were big sprawling trees and plenty of scope to make this space into something truly amazing. I could do that. I could learn to. I could read some books, and watch some YouTube videos, and get a grip of what would work and where. I cursed myself again as I thought it through. It was nothing but more craziness that would never happen. I needed to stop living such a dream.

I kept the front door open as I made myself some pancakes for breakfast, unable to face shutting the world out. I ventured out onto the lawn with my plate, loving the breeze in my face as I munched my food with a smile. Yeah, I liked it out here. I really damn well liked it.

I didn't want to watch anymore shit TV, not when there was so much better outside to be looking at. I wrapped up warm in one of Lucian's designer sweaters from his wardrobe, then tried to find some gardening equipment in the garage. It surprised me to find a set of spades and trowels ready and waiting. Maybe he did have a tiny streak of gardener in him. Maybe I'd even find out.

I was outside on the nearest flower bed on the lawn, dredging up weeds with a trowel when I finally condemned myself for what I was doing. Surely I couldn't work on Lucian Morelli's countryside garden? But I could. I did.

In one of the most bizarre and surreal choices of all time, I, Elaine Constantine of the Constantine family line, turned her back on escaping from the Morelli monster's mansion and tended to his goddamn garden instead.

Go fucking figure.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lucian

NO ONE WANTED to meet my eyes as I walked toward my father in the main lobby of Morelli Holdings. He watched me approach with his usual cold expression. No, they didn't want to look, but they couldn't help it. My father meeting me in the lobby was a fucking spectacle.

He put his hand out at the last second, and I shook it.

“Meeting room.” He was a terse motherfucker. “Now.”

My father walked beside me to the elevator. It was a silent, tense ride to the ninth floor. He stalked in front of me on the way into the room and took a seat at the head of the table.

I sat across from him, leaned back, and met his eyes.

“You're having a fucking mental breakdown,” he said.

“Hardly. I've just been busy.”

“Busy chasing down the Constantines?”

I pretended that I didn't understand his logic. “Excuse me?”

“Are you finding more Constantines to fuck now that Elaine has been taken?”

“Is that what Alto told you?” I didn't move, other than to release a breath. I wasn't going to let him think he was making me nervous. A strange fucking feeling, being nervous.

He leaned back in his seat to match me. Two Morellis in the same pose, staring at each other across the meeting table.

“He heard people are chasing after Tinsley.”

A wave of annoyance at Trenton twisted in my gut. I could have killed him right there and then. Still, I should be grateful. The accusation had fuck all of a Morelli criminality to it compared to the true extent of my crimes.

“I didn’t come here to discuss Trenton’s rumors with you. Is there something you wanted to say? If you don’t, I have other things to attend to.”

His jaw clenched, face reddening. His irritation was palpable. Something else, too. “You need to come back to Morelli Holdings.”

“Or else what?” I was flippant. An asshole. Just like him.

“Or the board will know you’ll leave whenever you damn well please.”

“Then the board would be right, because that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

He swore. “Christ, Lucian. You’re lucky you can’t feel pain. I’d whip you fucking raw.”

“If you laid a hand on me, you’d regret it. But I’ll make the decision much easier for you. As long as I’m gone, I’m not a threat. If you want me to come back? Make me CEO.” I didn’t think he’d actually do it, no matter how desperate he was for me to come back. It was more about smoke and mirrors. Let him think that I wanted to be CEO, when what I really wanted was to fuck my Constantine doll. She was only a short ride away.

“You leave the Constantines the fuck alone. We team up with the Power brothers or we do nothing at all. No fucking thing. No digging, no chasing, no attempting to tear them down.”

Part of me wanted to laugh in his face and say he had no idea what the hell I’d been doing. Instead I used the opportunity to use my truths as my strengths. “I’ve had fuck

all to do with Tinsley Constantine,” I told him. “I can assure you of that.”

He paused for long seconds, our eyes fixed firm and cold on each other’s. “Good. You’d better keep it that way.” He leaned in closer. “What the fuck are you thinking, Lucian? What the hell is going on with you?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Hanging out in the BDSM club?”

“Something like that.”

It struck me in that moment just how distant I’d grown from my family. He was referring to a point in the past where I’d been heavily involved with Violent Delights, happily focused on indulging my thrills with the women there. “Are we done with this little father-son conversation? I’ve got more important things to be doing than justifying my sexual interests.”

I knew there was a whole world of questions in his throat that he wanted to lash out at me, but he didn’t. Our lack of closeness had destroyed any bridges into my privacy he’d ever managed to build.

He gestured to the door, as though this was still his kingdom and not mine. I was already up and leaving when he spoke again.

“You go anywhere near any more of the Constantines without Power brothers’ approval and I’ll make an example of you. You’ll wish you’d never been born.”

It was another threat in the same vein, the Constantine vein. The vein that was turning me into the biggest fool I’d ever known. Still, it didn’t even touch me.

I smiled. “Are you upset because I’m not obeying your orders? Or because the stock prices for Morelli Holdings are down more than they’ve been in years?”

“You step up to the plate here at Holdings, or you step down until you can sort your shit out. Play your bullshit games

or hang out at your BDSM club, but don't ruin Morelli Holdings.”

“I'm not ruining anything. You're doing a great job of that by yourself.”

I wasn't interested in what my father was threatening. It didn't even bother me that Morelli Holdings was struggling. Well, it did bother me. Because it harmed more people than just me and my father. It impacted my mother and my sisters. It impacted the board. Our stockholders. And it really impacted the thousands of employees.

So yes, Morelli Holdings mattered to me.

But it was less important than Elaine Constantine.

The truth was a hard one to accept, and it took my breath away before I made it back to the elevator. I'd never been floored by emotion in my life. I'd never known such a rush of conflict, never mind how to fucking deal with it.

I forced myself into the elevator and selected the lobby. It was the slowest descent of my life.

I couldn't walk the line between Morelli Holdings and Elaine. There was no way I could juggle the two of them. I couldn't indulge the temptress and my wants for her and still wrestle control away from my father. It was impossible. The whole thing was fucking impossible.

I had to make my choice.

It should have been Holdings. Of course, it should've been Morelli Holdings.

I could take that sweet virginity of hers and revel in her pain and dismiss her into the trash where she belonged as a Constantine. Only it wasn't Holdings I wanted.

It was her.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Elaine

WHEN LUCIAN'S CAR pulled up in the driveway, I was still outside with a trowel in the flower bed. My heart leaped as I realized just what the hell I'd done by staying in this place and risking my life every second I was around him, but it was too late.

My decision had already been made.

The sun was still high in the sky, the afternoon barely half done when he'd parked up in the garage and was heading to the front door with his keys in his hand. I could have hidden in the bushes and pretended I'd already run away from him, but I didn't.

"Over here, honey!" I waved my trowel in the air.

The monster stopped and stared, fixing me in his piercing eyes as he stomped in my direction. I carried on digging the soil and pulling the weeds out, like it wasn't the most insane decision I'd ever made and I wasn't kidnapped in a hole of a place belonging to my archenemy.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

His tone was blunt, but it wasn't aggressive. His eyes were wild but not full of hate as he stared down at me.

I shrugged. "Does that surprise you?"

He couldn't hold back a smirk. "You're doing alright on that. I would've expected a lot more wallowing and begging

on the coke front.”

Yeah, I would too. I’d surprised myself there. I was firmly on the same page as him on expecting the wallowing and begging for lines of powder. That and bottles of fizz.

Lucian tossed his keys in his hand as he scoped out the pile of weeds I’d been digging up. I did a silly little bow from my knees and waved the trowel in the air like some kind of superstar as I spoke again.

“Yes, I know, I know. It seems I am quite the capable gardener, doesn’t it? Despite me not being a success with slicing salami.”

He tried to scowl. “There’s you with that sassy mouth again. You should be a more convincing kidnap victim, you know. Maybe then I’d take pity on you and let you go.”

I found my bitchy tone at that. “Screw you and your pity. I’ll never bathe in pity, no matter how rough it gets. I’m no *pet* for anyone. Not outside of the bedroom anyway.”

We were both staring at each other, and the Morelli-Constantine hate should have been bristling as strongly as ever. He should have been dragging me inside and telling me I’d missed my escape chances and more fool me, and I should be cursing myself for ever considering staying in this damn place, but we weren’t doing any of it, just damn well staring.

“I left the door unlocked, I’m guessing?” he asked me. “That’s what happens when you sneak into my bed overnight and fuck my alarm over. Maybe you should try it more often.”

“I didn’t fuck your alarm over. You were sleeping so deep you didn’t get up in time.”

“Regardless. I rushed out and left the door unlocked, did I?”

I shrugged like it was no big deal. “I noticed it on my way to get some breakfast. I’ve had plenty of time to get the hell away from here.”

“Yes,” he said. “You have. So why didn’t you?”

I didn't really have an answer for that. Not one that made sense. I couldn't tell him that the thought of leaving him and this place gave me a sick pang in my stomach and nothing but a sense of dread at walking away. I could hardly say that I'd stayed wrapped up in his bed covers for hours after he'd gone this morning, just to smell him. I couldn't admit that I'd fantasized about making this place into a dream home that I could dance around for the rest of my life.

"Really, Elaine," he pushed. "Why didn't you run?"

We stared at each other some more, and I couldn't fight the flutters in my belly. Something was happening between us... even under the hate and the craziness and the utter carnage in our world, something was happening...

"I don't know," I lied, then realized I had a question of my own. "Why are you back so soon? You can't have been in the city more than a couple of hours."

"You're asking for it, you know that?"

"I'm asking you to fuck me, you know that? Even if it's in the grass here, just get your cock out and fuck me, please."

We stared again, and my mind was churning, thinking. Why the hell was Lucian Morelli in a garden in the middle of nowhere while his empire was moving at full speed in the city? It didn't make any sense. None of this made any sense in the goddamn slightest.

"You are crazy, Elaine. You could have been back anywhere else in Bishop's Landing by now. You could have had me imprisoned. It would have been my mistake for leaving the fucking door unlocked."

"Could have been, but I'm not," I said. "I guess I really am crazy, aren't I? Or maybe you left it open on purpose. Maybe this was a test. Am I passing?"

Lucian Morelli grabbed me up from my knees and slammed me into the wall at the side of his crappy house. I thought he would hurt me, finally...

I thought he would tear me apart, this time for good...

But he didn't. Oh fuck, he didn't.

Lucian Morelli slammed me into the wall at the side of his crappy house and kissed me like he meant it. He kissed me until I moaned into his mouth and kissed him back.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Lucian

I COULDN'T FIGHT it any longer. The truth was too strong in my mind. Elaine was too good a temptress, and I couldn't resist her anymore. I pressed her up tight to the outside wall, and I kissed her, only this time it wasn't laced with hate or spite or the need to tear her to pieces. This time it was about something I'd never felt before, something as alien to me as pain.

I was in love with her.

I was in love with a Constantine.

Both the Constantines and the Morellis would kill me for my crime, and I wouldn't blame them. I'd kill *myself* for my crime if I didn't love myself too damn much.

There was as much truth and need in the way she kissed me back. We were frantic, desperate beyond belief as we made our way along the wall toward the front porch. I backed her in through the front door with my mouth still hungry on hers, and it didn't matter which direction we were headed in, just as long as her body was next to mine. I was confused and split apart by conflicting desires. I wanted to save her from her past and savage her in her future both at once. I craved her pain and her tears and her cries of my name, only this time it wasn't power and punishment driving me, it was more than that. It was fascination for her body and her desires and her needs, because she needed it like I did. Elaine was a masochist to my sadist, the yin to my yang, the light to my dark, the blonde to my black.

Elaine was the Constantine to my Morelli.

She mumbled against my mouth. “Hurt me, Lucian. Make me yours.”

I growled and bit her bottom lip, shunting her toward the living room. “You’re already mine. Your pussy will be the jewel in my crown.”

“It’s given, not stolen.” Her words gave me another chill of a thrill. She wasn’t stolen, she was given. I’d never wanted anything I’d been given before. I’d always claimed or bought it, taking everything on my own terms.

Strangely enough, I didn’t want to take the jewel in the crown—not so quickly or frantically. I wanted to enjoy every second of holding back.

Elaine was wearing so much of my crap against the cold. I tugged my sweater up and over her head and cast it away. I tore my shirt apart so hard the buttons sprang off, and there she was, beautiful in her bra. I tugged my pants off her, oversized and hanging, and she wasn’t wearing any panties underneath. She was naked perfection as I unclipped her bra and thrust her through the living room doorway.

I held her wrists over her head against the living room wall, pinning her firmly enough that she let out a moan. She rubbed against me, that sassy smile of hers so pretty it sent me wild. I ground my hips against hers, then forced her legs open with my thigh, and we were right back there, in the bathroom at Tinsley Constantine’s ball. If I would’ve believed in fate, I would’ve believed in it in that moment. If there was such a thing as destiny this would be ours, star-crossed lovers whose paths belonged as one, no matter how much it would cost them.

“Keep your hands above your head,” I growled at her, and she nodded. “Good girl.”

My fingers slipped down her throat and along her collarbone. My mouth was back on hers as I took hold of her tits and squeezed hard enough that she moaned against my

lips. I squeezed harder, twisted, made her moan louder. My thigh rubbed against her pussy with a force that made her cry out, but still she squirmed against me. Yes, Elaine was a masochist. She wanted this.

I was as desperate as she was as I dropped to my knees before her. I, Lucian Morelli, dropped to my knees in front of a Constantine with the sole desire to pleasure her. The very thought was insanity. My mouth was hungry for her pussy, my tongue was a snake against her clit, around and around in a rhythm that had her hands in my hair.

“No!” I barked. “Hands above your head!”

She did as she was told. Her arms were up straight, hands flat to the wall as I ate her out with renewed vigor. She was mine. Her pussy was mine.

Elaine tensed up as I did the unthinkable and prepared her beautiful slit for my cock. I wet my own fingers before I pushed two inside her, slowly enough that she murmured. I was so gentle. Even as I nipped at her clit, I was gentle inside her.

“My God, Lucian! Please! Yes! More!”

I didn't give her more. I made her wait, slowly, slowly, back and forth.

“Please! More!” she cried.

“Quiet!” I grunted, and once again she did as she was told, holding her breath as I teased her with my tongue.

I was going to make Elaine Constantine come with my fingers inside her. I wanted to hear her come, from my knees, with my mouth on her pussy and my fingers rammed deep.

I worked like a perfect beast against her clit, licking, sucking, nibbling as she whimpered. She tensed and she squirmed as I slid two fingers into her, and her hands dropped down the wall a touch, even though she did what she was told and kept them raised. She moaned and pushed against me, and slowly, ever so slowly, she lost herself to the sensations as I

circled my fingers inside her, my tongue lapping at her clit, feeling her tension as the orgasm bloomed inside her. Her pussy was divine, a flower that would be the most beautiful thing in the world to stretch open wide when I thrust my cock inside her. Only it wouldn't be now. I would be holding out on those petals until I couldn't stand it anymore.

The noises were beautiful as she crested. Her murmurs were the most intoxicating sound. My face was wet with her juices when she shuddered and buckled and gasped to find her breath. Elaine Constantine was a perfect little doll when she came for me.

I still tasted her when I got to my feet and pushed my tongue in her mouth to dance with hers.

I tugged hard on her nipples and claimed her hot mouth with mine until she was squirming and fucking drooling.

Fuck, I loved kissing Elaine.

I was in *love* with Elaine fucking Constantine.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and held me close, and I wanted it. I couldn't deny it anymore, not any of it. I wanted Elaine Constantine to hold me. I'd never wanted anyone to hold me in my life, but her touch was magic to me.

I thought she'd be done and finished when I pulled away from her mouth and let go of her nipples, but her breaths were still fast and light, and her eyes were wide on mine.

"Don't stop," she whispered. "Please, Lucian, don't stop."

I thought she wanted my tongue back on her clit, but she didn't. Her cheeks were flushed pink when she dropped her eyes from mine, squirming nervous.

"Please, Lucian. Hurt me some more. I need more pain."



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Elaine

I WAS STILL flying high when Lucian pushed me forward over the arm of the sofa. My breaths were still shallow and my clit was still tingling as I bared my ass to him and he slapped me, hard. I loved it. The sensations set me alight. *This* was the kind of pain I needed above any other. I needed to be hurting, but high, and I was so high I was soaring...being hurt by the man I loved.

The man I *loved*.

The very thought had me grinning as he hit me.

His slaps were quick, but not so quick they had me squealing. He was paced and steady, and that's when I knew it, for the very first time I'd ever known it. He was hurting me for me and not for him. He was giving me pain for my pleasure and not his own. It was the most amazing feeling.

My flesh was alive, burning just right where he'd hit me. I couldn't hold back a moan as he slipped his fingers between my thighs and pushed them inside me, teasing just like he'd done before. This time I was ready for him. I was bucking back against him for more. More fingers, more slaps, more Lucian. More Lucian, more Lucian, more Lucian.

The gorgeous beast gave me more Lucian.

"Tell me you fucking want this," he said, but there was no venom in his words. The monster's words were dripping with lust.

My voice was desperate. "Please. I want it."

I heard him unbuckle his belt, heard it sliding through its loops, and I tensed, waiting, only he didn't hit me. There was no torrent of thrashes or promises of how he was going to hurt me. Not this time. "Tell me you want it, Elaine. Make me believe how much you want it."

It was an amazing rush, to have to convince Lucian Morelli that I wanted him to hurt me before he would hit me. I looked back at him over my shoulder with pleading eyes. "Please, Lucian. I really do want it. I promise you I want it. I need it. I need *you*."

He trailed the leather across my ass, and I clenched. "Make me believe you want it, sweetheart," he whispered, and I felt it right down in my stomach.

He said sweetheart like he meant it, because he did. I really was his sweetheart.

Not just his doll.

My eyes must have spoken as loud as my voice when I gave him the words.

"Please, please, I want it. I want your belt on my ass. Please give me your belt on my ass. Please..." I was so ready for it when he hit me. One, *yes*. Two, *yes*. Three, *yes!*

I cried out on the fourth thrash, and he paused, waiting as I rocked, then stilled.

He waited for me to be ready for the fifth thrash. My God, he waited for me to be ready.

Lucian was a master at mastering me. His touch was incredible, teasing then thrashing, teasing then thrashing. The sensations blurred between pleasure and pain, like they normally did, only this time there was more to it. I was being guided, played like a violin by a man who wanted to play me right.

My ass was hurting almost too much to bear by the time he flipped me onto my back, arching me tightly over the sofa arm. My flesh was throbbing, raw. Divine.

“Are you going to trust me?” he asked, and his eyes were so sincere in their beautiful power, no longer a foe.

The nod of my head was genuine. “Yes, Lucian, I’m going to trust you. I do trust you.”

I did trust him. I trusted a Morelli. The very idea was insane, but it was true. I trusted Lucian Morelli more than I trusted anyone, even more than I trusted myself.

“Spread your legs nice and wide for me, Elaine,” he said, and I did it without hesitation.

I stretched my thighs wide open and presented myself for him, wet and wanting. He brushed his thumb against my clit and let out a gorgeous moan.

“You are a beautiful creature. Your sweet blonde pussy is to die for.” He smirked at his own words. “It is though, isn’t it? Your sweet blonde pussy is literally to die for. I’ll be a dead man for my crimes.”

“I’ll be a dead woman for wanting you back,” I whispered. “We’ll both be dead, Lucian.”

His smile made my belly flutter along with my clit. “At least we’d die happy.”

I couldn’t hold back a giggle. “I’d die happier than I’ve ever been in my life.”

His thumb was working magic on my clit, and my ass was still throbbing underneath me. I could have laid there for a lifetime enjoying it, watching him. It was him who coaxed me to more.

“Trust me, baby,” he whispered and then he raised his hand. “Keep those legs spread nice and wide. I’m gonna take your pussy in so many more ways than one.”

I would keep my legs spread as wide for him as I could for as long as I lived. I held them up high, offering him everything. I knew he was going to slap me where it hurt the most, and I wanted it. People had hurt me in so many ways

before, but never because I wanted them to, and never with such care in their eyes.

I cried out when he slapped my pussy nice and hard, but I kept my legs spread. I bucked and cried and squirmed as he hit me over and over, but it didn't matter, I still kept my legs spread wide. He hurt my pussy, and I loved him for it.

"You're such a good girl," he told me, and it made me glow inside.

I'd always wanted to be a good girl for someone I loved.

I was a good girl as he teased my nipples then twisted my tits until I cried out for him. He did it slowly enough that I was begging for more, seeking the pain.

"Please fuck me," I asked more than once. But he didn't.

We were there for hours in the living room, and all of those hours were about me and not him. He gave me every scrap of his attention and care and time. Even when I tried to grab for his cock, he wouldn't let me. It was all about my body. He took care of me.

I was exhausted, burning and breaking in the most incredible of ways when he made me come for the third time over. I was sweating and smiling and lost in my bliss, and the monster was smiling right back at me as he grabbed my arms and pulled me up to my feet, then against him.

"You are one tired little doll," he told me, then wrapped me up tight in his arms. "How about we get Chef Morelli to make you some dinner, hmm?"

I couldn't stop my laugh as I held him back. "Yes, please."



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lucian

I'D NEVER ENJOYED doing anything for anyone. Gratitude meant nothing to me other than weakness. It was an entirely new sensation to enjoy doing things for Elaine.

I enjoyed making her come until she was a quivering mess, and hurting her in a way her body ate up in bliss, and most surprisingly of all I enjoyed making her pasta while she watched me.

She looked more beautiful than ever as she stood by my side at the kitchen counter, swamped in one of my clean shirts from the wardrobe. Her hair was wild, and her eyes were wide, and her grin was wide to match.

I knew one thing for certain before I'd even finished slicing the salami. I was going to enjoy hurting the people who'd hurt her. I was going to savor every fucking second of it.

“Have you quit the family company, then?” she asked me, with a twinkle in her eyes as I stirred the pasta. “Or is that still a big secret? Is it still none of my business?”

I couldn't hold back a smile. “I'm taking a vacation.”

“A vacation?” she asked, then laughed. “I can't imagine you ever taking a vacation.”

“You and the rest of the people who know me.”

It was a very true observation on her part. I couldn't recall ever taking a vacation in my life. I hated non-productive time.

“So...where are we going on this vacation?” she laughed. “A beach resort somewhere amazing?”

I tipped my head with a smirk. “Bishop’s Landing. I’ve heard there is a nice little countryside house which needs some gardening work.”

I loved the way she grinned.

We ate in silence as we munched at our pasta, but this time it wasn’t tense; it was easy. A lovely ease between two people who really like each other’s company. *Like* was an understatement, but I was still struggling with speaking the word in my own mind, even to myself. Two people who really *love* each other’s company.

I couldn’t remember the last time someone had looked at me with love in their eyes like Elaine did for me. It was a stunning thing. Her eyes had never looked like such magical pools of blue as they did when they were filled with happy adoration. I’d never grow tired of looking back at them. I could only assume that mine were filled with a sheen of adoration to match. Even the thought was still too bizarre to imagine.

Still, I may be a *lover*, but I was a hater, too. The love for Elaine fueled the evil inside me in other directions, and it fueled it hard. I despised the men who’d broken her pretty little soul when she was a sweet young butterfly with innocent wings. I’d always enjoyed hurting people, but I’d never wanted it with the passion I felt down deep as I thought about tearing those sickos to pieces.

“You going to curl up with me on the sofa like a boyfriend?” Elaine teased as she collected my dish from me. “Is that what you are now? Are you my boyfriend?” She was joking. Her humor was all over her face. I didn’t answer her humor with more. My reply was deadly serious.

“I’ve never been a boyfriend in my life. I’ve never even been close. This situation is entirely new ground.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve never been a girlfriend, either.” She laughed. “I was being silly, not serious. I’m hardly going to be talking marriage and kids next, am I? Just because we like playing around with orgasms and eating pasta together doesn’t mean we’re suddenly soulmates.”

“It would be hard to be soulmates with someone who’s soulless,” I told her. “Believe me, sweetheart. I’m pretty damn soulless.”

Her eyes were wide as she looked at me. “Yesterday, I would’ve believed you.”

I couldn’t find a reply to that. The whole concept of having a soul and a girlfriend and any kind of romance was enough to make me feel strangely fluffy inside, and I didn’t like fluffy. Fluffy was for pathetic wimps and pussies.

Even in my *fluffy* loved-up state I couldn’t bring myself to curl up on the sofa with Elaine and watch shit on TV. I made for an early night, and she headed up along with me with no mention of the room down the hallway. She climbed straight on into my bed along with me once we were done with our showers.

“Are you going to actually fuck me soon?” she asked as I pulled her close under the covers.

“It’s the jewel in the crown,” I said. “When I take it, I’ll be taking it slowly. It’ll be worth waiting for.”

Her little giggle was cute. “I’ve been waiting quite a lot of years for it. I’m sure a little while longer isn’t going to hurt.”

Her sweet little yawn was divine. Even the most innocent things she did made her a pure temptress.

I wish I could have gone to sleep when she did. Her flutters of breath were sweet against my chest. I held onto her as she slept, loving the heat from her and thinking about how fucking bizarre my life was turning out to be. I hadn’t given a thought to Seamus or Duncan or Morelli Holdings. I’d been thinking of nothing but Elaine since the very second I left the

office that morning and came speeding back home to find her outside.

Home.

This was really home now. Elaine was my home.

Elaine was the jewel in my crown.

For the first time in my life, I felt I needed to do more to deserve it, to *earn* that particular treasure.

She was still sleeping as I eased out from beside her, settling down into the covers like an angel. I made sure I was out of her view when I finally accepted my own need for revenge against those who hurt Elaine and my need to do it now. I had been planning on starting with Colonel Hardwick or the pricks on the charity auction scene, but no. I had one person at the forefront of my mind that night.

The first piece of shit to touch her.

I was aching with the need to destroy someone when I checked out *Reverend Lynch* online. Interestingly enough, he wasn't all that far from Bishop's Landing. He was at an abbey down at Renyard Lake, only twenty minutes down the road back toward New York City.

Hmm. Maybe there was such a thing as fate after all.

As soon as I saw the details of his manor online I felt the surge of evil in me down deep. There was no way I could fight it, not even for a single minute longer. The man had to suffer, and he had to suffer soon. Him and the others, one by one. I'd enjoy destroying every single one of them.

I checked that Elaine was still sleeping like a baby and headed on out to the car in the middle of the night. I left a scrawled note on the kitchen counter with a *Be back soon, baby*, sarcastic, like I really was going to get any good at being a *boyfriend*. The roads were empty as I sped toward Renyard Lake. My brain was churning like an evil bastard as I plotted the ways I was going to hurt him. So many options, so many of them appealing enough to make my pulse race.

I'd packed a blade from the kitchen in my glovebox. A gun would be far too impersonal. I wanted to get up close. Pointed and sadistic. I wanted to see the fear in his eyes as I exacted Elaine's revenge.

The manor was on top of me before I'd even registered I was there. It was a sprawling thing, slightly back from the lane. It was the easiest thing in the world to pull into the driveway. It would be the easiest thing in the world to kill him too, considering the security around this place was non-existent. Still, it would be, wouldn't it? Who would ever be heading out here to kill a reverend?

I felt sick in my gut as I waited for an answer, imagining all too clearly how Elaine's sweet little body must have been shaking when she arrived at this place every weekend. When the door swung open it was an old woman standing there. Her expression was little more than a scowl.

I remembered Elaine's secret. I remembered the nasty woman who'd led her through the house. "Margaret?" I asked, and the old woman nodded.

"Yeah..." she said, with a tip of her head. "And you are...?"

"Lucian Morelli," I told her. "Reverend Lynch should be expecting me."

She stared at me with piercing eyes under the porch light. "At almost midnight?"

"Morelli," I reminded her.

"Hmm. Come inside then," she offered, and I did it. I stepped over that threshold with a smile on my face.

I could've taken her out along with him, breaking her neck in a heartbeat, but I didn't. I wanted to use her to scope the place out for everything it was. My eyes were fixed on our surroundings as we passed by, my head still full of everything Elaine would have been seeing and feeling when she was walking the same road. It was a disgusting façade of religion. I hated it with every fucking bone in my body. This was a new

thing for me. I'd never hated anything with such vigor as I did this shithole and everything it stood for.

"Wait here, please," she told me, and stepped away along the hall once we'd turned a corner.

I was expecting it when she came gliding back out of there with a puzzled expression on her face.

"The reverend says he doesn't know what you're talking about," she told me. "He has no recollection of any appointment with you."

"It will be a shame if I came all this way for nothing. I suppose my assistant didn't make the arrangements correctly. It wouldn't be the first time. Good help is hard to find."

She was the one to buckle. "I guess you should head in and speak to him yourself. He's right up the hallway to the right."

"Thank you," I told her. "I'll most certainly speak to him myself."

She didn't hang around to watch me make my move. She was off in a flash as there was a clatter from the floor upstairs. I wondered just who was up there and whether he still had a whole host of pure, sweet girls being used for his fun.

I guessed I'd be finding out soon enough.

The knife was already in my hand by the time I knocked on the door.

"Enter!"

I stepped over that threshold with a grim smile.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Elaine

HE WAS GONE when I woke up in the middle of the night. A terrified part of me thought that he'd come to his senses somehow and walked out of my hopes and dreams. That's what I was having—hopes and dreams that I hadn't had since I was a little girl.

I may have joked about marriage and kids with my *boyfriend*, Lucian, but it wasn't such a joke inside. I did want it all with the monster. The monster was everything I wanted and more.

I called out Lucian's name before I switched on the bedside light and looked around me. He was definitely gone. I slipped out of bed and checked the bathroom but nothing. He wasn't downstairs in the living room, and the kitchen was empty to match. I was reaching for a glass for some mineral water when I saw the note on the counter—scribbled, just like the one I'd left on mine. Only Lucian's scribbled note was hilarious. It lit me up inside.

Be back soon, baby.

I could imagine the smirk on his face as he wrote it. I was getting to know his expressions so damn well. Smirk, frown, scowl—and sometimes, like a ray of sun through his dark demeanor, a smile. Only for me.

Going back to bed was an appealing option, but I couldn't do it. My brain wouldn't have switched off enough to let me sleep. I flinched as I dropped onto the sofa and curled my legs

up tight. I was still hurting, my flesh sore from the monster's touch. It was magical in the very best of ways. He'd made it feel as good for me as it could possibly feel.

The TV was full of crap that didn't interest me. My mind was full of Lucian. Lucian and me, Lucian and life, Lucian and our future.

How the hell could we have a future?

We'd never be allowed to have a future. If anyone ever saw us together, they'd kill us for our betrayal.

I'd never really thought about just what was so unforgivable between the Morellis and the Constantines. I knew we'd hated each other since long before I was born, but the logic had never really been explained to me. I guess I'd asked when I was still young enough to ask such questions, but likely got the same universal response.

The Morellis are worthy of nothing. They are our enemy. They've been out to destroy us for all time.

I knew they had made every effort to undermine us in New York City life, and business, and deals. There was more to it, too. So many people believed it had been a Morelli who had killed my father. There was no doubt about it to any of my family—it must have been one of the Morellis. They'd been assholes at every opportunity—despising us as much as we despised them, enough to murder the man at the very top of the family tree—but why? I wasn't sure I really knew why. It would have been so bad if the hate was based on the very first thing I'd ever heard of between us—one original act that caused a divide between two men and the one woman they wanted. My mother. But it *was* that...of course it was...both men had fallen for my mother to the point they'd destroyed everything else for the chance of having her. Two men, one prize, and no damn way of sharing it.

My father had won. Caroline Roosevelt had become Caroline Constantine, and Bryant Morelli had been unable to accept my father's victory.

The battle must have been a rough one.

They hated each other from the moment my father took his bride. Now *we* hated each other. Every single one of us hated each other.

Or we used to. Before me and Lucian fell in love and broke tradition.

I let the thoughts simmer for long minutes, thinking it through, over and over. I hated the Morellis, right? They were assholes worth hating. For sure they were. Every single one of them was a piece of shit—apart from Lucian—and all that stuff between our families must have been a long time brewing with a whole load of backbone to it. Bryant Morelli and my father were close friends growing up. Surely it couldn't have only been my mother that tore them apart.

Lucian *must* know some stuff. There must be a whole stack of stuff that led to the war between two families who used to like each other.

I was kidding myself. Of course I was. I knew full well, in instinct as much as in sense, that it was my mother who destroyed them—just like she tore everything apart. She'd caused us a family divide destined to end in death for so many names on the family trees.

Maybe mine and Lucian's deaths would be next.

The thought made me shiver, and that made me smile just a little to myself. Oh, how quickly things can change. There was no doubt about it. Not in the slightest. I didn't want to die anymore. I wanted to live forever, for all time, for every breath I could possibly breathe in this world.

In *his* world.

I wanted it all alongside Lucian Morelli.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lucian

HE WAS A pathetic looking man. Even more pathetic than I'd imagined. His pitiful face was shallow and vile. His eyes were beady and his lips were pursed. Hardly a welcoming reverend by anyone's standards. I'm sure my eyes were as evil as they'd ever been as I closed the distance between us.

"Lucian Morelli?" he asked, and his voice was weakly curious. "I wasn't expecting you. Do you wish to be a member of the fellowship?"

I stepped up to one of the pictures on his wall. It was a garish piece of crap showing a benevolent Lord Jesus reaching down toward the children at his feet. "Tell me about this *fellowship*," I said, feigning interest. "I heard you used to offer Elaine Constantine as a benefit of membership."

His smile made me rage like a beast inside. "Ah yes, Elaine," he said, and his expression was one of relief. "Unfortunately, Elaine is now grown up. She was a delightful creature, but she outgrew us as they all do. We have other girls who are very similar though."

I didn't speak to him, just stared until he continued talking. "I really didn't believe the Morellis wanted to be a part of this fellowship. I didn't believe you crossed over with the Constantines. Lionel was adamant that you didn't." He paused. "May I ask who introduced you to our order?"

"One of the Constantines," I told him, and he let out a laugh.

“That’s quite a surprise. I really didn’t expect there to be any communication between you and the Constantines. I guess our world is changing. We can thank the Lord for his blessing in friendship.”

“We can certainly thank the Lord for my presence here,” I said.

“Take a seat,” he offered and gestured to the chair opposite him. “We can discuss the options. Joining the order is expensive, but most certainly worth the investment. Our handshake goes a very long way in this world.”

I took the seat, leaning back and crossing my legs at the knee like a truly relaxed potential member. My gloved hands flexed, fingers stretching.

“Who else does this handshake belong to? I want to know exactly who I’m signing up with.”

He paused. “I’m not permitted to disclose the full details of the order until after initiation into our group. I can assure you that our members are very established fellows who would be extremely pleased to have a man of your stature among them. I must say I’m pleasantly surprised by your interest.”

I didn’t speak, just sat there. I had two options available to me. I either tortured him until he gave me the member list slowly, or I got the piece of shit to spill all before I knifed him. Or both. I opted for both.

“I want the membership list, or I’m out of here. I’m not joining with nobodies or pussies.”

The standoff lasted seconds, not minutes.

His shrug was as pathetic as he was. “If it was one of the Constantines that told you about us, I’m certain you’re outside of the usual precautions. We have no nobodies or pussies in our order, I can assure you. We are limited in our numbers. Quite exclusive,” he simpered.

“I know of Rawlings, Eddington, and Hardwick,” I told him. “I’ve heard they are particularly brutal beasts with the

girls.”

He smirked at me. “Oh yes. They are brutal with the girls. They very much enjoyed Elaine, you know.” His eyes fogged over with memory. “She took her punishment like a good girl.”

I could have ripped his balls off and rammed them down his throat there and then. “Who else enjoys playtime?” I asked him. “Tell me.”

The Reverend betrayed his members so casually. “Lionel. Anthony Ellison. Carlos Madeira. Cederic Bartonshire,” he informed me. “A lot of our members are from across the Atlantic, of course. Their aristocratic scene over there is very...seeking. As I said though, it’s quite exclusive. That’s the full list.”

I could imagine it. Already my mind was running away, picturing routes overseas and just what the fuck I was going to do with them.

“Do enlighten me,” Lynch said. “Who told you about us? Surely it was Lionel, yes?”

That’s when I picked my moment. “It was Elaine.”

“Elaine Constantine?” he asked, and his shock was delicious.

“Yes,” I told him. “It was Elaine.”

He realized I wasn’t the potential member I’d presented myself as.

He moved as quickly as I did, but I was faster than that incompetent piece of shit. He darted for his exit, but I darted for him, tumbling him back onto his seat before he was even out of it. He crashed onto his back, staring up at me with panicked piggy eyes.

My foot was on his chest in an instant, pressing hard. He didn’t even try to push me off.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked me. “For her? For that little girl who lied as well as she took cock? She’s nothing!”

“She’s everything, but most importantly—” I leaned over and spat in his face. “She’s *mine*.”

“But she’s a-a Constantine.” His confusion was obvious. Mine would have been obvious to match his just a few days ago.

Voicing it aloud was a whole other league to me. It was a combination of disgusting and fantastic as I spoke the words. “I’m in love with Elaine Constantine.”

His jaw dropped open, and his eyes were huge white plates as I pulled out the blade from my inside pocket. “This is some ploy to get close to the Constantines, isn’t it? Let me up from here and I will tell you all you need to know about them. I’ll tell you all about Elaine. We didn’t mean to hurt her. She enjoyed it. She enjoyed being a fellowship girl.”

He was hoping for a miracle.

“I know everything I need to know about her Constantine background,” I told him. “I know everything I need to know about *you*.”

I pressed my foot to his throat. His hands gripped my ankle as he squirmed, but I wouldn’t budge, just kept my weight at a beautiful enough pressure to make him choke and turn red. Wriggling piece of shit.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” I said, and lowered the blade.

I stripped that man with my knife before I hurt him. I kicked him in the face as he tried to scream, busting his jaw so bad he was a mess, and then I took it slowly. Each slice of my blade was a thrill to me, only this time it wasn’t about my addiction to inflicting pain. This time it was all about the woman I was avenging.

It was about her beautiful eyes and how they must have cried when this man touched her. It was about him punishing her over so much time that she believed she deserved it.

It was about the way he'd touched her, the way he'd whispered filth into her ear when she was too broken to understand what he was doing to her.

It was about the way he'd been in this place, letting other men in for their sick thrills at her expense—my beautiful girl with a heart of gold.

I did things to the sick fuck that made even my stomach turn. He was a gurgling wreck as I finally took the ultimate payback.

I leaned in close, whispering right into his wheezing face.

“This is for Elaine,” I said. “Say hello to the Lord and Savior when you get there. I'm sure he'll be pleased to see you, you disgusting piece of shit.” I pushed the blade straight through his windpipe and twisted it.

I had a smile on my face as he gurgled his final breath. I was covered in blood as I left his body on the floor and smoothed my bloodstained jacket down over my chest.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Elaine

LUCIAN'S CAR PULLED up as dawn was just beginning to creep in. The low rumble of the engine woke me from my daze on the sofa, the headlights bright enough in the dark to shine through the window. He was home. My *boyfriend* was home.

That word felt strange. It didn't describe the wild, twisted, mad way that I loved Lucian, but I also cherished it. Such a simple, carefree declaration: *my boyfriend*.

Just thinking it made my heart leap.

I was already on my feet and at the front door when he stepped up to the porch. I was all set to dash out and grab him, but I stopped as he came into view under the porch light.

My *boyfriend* was covered in blood, and it most certainly wasn't his own. His shirt was splattered, red on white. His jacket was damp and his face was smeared with red to match. His gloved fingers were bloodied around his keys, and his eyes were shining dark.

Evil. But it wasn't evil directed at me...

I didn't even know what questions to ask. They were empty sounds in my mouth. I stepped back to let him through, and he walked in with purpose and strength, as powerful as I'd ever seen him. Then he smiled. Lucian Morelli, covered in blood, smiled at me.

"Morning, sweetheart."

He headed straight to the kitchen, flicking on the coffee machine before ditching his gloves in the sink. He got out two mugs and went to work, mute, without offering a single word.

It was me who finally found my voice and asked the most obvious question.

“What happened?”

His eyes were twinkling when they met mine. “I had some business.”

“Business?”

He laughed. “Yes, sweetheart, business. Business for *you*.”

I looked him up and down, still trying to soak in what the hell was happening. “For *me*? How the hell could this be for *me*?”

He leaned against the counter casually, like this wasn’t some kind of alternate dimension of craziness at dawn. “Well, that depends on who the blood belonged to, doesn’t it?”

I got a shiver all the way through me, because it couldn’t be...it couldn’t be from someone who hurt me. But it was. Of course it was. My stomach did the weirdest lurch. My heart was racing at the thought—both excited and scared at once.

“Who was it?” I asked, then took a breath. “Was it Uncle Lionel?”

Even the thought was terrifying—because if it was Uncle Lionel and people knew—if people knew, they would put the pieces together and those pieces would spell MORELLI in huge capital letters, and MORELLI would spell out LUCIAN Morelli the very moment it was said out loud.

Only it wasn’t Uncle Lionel.

“It was Reverend fucking Lynch,” he told me. “I tore the piece of shit apart.”

I stared in shock. Lucian had killed the man who’d prepared me for punishment and made me take it at the hands of other men. My mortal enemy of just a few days ago had

ripped apart the man who'd been my true enemy since I was a little girl.

"You killed Reverend Lynch?" I asked him.

He gave me a smirk. "I most certainly killed him, Elaine. I'm sure he was damn well pleased when I did. He was hardly enjoying his last few moments alive, I can promise you that."

The thought of Reverend Lynch suffering was strangely nice. Even buried after all these years, it was nice to think of him hurting, just like all the times he'd enjoyed my pain. Only he was *dead*. Lucian had killed him. Reverend Lynch was actually dead.

It shouldn't have surprised me, because this was Lucian Morelli standing before me, and Lucian Morelli was undoubtedly the most vicious man alive. He hurt people for fun and fascination. He arranged deaths for his own ends, whenever it suited him. What surprised me was that his own hands were dirty, and it was because of me. He'd killed someone for me. Again. He'd killed someone because they'd hurt *me*.

I'm not sure it was everyone's traditional idea of *boyfriend material* but in a fucked-up little part of my soul it sure felt like it to me.

My next words were a whisper as I tried to digest it. "Reverend Lynch is dead."

Lucian poured my coffee. "I also made sure the girls' doors were open before I left the place, even though they were sleeping soundly."

"Wow." He'd killed them and freed the girls. I smiled at him. Those girls would have been going through so much, just like I was. The monster had freed the victims.

"Thanks," I said, and it was the most pathetic word in the world.

"You're very welcome, Elaine." His eyes were fire on mine. "He will be the first of many."

“Many?”

His grin made me light up inside. “Many. Believe me, baby, I have a whole list of the next candidates. I’ll be savoring every single one of them.”

My brain was spinning just thinking about it. I was still trying to comprehend whether I was reading this right, because if I was... “You mean people alongside Reverend Lynch?”

“I mean every man who has ever laid his sick twisted hands on your sweet little body. Payback will be divine,” he said.

Yeah, he was certainly *boyfriend material*. I didn’t know what to do so I did nothing, still trying to get a grip on my thoughts. I took my mug from him with shaking fingers, still blown away by just how casual the monster was in the aftermath of butchering someone up close.

I stared at him, loving him. The full weight of what he’d done for me slammed me like a train when I finally came to my senses enough to process it. Reverend Lynch was dead, and the girls around him were free. I’m not sure who was more surprised when I launched myself at Lucian’s body and wrapped my arms around his neck. He was still wet with blood, but I didn’t care. All I cared about was being up close to the man I loved.

I didn’t just love Lucian Morelli, I adored him. I adored him as much as it could ever be possible to adore someone. He was like a god to me—a beautiful, vicious god who’d killed for me like a noble avenger.

“Thank you,” I whispered, and this time it came out from deep in my heart. “Thank you for loving me, Lucian.”

He pushed me away just far enough to look me in the eyes.

“I told him I loved you, you know,” he growled. “I told that bastard I was in love with you before I knifed him to death.”

The thought made me proud. It filled me with glee that Reverend Lynch knew that finally someone loved me enough to make him pay for his sins. Just a shame it was one of the Morellis and not the Constantines.

Lucian ran his thumb down my cheek, then pressed his lips to mine. His kiss tasted like blood, but I didn't care. I'd already kissed him in someone else's blood. Both times were because he was hurting them for hurting me. Boyfriend material didn't even come close to it on reflection.

"What did you do with the body?" I asked. "Is it just lying there? The police will come find it, right? Will they know it was you?"

His laugh was depraved. "Lynch's body is in the trunk outside," he said.

"In the trunk?" The whole thing was growing more bizarre by the second.

"In the trunk. They'll find plenty of blood in that fuck-up of a manor, but they won't find him. The police might well find the scene, but they won't be coming after me. The *fellowship* will be damned sure his death stays well hidden."

"Oh, thank god." The relief when I heard that was a beautiful thing. The idea of Lucian being arrested and taken away from me was becoming the most unbearable thing in the world.

"And that Margaret will be out of the country by the time the cops find anything. I told her to run if she wanted to live."

I held him tight again, breathing against him, grateful to have him in my arms. I wanted nothing but Lucian for all time. I wanted him at my side through every step I took, right to the end of my life. I couldn't be away from him if I tried. I'd never make it. I'd never want to make it.

"I mean it," he whispered. "I'll kill them all, baby, one by one. They'll all rue the day they ever looked at you that way, let alone touched you. That's a promise."

His warmth against me was blissful, even soaked in blood. I squeezed him, kissed him, did everything I could to let him know just how much I loved him, and then I asked him all over again.

“Please, Lucian, please will you fuck me now? I need to feel you inside me, please.”

He brushed my hair from my forehead and smiled down at me with dark, sparkling eyes. “Yes, sweetheart, I’ll fuck you now. It’s time.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lucian

ELAINE CONSTANTINE'S SWEET virgin pussy was the greatest jewel in the crown there could possibly be. It was still amazing to me that taking the prize mattered less to me than how much she would enjoy me taking it. But still, I wanted her to gasp and beg, desperate for every second.

She wanted kisses. She wanted holding. She wanted *me*.

I was drenched through to the skin with the reverend's blood. I dropped my jacket onto the kitchen floor and it landed with a damp thump on the tile. Elaine's fingers were already on my shirt buttons as I guided her through to the living room. Fingers that were shaking, just like the rest of her, only it wasn't fear that was making her quake for me this time. It was a whole other type of nervousness; I could see it in her beautiful eyes. Those pools of crystal blue were light and delicate, even in the dull of the pre-dawn. They were eating me up with a devotion I'd never seen before. I'd never *felt* before.

It was a beautiful thing to witness, just how surprised and moved she was by someone caring about her. There should have been a whole army of men in her life tearing down walls to destroy anyone who dared to fuck her over in the slightest, but that army had never existed. Her family was fake, each and every one of the sad fuckers too far up their own self-important assholes, casting her aside for telling lies when all she wanted was for someone to hear her truth.

I'd heard her truth. I'd avenged her truth with the very first vile bastard who deserved it.

I was already aching to get started on the next one on the list.

Elaine was still kissing me as we reached the bottom of the staircase. I tore the bloodied shirt from my shoulders, and she was already at my belt, unbuckling as we climbed the stairs.

I never thought I'd be desperate to take a virgin in my bed. I usually wanted them on all fours, begging for their first cock, or making them force themselves down onto my cock, not enjoying the comfort of the mattress like a princess with her legs spread beautifully wide for me.

"You're really going to do it?" she said as we reached the top of the stairs. "You're really going to take me?"

The nip of my teeth on her throat said more than words. The way I shunted her toward my bedroom screamed volumes.

I dropped my pants and kicked them aside before we reached the doorway. My hands were on the oversized shirt on Elaine's body, tearing it from her tiny frame.

She thought I was going to throw her down onto the bed and take my fill of her, I could see it by the way she backed up against the bed ready for me. I didn't. As usual, I surprised her.

I tugged her into the bathroom, still squeezing tight as I flicked on the shower. It was steaming in no time, the water pumping hard and fast in the little shell of a cubicle. I opened the screen nice and wide and guided Elaine in first, pressing her up against the back wall as I stepped in alongside her.

Steaming didn't even come close as I claimed her mouth as mine. I consumed her, tongue to tongue. I ate her up like a starving man, and she ate me up right back as I grabbed up the soap and lathered her body.

She was my girl, and I was going to treat her like one. Maybe *boyfriend* wasn't so far off the mark after all.

Maybe I, Lucian Morelli, really was Elaine Constantine's *boyfriend*. It gave me another one of those damn fluffy tingles to think of being a damn sight more than that, too.

Maybe I, Lucian Morelli, wanted Elaine Constantine to be my damn bride.

"I'm so nervous," she told me over the hiss of the water. "I've been waiting for this for years, and I never thought it would really mean anything, but now I'm here, ready. Now that it's with you, it means so much."

I wanted to kiss every inch of her until she was ready for everything that was coming. In the haze of how much I wanted the girl in front of me, I lost all sense of time, of urgency, of *me*.

I thumbed her clit just enough to make her grind against my hand before I slipped two fingers inside her and curled them. She supported her weight on my shoulders, moaning as she rocked, and I twisted my fingers inside her, just enough to make her whimper. She was tight, so fucking tight. Taking her sweet little pussy would definitely still hurt her. The thought made my mouth water and my cock swell.

I worked her soft skin slowly under the pummeling water. Kissing, stroking, squeezing. My fingers played her until the morning was bright outside the bathroom window, teasing her softly enough that when she came for me she was a bucking mess against my hand.

I guess it was when her sweet breaths were shallow on my face through the steam that the beast in me reared its head through the fluffy bullshit. I loved Elaine Constantine with every scrap of my fucked-up soul, but that didn't stop what I needed. What my *cock* needed. What my filthy fucking mind needed.

I flicked off the shower and reached for the towels from the rail. She must have seen my expression change because her eyes widened big and blue as she stared up at me.

I saw it in her gaze. There she was again, my opposite. The masochist to my sadist. The pain toy inside her was ready to dance with the beast.

Elaine wanted me to be rough with her. She wanted to be my little doll.

“Don’t make it nice,” she whispered, before I’d said a word. “Please, Lucian. I want to know what you’re like. I want to feel you as you.”

I felt my smirk and recognized myself as the true Morelli I’d always been.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, you’ll feel me as me,” I told her. “It’s gonna be one hell of a fucking ride.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Elaine

I WAS ALREADY learning so much about the dynamic between me and Lucian. We shifted so much from minute to minute, so naturally I didn't even feel the twist. Kind, then cruel, in the kindest of ways. The monster found his claws as he threw me onto the bed. I was still wet from the shower and so was he, both of us hot and steaming, and that just made it all the more beautiful as he slammed his body down onto mine.

His kiss was tongue and teeth, pain and pleasure. His breaths were heavy and hot, and his hands were savage as they sought out my tits and twisted my flesh until I moaned for him.

This was what I wanted.

I wanted the monster to claim me as his, lust and love dancing together in a blur. I wanted to be owned by Lucian Morelli and I wanted to feel him possess me, his body taking mine with every breath.

My skin was tingling, on fire in the flames. I knew this was it. The beast was really going to take me.

My legs spread so naturally for him, wrapping up and around his waist. My clit was still thrumming, alive from his attention in the shower.

He didn't let my legs hold him for long. He pulled them apart and licked a path down my body. He bit my nipples and pulled them sharp. I whimpered. He bit them harder.

His teeth were bliss as they nipped their way down my stomach. My hips were already rising from the bed to meet his mouth as his tongue found my clit all over again.

“Please!” I whimpered. “Please, Lucian, just take me! Take me!”

His eyes were dark with lust. “Quiet.”

One word, but it put me in my place. Lucian was the monster, just like always. He was *my* monster. My *true* monster.

I forced myself to relax into the bed, biting my lip as he worked his fingers inside me, slowly enough to make me buck for more. He slapped my thighs when I moved against him.

“Be still!” he ordered, and I loved it—that viciousness in his beautiful voice.

I was still for him. I took his fingers like a good girl, unable to hold back the moans as he sucked gently at my clit.

I wasn't expecting it when he took his fingers from my pussy and twisted them into my ass. I cried out but took everything he had to give me, smiling at the ceiling as he circled his fingers deeper, opening me up. *YES!* His tongue lapped at my ass and I wanted more. I wanted him as deep inside me as he could go, in every hole, not just my pussy. *Everywhere.* I wanted him everywhere. I wanted him to own every part of me and show me I was his toy as well as his love.

“Yes! Fuck me there,” I breathed. “Please. Fuck my ass.”

“Your ass can wait its turn.” He slapped my thighs. He slapped my pussy. He fingered my ass until I squirmed and begged for more.

He gave me whatever he wanted, and nothing more.

My body was so tense with sensations that I'd lost control of what the hell I was feeling by the time the monster climbed back up on top of me. His lips were puffy from where he'd been playing with me. They were hot and wet when they met with mine, and his tongue tasted of me.

His cock was swollen hard and thick when he ground it against my clit, the rhythm of his hips so natural against mine that we were one together. This time he didn't pull my legs away when they wrapped around his waist and gripped tight. I could barely believe it after all this time. My virginity was about to leave me behind.

"Time for me to take the crown jewel," he whispered, and he took it.

Lucian Morelli thrust his cock inside me in one slam of his hips and claimed me as his.

It stole my breath and hurt like hell, but I loved the way it felt. The way he felt deep inside me was every bit as magical as I'd dreamed it would be.

His hips were slow but powerful. His smile was both loving and dark at the same time.

He pinned my wrists above my head and crushed them tight to the bed, holding me in position as he picked up the pace and fucked me harder and harder. My pussy took him, aching for more, desperate for more, even though it was hurting. I was wet but sore in the most amazing of ways, and I realized in that one incredible moment that every day I'd resented being a virgin was worth it. I would've waited a whole other decade to feel the magic I felt with the Morelli monster deep inside me. It would be worth every single minute.

"Your pussy is going to get used to this," he told me, and I smiled.

"I hope my pussy gets used to this every damn day," I said, and he smiled right back.

"Don't you worry about that, baby. I'll be claiming this beauty as mine every fucking day we're breathing." His words were enough to give me the hint of a shiver.

Every day we're breathing.

There was a body of a reverend in the trunk of his car, and two families who'd kill us just for speaking. I was a kidnap victim all over the news, and Lucian was on a *vacation* that didn't exist.

Every day we were breathing might not be all that many.

"Come inside me," I whispered. "Please. Please, come inside me."

"Want to have my baby now do you, baby girl?" His smirk was perfection. "Our story gets more and more fucking crazy, doesn't it?"

I didn't say no, because I couldn't. I couldn't laugh the crazy off as crazy. I *did* want Lucian's baby inside me. I wanted to be his bride and his love and the mother of his child. Fucked-up, but true. The whole thing was fucked-up but true. I was plunging into the pit of insanity deeper and deeper every damn minute.

"Tell me, Elaine," he rasped, right in my ear. "Say you want my baby inside you."

I felt so raw when I found the words. I'd never felt so exposed as I did when I told the beautiful monster what I wanted. "Yes, Lucian. I want your baby inside me. One day, I want *our* baby inside me."

"Good girl," he said, and then he kissed me with a smile on his face.

He was still kissing me as his hips slammed with a whole new force and his breaths grew frantic. He tipped my hips back on the bed and plowed me deeper with every thrust, and there it was, the spot that felt just right...the spot that had me floating from the bed. The spot that had my clit singing all over again. I was coming and moaning against his open mouth as he emptied his balls inside me.

Lucian Morelli came inside me. He spilled his amazing, filthy seed inside me. It was the most incredible feeling.

He didn't pull out of me when he stopped thrusting. We were both panting as he let go of my wrists and collapsed his weight on top of me. Our limbs were tangled as he turned onto his side and pulled me with him, wrapping me tight in his arms.

I was grinning as my pussy throbbed, sore but loving it. I wasn't a virgin anymore. Whoa. The very thought had me grinning.

"The king takes his crown jewel," he said and tipped my face up to his. "It was every bit worth waiting for, Miss Constantine."

I giggled, high on life and not coke. It was an amazing contrast. "I hope the king can take the crown jewel again real soon," I told him, and he laughed along with me.

His cock was already hard against my belly as he flipped me onto my back. "Don't worry about that, sweetheart," he said. "And this time I'm gonna make it hurt."

He wasn't lying.

He made it hurt.

Bites and bruises and blood. Force and fight and filth.

And love.

So much love it chased my demons away.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lucian

I STARED DOWN at the freshly shoveled flower bed with a smile on my face, my arm wrapped around the woman I loved in a way I didn't believe was possible for this twisted heart of mine to love.

Elaine had been a darling with the spade, helping me in my mission to dig the grave with a sweet little smile on her face.

She didn't speak and neither did I. Words weren't needed.

Already the world churned around us. So many questions with our names all over them. Disappearance. Kidnapping. Morellis and Constantines.

I didn't care about any of it. Not anymore.

All I cared about was my devotion to the woman at my side, and just how the fucking hell we were going to forge a way for ourselves.

This property on Bishop's Landing wasn't going to be enough of a *home* to keep us together. People would be coming, seeking, demanding. They hadn't looked for her here yet, but they would figure it out soon enough. Even my connections and my power wouldn't keep the authorities out, if they knew I had Elaine held hostage.

People would be wanting to kill us the very moment they caught sight of the truth.

I kissed Elaine's head and held her tighter.

There was no doubt about it, we'd committed the most forbidden crime we could have committed, and it wasn't the reverend's body at our feet.

A Morelli had fallen in love with a Constantine.

And a Constantine had fallen in love with him right back.

Our road ahead was impossible, but we'd find it. We *had* to find it.

Elaine was thinking the same thoughts as me in that beautiful head of hers. She looked up at me with a delicate smile. "What do we do now?" she asked me.

"Well, sweetheart, we can't stay here forever."

She laughed. "Life would have been a whole lot easier if you could just keep hating me, wouldn't it? If I could have just kept hating you."

I tossed the spade to the ground. "I could never really hate you. You're too damn intoxicating for that, Elaine."

"You're pretty damn intoxicating yourself, Lucian," she said. "Cocaine has nothing on you."

I took her hand and led her back to the porch. The sky was already darkening, the afternoon reaching its close.

In truth I had no idea where the road ahead was leading us, I just knew it would be together.

"Time for the king to take my crown jewel again?" she asked me, tugging me inside with a mischievous smile on her perfect lips.

Yes, it was time for the king to take her sweet crown jewel again. The king would never grow tired of taking that pretty gem; I knew it right down in my dark, dirty soul.

They'd be coming after me, and I knew it.

Time was ticking, and it was ticking fast, but not fast enough to take away the moment.

With the smell of fresh dirt in the air, and no one else around for miles, it felt like we were alone in the world. Or like we were in some far-off place where we were untouchable.

That was an illusion, though.

We were in the heart of Bishop's Landing.

We couldn't see any of the other massive estates from here, but we knew they existed.

And we heard the vehicle before we saw it.

The gentle hum of an engine, the sound of tires on the road.

Our eyes met. The irony is that I was caught. If Elaine had wanted to be free, all she had to do was wait until she was seen. The world was looking for her. Whoever was coming would be her ticket out of my clutches.

I saw that awareness run through her mind.

I saw when she made her decision.

Maybe it was because of the body that's now six feet under. Maybe it was something else. Either way, she dashed to the house, hiding herself from view before the Bentley crested the rise.

The irony of the situation doesn't escape me. I'm standing here with a shovel and a flower bed as if I enjoy gardening. Me, Lucian Morelli. They'll think I've gone insane.

They're probably right.

I recognize this particular car.

Connor Ohanian was a man of strong loyalty. It has been very hard to get him onto my side for the takeover because he had worked with my father for so long.

He and I also worked together, of course. For years.

We worked together closely, and he trusted me. But it was only my father's risky behavior and the impact that it was

having on thousands of employees that made Ohanian agree to the coup.

I hadn't spoken to him since I went on a leave of absence.

His car glides over the long driveway and pulls a few feet away. He gets out, looking the same as he always does, wearing a suit and slightly worried expression.

It's his default state. I'm not sure I've ever seen him any other way.

"Lucian," he says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry the plan didn't work."

It's strange, but I find myself chuckling. "You know what? I've barely thought about it. Maybe everything worked out for the best."

"It didn't," he says. "Morelli Holdings is going under. Your father has become even more erratic. He's taking bigger risks. The entire company will fold if we don't do something."

It did bother me. The family, my mother, my sisters, all those employees. I cared about Morelli Holdings, but I loved Elaine more. "Not my problem. The board didn't vote me in."

"That's the thing. They're going to vote you in. It's already been decided in an emergency meeting. You're the new CEO if you're willing to take the position." He seems to notice the dirt on my hands and the freshly plowed earth. "Come with me. The vote can happen right now."

Surprise holds me still. "You're serious."

"Dead serious. Once we looked at the deals he's been signing and the numbers, we had to act. We're already facing serious layoffs, and perhaps worse. We need you."

They need me. I should be crowing at the triumph. This is exactly what I wanted to have happen. It means power. Money. It means winning over my father. I could leave Elaine in the house, attend the vote, and come back as the CEO of Morelli Holdings.

Except it's not just about the vote. It's about everything that comes after.

Early mornings and long nights of work. Righting what my father wronged. More power struggles. I couldn't go into the office every day, leaving her alone.

My little doll needed me. And maybe more than that, I needed her.

Strange that after working so hard to take over the company, that I was now faced with a choice. Only, it wasn't really a choice, was it? I already loved Elaine. We couldn't be together in public. That would put her safety at risk. But we could be together in private.

And for now, that was enough.

RELENTLESS



CHAPTER ONE

Elaine

FOR ALL THE weirdness in my life, nothing felt weirder than waking up in bed next to the man I'd grown up believing to be my worst enemy. Weirder still was being madly in love with him. The world was upside down. I was consumed by the devotion I felt for Lucian Morelli.

It felt even more bizarre for the fact there was a body buried in the backyard...and I felt happy about that. Relieved about that. Loving life with a passion I thought I'd never feel.

The Morelli monster had killed the monster who'd abused me.

He killed Reverend Lynch. For me.

It was early morning. The light was barely showing outside. I snuggled closer to Lucian and took a breath, enjoying the steadiness of his.

He was a deep sleeper. Beautiful.

I don't know how long I lay there at his side before he moved and turned toward me. It felt like hours of perfect bliss, but in reality it was barely more than minutes. The light was shining brighter outside, but not by much. The day was still only just beginning.

Lucian's arms were around me before he woke, holding me with the kind of strength that made my heart sing. He was possessive, even in a dream state.

His eyes focused on mine just as soon as he opened them.

Neither of us moved. Our faces were barely inches apart, breaths matching.

His heat was divine.

It was his cell phone that broke the spell. He fumbled a strong hand to the nightstand and looked at the screen. "It's my cousin. Elliot Morelli."

The word was a slap, even as I sat there, even as he took the call.

I thought of him as Lucian. I thought of him as a monster. I didn't mind that he was a Morelli, not anymore, but the world would mind. The sound of the other person on the phone was tinny and indistinct. I couldn't make it out, but I could feel the way Lucian tensed. He pushed up to sit down, revealing a strong, muscled back and the barest hint of his ass. He was unselfconscious, which made sense, because he was perfect. Sculpted by Michelangelo. I couldn't enjoy the view, because tension spread like a virus.

He gave a couple terse responses, but I still didn't know what was happening.

I only knew that it was bad.

He hung up with a muttered curse word.

"What's wrong?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer. But he'd heard it. He'd heard it with a stoic courage that I wanted to match.

"Someone put out a hit."

A hit. It took me a long second to understand what he meant. Not a hit of cocaine. Not a hit like a punch to the face. He meant a hit like murder. "On me?"

"On both of us."

I gasped. "Why?"

"You know why. It was okay when we were fucking. But now that we care about each other, they're worried. And they want it to stop."

I sat up with him, struggling to make sense of things. A few minutes ago I'd been luxuriating in a love-drenched haze. Now my heart beats a million miles a second. I knew we were forbidden, of course. Star-crossed lovers, our families at war. But I thought that meant fights over the dinner table. I thought that meant being ostracized or cut off. I thought that meant angry actions taken through business leverage. I didn't know it meant assassination. "Who?" I manage.

"I don't know, and I'm not sure it even matters. My father, probably. Though it could be your mother using her resident fixer Ronan Byrne. And that's to say nothing of the Power Brothers."

He was right. It wouldn't make any difference who'd given the order when we were dead. Nothing could stop the truth. We were in danger with every passing second.

Out there in the big savage world beyond Bishop's Landing, and the diamond of a house we shared, our families were part of one hell of a war.

Constantines vs Morellis, just like always.

Only now the Power Brothers were up against the Constantines too.

Blamed for my disappearance and kidnapping.

Yeah, it would be getting seriously damn bad out there, and if anyone should find out that it wasn't the Power Brothers who had taken me from my NYC apartment...that it was Lucian Morelli I was with... "It can't be my mother. She doesn't know it's you."

"Then it's only a matter of time until she wants my blood, too. They'll find out it was me, eventually. Maybe all of them will put out hits on us. They'll kill us again and again until there's nothing left. No children to betray the family pride."

My thoughts were in chaos.

I had nothing to say, so I didn't say a word, I just kissed him.

That was the only answer I had to give.

I kissed the beautiful monster, and he kissed me back. Hard. Really damn hard. Love and lust are a heady combination, an ocean more welcome than thoughts of our doom.

His hands pinned mine above my head and he ravaged me, flesh to flesh. My legs parted and wrapped around his waist and his movements were raw. Fierce.

I was still sore from where he'd taken me the night before. He'd played me like an instrument into the early hours of the morning, teasing, tempting, hurting. Loving me.

I was more than ready for him when his cock pushed inside me on a fresh new day. My moans were as raw as his thrusts, my hips pushing back up to meet his.

We were still in the rhythm when his cell rang again. He ignored it. It sounded out again. He ignored it, but I felt him flinch. I knew he was hearing the danger as loud as I was.

He hit the spot just right inside me when it sounded out again and I was coming for him, just as they were out there coming for us. I was squirming under him while he slammed, slammed, slammed, but it was more than the *want*. It was the fear that had my pulse racing along with my desperation for the man I loved.

He came at the height of my crescendo, breaths ragged when he let his weight crush down onto mine. His cell sounded out again and we were both feeling it. Both scared.

It terrified me even more to sense Lucian's fear than it ever would to feel my own.

"Are you going to get that call?" I asked him.

"I'm going to have to very soon." He rolled off me with a sigh and took my hand. "That was a lovely distraction but we really are fucked, you know. Maybe your family and the Power Brothers will wipe each other out and we won't have to worry."

“Maybe,” I said, but my voice was weak.

His eyes spoke more than words. Heavy. “We both know that’s not going to happen,” he told me. “We’re in serious fucking danger.”

The thought stabbed me in the stomach.

The idea of the carnage happening in the world outside was a hard one to take. Families at war, over me, over us. People thinking they were lashing out to rescue me from kidnapping or death—if they didn’t believe I was dead and gone already.

The warfare outside was because of me.

I let out a sigh. “Maybe they won’t actually find out it was you. Maybe we can stay holed up here forever and nobody will ever think to look in Bishop’s Landing. Maybe this can be the Lucian and Elaine paradise, immune from the world.”

“I love your stunning optimism. I wish it had a scrap of a chance of being true.”

The Morelli god got out of bed and slipped on some sweatpants as I watched him. I’d never seen him so casual and it suited him. His body really was a masterpiece, sculpted to perfection. His pants sat down low on his hips, the V of him proud.

There was no protest from him today as I dipped straight into his closet and pulled out one of his shirts. I slipped it on over my head as he watched me right back.

“You really are a beautiful creature,” he said, and it made me glow.

I could have flicked on the TV on our way through to the kitchen. But I couldn’t face the barrage of news about my abduction. I couldn’t face seeing my sisters crying, begging people to contact the authorities with any news of my disappearance. I didn’t want to see the speculation, and the stories, and the hotlines for reporting information. I had too

many feelings swirled together—guilt, fear, and irrepressible love.

Lucian had his phone with him but he wasn't looking at it. That's when I got a sense of it again—that simmering tension under his skin, knowing even better than I did just how the world would be coming for us.

We headed right through to the kitchen for coffee, neither of us acknowledging the calls he was trying his best to ignore.

I shot a glance out of the window, and my mind was right back on the body buried out there under the flower beds.

“What you did to Reverend Lynch, Lucian...I don't even know how to say thanks for that. Is it even right that I'm happy he's dead? Does that make me a bad person?”

“Of course you're happy he's dead,” he told me, deadpan. “If I could have prolonged his suffering any more, I'd have done it. As it is, the ground is soaked in his blood.”

I knew I was blushing. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” he said, and he meant it. I could see it in his eyes.

I chose to face up to the obvious. “How long do you think we'll be able to stay here?” I asked him, and he shrugged.

“Days, tops. Questions will start needing answers. Bullets will start flying. Every scrap of the war will lead them closer to the core.”

Even the thought of it had my stomach twisting. “Then we run?”

“You would really do that?” he asked. “You would run away from everything you've ever known?”

My nod was frantic. “I'd run right now. Together.”

He was quiet, pondering. Staring out through the window as I stared at him. “I haven't a damn clue where we would go. Our families have reach in every place we could run to.

They'd be after us, chasing us down every single day for the rest of our lives."

I couldn't hold back my flood of emotion. "And every single day would be worth it."

He leaned against the counter. "You might not be saying that when we're running around the globe like a couple of escaped convicts, living from a suitcase."

"What's the alternative?" I asked. "Waiting here until they find out you were the one who took me and hunt us down? We could always try the double suicide option."

"The alternative is that you head back into the city," he said. "You tell them the Power Brothers did this, or some random criminal on the street, or whatever the hell you want to tell them, and go back home. Regardless of how pissed your mother is, she won't let you stay on the streets. She won't let you die. You'd be back home safely."

My reply was instant. Strong and fierce. "*This* is home. With you."

The stare between us was intense. My heart thumped, hard. I meant it.

This was home. *He* was home.

His thumb brushed my cheek as he stepped up close, and my body was alive with the scent of him, the touch of him, the heat of him. "I'm glad to hear it," he said. "Just remember that I gave you the option once you have a gun barrel in your face, saying your holy goodbyes."

"That wouldn't matter," I whispered. "Saying my holy goodbyes, I'd still be happy that I'd spent the last of them with you. With you inside me. Loving me."

That's when the beautiful monster surprised me more than ever. "It's not just your body I want to be inside. I want to be inside your mind, your hopes, your fears. Your quirks and your laughter. Your whole fucking soul."

It slammed me, right in my heart. I felt like a little girl again, praying that I'd be good enough for someone to love me one day.

We were kissing when his cell started up again.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he cursed, finally pulling away far enough to take hold of the phone. “It’s the devil himself. Bryant Morelli. Well, he was always a brazen son of a bitch.”



CHAPTER TWO

Lucian

NOT IN THE slightest. The days were counting down to hours, to minutes. All of them leading to our doom. Was Bryant Morelli calling to gloat?

“Good morning,” I said, knowing full well that it would be anything but good.

“What have you done? What have you fucking done?”

This shock seemed genuine, but then again he was a smart man. A manipulative man. Right now he seemed the most likely source of the kill order. “You knew I was going after Elaine. You knew I picked her over the company.”

“You’re a traitor,” he growled. “And you’re an idiot to match. You must have been trying to get yourself killed, fucking around with a Constantine. They aren’t going to stand for it.”

“Are you going to stand for it?” I asked softly.

“Come home. We need to strategize. We need to make a plan.”

“I’m busy.”

“Your mother is crying her eyes out.”

“How do I know I’m not going to get shot as soon as I walk into the door?”

There’s a pause. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No.”

“Are you suggesting that I put out a hit on my own son?”

“Spare me the outrage. Someone did. And you aren’t exactly the picture of fatherly love. I tried to take over Morelli Holdings. That was before I committed the ultimate sin—caring about a Constantine.”

“We all make mistakes,” he says, his voice wry.

The way he said it made me wonder if he’d made similar mistakes. I knew the takeover of Morelli Holdings from his father hadn’t been a peaceful one. I wouldn’t have expected any less from my father. It was practically a family tradition for the Morellis.

It made me wonder if he’d made similar mistakes about forbidden women. It would explain why he hated the Constantines so much. And why he’d refused to really take action against them now that Caroline was a widow. Did he secretly want her?

None of that mattered.

I would have a better sense of my father’s intentions in person. And if it was him, then the hit was more than a simple desire to have me dead. It was a power play. And the way to react to a power play wasn’t to fucking run. It was to face him.

“I’m on my way,” I said and I ended the call.

“What is it?” Elaine asked, and her beautiful eyes were wide open.

Even in that moment of horror I couldn’t stop the flood of adoration I felt for the stunning creature before me.

Her blonde curls were messy in the most gorgeous of ways, framing her perfect face like a halo. She was a goddess. The most divine little doll in creation.

I’ve never been a man to share anything with anyone. I never talked about any of my business, any of my personal associations, any of my actions, but with her it flowed naturally.

“That was my father. I’m going to see him.”

Her eyes widened. “Won’t that make you a target?”

“Yes,” I said honestly. “I’ll be careful, but I want you to lock the front door when I’ve gone. If I’m not back by dusk, I want you to head to the Constantine Compound.”

Her mouth dropped open, scared. “Then don’t go,” she whispered. “Please, Lucian, just don’t go. We could run now. We could run...”

I took her hands in mine. “We wouldn’t get very far, sweetheart. Not like this. We don’t have the network in place to get out of here without getting caught. If people are talking about us. If people know *anything* about us, then we are absolutely fucked.”

“Please...” she started, but I squeezed her fingers.

“We pray, Elaine. We pray that I can change our fates. That’s the only reason I’m going in right now. The only reason I’d leave you alone for even a minute.”

She didn’t argue because there would be no point and she knew it.

My mind was already set.

I headed upstairs and took a shower. There was nothing but a few minutes of hot steam to set me up for the day before I toweled myself down and got myself suited up and ready.

She waited anxiously at the bottom of the stairs when I came down. “Are you sure this is okay? What if he attacks you?”

“Unlikely,” I told her. “He knows I would fight back. If he’s going to kill me, more likely he’ll do it through someone he pays. I’ll do everything I can to divert the smoke from the fire, but the fire is there, Elaine, and it’s burning bright.”

She wrapped her arms around me like a blanket before I walked out of the front door, pressing so tight to me that I could feel her thumping heart. “Be safe.”

“I’m serious,” I whispered, right in her ear. “If I’m not here by dusk, you head to the Constantine Compound. You stay the fuck alive. Promise.”

“Okay,” she said, but I knew she was lying. I could hear it in her voice.

I pulled away enough to take hold of her jaw. “You swear to me, Elaine. If I’m not back here by dusk, you head home. You let your mother protect you.”

She stalled. I could see the lie dancing behind her eyes.

“This is one thing we get straight, right from the beginning,” I told her. “You don’t lie to me. However bad the truth is, you never lie to me, sweetheart. Is that understood?”

The lie disappeared. I saw it loud and clear in that moment. Elaine Constantine wouldn’t lie to me, not once she’d sworn her loyalty. “I won’t lie to you,” she said. “I swear it.”

“Good girl,” I said and kissed her forehead.

Handing over the keys to her felt surreal. Handing control of anything to another person felt surreal.

I said it once more to be sure. “If I’m not back here by dusk—”

She was nodding when she interjected. “I’ll stay alive. I swear it.”

I said something I thought I’d never say. It rolled off my tongue like the easiest words I’d ever spoken. “I love you.”

Her smile was perfection. “I love you, too.”

I kissed her once, hard, and then I walked away.

The drive to my parents’ house was short.

The butler nodded his head when I entered. *Good morning, Mr. Morelli, sir.*

I tipped my head at them, keeping my expression as stoic as ever.

My father would be in his study floor nine. I knew he'd be at the very end of the management suite meeting rooms, awaiting me with his evil eyes and his pitted jaw.

I wasn't mistaken.

"Sit the fuck down," he said, and I did as instructed, sitting back in my seat with my foot up on one knee.

"What is this about?" I asked him, my voice barely more than a hiss to match.

He tossed a file across at me and I flicked it open.

Testimonials of clubgoers saying how they'd seen Lucian Morelli chasing down Elaine Constantine. The event where I'd floored the security guard after the pathetic little downtown dive was recorded loud and clear.

"How do you think this fucking looks?" he said. "I knew you'd been chasing that Constantine, but I didn't expect the whole fucking world to be talking about it. The Constantines are entering a discussion with the Power Brothers. A fucking *discussion*. It should be bloodshed, not conversation, and this is because of you, isn't it? We were set to pair up with the Powers, not watch from the sidelines as they begin negotiations."

My blood chilled even colder than its usual ice. Discussions were never good, not between enemies. They showed nothing more than that people were prepared to hear alternate versions of events.

"Tell me now," my father said. "Is there anything I should know about this?"

I looked him right in the eyes. "Such as what?"

"Such as you chasing down Elaine Constantine. Did you kill her?"

My answer was perfectly truthful. "No. I didn't kill her."

"So the Powers have her, yes? Their negotiations with the Constantines will be futile?"

“What the Powers have and don’t have has never been high on my list of priorities. I can sure as hell not answer questions for them.” Again, I wasn’t lying.

My father’s glare was savage. “If the Constantines and the Power Brothers come to some crazy conclusion that we’re responsible for this, Lucian, life sure as fuck isn’t going to be easy.”

He was right on that front. The Constantines we could take on, happily. It would be a difficult battle, but it would be a fair one. For us to go up against the Constantines with the Power Brothers also on their side would be a whole other matter.

“We could have paired up with the Powers,” he said. “You know full well they wanted our allegiance. We could have made a powerful ally.”

“Yes,” I replied. “I know that. Maybe they still will.”

“Then it should be *us* they are entering into discussions with, not the fucking Constantines.” He gestured to the file in front of me. “Tell me about this. What do I need to know about your relentless pursuit of that little blonde?”

I shrugged at him. “I was chasing her. It got intense.”

His stare was ruthless. “I’ll get to the bottom of this, boy, and you know it. If there is anything you need to tell me, you’d better do it now.”

“I have nothing to say.” In that very moment I was sealing my demise.

“Get out of here, then,” he said. “Get your head straight with whatever pussy you want to indulge in and then get the fuck back to work.”

“Fine,” I said, and got to my feet. “I’ll enjoy my fucking *vacation*.”

He called me back when I got to the door.

“I mean it, Lucian,” he said. “If you’ve done anything to jeopardize our family name or position in this world, I’ll kill

you myself. People are talking, and they're talking now. If you think for a second you are one step ahead of anyone, you are very sorely mistaken. They're coming for you, and I will be too if you've let me down. Believe me."

I had no doubt about that as I turned my back on him and walked away.



CHAPTER THREE

Elaine

I WAS PETRIFIED, wandering through the house like a ghost, praying, praying, praying that my love would come back to me before dusk. The front door was locked, just like I promised it would be. I couldn't stop looking at it. Pacing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Up and down the hallway like a woman possessed.

My mind was churning through the maybes.

Maybe people had found out about where I was. Maybe they'd found out that my note blaming the Power Brothers was just more of my lies. Maybe this whole new beautiful part of my world would last just a few tiny days before fate laughed in my face and gave me the middle finger.

I'd sworn to Lucian that I'd head back into the city if he didn't come home. Heading back into the city would be the last thing I'd ever want to do again. Not ever.

It turns out fate wasn't such a vindictive beast after all. Thank the Lord.

My heart was a racing train when I heard the car pull up into the driveway. My fingers were shaking as I twisted the key in the lock to let him in. I almost swung the door off its hinges as I burst my way out there to meet him.

My exclamation was loud. "Lucian!"

His arms answered me when he stepped up onto the porch. They wrapped me up so tightly it was heaven, squeezing me

safe.

I pulled away enough to stare up at him, my eyes searching his face.

His expression was solid, like steel, but there was something in his gaze. Something that told me fate hadn't been quite so kind after all.

He didn't launch straight into an explanation.

"What was it?" I asked him. "Was it work?"

"No, sweetheart. It wasn't work."

We went through to the kitchen and he propped himself against the counter, but his stare was anything but relaxed. "The Power Brothers are entering into discussions with your family."

I'm sure my mouth must have dropped open. "Discussions? But what the hell have they got to be talking about? My family thinks the Power Brothers killed me to clear my debts..."

"This is the problem," he said. "Apparently they aren't quite so sure that is the case anymore. It appears the Power Brothers are intent on making that clear, and everyone else is likely believing them."

I felt a flood of panic in me, because if my family didn't believe my note was telling the truth...If they started asking questions which led them closer to reality...

Lucian made us coffees that neither of us had an interest in.

"My father had a file full of witness statements. People telling tales about how I was chasing you through clubs downtown. Even the security guard I kned in the gut was fool enough to tell the world it was me who did that to him. Under usual circumstances he'd pay for that. I'd have him torn to pieces."

“Does he believe them, your father?” I asked. “Does he think it was you who took me?”

He sipped his coffee. “He asked me if I killed you. I said no.”

I let out a breath. “Maybe they won’t find out what really happened. Who knows? Maybe my family will attack the Power Brothers before they ever realize they didn’t get to me in time. Because they would have taken me, the Power Brothers...I really did see them hunting me down. They would have killed me.”

He shook his head. “Your friend Tristan hasn’t spoken up yet. That singer he was hooked up with hasn’t either, but if they do. *When* they do.” He paused. “Or when they realize that Reverend Lynch has been taken from the manor. So many things, baby. It’s only a matter of time.”

My soul was shriveling, because he was right. The roads all led to Lucian. To me and Lucian. Even my cousin Silas had seen us together, back at Tinsley’s birthday ball. As soon as the Power Brothers were out of the equation, it would be like an atom bomb, waiting right at our door, ready to explode.

“So what do we do?” I asked him. “We have to do something, right? There has to be something we can do, because I can’t go back there. I can’t, Lucian.”

“Every second is one step closer to our doom,” he told me. “We have to move. Quickly.”

I was nodding, frantic. “Yes, we move! We move anywhere! I don’t care where we go, just as long as I’m with you. Please, Lucian, let’s run. Let’s run now!”

His cell sounded out again. A message. He picked it up and I watched his face as he read it. I saw his mouth drop. “That’s my cousin, Elliot Morelli. He’s asking me what the hell is going on. Says everyone is talking about Lucian Morelli and Elaine Constantine and how I’ve been hunting you down.”

My head was spinning, trying to work out some miracle solution. I’d been a fool to think a single note would condemn

the Power Brothers for wiping me out without anyone questioning a thing. Only I hadn't cared about Lucian Morelli then. Not enough to attempt something less questionable.

Lucian's fingers were still hitting his cell screen.

"I'll make some calls," he said. "Get an exit plan together."

"An exit plan?"

"Fake IDs. We need to get out of here, overseas as soon as possible."

"Okay. Right," I said. "I guess you have loads of them, right? Fake IDs and stuff. I know people do. People like you, I mean."

He sneered, but there was affection in it. "*People like me*. I love how you've been raised to believe that I really am some monster from the underworld and your family is on the other end of the spectrum. Believe me, sweetheart, your family will have as many fake IDs as mine will. They're as fucked up in the evil shit as we are."

I tipped my head. "Yeah, okay, well, *I* don't have any fake IDs. I've never seen one in my life."

He smirked. "I love your innocence."

I rolled my eyes. "Not many people would say a party girl with a debt so huge that it would cost her her life had a huge amount of innocence about her."

"Still," he said. "You're innocent. I love you for it."

Hearing those words from him made my soul sing. *I love you*. Lucian Morelli really loved me. A Morelli really did love a Constantine.

And a Constantine loved him right back.

"You know this is like some fucked-up version of Romeo and Juliet, right?" I said. "It's like a modern-day Shakespeare, just a whole load less...picturesque."

I adored his smile, even though it was a sad one. “Just a shame Romeo and Juliet both die at the end of it, isn’t it? Let’s do our best to make sure we don’t follow in their fucking footsteps.”

He finished his coffee and wandered away with his cell in his hand, fingers busy. I finished mine and headed through to the living room, daring to put the TV on to check out the latest news.

It was all still the same, pleas for information from my family and people saying random shit about where they’d seen me. It seemed the mainstream media wasn’t anywhere closer to the truth. I doubted they ever would be.

I could hear Lucian speaking, his voice low and his tone his usual icy pitch. I didn’t focus on what he was saying. There was a strange calmness in me somehow, even with the looming carnage. It was trust. I trusted Lucian to take care. Of me. Of us.

He was gone a while before he came through to the living room.

“The UK,” he said to me. “We’ll go abroad. We’ll be running, but we stand more chance of surviving with the Atlantic Ocean as a buffer, at least.”

I hadn’t been overseas since I was a little girl. We’d gone there as a family, smiling for the cameras as we checked out London with a few of the aristocrats we were such good family friends with. I’d been in awe of the place. I’d loved it. The London Eye and Buckingham Palace and the quaint countryside surrounding the city.

“Can we get there?” I asked him. “Will we manage to make the journey?”

“Only one way to find out.”

One thing was for sure, I’d risk my life trying.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lucian

WE WERE FIGHTING time and I knew it. The tentacles were snaking closer to us. Questions hissing closer and closer.

I'd managed to find out that the Constantines were meeting the Power Brothers at that very moment. We had hours, tops, before those discussions would lead to our demise, or get very close to it. As soon as the Constantines stopped looking at the Power Brothers and shot even the slightest glance in another direction, we'd be fucked, and my father had his pulse in line with theirs, seeking out my lies.

The contacts I chose to use were distant from my regular network—as distant as I could possibly risk venturing. I mentioned nothing about Elaine Constantine being alongside me, just that I needed a fresh set of IDs to get out of the country. Wesley Dale was all set to meet me in the parking lot of JFK International Airport, but it would be over twenty-four hours until he could deliver. As well as the fake IDs, he was also getting us tickets on a flight out of there.

As much as twenty-four hours between now and our flight would be one hell of a long one, it did grant me a window to complete the calling in my soulless heart that couldn't be silenced.

I had something that needed to be done first, before we made our escape. Something I couldn't walk away from. Something I could never leave the country without fulfilling, no matter how insane it might be. It was festering too deep in my gut to ignore.

There was no guarantee I'd ever be back in the US again in this lifetime. This might well be my one and only chance to deliver what was deserved to the pieces of filth.

I'd do my damn fucking best trying.

I gave Elaine one more chance to back out of a future on the run before we were snared for good.

"You're really sure about this? This is your last opportunity to head back to your world. Make sure you won't regret the road you take with me, sweetheart."

Her reply was instant. "I'd rather die with you than survive alone."

It was a beautiful statement. One I fully reciprocated as I pulled her close and held her tight.

"Ditto."

Her smile was amazing.

"Let's go, then, Romeo. Let's get across the ocean and start our new life."

That's when I told her, my eyes fixed firm on hers.

"Our escape will be tomorrow, which is just as well. I have something I need to do before then, Juliet."

Her question was instant. Wide-eyed.

"What? What do you need to do before then?"

I contemplated sharing my plans, but I didn't. She would only beg me to let them go, but I had no intention of it. I wouldn't let retribution go for any fucking thing in the world.

It wasn't only fake IDs and plane tickets and women's clothes I'd been seeking out on my cell for the past sixty minutes. It was Colonel Hardwick's current location. Only that had led me to so much more. You could call it God giving me his blessing. I fucking deserved it for the beautiful payback I was about to deliver.

Through my backhanded investigations, I'd managed to find out that it wasn't just Colonel Hardwick who was at Hanborough Park Golf Course that morning. No. Lionel Constantine, the depraved uncle who'd delivered Elaine to her abusers when she was just a scared little girl, was right there with him. A forty minute drive away.

Halle-fucking-lujah.

I knew what they were there for. I knew the only thing they could possibly be there socializing for in the midst of Elaine Constantine's abduction. Reverend Lynch. The vile priest and his sudden disappearance, and no doubt the girls I'd set free to run away from the manor late that night after I'd taken his sicko life away from him.

I changed my clothes to casual golfing attire as Elaine stared on from the bedroom doorway. She was visibly scared as I loaded myself up with the necessary weaponry from the cabinet downstairs. She was ghostly as she followed me around the place, eyes wide and terrified.

"Really, Lucian, whatever it is you *need* to do, do you really have to do it? We could hole up here and stay as quiet as we can, and just pray that nobody finds us."

I stepped up close and took hold of her chin, tipping her face up to mine.

"I need to go. I can't leave without delivering what's due."

She was shaking as I kissed her. She let out a breath as my tongue pushed its way inside her mouth and danced with a passion. Kissing stopped her questions.

"There are suitcases under the bed in my room," I told her as I forced myself to pull away. "If you want to make our escape as smooth as possible, then please feel free to pack as many essentials as you can find for the journey. The more ready we are to leave, the better. Somehow we need to find you some damn clothes to go with, too. I don't think you wearing my shirt on the plane is going to blend us into the hustle all that much."

She smiled at me and did a scared little curtsy. “I kinda like wearing your shirt constantly. Can’t say I’ve been missing my wardrobe.”

I did my best to smile right back at her. “Lock the door behind me again. Same rules apply. I’m not back by dusk, you head back to the city.”

This time her nod was quiet, her meekness visible. The sassy doll who’d fired back at me at every opportunity just a few days earlier was well out of sight.

Surprisingly, I was looking forward to her return.

I was off quickly, slipping into the car and driving away with a screech of tires as she watched from the doorstep, arms wrapped around her chest.

I called up the navigation on my cell and sped toward my destination. I had my own membership to Hanborough Park, nobody would question my arrival.

There wasn’t even the faintest sliver of uncertainty in me as I pulled up into the golf course parking lot. I was as sure of my actions as I’d been of anything in my life. My fingers were already itching to pull the trigger and deliver revenge on behalf of the woman I loved.

“Good morning,” I said to the guy at the check-in desk when I stepped into reception.

“Good morning, Mr. Morelli, sir,” he offered and waved me on through. He was new to the position. I’d never seen him before.

New enough not to know that you keep Morellis and Constantines apart at all costs.

I used that to my advantage.

“I’m here to meet up with Colonel Hardwick. Could you please tell me which hole he’s on?”

He gave me a happy little smile. “Last time I heard they were at hole four, but I’m not sure.”

I would have to take his advice and hope for the best. Hole four was very isolated. There wouldn't be a passerby for quite some time—at least I hoped not.

“Thank you,” I said to the fool who'd shared their privacy, and then I walked on through.

I knew where I was headed. My pace was quick and determined, ensuring I stayed on the edges of the course and out of view of the stragglers of golfers in the distance. Every single moment I could delay people identifying me as the culprit behind this attack was a tick for our odds of managing to reach the UK.

I couldn't take a golf cart, but I'd been walking no more than ten minutes when the two pieces of shit appeared on the horizon. I slowed down my pace, being more sure than ever to keep hidden as I approached. They were talking heatedly. I could see the waving of their arms, golf clearly the last thing on their minds.

I knew then, beyond all doubt, that they were aware Reverend Lynch had encountered some...*difficulties*.

I kept to the rough as I walked, heart thumping and blood ice cold and burning bright with the promise of vengeance. My gun was aching to fire and my fingers were aching to set the bullets free, right into the guts of them.

I slipped on my leather gloves and was already holding the gun when I appeared in view. They were talking so intently that they didn't notice me until I was close enough that they could hear me clear my throat.

Both sick fucks jumped a mile when they saw me there, starting backwards once they registered it was me.

Hardwick stepped away from Lionel Constantine, clearly happy to abandon him for his demise. So much for friendship and loyalty. He was clearly ready to run, his hands held up in front of him as I stepped up closer.

“This is between you two,” he told me. “I'll leave you to your family dispute and head on to the next hole.”

“Get the hell fucking back here,” I snarled at him. “This has plenty to do with the both of you, you disgusting piece of shit.”

I watched his mind whirring. I smirked as I saw the pieces come together for him, while Lionel Constantine was still staring on in mute horror.

“You’re attacking the fellowship, yes?” Hardwick announced, his wavering voice scared enough to set my heart alight. “The fellowship has nothing against the Morellis, I can assure you of that.”

“This isn’t about the fucking Morellis,” I told him with a vicious smile. “This is to do with Elaine.”

“Elaine?!” Hardwick gasped. “You mean Elaine Constantine?”

That’s when Lionel found his voice. “You just *killed* Elaine Constantine,” he said, and there wasn’t even the slightest hint of anger in his voice. “What the fuck has that got to do with coming after the fellowship?”

I laughed to myself at their ridiculous attempt at feigning ignorance.

“You know exactly what coming after the fellowship has to do with Elaine Constantine,” I told them. “You fucking *abused* Elaine Constantine when she was a pure little girl, you sick cunts.”

I pointed the gun at them, the silencer already in place. Their shock was evident, but not nearly so evident as their fear. They were absolutely petrified. Their own doom looming loud and clear.

“What the hell are you doing?” Lionel said. “Like you give a fuck about Elaine.”

“I love your beautiful angel of a niece,” I told him. “Just be grateful I don’t have longer to make you suffer even more for your crimes.”

His eyes were open right on mine when I pulled the trigger. One lonely bullet, right in his face.

He was gone. Hardwick started stumbling, trying to run. The sad, bloated prick didn't get very far before I was up and at him, tearing him backwards and spinning him to face the corpse I'd just landed into hell.

"No!" he cried out as I forced the gun in his hand and grasped his fingers around it. He fought, but I was stronger. His hand was clutching the gun when I turned it around and pressed the barrel up against his temple.

"Please," he begged me, squirming like a slug in my arms. "Please, no!"

"Good night, motherfucker," I said, and then I shot him.

Only *I* didn't shoot him, did I? It was *his* finger on the trigger.

The sad, miserable fucker had shot himself. Appeared to the onlooker that he'd shot Lionel Constantine before blowing himself away, too.

Oh, the bliss of inflicting that much hurt. I was back in my school days again, enjoying the suffering. Only this was better. More fulfilling than ever. Delivering Elaine's revenge was the most rewarding torture I'd ever given.

I was running out of time with the shots ringing out, and I knew it. The course was big and people were distant, but they were audible. Questions would surely be asked, and asked quickly.

I got the fuck out of there as quickly as I fucking could.

Only it wasn't quick enough. Not as the dominos started tumbling.

My cell was alive with news and whispers. My father as close to the tendrils as anyone else on the scene. They were coming for us. Right fucking now.



CHAPTER FIVE

Elaine

I STARTED PACKING as soon as the car had left the driveway. My hands were jittery, but that was okay. It was good to have them occupied.

It took barely any time before I'd folded and packed almost every item of clothing from Lucian's closet. I'd boxed up several pairs of his shoes, and the bulk of toiletries we wouldn't need to use before leaving, and then I'd dug into his most private space and packed his dream journal and fountain pen and the watch with RHM on the leather strap. I was on a mission, getting us ready to roll.

My jitters were even worse when I was done. I drifted aimlessly around the place, chewing at my nails, staying inside with the door locked—just like I promised Lucian. As much as the grass outside was calling me, tempting me to head outside for some fresh air, I wouldn't break my promise. As much as I wanted to venture out and see the mound of dirt we'd thrown over Reverend Lynch's body, I didn't. I didn't break my promise to Lucian.

Still, I'd stare at it from the window. I'd stare at that dirty grave and think of the disgusting body inside it with a flame down deep inside me. *Fuck you, you sick asshole.*

I was so fucking glad he was dead.

Reverend Lynch's pit of a resting place was a beacon, thrilling me, but there was more to it than that. I couldn't deny the thoughts that were tickling my mind. Thoughts of what

Lucian might be doing as I waited for him to come home that could be so damn important. So damn important, and so private that he had chosen to keep it from me.

Where could he be?

If he wasn't at Morelli Holdings, and we weren't getting flights on our escape run until tomorrow, then where the hell could Lucian be?

I knew there was something dark and deep about what he'd headed off to do, stepping out into the world when we should surely be hiding in here as quietly as we could and counting down the minutes. I also knew, just an inkling, but a powerful one, that what he was doing had something to do with *me*. I was still in shock about that—a powerful beast of a man like Lucian on a mission to do something for a little fuckup of a girl like *me*.

There was a strange pleasure to it, better than the greatest cocaine buzz I'd ever felt. It made my heart soar to mean that much to someone. I'd never felt so wanted, or so important, or so validated.

That tickle was deep and strong in me. The whisper that maybe, just maybe, someone else who deserved it would be joining Reverend Lynch in hell.

I couldn't even hope.

One hour felt like a lifetime as I waited with the suitcases all packed and ready to go, so hell only knew how long twenty-four of them would feel like as we waited to make our run overseas. The minutes were dragging so slow they could cripple me. Still I drifted, thought, stared out of the window. Drifted, thought, stared out of the window.

I couldn't do it. Not all through the afternoon.

I stopped drifting around the house enough to put the TV on once another twenty minutes had crawled on by, expecting to see my face staring back out at me like usual. Only it wasn't my face staring back out at me. Not this time.

As it turns out, I wasn't quite prepared for it.

I knew we were in some serious trouble the moment the photograph came up on-screen.

If you have any information about this man, then please call the number below.

Oh fuck.

The image was a blurry photograph taken outside my apartment, presumably right before my abduction. He was dark and tall...like a lot of men. A lot of men who weren't Lucian Morelli.

I was hoping my letter would have drawn the attention away from his visit but it was only a matter of time. It had always been just a matter of time.

The number on-screen was scrolling.

If you have any information about this man, then please call the number below.

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There were people from the Work Truths auction we'd been at, talking about how they'd seen him there, including my cousin, Harriet. It broke my heart to see her like that—tears streaming down her cheeks. She was genuinely asking for information, but it was her naivety asking, loud and clear. There was no way in this world that people wouldn't know. That people wouldn't see the connection, the similarity between the Morelli god and this lurking shadow.

Yeah, sure, there was no doubt about it. The pieces were piling up around us. The picture on-screen was just another huge pointer linking Lucian Morelli to me.

We were running out of time.

If you have any information about this man, then please call the number below.

If only I had a cell, maybe I would. Maybe I'd tell them something, *anything* just to get them off track. But I didn't. I had nothing. It was just me, with my legs pulled up and crossed on the sofa as I rocked back and forth, staring at that blurry photo on the screen.

I leapt out of my skin when I heard a car pull back up in the driveway. Thank fuck for that. Thank fuck Lucian had made it home.

For the second time today, I twisted the key in the lock and raced on out of there to meet him, and this time I got further. I was racing, rushing...only it wasn't Lucian's car that was waiting for me outside when I screeched to a halt on nervous legs.

It wasn't the strength of Lucian greeting me when a tall stranger stepped out of the driver's side and came after me.

No.

Oh my God, no.

My body was on autopilot as I turned around and made a dash back to the safety of the house, but it wouldn't have mattered, not for anything. My body would never have been fast enough.

I was back up on the porch when the man's hands grabbed me from behind and slammed me right into the hallway. I had no idea who I was squealing against as he spun me around and threw me right up against the wall.

"Elaine Constantine," he snarled. "We knew it. We knew you two were holed up together in some fucked-up little shit show of a haven. Where is Lucian?"

I stared blankly, every inch of my skin prickling as I tried to work out just who or where this guy had come from. He had a scar down the right side of his face, a brute in the most

brutish sense of the word. Dark and deadly with heavy eyebrows that made me feel like a useless little girl.

“Who are you?” I asked, and his eyes were nothing but vile as he stared down at me.

“I could be anybody,” he said to me. “Everyone is coming for you. The Morellis, The Power Brothers, your own fucking family.”

It broke my heart that he was right.

It also broke my heart that I may never see the love of my life again.

One thing for sure was that I was never going to betray Lucian Morelli. The guy before me could do whatever he wanted, but I wouldn't be revealing anything about the man I loved.

“Tell me,” he pushed. “I want to know everything you know about the spawn of Satan.”

I gasped when I felt it. The chill of the blade pressing against my ribs.

He was really going to hurt me. The sick fuck in front of me was really going to hurt me.

I was a little girl in that moment with my life flashing before my eyes, but I didn't want it. I wanted everything but to say goodbye to the first shot at a future I'd ever really craved.

“Tell me,” the guy grunted again. “I have a whole load of people waiting for a damn fucking update.”

I closed my eyes as I shook my head.

The whole load of people could wait, because I wouldn't be telling him anything. Not a fucking thing.

I don't know when he used that blade on my ribs. My senses were swimming as I first felt the stab of pain slice my skin through the fabric of the shirt on me, and my squeals sounded distant. Distant and scary enough that my legs were like Jell-O.

I just prayed with every part of my fucked-up little soul that on some weird level, I'd get at least one chance to see the love of my life again.

Please God. Please just one more glance at Lucian Morelli.



CHAPTER SIX

Lucian

I DROVE THAT car faster than I'd ever driven a car in my life as I sped my way back toward Bishop's Landing.

The pieces were tumbling, a mess so churned that I had no idea who was coming from where anymore, only that they were all heading in one direction. Ours.

People had been talking—Constantines and Power Brothers, and my own family on the sidelines.

We were doomed. I was just begging to the universe that I'd reach Elaine before anyone else did, and before anyone reached me en route.

I hadn't known just how visible my own little shack in the wilderness had been to those around me. Naivety on my part.

Please God, let me reach her.

My wheels were spinning on gravel when I reached the driveway, and my heart was spinning to match when I saw the red car already parked up by our porch.

Holy fuck, they were here for her.

There was no point trying to be quiet or calm, so I didn't. I burst through the door consumed with a whole other league of rage and fear than I'd felt before, and there he was, some disgusting piece of shit with his hand around my sweetheart's throat, his face right up in hers.

And his blade against her rib cage, hurting her. Hurting her bad.

The guy thought he was some kind of professional killer, all set to bargain with me or battle information right out of me, only I didn't give him even a second of a chance before I launched myself right at him and shunted him down to the floor.

I was a beast possessed with hatred and rage, no longer caring if he took me out for the count, just so long as my Elaine was free from him.

“Run!” I yelled at her, as I fought with that cunt, but she didn't move, paralyzed, her blood visible even through my shirt on her chest.

“RUN!” I yelled again, but it was the man underneath me who responded with action, trying his best to seize control.

Luckily, thank holy fuck, he didn't make it.

I heard his grunt before I felt his blood, both of our limbs flailing and twisting.

The universe was damn fucking kind in that moment. Seriously damn fucking kind.

His eyes were cold and dying as I twisted his blade even further into his ribs. I felt a whirr of satisfaction seeing that—seeing his payback for trying to hurt my woman with the same callous intent.

His stare was already void and numb when Elaine finally found motion and dropped to the hallway floor. I reached for her and she went straight into my arms, and she was hurting enough to be trembling and crying, the blood on her chest enough to redden my fingers.

“You saved me,” she managed to whisper, and I wished it was skill and intent more than luck that had led me back to her in time.

I'd been a fool to hit the golf course. An absolute fool to believe we were in anything other than a web of people out for our blood, all coming at us with different whispers.

“You saved me, Lucian,” Elaine whispered again, and I tugged the shirt from her ribs enough to realize she was right.

She was hurt and bleeding, but she wasn't in danger of bleeding out, not entirely. Still, it was enough to have me reeling, sick and desperate, and I knew then that I'd never be able to stand seeing my beautiful baby girl take any pain from any piece of shit in this world. Especially not because of me.

The knowledge that I'd brought her to this was a hammerblow to my chest, heavy and hard.

The body on the floor next to us was just another example of not giving a fuck for anyone's life other than ours as I got to my feet and lifted her to hers.

I carried her through to the bathroom and found my medical supplies, wrapping her up tight in a bandage.

She whimpered but let me touch her, giving me control over her body, even through her pain and tears.

There was no doubt about it when I saw that wound of hers in the cold hard light—he would have killed her.

There was no doubt about the coming truth, either. They would be coming right back in for round two, and it would be soon. Really damn soon. We needed to get out of there as quickly as we possibly could.

“You packed?” I asked and she managed a nod.

“Yes, I packed.”

“Let's do it, then,” I said. “We're on the fucking run.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Elaine

EVEN NOW, IN pain with my blood still flowing under the bandage, I didn't care about anything but holding the man I loved.

He was home.

Safe.

Alive.

But that wasn't going to be the case all that much longer. Not with the pointer fingers coming up from all directions.

My eyes must have been terrified when they met his.

“Have you heard the news?” I asked. “They're looking for you, Lucian! There's a photo of you outside my apartment! That's what's bringing them here, isn't it? They've put the pieces together!”

I expected him to freak out and curse, or at least do something in shock, but he didn't. “Sure, them hunting down that person is a nail in the coffin, Elaine,” he told me as he grabbed hold of our things around us. “But believe me, baby, there are a whole load worse nails coming for our coffin than that. You've just met one of them.”

“There are more people coming, aren't there?” I pushed.

I'll remember his answer for the rest of my life.

My beautiful monster was so proud and terrified both at once when he told me, his expression will be etched into my

soul for all time.

“Plenty of people will be coming for us,” he told me. “But I’ll be protecting you and dishing out revenge with every breath in me, I swear it on my life.”

And then he paused.

Lucian Morelli actually paused before he told me what he’d done.

“Speaking of revenge, Elaine. I just killed your fucking uncle,” he said.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Lucian

HER FACE WAS magic. A perfect picture of shock as her hands clasped over her face.

“You...you killed Lionel?”

“Yes, my beautiful princess. I killed the vile fuck who delivered you for abuse. Shot him bang in his fucking face.”

“He’s really dead?”

I could tell she was still trying to process it. Still trying to believe my words.

“He’s dead. I bid him a fair fucking farewell.” I paused. “And I delivered Colonel Hardwick a fair fucking farewell alongside him. Both of them can rot in hell.”

She was still hurting from her wound, but in that moment it didn’t matter, she was too caught up in what I was telling her.

“I don’t even know what to say...” she said.

I took hold of her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

“You don’t have to say anything. It was the greatest achievement of my life. I’m just fucking grateful I made it back here in time.” I sucked in a breath. “I won’t be leaving you again, I guarantee you that.”

She sucked in a breath to match mine, and then my doll shone bright and perfect. A tear dropped from her eye and ran

down her cheek, but there was a smile on her face. The most beautiful smile I'd ever seen.

It was the little girl Elaine who was smiling at me. Grateful. Humble. Surprised.

The little girl Elaine I was more petrified of losing than anything else I'd ever felt.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper, and then she broke, sobbing hard and deep.

I wrapped her in my arms and soothed the stunning girl as she cried. It only made my black soul thrum even harder. Pride. I was proud of what I'd done for her. I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat and enjoy every second more than life itself. Only now wasn't the time. Now was the time we needed to get the holy fuck out of there.

"I'm going to get the rest of those vile cunts," I said. "As long as there is life in my body, princess, I'll be hunting the rest of them down."

I didn't tell her that one of the main reasons I was choosing the UK as our runaway destination was that the other main members of the fellowship were based there, in their stuck-up British empires. It had been one of my motives—to reach Baron Rawlings and Lord Eddington. A far bigger attraction to me than Buckingham Palace, that was for damn sure.

"I can't believe it," she whispered through her tears. "You did that for me...you made them pay for what they did to me..."

"They deserved a whole lot fucking worse, Elaine. They're lucky I didn't have more time."

I held her close, savoring the touch of her body against mine. She was tiny, pressing hard to my chest, and I loved feeling her like that, so trusting of me. I don't know how long we were standing there, but the sky was turning pink to dusk outside when she pulled away from me. Her eyes were puffy

but every bit as stunning, and her smile was delicate in the most gorgeous of ways.

I told her how I'd tracked them down at the golf course and accosted them at hole four. I told her how they knew exactly what I was taking revenge for, but all the while I was finishing up gathering our things ready to go.

"I'd have killed Lionel myself if I could," she told me, and the flash of hate and hurt in her eyes showed me just how true that was. "Honestly, Lucian. I'd have killed him myself."

I was very glad to have delivered her wish by my hands.

Her mind seemed to click back onto our own situation as I gathered the rest of our suitcases.

"Your photo is all over the news. There's a hotline wanting information."

I knew we were fucked. She didn't need to tell me. We just had to pray that we could make it through the hours to get to the airport tomorrow. It's not as though we could even check into a hotel for the night with one of my other fake IDs. We were too recognizable with that photo all over the news alongside Elaine Constantine's.

I got the suitcases ready to go, positioned at the bottom of the stairs. She told me how she'd packed everything she could see we'd need, and how I should check it to be sure, but I shook my head at her.

"Whatever you've packed will be fine."

"Okay," she said.

"Getting out of here is our biggest hurdle," I told her between loading up the suitcases into the trunk of the car. "But hiding isn't going to be all that easy. People will be screaming out for our blood, on both sides of the family divide."

"I know," she said, then took another deep breath. "My mom will find out about my uncle. She won't let it go easily. He's a Constantine and she'll want answers about why he's dead."

“I set it up to look like Colonel Hardwick shot Lionel. She won’t be out for his blood for very long though, since he’s already dead. I made sure it looked like he killed himself after murdering your uncle. Only that won’t wash. Not for long. Not for the people who know us.”

“Hopefully they’ll never know it was you. Not ever.”

“There’s that beautiful optimism again.” I shrugged. “Your mom should have listened to you when you were a little girl begging for her care and protection. She’d have probably killed your sick fucking uncle herself.”

Elaine said something that shocked me right to the fucking core.

“Not so sure about that.”

“Not so sure about what?” I pushed, helping her out to the passenger seat of the car. “That your mother wouldn’t want to kill a man that was setting you up for abuse?”

She shrugged. “Just not sure she really ever loved me enough that she would have turned against him.”

If I had a heart, it would have broken to see the pain on her face. My doll truly believed that she was unloved by everyone. Only it wasn’t just that. It was the twiddle of her fingers in front of her again that spoke words she’d never say. The way they were twisting, hurting. The way she was clearly so broken inside.

My doll really believed she was worthless.

Only she wasn’t worthless.

She was worth everything in my whole fucking world.

“I really am going to make them all pay,” I told her, and my voice was a ripple of well-deserved hate for those disgusting pricks.

“Thank you,” she said, and there was the young Elaine again, staring over at me with a smile.

It was all I could take. I grabbed her hard and strong before I lowered her down to her seat, showing her my full depth of emotion before letting go of her enough to belt her in, trying to show her everything she deserved and had never had. Protection and love. I'd give her both until my very last breath.

Unfortunately, that last breath might not be all that long coming.

I was still holding her tight when my cell sounded out again, three times straight in a row before I broke away to pick it up from the dashboard.

Trenton Alto.

My resident fixer and my personal Judas. My right-hand man was a long way from being my right-hand right about now, but still, he was trying.

I managed to answer his call on his fourth attempt, grunting out a *yeah, what?*

“Yeah, what the holy living fuck are you doing?” he said. “Did you just fucking kill Lionel fucking Constantine on Hanborough Park Golf Course? People are saying it was some Hardwick guy, but you were there too, weren't you?”

“What do you think? Not that it's any of your fucking business.”

He cursed at me.

“Fuck you, Morelli. You'd better be glad it *is* my fucking business, or you'd be up to your neck already.” He paused. “You're fucked. The cards are all falling down. The Power Brothers have someone on their way already. Warren, a guy with a scar down his face.”

“Yeah, tell me something I don't know,” I scoffed. “I've got a handle on that one.”

“But you haven't got a handle on anything, have you?” he said, and his voice got lower. “Because if you're in Bishop's Landing, and I suspect you are, you'd better get the fuck out of there right fucking now.”

My blood froze.

“You’re there now, aren’t you?” he said. “You may think it’s a private refuge, Lucian, but you’re wrong. People know it’s out there. People know it’s where you go.”

“*People?*” I asked him. “Who do you mean by *people*? I still don’t know how the hell the Power Brothers ever found out about this place, so who the hell else are you meaning?”

“I mean your father,” he told me. “And believe me, Lucian, he’s after you. He knows you’ve fucked up and gone after the Constantines. He thinks you’ve killed Lionel and taken Elaine, or even worse than that...he thinks you’ve kept her. For you. The cleanup team are on their way, right fucking now.”

I knew Trenton was breaking every rule of self-preservation and common sense he had in his head.

There was no way he should be warning me. No way he should have ever tried to save my ass from my own undoing.

I stayed on the call long enough to give him a response.

One single phrase.

“Thank you.”

I rarely said it, rarely felt it, rarely considered anyone worthy.

He confirmed what I already knew would be the only route ahead for him.

“This is it for us,” he said. “From this moment on, I’m on team Morelli. They’ll take my life if I’m not. They’ll take Lucinda’s life, too. If they tell me to come for you, I’ll be coming for you.”

Lucinda was his little baby girl. Four years old.

“I know,” I told him.

“Goodbye, Lucian,” he said.

And then he hung up.



CHAPTER NINE

Elaine

IT WAS BAD and I knew it.

“We need to go,” he said. “Now. People are already on their way.”

I nodded, mute, praying I’d packed everything we needed to take, only there was nothing for me to be taking. I had nothing here.

Nothing except Lucian Morelli.

It seemed Lucian forgot he did have things left to pack up, though. I should have waited in the car, holding my wound tight in my bandage, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t stay still. He was already in the kitchen when I joined him, pulling the panel from the bottom of one of the cabinets, then pulling out several cases to follow. He opened them up one by one to check the contents, quick and sharp. Cash. Lots of cash. Several guns came out after them in a case of their own.

He was a machine as he headed outside and loaded up the trunk with the final contents ready to roll. I would have helped him, but I was too busy getting my feet into my high heels with trembling fingers, managing a surprising amount given the pain I was in.

“Stop it, Elaine,” he said when he stepped back in to join me. “Let me do this for you. I was going to help you into this before we left, I just wanted you as safe as possible in the damn fucking car.

I was startled as he dropped his cell onto the porch step and smashed the hell out of it with his boot heel. It was a trashed wreck as he tossed it into the bushes at the side of the house.

“Don’t use that thing again,” he said. “It’ll be a beacon.”

The car was already started up when he slid me back into the passenger seat and fastened me in for the second time.

The tires screeched against the driveway as he sped away, and I stared at the house in the rearview with a strange pang of homesickness in my belly. Yeah. This place had been the closest thing to a home I’d ever known.

The roads were quiet, but he veered off onto even quieter ones. Rural, remote and out of sight of any kind of main highway.

“Who’s on the way?” I asked him when his driving slowed down a little.

“It’s my own family coming for me this time,” he said, “I’m now my father’s enemy, not his son.”

I felt awful for him.

“Sorry,” rolled off my tongue without a thought.

He looked right at me.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart. I have no regrets and you have nothing to take accountability for.”

“Still,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

I had no idea where we were headed until signs for the city showed up and told me directly. I had no idea what the plan was, or where we were going to end up, not until Lucian pulled another surprise out for me.

“I’m trusting your friend Jemma isn’t back from her world-saving mission yet?”

I spun in my seat to face him, taken aback he even remembered her name. Jemma. My friend who gave me her

apartment keys whenever she was on a charity project or a protest drive somewhere. The friend whose apartment Lucian had followed me to downtown and threatened to kill me in her kitchen. Only he hadn't. He'd walked away and left me bleeding from my own self-harm on her living room carpet.

"Yeah, she'll be away for weeks," I said.

"Good. I have a set of keys to her apartment that I had made up, we'll wait it out there overnight."

It was another shocker for me.

"You have keys to her apartment?"

He smirked, even through his tension. "Yes. I have keys to her apartment. I was planning on using it to finish you off in Trenton Alto made them for me."

I smirked back. "Life works out pretty damn weirdly sometimes, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he said. "It sure does."

Gaol Street was barely more than a dive, and definitely nowhere that people would ever come looking for Lucian Morelli. He ditched the car a few blocks away in an underground parking lot, as far into the shadows as he could, and then he took the suitcases from the trunk. He couldn't carry all of them, so I took hold of the cash. It felt so bizarre to be carrying that much money in my hands. Bizarre and painful, even though I was lucky enough that the wound from the blade didn't seem to be nearly as bad as I was fearing.

Painful but manageable. Torment, not quite torture.

Together we made our way over to Jemma's place. I was teetering with every step, heels feeling crazy. I must have looked absurd, dressed in a long shirt and one of Lucian's jackets with stilettos on my feet.

Sure enough, Lucian had keys to Jemma's place. He looked up and down the street before he let us into the apartment block, but it seemed there was nobody around.

I was so used to being in this place that the hallway actually felt relaxing as we made our way along to apartment seven. I took the key from Lucian and let us inside, and there we were, back at one of the very first places we first truly crossed paths.

I still remembered him being there, pinning me to the kitchen countertop.

Holy hell, how I wanted him to do it again. Even though I had a slice to my chest, I still wanted Lucian to take me.

We dropped the cases down in the living room, then I headed into the kitchen. I took two mugs out, staring at him afresh all over again as he stepped out into the hallway. It didn't matter how many times I looked at the man I adored, he still took my breath away.

He looked bigger than ever as he stood looking at Jemma's whale tapestry up on the wall. His hair looked darker and slicker, and his eyes looked fiercer, and his stance was more powerful than I'd ever known.

Yes. He was the man I was destined to be with. I could feel it with every breath, right into my heart. Romeo and Juliet had nothing on us. We were as soul bound as it would ever be possible to be.

Lucian gestured to the bedroom.

"This may solve another issue at least," he said. "You might leave this place with some clothes that actually fit you."

He was right on that. Jemma was almost exactly the same size as me.

"Yeah," I said. "I can pack a suitcase of her stuff. Or try to, at least."

Making us coffee gave me tingles, reminding me so much of the first time in that space together. He stepped up close to take his mug and I couldn't fight the waves of shivers rushing through me. Only this time they were good shivers. This time they were shivers because I was so desperate for his touch.

“I’m going to redo your bandage later,” he told me. “I was lucky to reach you. An inch deeper and we’d have been on totally different ground.”

I loved how he cared, but my mind was somewhere else in its thoughts, along with my body needing more.

It was me who grabbed him, using all of my weight to pin him against the counter. His mug went clattering out of his hand and smashed on the floor at the same time as my mouth smashed against his.

I wasn’t in charge of the kiss all that long before he grabbed me tight and hoisted me up against him. My legs wrapped around his waist and he carried me through to Jemma’s bedroom, my mouth hot and hungry on his through every step.

I was ready when he dropped me down onto the bed, propping myself up on my elbows as he shrugged his jacket from his shoulders and tugged his golf sweater up and over his head.

There he was. My beautiful monster.

His abs were sculpted from the divine, and the V of his hips was magical as his pants and boxers were kicked off. His cock was...hard.

Very, very hard.

He moved his hand up and down the length as he stared down at me.

“I’ve reached just about the limit of how long I can go without burying myself all the fucking way inside you,” he said, but his mouth wasn’t about that. His mouth was about peppering kisses around my pain.

“That’s good, then. Because I’ve reached just about the limit of how long I can go without you burying yourself all the way inside me,” I replied.

“You’re the prettiest little thing in creation, you know that?” he asked me, and I felt myself glowing, even through

the hurt.

My heart was racing as he dropped himself onto the mattress and climbed on top of me, stalking me slowly, like a tiger on the hunt. A very careful tiger. Skilled and caring, even through his dark needs.

I had needs too. Urgent ones. Ones that made me feel alive when my death had threatened so hard.

We were both ready for it, bodies responding on perfect instinct as our flesh worked together to find our rhythm. It was primal and raw, no kissing or teasing. Nothing but the grind of his cock against my clit until I cried out, and then the pound of him slamming his way right inside me.

Fuck, it was what I wanted.

I took hold of his ass and coaxed him for more, more, *more*. He gave me more. He gave me such hard thrusts that they hurt as well as made me squirm for more. I liked both, pain and pleasure intertwined. I wanted to feel owned, taken, controlled. I wanted to feel like my body was crying out for more and less, both at once.

It cried out for both. Loudly.

Lucian Morelli fucked me like a demon, grunting like a beast with every slam of his hips.

My thighs were spread wide, taking everything, back arched as far as it would go to buck for more, bandage holding.

As always, the master of surprises made me cry out in shock as he pulled out of me far enough to flip me over onto my front, again being careful enough to knock me aback with his skill.

His chest pressed to my back, a slab of iron and strength. His breath was a hiss in my ear as I felt his cock pressing hard against the crack of my ass.

“Take it,” he growled at me. “Take it like the very good girl you’re learning to be.”

I knew what he was talking about. I braced myself, teeth clenched as he gave it to me.

I took it, like the very good girl he was teaching me to be.

I took Lucian Morelli's huge swollen cock in my ass in one single thrust with a guttural groan from the back of my throat but not even a single expletive. I didn't need to. My body was already adjusting to hurt on all different levels.

It was fast, rough, brutal.

Lucian's hand pushed its way between my hips and the mattress enough to circle my clit. Fast, rough, brutal to match.

I don't know who came first. It was blurred. Jagged and wild beyond all reason.

One thing I do know was that it was bliss in the midst of our crazy whirlwind of hell.

He collapsed onto the bed and pulled me toward him. I snuggled up to his side and pressing my cheek to his chest felt like the most natural thing in the world.



CHAPTER TEN

Lucian

I WAS ON my own from here on in. No Morelli backdrop to give me control of any situation I turned my attention to, just me, on the run with the woman I loved.

I'd never have believed I'd be in this position in a million years.

I only prayed that Wesley Dale would be brave enough and far enough outside of our social circle to hold true to our deal. Without fake IDs and plane tickets, we would be royally fucked. I didn't have my cell anymore to contact him, either. We'd just have to turn up at the meeting point tomorrow and hope he'd make it.

Elaine let out a moan as I left her side after stroking her back for an age as she lay against me. She was wrapped up in her friend's dressing gown when she followed me through to the living room.

It was a relief to see her bandage had held firm. Chest accepting the wound and making its roads to fix it. Still, I'd never forget it.

I'd never forget how dangerously close I'd come to losing her, and watching them hurt her beyond recovery.

I was also perfectly aware of the fact that we were only at the beginning of our travels and struggles. They'd be coming for us again, and at some point they'd find us.

At some point I'd have to win the fights all over again.

“Does your friend have a laptop or a tablet here?” I asked her, and she nodded.

“Yeah, I think so.”

She disappeared back into the bedroom with barely more than a wince and a hand on her ribs this time, then reappeared with a tablet and charger. I plugged it in, glad that it connected straight up with her internet.

My finances hadn't been seized by my father, not yet, so I used the opportunity to transfer my current balance through three different bank accounts, obscuring it from view to anyone looking. I made sure to safeguard my personal investments and cash reserves, protecting my personal wealth as well as I possibly could, even though I was soon to be removed from the Morelli business empire.

I smashed the tablet to pieces after I'd used it, just like I'd done with my cell.

Elaine stared at the cases in front of us as I opened one of them up to check the contents. Plenty of cash, just a shame we wouldn't be able to use the bulk of it. “We won't be able to take that cash with us on the plane, will we?” she asked, reading my mind. “Not without people asking some serious questions.”

“No,” I said. “We won't. Not the guns, either.”

She nodded, and then she managed to smile. “In that case, can I leave some of the cash here with a note for Jemma? I can't even imagine how happy that would make her.”

I loved her generosity, despite the absolute insanity of what was going on around us. “Yes,” I told her. “You can leave some of the cash here with a note for Jemma. Be my guest. Maybe she'll use it to save a bunch of whales and plant some more trees in a rainforest.”

“That's not so much of a joke as you think it is,” she said. “She'll likely use the whole load of it to save a bunch of whales and plant some more trees in a rainforest. She wouldn't accept any money from me usually, but if it's here with a note,

I think she'll take it. I mean, she can't not, right? I'll say I'm paying her for the clothes I've stolen and the tablet you just smashed up. She'll at least likely buy some more jeans before she devotes her money to saving the planet."

I adored the happiness in her eyes and her sweet little giggle. "Speaking of more jeans," she added. "I'd better pack some clothes."

She was still looking through her friend's wardrobe once I'd finished scanning through my suitcases and headed through to join her. She was holding up clothes hangers and pressing the clothes against herself in front of the mirror in the corner. The outfits were nothing I'd expect Elaine Constantine to ever be dressed up in. Cheap twenty-buck dresses, like some eco warrior would be twirling around a campfire in. Cheap jeans and underwear which would never be seen anywhere in our world. Still, they all looked just fine against the goddess.

It was also a good thing she'd be wearing them. She would stand far less chance of being recognized in the airport with that shit on.

"I'll tie my hair up in one of her bands," my sweetheart told me and fastened one in her curls to demonstrate.

Yes, she looked anything like Elaine Constantine with her hair bound up messily like that.

"If we make it through, things will get a little bit easier, but it'll still be tight," I said to her. "It'll still be one hell of a mission to survive this chaos, but we'll stand a much better chance at least."

She nodded. Smiled. "Pray to God we do. I would love to be staring out from the London Eye with you and looking at the city lights."

The idea gave me a strange little tickle in my gut. A sappy sense of utter affection I thought I'd never feel. Part of me felt like a loved-up little wimp of a teenager, besotted with his first girlfriend or some shit like that. Although technically Elaine

Constantine was my first girlfriend, I supposed. I hadn't ever been interested in a relationship with anyone else. I hadn't ever even considered *loving* anyone else the way she'd managed to snare my soul. I'd just used women and hurt women and fucked them senseless as I wanted to.

I drank water while Elaine sipped at coffee as the night carried on. The tension was palpable as we counted down the hours, even when we slipped into her friend's bed and attempted some vague notion of sleep.

It sure as fuck didn't come easy. I stared at the ceiling while she tossed and turned beside me, every sense on high alert. Only Trenton Alto knew I had keys to this place. I wondered if he'd conveniently forgotten about it, for now at least. Luckily, nobody came for us. The sun came up in the morning and the streets sounded out with car horns and voices, and we were still alive and breathing.

Elaine managed to climb on top to straddle me before we got out of bed. Her eyes were pools of tired beauty as she stared down at me, running her hands over my chest.

"I never thought I'd be sitting on top of Lucian Morelli in Jemma's apartment at six a.m. in the morning."

"Me neither," I said.

She cast a glance over at the doorway. "Shall we turn on the TV, see what's happening out there?"

I shook my head. "Most definitely not. Any news won't be good news."

"Good," she said, lifting up on her knees and reaching for my hard cock. "My turn to fuck you."

I couldn't help but smile as she rode me tenderly... slowly...carefully...couldn't help but fuck her back as she rode me. Couldn't help squeezing her tits hard when she came. "Fuck that's nice," she said, my cock still spurting inside her.

"So nice," I said, stroking her pretty face.

“You look so out of place in here,” Elaine commented when I stepped back out, and there was a pretty little smirk on her face, even through the chaos and fear. “I mean you looked pretty out of place at the house, but this is a whole other league.”

“You’re reading my mind,” I said, and that smirk stayed bright on her.

“Maybe we really are star-crossed lovers after all. Our minds and hearts, in alignment.”

I was coming close to actually believing her.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elaine

I WAS SO nervous as we gathered our things ready to go.

No, nervous doesn't cut it. I was terrified.

I had a battered old suitcase of Jemma's with her clothes inside and was dressed in a way I'd never been dressed before. I'd chosen as casual as I could, hoping it disguised me as well as humanly possible. I had a tight little t-shirt on with *be the world's best friend* on it in scrawly script under a big loose green sweater, and faded jeans that fit me just fine. Her sneakers were okay on my feet, besides being a little bit big. It would do okay. I hoped so anyway.

I appeared nothing like my usual self with my hair scraped up into one of her hair bands, and that was a good thing.

Lucian nodded his approval. "You make that look damn fine."

"Thanks," I said, then took a solid look at him. He was in by far the most casual combination he was able to muster from the clothes I'd packed for him. He was wearing some loose joggers with a sports sweater on over the top. Unfortunately, his head still looked very, very much like Lucian Morelli, the sculpted god.

I just hoped they'd let him on that plane without realizing.

"Just a few hours left," he told me, but I already knew that. I was counting down every minute.

He gestured to the cash cases on the living room floor. “Take what you want for your friend, just make sure we have plenty left for our airport deal.”

As soon as I opened the case, I realized that his idea of leaving some money for Jemma and my idea of leaving some money for Jemma were very, very different things. A couple of little bundles would easily be enough to make her faint in shock.

The letter I wrote for her brought a tear to my eye.

Be you, forever, because you are amazing. Just a shame I won't be able to share that forever with you. You've been such an important friend to me. I'll miss you for all time.

Love, Elaine.

P.S. Use the money to save the planet if you want to, but use it to save your wardrobe, too.

Oh, and please at least allow yourself some little treats before you donate it all to charity.

P.P.S. I've included another little pile for Tristan, too. If you could please pass it on to him, I'd be grateful.

Lucian scanned my letter as I put it on the kitchen countertop along with the six bundles of cash.

“Wow,” I said as he reached into a cash case and pulled out another two bundles, placing them next to the others.

“I know these people mean a lot to you. I'm sure the money will mean a lot to them.”

I would have never expected the Morelli monster to be so generous. Even now, after all the shockers I'd witnessed from him, this was one of the biggest.

Clearly he could see that. He brushed it aside like it was nothing.

“We can't take the cash anyway, Elaine. It's hardly me being Mr. Compassionate.”

But it was.

Lucian sure was turning out to be Mr. Compassionate to me.

Slowly but surely the minutes ticked by. The afternoon matured until it was ripe for us to leave, and there we were, gathering our pitiful excuses for belongings ready to go.

I cast one last look around the place before we stepped out into the hallway, then I locked up behind us.

I kissed my fingers and pressed them to the door. “See you later, Jemma,” I whispered, and then I followed Lucian down the corridor.

The street was pretty busy when we headed outside and began our walk. The taxi stand was a few blocks away and luckily we got there just fine without anyone shooting us too much of a glance—or actually shooting us.

The cab driver was barely interested in us when we slipped into the back seat.

“JFK,” Lucian said and he gave us a nod.

“Sure.”

We didn’t speak in the cab, just stared out of the windows. My heart was thumping scared as NYC hustled and bustled outside. This was real. Definite. We really were on the run, and they really were coming after us from every direction.

Lucian directed the driver to one of the furthest parking lots from the airport hub, and handed him his fare with a grunt of *thanks*.

The driver didn’t even help us with our luggage, just popped the trunk for us to take them. He sped away without another word.

“Wesley Dale should be here soon,” Lucian told me, then checked his watch. “Next few minutes.”

“Is he the guy getting us out of here?”

“Yes. He’s the guy who *should* be getting us out of here, provided he hasn’t turned into too much of a pussy to go through with the deal.”

I couldn’t hold back the question. “And what if he *is* too much of a pussy to go through with the deal?”

Lucian’s face was deadpan. “Then we’re fucked. Dead and buried.”

I nodded. “Okay, I just hope he isn’t a pussy, then.”

“So do I.”

Luckily Wesley Dale *wasn’t* too much of a pussy to go through with the deal. A black car pulled up ahead of us and reversed into a parking space up close.

“Here he is,” Lucian said, and closed the distance.

I watched the guy get out of the driver’s side and he looked...agitated. His eyes were roving all around before he pulled a little black briefcase from the passenger seat and placed it down on the hood.

“Is this everything?” I heard Lucian say to him. “IDs, passports, plane tickets?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Everything.”

Lucian opened the briefcase and flicked through the contents. He nodded. “Good.”

The guy leaned against the car and folded his arms across his chest. “Yeah, fucking good and fucking harder than you said it would be. You know you’re the most wanted guy on the planet right now, by both your family and the world chasing down that man?”

“I’m well aware of that. Just as well, a business deal is a business deal, isn’t it?”

That’s when the guy reached out and closed the briefcase in front of him. I could hear his voice loud and clear when he spoke next. “See that car over there?” He gestured to one a few bays down. “They are here with me. Any move toward me

and they're set to take action. They'll shoot you *and* turn you in."

I could see the rage in Lucian's eyes. "Right," he said. "So let's get down to it. What the fuck do you want?"

"I want two hundred and fifty thousand more," the guy announced. "Or I'll turn you in myself right now."

Lucian's voice was as angry as his face. "You want two hundred and fifty extra for two sets of fucking IDs, some plane tickets and a pair of fucking glasses?"

The guy shrugged. "Your call, what's it gonna be? You know everyone is after you, just as well as I do. You pay up, or you're dead. Both of you."

Lucian's voice was evil. "You're lucky I can't break your neck."

"Yeah, I am," the guy said, and he laughed. "So, do we have a deal?"

Lucian paced over to me and took the cases of cash from the floor. "We have a deal."

They swapped cases and the guy smirked.

"Nice doing business with you." He gestured to the airport building. "You'd better make a run for it, you ain't gonna survive long around here. Whole fucking city is looking for you."

"Just as well we won't be around here for long, then, isn't it? Flight's at eight fifteen?"

"Yeah." The guy nodded. "Three hours. You'd better get over there and get checked in."

I was so scared I was shuddering as his car pulled away from us and the other one followed behind him. Lucian was straight back over to my side once they were out of view. He tipped my face up to his and kissed my forehead, then wrapped me up tight in his arms.

“Here we go, sweetheart,” he said. “We have a shot at it. Maybe, just maybe, we’ll truly make it across the Atlantic. Just as well we had enough cash in those cases for that asshole, isn’t it? He could have billed my father ten times that, just for my whereabouts.”

It was only when I heard the tone of relief in his voice that I realized just how unsure he’d been that this deal would happen at all.

Yep. He’d been as terrified as I had, he’d just been better at hiding it.

“Let’s do this, then, baby,” I said to him with a smile. “Let’s go see the London Eye.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

Lucian

THERE WAS A new flame of life inside me as I realized how I was feeling as I prepared Elaine with her fake ID ready to head into the airport. I was far more concerned that she would make it out of the country alive than I would. Far more concerned that she could stay alive than I was about staying alive myself.

She looked at her new passport. “Okay, so I’m Penelope Anne Jackson from here on out?”

“Yes,” I told her. “And you’re sitting in Seat 29C of Flight 181. NYC to London Heathrow.”

“Great,” she said. “And who are you?”

I opened up my new ID. “I’m Jason Ryan Reynolds, sitting in Seat 37A of Flight 181. NYC to London Heathrow.”

She looked sad. “It’s sad we can’t sit together at least.”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “But not nearly so shit as it would be to attract attention. They are way more likely to question our identity if they see us next to each other. If anyone finds us before we are off on our own in London, then we’re done for.”

“Yeah, I know,” she replied, and gave a cute little shrug.

I unzipped her friend’s battered old suitcase and put a few of our remaining bundles of cash in there amongst her clothes. I’d already ditched my weaponry in the trash and wrapped my own bundles of cash up in my own suitcase. Now that we were truly ready to go, I felt uncomfortably vulnerable.

I fucking hated feeling vulnerable.

“If I don’t make it through,” I told her. “You get to London and you carry on as long as you can, with or without me.”

Her perfect blue eyes were so fucking scared. “But I don’t want to make it through without you,” she said. “I’d rather die alongside you than exist apart.”

“That’s a beautiful thing to say, Elaine, but regardless. You get to London and you carry on.”

I knew from her expression that she had no intention of doing that.

“Elaine,” I pushed. “You get to London and you keep going, do you understand me? I want you to swear it.”

She let out a sigh. “But I don’t want to swear it. I don’t want to keep going without you. There *is* no *me* without *you*. Not anymore!”

Having someone feel that way about me was a strange sensation and always would be. Her mouth was so pretty, lips pursed in defiance.

“I mean it, Lucian,” she said. “I don’t want to swear it. We make it together, or not at all.”

I stared at her, hard. I soaked in every little detail of her in that moment and fell in love with her all over again. She did it. She won the battle. “Fine,” I told her. “Don’t swear it, but please do think about running with or without me if you make it to London.”

She looked as surprised as I felt that I was backing down for once in my life. I never gave in. Not ever. But with her I had. With her I’d backed the fuck down.

She was smiling as we began to walk along with the suitcases, and I knew that she was thinking just the same as I was. She was thinking about how I’d let her win the battle.

“Don’t expect this to become a habit,” I told her. “When I say something, I always mean it. If I say I want you to swear

something, I'll damn well want you to swear it."

She shrugged, shooting me a mischievous glance, even though we were both fucked with the stress and her bandaged chest. "We'll see about that when the time comes, I guess."

"We'll see about that when the time comes, I *hope*," I said. "We might not even make it out of the country yet."

She dropped her suitcase on the ground and pulled me toward her as soon as the main entrance came into view. "Fuck, I'm scared," she said, and the sassiness in her voice had shriveled up and gone. "Once we head in there, that's it. We make it or we don't, don't we?"

I dropped my suitcases on the ground and held her tight. As tight as I dared through her healing wound. "We'll make it," I told her, wishing I was as sure as I sounded. "Tomorrow evening we'll be on the other side of the Atlantic, Penelope Anne Jackson and Jason Ryan Reynolds beginning their new life together."

I kissed her once, hard and deep, before I sent her on ahead to the entrance. "Do this," I said. "I'll be behind you, just pretend I'm not. We can't be seen together."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Okay," I confirmed. "Go do it, *Penelope*. Go check in for Flight 181."

She looked back at me once over her shoulder before she reached the main doors with her suitcase in tow, but that was all. I hung back until she was out of view before I put my new fake glasses on and made my own way through the airport.

It was busy, people mingling and chatting and pacing around on missions to different check-in desks. Security were alert but hardly ready to pounce. I walked right past several of them without them shooting me the slightest glance.

My hopes were true. Believable. We might just make it.

I caught sight of Elaine's blonde hair as she bobbed her way through one of the terminals. I kept at a safe distance.

My beautiful girl really did look like a regular airport-goer making her way to a transatlantic flight. I only hoped I looked like enough of one to make it onto the plane with her.

She was at security ahead of me. She put her suitcases onto the conveyor belt for scanning and stepped on up with her ID to the counter while I hung back even more, pretending to search in my bag for something as several people stepped up ahead of me in the line.

Elaine was through the desk and out the other side with her baggage before I joined the line for screening.

My heart was pounding as I showed the same attendant my passport. *Please, just don't fucking question me.*

The seconds were hours as she looked from me to the fake photo and back again. My fake glasses felt like clumsy weights against my face and my smile felt fake to match.

I could have leapt up with a hallelujah when she waved me through and my baggage arrived on the conveyor belt on the other side. My heart was still racing as I picked up my bags and headed toward the terminal, but not as fast as it was racing when I saw my beautiful Elaine hovering next to a seating area, eyes wide as she watched for me.

Her smile made my soul soar.

The relief on her face was a blessing from the Lord above.

I gave her the slightest nod, because I couldn't draw any more attention to us, but it was enough that she nodded right back at me, then dashed her way along the corridor, heading closer to Flight 181. But I held back. Waiting. Praying.

She must have already been through check-in when I reached the desk, as there was no sign of her in the line.

Here we were. The true make-or-break moment. If we got through here and onto the plane...if only...

The gate attendant was chirpy when she looked at my plane ticket and passport. Her smile was bland, but welcome.

“Good evening, Mr. Reynolds. I hope you enjoy your flight. Thanks for joining Jettison Air today.”

My suitcases were gone. Taken for the flight. There was just me now, and a briefcase with my essentials in it, all set for travel.

Yes. Thank fuck. I was there. I’d been accepted through check-in and allowed through to the lounge, all ready to board the flight.

And there she was, my beautiful Elaine, sitting in her own little bench seat on the other side of the lounge, staring right over at me as I stepped inside.

We’d done it.

We’d made it through the airport.

Now we just needed to make it onto the damn plane and off the other side.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elaine

I STARED AT the plane ticket. Seat 29C. Flight 181. NYC to London Heathrow.

I was still in shock that I'd made it through security and check-in with nobody saying a word, but I had. Praise God, it seemed Lucian had, too. My whole body flooded with relief when he stepped into the lounge and took a seat at the other end of the room from me. We were both there. Together, though it seemed apart.

I'd never been so happy in my life.

Other travelers came and filled up the lounge around us, busy with their own business and without giving us too much interest. There was chatter, and excitement, and people busy on their cell phones, while I just stared at the plane ticket in my hands, truly trying to believe this was happening.

Seat 29C of Flight 181. NYC to London Heathrow.

I was now Penelope Anne Jackson and I was going to London. *We* were going to London.

The voices of a couple sitting next to me were enough to pull me out of my trance. My stomach dropped right down to the pits when I heard their words.

Can you believe it? Lionel Constantine is really dead! Shot on a golf course. It's just crazy. CRAZY.

First Elaine Constantine gets kidnapped and then her uncle gets murdered!

Yeah, and you know what they're saying, right? They're saying it's Lucian Morelli who kidnapped Elaine!

Madness. It's fucking madness.

Holy shit, it hit me hard, but I just kept on staring and praying, barely risking a breath since I was sitting right next to them.

I kept my attention on my plane ticket. My thoughts trying to be a mantra.

Seat 29C of Flight 181. NYC to London Heathrow.

Penelope Anne Jackson.

The mantra didn't last long as the couple carried on talking.

You don't really think Lucian Morelli kidnapped and murdered Elaine Constantine, do you?

I dunno. I've heard people saying that he was fucking her. That they were dating or something.

Fuck knows, then. Whole thing seems crazy.

What seemed even crazier was that the both of us were sitting in the same damn room and nobody had noticed.

I risked a glance at Lucian and he was sitting mute, staring ahead of him. He didn't look like a Jason Ryan Reynolds. He also didn't look like a man who was wanted for murder.

I heard someone on the news saying that Lucian Morelli was chasing Elaine down so hard at a club that he kneed some security guy in the stomach and threatened to kill him if he didn't let him through.

Maybe he really is the one who kidnapped her. They think she's dead.

I was so relieved when the attendants called us for our flight that I leapt up out of my seat and dashed straight over to the doorway. I was right at the front of the line with a big, fake smile on my face as the attendant started letting us through.

“Enjoy your flight,” she told me, and I thanked her with another big smile.

I went straight onto the plane and up the aisle. Seat 29C. 29C. 29C.

It was on the right-hand side of the aisle, next to the window. I sat myself down and stared out, heart racing so fast I could feel the thump in my ears.

I could sense Lucian walking up the aisle between other passengers. I twisted in my seat just enough to see him walk right on up to row 37.

Yes.

He'd made it.

I couldn't believe it when the same damn couple from the lounge came along to sit in the seats next to me. They got themselves ready for the flight, loading up their baggage into the overhead compartments. This time the woman actually looked at me and smiled as she sat herself down.

“Hey,” she said, and I smiled back.

“Hey.”

Then I did it. I tried it out for the first time. “I'm Penelope.”

“Carrie-Ann,” she said back. “You off to London on vacation?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I'm off on vacation. Got family over there.”

“Cool,” she said. “We're off on vacation, too. Been wanting to go since I was a kid.”

She got herself comfortable and then she started up a conversation with her boyfriend. I let out a long slow breath of relief when her attention was gone from me.

We could do this. We really could.

In the face of two people literally talking about my abduction, I could introduce myself as Penelope Jackson and get away with it. That was one hell of a blessing I was grateful to receive.

The attendants did their safety demonstration and we got buckled in ready to fly. The takeoff was a brilliant rumble up the runway and soon we were up there, high in the sky and leaving NYC behind in the distance.

Under normal circumstances I'd be enjoying myself, but every second felt like a year as I begged the universe that we'd make it across the Atlantic and off at the other side.

The flight was long as we flew into the night. The sky was dark. Sleep was anywhere but with me as the lights dimmed down around me.

The couple next to me were pretty good at snoozing. They had eye masks and those neck pillows to help them sleep, and drifted off just fine. Eye masks and neck pillows would have done jack shit to help me. I was well and truly wired.

I tried watching bland movies on the back of the seat in front, but nothing held my interest. The only thing on my mind was my beautiful monster a few rows back. Being away from him, even just for a few long hours, felt like hell. That and the pain in my chest that was still hurting raw.

At least I'd survived it. Lucian had made sure of it.

The flight attendant came up and down the aisle offering hot drinks. I took a black coffee and sipped at the caffeine like it was some sacred fountain of life. That was my main addiction now—caffeine.

The thought of alcohol and cocaine abuse felt so removed it was alien. Insane. The thought of *anything* to do with my previous life felt so removed it was alien, even though in reality it was just a few short weeks ago that I was holed up in my hellhole of a world.

Mom. Harriet. Silas. Tinsley. Tristan. Jemma. I wondered if I'd ever speak to any of them again, let alone ever see them.

It gave me a surprising lump in my throat when I thought of my mother. Harriet and Tristan and Jemma, sure, I'd be prepared to cry over, but my mom? I never expected to cry over her, but I couldn't deny it. There was a tear in my eye as I pictured the smile I rarely saw from her.

Somehow I doubted she'd be crying over me anytime soon. That was the thought that truly made my tears fall.

Mom wouldn't be crying over me. She'd be glad I was gone.

I think I must have finally managed to drift off to sleep in the very early hours of the morning. The sun was up and the morning was bright when I squirmed into life after a few hours of unconsciousness, and the couple next to me were already awake watching movies with headphones on. I stared right out of the window and I saw the land under us, cities and roads mapping out the veins of the country.

We'd done it. We had crossed the Atlantic.

The attendants did one more pass through the aisle and I took one more cup of coffee before asking the couple next to me to get up from their seats so I could take a pee in the bathroom.

I had tickles running through me as I walked up toward the rear of the plane. I held my breath as I passed right by him. Lucian. Only he wasn't Lucian anymore, he was *Jason Ryan Reynolds*.

His smile was calm, but his eyes were anything but stoic behind his glasses when they met mine.

It sent my heart racing to see the truth in them, because there was no denying it. Lucian was as desperate for me as I was desperate for him. Both of us. Hungry. Needy. Horny.

Both of us happy, too.

Happy we'd made it.

I really, really wasn't expecting his desperation to overload him enough to catch up with me outside the bathroom. I was

just stepping into the lavatory when he grabbed hold of me from behind and shunted himself in after me.

“I’ve been missing you,” he told me, then locked the door behind us.

I barely let out a squeak before his mouth was on mine.

His hands were frantic as they tugged my sweater and t-shirt up and over my tits. There was no doubt about it, he sure had been missing me as badly as I’d been missing him, but it wasn’t what he was looking for. He was checking my wound all over again.

“This is crazy,” I whispered. “Lucian, this is crazy. I thought you said to stay away from each other at all costs.”

“I did,” he growled. “But I can’t stay the fuck away from you, Elaine. You drive me too fucking wild, and not only that, I’m too fucking worried about you.”

His cock was hard through his joggers and I squeezed him tight, working my fingers up and down him as he pressed me even tighter against the side of the cubicle.

It was him who came to his senses before I did. He took hold of my wrists and gathered his breaths and there was at least some kind of rationality in his eyes this time as he stared at me through his glasses.

I tried to gather my own.

“I’m Penelope Jackson,” I reminded myself. “I have to be Penelope Jackson from here on.”

“You’ll never be Penelope Jackson to me,” he said, and there was a whole fresh burst of fire in his eyes. “You’re Elaine Constantine and I love you for it.”

With that he opened the bathroom door just a crack to check the aisle. “Just a few more hours to go, little doll,” he whispered, and then he was gone.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lucian

THE UK WAS five hours ahead of NYC. My senses were fried when the plane began the descent—the day already marching on ahead outside. My interior clock was a mess, but I still managed to keep my thoughts together and my mind on high alert. I had to. We still had a long fucking way to go.

People were already bustling into action when the plane touched down onto the runway. The *thank you for traveling with Jettison Air* recordings were lost in the thrum as everyone went full throttle into gathering their things together. I stayed still. Quiet in the chaos. Waiting, poised.

My eyes were on the woman a few rows ahead of me, getting to her feet with a smile at the couple who'd been sitting next to her.

I let the two guys to the side of me out into the aisle and held back even more, pretending to be busy with my briefcase as Elaine joined the line to get off the plane. I was one of the last people to step past the attendants with a smile and a *thank you*, and once again there was no flag as to my identity, they just let me right on by with a wave and a *you're welcome*.

London Heathrow felt so much different to JFK. I'd been before, and there was always some kind of cultural overtone to it but it felt more pronounced somehow. Maybe that's what happens when you are effectively emigrating. You get a whole load more sensitivity to the new world around you.

Elaine was ahead in the line far enough that she was out of my view, but I caught sight of her again once we got to the baggage collection. She was on the other side of the conveyor to me, and jumped into action when her friend's battered old suitcase came out for collection. I gave her the slightest nod as her eyes met mine and she moved along to passport control.

My suitcases were some of the last to appear which again felt damn weird considering I usually had people jumping to attention everywhere I went, clicking my fingers and having my wishes delivered in a flash. That just confirmed again what I already knew. Being Lucian Morelli with an empire around me was very, very suited to my nature. Even carrying my own luggage through to that damn check-in felt like a fucking drag.

Elaine was already through and out the other side when I stepped up to the counter.

I was steady. Composed. Confident. They let me through without a challenge, and then I was there. Done. We were through border control into a whole new country and a whole new life set for the taking. I felt a sense of relief I'd never felt before. It consumed every breath. Hell. Fucking. Yes.

There she was in the main terminal, waiting for me with that battered suitcase resting against her legs, her eyes alive with a clear sense of relief that mirrored mine.

Her arms slung around my neck when I reached her.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," she breathed, clearly gushing it out. "I've been waiting to say it for hours. Just because I can. Just because I want to. And I can, now! I can say it!"

Fuck, how it made me smile.

"I love you too, baby," I whispered to her. "Believe me, you'll be knowing it soon enough. I'll be showing you how much I love every single little part of you. Inside and out."

Only that wasn't for now. Now I was absolutely fucking exhausted.

People were all around us, but they weren't really looking. We got a baggage cart and walked along, blending right into the masses. Her eyes were darting everywhere as we made it through the main terminal, her enthusiasm palpable. I had to dig through one of my bags to find a bank card associated with one of my other IDs and use that in the cash machine for some British pound sterling, and she was still wide-eyed at the people and the accents passing by.

Her energy dried up somewhat when we found a cab and they helped us load our suitcases up into the trunk. We practically flopped into the back seat as our exhaustion truly caught up with us. It had been a long fucking flight.

Elaine's fingers squeezed mine and she let out a yawn as she arched her back against the seat, barely able to keep her eyes open.

"Sleep, sweetheart," I told her, but she shook her head.

"Not until I can sleep curled up against you, warm in bed. My chest is hurting again, but not so bad." She smiled. "You saved me from that. You are amazing."

But I loved the cuteness in her. Such adoration was the most intoxicating thing.

"Where in the city are you headed?" the cab driver asked and I made up an answer on the spot.

"Elephant and Castle."

Elaine looked at me as the cab set off. "I've never heard of that."

I shrugged. "Quite a memorable name, you'll be sure to remember it."

I'd been to Elephant and Castle once as a boy on my way to some deal with my father. It had certainly stuck in my memory. It wasn't a particularly grand part of the city, which was necessary seeing as I hadn't organized my identity and my finances. I couldn't be too grandiose. Not yet anyway.

The outside rumbled by in a blur as we made our way from the airport to the city. I could barely keep my eyes open.

“Elephant and Castle,” the driver said finally.

I snapped back to attention, checking out the street through the window.

I got him to pull up outside a budget inn that looked significantly nicer than it would have if we hadn't so recently holed up in her friend's shithole of a neighborhood. It would sure do us alright until we could get our damn life together.

Its mediocrity didn't seem to matter shit to Elaine. She stared up in abject awe at the building as the cab driver unloaded our suitcases beside us.

“Wow!” She was a sweet little girl all over again with that one little word.

The cab driver was off as soon as I'd paid him, and still she was staring up at the hotel. I held open the entrance door for her to step inside and she was tight against me as we made our way to the reception desk.

“I'm hoping you have a double room available for a few nights,” I said to the woman behind the counter.

She nodded. “Yes, sir. Would you like standard or premium?”

“Premium,” I told her and she handed over a key.

“That will be a hundred and twenty pounds per night.”

Pounds. The word would be a novelty for some time.

I handed over one of my credit cards. This one belonged to a fake ID known as Evan Taylor. She swiped it through her machine without any concern.

“I've booked you in for two nights, Mr. Taylor. Please let us know if you would like to extend your stay.”

Looking around the lobby, I very much doubted it.

I doubted it even more when we stepped inside the *premium* room and found it to be little more than a crappy cheap box with a plain double bed, a cruddy little dresser and a budget little TV on the wall, but that didn't matter. Not right then. It didn't matter shit to either of us.

Elaine let out a huge sigh as she dropped her suitcase on the floor and threw herself backwards onto the bed. She was washed out, exhausted and showing it, eyes barely open as she kicked off her sneakers and scrabbled her way up to the pillows.

My eyes were barely open when I climbed up beside her.

We weren't even under the covers when she snuggled her way up against me. She let out a sigh as I wrapped her up in my arms.

"I still can't believe it," she whispered after another yawn. "We're in London. My name is now Penelope Jackson and I live in London."

Only she wouldn't be Penelope Jackson, just as I wouldn't be Jason Reynolds or Evan Taylor or any other of the numerous fake IDs I had in my suitcase. I'd already realized that on the flight, sitting amongst the regular travelers, the thoughts churning over in my mind all the way.

I was Lucian Morelli.

I'd always be Lucian Morelli and the world would always know me as Lucian Morelli.

I watched the little doll fall asleep beside me, drifting into lovely steady breaths with the very gentlest of snores, and I let the thoughts tumble and focus one last time before drifting asleep myself.

Just as I'd always be Lucian Morelli, my beautiful sweetheart would always be Elaine Constantine, and I wanted her that way. I wanted Elaine Constantine at my side.

I wanted the world to know it was Elaine Constantine at my side because I was proud.

Proud of her, proud of me, proud of our life together.

What a shame our families across the Atlantic would be anything but.

That was another reason I needed to step out and take charge of our new place in this world. It was the only hope we had of staying alive.

Sure, they'd still come for us, they'd be trying even as my thoughts were tumbling fresh, but to survive it, and attempt to get them to give up the fight, I'd have to stand strong, proud and ruthless. Bold in a brave new world.

One thing was for sure—I'd have a damn fucking load of work to be doing before Lucian and Elaine could take the public stage in this new kingdom, otherwise we'd be wiped out in the blink of an eye.

Just as well I'd always been a relentless workaholic, then, wasn't it?

Only I wasn't right there and then.

I was anything but a relentless workaholic as I took hold of Elaine even tighter and let myself finally fall asleep at her side.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elaine

I HAD NO idea what time it was when I woke up. It was dark outside, just the orange glow of the London streetlights showing through the window. We hadn't even closed the blinds, we'd been that tired when we'd flopped on the bed.

Lucian was still deep asleep beside me, and I loved that. I knew I'd be loving that for the rest of my life. I loved it way too much to ever take it for granted.

I just hoped the rest of our lives was quite a long period of time, and not going to be snatched away from us in just a few days, if people found out where we were. That was another case of optimism on my part at best.

I needed to pee, and tried to move without waking him, but I didn't manage it. He reached out for me before I'd made it off the bed.

"Get back here, Elaine," he said, and his voice was low and beautiful.

"I need to pee," I whispered.

He let go of my arm with a grunt. "Then hurry the fuck up. And ditch those clothes while you're at it. We need to rebandage you as well."

I hurried to the bathroom as quickly as I could while still flinching at the pain, didn't flick on the light switch, thinking it might wake up some hitman sniper on the roof opposite. God this was crazy.

I ran the sink tap to hide the sound of me peeing. That was crazy, too. As if that mattered anymore. I flushed the toilet and had a quick drink from the tap before I tore my clothes off and hurried back in there, stopping short of the bed. He was sitting up, still dressed, his beautiful face bathed in the orange glow through the window.

He didn't say a word, just opened his arms and I fell into him as he held me tight.

"God, I love you," I said and it rolled off my tongue in the most amazing of ways.

"Just as well, sweetheart, since I love you right fucking back."

I knew he was smirking.

I let out a breath against his chest. He smelled so much of him through his sweater that I pressed my nose against him just to smell him deeper. I loved it. Love, love, love. I loved every damn thing about Lucian Morelli, or Jason, or Evan, or whoever the hell he was now.

His fingers trailed up my back and his touch made me shiver—a nice shiver.

That was another thing I loved about Lucian. I loved how hard his cock was for me constantly. It made me feel like the most attractive woman alive. Even now, after grabbing sleep after a crazy, crazy few days, his body was still seeking out mine.

And it was crazy instinct as I ached for his body, lifting his sweater off over his head for him.

It didn't take him long to get naked.

Didn't take him long to pull me onto bed and under the covers with him, still being so tender around my bandage that he was like a saint, even through his dark eyes.

And it didn't take me long to grab hold of his cock and squeeze it hard.

“I love what a horny little doll you’re turning out to be, Elaine,” he said, and his face was illuminated just enough by the glow from the window that I could see his smile.

“So treat me like one,” I whined. “Make me your horny little doll.”

“Oh, I will be treating you like one,” he told me. “Don’t you worry about that, little doll. I’ll be making you my horny little doll so much you’ll barely be able to take it, just as soon as we get you nice and healed.”

The pause was magic. Our eyes meeting in that stillness that only the early hours of the morning can give you.

He took my hand from his cock and wrapped it around him, his voice was so deep and pure when it came, when he hugged me.

“Luckily right now, sweetheart, I’m enjoying this too much to move.”

That gave me a weird little pang in my chest. Something like a tickle, because it felt so nice. To be wanted by someone so much that they just wanted to have their bare body next to yours and savor that moment was so weird I never thought I’d feel it. I never thought I’d be good enough.

I reached up and took his face in my hands, just touching his cheeks, feeling him right back.

An *I love you* just wouldn’t have cut it right then. Even those three magic words just wouldn’t be enough.

Neither of us said anything, just lay there together, holding, breathing. I felt so secure. Protected by the monster.

It was me who broke the silence.

“I can’t believe you gave up being Lucian Morelli for me. It’s just...crazy.”

“I’d happily give up anything for you,” he told me, and his voice was so sincere. “You’re worth everything I could ever give.”

“Clearly, since you’d die for being here.” I gave a little laugh. “Hopefully people won’t hunt down Jason and Penelope and we’ll manage to live a sweet little life.”

He kissed my forehead before he rolled away. I had to blink as he flicked on the bedside lamp, eyes shocked at the light.

His face was so serious when I managed to focus on him, his stare firm on mine. I could almost hear his brain ticking. I could see his mind at work behind his eyes.

“This is the thing though, baby,” he said. “Do we really want a sweet little life? Do we? Do we want to spend our life glancing over our shoulders worrying people are going to catch up with us and wipe us off the fucking planet every damn day?”

I shrugged. “What choice do we have? We could try to make it great, like Bishop’s Landing. We could get a little place somewhere, where nobody would ever know who we are. It could be okay. I do like gardening, you know?”

He didn’t laugh along with me. His brain was still ticking.

“The choice we have, is that we don’t fucking take it. We make it work however we want to make it work. We be whoever *we* want to *be*.”

“I don’t think we can be Lucian and Elaine anytime soon.”

I was laughing. He wasn’t.

He wasn’t laughing at all.

“But what if we were?”

It stopped me laughing in a heartbeat.

My face must have looked puzzled. “But we can’t be. Ever. People would come for us. They hate us already.”

“They’re going to come for us regardless,” he said. “Lucian and Elaine, Jason and Penelope, Evan and fucking *Matilda*, it doesn’t matter. They’re coming for us.”

His words were bristling with fire. With fight. With the kind of strength that people always associate with a beast like Lucian Morelli.

“So, what do we do?” I asked him.

My heart was racing, only it wasn't fear it was racing with, it was something else. Respect and awe. Because it's the monster in him that stole my heart. The man who controls and dominates whatever is around him, not just me.

Everything.

Every fucking thing in his path.

He was sitting up on the bed, naked and brilliant. I felt like a meek little lamb lying beside him, staring up at the monster.

His answer was enough to make me tingle. The idea was one I'd never have considered in a million years.

“What we do is take hold of London and put our mark on it, loud and clear. We work our connections and we use our strengths and we own it. We own our names and our lives for who we are, fuck our families and what they want to do to us. They can keep their bitter shit across the Atlantic and accept who the fuck we are.”

I didn't even know what to say, I was so shocked.

His smile was proud.

“Who would you rather be, baby? Penelope or Elaine?”

My answer was quick and obvious.

“Elaine.” I managed a proud smile too. “Provided Penelope doesn't live seventy years longer next to Jason's side than Elaine lives next to Lucian's. I like gardening a bit too much for that.”

I was trying to make light of the tension, because I just didn't know how to process it. I didn't know how to even begin to digest that we could be Lucian Morelli and Elaine Constantine, walking the London streets together as Lucian Morelli and Elaine Constantine. It just seemed...unreal.

But that's when I realized just how much power that gave my heart—the idea of us walking the streets together as us. Proud. Because that's what I'd be. Proud. I'd be so fucking proud of being Elaine Constantine at Lucian Morelli's side with the whole world there to see it.

“Then we do it,” Lucian said. “We take hold of London and we put our mark on it, loud and clear.”

I propped myself up onto an elbow, still trying to let it sink in.

“The very idea of a Morelli with a Constantine is going to drive people wild. Everyone in the world knows we detest each other.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “They do. So let's fucking surprise them.”

I let out a giggle. “It's hardly how Romeo and Juliet ends, is it?”

“No,” he said. “It's not, but what if Romeo and Juliet had used every bit of power they had in them and stepped out proud and given their families the middle fucking finger?”

I shrugged. “Their families would have probably stabbed them and danced on their corpses.”

He was shaking his head. “Not if Romeo and Juliet had a whole fucking army around them, ready to stab their families right back.”

I could see his reasoning now. I could see what he meant by connections and strengths and using them.

He was planning on working this city and all the associations he'd known at a distance from across the Atlantic and forming allegiances in this new world.

I had a whole flood of new admiration for him when I saw another burst of fire in him. He was truly a monster. A monster who needed to be ruling an empire.

A monster who deserved it.

The anonymous man in hiding Jason Reynolds could never be ruling an empire. Not from some cute little cottage on the British coast.

“You with me?” he asked. “You ready to stand up as Elaine Constantine at my side? The two of us, proud to be one?”

I could feel the fire in my eyes match with his.

“Yes,” I said, “I’m with you all the way.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lucian

I SHOWERED WITH Elaine, soaping her up in a lather very carefully around the slice on her chest before we stepped out together and towed each other down. I brushed my teeth as she brushed hers, eyes on each other in the bathroom mirror, but my mind was already hard at work, weighing up what I needed to be doing in this place.

I still had my investments and my financial empire overseas, wrapped up safe and tight in the legalities. I had my reputation and my known power, and the talents that had led me to ruling the Morelli kingdom so effectively. Letting Lucian Morelli go would be a crime against my humanity.

I watched Elaine pull out some fresh clothes from her suitcase once we were back in the bedroom. Not standing tall and proud next to that little doll would be a crime against my very soul to match.

I hadn't ever known my soul. It was still an interesting stranger to me. Elaine had brought that gift to me by showing me hers.

It wasn't clothes I tugged from my suitcase, it was the little black book I'd slipped deep between some shirts when I'd been getting out the cash cases from Bishop's Landing. The book I'd always used to record the most private of my affairs, in scrawled handwritten text, safe away from the virtual world. I'd been writing in it for years. Passwords, and ID numbers, and names and connections. The most important keys of the most important locks of my life.

Elaine lay down on the bed next to me as I thumbed through the pages.

“What’s that?” she asked, her pretty eyes shining bright in the lamplight.

“It’s our future,” I told her, and turned the book around to face her.

She scrunched up her face as she stared at the numbers and letters. “Business stuff?”

“Financial security of the very highest order.” I flicked through a few of the pages, until the numbers and letters turned to names and numbers. “Associations of the highest power. This is where we’ll get started.”

“Some of those are from the UK, right?” she asked, and took the book from my hands.

“Some of those very important ones are from the UK,” I said. “So I’d best get taking advantage of them before my father realizes this is where I’ve gone and starts reaching out to them himself. I need to get a head start on the battle.”

She handed the book back. “So, we’re really doing this? We’re really going to be Elaine and Lucian?”

I knew it, right down in my core. Yes. We were going to be Elaine and Lucian. Running away as damn Penelope and Jason would be a pitiful last resort. Elaine deserved to be a Constantine even more than I deserved to be a Morelli. She was too regal to carry any less of a crown.

I smiled at her. “It would be a travesty to call you anything but Elaine. You are Elaine. You will always be Elaine, not just to me, but to the world.”

She let out another one of her sweet little giggles.

“I never, ever thought we’d be holding up each other’s names as some kind of pride thing. We were born to hate each other’s names. I was told to hate the Morelli family as soon as I could understand the words.”

“I was taught to hate the Constantines with so much venom it would kill a whole fucking nation,” I replied. “You were nothing but pieces of shit since the moment I first opened my eyes.”

“Strange, isn’t it?” she asked. “It’s insane how the universe turned so damn weird and brought us together.”

“The universe is a strange fucking place,” I said. “Only it isn’t. Not when you really think about it. Not so strange as it seems. The whole world is magnetic. Opposites. It’s full of poles apart in the most extreme of ways with the most potent attractions. Darkness and light. Fire and ice.”

“Constantine and Morelli,” she finished.

I put the book down and took her hands in mine, squeezing her fingers.

“Just imagine the beautiful combination that Constantine and Morelli could bring together.”

“Let’s find out,” she said, and her stunning smile was at full volume.

“I’d best get started, then,” I told her and kissed her fingers before turning my attention back to the pages.

Dawn was just creeping in outside when Elaine put the TV on and flicked through the channels. There was no doubt about it—her wound was recovering nice and fast.

She dozed there, watching the screen while I scoured through my book some more, creating a strategy in my mind. I plotted out the most important connections, and what I’d like to propose to them. I considered just which of my investments would be the most valuable assets in this new world and how best to exploit them.

Elaine was quiet, relaxing in a way that spilled over to me like a drug, helping my focus rather than hindering it. She was an asset valuable enough to put all of my others to shame.

I could hear the street coming to life outside the hotel when she pulled herself up from the bed and stepped up to the

window. The light shining through her blonde hair was divine.

“London,” she said. “Wow. I still can’t believe we’re in London. There are so many things I want to do here, to see here. I just can’t believe I’ll be doing them with you.”

So many things were unbelievable in our life, it was insanity.

“I need some things of a more practical nature,” I told her. “A cell phone is at the top of my goddamn list, that’s for sure.”

She turned and smirked. “I need some things of a more practical nature too. Your cock is at the top of my goddamn list, that’s for sure.”

Holy fuck, her sassy little face changed the atmosphere in a heartbeat, charging up the beast down deep in my fucking gut. She was indeed a sassy little doll, and that sass had been shining there in her eyes, poking my fire.

She saw the shift in me. That sassiness turned to that sweet little rabbit in the headlights, eyes open wide as I got up from the bed, still naked, cock hard and huge.

I gave her my goddamn cock, that was for fucking sure.

Her clothes were off, practically torn. She was slammed onto her back on that cruddy mattress and kissed so fucking hard it took her breath away. Her pussy was hungry, and my fingers filled her up, stretching her as wide as she could fucking take as she whimpered and moaned.

“Let’s see how much of a practical nature this feels like, shall we?” I growled.

I still had two fingers inside her when I forced my cock straight in. I knew it hurt. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted to hear her pant and gasp and struggle to take it.

“Beg,” I grunted. “Beg me for more. Spread your legs open as wide as they’ll fucking go and beg me for more.”

Her thighs were shaking as she forced them wider. Her breaths were shallow. Her whimpers made my balls tighten.

“BEG!” I snarled, and that’s when I knew it with every fucking sliver of my soul. I heard it in my voice and felt it right down my spine, that knowledge. That truth.

I’d only ever be able to be Lucian Morelli.

I couldn’t ever give up being Lucian Morelli if I tried.

Elaine was so pretty when she cried. Eyes watering. Pain. Such beautiful pain. Only it wasn’t about the wound she’d taken. That was fading...opening things up for more delicious sensations of hurt.

“Please...” she whispered.

I fucked her harder, grunting and slamming. She whimpered, taking it.

Wanting it.

Even in her pain, she was fucking desperate for it.

I was her lord. Her master. Her fucking god.

Only now we were magnets coming together. Poles colliding as one.

Elaine Constantine was my goddess right back.

I was circling my hips when I pulled my fingers free from inside her, leaving just my cock stretching her wide. I forced them into her mouth so far she gagged.

“Suck,” I said and she did. She sucked like a good girl.

My fingers were nice and wet when I shifted position enough to play with her swollen pink bud of a clit. She was squirming, greedy, moaning for more as I played her like my sacred little instrument, faster and faster and faster.

Yes.

This was the connection that had eaten us up in the first place. The calling that had snared us right from that very first encounter at her sister’s sad little birthday ball. This was the reason we were here in the first place and it had turned into so much fucking more.

She came before I did. I watched her crest and peak before I slammed deep and fast enough to shoot my load inside her, my hand on her throat as I took my fill.

We were both panting, wrecked when I pulled away from her. The air was tense and glorious, both of us still heady on the climax when I reached out and held her hand.

She held mine back. Tight. Both of us, staring up at the ceiling. I didn't need to see her face to know she was smiling along with me.

The bustle of the London street outside was a whole load busier when I gathered myself enough to take a look out of the window, the morning finding its true swing.

I pulled out a fresh pair of pants from my suitcase, smirking down at her while she winced, soothing her poor battered pussy.

“We'd better go get that goddamn cell, then,” she laughed. “You're going to have to help me off the bed though, since I'm too damn sore to move.”

She held out her hands with a grin and I pulled her up to her feet.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Elaine

MY STOMACH WAS rumbling as we finished getting dressed, ready to head out into London. I could feel it as I put my sneakers on and it was so loud even Lucian heard it standing next to me.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” he said. “We definitely need breakfast right now more than we need a cell phone.”

I sure wasn’t going to argue with him on that.

We headed downstairs and they were already serving breakfast in the hotel restaurant. We stepped in and found a table, and it was a whole other round of strange—sitting in public next to the man the whole world expected me to despise. There were a few other couples eating, but they were all too busy with their food to give us much attention.

The woman who came up to take our order barely looked at us either. She had a notepad in her hands and hardly shot us a glance. Probably not because I had my hair scraped up into a loose ponytail. I hadn’t worn makeup for so long I’d almost forgotten what it felt like. I was hardly recognizing *myself* in the mirror, let alone anyone else recognizing me.

“Full English?” the waitress asked, and I looked up at her.

“What’s a full English?”

She listed a whole load of things she’d be serving up. Sausages, bacon, eggs, baked beans, hash browns, something called a black pudding, and wholemeal toast. Even the thought made my stomach rumble some more. It sounded like an

absolute feast, apart from a black pudding, that didn't sound so good.

Lucian was looking at me, waiting for me to answer.

"Yes, please," I said to the waitress with a smile. "I'll have a full English."

"Tea or coffee?" she asked, and I was still smiling.

"Black coffee, please."

She looked at Lucian, and he was smiling too. I loved how easy and casual he looked here, enjoying the simplicity of the place.

"I'll have the same as Elaine," he said, and my eyes widened.

Penelope. My name was *Penelope*.

Luckily the server didn't seem to notice or care.

"Coming right up," she said, then pointed to a counter at the side of the room. "If you want any fruit or cereal in the meantime, just help yourselves."

I leaned across the table to get closer to Lucian, whispering just loud enough that he could hear me as she walked away.

"You called me Elaine!" I said. "My name is Penelope, remember?"

His stare was so firm.

"I know," he told me. "I'm perfectly aware I called you Elaine."

"But she might know—"

He shook his head. "She barely knows her own name, I imagine."

Damn he was so rude. I saw that side of him again. The arrogance. The bluntness. The sarcasm. It was classic Lucian Morelli.

He leaned across the table to me as I leaned away.

“I won’t be calling you anything but Elaine unless I damn well have to. It’s sacrilege.”

“What do I do, then? Go around calling you Lucian right back?”

“Let’s see how far we get around London, then, shall we?”

He smirked. He actually smirked.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I said, attracting stares from an elderly couple nearby.

“You really are a sassy little doll, you know that?” Lucian whispered. “It’s going to make punishing you for it so fucking pleasurable.”

I smirked back at him. “I’d better keep doing it, then, so you’ll be punishing me nice and hard.”

We were still smirking at each other when the server came back with our coffees.

“Breakfast is coming right up.”

I was so ready for it when it arrived. Damn it really was a feast. I dug in like a girl possessed.

Lucian was quick into his along with me.

“Yummy,” I said between mouthfuls, and he nodded.

“Full English will definitely be a staple of mine,” he replied, “especially the black pudding.”

I pulled a face. I couldn’t even bear to taste the thing. It looked like baked shit.

My stomach was nice and full when I finished up and leaned back in my seat. I finished up my coffee with a satisfied smile on my face, and he leaned back to mirror me. Only his smile was something more than just satisfied. I got that flutter again, feeling so...valued. I guess it was that magnetic thing he talked about. Feeling so drawn to someone that you can’t keep your eyes off them. Polar opposites in the most amazing of ways.

It was him who shifted us, getting to his feet with another one of his smirks.

“Let’s go get those cell phones.”

It felt so natural to slip my fingers into his when we walked through the reception lobby. The receptionist held up her hand in a wave as we passed on by and stepped out through the door, and there we were. The streets of London.

“Cab or underground?” Lucian asked, pointing at the sign for the station across the street.

I hadn’t taken an underground train in my life. It was limos everywhere I went for the most of it—limos, and private planes, and cabs at the very worst.

“Underground,” I said, and realized I was grinning. “It’ll be fun.”

“Hardly sure it would be top of the list of London experiences,” he told me, with that sarcastic tone in his voice, but he was smiling as he squeezed my fingers a little tighter and led the way across the street.

The underground was bustling, even in Elephant and Castle, on the outskirts of the city. We went down on the escalator and it had a vibe to it I hadn’t felt before. Busy and British in a different kind of way. The platform was strange when we reached it. The other side had huge posters with London musicals on them. My heart leapt at the thought we could maybe one day go to see them.

Lucian read my mind.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, we’ll be seeing plenty of those once the world knows we’re here. They’ll be rolling out the red carpet all the way down the fucking street for us.”

I could imagine it. It made my heart race.

The train was empty enough that we could take a seat together. My eyes were glancing all over the place, trying to take it all in. The accents, the people stepping on and off at

each station, and the way the train rumbled through dark tunnels.

Yeah, I could live here. I could live in London for the rest of my life. I was loving it already, even on day one.

Lucian guided me off the train at one of the stations closer to the city center. *Wembley*. We began the ascent on another escalator, and the street we stepped onto this time was a whole other affair. It was busy in a much more, I dunno, classy way. The buildings were so much more stately and grand, and the place had a whole other energy to it. One I felt much more suited to.

That's another moment I realized just how right Lucian was with our need to be us, as us. We belonged in stately and grand surroundings. Hell, we'd never known anything else.

We only had to walk down the street a little way before a cell phone store came into view. Except they weren't called cell phones here, they were called *mobile phones*.

I'm surprised they didn't recognize Lucian from the very force of his voice as he stepped up to the counter and asked them for two of their best phones and some tablets to go along with them. The guy started asking questions, but Lucian waved his efforts aside.

"Just two of the best," he said. "Now, please."

The guy jumped to attention like we'd just ordered liquid gold, boxing things up with a nervous smile.

I don't know which bank card Lucian handed over, but the payment went through just fine. We headed back out onto the street with a bag of our purchases, practical mission accomplished.

Lucian was all set to head back to the underground and get us back to Elephant and Castle, but my heart dropped a little at that.

I could see the London Eye from where we were. Its pods visible in the skyline.

“No,” he said, seeing where I was staring. “Every hour is essential right now.”

I pouted. “I know that, but I just want to see it so much...”

I knew by the way he shook his head that it was a pointless argument. The London Eye would have to wait until another day.

I sighed and shrugged and took back hold of his fingers.

“Sure,” I said, still pouting. “I guess I’ll have to wait.”

I was only half serious, and my tone was nothing more than a joke, so I wasn’t expecting it when he stopped me in my tracks and tipped my face up to his.

His expression was so damn serious. So damn sure.

“I promise you, Elaine,” he said to me, like he was declaring the truth of a lifetime. “We’ll be getting on the London Eye together and doing it soon. Only we won’t be lining up and stepping onto it like some pathetic little tourists in these pathetic fucking clothes.”

My eyes must have widened in their usual shocked way, because his smirk was magnificent as he kept on talking.

“I’m going to take you on that wheel, baby, and it’s going to be everything you dreamed it would be. Only when I take you on it, we’ll have the whole fucking thing to ourselves. I’ll be taking over the whole damn lot of it, all for you.”

I could have cried as we carried on walking back to the underground. Only these weren’t sad tears waiting to fall, like I’d been crying all the way through my life.

These were happy ones.

Lucian Morelli made me so damn happy I could cry.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lucian

WE PUT THE new cell phones on to charge as soon as we got back to the hotel. The room had cheap crappy coffee in sachets next to a crappy kettle, but we made the most of them anyway. Sipping away on liquid shit while I plowed through my black book some more, scribbling down some more notes on my strategy.

Elaine lay on the bed and watched me, seemingly fascinated by everything I did. I adored that about her. Her fascination, so innocent and addictive. It was truly wondrous.

“You have amazing handwriting, you know that?” she asked me.

I shrugged, my pen poised over the page. “Nobody has really commented on my handwriting since my school days, I can’t say I’ve given it much thought.”

“It is,” she said. “It’s like calligraphy. I noticed it in your dream journal.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You really were nosy in Bishop’s Landing, weren’t you? Going through my bedside drawers.”

She nodded, proud of it. “Yeah, I was. I wanted to know just who you were. All of your secrets.”

I put my pen down.

“You know a whole damn bigger secret than you’ll ever find in a dream journal. You know you can stab me through

the hand and I won't feel a thing. That's a much bigger slice of knowledge than what happens when I'm sleeping."

"True." She laughed. "Maybe I'll see you writing in that dream journal again soon, hey? Maybe I'll start keeping one too. We can share dream stories in the mornings."

The hopeful glint in her eyes was delicious.

I laughed back at her. "I'd be considerably happier about you seeing me writing in my dream journal again than I would about you seeing me stabbed through the hand again."

"Same," she said, and she was sparkling. Glowing. Happy. Even with the crazy world hunting us down across the Atlantic.

I checked the cell phones on the bedside table. They were charged and ready to go.

I handed Elaine hers and she swiped the screen, setting up the Wi-Fi. I had much more important things to be doing than browsing the internet. I got to my feet and began pacing as I made my very first phone call.

The words were a relief as soon as they rolled off my tongue.

"This is Lucian Morelli calling."

My introduction was met with every scrap of respect I expected. Yes. The London world was ready for me. Ready and waiting.

Every contact that I reached out to was eager to meet up with me. The highest echelons of the underworld and the shiny businessmen standing tall over them were eager to hear my news and my proposals for partnerships. Or at least they seemed to be.

Elaine was staring at me when I put my cell down after my first round of calls. Her own cell was still in her hands, and she was playing some cute little game on there that made me smile. But there was an enthusiastic innocence shining out of her.

“Sounded like it went well,” she commented, and I nodded.

“Very well,” I confirmed. “My first meeting is later today, in just a few hours. A very important one.”

Her innocence turned to nervousness.

“You’re meeting up with people today? These people...are they safe?”

“I’ll soon find out,” I told her, and I was already choosing smarter clothes from my suitcase.

Her fingers were twiddling in front of her, cell phone forgotten as I buttoned up my fitted shirt.

“Who is it you’re meeting?” she asked.

“Devon Quentin and his associates, and a business partner he has a lot to do with. George Ellis.”

“And what do they do?”

I pulled up my tailored pants.

“A variety of things. They have networks of friends, and suppliers and clients. Both official and nefarious.”

She nodded, weighing it up. “They can help us set up here, then?”

I nodded and took a tie from the suitcase. A deep rich burgundy silk. “Yes, they can most certainly help us set up here. I’m prepared to share some of my own business investments and trade deals with them, and discuss cross-country ventures. I have plenty of ideas.”

“And they can protect us?”

I smiled. “They can most definitely protect us, sweetheart. This meeting is one of several I’ve already organized. If my ideas come to fruition, we could be in a very good position here.”

“And if not?” she asked, and there was a shake of nerves in her voice again.

They had every right to be there. If I'd been less of an arrogant asshole, I would have had nerves myself. These connections I'd made were tenuous, and I hadn't had direct communication with them for quite some time. If they opted to liaise with my father and exploit my location details as opposed to truly hearing my propositions, then I would be setting myself up for my own demise.

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. "If not, then we think again. Jason and Penelope might be gardening together as soon as they can."

That was an understatement. We'd need to be thinking again pretty damn fast or Jason and Penelope would never even manage to get hold of a trowel before their brains were blown out of their heads.

I finished getting ready, checking myself in the hotel mirror before slipping on a suit jacket. I looked very much like myself as I swept my hair back neatly.

I sighed in frustration and forced myself to take off my tie and roll it up for my jacket pocket, unbuttoning the shirt at the collar to make me look considerably more casual. Jesus, I hated casual. It grated at my spine.

My pretty sweetheart swung her feet from the bed and got up as I was preparing to leave, fingers still twiddling in front of her.

"Can I come with you? Maybe I could help?"

God, she was so fucking beautiful.

No doubt having Elaine Constantine along for the discussions would be another weight of namely respect there for the taking, but I didn't want to risk it. I didn't want to risk her being at my side in case things all went to shit.

"You stay here and rest up, baby. Enjoy the room and your new cell."

She let out a sigh. "This is a really dangerous meeting, isn't it? That's why you don't want me to come."

I didn't lie. "Yes. This is dangerous. That is why I don't want you to come."

She sighed again. "But you can't protect me from everything in the world, Lucian! It won't work!"

I stepped up to her and brushed her cheek with my thumb. "Maybe I can't," I told her. "Maybe I can't protect you from everything in the world that life has to throw at us, but believe me, Elaine, I'll die trying."

She saw the argument was futile and dropped her gaze from mine. She was shocked. That little girl in her again was still trying to soak it in—the very fact she could be so loved. I could see it all over her face.

Making her realize just how much I loved her would be a mission I'd be enjoying for the rest of my life. I just hoped my life lasted longer than one single afternoon. "Please, please stay as safe as you can," she said, grabbing my hand as I stepped past her to grab my briefcase.

I squeezed her fingers before picking up the case, picking up my new cell phone along with it. "I'm certainly planning on it." I held up the phone. "At least you have this to reach me."

"Great," she said and rolled her eyes. "I can send you some sappy messages and heart emojis before they kill you at your father's instruction, then."

Sarcastic little doll. I'd have spanked her if I hadn't been so pressed for time.

I tipped my head as I told her so.

"Be prepared for when I do get back later, little doll. I'll be punishing you for your sass."

She managed a smile. "I just hope it's coming. I just pray you'll come back."

The fear in her was burning bright in her eyes, so scared.

It gave me a pang of need. The need to protect, and reassure and love her. The whole concept was still alien to me, but so fierce. So raw.

I held her so fucking tightly, I almost crushed her in my arms.

She breathed against my shirt so shallowly, a beautiful doll holding me tight right back. “Please come back to me,” she whispered.

“I’ll be giving my everything to come back to you,” I told her.

I didn’t want to run through a big list of what she must do if I didn’t make it back. I didn’t want to dwell on the potential fatality of my plans enough to go through the fake identities and the cash cards and the funds she’d most definitely find access to in my suitcase if she needed to run away, I just trusted her that she would find a way to stay alive.

I kissed her slow and hard, savoring her mouth like it was my heaven. “I love you,” I told her, and then I walked away.

I took a breath as I closed the hotel door behind me and stepped out onto the hotel landing. My shoulders were held firm and my chin was high, holding my Morelli posture grand and true as I made my way down to the lobby.

I asked reception to order me a cab and they did so. I was waiting barely more than five minutes before they pulled up outside the front entrance.

“Canary Wharf,” I told the driver and handed him the address.

“Sure thing, mate,” he said, and his accent had a cockney twang.

He had the radio on, tapping his steering wheel to tacky pop beats as we made our way across the city. I kept checking the time and we were still on schedule, but there was a sliver—just a sliver—of nerves squirming right down in the depths

of my stomach. I didn't like them. Nerves weren't anything that belonged in my life.

I had already pulled the tie from my pocket and fastened it before the cab arrived at our destination. Venley Finance. I knew it was a front for a world of other lucrative bullshit, and was fully prepared for the corporate gloss once I paid the driver and stepped right in.

Sure enough, it was corporate gloss that greeted me. A sprawling lobby with a ridiculously ornate water feature in the center, lit up brightly enough to gloat about its presence.

"I'm here to see Devon Quentin," I said to the man at the front desk.

I still had the fucking glasses on my face and he didn't clock who I was, even in my suit.

"Mr. Morton?" he asked, and I nodded, taking hold of whatever bullshit identity Quentin had given them. "He's on floor fifteen. Meeting room seven."

I didn't even thank him, just raised a hand and carried on my way.

The elevator was as glass and pompous as the rest of the building. The voices were posh and British all around me as I arrived at floor fifteen and made my way along to meeting room seven.

I took off the glasses and knocked one single knock at the meeting room door before I stepped in there, well and truly back to Lucian Morelli as the figures on the other side of the table stood to greet me.

Devon Quentin, George Ellis, and a few I didn't recognize.

They sure recognized me.

It was Devon who spoke first, offering me a handshake which I accepted before he gestured to a seat at the table.

"Lucian Morelli," he said. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

I smirked as I placed my briefcase down on the tabletop, clicking it right open.

Yes. They were pleased to meet me. I could see it all over their faces, hungry for trade deals and associations. “Let’s get down to business,” I said.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Elaine

I SHOULD HAVE been getting used to the feelings of abject fear that hit me when I was waiting for Lucian to return to me, but still they floored me. I paced, worried, thinking, staring at my new cell phone and hoping for something, *anything* from him.

I had no idea about the people he was meeting up with. I had no idea what they would want from him, or what the meeting would lead to, or if they'd already sold him out to his father back home. I could only hope and pray.

I flicked on the TV and British news was quite different to the US. The stories were about politics and football and their National Health Service. My kidnapping was just a short snippet, people talking about how investigations were ongoing. Drama, but in no way the drama I was used to. It felt so much quieter here.

Just a shame my heart was anything but quiet as it raced and thumped, desperate for Lucian to walk back through the door.

I guess that's why I did the unthinkable and dialed Tristan's number at 5 p.m. I knew it by heart, like a mantra. He'd been my best friend since I'd met him in his own world of abuse when I ran away from home in my teens, and that kind of bond gets etched into your heart forever...along with their telephone number, it seems. I was justifying it to myself as I heard his line ringing.

“Hello?”

His voice was such a relief I had to let out a breath.

“Tristan!”

“Elaine?! Just...my God! Elaine!”

Hearing the relief in his voice matching my own was absolutely divine. I felt like a kid again as he kept on gushing.

“Oh my fucking God, Elaine! I thought you were dead! Where are you?! Just what the fuck are you doing?!”

And that’s when I told him.

That’s when I began a whole fresh round of pacing, gave a massive sigh and told him everything, friend to friend.

I told him about how the Power Brothers had been coming for me, and I was counting down the days until they wiped me out. I told him how crazy things had been with Lucian Morelli and how I’d hoped he’d wipe me out before the Power Brothers did, since he hated me so damn much.

Only he hadn’t hated me. He couldn’t. Just as I couldn’t hate him.

I told Tristan how I was in the process of ending my own life when Lucian turned up at my apartment and blackmailed me into going along with him, only it hadn’t turned out like that. It had turned out anything but blackmail to get me to stay in Bishop’s Landing.

Tristan listened as I told him the whole crazy story.

I finally poked him for a response when I was done with the bulk of it, needing to hear his voice again.

“Well, does that make sense? Do you get it?”

It was his turn to let out a massive sigh. “Seriously, Lainey, I’m just so glad you’re still alive that I couldn’t give a fuck who you’re with anymore.”

“You mean that?” I asked him. “You really don’t give a fuck that I’m on the run with Lucian Morelli?”

“No,” he said. “Just stay alive, will you? Things are insane over here. People asking questions. People looking for you. People wanting to know why the fuck Lucian Morelli was hunting you across NYC.” He paused. “They are saying he did it now, you know? They think he kidnapped and killed you and went on the run for it.”

I couldn't hold back a smile. “Yeah, well, he didn't.”

He sighed again. “Yeah, and I can hear just how gooey you are about the piece of shit. I damn well knew you'd fall for him. From the very moment you told me about him grabbing you at Tinsley's ball, I knew you'd go crazy over the bastard.”

He wasn't wrong on that score.

I nearly leapt out of my skin when my cell phone beeped with a call waiting to come in. My fingers were shaking in an instant as I knew it was him. Lucian. It couldn't be anyone else.

“Got to go,” I said to Tristan. “I'll be in touch though.”

“Just don't come back here!” he told me. “The Constantines and the Morellis are about to start a war, and they'll take you out. Both families will take you out. I've had people from both sides asking me questions.”

I blustered out a fresh chunk of goodbyes and picked up the call from Lucian with a gasp.

“All good,” he said. “On my way back. Pack our things, get ready to go. Quickly.”

“Ready to go?” I asked. “Ready to go where?!”

“Wait and see,” he replied, and his voice had a dark tease about it.

It gave me shivers of a whole other kind than fear.

With that, he hung up, leaving me hanging.

Hearing he was on his way back was enough of a relief that I dropped down onto the bed, still staring at the screen in shock. I let myself have a minute to collect myself.

All good.

He was alive. Alive and well. Alive and safe.

Thank holy fuck for that.

Pack our things, get ready to go. Quickly.

A simple enough instruction.

I jumped to attention, scouting around the room to pile everything back into the suitcases. Toiletries, a few crappy clothes that needed washing...barely anything worth keeping. I looked around for his things at the same time, but his suitcases were already organized a damn sight better than mine were. He was a whole lot neater by nature.

He walked in the door twenty minutes later and I nearly bowled him over, I launched myself so hard at him.

It was another wail from me, an exclamation that boomed around the room.

“Lucian!”

I had my arms around him in a flash, like a limpet to his chest, pulling back just far enough to check out his expression. Stern. Disapproving. He was well and truly Lucian Morelli again.

He dropped me to the floor. “Are we all packed and ready to go?”

I nodded and pointed to the suitcases on the floor by the bed, feeling like a nervous little doll under the dark gaze of her monster. “Yeah, we’re ready to go.”

“Good, because we have a limo waiting outside.”

“A limo?”

He nodded and gestured to the window. I raced over and looked out at the street below and there it was. A sleek black limo parked and waiting.

I asked the obvious question. “Where are we going?”

He was already picking up the suitcases, still smiling when he met my eyes. “To Henley on Thames. A town on the outskirts of London.”

Henley on Thames sure sounded grand. I could feel the tingle of excitement at the idea of going anywhere with Lucian Morelli, but this was intense, because I could feel it in him, that excitement to match.

I wanted to ask him a million questions, but he didn't give me the chance. He was too busy getting ready, checking the suitcases were fastened up securely before positioning them ready to go.

“Come on,” he said. “The less time we have to spend in this shithole, the better. I'm well and truly done with it.” His voice was laced with himself. With the Lucian Morelli I'd grown to adore.

I picked up the cruddy suitcase of my own and joined him at the door.

“Ready?” he asked again and I nodded.

“Yeah, I'm ready.”

“Good,” he said, holding the door open as I stepped through to the hotel landing.

I trotted along at his side, heading downstairs. He didn't bother checking out. Didn't even look at the reception desk as we walked by to the main entrance, just paced along as him, proud, tall and on a mission to get to where he was going.

Yep, there it was right outside the front doors. The limousine. It felt like a passport into the kind of world I truly thought I'd left behind.

“Farewell, fake fucking IDs,” Lucian growled and I followed him, stepping out into the evening chill.

The driver was suited and gave a little bow as he opened the limo doors for us. I slipped inside and Lucian followed me, pressing up close in the back seat and wrapping his arm

around my shoulder as the driver loaded our suitcases into the trunk.

“Here we fucking go,” he said. “Say hello to the start of our whole new life.”

I felt starstruck as we pulled away, still trying to soak in the speed of the change around me. I stared back at the hotel as long as I could until it disappeared from view, feeling a strange attachment to it as we left it behind.

“Talk to me, then,” I said to him. “Where the hell are we going, in a limo, out of the blue? Where is this whole new life?”

He leaned back in his seat, still smirking. “We’re going where we belong, Elaine. To a glorious damn manor house in Henley on Thames.”

Even the thought of being in a manor house was weird. I laughed out loud as I raised my foot from the floorboard, showing him a battered sneaker. “Not sure I belong in a manor house looking like this.”

“Not yet,” he said. “But you will. I assure you, Miss Constantine, you will. You’ll be fitting in there just fine when we get you the wardrobe you belong in.”

He took my hand and pulled it onto his thigh, holding it firm as he kept on talking.

“My initial meeting with Quentin and Ellis went exceptionally well. We have many opportunities to discuss. Many.”

“That’s great,” I said. “So, we’re going to be safe here? We’re really going to be Lucian and Elaine living abroad? Do you think it will be far enough away?”

“Yes, we’re really going to be Lucian and Elaine living abroad. For right now we’re going to be Lucian and Elaine living at the Quentin Estate, on the outskirts of Henley on Thames, staying with our very prestigious associates, Devon and his lovely wife, Francesca.”

He made it sound like these people were supposed to be our very best friends or something, even though I knew he barely had any friends at all. He read my mind.

“It’s amazing how attractive friendship can become to people who want to do business with you,” he said. “Believe me, sweetheart, Devon Quentin most certainly wants to be our friend. He’s dedicated a whole wing to our stay.”

I had never heard of Devon Quentin or his wife, Francesca, but I could tell from Lucian’s tone that they were very important people. I felt weirdly self-conscious at the thought of meeting them with crappy clothes on and not a single scrap of makeup on my face.

“You’ve come up with a deal with him, then?” I pushed. “He wants to form an alliance?”

“Yes, indeed he wants to form an alliance. There are plenty of my assets and associations that he finds very attractive. They should partner up very well with his.” He paused. “And very well with some of his other connections’ assets too. As I said, we have many things to discuss.”

I asked an obvious question. “They should partner up better with yours than with your father’s assets and associations, then?”

“This is the beautiful thing, Elaine,” he told me. “My father hasn’t been running the Morelli empire for years, not truly. People have been dealing with me, singing to my tune, dancing whatever dance I want them to dance. Stepping onto British soil and taking control of a new empire isn’t all that difficult a task. I should have realized that the very moment we stepped off the plane.”

My head was still spinning, not quite sure what the hell to make of it, other than that Lucian Morelli was truly stamping his foot on London, and people were listening. We were headed to a British country manor, with some posh-sounding VIPs, sitting in the back of a limo I only assumed could be theirs.

I sat back in my seat, letting my mind slow down, because there was something strangely comforting about doing that—letting the world twirl around me with Lucian taking the lead. I was tired from all the traveling. Still exhausted at the chaos.

I snuggled up closer to him and he didn't say much else, just kept holding my hand as I rested my head on his shoulder. I enjoyed the rumble of the open highway as the city eased off around us, the night slowly darkening to twilight. We were traveling for over an hour before the limo pulled off the main road onto a huge sprawling driveway.

Wow, yes, it was impressive.

There were perfectly sculptured trees lining each side of the driveway, and the backdrop waiting for us up ahead was a perfect rich glow of gold from the blaze of window lights.

The people who lived here were most definitely, definitely wealthy.

The limo swung around a fountain and pulled up directly outside the main manor entrance. Lucian helped me out of the back seat once the driver opened the door for us and I stared around admiring the sheer size of the place. It certainly had wings.

A man arrived at the top of the front steps and welcomed us inside. The hallway was cream and huge, with stairs twisting up on either side. Whoa, I felt more self-conscious than ever being so underdressed here. The estate housekeeping staff would be dressed more stylishly than I would in this outfit.

“Mr. Quentin will be with you soon,” the butler said, and Lucian tipped his head in acknowledgement.

My fingers were twiddling but I couldn't stop them. I felt anything like Elaine Constantine as I waited for our host to arrive to greet us.

We didn't have to wait very long.

“Lucian!” the guy exclaimed, in an uber posh British accent, and he had a rich boy smile on his face as he paced down through the hallway to meet us, shaking Lucian’s hand in a business-style grasp. “I’m so pleased to have you stay with us.”

I felt shy. Like a silly little girl, out of place.

The guy was tall and broad, in his late forties, minimum. His hair was dark, and his beard was well-trimmed, and he was dressed in tweed.

“This is Elaine,” Lucian said to the guy, introducing me. “Elaine, baby, this is Devon.”

“Hello, Devon,” I said, making sure my own voice was as posh as it should be. “Thank you for having us.”

That’s when another set of footsteps arrived and the guy called Devon gestured our attention behind him, looking proud. “Lucian, Elaine, this is my wife, Francesca. Francesca, this is Lucian and Elaine.”

Holy hell, Francesca was a picture. She was stunning. Absolutely damn stunning. Red hair curled just fine. Scarlet lips and a scarlet dress to match, her smile perfect in a way that lit up her whole perfect face.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, and took my hand.

I was grinning bright, unbelievably relieved in that moment to see another woman with a smile. “Pleased to meet you, too,” I said, and let them welcome us into their home.

At least for now, we were safe.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Lucian

WE WERE SHOWN to our suite after the introductions, clearly exhausted after our few days of madness. We had the whole wing to ourselves, an environment much more suited to our characters. Still, Elaine was her wide-eyed self as the Quentins left us alone, staring around our opulent surroundings like we'd suddenly arrived in paradise itself.

“Wow, Lucian,” she said, “just wow!”

“Thank fuck,” I said back, casting barely more than a glance at the pitiful suitcases that had already been delivered.

I had no intention of diving into that piss-poor collection of attire any longer, but I had even less intention of Elaine making do with her budget clothes for even a single day longer. I'd already been making arrangements on that score.

I followed Elaine as she checked out the bathroom and she was grinning with delight at the opulence of the jacuzzi bath in the corner. The bathroom itself was bigger than the shitty hotel room we'd stayed in the night before.

“I've so needed one of these,” she said, stretching her arms above her head. “I'm desperate for a good long soak.”

I turned the water on and she smiled.

“Look at you, Romeo,” she laughed. “I didn't expect you to be running a bath for your princess.”

“I'll be doing a lot more than that for you,” I told her, and I meant it, too.

She had no idea just what was coming to her. Her surprise would be worth a thousand bars of gold.

She stripped straight out of her clothes, reminding me again just how perfect a doll she was, even though the slice on her skin was still raw. It only made her more divine. A painful reminder of how vulnerable she'd been, and how important it was I protect her at any given cost.

She was delicious, enough to make my mouth water at the sight of her. She'd look even more irresistible with some of my bite marks all over her.

We added some of the luxury bath foam, and the bubbles rose invitingly. I was naked alongside her by the time the water had finished running, smiling along with her as she lowered herself in.

“Wow,” she said again, and let herself sink into the bubbles.

I stepped right in after her and lowered myself down on top, and then I kissed her, hard. Deep.

Her soapy hands were up and at me, holding my face as my tongue invaded her mouth. This was us. This would always be us.

I flicked the jets on between kisses and we were amongst the force, massaging tired flesh as we played with one another. She was as desperate for me as I was for her.

She wasn't expecting it when I twisted her onto her side and hoisted her leg back over mine. She was expecting it even less when I thrust her forward at the jets, positioning her sweet little pussy against the flow.

She gasped and squirmed as I spread her pussy lips, exposing that tender little nub to the water.

My dirty little doll let out a moan, pressing back against my solid cock.

“Fuck me,” she said, and there was such a need in her voice. “Please, Lucian. Please fuck me.”

Oh, how I liked to surprise her.

It was her asshole I pressed against, giving her just a moment of realization before I forced my way inside her. Three thrusts that had her whimpering before she took it.

The rock of her hips was perfection. Backward at me, forward at the jet on her clit, over and over until she was lost to everything but the sensations.

My horny girl came loud for me. The water splashed around us as she rode the waves, coming until she was so tender she had to move away from the surge.

She didn't move away from my cock, though. It was her who repositioned herself so she was sitting on top of me with her back to my chest. It was her who spread those ass cheeks wide and moaned as she took it deep. It was her who guided my thrusts, eating them up like a good girl.

She let out a groan as I sank my teeth into her beautiful bare shoulder, taking it as I sucked my mark right onto her.

"Oh God...please...more..." she whimpered, and she got more. Her shoulders were bitten sore by the time I unloaded my cum into her ass, and she was exhausted in a whole new way, glowing with life once we were finally done with soaping up, hoisting ourselves out of there.

I wrapped her up in a towel before I wrapped myself up in one, and she let her wet hair shake down in beautiful blonde snakes, shimmering.

I'd never get tired of looking at her. I could be staring at her for the rest of time and she'd still snare me like a siren calling me right out to sea.

We were still in towels when a knock came at our bedroom door. I answered it with the towel still around my hips, glad to find it was one of the Quentins' housekeepers with a tray of food.

Steak. Tender and rich and exactly what was needed.

Elaine gobbled hers up on the bed, still in her towel, hungry enough that she had eaten the whole dinner before she glugged down some mineral water and lay back with her hand on her freshly swollen little belly.

We snuggled up in bed together, flesh against flesh. She slept like a delicate creature next to me, barely moving until we woke up in the morning with sunlight shining bright through the windows.

I had no idea what time it was, but I knew it was time to be forming more of my allegiances and cementing new partnerships in stone.

Elaine was still half asleep as I got myself washed and suited up ready for the day. She sat up in bed as I fastened my tie, her hair a stunning mess like a halo.

“Shall I come with you?” she asked, but I shook my head.

“No, baby. Enjoy your new surroundings, and enjoy your time with Francesca. I’ll make sure they send your breakfast upstairs before she comes to get you.”

Again she looked surprised. Surprised and happy. “I’m spending the day with Francesca?”

“Yes,” I told her. “She has a whole host of plans for your time.”

Hell, I couldn’t wait to hear about them later, but I wasn’t going to share them with her. I wanted her amazement to be fresh when Francesca told her exactly what would be happening for her.

I kissed my doll before I left, having to pull myself free from her arms before she tugged me back under the covers with her.

“I’ll see you later, sweetheart,” I told her, and again, it felt so natural to be in such an easy new world with no fears hanging over our heads.

“I’ll see you later, handsome,” she replied, and waved me off with a smile.

She'd sure be smiling when I did see her later, that was for sure.

Devon Quentin was already suited up and ready to roll when I joined him downstairs in the sitting room. He got to his feet, giving me a handshake that was even more firm and enthusiastic than the day before.

"Francesca will be getting Elaine's breakfast sent up to her," he confirmed, and I smirked at him.

"A full English breakfast, I hope."

He smiled back. "Of course, Lucian. Most certainly a full English. Minus the black pudding, as per your request."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm very appreciative that she's going to be well taken care of."

"Don't you worry about that. Francesca will most definitely be taking care of her. It's an honor to have you both here. Speaking of which," he added. "Would you like any breakfast yourself?"

No, I wouldn't. I shook my head with a thanks. "I have more pressing things to concern myself with," I told him. "We have plenty of plans to finalize."

"Of course," he said, and patted my back as we walked toward the hall. "I'm ready for us to get started."

The limo was already waiting outside when we stepped out through the entrance. I glanced up at the wing I knew my princess was relaxing in, relieved all over again that I'd trusted my primal calling to be so true to our nature.

Quentin and I took our seats in the back of the limo, and our negotiations started up the moment we pulled away from the manor.

I was very firm in my offerings, and he was very eager to accept them. Partnerships in everything from pharmaceutical research to cross-Atlantic insurance deals, right through to underworld arms deals. I had a sense of drive and excitement I hadn't truly felt in my gut for several years. Life at Morelli

Holdings was challenging, and interesting, but not like this. Not like forming a whole new initiative of opportunities with a whole new web of connections.

We pulled up in Canary Wharf and the limo dropped us off at Quentin's HQ. I stepped inside, shoulder to shoulder with him, proud and arrogant in my very finest of ways.

It was after a solid morning of conversations with Quentin's recommended associates that we shook hands on some deals and some of the other business partners left the room. Then it was just Quentin and I alone together again, sitting across the table from each other with a respectful smile on our faces. He was impressed. I could see it.

It was him who leaned closer, curious.

"So, given that you have been so forthcoming in what you are offering us," he said. "What is it that you want in return? There must be some things you are seeking that I could show you my appreciation by supplying."

My expression was stoic as I weighed it up, but he was eager, clearly very taken with the offers I'd been presenting him.

Yes, there were some things he could show his appreciation by supplying. Two of them.

I decided to lay my cards right out there on the table. "I want a few things in particular," I said. "Some things that may be controversial."

"Anything," he said, holding up his hands with a smirk. "Controversial is my middle name."

My gut was boiling with need even as I uttered the words. "I want Lord Eddington and Baron Rawlings," I told him. "And I want them delivered to me personally so I can kill them myself."



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Elaine

I WAS STILL enjoying the comfy bed and my full stomach from breakfast when the knock came at the bedroom door. It was a different knock than the nervous little taps we'd had previously, this one was confident, with a real bounce in it. My nerves shot up into my throat as I headed over to answer it, knowing full well it must be Francesca Quentin out there on the landing.

Yes, it was. It was Francesca Quentin greeting me with a smile, and she looked every bit as radiant as she had the night before.

She was clearly wearing a designer dress down to her knees, in a turquoise green that brought out the green of her eyes. Her lips were scarlet, matching her flame hair just right.

The woman just reeked of glamor.

Such a shame that I didn't.

I was in one of Jemma's cheap cami tops over a faded pair of jeans. I felt a mess compared to her, but she made me feel anything but as she clapped her hands together in excitement to see me. "Such a pleasure to have you! I can't wait until Marissa Frank arrives. Just a few more minutes and she should be pulling up with her collection, armed and ready to go."

I had no idea what she was talking about and it must have shown on my face. She tipped her head as she spoke again.

"Lucian didn't tell you? We have both my stylist and makeup artist coming over today to treat you to whatever you

desire. He said your suitcase needs the additions.”

No, Lucian hadn't told me. He hadn't mentioned a thing, and it touched me all over again to realize just how important my happiness must be to him. He was spoiling me in every way he could, at every opportunity.

“It's going to be so much fun!” Francesca exclaimed, and I had to hide another fresh bout of happy tears that threatened to spill from me, beaming a grin right back at her.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it.”

She waved a hand. “Nothing to be thankful for. Two girls together, having fun. Makes my day as much as yours.”

I had nothing to take with me, so I didn't even bother looking, just stepped out onto the landing alongside her and let her lead the way.

All the way down the stairs she was telling me just how amazing a stylist Marissa Frank was and how excellent her beautician was to match. She walked me through to the main sitting room telling me about some of the incredible outfits Marissa had sourced for her and just how fantastic my wardrobe was going to be by the time she left today.

“Prosecco or coffee?” she asked me with a laugh as she called the housekeeper in.

“Coffee, please, black,” I said, and she shrugged, then ordered herself a prosecco.

It was a strange situation not to be ordering a prosecco to match, but I didn't want one. I had no desire to drink again. It was gone. Faded. Finished.

One thing I did want was the doctor who arrived on demand and checked out my rib cage through my bandages. Francesca acted like it was nothing when they nodded their approval and gave me a shot of antibiotics, wiping it aside like *no big deal*, even though it had been a huge scary one when it had happened.

I was really fitting in here, comfortable, and so was Lucian.

For once I felt like this truly might work for us. Maybe, just maybe, we'd survive this long-term.

The housekeeper had only just delivered our drinks when I heard a *hello* sounding out from the sitting room door. Francesca jumped to her feet and went rushing over, hugging the woman stepping inside and showering her with air kisses. The woman resounded with style, just as Francesca did. She had a flick of violet in her jet-black curls, dressed in a glorious purple tunic over fitted pants.

I guessed this was Marissa Frank, and rightly so, since she headed right over and clasped her hands together, staring at my clothes up and down.

“This is Elaine,” Francesca told her, and the woman’s jaw practically dropped open.

“Elaine Constantine?”

It felt like I hadn’t been recognized in years by that point, and I’m sure I was blushing. “Hi, yes, I’m Elaine Constantine.”

Francesca picked up the conversation for me. “Elaine needs to expand her wardrobe,” she told the stylist. “Her location is confidential at the moment, non-disclosure at any cost.”

The woman nodded her approval. “Of course, yes, absolutely.”

She shook off her surprise and gave me a smile of a whole different nature. Excitement and respect to a whole different tune. That’s what the Constantine name does for you, though.

“I’d better start bringing the collection in,” she said and she was off with the help of the housekeeper and butler, bringing cases and clothes racks in from outside.

There were a lot of them. It was like being in a designer store by the time the whole selection of clothes was unloaded.

She'd also arrived with a selection of full-length mirrors, all ready for spin and twirl.

“So, tell me what kind of styles you like,” Marissa Frank said, and I took a breath, then began my answer.

I told her exactly what kind of styles I liked, everything from designer casual to designer evening wear. She measured me up to confirm all my sizes, and her markers. I was a size eight. She had a whole ocean of size eight clothes ready for my perusal, and Francesca was joining in with the exclamations as I started working my way through the racks, pulling out anything that grabbed my interest.

My God, plenty of things grabbed my interest.

Beautiful designer blouses and pencil skirts, right through to floaty mid-length dresses, fitted pants and tight little cami tops that put Jemma's entire wardrobe to shame.

Marissa Frank had everything I could possibly want. Bras and panties and tights and stockings. Bustiers and corsets and tights. Jeans. Jackets. Everything.

I was in my element as I pulled clothes out from the racks to try on. It only took one scoot of me heading into the room next door and shifting from Jemma's clothes into a new bra and panties before I felt utterly like Elaine again. It was like a light switch had been flicked on in my head.

Francesca was as expressive as Marissa was, both of them clapping and whooping whenever I stepped out in a new outfit. They loved them all. So did I. I had a new level of appreciation for every single thing I tried on after having gone without any clothes at all bar Lucian's shirt for days on end.

We took a break for lunch, presented with some quaint little British cheese and cucumber sandwiches that I enjoyed as we chattered between the three of us.

It was after lunch that Marissa presented me with a rack full of occasion wear and my heart truly started to thump. Silks and satins and sparkles. Diamante and mermaid tails and

backless gowns. Every one of the dresses was enough to take my breath away.

So were the price tags, but once more I was back to Constantine status, on the arm of a Morelli. Once more, price had no relevance in my world.

It was a deep dark blue ball gown that transfixed me more than anything else. Taffeta interlaced with silks, absolutely divine. But there were others, so many others. A silver satin slip which glided just perfectly over my curves. A little black dress that hugged me like a glove. A pale pastel pink gown with a tail and diamante all around the neckline.

I knew I'd be taking them all.

Francesca covered her mouth with her hands as I stepped into the room once Marissa had fastened me into the little black number. She was nodding like crazy as she moved one hand to her chest.

“Jesus, Elaine, that is truly sensational! Sensational!”

I felt it.

I felt sensational.

But not nearly as sensational as I felt once Francesca's beautician turned up later that afternoon armed with a mobile salon chair and every tool she could ever need.

She styled my hair, lashes, and eyebrows. She gave me a facial, and did my nails, and waxed all the bits of me that needed waxing. Then she addressed my makeup situation—making me up like the Elaine Constantine everyone expected me to be, then leaving a full makeup case of supplies for me in her absence.

Once again Francesca covered her mouth with her hands as I stepped back into the sitting room.

“You really do look like Elaine Constantine again now,” she said. “You look absolutely fucking perfect.”

I only hoped Lucian agreed with her when he arrived back that evening. Only it seemed that evening wouldn't be all that long coming. Francesca checked the time on her cell phone before shooting a glance out onto the driveway through the main windows.

“Devon messaged an hour ago to say they will be home before dinner. We only have an hour or so left.” She smiled at me. “So what's it going to be, sweetie? What are you going to wear for Lucian when he steps in through the door?”

I'd already chosen. I was smiling as I stared over at my new rack of items, eyes hovering on the silver satin slip. My God, just to imagine his hands over me through that fabric. The very idea sealed the choice in my mind.

I held it up for Francesca to see and she gushed all over again.

“Yes! He is going to go crazy to see you in that!” With that she sighed and gestured down to her own outfit, smiling. “It seems I'd better select something fitting myself, then,” she said, and summoned the housekeepers to take my new wardrobe upstairs while she guided me along with my arm in hers.

“Let's get ready,” she said. “Let's give our men something that knocks them truly senseless.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lucian

I'D ENJOYED MY day with Devon Quentin, it had given me a new lease on life. A thrill. That's the ultimate word for the buzz that was coursing through me. The satisfaction in knowing you are forging deals which will lead to an epicenter of success. Huge success. The kind of success that I'd been bred to create, and excelled at through my own nature.

We rolled back up at the manor in the limo, still talking through the finer details of some of our newfound partnerships. The driver opened the door for me and I stepped out, looking up at the magnificent house with a sense of satisfaction. Satisfaction and excitement.

My doll was waiting for me there.

I couldn't wait to hear about her day with Francesca's stylist. I couldn't wait to see the smile on her face as she showed me her collection of new attire, my princess getting whatever she wanted and deserved. Elaine Constantine deserved everything in the world, and I was going to give it to her. I was going to give her everything she ever wanted and more.

"Dinner will be a good one tonight," Quentin told me. "Roasted pheasant."

I had no doubt it would be a good one. Quentin's chef was Michelin starred. "My mouth's watering already," I responded. "I'm looking forward to it."

I felt so alive as we stepped into the hallway, alive and buzzing and eager to see my doll, but I was stopped in my tracks when Quentin's gaze shot up to the balcony and mine followed.

Francesca and Elaine were standing there, proud and poised together as they leaned against the railing and stared down at us with a smile.

Christ, she looked absolutely incredible.

There she was again, the woman in gold who'd transfixed me right from day one. Only this time she was a woman in silver, in a gown that graced every part of her perfect body.

This was the goddess I couldn't keep my eyes or my hands off of at Tinsley Constantine's birthday ball, only this time she was her to a whole other league. She was now the goddess that I was in love with.

Quentin elbowed me in jovial camaraderie as they began the descent down the staircase and fully came into view. Francesca was also a stunning creature, but my fucking God, Elaine was divinity itself.

It looked like she had a new lease on life, too. There was a confidence in her eyes and smile that made me smile proudly right back.

"Welcome home, boys!" Francesca exclaimed, but my gaze wasn't on her, it was on my siren as she stepped over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

She didn't need to speak and neither did I, our stares said more than words ever could. I imagine they said a lot to the Quentins as well since Devon cleared his throat to get our attention, then gave us a laugh.

"You can get a room later, we have pheasant on the way," he said, and Francesca was laughing too.

Elaine laughed along with them, blue eyes sparkling like pure fucking sapphires as I let out a laugh of my own.

We'd most certainly be getting a fucking room later.

I gripped Elaine's fingers nice and tight as we made our way through to the dinner hall. The places were all set at the top of the table and I pulled Elaine's seat out for her, my mouth watering at the sight of her bare back as she sat herself down. I saw just a glimpse of one of the bruises I'd left on her shoulder and that made my cock hard in a flash as I took my place beside her. I could feel her, her whole body, a temptation and a tease in that dress.

The server delivered the meals, but the food held no interest to me. Roast pheasant could go fuck itself compared to the woman I wanted to ravage. I ate mine with an appreciative smile on my face, but it was barely more than paper thin. My attention was all on Elaine recounting her day along with Francesca, gushing with excitement about all of the wonderful things she had tried on.

Devon Quentin was glazing over as his wife talked about clothes, attention fully on his dinner, but I was transfixed by the women, completely captivated by their exclamations.

"Elaine looks amazing in her dresses!" Francesca told me. "Every single one of them."

"Marissa was so, so good," Elaine said, putting the achievement on the stylist and not on the way she could look amazing in goddamn pig shit if she rolled in it.

Devon interjected at that point, putting down his fork on his plate. "So the question is, when and where are you going to be showing these new dresses off?" he asked, then turned to Francesca. "Chessie, don't we have the Songbirds in the Wind premiere on Saturday night?"

Francesca clapped. "Yes! We do! It's going to be incredible! The musical is going to be fantastic! We'd love to have you along with us."

Elaine looked at me, that innocence glowing in her, waiting for my reaction.

"It's in the West End," Francesca added. "A perfect opportunity to show off one of your gowns."

Holy fuck, how I'd love to have her on my arm at a West End London premiere. It would be the perfect opportunity for a showstopper. Elaine Constantine at my side, proud and shoulder to shoulder as we showed ourselves off to the world.

"Yes," I answered, firmly. "We'd love to attend the premiere. Thank you."

"Excellent indeed!" Devon said, and raised his whisky glass. "We'll get you on the red carpet list."

I could imagine the surprise on the paparazzi's faces as we stepped out of the limousine with the Quentins. It would be absolutely fucking glorious.

"Thank you," Elaine said to them, her voice so sweet with gratitude. "Thanks so much, really."

"You're very welcome," Francesca replied, and she meant it. They'd be really damn pleased to have us at their side at the public outing, of that I was sure.

Elaine's fingers were so delicate as they sought out mine under the table. I squeezed hers right back, brushing my thumb over her knuckles. God, I fucking loved her.

The rest of the conversation over dinner was flowing and easy, the companionship of this couple something I hadn't experienced all that much in my life. It felt surprisingly like a friendship, not a business partnership finding its ruthless feet. It was something I wasn't all that well acquainted with, but I was liking it. Enjoying it.

Maybe I was actually capable of forming genuine friendships. Besides Elliot Morelli back home, I didn't have all that many people I held true affection for. My life was certainly taking some very strange turns of late, maybe this would be another to add to the collection.

The four of us ate dessert together, another fine presentation from the chef. Mixed berry tart, with raspberries and plums.

I was truly done with eating when I dabbed my mouth with my napkin and reclined back in my chair, my interest in the conversation on British politics drawing to a close.

All I wanted was to get that girl of mine upstairs to our bedroom.

When Devon threw down his own napkin and shot a hungry look at Francesca, it was obvious he was wanting to get her up to theirs too.

“I’ve had a lovely dinner with you both,” he said to us, clearly drawing a close to the evening.

I gave him a nod and a smirk. “Very much reciprocated.”

“Fantastic,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll be having many more.”

Francesca hugged and air kissed Elaine with real affection before we all headed back through to the hall together. They disappeared off on their way with a wave and a *good night* and Elaine and I were left at the staircase up to our wing, waving them off right back.

And then it was us.

Alone.

One look from me had her taking in a breath, and she was as desperate as I was when I grabbed her tight and kissed her hard, tasting mixed berries and lipstick. We headed upstairs and along the landing, a tangle of limbs and kisses, flesh seeking flesh.

We stumbled through our bedroom door but I didn’t throw her down onto the bed. Instead I backed off her, leaving her gasping, lips puffy and lipstick smeared.

“Twirl for me,” I told her, and it was a command.

She looked surprisingly nervous as she did as she was instructed, doing a ballerina twist nice and slowly.

The silver satin of her dress was a shimmer, enough to make me heady. Her hair was alive with sparkles under the

light.

“You set me on fucking fire, you know that?” I asked her, and she looked so flattered it was unbelievable. It was insane, just how beautiful that woman was.

“You set me on fire to match, you know that?” she asked, and there was that sweet sassiness in her I adored.

My next instruction felt like a crime, but I couldn't hold back. No matter how much I was enjoying the beauty of that dress on her, I'd be enjoying the beauty of her flesh underneath it so much more.

“Strip for me,” I said. “Nice and slow.”

Once again, she did as she was told.

She let the straps of the dress fall from her shoulders and did another spin. Slowly.

There were the bite marks I'd left on her the night before, appearing perfectly from beneath the fabric.

I loved seeing her marked like that. Owned like that. Hurt like that, by me.

If anyone else ever hurt her in any way again, I'd skin them alive, but to see my own brutality etched into her was nothing short of filthy magic.

My cock was so hard it was fucking painful in my pants when I closed the distance between us. Her dress dropped to the floor around her feet, and she was wearing white lace panties, so fucking pretty. I tugged them down and dropped to my knees along with them, and there was her wet pussy, freshly waxed and begging for my tongue.

She gasped as I pressed my mouth to her slit, wrapping my arms around her thighs to spread them wider.

Still, the insanity of this new world was a shock to me.

I was on my knees.

A Morelli on their knees before a Constantine.

Lucian Morelli on his knees before Elaine Constantine.

Who'd have thought it would be the greatest feeling in the world?



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elaine

WAKING UP WITH a sore pussy was something I could happily get used to. I don't know what time we eventually fell asleep, but it was late. Lucian had played with me for hours, only giving me his cum when I was so used up I couldn't come for him anymore.

I reached out for my lover by my side, eager to snuggle in, but he wasn't there. I jolted, looking around the room for him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

There was only a note on the bedside table.

See you later, princess.

Of course he'd gone. He was Lucian Morelli. He'd probably been signing deals for his new empire since six in the morning, regardless of what time we went to bed. It made me smile to myself. He was truly back to him again. Only I wasn't back to me. I wasn't the old Elaine Constantine hiding behind drinks and parties and feeling ashamed of herself behind a sheen of glamor. I was someone else. A new Elaine with all the positives of my old self with a whole host of new ones.

And that was all thanks to the man I once believed to be a monster.

I reached for my cell from the bedside table and there was a message waiting for me. Tristan. The only one besides Lucian with my number.

His words were simple.

Call me when you get this. URGENT!!

I checked out the time. It was 10 a.m. It would be 5 a.m. back home. I weighed it up, but the instruction was clear. There was that little instinctive feeling of worry that couldn't be shaken off. My finger pressed the call button and I waited for it to connect, telling myself I'd give him just a few seconds to pick up, in case he was sleeping, but he wasn't. He answered in a beat.

“Lainey, thank fuck you called. You're all over the news here in a whole other way.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. “What other way?”

“They've figured out who it is. They figured out it's Lucian Morelli. The gossip blogs are saying he's with you, and you are a fucking couple.”

For once the gossip channels were surprisingly accurate. Made a change. Still, the thought that people were talking about it, realizing it, gossiping about it...our families would be realizing it, too. Shit!

“They'll be coming after you,” Tristan said, stating the obvious. “You know that. They'll be coming after you damn quick.”

“Yeah, I do know that,” I said. “We both do. Me and Lucian.”

“You gonna run again, then?” he asked me. “Get the hell out of London whatever you do. That's where the rumors say you are.”

I bit my lip before I answered, registering just how brazen our plans were to step out together over here and let the world know we belonged together.

“You are going to run, right?” Tristan asked.

“No,” I told him. “We're not. We're going to a West End show together this weekend.”

He took a breath. He actually sucked in a breath. “Are you both out of your fucking minds? You know they’ll come for you!”

Yes, I knew that, but I also had faith in Lucian, and how strong he was in forging our new life here and making it secure. I didn’t even try telling Tristan that, because his faith in the monster who knocked him unconscious wasn’t likely to be all that high.

“We’ll be alright,” I said. “We have plans.”

“Don’t do this, Lainey. Please, don’t do this. They’ll try to kill you. Run away!”

I sounded weirdly self-assured when I answered, with a strength in my tone I didn’t expect to hear. “I don’t want to run away,” I told him. “I want to stand by Lucian. They can come for us if they like, but I’m going to be alongside him, in the spotlight for everyone to see.”

“Then you’re fucking insane. Call me when you come to your damn senses,” he said, and hung up.

Tristan had never once hung up on me in all the years I’d known him. I’d lost my damn senses plenty of damn times throughout our friendship, but never enough to wind him up enough to end a call.

Maybe I really was insane. Maybe both Lucian and I were. Maybe we were so blinded by our love for each other that we wanted nothing more than to show that off to the world rather than accept that it might get us killed. I just hoped the gossips wouldn’t find out where we were headed to on the weekend. The last thing I wanted was to be shot dead on the first red carpet we stepped onto.

I headed down to see Francesca after I’d showered and dressed, loving life in a decent pair of jeans that actually fit me. She was all smiles as we sat down to breakfast together, telling me all over again just how good my outfit choices were yesterday.

I saw genuine friendship in her eyes and craved more of that, trusting fate enough to have put a genuine friend in my path in this new world.

She clearly wasn't expecting me to share my truth with her, not over her breakfast cereal. She nearly spilled the milk she was pouring onto her cornflakes when I looked her right in the eyes and said the words.

"Our families are probably going to try to kill us when they find out we're here together. I just hope it's not in the West End on Saturday night."

She stared over at me for a few seconds before she responded. "Well, yes, I, um...I have heard plenty of stories about the rivalry between the Morellis and the Constantines."

"Rivalry enough that they would want to wipe us out rather than see us together."

"But surely they won't be able to?" she asked me. "Not when you're publicly declared as together and the whole world knows about it. Wouldn't that point all the fingers directly at them?"

"I don't know. I just know they're going to try. Once we're established in public and everyone is getting used to it, then maybe they won't risk it, not without people speculating it was them with a grudge, but straight up that won't mean anything to them. They'll be too damn angry at being betrayed."

"That's what Devon said. He said the first round of revelations in public will be intense. Likely on both sides of the Atlantic. He said that's why it's been so important to get Lucian's signature on so many deals and partnerships and so much set in stone."

"Did he say he thinks we'll get ourselves killed?" I dared to ask.

She poised her spoon on the way to her mouth, clearly taken aback. "He, um...he said there might be some...difficulties."

I held her stare. “He thinks we’ll get ourselves killed, right?”

“He thinks it might be dangerous for a while, but he doesn’t think the West End will be the venue to wipe you out. He thinks the whole world is going to be cheering and flashing cameras and screaming it all over the globe.”

The idea of that still gave me excited tingles. I so much wanted to be in front of flashing cameras along with Lucian. I wanted people to be screaming it all over the globe.

I poured milk over my own cereal, managing a much easier smile as I shifted our chat onto much easier ground.

“So, tell me some more about Songbirds in the Wind,” I said.

She bought into the change of conversation, giving me a much easier smile herself. “It’s most certainly going to be a good one,” she said.

By the time she finished talking, I had no doubt about that.

I only hoped we’d survive it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lucian

WE HAD JUST a few days before the paparazzi would go insane. Just a few days before our presence would be known around the globe. I'd already seen the gossip columns. I knew the rumors were flying and I knew that our course ahead was clear. Me and her, standing strong.

I needed to be ready for it.

My web of connections was sealed in stone, secure and invested. Devon Quentin was at the head of a network that would keep Elaine and me at the heart of an empire. I could run Morelli Holdings from here for now. The location was temporary, but my companion was not.

She was my life now. Forever.

As well as setting up the Morelli-Constantine Manor, I was going to demonstrate my love for Elaine in the most spectacular of ways, and had already started on the arrangements, but first of all I had a much more pressing engagement to be putting my attention into.

“Are you sure this is a sound idea?” Quentin asked on the limo ride back to the manor. “The West End will be a fantastic venue to strut around in your first public appearance, but it will be...dramatic.”

“Are you trying to back out of the invitation to have us included on the VIP list like a pussy?” I asked him with a smirk on my face.

He rolled his eyes at me. “No, of course not, Morelli. I’m no pussy. I’m just well aware it will cause some controversy overseas.”

“Not as well aware as I am,” I replied. “I’m very well aware it will cause some controversy.”

He’d been looking into US gossip news too, I could see it. It was probably being whispered about behind every closed door in his corporate HQ. *Morelli and Constantine, shhh*. He was probably shitting his pants that he’d be caught up in the crossfire if my family opted to take us out on the red carpet that weekend.

“Fine, then,” he said. “If you’re signing your own death warrant, that’s your call.”

I’d been weighing that up myself, and I was undoubtedly signing my own death warrant. Whether they’d come for us outside a London West End theater was a different matter. I didn’t think even my family or Elaine’s would be quite so brazen as to take us out so blatantly in public. Still, I could be surprised. They could try.

Hopefully they wouldn’t. Hopefully both sides of the battlefield would realize that we weren’t just escapees on the run looking for an easy life anymore, we were standing proud and firm, ready for the fight.

At least, I was. I’d fight with flying axes and fists and machine guns happily enough all day long, but my Elaine was a beautiful little darling who deserved protection from every flying fist on the planet. I’d give everything to give her that protection.

We were approaching the driveway when Quentin’s cell buzzed. His eyes went straight to mine once he’d read the message.

“Those things you wanted,” he said, clearly aware of the driver’s ears in the front seat.

“Yes?” I prompted, knowing full well what *things* he was referring to.

“They’ll be ready soon,” he told me. “Sunday evening most likely. They’ll be delivered by nightfall.”

I was pleased. Very fucking pleased. “Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied.

My tiredness was catching up with me as we left the limo on the driveway and stepped back into the manor. I’d barely slept the night before, but my senses were on high alert as Elaine came charging down the hallway, flinging herself into my arms.

“Welcome home, baby,” she whispered, peppering my cheeks with kisses.

Home.

Another use of the word out of the blue.

I couldn’t wait to see her exclamation when she saw the home of our own. It appeared the impetus to move out of Quentin Manor wouldn’t be coming from the Quentins anytime soon, though. Both Francesca and Devon looked very enthusiastic when the housekeeper approached us about dinner that evening, asking us what time we’d be sitting down to eat.

“What time works for you?” Devon asked, looking at me, but I looked at Elaine, in her hot new day clothes, her time more valuable to me than mine.

She shrugged, innocently. “Whenever works for you.”

She was so fucking cute. A woman like Elaine Constantine could be looking down her nose at any human being she chose to, even the Quentins, but she was doing anything but. You’d think they were our lords and saviors.

Quite possibly because they were. They just didn’t realize it.

“We’ll see you at seven,” I told Devon, stepping in to seal the decision.

“Seven,” he told the housekeeper, and my word was law.

Elaine didn't bother getting dressed more extravagantly for the meal once we'd made our way upstairs to the wing. She was still buzzing with happiness to see me, but I could see a conversation brewing on her face. Nerves.

"Tristan called me today," she said.

I knew exactly what that would be for. "Gossip columns," I responded, and she nodded.

"He thinks we should be running away."

"So would anyone who knows the situation and our families, but they can go fuck themselves, Elaine. I'm not backing down on this for anyone. You're the love of my life and I'll be shouting it from the fucking rooftops. Our families can suck it up and take it."

"But what if they come for us?" she asked.

"They'll want to," I said. "But our empire and roots here are growing and expanding firmly. I hope they'll have more sense than to take a shot at that."

I could see she wasn't so sure. She knew her mother after all, no doubt grieving the prick who'd spent years giving her daughter over to the cunts in the *fellowship*. Still, I knew my father. He'd no doubt be fuming to the point of abject rage, too. My father had a brain at least. I hoped he chose to use it.

"We're really doing this?" she asked. "The West End premiere?"

"Yes," I told her. "We're definitely doing it."

She didn't question me again, just turned her attention to dinnertime, saying how excited she was with her new friendship with Francesca. Again, it was lovely to see her glowing so brightly, right from the core.

Dinner was nice. Once more I was far more interested in Elaine enjoying the conversations than I was in enjoying them myself. I saw Devon smirking at me when he realized I was staring at Elaine between every mouthful of roasted lamb.

Francesca didn't notice. She was chatting away quite happily to my princess, clearly excited about the friendship just as much as Elaine was. I loved that. I adored that. The Quentins would no doubt be high on our list of guests when we were in our own kingdom.

We headed upstairs as soon as dinner was over. As usual my hands were all over her as soon as she stepped in through the bedroom door. As always, she was desperate right back, begging for everything she took from me.

One thing she did ask for was pain, beautiful pain. Only I didn't give it to her, not that night. I had a whole set of other plans on that front, too. Ones I wanted her skin clear and flawless for, a perfect canvas for when I did truly put some marks on her.

"Wait for your gifts," I told her as I fucked her pretty little slit from behind. "You'll be given them when I choose."

I knew she loved that from me. Ownership. Possession. Making her my hungry little submissive under my command.

I made her come, my fingers rubbing her clit as I slammed into her, only giving her my cum in return when she was riding the wave. Fuck, I was spent when we were done, long days and nights finally catching up with me.

Then we did something we hadn't done all that much of before. We lay in bed together, staring at each other in the fuzzy glow of the aftermath, asking each other random questions.

"Do you like snow?"

"What's your very favorite color? The exact shade, not a vague one?"

"Have you ever watched a sitcom and been hysterical laughing?"

"What's your star sign? Have you ever had your birth chart made?"

It was so much fun. So lively. So lighthearted. Something we hadn't had much of in all the time we'd known each other.

That's when I picked up on it in myself—just how much I wanted to see the same things I'd seen in her eyes when she was looking at me as when she'd been looking at Francesca downstairs across the dinner table. Friendship as well as love. Love was all-consuming and everything, but friendship is knowing. Truly knowing someone. I wanted to know my princess inside out.

She was asleep before I was, the bedside lamp still on on my side of the bed. I watched her, smiling to myself.

I couldn't wait to show her off to the world. Miss Elaine Constantine on my arm on the red carpet.

My love, my life. My very best friend.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Elaine

I MUST HAVE twirled a thousand times in front of the mirror, staring at the sparkle in my sapphire gown while Francesca stood beside me. She looked absolutely sensational, in a bright orange dress fitted like perfection to her curves. It was so striking. Totally beautiful.

“You look so beautiful!” she told me for the hundredth time as I checked out my back in the mirror all over again.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m just...I’ll be standing next to Lucian Morelli, the hottest guy on the planet.”

She laughed at that. “Just as well you’re probably the hottest girl on the planet, then.”

I rolled my eyes, because that was a crazy statement, but it still made me feel so nice inside, her being so nice to me.

She checked the time.

“Really, we have to go now. The boys will be waiting downstairs. Fuck, how Devon wishes Lucian was a drinker, he’d love to be knocking back whisky with him tonight.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Fuck, how you wish I was a drinker too, I imagine,” I said, gesturing to the glass in her hand. “You’d love to be knocking back prosecco with me tonight.”

One thing was certain. I wouldn’t be knocking back anything. Me and alcohol were well and truly enemies these days.

I took a deep breath before we began our descent downstairs from Francesca's bedroom. I had been trying my best not to touch my makeup, since it had been applied just right by the beautician. I wanted to look as perfect as possible for the red carpet.

I thought I'd seen Lucian taken aback by how I looked before, but it was nothing compared to how his eyes widened when I stepped through the sitting room doorway that night.

It was enough to knock me sideways. Absolute, total, adoration. I can only imagine my stare at him must have been equally as adoring, because he looked absolutely fucking amazing.

I had no idea when he'd been fitted for his tuxedo, but it was perfection on him. He was a god. A pure god. The sight of him made my heart race, giving me literal shivers because I was so excited.

He put his mineral water down on the coffee table and walked right over, tipping my face up to his. "Elaine. I have no words. I'll be the proudest man alive tonight."

I must have grinned like a happy little girl, my eyes meeting his with devotion. This man *was* a god. *My* god.

"Time to roll," Devon said and I looked over to see his hand in Francesca's, gripping tight.

Yeah, she was his princess, just like I was Lucian's. It was written all over his face, just as he was enough to set her on fire right back. So lovely to see it.

The limo was waiting outside for us, ready to go. My heart was still thumping, nerves and excitement and love a heady mash-up.

Lucian stroked my knuckles for the whole ride into the city while the Quentins told us all over again about the different performers and VIPs who'd be there with us. I was only half listening, too focused on London through the windows, burning bright.

Wow, the West End was thrumming with energy when we got there. I could feel it. People crowded around waiting to be let in. Paparazzi focused on the VIP entrance.

Here we were. This was it.

Songbirds in the Wind. The signs were bright and bold.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on our car as it pulled up outside the VIP entrance, red carpet waiting as the attendants stepped forward to open our doors.

They looked very shocked as I stepped out, and shocked to a whole other level as Lucian stepped out and joined me. Yes. It was us. A Constantine and a Morelli standing together.

And that's when it went crazy. Absolutely fucking crazy. Lights flashing, and cameras clicking and journalists racing forward to get shots of us up close.

Holy Jesus, I was proud. I held Lucian's hand with my chin up high and my smile alight, posing for the press before we began our walk along the red carpet, along with the Quentins.

The press were calling out questions. Someone shoved a microphone right in my face.

"Elaine! Elaine! Were you kidnapped? Give us a statement!"

I gave them a statement. A very simple one, with a smile. "I wasn't kidnapped, there has been a misunderstanding. I've been with Lucian Morelli and I'm very happy. He's my partner now."

All fear was lost under that pure burst of excitement. All thoughts of our families taking a swipe at us was lost under the bliss as the press went even more crazy with the camera flashes and questions. We ignored the rest of them, just kept on walking.

The red carpet steps lasted a lifetime and a heartbeat both at once. The theater was beautiful when we hit the entrance hall. We were guided to our VIP balcony and the view of the

stage was incredible. I took my seat by the railing, leaning forward to check out the full scope of the place. It was everything I'd dreamed it would be.

"And here we are," Lucian whispered to me. "A couple for the world to see. It's an honor, Elaine. A true honor."

"Ditto," I said, with a grin. "Being anywhere with you is an honor, Lucian. I didn't know it was possible to love anyone as much as I love you."

His grin was amazing, nothing like his trademark smirk. "Ditto."

The lights lowered to darkness, bursting to brightness again as the curtains pulled back and the show began. The music was so good. The orchestra was outstanding, and so were the performers on stage.

The story was about two birds separated by the bitter cold and wind, both of them believing the other was dead and not being able to live without them, searching desperately for the other even though they believed they were gone.

I was crying by the end, giving a standing ovation alongside Lucian and the Quentins with my hands in the air.

I only hoped we'd be able to do plenty more of these musicals, because they were magic. Magic.

Lucian knew I was crying with the emotion of the story when he took my hand and led me out onto the landing to make our descent.

"We'll be doing plenty more of this," he assured me, and wiped away my tears with his thumb.

"Thank you," I said.

"There's no thanks to give," he replied. "The pleasure is all mine."

The paparazzi were ready and waiting for us all over again when we left the theater. This time we dashed right past them,

taking a dive into the limo before the Quentins slid in and joined us.

Devon let out a breath once we were back in our seats, letting out a guffaw of a laugh.

“Well, we’re all still alive. Thumbs-up for that.”

Lucian laughed along with him, and he gave him a thumbs-up. An actual thumbs-up, which made me laugh too.

Yeah, these were our friends now. I knew in my heart they always would be.

“Time for the after-party!” Francesca said with a grin, but Lucian shook his head, then smiled at me.

“Not for us. We have somewhere else to go.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but Devon did. “Ah, yes. You’ll be taking the limo to Soho. Of course.”

I’d heard of Soho as a part of London, but our destination was a mystery to me. Lucian put a finger to my lips as I began to ask questions.

“Wait and see,” he told me, and I did as I was told, mind spinning as to where the hell we could be going. He looked... simmering. Intense. Excited in the very darkest of ways. Truly Lucian Morelli.

The limo dropped Devon and Francesca at some grand hotel a short way from the theater.

“See you later.” Francesca waved along with Devon, and we waved back but stayed in the back seat and kept on rolling.

“Tell me where we’re going,” I pleaded with a grin, but Lucian smirked.

“No,” he said. “Wait until you’re shown.”

The street we pulled into was almost empty. The limo dropped us off outside a set of unmarked doors with two security guards outside, big and gruff. I still had no idea where

the hell we were stepping into as the driver let us out onto the sidewalk.

The security guys looked as taken aback as the West End paparazzi had as Lucian led me up to the doors.

“We’re expected,” he told them. “Your owner, Andy, told me to head right in.”

They looked at each other for a long second, then swung open the doors for us without question, letting us walk straight inside.

My eyes were shooting all over the place when they closed the doors behind us. We were standing in a red reception room with a woman with green hair and piercings sitting behind the counter.

She saw us and the recognition was clear all over her face. It took a few seconds for her to compose herself, clearly as surprised by our presence as everyone else we’d crossed paths with that evening.

“Um, hi,” she said, struggling for words. “Welcome to Club Explicit.”

It was when I saw the couple on the stairs ahead of us that I realized what Club Explicit was, but of course that made sense. Club *Explicit*. It was a dirty one. A BDSM club. I could see it by the crop in a guy’s hand as he made his way upstairs alongside a woman in nothing but a thong.

My heart was absolutely pounding when I saw the lust in Lucian’s eyes.

He gestured to the stairs. “Let’s go check out Club Explicit,” he said. “I hope you’re ready to show me what an obedient little doll you really are.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lucian

I'D HEARD EXCELLENT things about Club Explicit. When I was setting up Violent Delights, my own BDSM club back home in NYC, it had been one of the places I'd investigated heavily online in my research. I'd been meaning to visit for quite some time, but I never expected to be doing so with such a delicious creature on my arm. Let alone a woman I was totally in love with.

The mural on the wall as we climbed the stairs was a marvel in itself, but that didn't surprise me. I'd heard that one of London's best street artists had been at work on it. Everything from the lighting and the booths in the main bar, right through to the grand stage and the opulence of the dance floor were testament to the quality and prestige of this venue.

It suited us.

This visit would kick the ass of any damn West End after-party, for sure.

Elaine was her usual wide-eyed self as we headed up to the bar. The girl behind it was a sweet little thing in pigtails, with a lip piercing that gave her a sweet little pout to match. As with everyone else, she stared in shock as we approached, stumbling over her words as she asked what we were drinking. Her shock didn't get any less obvious when I replied.

"Two mineral waters."

She served them up for us with shaking hands, a nervous smile on her pretty little face.

Under previous circumstances, I'd have had her over my knee taking a spanking in a heartbeat, but not anymore. Now it was only Elaine in my world.

We took seats at the bar, looking around the room. It was busy, but not heaving. People were clearly very well acquainted with each other, the atmosphere was tense, but in a magnificent way. I'd never have expected to admit it, but this club was actually better than mine back home in NYC. I'd never have expected to believe *anything* would be better than something of mine, but I had to give credit where it was due. Club Explicit was better than Violent Delights. It kicked its fucking ass.

One thing was for sure, we looked out of place amongst the host of hot-looking freaks in this place. There was nobody else in a tuxedo, and Elaine was shining like a beautiful beacon in her ball gown to the whole damn club. As people began to notice us, heads began to turn en masse, people checking us out with disbelief and a clear rush of excitement. Generally though, they kept their distance. All besides one cocky creature.

The very attractive woman took a seat at the bar next to us, dressed in a black latex catsuit with her jet-black hair swept back into a high ponytail. Her confidence was flawless.

“Hello,” she said, with a self-assured smile on her face.

It was Elaine who replied first, with a wave. “Hello.”

“I'm Raven,” the woman told us, and held out a hand.

My princess shook it with vigor.

“Elaine,” she said, and Raven smirked.

“Yes. You are easily recognizable as Elaine,” she replied, then turned her attention to me. “And you are also easily recognizable as Lucian. Nice to meet you both.”

People didn't usually refer to me on a first name basis in an initial meeting, but with her I didn't seem to mind it. I liked her. I didn't usually like people at first sight, or *ever* in fact,

but with her, there was a shine of authenticity. Yes. I liked her. I liked Raven a lot.

I liked her even more when a stunning blonde girl arrived to sit next to her, taking her hand.

“This is my girlfriend, Cara,” Raven told us, and the girl waved.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” Elaine said, and in that one single instant I knew these girls would be her friends. Instinct is a very powerful thing when it strikes.

“Your first time in Club Explicit,” Cara commented, stating the very obvious.

I found myself nodding and answering with no sarcasm whatsoever. At odds with my usual self.

“Yes, our first time in Club Explicit.”

“Won’t be your last,” Raven said, with a laugh. “I’m sure you’ll have a very good time here.”

I found myself nodding at that, too.

“Playrooms are over there,” Cara said, pointing to a corridor by the dance floor. “They’re great. You’ll want to check them out.”

But no. I wouldn’t.

I knew exactly what I would be checking out. I’d known it from the very instant we’d walked into the bar.

The stage.

I’d be checking out the damn stage.

“Here they come,” Raven said, gesturing up to the very stage I was thinking about.

Elaine sat forward on her stool to get a clearer view, and the lights dimmed down on the dance floor, lighting up the stage like the West End theater we’d seen earlier. Incredibly dramatic. Enough to make my pulse race.

I had no idea who *they* were who were coming, but I was very interested to find out.

Elaine asked Raven the question.

“Who’s coming up on stage?”

Cara was the one who answered, with a filthy grin on her face. “Masque and Cat. They are Explicit superstars. You’ll see why in a minute.”

The whole room’s attention was up there, which was also an unusual feeling, given that almost everywhere I went in the world, everyone’s attention was always on me.

It only took a moment as the figures appeared on stage to realize why.

The woman was beautiful. Beautiful, naked and proud of it, her dark hair cascading down her back as she raised her hands for the shackles coming down from the ceiling. But it wasn’t just her who was grabbing the attention, it was the hulk of a man who appeared behind her.

He was absolutely fucking huge. Huge, toned, and quite possibly the most confident guy I’d ever seen outside of myself. He reeked of it. Pure, unabashed confidence, without a hint of arrogance. He was in a leather mask that covered half of his face, and that made him look all the more intimidating. That combined with the fact that he had a huge dark tattoo on his chest. A two-headed dragon creature, its tail curling around his back.

“Wow,” Elaine said, and Raven nodded.

She leaned over close enough to nudge my princess with a smirk on her face. “I did that tattoo for him. The chimera.”

“You’re a tattoo artist?”

“Yes,” she said. “I am.”

Again I had another flash of instinct. A very definite one.

My princess was going to get tattooed by her, and I was going to be the one choosing the marks she’d be wearing

forever more.

Conversation sure as fuck dried up when the big guy grabbed his flogger and started trailing it down his submissive's spine. She tipped her head back, ready and hungry. A true submissive. That much was very obvious.

Fuck, how he hurt her.

Fuck, how she wanted it.

Whimpering turned to squeals, and squeals turned to gasps, and gasps turned to tears.

Tears turned to begging for more.

The flogger turned to a crop, and a crop turned to a cane, and that beast of a man took that woman like a serious fucking master. I felt strangely competitive as I watched him. I also felt strangely competitive as I watched the way my little doll was watching him hurting his woman, transfixed. I was jealous.

He was the first damn man I'd been jealous of in my whole fucking life, but again it was bizarre, because I didn't feel any malice in it. Nothing but an insane sense of...respect. I didn't give respect very easily.

The master slapped his girl's pussy until she was clamping her thighs closed tight and then, when she was trembling and quaking, he barked at her to spread them wide.

She did just as she was told. Good little doll.

Even I was surprised when he fisted her. Hard. Right up there on stage, in the spotlight, in front of the whole damn room. Jesus Christ, she took it like a perfect whore, working herself onto his fist, even though she was gasping with the pain.

My cock was hard watching them, but it wasn't hard for them. It was hard for the girl at my side, picturing her up there in the same fucking shackles, bracing herself to take the pain.

I looked across at her, my Elaine, and she was still transfixed. I saw the way she was clenching her own thighs

together under her gown and could imagine how her heart was fluttering.

She liked it. She wanted it.

My little doll wanted to be taken in shackles, just as I wanted to take her that way.

That sealed her fate. My beautiful princess had sealed her fate.

The man they called Masque took his woman until she was a quivering wreck, then fucked her ass as she moaned, still strung up tight as the club watched them in awe. It put the West End musical to shame.

Raven was nodding at us with a clear *yeah, told you so* when the lights came back up and the couple left the stage to thunderous applause. Even my princess was clapping and whooping.

“Explicit superstars,” Raven reiterated. “Nobody ever gets enough of them.”

I most definitely wasn't expecting it when the two of them headed right over toward us, the girl still teetering on wobbly legs as she reached Raven and pulled her in for a hug.

Masque was an even bigger beast up close. He checked us out, both me and Elaine, and gave a smile.

“Welcome to Club Explicit.”

He held out a hand and I took it, well aware it was covered in his pretty submissive's juices.

“Lucian,” I said, only registering that I'd introduced myself on first name terms after the word had left my mouth.

“James,” he replied, and Raven let out a laugh.

“My God, Masque, did you just tell him your actual name?” She leaned closer to me. “You must be damn royalty for James to call himself James.”

I guess we were damn royalty though, and we always would be.

“Have you checked out the playrooms?” James asked me, but I shook my head.

“No,” I told him. “I have more pressing interests.”

He read my mind and smirked at me.

“You’ll have the whole place lifting the roof if you give them a second show tonight.”

Elaine’s eyes widened like saucers at that, pretty little mouth dropping open.

“On stage?” she asked, attention all on me. “We might be going up on stage?!”

I got straight up to my feet, cock throbbing hard enough in my pants that it hurt.

“No might about it, baby,” I told her. “Get your sweet little pussy over there right fucking now.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Elaine

EVERYBODY'S EYES WERE fixed on me as I made my way across the room, heading up to the stage. I'd never felt so exposed in my life, and I wasn't even naked, my ball gown was still glittering bright, sweeping around my feet with every step.

Lucian led the way up the stairs at the side of the stage, then presented me under the spotlights, showing me off to the gathering crowd with that beautiful pride on his face, and I felt it. Even under the tension, and the nerves, and the fear, he was the core of me. My heart and my soul.

With the lights blinding me from up above, people were largely shadows, but I could still see them gathering closer, their eyes on me.

I'd never have imagined myself in this position, up on stage in a BDSM club, about to be fucked and hurt in front of a crowd by the ultimate lord of my life, Lucian Morelli. The craziness of this situation put the red carpet walk to shame. I was shivering, goose prickled, pulse racing in fight or flight.

I knew I would never be fleeing from my monster. I knew I would do whatever he commanded me to do, and I wanted that. I *needed* that.

I was still flushed from watching the couple up on stage before us, still excited, because from the very first moment I'd seen them up there, I'd wanted to be that woman up on stage, held firm in the shackles.

Only I hadn't wanted it to be her beast of a man up there alongside me.

I'd wanted it to be *my* monster.

His hands were firm and steady as he took hold of the shackles above me and bound my hands in the cuffs. I let out a gasp as he pulled them high, stretching my arms up tight above me, high enough that I was on tiptoes, even in my heels.

His body was so hot as he pressed himself tight to my back, even through his tuxedo. His voice was a gravelly whisper in my ear.

"You'll take what you're given, Elaine, and it's going to hurt."

A whole new wave of shivers raced through me, and I was back there in front of him in my mind, right from the very beginning, when I'd known he'd give me pain and I'd wanted it so much I was begging him.

I closed my eyes when he pulled my dress loose and let it drop to the floor around my feet, my heart racing all the more at the cheer from the crowd. And there I was, teetering in front of the watching audience in just my heels and panties. My panties which were already wet from how much I wanted this.

I knew my cut was still clear on my ribs, but it was already beginning to heal. To fade. To become irrelevant. Enough that the crowd in front of me didn't freak out at me under the lights.

"Step," Lucian said, and I raised my feet one at a time as he pulled my dress out from underneath me.

Then he moved away.

It felt like I was there for an age, standing bare for the spectators.

I heard him behind me, clearly swishing implements from a rack. It was a flogger he presented me with first, only he didn't run it down my back like the beast before him had teased his woman. Lucian curled it right around my tits from

the very first swing, catching a nipple so hard it made me jump in the chains, and that's when it truly took me, the craving for the hurt running right through my veins like a calling.

I was ready for it when he did it again, only this time I didn't jump, I moaned, bracing myself proud.

He tugged my panties down my thighs.

"Step," he said again, and I was ready, stepping out of the lace.

I was naked apart from my heels, nipples hard and still stinging. He reached his hands around from behind me, sliding them across my skin to twist and pull to turn that stinging to a hard, strong pain.

"Take it," he said, and I tipped my head back against his shoulder, offering my tits to his hands and he twisted and pulled some more. His breath was on my neck and I found I was smiling, eyes still closed as I focused on his touch and nothing more.

His fingers slid down my ribs, tickling, but again he was so careful not to hurt the pain he didn't cause. I clenched my stomach muscles as they swept their way further down.

"Spread yourself for me," he whispered. "Be a good girl and spread your thighs as far as they'll fucking go."

I was a good girl for him. I spread my thighs as far as they would fucking go, putting all of my weight on those shackles.

His fingers spread my pussy lips, exposing my clit to the crowd. I gasped as he circled the right spot, teasing me just enough that I let out a moan as he pushed three fingers inside me in one thrust.

"Show them what a horny little doll you are," he ordered me. "Squirm on my fingers."

I did.

I squirmed on his fingers, even though he was so brutal it hurt.

When he yanked those fingers from me, his breaths were faster. I could feel the swell in his pants against my ass and he was so hard that it made me alive with a new sense of pride. I wanted the crowd to see me be good enough to please him. I wanted them to see I could drive a man like Lucian Morelli crazy because he wanted me so much. Not any of the other stunning women in this room who were more experienced than I was, but *me*. Only me.

“Suck me clean,” he said and pushed his wet fingers into my mouth and I sucked him so hard I was slurping.

“Good girl,” he said, and then he became my true monster. My monster for the world around us to see.

His hands slapped and twisted, setting my skin alive. My pussy was so sore after he spanked it long and hard that I tried to close my thighs, but he barked that I wasn't to fucking disobey him.

The flogger was a gem, trailing, then stinging, everywhere from my back, to my ass, and my tits, everywhere desperate for more...but he was as careful a tiger as ever, playing just the right places of me in just the right ways.

The crop attacked my thighs with perfect precision, making me cry out a little every time it landed by my pussy, so tender. His fingers fucked me between rounds of thwacks and I moaned for him, giving him my insides like a whore craving more.

My mouth was already open, panting when he kissed me, and that's when I realized it. My eyes were still closed. My eyes had been closed the whole time he was using me.

Turns out, he'd realized it before I had.

“Look at me,” he commanded, and I opened them to find him standing right there, his face beautiful enough that I sucked in a breath. The dirty glint in his stare, hungry for me. His stunning mouth that made mine water, needing his spit and his tongue more than I'd ever needed champagne.

“Suck,” he said, again reading my mind, and I sucked his tongue as he kissed me like a kid needing a lollipop, still so firm in the shackles that I moaned for more when he pulled away and I couldn’t reach him.

He stepped away and my open eyes landed on the room. On the figures there staring up at me. At the gathered crowd, some of them so close that I could see their faces under the glare of the spotlights. Every single one of them was looking at me like I was a queen.

Yes.

I wanted this.

It was a mirror to everything I’d hated in my past. People playing with me when I didn’t want them to, looking at me like a dirty little piece of shit who meant nothing.

This was a whole other world. Lucian Morelli playing with me when I wanted nothing more than his touch and his commands, while the whole room stared at me like I was a goddess who meant *everything*.

I was so happy when Lucian stepped back up beside me with a smirk and placed a cane against my tits. I nodded, smiling right back, my stare all on him.

He caned my tits so hard I was crying out, but still I was offering myself for more, desperate for the stripes, for the pain, for the marks on my skin.

His marks on my skin.

I was trembling as he caned my thighs, striping me up all over again.

He caned me until I was panting and struggling to take it, even in my submissive state. Then he played with my clit, his fingers a perfect tease. He caned my ass until I was crying out, broken, and then his fingers played me some more, over and over and over, until I was in a blur in the most blissful of ways.

Still that room stared up at me, transfixed.

I didn't know it was coming when he lowered my shackles and dropped me down to my knees. The chains were hanging loose when he presented himself in front of me, his pants unbuckled and his cock hard enough that it was dark with desperation.

Oh, how he fucked my mouth. I gagged and retched and spluttered, dribbling spit down onto the floor. He took hold of my throat and choked me as I tried to suck him, my eyes watering as I stared up at his face. I was moaning as he stole his cock from me, moaning harder as he got down onto his knees behind me and rubbed himself against my slit.

Oh, how he fucked my pussy. Oh, how I moaned, chains rattling and the crowd cheering as I slammed myself back onto his cock with every thrust.

He took my hair, twisted and pulled, showing me off as I moaned, angling himself just right so I bucked and gasped and came for him.

And then he came for me.

Lucian Morelli came for me in front of a crowded room, grunting as he spurted inside me.

I'd never been so proud in my life.

I was his woman. His whore. His doll.

I was the love of his life.

God, it was bliss. Pure, absolute bliss. I was grinning when he unbuckled the shackles and helped me to my feet in the most gracious of ways, smiling back at me in the most gorgeous way I'd ever seen him smile.

He helped me back into my dress with gentle hands, and I knew full well I was marked all over by his brutality. I was buzzing from it so brightly that it felt like a crime to cover it back up with the fabric.

The crowd had already begun dispersing when we climbed down from the stage and made our way back over to the bar. I must have been glowing like a beacon, flinching as I sat down

on a stool next to the woman who'd introduced herself as Raven.

She laughed at me, a lovely genuine giggle that was almost like a cackle.

"Told you it won't be your last time here," she said, and I laughed along with her.

She was damn right on that.

We were in there for a long, long time, chatting away quite happily to Raven, and her girlfriend, and James and Cat. They were amazing, treating us like any other clubgoer and not as people in the media glare all over the world. I loved it. All of it.

It was almost morning when we finally got into a cab, all set to head back to Quentin Manor and a nice, warm bed. Lucian was only glancing at his cell when he pulled a face. I was close enough to see the twenty-five missed calls, all with the same number.

A number from over in the US.

Lucian recognized it though. I could see it from his scowl.

He didn't even get a chance to talk about it before his cell started up all over again. It was still on silent from the club, but the screen was flashing, showing it was still that same number.

He answered with a "what?" and I heard the voice at the other end, my head still on Lucian's shoulder, close enough to hear.

The voice was seething. Nasty.

"You've gone way too fucking far this time, Son. It's time to say goodbye."

Lucian was right back at him, his tone nasty to match.

"Don't start a war," he said. "It won't be a pretty one."

And then he hung up the call.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lucian

I'D KNOWN THE war was coming, and I knew my family would be out for the attack, just as Elaine's would be. Still, it didn't stop the shiver up my spine as I realized afresh what would be headed our way. At least one attempt on our lives.

I'd been busy in the background, preparing security. I was ready to fight right back, standing up for our place in the world.

We could do this. *I* could do this.

Elaine looked scared as I turned in the back seat to face her. She was biting her lip, terrified.

"They are going to come after us, aren't they?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "They are, but they aren't going to win, sweetheart. I can promise you that. This is our world now. *Ours.*"

She nodded, even if there was still that bubble of fear in her below the surface. Fuck, how I wanted her. I wanted to be her blanket of protection and her lord of hope, with every single step we could take.

The cab driver barely said a word as we pulled up back at Quentin Manor. Elaine winced as I helped her out of the back seat, tenderness taking hold of her. Fuck, I'd hit her nice and hard.

I paid the driver and he sped away, leaving us to ascend the manor steps as the sky showed the first taste of dawn all

around us. Hell, it was a late one.

Elaine acknowledged my thoughts, matching just right with hers. “Wow, it’s late. I’m so tired.”

I smirked as I opened the main door for her.

“Yes, baby. It’s very late and you must be very tired.”

She was grinning an innocent grin as we began to climb the stairs up to our wing.

“You going to snuggle me tight in bed, then?” she asked.

“Get your sweet ass up there and find out,” I pushed, and she did. She sashayed that sweet ass up there with a spring in her step despite her body undoubtedly aching from my blows.

We showered together, slowly. I soaped her nice and gently, but she was still flinching as she smiled. Her skin was a masterpiece, already darkening, brewing with bruises. She was delicious, but now wasn’t the time to feast on her.

We did snuggle up in bed together and she fell asleep within a few short minutes of me stroking her hair. It took me a lot longer to close my eyes, staring at the light of the morning glowing through the drapes.

My mind was full of the plans I’d made. The purchases I’d made. The declarations I was ready to make.

My father could lash out from overseas if he thought I was unprepared for that. Elaine’s family would be brewing on their own ideas to the same tune, but they could get fucked too. We had too much of a network of power over here already, and that was growing every minute.

The Quentins didn’t organize breakfast for us, undoubtedly well aware that we would have had an exceptionally late night. I rolled over after a fitful slumber and Elaine was still sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the world.

I watched her, replaying the vision of her in shackles over and over. We’d certainly be repeating that experience, but first I had more pressing engagements.

Devon was outside playing tennis on the manor court. I saw him through the window as I dressed myself quietly, leaving my princess sleeping as I headed out. He smiled when I came into view, waving his *later* wave to his assistant playing along with him. He dropped his racket against the fence as he joined me, still catching his breath.

“So how was Club Explicit?” he asked, and I smiled back.

“Just as I’d hoped. Excellent.”

He nodded. “Good. I’m glad London is living up to your expectations.”

Yes, it was. It was surpassing even the wildest hopes I’d been holding onto as Elaine and I had boarded that plane with fake IDs.

It was Devon who raised the subject I’d been planning to question. He leaned in closer, even though there was nobody even vaguely close enough to hear us.

“The timescale is on schedule,” he told me. “They will be here before nightfall. The outbuilding at the bottom of the far paddock.”

“Thank you,” I said and that villain in me was alive and burning through me.

“Dinner this evening?” he asked, and I nodded.

“It would be a pleasure.”

“A pleasure for us, too. Roast beef with all the trimmings.”

“Sounds delicious,” I acknowledged, and we made our way back to the house.

Francesca was waiting for him in the sitting room, clearly wanting his attention, so I made my exit, heading back upstairs to the wing that was beginning to feel like our own. Still, that would be coming to an end soon enough. We would soon have a manor all of our own.

Elaine was up and getting dressed as I walked in, still flinching as she pulled her jeans up over her bruised thighs.

“Ouch,” she said, with a smirk. “I’ll be feeling this for days.”

I loved that. My eyes must have said it all because her cheeks reddened, her smirk turning to an innocent smile, eating up my happiness. The thrum of the night before was still magic between us.

“Are we eating with the Quentins this evening?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Roast beef with all the trimmings, apparently.”

“Sounds nice.”

Conversation was brimming heavy with that need for each other, but today it wasn’t about sex, or pain, or consuming flesh. This was about the closeness. The need for connection.

We lay there together for a long afternoon, watching crappy TV and munching on snacks delivered from the kitchen as we carried on the random question chatter, only this time it was interspersed with snippets of memories and funny stories that had us both laughing.

We were still laughing as dinnertime reached us and we headed down to the dining room, taking our places opposite Devon and Francesca at the table.

Throughout the meal the women were talking nonstop about the West End and the red carpet and the musical, but there was a secret nod between Devon and me across the table as soon as his cell buzzed with a ping. He excused us for some business conversation after dessert, leaving the ladies chatting about the next series of musicals due for the West End.

I knew exactly where we were going. I walked alongside Devon Quentin without a word, following his march through the manor grounds to the paddock at the bottom of the pasture.

The outbuilding was there, standing tall.

“I’ll leave you here,” he said, and slapped a hand between my shoulders. “Everything you asked for has been delivered. Nobody is close enough to hear a thing.”

I tipped my head. “Much appreciated.”

“I’ll make sure the women enjoy their evening, I’m sure they will be very distracted,” he assured me.

I had no doubt about that.

Devon left me standing there in the twilight. I flexed my knuckles before I stepped up to the main barn entrance, swinging the big wooden door wide open to step inside.

There were two figures hanging from a whole set of shackles of their own, only this time there were no spotlights like in Club Explicit, just some orange glowing lanterns to allow me to see. There was no crowd cheering for the hurt, just two sick fucks begging that I didn’t kill them. Begging that there had been a misunderstanding and they had never crossed the Morellis.

It gave me a huge rush of pleasure to tell Baron Rawlings and Lord Eddington that it wasn’t the Morellis I was taking retribution for. It gave me an even larger rush of pleasure to tell them exactly who I was claiming retribution for and why.

Elaine Constantine, because I loved her. Because I adored her. Because she was the woman of my dreams and heart and whole fucking soul.

I showed them how much I loved her with every slash of the blade. I paid them back for every time they’d taken sick pleasure from the woman I loved by taking sick pleasure of my own from hurting them.

They’d been begging for their lives when I’d first stepped in to join them. They were begging for their deaths when I finally pulled my cell out of my pocket and told them to confess their sins on camera.

They confessed their sins. They gave me the details of the fellowship on-screen and how they’d been a part of it and just what the fuck they’d done. There was a truth in their eyes and voices that could never be disputed. Their memories matching and perfect. Memories of themselves, and Reverend Lynch, and the other fools still on my list to be wiped out for ever.

Plus memories of the sicko at the center of Elaine's fate—Lionel Constantine and how he'd delivered her for her abuse when she was nothing more than a gentle little girl looking for acceptance and love.

It was well into the night when I finally stepped back out from the barn, my shirt red and slick, leaving two corpses behind me, still in chains. My hands were tainted scarlet, blood crusted under my fingernails.

There was only Devon in the sitting room when I arrived back into the manor. He gave me a nod and pressed a button on his cell phone, no doubt to alert the cleanup team.

I said two simple words that were straight from my cold black heart.

“Thank you.”

“You need a cleanup team of your own,” he laughed, gesturing at my outfit.

“I'm sure Elaine will help me out on that front,” I laughed back. “And on that note.”

“I'll see you in the morning,” he said. “Six a.m. start?”

“I'll be ready,” I told him, and I would be. I'd be preened and polished and ready to begin a whole new week of deals and planning and negotiations. Both business and pleasure. Pleasure of the greatest kind on earth.

Elaine was watching another round of crappy TV when I walked through the bedroom door. Her eyes shot straight over to me, and her mouth dropped open as she scabbled to her feet, dashing over to run her hands up and down my bloodied chest, checking me over.

“Not mine,” I reassured her and took hold of her hands to kiss her knuckles.

“Then whose?” she asked. “What the hell happened?!”

I told her. Slowly.

I watched her soak in the details, breaths hitching with an obvious combination of relief and gratitude that I'd destroyed the evil cunts for her. She cried pretty, moving tears that almost choked me up to match.

We took a shower when I finished recounting the events and she soaped me down, scrubbing me with delicate fingers, watching the blood swirl away down the drain.

Then it was her turn to say the two simple words, straight from her heart. Only her heart wasn't cold and black. Hers was warm and loving. Beautiful like the rest of her as her eyes pooled with a fresh round of tears.

“Thank you.”

“I don't deserve a thank you,” I told her. “The pleasure was mine.”

I meant it. I'd do whatever it took to make my princess happy in life. I'd love and protect and serve. I'd hurt, and barter, and bribe. I'd raise her on a pedestal for the whole world to see, and savor every heartbeat of her in my arms.

And I'd show her that.

I'd show her that in no uncertain terms very soon, in a whole different way than killing two of the pieces of shit who emotionally killed her.

I'd show her right at the top of the London Eye, right where she belonged.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Elaine

I HAD NO idea where we were going in the limo but life was buzzing around us as we headed into London from Quentin Manor. They weren't with us, Devon and Francesca. This wasn't one of the premieres we'd been talking about, and this wasn't a late-night visit to Club Explicit that Lucian and I had been planning. This was something else. Something that had Lucian in a new tailored tuxedo and me in the little black dress I'd picked out so happily with Francesca.

There were security vehicles surrounding the limo as we drove into the city, keeping our safety their priority. So far there had been no sign of attack from either my family or Lucian's, and it was seeming to be less likely—security growing stronger and associates promising even greater protection.

Maybe, just maybe, we'd be safe in our new future. I was daring to believe it.

I shot forward in my seat when the pods of the London Eye appeared in view, and my heart leapt as I pressed my face to the window, because I knew it right there and then. I knew just where we were headed.

"Really?" I asked Lucian with a squeal. "We're going to the London Eye?"

God, his smirk. "Wait and see."

I couldn't sit still. I just couldn't. I was squirming back and forth, my attention zipping from him to the window and back

again on constant loop, still flying high with the excitement.

Oh my God, we were going to do it. We were going to ride the London Eye as the sun set, lighting up the river Thames in perfection. It would be *perfection!*

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I gushed at Lucian as the limo pulled up at the entrance, next to the line barriers.

Except there were no line barriers. Not tonight. There was only a red carpet, lined with security guards and attendants.

They helped me from the limo and I stared up at the Eye with a lump in my throat as Lucian took my side. It was really happening. It would be a dream come true.

There wasn't a single person around. Nobody in the line. Nobody in the pods. Not a single sign of life as Lucian guided me along the carpet, all the way up to a waiting pod.

He stepped aside, giving me a little bow as I walked in, and there I was, spinning around with that lump still in my throat, trying to comprehend the reality of truly being in this space. My dream.

Being in this space *with* my dream.

I let out a squeal as the pod started moving and we began the ascent, just the two of us holding each other tight, mineral waters in our hands, staring out at the incredible view.

“Thank you so much,” I said again, and the lump in my throat showed itself with the dip of my voice.

“You are more than welcome, princess,” he told me. “You are my life, this is just one tiny little testament to that.”

We pointed out landmarks with smiles, everything etching itself into my memory forever. The Shard. Westminster. The Tower of London.

I still couldn't believe it. Lucian had taken over the whole of the London Eye, all for me.

It was when we reached the very top, and the very height of our spin, that Lucian let me go from his arms. I turned to

face him, shocked at his body moving away from mine, but not as shocked as I felt when he dropped down in front of me onto his knees. Only it wasn't onto his *knees*.

It was on one knee. One.

Lucian Morelli was on one knee in front of me, at the very top of the London Eye.

It was then when the fireworks lit up the Thames in front of us. Bursts of pure sparks flying high into the sunset and glistening diamonds on the water. I was blown away by the crazy emotion of it, because surely not...surely it couldn't be...

But it was. It was.

“Will you marry me, Elaine Constantine?” Lucian asked me, and presented the ring. A full-on glittering diamond in a little black box.

I couldn't speak. I didn't have a voice. Didn't have a breath. Didn't have anything but a nod as the tears fell. The lump in my throat had nothing on the gushes of happy tears that ran down my cheeks as Lucian got back up to his feet and slipped my engagement ring onto my ring finger.

He held me tight and kissed me deep, then turned us both back to face the fireworks still bursting all around us. Only my eyes weren't on the fireworks, they couldn't be. They were too transfixed on the diamond on my finger.

I was going to marry Lucian Morelli.

Holy fuck, I was engaged to Lucian Morelli.

He held me tight as the pod descended back to the ground. It was slow and perfect, the atmosphere between us so loved up that my heart could have burst for real.

The attendants were ready and waiting for us when our descent reached its end, helping us back onto solid ground with smiles and congratulations.

The red carpet felt so long and incredible as we made our way back to the street. There were paparazzi gathered, managing to capture just a few pictures of us walking together before the security guards ushered them away.

“They were given minimum access, don’t worry,” Lucian told me. “Believe me, baby, I’ve got so much security around us they could fight a war.”

“Amazing,” I said, because it was. It was amazing. Us being *alive* was amazing, after betraying both families and their vendettas back home across the Atlantic.

He had his usual smirk on his face as we approached the waiting limo. “It’ll be even more amazing when you see the Morelli-Constantine Manor by High Wycombe. The security is so well ingrained you won’t even see their presence, but believe me, princess, they will be there. People won’t be able to step within a quarter mile of the place without being wiped out for their intrusion.”

“We have a manor?”

My pulse couldn’t race any faster. The surprises were piled too high. My heart soaring too fast.

“Yes,” Lucian said. “We have a manor. Just you wait and see.”

“When?!” I asked him. “When will I see it?”

An attendant opened the limo door and I slipped into the back seat ahead of Lucian. They shut us inside with a smile and wave.

“Now,” he told me. “You’ll see it now. We’re heading right on over. Francesca and Devon are already waiting there to celebrate.”

My hands were shaking as I checked out my ring finger for the thousandth time already.

The limo pulled away and the security cars drove along with us until we were out of the city, well on our way to the new manor in the darkness.

I couldn't wait.

Holy hell, I couldn't wait. We were going home. Home.

Home to a whole new home of our own.

The signs on the road started showing High Wycombe getting closer.

It was only when the distance seemed to be getting further away rather than closer that Lucian leaned forward in the seat and cast a scowl at the driver.

“The sooner the fucking better, please,” he said. “Get your act together.”

But that's when the interior locks sounded out loud around us and the screen between us and the driver closed up tight.

“What the fuck—” Lucian began, but then he shifted again, staring at the driver through the glass, and I saw him realize something. Saw something slam him like a hammerblow.

His eyes were wild when he turned back to face me, grabbing me by the hand before trying the doors, but they were locked up tight.

“What's happening?!” I asked him. “Lucian?! What the hell?!”

I'd never seen him scared before.

I'd never seen him frantic like he was when he tried to elbow the window until it smashed, but still he couldn't break it.

It only took one sight of the driver staring back at me in the rearview mirror before I knew exactly what was happening.

It wasn't the same driver as the one who'd taken us to the Eye. It wasn't any one of the drivers who'd been responsible for driving us around since we first stepped foot on their soil.

I cried out as the limo pulled off the road at a random junction marked with a sign that said “Briar Dene Village, *please drive slowly.*” But we didn’t drive slowly. The limo sped through the village and I cried out harder as it screeched and rumbled up onto a gravel path, heading off road into some woodland, lined high with trees. I was so scared. So fucking scared I couldn’t breathe as we came to a stop.

Lucian’s hand was tight in mine when the driver got out of the front seat and came for us. The gun was already aimed at us as he opened the door and ordered us out.

Lucian moved first, keeping me firmly behind him.

“Whatever they’ve offered you for doing this...” he said, but the guy shook his head.

“Don’t even think about trying to buy me,” he replied. “I’ve been pro Morelli my whole life, you ain’t got shit to hold over me. Now, get out of the car slowly. I know you’re packing. Hand it over. Try anything and I’ll blow your bitch’s brains out.”

Lucian did as he was told, revealing the holster beneath his jacket, carefully taking the gun from it.

The driver snatched it from him, told us to get to the trunk.

Lucian kept me close behind him as we did as we were told, shuffling to the back of the limo while the driver kept the gun aimed at Lucian. He opened the trunk and there was the original driver, curled up, dead.

“I have orders,” the driver said. “And I’m going to be following them. Hurry up.”

He took out a cell phone and pointed it at us, and the light came on as he set the video camera rolling.

Once again he gestured us forward, guiding us into a space on the grass.

“Get the fuck over there,” he said to Lucian, and Lucian held his hands up as he stepped away from me.

“Stay where you are, Elaine,” he said as I made a move to follow him.

“No!” I cried out.

“Stay there, Elaine. This is between me and my fucking father.”

The driver laughed. “Not quite. It wasn’t actually your father who ordered the hit. It was Elliot fucking Morelli, your own cousin, who wants to take over the company.”

“Any last words?” the driver asked Lucian, stepping up closer to get a decent view on camera.

“Yes,” Lucian told him, stepping forward so his stomach was pressed to the gun. He looked straight at the cell and pulled a smirk. An evil one. “Go fuck yourself.”

I screamed as the gun sounded. Lucian collapsed onto the grass. I rushed over but I didn’t get very far, the driver stepping between me and my love before I could reach him.

I was wailing inconsolable, on my knees on the grass when the driver pointed both the cell and the gun at me. “It was all about money,” he said. “That’s all anyone cares about, whether you’re rich or poor. And I’m going to be one of the rich ones, now.”

The evening was dark around us, but not so dark that I didn’t see the movement of Lucian’s body between the driver’s legs. It didn’t make any sense, because if Lucian wasn’t dead, he would be screaming and flopping. He wouldn’t be able to hold himself still.

But of course.

He wouldn’t.

He wouldn’t be feeling a thing. He *couldn’t* feel a thing.

I gulped in a breath when my love got to his feet without a sound.

I’ll never forget the sound of that knife going in. The driver fell to his knees, dropped the cell and almost dropped

the gun. He tried to swing it round but Lucian had him, snatching the gun in a beat.

My love won the battle and fired the next shot.

The driver fell to the ground, bleeding out and wailing before Lucian shot him in the back of the skull, just like the driver should have had the sense to do to him.

Then my perfect lover collapsed.

He collapsed to the ground with his arm clenched to his wound, blood spilling from his mouth as he struggled. "It shouldn't hurt," he murmured to me, looking dazed. "But it does."

I don't know how I had the breath or the voice to make the call to the emergency services from Lucian's cell, pulled out from his tux pocket, but I did it.

"Please hurry," I said to the dispatcher.

I sat next to my fiancé and begged the heavens to save him. Please, please just save him.

My hand was pressed tight to Lucian's bleeding stomach when the sirens and lights showed up, begging them for help as they fought for his life.

Thank fuck, and thank the lord, they managed to get Lucian's breathing steady before we pulled up at the hospital, screeching to a halt outside the emergency entrance.

I waited for him through a long night.

Francesca rushed in to give me a hug and hold me tight. I waited until the morning next to the people who'd become our friends, grateful for the true support I felt from them with every breath.

And then, finally, when the sun was bright outside and London was stirring to life for another day, the doctor arrived to tell me Lucian Morelli was done with surgery, and that he too was stirring with life for another day.

Lucian Morelli was going to make it.

My fiancé was going to survive.

This wasn't a tragedy, after all. It wasn't a love story the way the world understood them. He was my monster, and I was his doll, and we would live together forever.



EPILOGUE

Lucian, one year later

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL thing, having such ultimate power over somebody so powerful. Enough evidence to destroy them if they so much as step a threatening foot onto your turf.

My father accepted my engagement to Elaine Constantine, realizing it wasn't worth the risk or the fight. Elaine and I had enjoyed our engagement very happily in our Morelli-Constantine manor in Bishop's Landing.

I was surprisingly nervous as the day began, waking up alone in bed with a strange rush of flutters in my stomach, still scarred after all these months from taking the bullet. Leo, Tiernan, and Carter were downstairs in the breakfast room, still looking groggy from my bachelor party as they guzzled down black coffee. Devon was telling them about his insurance empire when I joined them. All three of them let out a mocking cheer as I sat myself down at the breakfast table, giving them a smirk that matched my mood. A happy one.

"Here comes the groom," Carter said, reaching over to punch me in the arm. "Never thought I'd see you getting hitched. Never thought it would be to a Constantine."

"There must be something in the water," Leo said, his voice dry. Over the past year I'd learned that he'd fallen for his own Constantine. She'd attend the wedding with him.

"Elaine is worth it," I said, my voice sober.

Devon nodded. "My wife absolutely adores her. Has since the moment they met."

We still had a few hours before the ceremony. The guys started on the whisky as soon as we were dressed up ready for the service. Tiernan was more gruff than the other brothers, but even he had shown up to support me. It touched me more than I thought it would.

We got ready together, a photographer there to document the occasion. Surreal as fuck.

The caterers and wedding planners had already been at work on the manor for days. It looked even more incredibly grand than I'd expected as we set off in the limo for the church, and it should. I'd invested the very best into the very best celebration life could offer.

The church only had a few guests in their seats when the four of us arrived and made our way inside. My brothers took their positions at the entrance, ushers standing proud, and I gave them a thankful nod as I left them to their duties.

It was Devon I'd chosen to be my best man, his place feeling very natural at my side as we stepped into the front pew. My brothers were there next to him, and my sisters in the pews.

"I'm weirdly fucking nervous," I confessed to Devon, and he laughed.

"Never thought I'd see you nervous, Lucian. It's a damn novelty."

The nerves only heightened as the benches filled up with associates, as well as some of my old business acquaintances who'd flown in.

My family sat in the front rows of the groom's side. My mother, looking severe with her begrudging approval of my bride.

Bryant Morelli had been cleared of the worst of it when it was revealed that Elliot had masterminded the plot to kill us. We were a bloodthirsty family, when it came down to it, but I was actually glad that my father hadn't done it. It hadn't been the worst betrayal.

Now the company was mine, and he was only a figurehead over the family.

Elaine's friends were filling up her side of the aisle just as mine were filling up mine. I recognized many of them from local events she'd been attending, all of them giving me a wave as they saw me standing there.

Yes, the room was most certainly filling up.

It was almost full when I saw them. Elaine's sisters. Vivian and Tinsley, looking spectacular in pastel gowns. My heart lurched, thumping like a fucking train, hardly daring to believe they'd shown up for the sister who'd seemingly betrayed their family name. My heart thumped even harder when I saw Harriet, her cousin, stepping in to join them. The cousin that Elaine had cried about missing when we were in London, desperate to see again.

And there was Winston Constantine, along with his new bride. The patriarch of the Constantine family, came to show his support of the union.

Still, my thumping heart had nothing on the fucking speed it thumped when Caroline Constantine, Elaine's mother, came into view and took a seat alongside them. My eyes met hers, staring hard in disbelief. Total, utter disbelief.

I expected nothing but hatred on her face as she stared at me, but it wasn't there. There was nothing but...grace. Grace and...thanks, and holy fuck I felt it. Jesus Christ above, she offered her imperial approval with a small nod of her head.

I'd have stepped right on over to begin dialogue with her if the harpist hadn't started up the beautiful music for the bride's entry. My whole body heated up in the most incredible of ways as I strained to get sight of the church entrance, because even now, after months of imagining it, I couldn't quite believe it. I couldn't believe my love, Elaine, was walking up the aisle.

She'd taken my breath away countless times since the very first moment I'd laid eyes on her, all the way back at Tinsley's

ball, but my breath was ripped right from my chest as I saw her there, nervous, her blonde curls swept up behind her, and her white veil positioned so perfectly underneath her tiara. White, because she was pure. Regardless of the sex. Regardless of her history. She was pure in every way that counted.

Her dress was the most intensely beautiful thing I'd ever seen on her. It framed her figure in such a way that would burn itself into my heart forever, flowing around her feet in the most divine of ways with every step.

Elaine was walking up the aisle. To me. My love was walking up the aisle.

Every step was getting closer.

Every step had my whole soul desperate, insane.

It was the guy who utterly despised me that was standing next to her with his arm in hers, all set to give her away. The best friend she'd known since she was a teenager, who I'd knocked out cold when I was hunting her down a year ago. Not exactly the best of introductions to your future wife's bestie, but it was what it was.

As it turned out, Tristan wasn't glaring at me when he delivered her to my side. He managed a smile, and I managed the briefest of smiles back. Her bridesmaids, Francesca, Raven and Cara were grinning bright as they took their seats, but I barely saw them. My eyes were fixed all on Elaine. She was shaking like a leaf as she joined me at the head of the aisle, her beautiful blue eyes, pools of perfect love.

"I have no words," I whispered to her. "None that could do you justice right now."

That's when her innocent smile lit up her face even brighter. "Ditto," she said.

Elaine was so focused on me that she had barely cast a glance around the guests before the service started. The ceremony started right up, every word etched into the fabric of

time, vows of declaration that people had lived by and loved by, for hundreds of years before us.

I took Elaine to be my lawfully wedded wife with a lump in my throat because it meant so much to me.

She took me to be her lawfully wedded husband with a lump in her throat to match, eyes welling up because it meant so much to her.

Devon handed me the rings when they were called for and I slipped the gold band onto Elaine's finger with surprisingly shaky fingers of my own, to which she returned the favor, and there we were. Officially declared. Husband and wife.

"You may kiss the bride," the vicar said and how I fucking kissed the bride.

I took her face in my hands and I kissed her with all the love in my heart, except it wasn't all the love in my heart. Not anymore. Not now there was the slightest hint of a bump under her wedding dress.

The room cheered, and the exit song sounded out, ready for us to walk back down the aisle as a couple, and that's when Elaine stopped in her tracks, mouth dropping open as she first caught sight of the blonde row of family members, her mother positioned right on the end of a pew.

Her mother, who had tears in her eyes as she clapped for her daughter.

I coaxed Elaine forward but she struggled to look away from her family. There was a whole fresh set of tears in her own eyes as we reached the church porch and the confetti started up around us, a whole new set of cheers sounding out loud.

It was when we were in the back of the wedding limo that she turned to me with those saucer-wide eyes of hers and a billion questions dancing behind them.

"It was you, wasn't it?" she asked me. "You invited my mother here?"

“I did more than that,” I told her, and the glee was bursting free as I finally got to tell her exactly what I’d done. I’d sent her mother a recording of the Eddington and Rawlings confession, delivering it straight into her hands through one of my very closest contacts.

I’d sent her undeniable proof that her beautiful little girl has been abused by the sick fucks she’d sent her to spend her weekends with, at the hands of her cunt of an uncle.

I’d sent her undeniable proof that every time her little girl was sobbing and trying to ask for her help and had been cast aside as nothing but a naughty little liar, she was no damn liar. Not in the slightest.

Clearly it had done its job, since she was here, to watch her daughter marry a Morelli.

Elaine cried. Hard. She cried and thanked me and held me tight, trying to gather the courage to step out to our marquee and see our guests all over again, knowing her mother would be there.

She didn’t have to step out very far before Caroline was there to meet her, crying too, giving a declaration that would begin a very long road of forgiveness.

“I’m sorry, Elaine. Please, believe me, I’m so sorry. I never knew...believe me, please, I never knew...I’d have killed that evil bastard myself. I’d have killed them all.”

From the very tone in her voice, I believed her.

She held her daughter tight.

Elaine held her right back, sobbing to match, taking a few long minutes before the two of them managed to drag themselves apart enough that I could walk my bride through the manor grounds to our wedding reception and the waiting crowd.

“Let’s do this,” I said, and she nodded with a smile.

“Yeah, let’s do this, *husband*. I’m ready.”

It was time to toast champagne with the hip, hip, hoorays, and give the speeches and cut the cake. We did it. We loved it. We enjoyed every fucking second of it, and then finally, eventually, after the greatest day of my life, I took my wife for her wedding night.

I loved her right through until morning, every little part of her, my wife and my lover.

I loved Mrs. Lucian Morelli-Constantine right through the night until morning, smiling with a whole new smile as I kissed her belly—knowing our little baby was in there.



Thank you for reading the Starcrossed Lovers trilogy! We hope you loved Lucian Morelli and Elaine Constantine's dark and sexy story. Find out what happens next in the Midnight Dynasty world with Lucian's brother, Leo.



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Leo Morelli is known as the Beast of Bishop's Landing for his cruelty. He'll get revenge on the Constantine family and make millions of dollars in the process. Even if it means using an old man who dreams up wild inventions.

The beauty will sacrifice everything for her family...

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Ready for more bad boys, more drama, and more heat? The Constantines have a resident fixer. The man they call when they need someone persuaded in a violent fashion. Ronan was danger and beauty, murder and mercy.



Outside a glittering party, I saw a man in the dark. I didn't know then that he was an assassin. A hit man. A mercenary. Ronan radiated danger and beauty. Mercy and mystery.

I wanted him, but I was already promised to another man. Ronan might be the one who murdered him. But two warring families want my blood. I don't know where to turn.

In a mad world of luxury and secrets, he's the only one I can trust.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jade has increasingly little to say about herself as time goes on, other than the fact she is an author, but she's plenty happy with this. Living in imaginary realities and having a legitimate excuse for it is really all she's ever wanted.

Jade is as dirty as you'd expect from her novels, and talking smut makes her smile.

She lives in the Herefordshire countryside with a couple of hounds and a guy who's able to cope with her inherent weirdness.

She has a red living room, decorated with far more zebra print than most people could bear, and fights a constant battle with her addiction to Coca-Cola.

Find Jade (or stalk her – she loves it) at:

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