

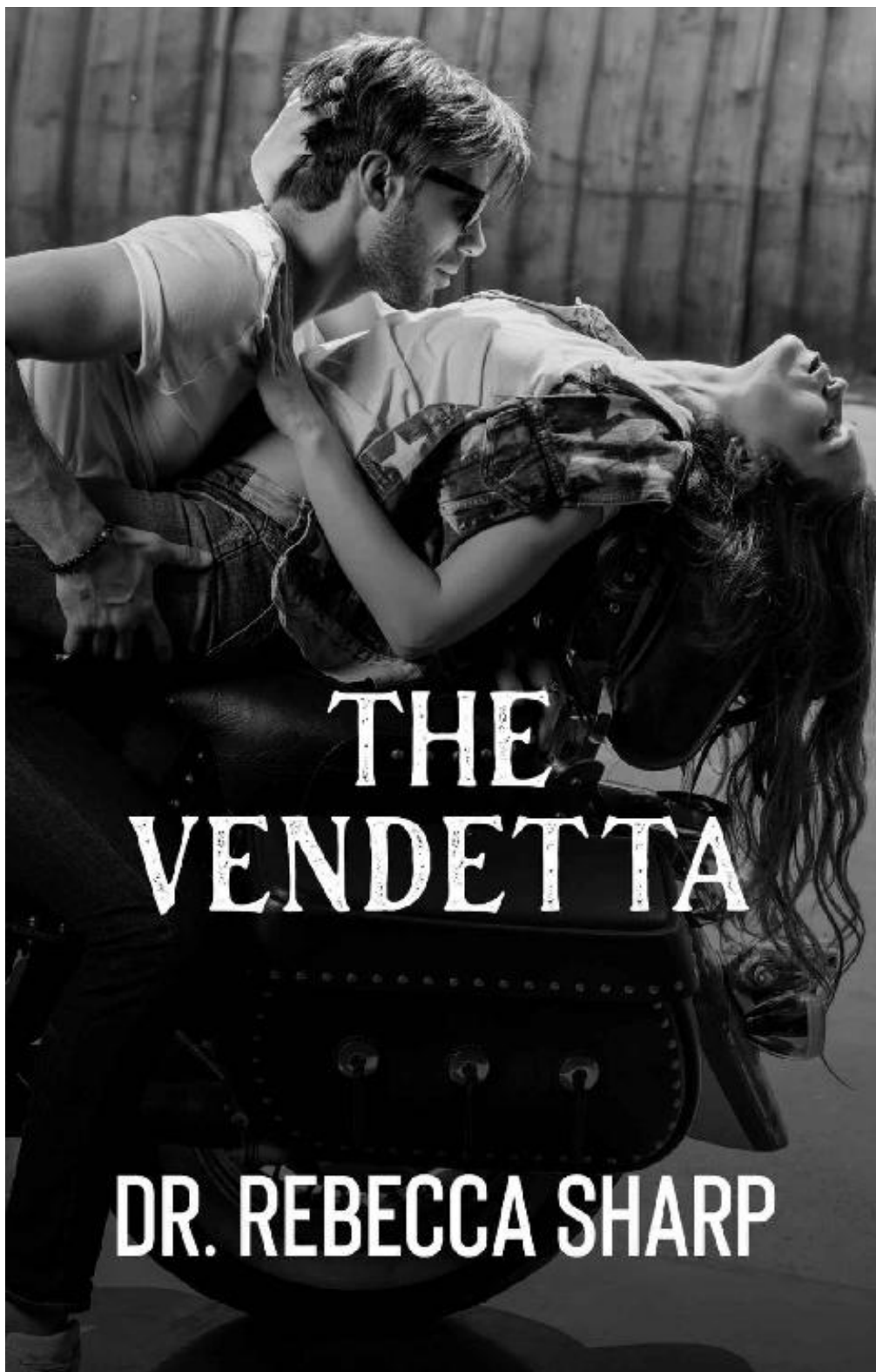
VIGILANTES MC

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THE
VENDETTA

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DR. REBECCA SHARP



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The Vendetta (The Vigilantes, Book 1)

Published by Dr. Rebecca Sharp

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THE VENDETTA

Book 1



DR. REBECCA SHARP

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Chapter One

Harmon

There were days made for vigilante shit, and then there were days like today—the kind of day made for a motorcycle.

End of summer midsixties clung to the long hours of sunlight and lingered into the evening. On one side of me, a crimson sunset stained the ocean-creased horizon with an inferno of color. On the other, shades of green blanketed the hills like nature's own camouflage, obscuring the popular tourist town of Carmel Cove in the distance as though it were nothing more than wilderness.

One turn of my wrist and my Harley El Diablo growled appreciatively beneath me, the tires stealing miles of asphalt like the devil did souls. For the last few miles of my ride, things like speed limits and consequences didn't exist. Nothing existed except the open road. The freedom. The power to choose my own path.

It would've been better if the rest of the guys were with me, but group rides were few and far between anymore, our purpose taking precedence over our passion. Today, like most days, they were out on various assignments. Darius, Rhys, and Tynan. My brothers. The first by blood, the rest by fire. Once upon a time—a lifetime ago—we'd all been Special Forces. Green Berets. Until one fateful mission almost cost us everything. We'd been betrayed. We'd lost a brother—Ryan. It was the kind of thing you don't ever recover from no matter what anyone says. We'd returned home broken. Lost in a

world where we no longer belonged with nothing but our creed to cling to.

Family first. Justice for all.

I slowed my bike, not bothering with a blinker as I veered across the opposite lane and onto a road with no sign or markings. The drive led to the Sherwood Garage—*my garage*—tucked away where only those that needed us knew where to find us.

The garage was our haven. The place where we found purpose. On the surface, it was an exclusive motorcycle garage nestled amid almost fifty forested acres of no-man's-land between Carmel Cove and Monterey.

The guys and I made expensive motorcycles as our business and a damn good one at that. Painting. Detailing. Tuning. Complete restorations. But the garage was just another instance of camouflage—commercial camouflage to conceal our calling.

The Vigilantes. Our motorcycle club.

If anyone knew anything about motorcycle gangs, it was that there were two kinds: the 99% and the 1%. The ninety-nine being the law-abiding groups and the one percent being the outlaw gangs.

The Vigilantes were neither. We were the fucking line between the two that no one else could walk, and no one dared to cross. Ruthless. Righteous. *Vigilante*. We weren't the ninety-nine because we operated outside of the law. But neither were we the one percent because we worked to mete out justice not cause chaos.

I opened my bike up on the almost two-mile long driveway that led to the garage, feeling the last rush of freedom against my chest until the building came into sight.

As well as the unexpected SUV parked in front of the closed bays.

Who the hell was here?

The garage was supposed to be empty. Rhys was out collecting another bounty on a bail bond, and Dare and Ty were on an embezzlement case that took them all the way up to Napa to find the fucker stealing money from children's charities.

As I approached, the door opened, and the driver got out. I tensed for a second until recognition dawned. *Kane Rivera*. There was no mistaking his trim mustache and beard and that half-cocked smile. The former DEA agent turned private security worked for the local firm in town, Covington Security, alongside my younger sister Izzy's husband, Jackson.

What was Kane doing here?

I slowed my bike, pulling to a stop next to him. The rumble of the engine dimmed before I spoke. "Been a minute, Rivera."

About six months ago, Kane had been tracked down by a member of the Sinaloa cartel from his past who wasn't too fond of Kane for faking his death, so he'd taken shelter here for a few weeks... along with the woman who was now his wife.

"Miss me?" Kane's smirk grew.

I grunted and hit the code on my watch to open up the garage bay, pulling inside as soon as the door lifted and sensing Kane followed.

It wasn't that we didn't cross paths with the guys at Covington often enough, but they operated on the right side of the law, and we... tended to stray to the other. Though our goal was the same—justice—sometimes, the law wasn't enough to make things right.

I parked my bike at the center in the square marked by a giant 'one' stenciled on the light gray floor and lowered the kickstand. The ten-thousand square foot garage was lined with tool chests, desks, and TV monitors along the walls, but the open floor space was broken down into numbered squares, each assigned to a bike when it came in for a job. Between that and our militarized need for structure and cleanliness, the

space wound up looking more like a motorcycle museum than the typical grungy auto body shop.

Unhooking my helmet, I pulled it off and shoved my fingers through my hair.

“New ride?” I asked, climbing off my bike and nodding over Kane’s shoulder to the SUV.

“Needed something a little bigger,” he replied, shifting his weight.

Translation: His wife, Juliana, was pregnant.

I had no explanation for the ripple of tension that snapped through me. No explanation except that Kane was around my age, had survived his own fair share of trauma, and still managed to find love. No explanation because I couldn’t want what Kane had for the same reason that fish couldn’t want to fly. Because it wasn’t physically possible.

The heart was like any other muscle, and after the damage mine had endured, its ability to love had become sclerotic.

“What brings you up here?” I redirected, wanting to get back to the stack of potential targets that Ty had left on my desk to review.

“I’m looking for Rob.” His eyes flicked around the garage.

Rob—or Robyn to the few who knew her best—was my adopted sister and the quasi-fifth member of the Vigilantes; motorcycles weren’t her thing, but justice and family were. More than that, she was the reason our club existed.

We’d come back from the Middle East with no recourse for what had happened to us—to Ryan. But Rob... the unthinkable had happened to her here. She’d been used. Taken advantage of. And when the man responsible had escaped—when we realized how many men like him skirted justice by manipulating the law—the Vigilantes had been born. Our purpose: to right the wrongs the law left unpunished.

One day, we’d find the man—all the men—responsible for hurting Rob—for taking everything from her after she’d lost so much—and make right the injustice that started all of this.

“She’s not here,” I told him; Rob rarely came to Sherwood, preferring to keep her home base in San Francisco. Meanwhile, the rest of us didn’t care for city crowds. I shrugged off my leather jacket, the crisp almost-fall air greeting my skin with a chill. “Why?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

My eyes narrowed as Kane reached into his back pocket and pulled out an envelope, handing it to me wordlessly.

“For her?” I arched an eyebrow and took it.

“For me,” he replied cryptically.

The envelope was heavy. Not the contents but the weight of the paper. It was thick. Expensive. On the front in sweeping cursive was Kane’s name.

Clearly whatever was inside was the reason he wanted to talk to my sister, so I lifted the flap and slid out the card, reading it silently.

You traded on my name to take down McCullough, and now it's time to pay me back. There is a young girl who needs protection. Apply for the position directly at this number: 415-650-0000.

When you realize the target, you'll see my request is a boon to both of us.

Regards,

The Real Damon Remington

I read the damn thing three times, but nothing filled the pit in my stomach. “Shit...”

“Yeah,” Kane grunted.

I looked up, my drawn expression mirroring his own.

Six months ago, part of Kane’s plan to outsmart his little cartel problem was to pose as Damon Remington—the greatest criminal the world never knew.

Remington was everything to everyone. A consultant to the who’s who of the world’s worst. A procurer. A connector. A mediator. An instigator. And number one on the FBI’s most wanted list. He was a legend, the tales surrounding him almost too fantastical to be real, but most importantly, he was a ghost. Few spoke to him directly, and even fewer had ever seen him, but all knew what happened if you crossed him.

Damon Remington was not a man to mess with, let alone impersonate. And Kane never would’ve taken the risk if it hadn’t been for Rob.

The whole thing had been Rob’s idea—a classic case of her recklessness when an op hit too close to home. The cartel after Kane had killed one of the women under her wing, and that was what blinded her. *Guilt*. I knew what it was like to lose someone you were responsible for—someone you’d promised to protect. The pit that gnawed at your gut with teeth made of fire.

That day, her brand of vigilante justice was impregnated with vengeance, and she’d reacted instead of acted. Had I been there when she made the call, I would’ve stopped her; I would’ve made her realize that using Damon Remington’s name to gain advantage was the epitome of recklessness.

Of course, it would work—*it had worked*. But that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be a cost. And now Remington had come to collect.

“I’m not going to be blackmailed by Remington,” Kane said, folding his arms. “Especially if his target is a damn kid.”

“I don’t think it’s the kid,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Not Remington’s style.”

Strangely enough, though Remington catered to criminals, he was particular about which ones he would or wouldn’t

work with. Those who harmed children were on his blacklist.

“So, you think Rob should handle this?” I asked.

“She’s the one who told me to use his name.” *So she should deal with the fallout,* went unsaid.

“I’ll handle it,” I said and gritted my teeth. My sister had already dug this hole too deep.

He groaned. “I didn’t mean to rope you into this, Harm. I wanted to talk to her about a plan—”

“I know.” I nodded, lifting the card once more. “But until I know who the target is, I’m not getting Rob involved.”

My sister should be responsible for her own mess, but letting her be responsible worried me even more. The last thing I needed was for Rob to try to take down Remington. He was too big a target—too elusive. *Too dangerous.* Not even the skills of all of us combined were ready to fight that war.

Kane breathed deep. “You sure?”

I nodded and pulled my cell from my pocket. “Family first.”

Kane’s chin lowered. “Let me know what you need from me.”

“Yeah,” I said, already knowing I wasn’t going to ask him for anything.

I would fix this. Take care of the problem. Take care of my sister.

I tapped the number into my phone and headed for the door at the back of the garage. *Time to figure out who Remington’s target was and why he wanted us involved.*



Sherwood was an illusion. The garage appeared as large as the open space felt inside, but the trick was that the compound was far, far larger.

A single door opened from the garage to a hallway that branched at the end, leading to several smaller rooms, storage spaces, Tynan's security office, a communal laundry, and a spacious rec room, complete with a pool table, bar with a tap, and stone fireplace.

But even that was still part of the camouflage.

Another door with a biometric keypad opened to an elevator, one that descended below ground rather than rising above. The elevator led to another hallway, long and wide like a massive root that supplied the whole compound. It bypassed the tall fence and government-level security features that ran through the trees above, encasing the forested acres like a fortress.

Secret, but secure.

There were six doors spaced along the fifty-yard hall, each of them opening to a staircase returning above ground and into one of the six corresponding cabins on the land. One for each of us and one for friends seeking shelter. My team—the club—we didn't just work at the garage, we lived here. Except for Robyn.

I glanced at the door that led to my sister's cabin. It was the farthest one down the hall and the only one beyond mine. There were countless times I thought she'd be better off if she stayed here with us, but I wasn't my sister's keeper. No man was. And I pitied the fool who tried.

I punched in the code to my door, taking the stairs two at a time to the entrance to my cabin. The passage opened into the modest kitchen, a small dining table to my left.

The layout of all the cabins was essentially the same. On one side, a kitchen, small dining area, living room, and an exit to the outside grounds. On the other side, a bathroom and bedroom. Some of the entrances from the main passageway varied. Mine was a paneled door in the kitchen. The guest

cabin entered into the bedroom. More or less, the buildings were identical. Simple. Functional. Maybe sparse for most, but luxurious compared to the living conditions we'd seen overseas.

Until my younger sister, Isla—Izzy—had kids, there wasn't anything besides the individualized passcode that marked this cabin as mine. No decor. No memorabilia. No photographs. Now, there were pictures of my nieces hanging on the wall in the living room along with one of the four of us—me, Izzy, Dare, and Rob. It was all Izzy's doing; she was just as unstoppable as Rob.

But photographs didn't change a person. After losing Ryan, I'd returned home with more purpose than person. *We all had*. And to survive—to not be consumed with guilt—that was the way it had to stay. But I'd never tell Izzy that. That kind of hopelessness would break my sister's heart, no matter how much good it enabled us to do.

I strode into the living room, dropping my leather jacket onto one of the dining chairs on the way and sank onto the leather couch. Lifting my phone, I double-checked the number, inhaled deeply, and dialed. *Time to get some answers*.

I shouldn't have been surprised when the first ring cut off to an automated system. There was only a single prompt that asked for my name, and as soon as I gave it, the robotic female voice thanked me, and the call disconnected.

“Shit.” What the hell was I getting myself into... what the hell had Rob gotten me into?

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I rose and walked to the kitchen, pulling out a bottle of water and some leftover pizza from last night from the fridge. Hot... cold... it didn't matter. Food was food. A necessity to keep me working.

Reaching for the note once more, I stared at the words while I scarfed down the slice.

...You'll see my request is a boon to the both of us...

Who the hell was the target, and what the hell was Remington's end game? It was rare, though not unheard of, for

Remington to want another criminal taken down or arrested—usually because it provided some business advantage to his own criminal empire, but this seemed different. My gut said this felt different.

I brought the water bottle to my lips, chugging it until the plastic crinkled. I was about to call Dare and at least bring my younger brother up to speed when my cell vibrated in my hand, the incoming call from a blocked number.

Well that was fast.

“Hello?” I answered coolly.

“Harmon Keyes.” The voice was steady. Confident.

“Yes, speaking.” I straightened, my body tense like it was preparing for battle.

“Tell me something,” the voice continued. “Over a decade in the military—Green Berets no less. Fifth Special Forces Group. Third Battalion. Honorably discharged with... almost... all of your unit. Unfortunate... losing someone you trust.” My blood began to hum. “All that to open up a motorcycle garage, and now, you want to babysit a child. Why?”

In less than ten minutes with only my name, this man had acquired many facts about my life. A show of both his power and influence without having to reveal his identity in return.

I knew he was purposely downplaying the position—referring to it as babysitting—trying to poke at either an ego he thought I should have, or a weakness he wanted to expose. Too bad for him, it wasn’t going to work.

“Motorcycles don’t pay like this kind of work, and I like jobs that pay well,” I returned, allowing an edge of annoyance to my mercenary tone.

“So, you’ve done this before?”

“If I have, it wouldn’t be very professional of me to tell you about it.” Discretion was everything to men like him—*whoever he was*. Men who had power and secrets would do

anything to keep them, especially if those secrets were vulnerabilities.

“I do appreciate discretion,” he replied, believing more of my persona.

“We all do.”

There was a long pause, but I refused to be the one to break it.

“Why motorcycles?” He finally asked. “Why not another position in the military or in law enforcement? The uniqueness of your skill set and level of expertise... I’m sure you’re aware of how valuable it can be.”

All too well. My shoulders tightened.

Green Berets were the most elite army unit trained in everything from unconventional warfare to hostage search-and-rescue to intelligence gathering with proficiencies in marksmanship, survival skills, and medical expertise. If there was anyone you wanted protecting your kid, it was one of us.

“Because after over a decade of military service, I got tired of my... skills being shackled by the law,” I said, truth laden in every word.

The idea of unconventional warfare hadn’t left any of us when we’d returned home. There were some evils the law didn’t have the power to fight, which was why we’d chosen the path of vigilante justice—but this man didn’t need to know that. All he needed to know was that I was capable of disregarding the law—that I had the same kind of entitlement he did.

“Very good,” he declared, his deep hum resonating through the line. “Well then, Mr. Keyes, the position is yours. You’ll receive an address on your phone. Be there at seven p.m. You start tonight.”

I straightened, my palm flattening on the counter. “Working for an anonymous boss with no details about the assignment or compensation?”

“The assignment is to protect my daughter. At home. At school. You will be her shadow for three months,” he clipped, his displeasure evident in his tone. *Too bad.* I knew that *he knew* just how valuable a man with my skills and discretion was, and if he wanted that, he’d have to give me answers. “When you reach the address this evening, half-a-million dollars will be deposited into your account as an advance for the first week. After that, each additional week will be paid at the same rate, along with a million-dollar bonus once the assignment period terminates.”

My muscles rippled. I wasn’t normally the kind of person who was shocked by large sums, but *damn*, that was a lot of money to watch a kid. And that could only mean one thing... this kid was a big fucking secret. Big enough to warrant a small fortune to protect. *Big enough to draw Damon Remington’s attention.*

“And who do I have the pleasure of working for?” My fingers dug into the counter, the tension on the line escalating.

“Money,” the man replied firmly. “That’s who you’re working for, Mr. Keyes, money.” There was a brief pause before he continued, “Seven p.m., Mr. Keyes.” And then the line went dead.

Instead of answers, pulling on the string Remington had given only unraveled more questions.

Who was this man?

Who could afford almost seven million dollars in private security over the next three months? And why did he need to?

If a kid needed that much protection, it reasoned her father did, too. So why wasn’t his security handling this? *Maybe it had something to do with the ‘losing a person you trust’ comment he’d made.*

Regardless, I didn’t have much of a choice. If I wanted answers—if I wanted to get Kane out of trouble—I had to continue down this damn rabbit hole.

I charged into the bedroom and pulled out a duffel from the closet and stuffed clothes into it. Three months or three

days, I packed the same. Gun. Ammo. Knife. Jeans. Cargo pants. T-shirts. Underwear. The final things to go were bathroom essentials and my phone charger. Three months. Hell, I probably could've lived three years with only the things in my bag. *More purpose than person.* Exhaling deeply, I zipped the bag and slung it over my shoulder.

I probably should've taken my Tahoe, but instead, I grabbed my leather jacket from the chair and my motorcycle keys.

It was a good day for a motorcycle ride, after all. *And a mystery.*

Chapter Two

Harmon

An hour later, I stepped into what had to be the nicest skyscraper I'd ever entered, and my body tightened.

Years of training and instinct made me uncomfortable in big public spaces, especially ones like this where the exterior walls were made entirely of massive glass panels; it didn't matter that it was probably the kind of glass that stopped bullets, the openness put me on edge.

I scanned the lobby, noting the two street entrances and exits, and then reached for my cell, firing off a text to the guys that I was exploring an assignment in the city, and I'd keep them posted. Until I had answers, I wasn't wasting anyone else's time.

My boots clicked on the marble floors. The walls were marble, too, with mirrors set into the large slabs. Modern lighting and decor echoed the minimalist, but massively expensive, design.

Jesus. A small fortune in housing and a small fortune in protection. Who was this guy?

"Harmon Keyes," I said to the large, bald security guard when I reached the desk; he was the only person there.

He gave me a once-over and then picked up the desk phone, hit the number seven, and repeated my name. Not even ten seconds later, my phone buzzed—an alert from my bank that a wire transfer had been initiated for five-hundred-thousand dollars.

No fucking joke.

“Follow me.”

The guard led the way to the elevator bay, each set of doors illuminated in bright purple. He didn't look like much more than standard security, but that was camouflage. I noted the numerous security cameras observing the space and the silent panic button under his desk; this place would clam up like Fort Knox if someone gave the signal.

“Busy night?” I rumbled casually, receiving only a grunt in response as he swiped his keycard next to the first elevator entrance, the purple light changing to blue as the dial ticked down the floors.

Interesting. There were no buttons for the elevators. To call one, you had to have a keycard.

The bay doors opened.

“Penthouse,” he instructed with another grunt and then walked away.

I hit the button for the top floor, watching the guard lumber back to his desk until the doors closed.

The ride wasn't long enough for the elevator music nor the cramped space to bother me. In seconds, the doors opened into a modest foyer and a set of double doors straight in front of me, framed by two suited security.

“Mr. Keyes?” One of them stepped forward.

I handed him my license that I'd pulled out earlier.

“No need. The lobby has retinal scanners.”

“Right.” That's what I thought when I saw those cameras, but now I had confirmation.

“I just need to pat you down,” he said, and I nodded my assent, lifting my arms to the side.

In addition to the frisk, he verified the weapons in my duffel, confirming that I'd passed through another kind of scanner on my way up here.

“You can come with me.” He used another keycard—one that looked different than the elevator access card the guard

had used—and opened the door to the penthouse.

I'd had an hour on the bike to decide what my expectations were. Minimally, I was prepared to walk into a scene similar to that of my sister's house when I went to visit. Toys everywhere. TV blasting some kid's show. Maybe not the level of screaming since there was only one child here... but it definitely wasn't this.

If the lobby was minimalist, the penthouse was anything but. It was fucking Versailles two-point-oh. Large windows. Gilded mirrors. But the grandiosity wasn't the most striking thing about the space—its cleanliness was.

The apartment was as pristine as a museum. No toys. No mess. Silence as thick as molasses.

My head swiveled. Was the kid even here yet?

“Here are all of your access cards and any contact information you might need.” The stuffed suit handed me an envelope, but I didn't bother to open it. I wasn't going to get the answers I needed from what was inside. “Kitchen. Living room. Gym and sauna.” *Damn*. “Stairs to the primary bedroom on the second floor.” He pointed to the left. “Your room is this way.” He led me to the right.

I kept silent, allowing him to get through his spiel. Reiterating the twenty-four-seven aspect of the job. Reviewing how access to the building worked. He opened a door at the end of the apartment, a modest bedroom and en suite bathroom inside. And no windows. *Perfect*.

“My associate and I are going to head out. There is a contact number in the folder if you have any questions for me.”

“And you are?”

He tipped his head. “You can call me Mr. J.”

Original.

“Okay, Mr. J. Where's the girl's father? I'd like to speak with him.” I wrapped my arms over my chest, widening my

stance. *Who the hell hired a bodyguard—for a small fortune no less—and wasn't even here to meet the guy?*

“That won't be necessary.” He nodded to my packet. “Any questions you have can be answered through that, along with the number to contact me directly with any issues.”

I stared blankly. This was so fucking weird. I turned my head. Still no sign—or sound—of a kid in here.

“Okay, then when does the kid arrive?”

His brows screwed. “She's already here. Upstairs in her room.”

“With her nanny?”

Mr. J looked at me like I was an idiot and was about to laugh when the soft click of a door drew both our attention to the staircase. A moment later, the figure who appeared at the top of the stairs answered all of my questions... *and opened up an entirely different world of problems.*

“Mr. J?” Her voice was thick. Sultry. *Mature.*

And she was no kid.

Fuck.

The daughter was a woman—and a fucking gorgeous one at that. My eyes traveled over her, tracing up her long legs until they hit her shorts and oversized T-shirt. Even though they were ill-fitting, the rigidity of her spine hinted at the swell of her chest and the curve of her hips, and my blood began to hum.

From there, the slender column of her neck gave way to her angled jaw and full lips. Loose chocolate-brown hair spiraled over one shoulder and reached the center of her chest. The gentle waves softened her high cheekbones and pert nose. She looked like one of those fancy portraits of aristocracy they hung in castles or museums come to life. No matter how casually she dressed, there was no stripping away the way she carried herself, standing like a queen at the top of the staircase, her expression so reserved, my only instinct was to uncover her secrets.

“Miss Daria.” Mr. J went toward the stairs, and my feet carried me behind him.

Daria. If that name didn’t fit her regal reserve, I didn’t know what would. Regal but still... exotic. Mysterious. *Just like everything else about her.*

“Who is this?” she asked, her tone tightly guarded though it revealed the slightest lilt in her voice. *Interesting, since her father had no accent at all. It must come from her mom.*

“Miss Daria, this is Mr. Harmon Keyes. He will be your full-time bodyguard starting tonight,” Mr. J said, linking his hands behind his back.

Her stare raked over me with all the warmth of an ice cube before it lifted back to mine. *Surprising.* I knew what she saw—a large brute of a man in black jeans, a black tee, and a black leather jacket. A rough-and-tumble soldier compared to the suited statue standing at my shoulder. Most people were intimidated. Hell, even Mr. J and his counterpart in the hallway hadn’t looked at me for more than a second or two before looking away.

But this girl—*woman*—she was unfazed. Her stare bold but guarded.

And it made the hum in my blood start to sizzle.

I shifted my position so part of me was blocked by Mr. J, and I kept my stance wide, hoping she wasn’t interested in looking below my waist.

“A pleasure,” I grunted. *Why the fuck had I chosen that word?*

Other than the slight part of her lips, she didn’t move, her large brown eyes a muddy collection of emotions I couldn’t decipher.

This wasn’t normal for me. To not be able to read a person. Counterintelligence was one of the areas we’d been trained in, and more often than not, reading a person right was the literal line between life and death. A lesson my brother had learned in the worst way, the consequences affecting us all.

For over a decade, I'd relied on those skills to distinguish between *innocent* and *insurgent*, and now either those honed skills had dulled, or there was something about this woman who made my instinct go haywire.

Impossible. She was nothing more than a rich prick's daughter.

"Nice to meet you," Daria murmured, her voice holding a natural warmth that her gaze lacked. She turned her head and looked to Mr. J. "Is my father—"

"He won't be here for several more weeks," Mr. J replied quickly, the information catching my attention. "However, if there's anything you need, of course, you can tell any of us, and he said you may contact him directly."

So, her father wasn't in town... My head tipped. Everyone else might've been instructed to keep their lips tight on who my new employer was, but I wondered if his daughter had the same restrictions.

"Of course." Her smile was hesitant as her chin dipped. A flash of disappointment clouding her eyes. "Thank you, Mr. J."

Mr. J muttered some aloof variation of a goodbye, and my eyes tracked him as he exited the apartment, the click of the door reminiscent of a pin being pulled from a grenade.

Why wasn't Mr. J assigned to continue guarding her? Was this part of the loyalty that had come into play? I knew I hadn't read that part of the conversation with my new employer wrong; he didn't fully trust the people in his organization, and that was why I was here. An outsider.

I cleared the rasp from my throat. "If there's anything you need—"

"Thank you, but I'm going to bed," she said before I'd even finished. Her accent came through just a little stronger as she shifted her weight and lowered her arms. The slightest fidget gave me the inclination that she wasn't used to having a man—a bodyguard—in her apartment.

If she hadn't, who had protected her before?

Her arms lowered to her sides, and my second glance at her shirt noted the small logo. *Berkeley*. College. She was in college. *Of course*. I passed by the campus on my way here. She was somewhere between eighteen and twenty-one. *Half my age and causing a full fucking hard-on*.

“Of course.” I gritted my teeth and dipped my chin. Maybe that was the reason for her protection... a city thing. Or a college thing.

I remained rooted to the floor, watching as she headed to her room. Her steps were confident. The sway of her hips rhythmic.

“Good night,” I uttered low just before she was out of sight.

There she faltered, glancing over her shoulder, our eyes colliding with the force of two meteors. *Goddammit*.

“Good night.” There was no mistaking the husk in her voice—or the riot it caused in my body.

Fucking Christ. Why the hell had I assumed she was a child?

That was what pissed me off the most. There was no reason for me to expect to meet a kid rather than... *her*.

And there was definitely no fucking reason for my body to be turning to stone like it was.

Family first, I reminded myself, exhaling through tight lips. *What the hell have you gotten me involved in, Rob?*

Chapter Three

Daria

“**M**aman!” I tried to reach for her outstretched hand. Blood ran down the sides of her face, but if I could just get to her... I ran faster, but the man holding her drew her farther into the shadows. Farther into his hold. My heart raced. I ran faster toward her. He held something to her head. A gun. No. Please, no. “*Maman—*”

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I sat straight up in bed, my chest caving with a gasp as though I’d been shot.

“Daria? Are you okay?” a deep voice demanded, followed by another two bangs on my bedroom door.

Merde.

For a second, I couldn’t speak. My eyes whipped around the room, my brain taking a second to disconnect from my dream and connect back to reality. *Apartment. San Francisco.*

“I’m coming in—”

“Don’t—I’m fine!” I called quickly, scrambling off the side of the bed and rushing to the locked door, repeating, “I’m fine.”

I bit my lip, holding my breath as I listened for him. Harmon Keyes. *My new bodyguard.*

I’d expected to meet someone like Mr. J and Mr. H—the suited and silent type—not a man wrapped in the rugged attire of dark jeans and a leather jacket who looked at me like he had

a million questions. *He'd have to get in line; I had too many of my own that came first.*

If Maman saw him, she would wrinkle her nose. Grungy was distinctly not her type; her weakness was men well-versed in culture and fashion. *And wealth.* While my mother wasn't shy about the type of men she was interested in, she was reserved. *The French kind of reserved.* So while I knew her various relationships existed, I had no idea who they were with.

"It will always be just you and me, ma chère." The two of us against the world. From Normandy to Paris to New York to Los Angeles. And all the cities in between. It had always been the two of us.

Until it hadn't.

Maman.

Tears pooled in the corners of my eyes, and I quickly swiped them away. Crying wouldn't bring her back.

"Okay." Even his voice was rugged. Rough enough to scrape me from the shores of sadness that felt like a black hole inside my chest.

The thud of his heavy footsteps retreated down the stairs, and only then did the breath lodged in my chest let loose as I sagged against the door. But my relief was short-lived. The moment I looked up, my gaze caught the mirror opposite the room, hardly recognizing the reflection in its glass.

My hair was a mess, a consequence of a fitful night. The dark circles under my eyes like scars from the nightmares and lack of sleep.

Three weeks it had been like this. Three weeks of being unable to rest. Barely able to eat. Uncertain about... everything.

Three weeks ago, Maman received a phone call. I knew it was a man who called because she only referred to men as old friends; if it were a woman, she would've told me a name. But I also remembered the quiver in her normally confident voice and the way she'd rushed out of the house without a scarf.

I remembered because I could clearly see her necklace—the gold chain with the small music note dangling at its end. That necklace was the one and only time Maman introduced me to one of her *old friends*. I had a piano recital when I was eight—not long after we’d moved to France. When I was finished with my song, Maman was standing with a man I’d never seen before. He had dark eyes, a white smile, and a funny hat. He looked about her age, maybe younger, and when they came over to me, he tried to give me the necklace.

But I was eight. In a new country with a new home, new language, and no friends. I didn’t want anything else new. So, I refused it.

“*Donc, un cadeau pour ta mère,*” he’d said easily, rising and hooking the chain around Maman’s neck. *A gift for your mother then. “Tu es sa musique. Sa petite note.”*

You are her music. Her little note.

I never saw that man again, but Maman wore the necklace like it was her most prized possession. And she never left the house without a neck scarf protecting it.

So that night hadn’t been one of her normal *liaisons*. I’d sensed there was something wrong then, and now, I wished I would’ve said something. Asked a question. Stopped her from leaving. But I hadn’t because I wanted to give her this—her privacy—since most days, it felt like she’d given up everything else for me.

Not even an hour later, the doorbell to our townhome in New York City rang. It was the first time the gong had ever sounded ominous. I went to the door, and outside stood a man I’d never met before: *my father*.

My relationship with Maman’s *discretion* was love-hate. I loved how strongly she preserved our unit, refusing to let anything or any man trespass into it. But I hated that she’d refused to tell me anything about my father, let alone show me a photograph.

Twenty-two years of life, and what a cruel twist of fate that the day I gained a father was also the day I lost my mother.

I laughed when the first thing he'd told me was that Maman was gone—killed.

“No, I just saw her. She went to meet a friend—” Surely, he didn't know what he was talking about.

“Why do you think I'm here, Daria? After all these years, why would your mother send me to you if she didn't believe she was in danger—if she wasn't worried that you were in danger, too?”

In the distance, the sound of sirens started to come through—a sound I'd learned to block out while living in the city, but there was no blocking it out when the warnings were for you.

My protests died then like a canoe capsized by a tsunami. I listened in shock as he told me he tried to save her—to get to her in time, but it was too late. He had pictures. Not that seeing my mother's lifeless eyes with blood smeared across her face was what I wanted, but I'd only just met him... and he had to prove that what he was saying was true.

He'd had to prove to me that I was in danger, too.

“We have to go now, Daria. They'll come for you next.”

There wasn't time to ask who 'they' were. Life had never moved so fast as it had in those next moments. Mr. J and Mr. H, who were with him, ushered me from the house and into his waiting SUV. From there, a private airfield.

“I'll be there soon, but I have to learn who did this to your mother,” he'd said from the bottom of the jetway, nodding to his personal security to escort me onto the private plane.

By the time we landed in LA, my eyes were swollen from crying and my throat raw from my sobs. It had taken days before I cared about where I was or what was happening. Days where it felt as though I'd emerged from major surgery with an entire limb missing.

Days passed before I spoke to my father again with enough clarity to process what he was saying; he'd wanted me to stay in Los Angeles—in Malibu at his home until he learned what happened to Maman. Until the men who'd killed her were behind bars, and he was certain I was safe.

Maybe I should've agreed. Maybe the right thing to do was fear for my safety—for my life. Instead, I refused.

At that point, I was two weeks away from the start of my first semester at Berkeley. No matter the grief and fear I carried, I wouldn't put my dreams on hold. Maman would never forgive me.

"You fight for your future no matter what happens. No matter what comes against you. Life owes you nothing but what you fight to hold on to."

I could tell my father wasn't pleased, but he didn't argue. A week later, he called to tell me he'd found a safe place for me to stay and was working on round-the-clock security; it was the only thing he asked—begged for. And I agreed. I was determined but not dumb. My mother had been brutally murdered on the streets of New York City. The man responsible was still out there and possibly looking for me. Of course, I'd feel better with a bodyguard around.

When Mr. J, Mr. H, and I arrived at the penthouse yesterday morning, all of my things—clothes, makeup, everything from our home in New York—were here waiting for me.

If there was one thing I'd learned about my father in the last few short weeks, it was that he spared no expense for me. My tuition. A lavish penthouse apartment. Meal deliveries. A piano. *A personal bodyguard.*

It was enough to make me feel like a princess in a tower as I left my room and approached the banister, peering over the edge. There was no sign of my new bodyguard, but there were sounds coming from the kitchen. A pan on the stove, the fan on low. *Was he cooking?*

I kept one hand on the railing and rounded the top of the stairs. From here, I had a line of sight down the staircase and straight into the kitchen. *To him.* My lips peeled apart, assessing him in a different light.

His head was angled—focused on the stove. A lock of his dark blonde hair fell onto his forehead, left to fend for itself.

His short beard outlined the hard angle of his jaw and then circled the firm line of his upper lip. I tried to remember the color of his eyes from last night, but my lack of sleep over the last three weeks made it impossible.

Again, he had on dark pants and dark shirt, but without his jacket, his arms were exposed, the edge of a tattoo peeking out from underneath the cuff.

I pulled my lip between my teeth, trying my best to drag my mouth closed. While tattoo culture in France had become more of a thing over the last decade, the French were more discreet, rarely discussing them and in most cases, keeping them well concealed while at work.

The US was different. Nothing was discreet here. And certainly, not the man in front of me. Not his size. Not his grungy attire. Not the way his presence felt both reserved yet imposing.

I took the steps one at a time, my bare feet quiet enough to not catch his attention.

Harmon. Even his name was heavy—weighted with a sense of balance unable to be toppled.

I was three steps from the bottom when his head snapped in my direction, his entire body tensing.

“Good morning,” I said, my voice catching at the end.

Mourning. Only in English would the word for a time of loss be able to be conflated with the start of something new. I felt the burn of unshed tears start to strengthen.

“Morning.” He gave me a brief once-over and then grunted, “I made breakfast.”

My eyes snagged on the flex of his arm. The ridges and valleys of his bicep, the partially obscured ink stained on his skin. I traced the muscles cascading down his massive forearm wondering why the sight made my mouth turn dry. *Mon Dieu.* I’d been to enough nude beaches in France that the sight of an arm shouldn’t make my stomach flutter and my cheeks heat. Then again, I’d never seen a man this muscled up close before.

In France, men had been toned but trim. Their muscles... well, they were missing some of the ones my new bodyguard had on display. Almost as though they'd been erased from the French genetic code. Whereas this man... Harmon had so much muscle, he had to have a monopoly on the anatomy.

Maman would laugh—her husky, knowing laugh—and tell me my desires always ran rugged. My head was never turned by her suave, suited preferences. Instead, I drooled over reruns of *Sons of Anarchy* and *Vikings*, finding even New York City lacking in the type of man I was attracted to.

The type of man like the one assigned to protect me.

“Hope you like scrambled eggs.”

My eyes snapped to his face and then to the pan.

Eggs.

No matter how hard she'd tried, I'd never be able to get myself to like Maman's over-easy eggs. They were drippy and sloppy, and so she always made me scrambled instead. Once, and only once—after a few too many mimosas—she'd teased it was the only American part of me.

That was the only time she'd slipped and alluded to my father—giving me the only two facts I'd ever learned about him—that he liked scrambled eggs and was American.

Maybe if my father made eggs for me it would be different—feel different. Instead, I felt the black hole of grief opening up, the way I missed my mother clawing free, and the very last person I wanted to fall apart in front of was my new bodyguard.

“I have to go over to campus to pick up my books for the semester,” I declared, balling my fists and digging my nails into my palms, pain being the only thing sharp enough to cut through sadness. “I'll be ready in fifteen minutes, if you could take me.”

I should've said please, but I couldn't think. My chest tightened to where it felt hard to breathe. I was rapidly losing hold over myself, and I had to get out of there. I spun, trying to

forget the brief flash of hurt in my bodyguard's stare before I charged back upstairs, desperate for the solitude of my room.

Gasping for breath, I fought back the pain. *I could do this. I had to do this.* I let the tears fall, but I didn't let them take me under, busying myself by changing quickly into a pair of cropped black linen pants, a smart gray blouse, and a pair of black wedges. Another thing that made my chest squeeze. Maman planned to take me shopping the day after she'd disappeared. "*You need some color in your wardrobe, ma chère. We're not in France anymore.*"

I sat at the vanity, brushing quickly through my hair and then pulling the top half back with a clip. Simple but sufficient to keep it out of my eyes. Maman would hate how much makeup I put on, but I didn't want the dark circles to show.

I'd just stood when the phone on the nightstand buzzed—the one that only a single person called me on. *Papa.*

"Hello?" I held my breath.

"Hey, there, sweetheart," my father's voice threaded through the line. "How's the apartment?"

"Fine." I didn't care about the apartment. I know he wanted me to, but none of that mattered to me. "Did you learn anything about Maman?"

I hated the way his drawn-out pauses almost echoed with annoyance. Then again, perhaps it was hard to continually face a daughter you'd just met with no answers about the death of her beloved mother.

"No, not yet," he answered reluctantly. "Have you met your new bodyguard?"

"Yes." I shuddered. "Are you sure I need him? Mr. J—"

"Was needed back with me, Daria," my father chided and then let out a long sigh. "I carry enough guilt that your mother may have been killed by men who were after me. I can't—I won't risk that they find you next."

My head dropped. "Of course."

“I will find whoever did this to your mother, Daria. I promise. But you have to trust me. The kind of men who would come after me—who would hurt your mother and you to get to me—their reach knows no bounds. Their strength can dissolve the deepest loyalties. Until they’re caught—until I’m sure you’re safe—no one can know you’re my daughter,” he insisted. “No one’s trust can be taken at more than face value.”

After those first days that blurred together into a shock and grief-laden haze, my father explained to me who he was—and *why Maman’s death might have been his fault.*

He was an investor. The kind of investor that catered to only the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world. And whether it was the sums of money entrusted to him or the powerful people those sums belonged to, it painted a perpetual target on my father’s back for any criminal in search of money or power.

He told me it was the reason he’d always been distant from my life—the reason he’d begged Maman to raise me in France. *The reason she’d never told me who he was or anything about him.*

“Please tell me you understand, Daria,” he begged.

“Yes.” I nodded like he could see. “Of course.”

“Good. I will let you know as soon as I know anything. Until then, please be careful. Don’t go anywhere without Mr. Keyes. And I’ll be with you soon.”

“Okay,” I agreed softly and followed with a murmured goodbye.

Returning that phone to its charger, I gathered my second new phone—another safety precaution—along with my wallet and the folder containing all of my class information, and tucked them into my large black tote.

This time I didn’t pause when I reached the stairs, declaring, “I’m ready.”

Harmon sat at the counter in the kitchen, scrolling on his phone when my voice broke his trance. His head lifted, his gaze widening the instant it landed on me.

Espresso. That was the color of his eyes. More than a color, really, the way they injected the same warm rush into my veins as a shot of caffeine.

“Of course.” He rose.

Tearing my attention from him, I noticed there were no eggs in sight. No pan on the stove. Not even plates in the sink.

My throat tightened. Either my distress wasn't as well concealed as I'd hoped, or he saw through my veneer of strength. *It didn't matter; he was just my bodyguard.*

Keeping my head high, I marched to the apartment door, his longer strides easily catching up to mine

“Thank you,” I murmured.

The elevator ride to the lobby was silent. Common civilities like ‘*how did you sleep last night?*’ or ‘*do you want to stop for breakfast?*’ were ruined by the minimal encounters we'd already had. I didn't want to explain to a stranger about my nightmares or about Maman.

Outside, the air was cool. Crisp. The fingertips of fall closing over the retreating hold of summer.

He outpaced me to the black SUV parked out front—everything I expected from a bodyguard. *But not from him.*

“This is your car?” I asked, hazarding a glance at his face as he held the passenger door open, and I climbed into the seat.

“No,” he grunted. “This is your car.”

He shut the door before I could respond. *Mine?* I exhaled. *My father's.*

In the rearview, I watched him round the SUV, but it was the way his head turned slightly when he reached the other side—as though he were checking on something else in the covered garage—that drew my attention in the direction of his gaze.

The motorcycle. Big and red, it gleamed as it caught the mid-morning light from where it was parked in the covered

garage. My lips parted. Now the leather jacket made sense. The boots made sense. *He* made sense.

“We could’ve taken—”

“No,” he clipped, and I snapped my jaw shut. *Guess that was the end of that discussion.*

As soon as he put the SUV in drive, he turned up the volume on the radio, Taylor Swift coming through the speakers as the directions to the school projected for him on the inside of the windshield. He parked mid-bridge of “*Cruel Summer*,” leaving the lyrics about keeping secrets stuck on repeat in my head.

Harmon followed a pace behind me as I walked along the path leading onto the campus. The modern buildings sprawled out in front of me, lined with greenery. It was my first time here. Even my interview had been virtual. Now that I was on campus, the prestige of the school hung as thick as the smog in LA.

I stopped at the first intersection of pathways, reaching for my phone to bring up a map. Meanwhile, students milled about, their anticipation for the upcoming week buzzing like a current through the air.

I felt eyes on me. I looked up and saw interested stares and half-drawn smiles from a few guys about to pass by. And then I felt it. *Him*. Behind me. Looming. And almost instantly, those half-drawn smiles were drawn and quartered by Harm’s imposing presence.

He came to stand right next to me and warmth spiraled up my spine. *Was it the muscles? The tattoos?* I searched for a reason why my body responded to him the way it did but came up empty.

“Where to?”

Biting my lip, I zoomed around the map, searching for—*there*.

“This way.” I directed us to the left.

When it was clear the store wasn't close to where he'd parked, Harm asked, "What year are you?"

"A 1L."

Found it. I tucked my phone back in my purse and turned to the right, having to cross in front of my stoic bodyguard in the process.

"Does that mean freshman?" He said, keeping pace with me again. "It's been a while."

I slowed and looked at him, my brows creasing. "It means a first-year law student." *Did he think I was in college?* To be fair, I was only a few months beyond being a senior, but still.

"You're going to be a lawyer?" He blinked, the same expression on his face as earlier when I'd fled from the eggs. *Shock.*

"Women can be lawyers now," I drawled, and he instantly collected himself.

"That's not what I meant—" He huffed and clenched his jaw, the movement pulling tight the muscles in his neck.

Great. My bodyguard thought I was some spoiled princess. I didn't stick around to hear what else he had to say because what was the point? It didn't matter. *He* didn't matter. In the grand scheme of my life right now—my mother murdered not even a month ago, my father entering my life after twenty-two years, starting law school on the other side of the country, and the possibility that whoever had killed Maman was after me—I had no room left for a bodyguard who thought me some spoiled brat because my father was incredibly wealthy.

My determined pace brought me to the bookstore a few moments later.

"I'll be right out," I declared, pulling open the door to let myself through.

In an instant, the weight was lighter. I looked over my shoulder, finding the massive palm splayed to hold the door wide and following the ridges of his knuckles down the length of his arm—even closer this time—all the way to the broad

bulk of his shoulder and finally, to the hard stare just waiting to capture mine.

“I’ll be right here,” he said in a low voice, but there was no mistaking his meaning.

He didn’t mean *here* as in outside; he meant *here* as in right behind me.

Something thrummed through me. Something unfamiliar but warm. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d encountered a man’s protective instincts. My experiences with the opposite sex had always been brief. Superficial. Fitting in the mold Maman had set. Even the night my father came for me, it hadn’t felt like protection; it felt like necessity. A difference I hadn’t appreciated until this moment.

Fantastique.

I inhaled deeply, but my frustration was doused with the scent of him. Leather and spice. Musky. *Heady*. And even as I quickly turned and went inside, his scent remained lodged in my nostrils and throat, fizzling like the delayed kick of peppered heat long after the initial warmth was gone.

From my bag, I pulled out the folder with my list of requirements for each class. Many of the texts and resources were available online, but there were a few books I needed for my Introduction to Criminal Law course.

I tried to ignore the hairs on the back of my neck and the way they rose to attention when Harmon stopped close behind me. *Did he have to be so close? Was this normal bodyguard protocol?* I had no idea, and I certainly wasn’t going to ask.

“I wasn’t questioning your ability to become a lawyer. I have two sisters who would murder me if I let you think that I was.” His deep voice rumbled, and the words on the page started to swim. He had two sisters; a fact that softened the very rough and... hard perception I had of him. “I was under the impression you were younger, that’s all.”

My breath caught. *Younger*. Had my father not told him anything about me? Perhaps in his mind, it made no difference

whether my bodyguard knew I was eighteen or twenty-two. His job was to protect me, regardless.

“I see,” I murmured, turning and letting my head tip to one side, allowing my eyes to do a quick scan of his person. “And I was under the impression that all bodyguards came packaged like James Bond.” I let a small smile toy with my lips as his eyebrows lifted. “I guess we were both wrong, Harmon.”

He shuddered. “Call me Harm.”

My jaw went slack. Harmon was one thing. Strong and balanced. But Harm... *Harm sounded like a warning.* Perhaps a good one for me to have.

“Harm,” I tested it, the syllable a little husky on its release. *Mon Dieu, Daria. A little discretion, s’il-te-plait.*

I offered a conciliatory smile, adjusted my tote on my shoulder, and then bee-lined it for the one-hundred-level courses in the corner of the bookstore.

“Why a lawyer?” He followed a few moments later as my fingers trailed along the shelf, pausing at each placard until I found the ones for my class, *Introduction to Criminal Law*.

I reached for the two books I needed. “Do you not trust my motivations?” When I went to retrieve them from the shelf, a much larger hand flattened on top of them, preventing me from taking them.

“I think we’ve gotten off of the wrong foot, Daria. So, let me explain,” he rasped low, and for some reason, it didn’t register how tall he was until this moment when he was standing closer to me than he ever had before, looming over me with his ruggedly handsome shadow. “I wasn’t given a lot of information about you or this assignment before arriving at the apartment last night. And that’s fine—that’s something I’ve been trained to handle. However, don’t mistake the intent of my questions. I ask because I’m uninformed, not because I underestimate you.”

My heart thudded heavy in my chest, and without thinking, I slid my tongue out to wet my lips. His eyes instantly locked on it like a moving target. *I’d never kissed a man with a beard*

before. And I couldn't stop myself from wondering what it would be like...

Harm removed his hand and stepped back, leaving me no choice but to return to the books and forget I'd ever imagined what it would be like to kiss him.

"I volunteered at a Catholic orphanage in France," I began, shuffling the textbooks into my arms. "They specifically tried to support refugees from Africa and the Middle East. One of my coworkers went to work for a few months at our sister orphanage in Lebanon, and she sent me pictures and videos of this little boy—he wasn't even two." I smiled, recalling the sound of his little laugh. "He got sick with a virus that affected his hearing; he needed to come to France—to be seen by specialists here to help him otherwise he would go deaf."

I stopped, glanced around, and realized I'd walked past the next class on my list.

"But they wouldn't let him leave," I continued, my voice hardening. "We sent lawyers. Petitions. We told the courts—the judge—that his treatment here would be covered; he would be healed. All they needed to do was agree to let him leave the country."

"And they wouldn't," Harm said quietly, the raw ache in his voice drawing my attention.

My brow creased, soaking in the sight of his drawn features and tight jaw. The hue of his eyes deepened to something. Somehow, he knew; somehow, he was intimately familiar with the injustices that went on in that part of the world, that the agony I felt didn't need to be spoken.

"They wanted to be bribed—even the judge. Especially the judge. Everyone involved in the decision from top to bottom wanted to be bribed with tens of thousands of dollars just to let a sick little boy leave the country to get medical help..." I trailed off, blinking rapidly.

I'd cried for weeks on end. Maman held me tight and called in every favor from everyone she knew, but in the end, it wasn't enough.

“After that, I knew I wanted to become a lawyer,” I said, adding softly. “Had to.”

In the corner of my gaze, I watched Harm fold his arms, his head giving a slow shake.

“Isn’t that proof that the law isn’t enough?”

I sucked in a breath and snapped my head in his direction. “Absolutely not,” I declared. “What it proves is that there is more work to be done.”

My breath expelled in a rush, time seeming to stop for a single moment as he scrutinized me, and it was as though I could see my words sinking in and altering his opinion of me. My skin started to tingle under his stare, chaos collecting in my cells like a pot of water starting to boil.

I pulled two more textbooks from the shelf and added them to the stack in my arms. *Maybe I should’ve gotten a basket—* Mid-thought, one of those large, tattooed arms snaked under the books and lifted them from my hold.

Don’t look at his arms. Don’t look at his arms.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

He grunted lowly, and as though he could tell I was about to run from any further conversation, he shifted gears.

“So, you’re from France then?”

“Not originally, no.” I shook my head. “I was born in America—in California, actually. I lived here until I was eight, and that was when I moved with my mother back to her hometown in France. We were there until I was twenty; I did my first two years of university online, but then Maman wanted me to have a university—*college*—experience.” The word felt funny on my tongue. I’d already attended college in France because *collège* was high school. “I finished my degree at NYU, and then—” I broke off, the memory of that night hitting me in the chest with all the softness of the sharpest knife.

“And then you decided on Berkeley Law,” he finished slowly, filling in the blanks though his gaze clouded with more

questions.

“Correct,” I clipped, my chin down in a nod and moved down the aisle to the next class on my list.

“And your father?”

‘Until they’re caught—until I’m sure you’re safe—no one can know you’re my daughter.’ I picked up the last book I needed and purposely ignored his question. He saw too much. Asked too much.

“This is it.”

I held it triumphantly, fully prepared to carry it to the desk myself when Harm instructed in a low voice, “Give it to me.”

I wasn’t going to argue. I went to add it to the stack he held, but the feat was impossible to do without brushing my fingers against him. Heat galloped through my body like a pack of wild horses, and I squeezed my eyes shut. *Focus, Daria*. I’d been raised to explore and embrace sexuality and desire and passion—topics that were openly discussed and encouraged in French culture. But here, in this scenario, my upbringing backfired magnificently.

Just because I wasn’t ashamed of my attraction to my bodyguard, didn’t mean I could act on it.

Like a tattoo, the way I felt might be imprinted into my very cells, but that didn’t mean I had to leave it exposed for the world—or him—to see.

“I’ll meet you at the register.” I jerked my hands away and sped down the aisle, turning the corner so quickly I didn’t even see the guy approaching from the other direction until it was too late, and I crashed into him.

“Oomph!”

“Whoa there,” a smooth voice said. “I’ve got you.”

Firm hands steadied me upright, and I got a good look at the man I’d crashed into. *Another student if his T-shirt was any indication*. He was good-looking. Dark-brown hair. Dark eyes. Aristocratic nose and a strong jaw.

“Collin McAllister,” he introduced, his mouth tipping on one side.

I was sure plenty of girls had been thrown off-balance by that charming crooked smile. He had all the right pieces, but for some reason, when I put them all together, the whole picture didn’t do it for me.

“I’m so sorry,” I gushed, stepping out of his hold.

“Daria,” a low voice rumbled behind me.

I turned and glared at Harm. It was one thing to be my shadow, it was another thing to frighten off any friends I could make at school.

“I’ll meet you at the register,” I said, my tone firm.

“Are you in Professor Samuels’s class?” Collin interjected, nodding to the books he’d seen Harm holding. “Criminal Law 101?”

“Yeah.” I smiled and nodded, feeling Harm’s stare on me the entire time as he went to the counter. “Are you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve heard he’s the best,” I said, recalling the excitement I’d felt when I realized I’d been put in his class.

“Oh, he is. Tough, but the best,” Collin agreed and then combed a hand through his hair as his eyes flicked to the register. “I don’t think your boyfriend likes me,” he joked, widening his smile as he looked at Harm and winked.

Oh, no. I groaned. “He’s not—” I stopped myself and grimaced. “He’s just a little grumpy.”

I’d have to figure out a better explanation for Harm’s presence. Not only did he not look like a bodyguard, I didn’t want to explain the reason I needed one in the first place.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you on Monday, Daria.” Collin tipped his head and stepped around me, leaving me to face my broody bodyguard.

“You can’t frighten off anyone who talks to me,” I said when I reached Harm’s side, digging my wallet out from my

purse.

“If he was frightened of me, that sounds like a him problem more than a me problem.”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. “I’m serious, Harm,” I said, handing my card to the cashier who had the good sense to stay quiet.

I held back the rest of what I wanted to say until we were back outside and out of earshot from anyone else around.

“I’m going to make friends here. You’re not supposed to stop me from that.”

His nostrils flared as he came to stand right in front of me. “I don’t think being *friends* is what was running through his mind, and it’s my job to protect you—”

“And I’m not stopping you,” I cut in. “I’m not trying to make your job difficult, but I’m asking you to please not make my life more difficult than it already—” I caught myself just in time. He saw it, too. I continued boldly, “I think it would be easier for the both of us if the people here didn’t know you were my bodyguard.”

He started to protest, but I saw the second the idea clicked, and he thought better of it. His head tipped to one side, and he crossed his arms, my bag of books hanging from his wrist.

“And have you thought of how else you’re going to explain me?” he drawled, his voice hoarse. *Mon Dieu, why couldn’t I be attracted to anyone else?*

I licked my lips and notched my chin just a little higher. “Well, I already told Collin you’re my boyfriend, so it looks like we’ll have to go with that.”

Chapter Four

Harmon

“**Y**ou should see the scowl on your face.”

I narrowed my stare, keeping my mouth clamped tight as I held the passenger door for her to get in. It wasn't a scowl. It was a tight hold on a protest I was waiting to let loose.

I placed her bag of books in the trunk and quickly slid into the driver's seat.

“I'm not pretending to be your boyfriend.” I couldn't get the words out fast enough. *I'd never heard of a more insane idea.*

Daria shrugged, but her casual demeanor fractured at the blush in her cheeks. “It was what Collin assumed, so I just went with it,” she replied. “If I had to explain the truth, I would've had to talk to him for longer.”

I grunted. “I'm twice your age. It was a stupid assumption.”

“You're forty-four?” She folded her arms, the movement pushing her full breasts tight against her blouse.

A bolt of desire made my cock harden so fast it bordered on painful, and my hand clamped on the shifter. For a second, I couldn't remember how old I was, lust obscuring my age into nothing more than time spent desiring her.

“Thirty-seven.” *Fuck why did my voice sounded strangled?*

Probably because my dick was strangled, trapped like a caged beast in my pants. But I wouldn't move. Or adjust my piercing. I deserved the pain for being attracted to my client's daughter.

"So not twice my age, then." Daria arched an eyebrow, a kind of playfulness dancing in her eyes.

I grunted. Not even two whole conversations, and I already knew the kind of lawyer she'd be: compassionate and determined.

"But equally unbelievable," I retorted. *So unbelievable that it teetered dangerously on the bounds of fantasy.*

Daria hummed and turned her gaze out the tinted window.

"What is it?"

She looked back. I shouldn't have asked.

"I grew up in France."

"So you said..."

"President Macron married his high school theater teacher who is twenty-four years his senior," she said, a ghost of a smile on her lips. "So, it's not so unbelievable."

Believability was different than possibility, and it wasn't a possibility. *No matter how fucking hard I was right now.*

"Maybe in France where free healthcare is also not so unbelievable. But here, it's impossible."

"Socialized healthcare or an age gap romance?"

Jesus.

"Both," I growled and added firmly before my dick decided to explode. "I'm not pretending to be your boyfriend. I'll think of something else."

"Okay." She sank back into the seat silently, her eyes back to the window, but her thoughts much farther away.

I tried to focus on the road—on my job—but made it only another minute before I saw her hand slide to her stomach.

She hadn't eaten. *Shit.*

“Lunch,” I grunted the word like a caveman.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s almost lunchtime, and you didn’t eat breakfast. We’ll grab something on our way back,” I said, afraid if I gave her a choice she’d bolt from it just like she’d bolted from my eggs.

“I can wait. We don’t have to eat on the thumb.”

“What?” I blurted out, sure I hadn’t heard her correctly.

“*Manger sur le pouce?* Eat on the thumb?” She blinked, and when my brow creased, rambled, “To eat quickly? To not sit and eat—”

“You mean eat on the go?” I fished for a better translation.

“Yes. That.” Her chin bobbed. “You Americans always like to do things... on the go.”

I had to wait a second before saying anything else. The urge to smile at her literal translation was too great. I was afraid if my muscles relaxed, they’d easily give away how goddamn easily she captivated me. One minute, bantering so fluently about age gap romances, and the next, stumbling over the translation of an idiom.

From the second I saw her, I’d expected one of two kinds of spoiled. Either the haughty, demanding kind of spoiled or the belligerent ‘I don’t want a bodyguard’ kind of spoiled. Daria was neither. So, what the hell was she?

“We’re not eating on the go. We’ll stop and get lunch at a place right up the road here,” I informed her, and before I could stop myself, added, “No need to worry about thumbing your food.”

I shouldn’t have joked; it wasn’t my place. But goddamn, there was something about her... something sad that made me ache to draw out her smile.

She let out a soft husky laugh, the sound breathing desire into my veins. “Oh, *Monsieur Protecteur*. We’re very *laissez-faire* about these things in France. I’m not worried about thumbing—or fingering of any kind.”

Fingering of any—I choked. *Jesus Christ*. I coughed loudly and then cleared my throat. Thank fuck we were already moving at a crawl, or the way I slammed on the brakes would've caused an accident. *Fingering*. I bit into the side of my tongue until blood greeted my taste buds. *Fucking hell*. I'd gone from zero to hard-on faster than she could say *French*.

“Are you alright?”

I gritted my teeth and nodded. “Yeah.”

At every turn, Daria was something unexpected. Distant and reserved. Then passionate and emotional. Then playful and cunning. And now, purposely intoxicating.

“Your scowl is back,” she murmured candidly, a twinkle in her eye.

“It's not back, that's just my face,” I grunted.

She made a little noise but let the conversation drop. A few minutes later, I pulled into a burger place we'd passed on the way here, a local chain that my brother and I had eaten at before.

I parked and turned off the car, cursing myself when she hesitated. “Shit. Sorry. Do you eat meat?”

She tipped her head. *Double shit*. I realized the question I'd just asked, but there was no taking it back now.

“Yes,” she answered, letting the question slide. “This is fine.”

She waited for me to come around and open her door, her gaze meeting mine as I did with a murmured “thank you.” I nodded, grateful my sunglasses hid the inappropriate way my eyes raked over her. *Christ... how many years had I exemplified the highest levels of discipline? And now all it took was one decadent Frenchwoman to make my body betray my mind*.

Daria followed me inside and while she scanned the menu above the counter, I assessed every table and person in the place.

A couple laughing at a table by the windows. Another table with five kids, their parents parked at a separate table behind them. And on the other side of the restaurant, two tables pulled together filled with what I had to assume were students. There were textbooks and laptops and highlighters everywhere.

When it was our turn to order, I let Daria go first and then picked the same thing she did. I didn't care what I ate, only where we sat—a table in the far corner where I could keep my eye on everyone as well as the entrances and exits.

Her eyes skirted the room as I pulled out her chair for her, her expression deceptively calm though her eyes were cautious.

There was something I was missing. I knew it in my gut, but until I had more information, there was nothing else I could do except my damn job.

I'd been given no reason to suspect Daria was in imminent danger. Nothing that indicated this was anything more than a powerful, rich man being protective of his daughter. Nothing in that sham of a phone call. Nothing from Mr. J. And nothing in the folder he'd given me.

The only thing useful in that folder had been the keys to the Tahoe parked in a reserved spot up front. Sure, there had been details about the building and the apartment. Numbers to call for all kinds of things from cleaning services to clothes to groceries... everything at the touch of a button except the fucking truth.

There was no indication who Daria was—who her father was—and what the hell this had to do with Remington.

I reminded myself I needed time. Operations always needed time. Recon. Intel. Assessment. I was one fucking day in. I shouldn't be so damn frustrated that I had no answers. Then again, I'd never been fucking attracted to an assignment before. It put me on edge. Made me feel like I was in some kind of danger—except the only danger was her.

“Do you know those people?” I blurted without thinking, seeing too many eyes from the group of students glancing at us.

Her head swiveled to follow the direction of mine, and then she chuckled, the rich sound affecting me like she’d reached out and touched me. “I hate to break it to you, but they’re staring at you.”

“What?” I flinched. “No.”

She smiled directly at me, and my heart slammed to the front of my chest harder than if I’d been staring down the barrel of a gun. *Something I had plenty of experience with to know.*

“You don’t exactly blend in.”

“What do you mean?”

“Leather jacket. Dark attire. Beard...” She bit the corner of her lip, and my dick jerked to life. “You don’t exactly scream law student.”

Clenching my jaw. “I blend in just fine.”

“So fine that Collin assumed you were my boyfriend rather than a fellow student.”

“Daria,” I warned, struggling like hell to sound harsh.

She shrugged, her blouse fluttering on her shoulders. “I’m just saying it’s something to consider if you want to give a different story, Harm.”

Fuck, the way the ‘r’ in my name had a little husk was enough to drive a man insane.

An image flashed—her dark hair spread over my white sheets, her head tipped back, the whole of her throat bared in front of me, and the husk of her voice screaming my name as I thrust into her.

Fuck.

I sat back so hard in the chair, it tipped back and then slammed forward as I caught myself. *Thirty-fucking-seven. Roughly* twice her age but apparently half as fucking smart

when it came to keeping my thoughts from straying to places they shouldn't—couldn't—go.

“I'll figure something out,” I said, my voice tight.

She hummed and uncapped her water bottle, bringing it to her lips. My head snapped in another direction so fast, my neck burned with a cramp—*better that than the burn watching her lips around that bottle would ignite in my blood.*

“Is there anything else you need for Monday?” I asked, keeping my attention bouncing through each checkpoint in the place. *Order counter. Students on the far side. Family tables. Couple by the window. Rinse. Repeat.*

“No. The books were it, thank you.” Her head dipped, a lock of chocolate hair drifting over her shoulder. Instinct to push it back forced my hand to tighten.

“How about food? Groceries?” I prompted.

The fridge seemed pretty well-stocked when I was in it this morning, but who the hell knew if anything in there was something she wanted to eat.

“They delivered some to the apartment yesterday. I have a phone number to text with whatever I want from the store,” she confirmed what the instructions in the folder indicated. “My father thought of everything.”

I grunted. *Seemed that way.* I knew next to nothing about this girl except that eggs offended her, nightmares haunted her, and she was determined to save the world. But if I was going to figure out what the hell Remington's business was with her or her father, I had to learn more.

And fast.

“So, what do you like for breakfast?” I tugged at the tiniest thread. Eggs seemed a safer topic than the cries that brought me upstairs to her room.

Daria's eyes widened slightly and then grew murky. Maybe I should've stuck to school and saving the world. The waitress came over then and delivered our baskets of burgers and fries.

“You can’t be going to class without breakfast,” I said once it was the two of us again. The last thing I needed was her passing out—or any legitimate reason to touch her.

I offered Daria the ketchup first.

“I’m sorry about that—about earlier,” she finally murmured.

“Nothing to apologize for.” I took the ketchup back, careful not to brush her fingers with mine, and added some to my burger.

I didn’t say anything for a beat, digging into my burger and waiting to see where she would take the conversation from here—or if she’d end it.

“I like eggs—scrambled eggs,” she said slowly. “Maman—my mother used to make them for me, and I haven’t had them since she—” Her voice snagged, and she blinked quickly and then looked away.

Jesus.

Her grief was suddenly as obvious as a fucking bullet wound to her heart, and I felt like a fucking idiot. I couldn’t have known, but still I felt like an ass for unintentionally hurting her.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked.

“She was my best friend...” Her eyelids fluttered, and then she quickly took a bite of her food, chewing quietly and holding her burger in front of her face.

It wasn’t enough to hide what she was feeling. Nothing was. And the only reason I could see it was because I’d seen it a thousand times in the mirror after Ryan died: the ache to talk to someone about the hollowness inside but the fear that as soon as you did, it would swallow you whole.

“You have some ketchup...” I grabbed a napkin and leaned across the table.

There was no ketchup on her face, only tears, but it was easier to pretend. I gritted my teeth and carefully swiped the droplets from her cheek. I pretended not to notice the catch in

her breath. Pretended like my hand hadn't just crossed into enemy territory. I wasn't even touching her skin, but I could feel its heat.

Shit.

"I lost a friend... a brother, really, a couple years ago," I offered as I sat back. I shouldn't be talking about this—about him. I shouldn't be trying to comfort the woman who was nothing more than a giant question mark, but I couldn't stop myself. "He loved Michael Jackson. Anytime his music came on, Ryan would have to get up and dance and sing. In a carrier. In the desert. He'd make the rest of us join, too, no matter how much we grumbled." I found her gaze and held it. "I haven't been able to listen to an MJ song since Ryan died."

"I'm sorry," she returned.

I balled the napkin in my hand, carefully collecting the garbage from the table in silence. I never talked about Ryan except with the guys, and especially not to a stranger—not like this.

"Why is it like this? It's just eggs. So silly..." Her throat bobbed, and she gave her head a little shake of dismay.

"Certain things anchor us to people—or their memories—and having to experience those same things without them... it's the anchor letting loose and fear taking hold, afraid we'll lose the tether to their memory, too."

Our eyes connected, the electric silence sparking with the reminder that this wasn't a conversation we should be having. I was her bodyguard. Not her therapist. Not her friend. *Definitely not her boyfriend.*

"So, you haven't lost your memory of him..."

"No." *And I never would—none of us would.* We kept Ryan alive every damn day with the garage—the Vigilantes. We lived with purpose because of him.

"Well, if the price of a memory is scrambled eggs, then that's something I think I can afford." Her pained smile was like a stab to my gut.

Why did it feel like I'd given her bad advice? Giving up something she enjoyed because it reminded her of her mom wasn't the solution, but how the hell did I counsel someone to do something I refused to do?

By telling her to go to a therapist and not getting yourself involved, the voice in my head mocked. Her feelings aren't your responsibility, her safety is.

I buried the ache down deep and forced myself to focus on my task—forced myself to put any feelings aside, sympathy or otherwise, and focus on the reason I was here. *To pay the debt Kane owed Remington because of my sister.*

“What about your dad?”

The question startled her, that much was obvious. She straightened in her seat, and the glaze over her eyes hardened. *A different kind of fear there now.*

“He's doing his best—doing a lot for me.” She shifted in her seat, her answer cryptic as fuck.

Interesting. “Is he coming to see you soon?”

“You don't know?” Her eyebrows rose.

Shit. This was what I didn't want to happen. I didn't want her to realize just how fucking little I knew about her father because then she'd be more guarded with the information.

“You're my assignment, not him,” I answered quickly. Too quickly. And too coldly.

My assignment.

Even the way she bristled was reserved. A barely-there tremor. The slight roll of her shoulders back. The half-lower of her eyelids. Her composure in the face of insult was admirable... even when I was the culprit.

“We should go,” she declared. “I have a lot to do before tomorrow.”

I didn't argue or apologize. It was better to have boundaries.

“There wasn’t a copy of your schedule in my folder—” I began once we were back in the car.

“I’ll print you one tonight.” She linked her hands in her lap, one leg crossed over the other, and her gaze distant and directed out the window.

I ground my teeth together. A *‘fuck you’* would’ve been easier to swallow than her politeness. Instead, her calm composure was like a slap in the face, reminding me that she wasn’t the spoiled brat I expected, but a grieving, guarded woman—a gorgeous woman—who was entirely alone here.

New country. New apartment. New school. Absent father.

And I was the asshole who had the nerve to remind her just how alone she was.



The rest of the afternoon passed like a masterclass in civility. Superficial questions and conversation only made the walls around her appear even higher.

After dinner—Mexican take-out—Daria disappeared upstairs after providing me with her class schedule that I’d requested. I pulled up a seat at one of the counter stools, researching what I could about her classes and what my days were going to be filled with for the coming weeks.

Boyfriend.

My dick thickened at the thought. Every goddamn time. It was like I was seventeen instead of thirty-seven. Hell, even at seventeen I’d still had better control than this.

What was it about her?

With a sigh, I shut my laptop and grabbed another water from the fridge and chugged two massive gulps.

Don't be fooled, Harm. Women can't be trusted. That was what Darius would say. My brother was one of the most cynical men I knew. After what happened on our last mission, we all came home with physical as well as invisible scars, and Dare's were all localized to his heart. No matter how I felt for him—no matter how many times we told him he wasn't to blame, it wouldn't change what he thought about himself or the idea of love.

My head tipped, the sound of the shower still softly filtering down from upstairs. *Had she even closed the bathroom door?*

I ground my teeth together. I didn't know how they did things in France, but she shouldn't be showering with the damn door open while there was a stranger in her apartment.

A stranger who couldn't stop his dick from hardening at the thought of her naked, soap and water caressing her lithe, seductive form.

Dammit.

I slammed the water bottle on the counter and adjusted my dick, letting out my breath when I freed the loop of my Prince Albert piercing from whatever it had snagged on. *One more thing we all had Ryan to thank for: a wild dare on our first night home after our first tour—first mission as a unit—and we'd all woken up with pierced cocks.*

I grunted and dragged my hand through my hair. It had never been such a fucking problem until now, the damn thing a steel reminder that I'd had a semi for going on twenty-four hours.

From the moment I'd met her.

I should head to my room, lock myself inside and all thoughts of Daria out, but for some reason my feet didn't move. I stared up to the second floor like I could make her appear. *To apologize for earlier.*

My phone buzzed, and I didn't think twice before answering the unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Settling in well?” Daria’s father asked even though I knew he didn’t give a shit about my comfort.

“You know I’ve settled well into much harsher conditions.” I strode over to the small table, gripping the back of one chair.

“Yes, I’d imagine this is a step or two up from camp Afghanistan.”

Just a few. I grunted, glancing down at the printout of Daria’s schedule, my fingers tracing over the information.

“How is Daria adjusting?”

My brow creased. *Adjusting to what? Her new life? Life without her mother? School? Why wasn’t he asking her?*

“Well as far as I can tell, but I’m no expert in emotions,” I said, testing to see if he’d probe deeper.

He hummed. “And she has everything she needs for school?”

“I took her to pick up her textbooks for the semester today.”

“Yes, I know.”

The hairs on my arm stood. “If you don’t think I’m capable of protecting your daughter, you shouldn’t have hired me.”

“I know you’re capable of protecting her, Mr. Keyes. However, this is my daughter—my most prized possession. I can’t—won’t—be too careful. You understand?”

His reply should’ve satisfied me, but it didn’t. Something about it... something about the way he said possession rubbed me wrong.

But I couldn’t dwell on it. Their father-daughter relationship wasn’t my concern. Figuring out who this guy was and what the hell he had to do with Remington was my only priority.

“Of course,” I said slowly, realizing my opportunity and taking it. “Is she in danger?”

“Why?” he demanded, firing off questions at a clip. “Did something happen? Why didn’t you call me—”

“Nothing happened,” I interrupted, noting how on edge he sounded. “But I need to know if there are any threats I should be aware of—any persons of concern to you or your daughter.”

“No.”

“No?” *Liar.* I slid my hand from the chair and picked up Daria’s schedule. “Because Berkeley is a big campus, and forget the general student population, but I just took a look at her schedule and some of her classes have over a hundred people registered in them—”

“You’re right,” he said, giving me pause. “I’ll have you enrolled to audit all of her classes by Monday.”

I jolted so hard, the chair slipped from my hold and toppled onto the floor with a bang. *Shit.*

“Excuse me?” I’d heard him, but I didn’t want to believe I’d heard him right.

“You’ll be joining her in class for this semester.”

Like hell. I wrenched the chair upright, opening my mouth to protest, when I looked up and saw Daria at the top of the steps, her wet hair draped over her shoulder and wearing nothing but a towel—a towel that was too damn short for those long legs.

Fuck.

She furrowed her brows, and it took a second before I realized I was the reason she was there—because I’d sent the chair crashing to the ground by accident. I stifled a groan and gave her some sort of haphazard wave that everything was okay and then turned and headed for my room.

I needed to be as far from towel-clad Daria as possible right now.

“I don’t think—” I stopped myself. *Boyfriend.* The insane alternative hit me like a punch to the gut. *Not a chance.* “I still need to know if there is some kind of imminent threat to her, sir.”

“She should know there is always a threat—always danger.”

I had to take that as a ‘no,’ but at the same time, something about the way he said it unnerved me.

“Understood.” But until I could figure out what was really going on, I played the obedient soldier.

“Good.” The word was as sharp as a knife. “I’ll be in touch, Mr. Keyes.”

The call ended, and I didn’t give myself a chance to listen and see if Daria had come downstairs. No chance in hell I was going out there if she was just wearing a towel.

I was a soldier. Trained. Disciplined. Regimented. But every minute that passed in her presence was a kind of torture I hadn’t prepared for, and if I wasn’t careful, this security assignment could rapidly turn into a suicide mission.

Chapter Five

Daria

The bold hum of middle C resonated through the apartment like a warm blanket on a fall day. Low. Familiar. Comforting. I lifted my finger off the key, waiting a moment to see if it drew my mysterious guardian from his lair.

His door had remained shut since he'd charged through it over an hour ago.

I'd rushed out of the bathroom when I'd heard the loud crash, thinking someone was here—panicked that the men my father warned me about, the ones who'd gone after Maman, had found me. But it was only Harm and a toppled chair.

And he had the nerve to look at me like I was the problem simply because I was only wearing a towel. *I wasn't the one who'd made the commotion, Monsieur Protecteur.* But it was how his gaze clouded from frustration to something duskier—hungrier—that locked my breath prisoner in my chest and made my insides start to heat.

For a lifetime, I'd kept things like attraction and desire only skin deep, and suddenly, the way I wanted him seemed drawn from my very bones. Maybe it was grief that made me vulnerable. Or maybe it was simply Harm and the way he saw me—really saw me in my hurt and understood it. Whatever it was, it ruined my ability—my desire—to keep him at a distance.

When he'd turned and went to his room, I realized he'd been on the phone, and a fresh wave of questions bloomed in

my mind.

Who was he talking to?

Was it my father?

Was he asking about Maman?

I reached up and cinched the edges of my black silk robe in my fingers, holding the gaping edges together as my chest tightened and tears welled in my eyes.

I shouldn't have told him about Maman, but the eggs... preparing for my first day of law school without her... *without anyone...* in that moment, I couldn't stop myself. Grief was a vast ocean, some days letting me float steadily on top of it, and others, crashing over me in waves.

That moment I'd been under a wave, and *mon Dieu*, but Harm was the only strong and steady thing I had to hold on to. *Sad, I knew, since he was being paid handsomely to play that part.* But a safe harbor was a safe harbor to a woman trapped in a storm.

I pressed middle C again, the soothing tenor drawing some of the pain from my chest as I sank down onto the bench. The keys were untouched. The piano was brand new. *Another generous gift from my father.*

He had a piano in his house—more for decoration I presumed when the first notes I'd played had sung slightly out of tune. But it wasn't enough to stop me from playing—not when I'd needed the escape. I'd wandered to the baby grand in his foyer almost every night in the weeks I'd stayed there. It was the only comfort when sleep promised either sorrow or nightmares or the tortures of both.

I must've woken the security, Mr. Q, at that house with my playing because after only a few days, my father began asking me about piano and how long I'd been playing during our phone calls. He asked if I'd play for him when he returned to California, and of course, I'd agreed.

Maman loved when I played for her; and I loved it even more when I played Edith Piaf, and she sang along, her deep sultry voice giving new life to "*Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien.*"

If that wasn't Maman's mantra, I didn't know what was. "Regret nothing, ma chère. I regret nothing."

I couldn't play Edith, but I had to play something. My fingers splayed into their starting position, my eyes drifting shut as the notes moved from my memory through my fingertips as effortlessly as air exuded through my lips from my lungs.

Für Elise.

The melody wove through the room like gossamer ribbons, dipping and curving, swelling and holding. My eyes fluttered shut, losing myself in the familiar score as each note loosened the clamps around my chest and breathing became easier. I'd had my pick of hobbies when I was younger; Maman made sure of that. Sports. Art. Drama. But music was the only one that I connected with—the only one that survived our move across the ocean.

My body swayed, tipping closer to the piano as the notes pooled into the space like grains of sand in an hourglass, piling higher and higher until the final chords crescendoed quietly on top, and my breath released in a rush.

Fini.

I should've felt relief. Calm. Peace. Instead, my skin prickled with warm electricity and without opening my eyes, I knew I was no longer alone.

"Beautiful," Harm rasped.

I straightened, slid my hands from the keys, and looked at him.

He had on another dark tee and a pair of dark-gray sweatpants, and with the tattoos and scruff... *Rough yet relaxed.* By now, I thought I'd expect his unexpectedness like I expected lightning after thunder... yet each time, the searing bolt of heat through my body was as striking as the first time.

I pulled my thighs together and cranked my head back up, his gaze still locked on me. *Beautiful.* He meant my performance. I was supposed to think he meant my

performance. But the intensity of his regard suggested something else. *It suggested everything else.*

“Thank you,” I murmured, turning my head back to the keys. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

He grunted, the rough sound enticing goose bumps over my skin. “I wasn’t sleeping.”

For some reason, it still sounded like that was my fault.

He stepped closer, reaching out and gripping the edge of the case to stare at the layered strings inside. “So, the piano was for you,” he rumbled, raking his eyes over me.

To his credit, it was only the hardening of his jawline that gave away his frustration with my attire. A black silk bathrobe. I wondered how hard it would turn if he knew I wore nothing underneath.

“It was.” My chin dipped.

“A lawyer and a musician,” he mused, noting the lack of music before turning to me.

I ran a fingertip along one of the black keys, his gaze snapping to it. I thought back to his words earlier—their coldness. I should just say good night and leave, but the loneliness upstairs was suffocating. And the way he spoke about grief... as pitiful as it was, my bodyguard felt like the only person who understood how I felt, and I wasn’t ready to let go of that. Even if it hurt worse in the end.

“They’re not so different,” I said. “Both are written in their own kinds of code, both have a set of rules to abide by in order to make something good, so maybe not so different after all,” I said, and then teased him a little. “Like a biker and a bodyguard.”

He grunted.

“Do you play an instrument, Harm?” I didn’t want to talk about me. I wanted to think about anything else right now.

He tried to hide it, but I saw the slight ripple of his muscles when I said his name; maybe it would’ve been easier to miss if it wasn’t for the tattoos.

“No, but my friend plays the hurdy-gurdy.”

“The... what?” I’d never heard of such a thing.

The tiniest smile tugged at one corner of his firm mouth. I wondered what Harm would look like with a full smile. Wide. White teeth shining. *Happy.*

“It’s a string instrument. Looks like a keyboard sitting on top of a violin and sounds like bagpipes,” he explained.

I laughed, the description unexpected. “Interesting. I’d love to hear that.” Our eyes locked, a fresh bite of heat sinking into my veins.

He gave his head a small shake, a strand of hair dipping forward. “Well, if you hear it, you should be prepared to sing along.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Irish folk songs are Rhys’s favorite, but really anything is fair game, especially if whiskey is involved.” That shadow of a smile lifted higher.

“Do you sing along?” It was all I wanted to imagine, the rich husk of his voice carrying over the range of notes.

Harm’s smile fell. “Only under duress.”

I hummed, rolling my lips between my teeth. *If I asked, I wondered if he...*

Harm cleared his throat as though he could see just where my thoughts were going. “Did your father teach you to play?”

I felt a flush appear on my cheeks, and I returned my attention to the keys. “No. Maman.” I pressed down a soft chord, blinking quickly at the sting of tears. “She taught me a little at first before getting me lessons. After that, she would sing with me.”

Silence ticked between us, and I felt his eyes follow the movement of my fingers as they ran ever so gently over the keys before settling into a familiar arrangement and easing one soft chord and then another into the atmosphere.

“It’s... comforting.” He cleared his throat. “The music.”

I hummed, pressing a soft chord through the keys. “Medicine, Maman would say. Music is medicine.” My fingers wove through a few more chords before they stilled again. “Your friend...the one who passed away... he would sing along, too?”

I lifted my head, wondering how it was possible to feel such a pull to another person’s gaze.

“The loudest,” he rasped.

Tears welled in my eyes. “That was how Maman was. Always the loudest—the boldest in the room. Never afraid. And her *joie de vivre*—” I broke off with a pained smile and shake of my head. “It’s ridiculous, but I wish she were here to sing with me.”

Sometimes, it felt like a melody was the only way to unlock my memories.

“It’s not ridiculous to miss someone you love,” he rasped quietly.

I started to play again because I needed more medicine. I needed more of something that would ease the pain.

“How long will it feel this way? Like she’s missing from me?” I swallowed over the lump in my throat, continuing to play bits and pieces of *Für Elise* again before I let my eyes lifted to his. For some reason, it felt like he had all the answers. Like they were carved into every inch of his stoic stone. “How long will I feel alone?” I breathed the final question out with the last bit of air in my lungs.

Our eyes connected, and I swore I saw sparks fly. Flint on tinder. Embers of attraction eating up oxygen until they turned into flame.

“You’re not alone, Daria.” The deep rumble of his voice burrowed straight into the marrow of my bones, taking hold like the thickest roots of an oak tree.

My fingers stilled, and my lips parted. “Harm—”

He cleared his throat and stepped away from the piano like it was an explosive. “I came to tell you that I’ll be joining you

for all your classes.”

“What?” I tried to process the abrupt change of topic as my heart somersaulted back into rhythm.

“I’m going to be enrolled in all your classes—auditing them,” he repeated, folding his arms over his chest, his muscles stretching his tee. “So no need to come up with an explanation for me now.”

“Oh.” I snapped my jaw shut and nodded slowly, processing the new information for an instant before I blurted out, “Did my father arrange that?”

“Yes.”

Of course. He took care of everything. *A good thing,* I reminded myself.

“That’s convenient then,” I said, the knot in my chest tightening.

It wasn’t even my idea to have Harm pretend to be my boyfriend; it was simply an assumption I’d gone along with, so I had no reason to feel disappointed now. *No reason to feel like I was suddenly more alone.*

“Well, if you change your mind...”

I watched his jaw knot and something distinctly hot flash in his eyes, and then it was gone. *Safely tamped down.* And replaced by a scowl. “Tempting but impossible.”

What would it be like to tempt him into the impossible?

“All the best things are.” I drew a sharp breath.

Where had that come from? Harm was not the man for me which made him the most illicit temptation.

“Right,” he clipped, his lips hardening into a thin line as he went to turn away.

Heat burrowed low in my stomach, and before I could stop myself, I tilted my head up to him and murmured, “Will you sing with me?”

I wanted... to soften him. Into a smile. Into a song. Into something more. *Just for a moment. A heartbeat.* And then I swore I'd give him back.

Instead, he froze. Muscle turning to stone right before my eyes.

“Good night, Daria,” he rasped, and my throat constricted.

Harm stepped back from the piano, and once again, the sea surrounded me. I squeezed my eyes shut, not trusting myself to say anything else to him, and started to play again, this time a song to sing to.

Hallelujah.

Leonard Cohen's classic was a favorite of mine.

I wasn't a great singer, but my voice carried the tune. I made it just into the first verse when I sensed Harm stop as though I were speaking directly to him. *You don't really care for music, do you?* I prepared for him to walk away, throwing myself into the crescendo before dropping off into a breathless hallelujah.

A tear coasted down my cheek, but I wouldn't stop playing to swipe it away.

Now. Now, he would leave. Tears were far too personal for him to stay.

I clung to the notes, ready for them to be my only company in a moment, but it was the low beat of his footsteps that resonated louder... *because they were coming closer.*

My lips parted, my lungs stockpiling air for the second verse, but before the words could come out, his deep bass resonated through the room.

He was singing.

A tremor slid through my body at the gravelly sound of his voice as it roughened up each note. He wasn't as bad of a singer as he made himself out to be. *He wasn't bad at all.*

I'd picked this song because it was my favorite—because it was familiar and comforting. I hadn't picked it because I

thought the lyrics were fitting—because he didn't care for music or because he caught me in only my silk bathrobe. That hadn't been on purpose, but everything about the way he sang made me feel like he thought it was.

I sensed him come closer and stop next to the bench. My eyes peeled open and moved to him the same way my fingers moved to the next notes of the song. His gaze traced the arcs of moonlight over my face, his word from earlier, "*beautiful*," echoing in each syllable.

My breath caught, and my nipples pebbled against the silk of my robe, the soft material no match for the way he'd roughened up my nerves. Even though my insides felt like they were unraveling with each chord, my fingers played steadily, greedily hitting each note like an addict needing the next hit of his voice and what it did to me.

The grit in his tone deepened, reminded how my plea broke him from his retreat.

Suddenly, it was no longer a song. It was an argument set to music. My charge and then his. My fingers flew over the keys, emotions rising with each note. The final verse came, and we sang together in unpracticed harmony. Neither of us was a phenomenal singer, but that wasn't the point. It was the emotion that carried us away, not skill.

Harm loomed over me, his head drawing closer to mine like two magnets that had no choice. Two people, similarly broken by the loss of someone they loved, left as nothing more than a prayer in pieces.

A broken hallelujah.

My hands lingered on the keys after the last chord. Afraid to move. We were both panting. Our lips inches from each other. Breaths colliding in the space where our words had met.

I hadn't expected him to stay. I hadn't expected the sound of his voice or the emotion as he sang. And I hadn't expected this pull—this ache where all I wanted was to feel the touch of his lips on mine.

“Daria,” he rasped, the texture of his voice sending a warm shiver through my body, my shoulders caving forward as I breathed in deeply, trying to calm my racing heart.

“*Jesus.*”

My eyes snapped from his lips to roam his face, searching for whatever prompted the harsh curse and following his eyes lower—

“You’re not wearing anything under your robe,” Harm ground out, pulling his gaze up from my chest like it weighed a thousand pounds.

My lips parted, realizing my robe had gaped in the front, giving him a perfect view of my bare breast.

“No.” I swallowed. I’m not.”

“Jesus, Daria,” he swore, his knuckles whitening where they held the case. “You can’t... wear... nothing.”

I licked my lips, savoring the way I made him ache. “I’m not wearing nothing. I have a robe on,” I said, my voice growing husky.

His jaw clenched so sharply I was sure that if I reached out and touched it, I’d come away with a cut.

“Then why can I see your nipple?” His eyes lowered to the gaping fabric like anchors he couldn’t hold up.

Defiantly, I refused to move—to adjust and cover myself.

“It’s just a nipple.” I shrugged, the silk gaping wider. “Plenty of people have seen my boobs, Harm. Don’t be so stuffy about it. They’re just a body part.” I tipped my head back and let out a sultry laugh.

“Excuse me?” he growled angrily.

I’d never had a man growl at me before. Sure, there were sounds used in the French language that had a throaty characteristic to them, but this was completely different. This wasn’t throaty, it was feral. It was rough and wild and enraged and fed by the pure possessiveness that bled through the desire in his gaze.

“What the fuck do you mean ‘plenty of people?’”

My easy laugh dried up, my mouth along with it. At the same time the place between my thighs grew slick with heat. Plenty of people had seen my naked breasts before, but none of them looked at me like him—*none of them caused the reaction he did.*

“I mean that I’ve been going to nude beaches with Maman for most of my life,” I replied, my voice catching as I stood. “It’s very common in Europe, *Monsieur Protecteur.*”

I shivered, and that was all it took for the fabric to shift over my breast once more, though it was too thin to hide my pebbled nipples from his hungry gaze.

“I don’t care where it’s common,” he warned low, his height suddenly feeling much more imposing than it ever had before. “Here—under my protection—you keep yourself covered.”

My heart pounded to the tune of fear, but I wasn’t afraid of what he was going to do to me—I was afraid of what would happen if he didn’t do it.

“And if I don’t?”

He let out a low hiss, his jaw vibrating with tension.

My head tipped higher, my attention locking on the firm line of his lips. His head drifted closer to mine, our breaths chasing each other like notes on a scale. I wanted to kiss him—to taste his roughness. To let it ground me.

“Don’t make me—my job hard, Daria,” he threatened.

I slid my tongue along my lips, my eyes lowering to his groin with a will of their own. “I wasn’t trying to make your job hard.”

His growl of displeasure erupted from deep in his chest as he swore, “*Christ.*” Harm stepped back so fast, the vacuum of air pulled me forward. “I’m going to bed. Good night.”

He retreated back to his room with the practiced ease of maintaining boundaries, but not before I caught a glimpse of the other part of him I’d made hard and how it stretched and

tented against the front of his sweats; the material wasn't as revealing as the thin silk of my robe, but I wasn't sure that even steel armor would've been able to mask the size of him.

"Merde." Shit. I pressed my hand to my chest and forced down a swallow.

I was going crazy. He was my bodyguard—a solid, immovable presence and a tempting support to cling to during this storm. But so was an anchor, and if I wasn't careful, getting too attached to the man protecting me would only take me down with him in the end.

Chapter Six

Harmon

My arms folded tight to my chest. I wasn't sure what should unsettle me more: the fact that I was about to audit a criminal law course—you know, where they taught all the rules that I broke—or the fact that I'd almost fucking kissed her—*my assignment*—last night.

I swore it had to be a dream. A bad fucking dream for how many lines I'd crossed.

Going out there when I heard the piano. Staying and talking to her about Rhys and his damn hurdy-gurdy. Telling her she wasn't alone.

Why had I said that? Yes, I stood there with her, but we both knew that my physical presence wasn't what I meant. *Dammit.* I inhaled deeply, the truth flaying the vulnerable lining of my lungs.

I told her she wasn't alone because I saw her. I saw in her broken pieces a reflection of myself. The same, but different. Like the sun and the moon. We both were chained to the same horizon of loss. Anchored by a guilt we couldn't shake.

And I wanted to free her from it before... before she became me. Closed off and guarded because I'd lost a friend who I'd sworn to protect.

So I *sang* with her. I swallowed a groan and shoved a frustrated hand through my hair.

So many fucking blurred lines, but none compared to seeing her naked breast. That wasn't a line I'd stepped over, it was a landmine I'd stepped on. So fucking paralyzed by desire

that I couldn't move closer or away without risking everything.

Not a big deal.

I let out a forceful exhale. Maybe one day seeing a bare tit wouldn't be a big deal just like it was no longer a big deal to see an ankle or a calf—*No. Fuck that.* There would never come a day when seeing any part of Daria naked wasn't a big fucking deal.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Daria asked over her shoulder, no trace in her expression or tone of what happened between us last night.

And for some unknown reason, that made it feel worse.

I followed a half-pace behind her, my gaze looking everywhere except at the back of her... and the way her fitted blouse tapered into black pin-striped pants that should've hid the curve of her ass better than they did.

All of it. One tug on the tie of her robe, and I could've seen all of her. *And been damned forever.*

“Yes,” I said tightly, shoving my hand in my pocket.

The best I could do for subtlety was leaving my leather jacket at the apartment, but the dark jeans and black tee had to stay; they were all I had. I looked older than everyone we passed, but I had a decent story—a simple one: *Ex-Special Forces soldier decides to pursue law school.* Not only believable, but hell, if it were actually true, it might actually be newsworthy.

“Well, you're scowling again, so I just wanted to check.”

“It's not a scowl, it's just how my face is.” Especially when a man's been suffering from a near-permanent erection for the last sixty hours.

“If you say so, Harm,” she replied, the tiniest smile toying with the corner of her lips.

I clenched my teeth, wanting to bite it. Was it a French thing? Was it the accent? Or was it purely dark fucking magic

that made her able to turn the most banal things into something erotic?

Even watching her play the piano last night when she hadn't realized I was there. The way her body moved, overtaken by the piece... God, I was such a fucking criminal for imagining the way she'd sway and the sounds she'd make if she were overtaken by pleasure instead.

My cock pulsed like the fucking narcissist it was, wanting more attention no matter how much I gave. Twice last night and once this morning apparently weren't enough. Not when she looked at me like that.

I clenched and released my fist, dragging my attention to the surrounding buildings and distracting myself by noting all the rooftops with possible sniper vantage points. A practical task for an improbable threat. *But improbable was better than the impossible distraction of wanting her.*

Now that I knew the law school was where her classes were, I'd parked close this morning, so the walk to the building wasn't long. To me, foliage and a fountain weren't enough to make the concrete cube look like anything more than a prison, but who was I to judge? School had always been the equivalent of a prison to me; it was why I'd enlisted in the army.

We reached the doors, and I snaked my arm in front of her, grabbing the handle before she could because it was the gentlemanly thing to do.

What wasn't gentlemanly was the way my dick jolted when my arm brushed hers.

"Thank you," Daria murmured, her eyes darkening for a moment before she walked inside.

I was still recovering from the passing touch when we reached the lecture hall.

Stadium seats filled with eager students, most with their computers already out, textbooks on their desks. A massive whiteboard behind a solid wood desk.

I groaned. *Hell.*

There were a lot of fucking people in here. Had to be close to a hundred, and my mind started to spin. Entrances. Exits. Counting heads. Looking for wayward glances or ones that lingered too long.

Ones like Collin.

Now, I was scowling, I wanted to point it out to her. Give her teasing smile a lesson in my displeasure. How a scowl turned into a menacing glower as the little prick smiled and waved jovially from where he stood up front chatting with two girls. I knew the second Daria noticed him because she paused, and right then, his grin widening at me, he motioned for her to join them.

Fucker.

Daria turned. “There are seats up front—”

Where my back was to the door and almost every other person or possible threat in this room? Not a chance in this hell.

“You go. I’ll stay back here,” I said low, fighting every urge to follow her.

Not only was the front of the lecture hall a poor position to be able to protect her, that fucker thought I was her boyfriend, and I didn’t want the rumor to be propagated any further by the enormous probability that I’d end up throttling him before the class was over.

“Are you sure?”

“Go,” I clipped, seeing people start to stare at the two of us standing in the middle of the stairs.

Daria’s lips peeled apart, a flicker of something like disappointment in her eyes for an instant before it disappeared, and her graceful composure returned.

You’re not alone, I’d told her. And yet here I was, insisting she go alone. I was an ass, and she hid her hurt well.

“See you after class.” Daria turned and headed down the shallow steps, and I told myself I was imagining the more

pronounced sway of her hips because there was no way it was for me.

I watched her greet the little posse of friends—watched the way they welcomed her. Watched the way she smiled warmly and chatted with them. *Good*. She could make friends. I could take the best seat for security purposes. And the best part would be the space it put between us. Not a lot but enough.

It was only unfortunate for me that it was my literal fucking job to watch the one woman I desperately needed to stop thinking about.

I took the end seat in the back row next to some scrawny kid whose eyes bugged wide when I sat down next to him.

“Harm,” I introduced myself.

“G-Geoff,” he stammered, staring at me like Thor had just taken a seat next to him.

Great.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” a deep voice boomed from the entrance to the room. “My name is Professor Samuels.” The tall man descended to the front of the classroom. I took note of his expensive suit, the logo on his briefcase, and the red color of the soles of his shoes; Jason Samuels was one of San Francisco’s top defense attorneys, and he wore his success well. *Literally*.

He stopped behind the desk, planted his palms on it, and declared with a half smirk, “This is Introduction to Criminal Law 101, or as Annalise Keating would call it, *How to Get Away With Murder*.”

Who the hell was Annalise Keating?

The class laughed at the reference I didn’t understand nor found amusing. I knew plenty of fuckers that got away with murder—plenty who had the law wrapped around their fat criminal fingers, profiting off of loopholes and pure greed. And I was at the end of the line.

“We’ll start with attendance because success starts with showing up.” He pulled a folder from his briefcase and began

reading off names like a goddamn auctioneer. “Susan Abrams. Jack Adamson...” Students chirped as soon as their names sounded, wanting to make sure that the most renowned professor on campus knew they were present.

Names.

My name. *And hers.*

“Geoff Howard.” The kid next to me squeaked in confirmation.

I sat forward, dissecting each syllable he uttered, waiting for the name Daria like I was listening for the pin of a grenade being pulled.

“Harmon Keyes.”

I managed a grunt which didn’t draw his attention, but it caught Daria’s. She looked back at me, and I met her gaze. I had to, I told myself. Part of the job.

She didn’t look away, and neither did I. Daria had no idea that I didn’t know her last name—that I didn’t even know who her father was. No idea how fucking momentous this next minute was about to be in deciphering what the *hell* was going on, what it had to do with Remington, and how to extricate myself and Kane from his problem.

Each name landed like a grenade, and I was stuck waiting for the one that would explode. *Amanda Richards. Dawn Rosen. Joseph Singh.*

“Daria Sinclair.”

The pin was pulled, and I didn’t even get a chance to prepare before the blast went off, and it felt like the world opened up at my feet, swallowing me whole into a chasm of anger I’d buried for so damn long.

Sinclair.

My vision went white. My insides twisted and turned red. I forced myself to stand, noting how the world around me continued to spin. The attendance call marched forward. But nothing was the same.

I strode through the back door, not caring who saw or what comments were made.

Sinclair.

It couldn't be.

She couldn't be his daughter.

Chapter Seven

Harmon

My fingers dug into the doorframe, burrowing deeper into the wood with each ring in my ear.

Pick up, dammit.

“Hello?” Ty answered.

Tynan Bates was the one in our unit who had the most experience in counterintelligence and surveillance. After we came home, and Sherwood was up and running, Ty spearheaded the technological side of our operations.

“Are you in your office?” I demanded.

“In the shop—”

“I need you in front of your computer now.” It was an order given with a tone from the past—one that Ty would never question or disobey.

The quick beat of his footsteps echoed through the line. “What’s going on? Where are you?” The click of keys followed his voice.

“I need you to tell me what you can find on Daria Sinclair.” I lowered my voice and stepped back so another student could enter through the door. As it shut, I found her through the small glass pane, her head tipped back, searching for me. *Worried.*

Fuck.

“Sin—wait? Seriously?” He rumbled.

“Daria Sinclair. Twenty-two years old. Born in the US, but lived in France for a bunch of years. Enrolled at Berkeley Law currently.”

“What’s going on Harm? What the hell are you involved in?”

“I think it’s him. It has to be,” I rasped like a crazed man.

There was a beat of silence. “Magnus Sinclair has been a ghost for a decade, Harm—”

“I know.” A ghost that had haunted me—haunted us all for what he’d done to Robyn.

“There was no indication—no information on any child—”

“*I know,*” I growled.

“Daria Sinclair. Born in Los Angeles, California twenty-two years ago...” He trailed off and picked back up a second later. “Only the mother’s name was listed on the birth certificate. Sandrine Decatur.”

I stared through the small window into the lecture hall, keeping my eyes on my assignment—*the daughter of my enemy*.

“I’ll dig deeper, Harm, but I’ve got nothing here to indicate she’s related to him,” Ty said, and I started to shake my head as though he could see me. “Sinclair’s not that uncommon of a name. It could be a coincidence...”

“No.” The word fired from my lips. *Not a chance in hell.*

“How can you be certain?” He asked. “And how the hell did you even stumble on Sinclair’s possible daughter in the first place?”

Because there was a feeling in my gut from the moment I met her that there was more to Daria than meets the eye—more to this entire fucking situation than the facts I was given.

More reason I should’ve fucking hesitated before allowing myself to fantasize about her.

“Because... Remington,” I said his name like a curse. The note he’d left... the insinuation... it all made sense now. *It*

only made sense now if Daria's father was Magnus Sinclair.

“Remington?” I could practically hear the drop of Ty’s jaw as he asked.

I clenched my teeth and glanced around the hall, making sure there were no more wayward students close by before I told him everything that had occurred from the moment Kane showed up at the garage four days ago note in hand, to the anonymous phone call and job offer, all the way to now. *Well, not everything.*

I kept the fact that I sang with her... and unprofessionally savored the sight of her taut pink nipple.

The entire time, my focus remained locked on the back of Daria’s head, noting every slight dip and tip as she listened to the lecture. Her hair caught the light, the various shades glimmering like rich caramel, and my fingers itched to twist into it and stick. It didn’t help that every minute or so, she turned to see if I’d returned to my seat, her expression wrought with concern.

I knew last night had been a mistake. Every fucking moment about it. But I didn’t realize what a catastrophic mistake it was until now.

“Jesus Christ...” Ty sighed. “Does Rob—”

“No. And she can’t know,” I insisted. “Not until I’m certain. Not until I have a plan.”

“A plan for what?” Ty asked, his characteristic caution resonating in the deep bass of his voice.

Ty was the oldest of all of us—two years older than me, but by far the most reserved and rational. Especially after we’d come home. We’d all lost Ryan, but Ty... Ty had taken one last mission. He’d returned to the Middle East at the special request of his mentor, Solomon Belmont; in my gut, I knew it was a mistake, but Ty would never say no to one of the men he most admired. That mission wasn’t the final nail in the coffin...it was simply another coffin. Solomon’s. And when Ty returned to Sherwood, it wasn’t as a broken soldier; it was as a haunted one.

Guilt was the most vicious ghost, making Ty even more cautious when it came to keeping Darius and Rhys and their sometimes-hot-headed natures in line.

I was cautious, too. Thoughtful. Circumspect. Except when it came to this—to Magnus Sinclair. *Then I saw red.*

“A plan for Magnus,” I answered.

The man had taken everything from my sister after she’d already lost so much. He’d stripped her to nothing and then disappeared into the depths of the criminal underworld.

Until Friday, I would’ve assumed his disappearance was facilitated by Damon Remington. *Who else could make a bastard like Sinclair disappear for over a decade?* But now, I wasn’t so sure.

“Have you seen him? You don’t know for certain—”

“I do, Ty,” I said in a low voice. “We’ll find proof, but I know it’s his daughter. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

“Give me everything you have.”

I rattled off every detail I’d collected in the last four days. From the make and model of the SUV I was given to use, to the information on the apartment complex, to the description of Mr. J and Mr. H from the first night. I even told him about the piano.

Proof that this thing I felt for Daria was nothing more than chemical lust.

He’d find something. He had to. I knew I wasn’t wrong.

“And look into the mom,” I added, thoughts sticking to the front of my mind like they were pinned by darts. “She passed away. Seemed recent.”

“You said she lived in France for a while... does she even know who her father is? His name wasn’t on the birth certificate, maybe she has no idea—”

“She knows,” I said, my stomach turning once more, thinking how I’d pitied her for the loss of her mother—

empathized with her. *Told her about Ryan.* A growl erupted from the rage in my chest. “She knows him. Talks to him every day.”

I’d talked to him, too. I’d spoken to the man who’d almost ruined Rob’s life. The man who’d made her a prisoner to her vengeance for so long.

“But that doesn’t mean she’s aware of who he is, Harm. If he can hide from the whole fucking world, he can hide the fact he’s a criminal from his daughter,” Ty said, stopping short at the end. “Does he know who you are? That you’re...”

“He knows who I am, but he doesn’t know Robyn’s my sister.” When Rob’s parents tragically died, and she’d come to live with us, she hadn’t wanted to change her name, so there was no obvious trail that led between Robyn DuBois and the Keyes family. “Not a fucking chance he’d let me near his daughter—alone—if he knew the truth.”

If he knew that he was my enemy number one.

I watched her tip her head and press her hand to her mouth trying to hide a laugh at something Collin had leaned over and whispered. *Fucker.*

“What are you going to do?” Ty’s voice claimed my attention again.

“Get to Magnus. Get justice.” It was the only thought in my mind—the only thing I’d wanted for so long.

“I meant about the girl...” He hesitated. “What are you going to do about Daria?”

“My job,” I said, letting my breath hiss through my lips. “I’m going to do exactly what I was hired to do until she leads me to him. She’s my ticket to justice, Ty.”

The apple from the goddamn forbidden tree.

Beautiful. Tempting. Erotic.

Daria was the key to finding her fucking snake of a father and claiming my vendetta. *Family first. Justice for all.*

“I’ll look into what you gave me, but until we know for certain, don’t make any assumptions, Harm.”

My nostrils flared, prepared to snap at him. “Don’t—”

“If this is your chance to bring down Magnus, don’t fucking blow it because of emotion,” he ordered with a firm tone that he rarely took with me.

I opened my mouth to argue that there was no fucking emotion. Not that he knew about. Ty had no idea I was attracted to Daria. No idea she invaded my every dream. No idea that my thoughts were consumed by her and not because it was my fucking job.

Thankfully, I realized in the nick of time that the emotion he was referring to was rage not desire.

“I won’t,” I promised. “And until we know for certain, none of this gets mentioned to Dare or Rob.”

He grunted in agreement, and a few seconds later, our call ended.

Shock and anger had distorted time because as soon as I hung up with Ty, a crowd of students headed for the door. *Class was over.*

I backpedaled and pulled my fingers through my hair, my heart pounding. I thought I’d have time—at least a few minutes before I had to see her. Talk to her. A few minutes to bundle back up the monster who was ready to bring down the world to avenge his sister. But I didn’t even have a few seconds.

Fucking hell, Harm. Bury the rage and focus on the mission—the new mission.

I spun, took a couple steps away from the door, and then turned and waited for her.

Caramel hair. Chocolate eyes. Full pink lips. She appeared like she always did. Elegant. Erotic. *Enemy.*

Her brow creased as soon as she saw me. Since last night, she’d allowed more emotions to surface in her expressions. A sign that she trusted me—that I’d gotten too close.

“Harm?”

I sucked in a breath, her husky voice giving my body life.

The daughter of my enemy shouldn't have the power to make my blood heat.

“Is everything okay?” She adjusted her bag on her shoulder, and I itched to take the weight from her.

“Fine,” I said, doing my damndest to take the edge off my tone. “Work call.”

“My father?”

I coughed to hide the grunt of anger that almost escaped and then shook my head. “No.” I grimaced. “Someone else.”

“Oh, okay.” She pulled her lip between her teeth, staring like she could see everything I was hiding. “We have torts next...”

My jaw pulsed. “And it looks like your friends are waiting for you.” I nodded to Collin and the girls she'd sat with.

Part of me didn't want her anywhere near them—near him—and that was the part of me that needed to be whipped into shape. I would watch her. Protect her. Learn everything I possibly could about her. But the one thing I could no longer do was give a damn about Daria Sinclair.

Her eyes fluttered, and then her face found that mask of composure. *Good girl.*

“Of course.” She smiled demurely. “I'll see you after class then.”

I waited a beat and then followed a few paces behind them to the next lecture hall, my mind too busy with other thoughts to pay any attention to the professor or the information.

Daria was either an accomplice to her father's evil or its collateral damage. Neither scenario allowed any room for me to care about her. Not unless I wanted to be the newest casualty of the Sinclair family.

Daria wouldn't be my downfall. No matter how much I desired her.

Chapter Eight

Harmon

His daughter.
My enemy.

I exhaled slowly, releasing the swell of anger that built each time the thought caught up with me. Ty confirmed that Daria was Magnus Sinclair's daughter.

It had taken four days to find any connection because there was almost no connection to be found. *Almost.* My first night in the penthouse, I'd dug into the owner of the residence, and it was listed as belonging to the owner of the building—a real estate investment company that was well known in the city and raised no red flags.

A dead end. *Except it wasn't.* I'd only done my research too soon.

When Ty took another look into the property records, everything had been updated to reflect new ownership: a shell corporation whose sole equity owner was the Juniper Corporation. *A known shell company belonging to Magnus Sinclair—one he hadn't used in over a decade.* But enemies had long memories, and Juniper had been in play when Sinclair was building his empire on the backs of unsuspecting victims like my sister.

I'd thought I'd waded through the initial wave of rage learning who Daria was, but I was wrong. The confirmation cut even deeper because for four days, I'd let my belief waver. *Because of her.* Because being around her, talking to her, listening to her play... I almost couldn't believe she was the

daughter of a cruel, callous criminal. The woman who was going to law school. Who craved justice with the kind of passion I did. *How could she be that and be related to Sinclair?*

I almost convinced myself that maybe the name was a coincidence. That Remington had some other reason for getting us involved. That I wasn't empathizing with my enemy's daughter. *Or desiring her.*

But I hadn't been wrong. Daria Sinclair was the daughter of the man who'd almost ruined my sister's life.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath and shifted in my chair. A new breath plummeted into my lungs, musty with the scent of stale knowledge. How the hell anyone could be comfortable in these library chairs was beyond me; my ass was practically numb from the last—*almost two hours*—we'd been here.

Stifling a grunt, I trailed my gaze around the law library again. The shelves stretched tall with tomes of legal history, their stuck-up spines standing proud with precedent. Centuries of rules to protect and punish, and yet here she was, the product of a man who'd managed to break them all.

My eyes centered back on her.

Daria leaned over the opposite side of the round table, her hair tucked into a neat bun on top of her head. She sat between Collin and Sophie, the three of them pouring over a stack of opened books, trying to find some loophole to get their fake client off the hook for murder.

An exercise I was begrudgingly a part of.

Her blouse rippled each time she pointed or reached, teasing inches of skin I'd already seen. *Inches of skin that made me crave more.*

Funny how hatred was no match for how hard she made me.

I adjusted my seat, the movement drawing Collin's attention. "Got anything to offer, Hulk?"

My jaw twitched. “Harm.”

The little shit got on my nerves, especially after Daria corrected his assumption about our relationship. Now, he just thought I was the pitiful roommate pining after her, sulking because she’d relegated me to the friend-zone.

I looked at Daria, having only half-listened to their discussion of the case, and said, “No body. No crime.”

Collin snickered. “Seriously?” He made a show of dropping his pen and lifting his hands in victory. “Ladies and gentlemen, the case is closed. In a shocking twist, Hulk here found that our real culprit is none other than Taylor Swift.”

I started to growl when Daria held up her hand. “Wait.” Her eyes sparkled at me. “Can I see my notes again?”

Somehow, her stack of printed notes had landed in front of me. I gathered them and held them across the table, her fingers brushing mine in the process.

Dammit. I was really trying to stop that from happening.

Heat sizzled over my skin, and I rubbed my fingers together, absentmindedly trying to wipe her touch off as I watched her eyes scan over the sheet.

I wasn’t sure what was more mesmerizing—watching her play the piano or watching the way her mind churned through facts looking for the truth. In a different world, I’d admire the hell out of her. Her dedication. Determination.

There was an energy around her—an electric field that drew everyone to her when she was like this. *Intoxicating.* There was no doubt in my mind that if Daria wasn’t here, desperate to find the best defense for their fake client, Blanche, the others would’ve called it quits for the night. *It was Friday, after all.* And if I had to hear Collin mention a party at his house later tonight one more time...

“That’s it,” she murmured, her head snapping up to me. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before... we’ve been looking for other possible suspects for Mr. Moser’s death, anything to take the blame off Blanche, but there was no body.” Her lips spread into a wide smile, the hot intensity of it

hitting me like full sun. “What if we argue that Mr. Moser faked his death to pin the crime on Blanche?”

Her classmates jumped on the idea, success—and the end of study hours—within sight. But Daria’s sights were only on me.

Thank you she mouthed, and my body warred with my mind.

Fuck. I had to get out of here—out of her orbit for just a few minutes so I could breathe without feeling like I was inhaling something I wouldn’t be able to let go of.

As if something heard my prayers, my phone buzzed. “Excuse me,” I said as soon as I saw the unknown number, stalking away from the three pairs of eyes that followed me all the way to the exit. “Hello?” I rasped only once I was outside.

“Where are you?”

My shoulders slumped, hearing my sister’s voice instead of the man who’d tried to ruin her. I was so used to his—*Magnus’s*—calls coming from a blocked number that it completely slipped my mind that Rob used them, too.

“On a case,” I replied. “Where are you?”

“At Sherwood.”

I tensed. “Is everything okay?”

Robyn rarely made an appearance at the compound. While the rest of us preferred solitude, she preferred the obscurity of the city and her network of spies she’d built there.

“Fine,” she answered. “I just needed a break. The city was getting a little crowded.”

My head cocked. “What does that mean?”

I heard her sigh. “Nothing.”

“Does this have anything to do with Remington?” I rumbled, my fist balling at my side.

He’d contacted Kane... *had he contacted Robyn? Had he found out she was the one behind Kane’s impersonation?*

I could practically hear the whoosh of her walls rising. “We’re not arguing about this again, Harm. I did what I had to do—*what worked*.”

“I’m not arguing,” I said, lowering my voice. “But neither are you answering my question.”

“I’m fine. I can take care of myself—especially when it comes to Remington,” she declared with a kind of confidence I didn’t understand. I wanted to know—demand answers why she was so nonchalant when it came to the FBI’s most wanted criminal, but now wasn’t the time. Not over the phone. Not while I knew she was safe at Sherwood with the guys. “I called because Dare didn’t realize you had a case, so neither of us knew where you were.”

“Worried I was kidnapped?” I played it off, keeping my voice even.

Rob snorted. “There are grizzly bears easier to kidnap than you, so no. Not worried. Just curious about your case and if there’s anything I—we can do to help.”

There was definitely something up with my sister, but hell would freeze over before she’d come to anyone for help. No matter how much we loved her, life had taught Robyn DuBois that it was too dangerous to rely on any man.

Which was why I couldn’t tell her that I was closer to Magnus than she’d been in a decade. That I’d spoken to the man who’d taken her legacy... or that I was living in the same apartment as his daughter.

“Potential case,” I clarified. “And I’m still doing some preliminary recon...”

“Who’s the target?”

The sound of the door opening interrupted the stillness of the night, and I turned to find Daria exiting with Collin and Sophie. My fingers curled into a fist at my side, watching them as I replied, “Law student.”

She paused. “Interesting... what did he do?”

“She,” I clipped, my voice cracking. “And I’m not sure yet.”

Robyn hummed. “Even more interesting. What’s your plan?”

Good fucking question. I gritted my teeth. My goal was to get to Sinclair and exact justice. That had been my goal from the moment he’d taken everything from Rob. But to do that... my plan...whatever it was, revolved around Daria.

A dangerous orbit considering the way my body responded to her.

“Why’d you say the city felt overcrowded again?” I pressed, returning her fire with some of my own. If she wanted answers, she’d have to be willing to give them.

“Fine.” She sighed, clearly bored and itching to get her mind off of whatever she was avoiding in the city. “Well, I’m glad you’re not kidnapped. Rhys is nagging for a game of pool, so I’ll let you go. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Yeah,” I rasped, my senses sharpening as Sophie walked away and left Daria and Collin.

I swore he made a point to exaggerate his attention when he knew I was watching. Like we were in some kind of competition for Daria’s affection. *Idiot.* We weren’t even playing the same game.

“Will do.” I grunted and ended the call just as Daria stopped in front of me, the moonlight catching the flutter of her eyelashes and the gentle part of her lips.

I wasn’t kidnapped... but somehow still held hostage.

She skated her tongue along her full bottom lip, and my caveman brain noted how she didn’t do that little move for Collin. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I brushed her off, shoving my phone into my pocket. “Ready to go?”

“Collin’s having a small party back at his place.”

“Good for him.” I scowled, earning me her pointed stare and a laugh that was too soft for how hard she made me.

I reached out and claimed the straps of her bag as she went to adjust them. Of course, she’d checked out all the books they’d been referencing—she’d be the only one spending time over the weekend to review them for class on Monday.

I took her bag off her shoulder and placed it on mine, ignoring how the lamplight caught the spread of color over her cheeks.

“I told him we’d go.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I protested immediately.

“Well, it’s either that, or we go back to the apartment, and I play piano with even less clothing than the last time,” she murmured coyly.

I sucked in a breath. The last thing I needed was the image of her playing the piano naked to invade my mind and overturn my senses, but goddammit, that was what she did.

She overthrew me.

I gritted my teeth, feeling my cock strain against my jeans. “Daria...” I warned with a deep voice.

I wished I could say that her not-so-subtle flirting was infantile. Shallow. And maybe it would’ve been if she was a product of this puritanical-born country and its ideals.

But she wasn’t.

She’d grown up somewhere that viewed nudity as commonplace rather than a topic of censure. She was from a world that normalized sexual appetites like any other kind of hunger. Something to be tasted... or gorged.

And every time she tempted me like this, I was the one left feeling childish for my restraint. For not indulging in the attraction that crackled between us.

There was no doubt in my mind that the woman standing in front of me would sit nude at her piano and play a

symphony for me. *No doubt that it wouldn't be the first time she'd performed that way either.*

“I don't think a party is a safe idea.” Or playing the piano naked within three zip codes of my cock.

Her playfulness dissolved, and I hated that I was the cause. But dammit, a man could only withstand so much.

“I need this, Harm,” she confessed, her chin lifting. “I need to not feel alone here.”

The whole of my tongue burned to insist that she wasn't alone because I was here. But I wasn't. Not really. *Not for her.*

My shoulders sagged. I didn't have a choice. I had a persona to uphold—and letting my anger get the best of me was just as dangerous as letting my desire take hold.

“Where's the party?”

She smiled at me. “Collin's house. I have the address.”



It wasn't a house. It was a mansion tucked on top of one of San Francisco's famous hills.

The house was packed. Free alcohol and fame made for fast friends... and a fierce hold on my throat. I wondered if Judge McAllister knew the kind of gathering his son was hosting while he was away on vacation.

I made a slow turn, trying to absorb more of my surroundings in my vision. There were too many people. Too many rooms. Too many doors and windows.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been around this many people—save for in the criminal law class—but that was different. This was unruly. Wild. Explosive.

Shots. Kegs. Music.

I tried to remind myself that Sinclair insinuated that his daughter wasn't in imminent danger. That I didn't need to worry about an assassin hidden among the assholes. But it was fucking hard, and every minute more I spent surrounded by... chaos... made me more on edge.

I felt like I was back in Afghanistan—every sense heightened because something didn't feel right. No matter what Dare had said that day, the intel seemed too easy. The target to clear. *Because it had been. Because we'd been betrayed.*

I shuddered. I had to get out of here. I'd been prepared for a lot of things coming here but not this—I'd never had this happen before. The ice in my veins. The sheen of sweat on my brow, panic oozing from my pores.

Fuck.

My heart pounded in my ears. I had to get out of here. We had to—the sight of her stopped me short. Daria was smiling and laughing with Sophie and a few other girls from class near the center of the room. Made sense. Everyone's eyes—including my own—found her.

My jaw locked so tight I wondered if it would ever open again.

At least Collin was nowhere to be found. The kid had hovered around her from the moment we'd arrived. Bringing her a glass of his father's most expensive wine, proudly giving her a tour of the house like he had any right to take credit for the fruits of someone else's labor.

“Hey there, handsome,” a drunk girl stopped and swayed in front of me, her shirt practically falling off her generous chest. “You look like you could use a little loosening up—”

“Let me spare you the heartbreak, Jax. Hulk's not interested—at least in anyone who's interested in him,” Collin sneered before she could even finish, appearing by the girl's side and slinging his arm over her shoulder.

The girl—Jax—made a pouty face but with a little nudge, Collin sent her swimming through the crowd. For a second, I

was almost ready to thank him.

“How long have you wanted her?” he drawled, taking a long swig straight from... *a bottle of vodka.*

And the second of gratitude was over.

“I don’t want her,” I said tightly, trying to focus on keeping my breaths steady though each inhale reminded me that my chest was about to split open from the stress—and this annoying piece of shit wasn’t helping.

I should go. *We should go.* But one look at her, and I knew I couldn’t go anywhere.

She was enjoying herself, and for the first time, I couldn’t find the shadows of grief lingering in her gaze.

You shouldn’t care. She’s Sinclair’s daughter, the devil on my shoulder argued.

“You sure stare at her a lot for not wanting her,” he taunted.

“Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath. *I stared because it was my job. Because I was being paid a king’s ransom to keep an eye on her.* But of course, I couldn’t tell him that.

And I did want her. He wasn’t wrong. But that didn’t make me stare. That simply made it impossible to look away.

Normally, a growl and a glare were enough to get him to go away, but with the music... and the vodka... he was too far gone to realize he was wearing my patience.

“I’m just making sure she doesn’t fall for an idiot like you,” I clipped, realizing how jealous I sounded only after the fact.

I folded my arms and turned my attention elsewhere, hoping he’d tire of annoying me and move on because I certainly wasn’t moving. From the moment we’d entered the living room, I’d claimed the corner closest to the hallway and therefore, closest to the front door.

I wanted to see everyone who came in. I wanted to see my exit plan at all times. And I wanted to hide in the shadows while Daria enjoyed her night in the light.

Collin snickered, too full of himself to take any insult—or any reality—seriously.

“Well, can’t say I’m sorry for your predicament, Hulk man. Time for McAllister to seal the deal.”

It would’ve been nothing. Something not even worth the roll of my eye. But the stupid kid decided to clap me on the back. In a crowded room. When my senses were already frayed—my mind splitting time between past and present.

And as soon as he touched me, I was yanked back to the past. To the war. To that last mission. *To those moments of kill or be killed.*

I grabbed my assailant’s arm and wrenched it behind his back, my arm whipping around his neck in a chokehold. One swift twist to break—

“Harm!” The sound of Daria’s voice ruptured through the chaos—the confusion in my mind.

I blinked, and all I saw was her.

Daria stared at me wide-eyed from the center of the room, the rest of the details filling in in a matter of moments.

Collin’s vodka bottle on the floor. His cries and curses of pain. The growing number of people staring at me.

Shit.

I released Collin instantly, shoving him a good couple steps in front of me. *What the fuck had I done?*

“What the hell...” Collin choked out, rubbing his throat and glaring at me with hatred.

“Go away,” I ordered, backing farther into the corner like some kind of wounded creature.

I shouldn’t have grabbed him, but for a fraction of a second, I hadn’t grabbed him—the perpetual frat boy—I’d grabbed the insurgent who’d been trying to kill me.

“What is wrong with you?” he snarled.

My heart pounded, and it felt like a thousand degrees in the room. Every instinct told me to get out. Self-preservation. Safety.

I dragged my hand through my hair. *What the fuck was happening to me? And why now? Why here?*

Fuck.

Collin didn't go away. Instead, his genius idea was to continue with a tirade straight in my face. Thankfully the music was still loud. Thankfully, not many people were paying attention to us.

“Harm...”

“Did you see that?” Collin interjected, stepping between Daria and me. “Did you see what the hell he did?”

“Yes. Can you please—” She tried to move around him, but he wouldn't let her.

“He grabbed me, Daria,” Collin went on belligerently, refusing to move out of her way. “He practically dislocated my shoulder.” He spun and pointed at me, at least careful enough to keep from touching me this time. “You're a fucking psycho. I could press charges—”

“But you're not going to because you're fine and that would look... pitiful,” Daria said, taking Collin's arm and forcibly returning it to his side.

“How can you protect him?” he scoffed. “Your beauty deserves better than this fucking beast.”

I jolted. *Her? Protecting me?*

“I'm defending him because he's sorry. Isn't that right, Harm?” She arched an eyebrow.

I was sorry. Not that I wanted to apologize to the little bastard, but it wasn't his fault for whatever the hell just happened.

“Yeah,” I croaked with a nod.

“See?” Daria cooed, and finally Collin seemed to calm down.

“Fine,” he grumbled, swiping his vodka bottle from the floor.

“Thank you.” She gently touched his shoulder and then looked around. “I seem to have misplaced my glass of wine —”

“Oh, I’m on it.” Collin tipped his head and disappeared into the crowd.

“Daria—”

“Are you okay?” She demanded, her soft hands framing my face.

I grabbed her wrists, wanting to yank them away, but God help me, they anchored me. *She* anchored me. Above the chaos. Above the fray. I squeezed my eyes shut and gasped in air, relegating the consequences of this moment—of her touch—to later when I could think straight.

“Fine,” I said through locked teeth, feeling my head drift closer to hers as I fought to even my breathing. “We should go.” Back to where there were fewer people and more quiet.

Back to a place where I wasn’t so close to her.

“Harm...” Her voice was so soft, I felt more the rush of her breath than I heard my name.

She pulled my head toward hers. My jaw clenched. I shouldn’t do this—shouldn’t want this. And I could’ve stopped it. Straightened out of her reach. There were a thousand ways to avoid her mouth as it came for mine.

But I ignored them all, instead letting myself sink toward her haven. *Toward my downfall.*

Pop! Pop! Pop!

“Fuck!” I cried out. The moment shattered as I spun us, pinning Daria into the corner that had been at my back. My body crowded hers, pressing flush to hide and shield her from whatever had exploded.

I waited for the screams. The crying. The commotion. My past ambushed my present with a violence that only war can.

Protect her. I had to protect her.

“Harm,” she pleaded softly, her voice barely breaking through my heavy breaths. “It was confetti. It was just confetti poppers.”

I heard her—processed what she was telling me. I realized there was no screaming or crying—nothing but laughter and the low beat of the music again. I forced my eyes down and noticed the flutter of tiny papers rocking their way to the floor.

Fuck.

“Daria...” Her name was nothing more than a ragged exhale. A plea. *A warning.* Because my body refused to move. Every muscle locked in place and pressed to hers.

“I’m okay,” she murmured, curling her hands into my shirt and holding me tight. Her eyes searched mine with worry and confusion.

A low noise vibrated through my lips, my hand dragging from the wall to her shoulder and then onto her neck.

She was fine. She was whole. But for some reason, I couldn’t stop touching her. I couldn’t stop my palm from sliding up her neck and my fingers from clasping her throat. There was no pressure—no pain. I just needed to feel her life... feel her pulse under my fingertips.

“I’m okay,” she murmured as my hand framed her throat.

I swallowed, letting her heartbeat sink into my skin and absorb into my veins. Her life into mine. Intertwined. Her father. My sister. Enemies. But Daria and me... desire gnawed at my insides. A beast running rampant with all my shields down. My head drifted toward hers, and I saw her red lips like Eve saw the apple. Ripe and juicy with knowledge. Temptation personified.

I had to know.

With a growl, my lips sealed over hers. Hot. Sweet. Electric. The kiss sapped the tension from me instantly,

consumed me—*overthrew me*—with a singular thought: My enemy's daughter shouldn't taste so good.

Chapter Nine

Daria

J *e ne regrette rien.*

Not the press of my lips. Not the flick of my tongue. Not the way my mouth opened wantonly under his. I regretted nothing about kissing my bodyguard. *Or the way my body went up in flames.*

My heart was still racing from the moment I saw him almost snap Collin's neck. One look, and I knew something was wrong—that the Harm I knew wasn't the man standing there. The Harm that stood there had no walls. *Was vulnerable.*

And Collin was right. All I wanted was to protect him.

Until he had my back to the wall and his hand around my throat. Then, I was the one in danger—the one in *Harm's* way. And there was nowhere else I'd rather be.

Days of pent-up desire released like our very own explosion, and I let the kiss consume me. Hot. Demanding. Rough.

I grabbed his shirt, trying to pull him closer—to cocoon us deeper in the corner where nothing but our kiss could exist. Not Collin. Not the party. Not his fear. Not my worry. Nothing could survive the blaze of desire.

I'd had good kisses before. Lots of them from the time I was fourteen. There was a reason it was called a *French* kiss. It was too decadent to have been created by anyone else. *Or too depraved, depending on who was asked.*

One was not French if one never experienced good food and good sex—sometimes simultaneously. But this wasn't just good. This wasn't warm and tingly like sunshine and rainbows. This kiss was... wild. Like lightning straight to my lips.

It was electrified. Sizzled. Brought to life parts of me I thought were already living. And I clung to the embrace, desperate for more of the man I barely knew. Sparks galloped across my skin pounding heat into my cells, and my veins pumping molten lust straight to my core.

My fingers curled into the seams of his shirt, trying to pull his solid wall of muscle closer.

Our tongues lashed together, sparring like some great debate. Every lick, every stroke flooded heat between my legs until they were nothing more than Jell-O, and I was held upright by the mercy of the wall and his hand bracketing my throat.

Harm let out a low groan, angling his mouth to deepen the kiss and leave all of me at his mercy.

I was his hostage. A prisoner to the six-foot-sexy bodyguard whose rugged strength towered over me like a giant and devoured me whole. And all I could do was whimper incoherent sounds that betrayed the painful throb in my core.

The idea of being dominated didn't frighten me. Of being drenched in his spiced scent and captive to his honed, inked muscles. *I'd been independent plenty. Strong on my own plenty. With Maman as my example, how could I not?*

I tried to wriggle closer. To press my hips to his. I wasn't an exhibitionist, but for Harm—for this moment to not end—I could be.

Harm growled low and held me firm, but that didn't stop me. My hips rolled enough to press to his and feel the ridge of his erection. Thick and long and hard and—*gone*.

In an instant, noise and people and commotion flooded my senses. *That's right, we were at Collin's party.* I blinked and registered Harm standing a foot in front of me, his chest

heaving the same way as mine, the pain in his eyes reflecting the turmoil inside me.

I lifted my fingers to my neck and then my mouth... everywhere he'd touched tingled like scorched earth.

"We should go," he clipped, his eyes swirling with worry and frustration and... regret.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak before leading us out of the house and back to the car.



We began the slow descent through the hilly streets, the city lights sparkling around us. Compared to the party, the SUV felt like a rolling tomb.

I sat with my legs crossed, my gaze lost somewhere out the window while I tried to cool all the parts of me that still burned and to figure out how I'd been set on fire in the first place.

And why, even though the fire was gone, all I could smell... taste... see... was the smoke.

I knew passion. I knew pleasure. *I didn't know this.*

"Thank you." Harm's low voice finally cracked through my thoughts.

My throat tightened. "Don't thank me. Are you alright?" I'd never forget the look on his face when he realized where he was—who he was holding. *And what I must think of him.*

"It had nothing to do with Collin," he said without answering my question.

I sighed. "I know it wasn't his drunken ramblings that had the mustard going up your nose."

Harm choked. "Excuse me?"

I tipped my head, my brow scrunching in confusion.

“Mustard up my nose.”

Oh.

“Sorry.” I wrinkled my nose, realizing I’d translated my thoughts too literally. “I mean, it wasn’t his attitude that made you... lose your temper. In French, we say ‘*avoir la moutarde qui monte au nez.*’”

The little rush of his exhale made me think he almost would have laughed if the situation had been different. “I see.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t... know.” Harm sighed and shook his head. “That’s never happened before. For a second, I wasn’t in the house—it wasn’t Collin I was holding. I was...”

“Under attack.”

His chin dipped, his jaw clenching and releasing like a firing gun.

“Don’t hold back. You can tell me,” I said softly. “It’s not like I have anyone...” To tell. *Anyone to tell* was what I was going to say, but I simply didn’t have anyone, so maybe that was why I didn’t finish; I didn’t have anyone, but I wanted him.

I kept my head turned to the window, afraid if I looked straight at him, he’d clam up. When I’d volunteered at the shelter, I’d learned that people who’d been through trauma found it easier to unravel the knots of their own tale when someone wasn’t tugging insistently on the ends.

“Our last mission, we were ambushed by insurgents—betrayed by an informant,” he began slowly. “We barely made it out. Ryan didn’t.”

The friend he’d told me about before.

“I’m sorry.” My heart ached.

“He was like a brother to me—to all of us.” His voice was thick. “And at the house... the noise, the people.” He shuddered. “The confetti.”

I hummed softly. “It was the blue fear.”

“Blue fear?” His brow lifted.

Merde. “Terror?” I tipped my head. “Panicked? Sorry my translations are off, but you were so white—”

“Scared to death,” he muttered and nodded, his gaze flicking to me. “I thought someone was coming for you.”

I sucked in a small breath, feeling my heart stumble over a beat in my chest. *Don't be foolish, Daria. It's his job to protect you.*

“Is that who your tattoo is for? For Ryan?” I asked, determined to learn as much about Harm as I could before all his walls returned.

If I looked hard enough, I could make out the outlines of the crest peeking out from under his shirt sleeve in the window's reflection.

“Not that one.” A sad smile crossed his face. “We did a lot of things for Ryan... the bikes. Our motorcycle club. And the tattoos and piercings—” He broke off suddenly, clenching his teeth and adjusting his seat.

Interesting. I hadn't seen any piercings on him. Maybe it meant something else I didn't understand—something he clearly didn't want to talk about.

“This tattoo was for the unit. We were Green Berets.”

I bit my lip. “You were hats?”

His gaze flicked to me, and I held my breath, afraid I'd offended him, but then the smallest crease of a smile appeared in the corner of his mouth.

“Only a French woman...” he muttered with a shake of his head and then stopped my heart by reaching and tugging up his sleeve to bear the whole of his tattooed bicep. “Special Forces,” he explained. “Like the first RPIMA in France.”

My brows lifted, and I felt my mouth form an ‘o.’ *He was that kind of soldier. Elite.*

It made sense. Of course, this was the kind of man my father would hire to protect me. He'd bought a condo for me. A baby grand piano. Paid for my first semester's entire tuition. He hadn't been in my life for long, but he'd done everything to take care of me.

Except for being here.

I shook off the selfish thought. He was trying to find who'd killed Maman. I'd pay the price of solitude if it brought justice.

"De Opresso Liber," I read aloud the Latin insignia inked on his muscle. "To free the oppressed."

Harm grunted.

"It looks like the patch on your jacket," I remarked softly.

Harm didn't have any personal effects in the apartment. Well, maybe in his room, but I hadn't seen that. The only thing of his that was left anywhere in the common spaces was that leather jacket. Stiff but somehow soft. *Like him.*

"Supposed to." He flattened his palm on the wheel to turn it.

"Is that for your unit, too?"

"Yeah. Sort of." He cleared his throat. "For our motorcycle club. When we came back, it was... we had to stay together."

"Like a family." A pang shot through my chest.

"Yeah," he rasped. "Brothers by blood and by fire."

"Huh?"

"My brother served with me in our unit."

"Oh." I pulled my lip between my teeth, regarding him carefully. "So, two sisters and a brother."

He tensed as though he hadn't expected me to remember that first conversation at the bookstore.

"Yeah."

"I wish I had a brother. Or a sister. But it was just me and Maman," I found myself saying, desperate to not let the

conversation end—to not let the door shut that our kiss had opened.

“And your father?”

I shook my head. Of course, he wouldn't know my family's situation or how I'd grown up, and I probably shouldn't be sharing it with him now, but how could I not? The way he'd protected me back there, even if it was because of a delusion, was the kind of thing that changed everything.

“He wasn't part of my life until Maman...” A sudden rush of tears sprung in my eyes, and I quickly turned away. “I'm sorry,” I said thickly and then let out a watery laugh. “Maman hated motorcycles.”

I had no idea why I was telling him this, but somehow, little pieces of our conversation were like breadcrumbs back to her memory.

“Seems harsh,” he muttered, and it made me laugh; I couldn't explain why.

“I always wanted to take our Vespa everywhere, but Maman preferred her convertible.”

“Well, I wouldn't call a Vespa a motorcycle,” he grunted.

I tipped my head and gave him a pointed stare. “And I wouldn't call a nipple noteworthy, but I guess we'll have to agree to disagree and leave these definitions to be decided by international affairs.”

The word detonated in the car. *Affairs.*

His eyes started to darken, so I quickly went on, “We let the days decide; she got even days, and I got odd.” A tear streaked down my cheek. Love was built on little things, and it was the little things that unlocked the biggest grief.

“So, you got more days out of the year?”

“Yeah.” I chuckled and swiped the tear away. “Tomorrow is an odd day. Do you think we could—”

“No,” Harm said firmly, cutting off my request before it made it past my lips.

“Why not?” I asked, but I knew the answer because I felt it. I felt his wall rising up like a wave from the ocean, powerful and unstoppable.

He released an audible exhale, the tension radiating off him. “We’re not friends, Daria,” he ground out. “I’m... grateful for what you did for me tonight, but I’m your bodyguard. That’s all.”

And I, nothing more than his assignment.

“Bien sûr.” *Of course.* I tucked my disappointment behind my own wall.

Harm parked, the minutes between the garage and the apartment passing in silence. As soon as we were inside, he started to head for his room.

“Wait.” I reached for his arm, and he stopped, turning warily toward me.

“Daria...”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said, not wanting to lose the closeness I’d gained tonight. “The kiss, I mean.”

“It was a mistake. I wasn’t... in my right mind,” he replied, his voice deadly low. His chin dropped slowly, and too late, I realized it was like the cocking of a gun and I, the target. “In my line of work, one mistake can kill you. It won’t happen again.”

The words fired through my chest, pain blooming in their wake, but I wouldn’t let it show—couldn’t. Not when I’d just insisted the kiss was no big deal.

“*Mon Dieu*, I had no idea how dangerous a single kiss could be,” I mocked breathlessly, hoping it would ease the sting in my chest. It didn’t. Instead, it made his gaze crackle with even more determination.

“Good night,” he rumbled with the entirely unfair ability of his voice to fan the flames his coldness should’ve put out.

“Good night.”

I waited until the door to his room shut before I moved, and even then, I didn't retreat upstairs. I'd never retreat for a man. *Or regret a kiss.* Instead, I made my way over to the piano, my fingers finding a home on the keys.

It wasn't a big deal. My eyes closed, and I let the music carry me away. *But to let it happen again clearly would be.*

One kiss incinerated the idea of a casual liaison with my rugged bodyguard because it left more than my body aching. It made me feel something I never had before.

And the last thing my lonely heart deserved was to be put in Harm's way.

Chapter Ten

Harmon

The rapid thrum of my pulse as I met Daria's gaze was annoying as hell.

We lived together. Not in the normal way. *Not in the way my dick fantasized about.* But we were in the same place twenty-four-seven. So there was no reason for the way my heartbeat picked up—no reason for the way my nerves rushed every time our eyes met. Especially after three weeks.

That was plenty of time for my self-inflicted wound to heal, but it hadn't. The wound of wanting her still gaped wide open, bleeding and aching. A twisted kind of PTSD where all I could think about was the trauma of her touch. The lush warmth of her mouth. The details of her lips. Every minute detail of each moment spent losing myself in her softness.

Seconds kissing her was all it took to realize she wasn't the only one who was alone. As I gasped for air—fought for reality—there was no mistaking my loneliness. I'd just called it by so many other names—focused, determined, busy—for so long, it was easy to pretend I wasn't hollow inside.

Until her kiss started to fill me back up.

A grievous mistake. Because the other side of that coin was the reminder that Daria was Sinclair's daughter, and one flip of fate could destroy the vendetta I'd sworn to claim.

I inhaled deep, focusing back on the scent of the coffeehouse—freshly ground beans and sweet pastries.

The barista called my name and brought Daria's attention to me. She was perched at the table in the corner with her

usual crew doing some last-minute studying before their exam this afternoon. *Not like she hadn't already spent the whole night studying.* I knew because I heard her—her bare feet padding on the hardwood floor.

She was a pacer. Always moving while she absorbed the information. And I listened from inside my room until her feet finally carried her upstairs.

If there was one thing my military career had taught me, it was to be prepared for anything. But to leave my room when it was only her and me at night... I didn't need to prepare for anything. There was only one thing that would happen between us... and it would be the biggest mistake I'd ever make.

I swiped the two to-go mugs of coffee from the counter, muttering my thanks, and made my way over to the table, my chest tightening with every step.

Collin glanced up, his expression souring as I approached before ignoring me altogether. He never brought up what happened that night at his party. Whether he was scared or embarrassed or... who the hell knew... but I was happy to pretend it never happened either.

I handed Daria her coffee and the pastry bag I'd been holding onto.

She took the cup and then pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, eyeing the bag with confusion.

"You haven't eaten. You should eat," I grunted. She'd hardly touched her smoothie on the way to class this morning, and then only asked me to get her a coffee while they crammed over lunch.

Her mouth parted, and that was all it took for my mind to put our kiss on repeat. The softness of her lips. The sweetness of her tongue. Thirty-fucking-seven years old, and I'd never had a kiss like that before. Talk about a sobering thought.

If I was going to fuck up so royally as to kiss my assignment—*kiss my enemy's daughter*—the least fate could do was have reality fall short of all my fantasies.

But no. Daria hadn't just talked a big game with her laissez-faire French upbringing. She kissed like she damn well invented the act. And I... I'd witnessed military-grade explosives do less damage than the way it had destroyed me.

My nerves buzzed with heat. With lust.

Dammit.

I cleared my throat and folded my arms, hoping it hid the way I widened my stance to accommodate the thickening of my cock.

“What did you...” She peeled open the bag, and as soon as she saw the chocolate croissant inside, her eyes lit up.

I gritted my teeth. I got her the croissant because she needed calories, not because I cared. Not because it was French, and I thought it would make her smile. That didn't matter to me. At all. I had a job to do—a persona to maintain. *And answers to find.* Letting her forget to eat helped with none of that.

“What about you?” She pulled out the pastry and took a bite.

“I ate a sandwich while I waited,” I said, barely finishing the thought before her low moan of pleasure caught me by surprise.

Unconventional warfare. There was no other way to describe the constant yet ever-changing way she made me desire her.

Hot air hissed from my lips, scrambling to defend the attack. And then the tip of her tongue darted out to lick some chocolate from the corner of her mouth.

Fuck.

“I'll be at the bar,” I ground out and settled on retreat instead, heading back to one of the counter stools and wishing there was something stronger than coffee there waiting for me.

I sipped on my coffee and watched her from afar. My excuse was always that I studied better solo, and whether or

not her friends believed that was not as important as the fact that they wanted to believe it.

My thumb flicked through the news on my phone as I skimmed the headlines and tried to ignore how Collin inched his way closer to Daria each time she pointed to something in her notes.

She's not fucking interested, I wanted to growl. But I'd already mangled that situation, and his perception of me was so damn bad, my only chance at salvaging it was with some space. Let him try to have his chance. Daria sure as hell didn't need me to defend her; the damn woman managed every flirtation like a queen rather than a law student.

My phone began to buzz in my hand, and Ty's name flashed at the top of the screen.

He was the first person I'd called after what happened at the party. *The panic, not the kiss*. Ty always avoided crowds because he had similar attacks. He didn't share much about them because the rest of us never experienced the same... until now.

Since then, his calls had been more frequent, cautioning my continued presence here with, "*Rob wouldn't want you to put yourself at risk.*"

I answered the call, "Now's not a good—"

"I don't fucking care, Harm. Hang up on me, and I will come have this conversation in person."

Years of training was the only reason I didn't flinch hearing my brother's voice instead of Ty's.

"Dare." My jaw locked. My younger brother was nothing if not impulsive when it came to family, and I didn't doubt that he'd make good on his threat. "Where's Ty?"

"Sitting here, glaring at me."

"What do you want?" I asked though I already knew.

"The truth," he croaked.

Two little words that conveyed a world of information. He knew where I was. He knew who I was with. He knew who she was related to. And he knew that I'd kept it all from him.

"Alright," I said low, keeping my eyes on Daria. As long as she stayed at the table, I'd let the conversation continue.

"How could you not tell me?"

"Because there's nothing to tell. No information," I ground out, my frustration aimed at myself for a second. Three fucking weeks. An earth-shattering kiss. And all I'd learned was that Daria knew very little about her father.

"Bullshit," he charged. "She's his daughter. She has to know something—"

"She's only known him for a few months," I said in a low voice. "He wasn't part of her life before that—before her mom died. And he hasn't been a big part of it since."

Daria didn't try to hide her feelings from me—at least, not her feelings about her father. Every time she talked about him. The piano. The apartment. Her bittersweet gratitude shadowed every soft curve of her face; she was grateful for everything he'd done for her, but she wished he were here.

I knew how she felt because after Ryan died, all the guys and I had was each other. And no honor or reward or pension or job was enough to ease that pain except to walk through it with someone. But Sinclair had left her here alone. Protected and provided for, but still alone.

"You sure about that, or is it only what she told you? Is it what he wanted her to tell you? You can't trust her, Harm. Don't be a fool." His voice dripped with bitter skepticism, and the nagging thought snared me, wondering if my brother would ever recover from what happened to him enough to trust a woman again.

"Ask Ty. He's the one looking into her past," I clipped.

"Her story," he countered, and I stifled the urge to correct him.

“I’m not done looking yet, but I haven’t found much on Sandrine Decateur. Not since fourteen years ago.”

“When she and Daria moved to France,” I said, the information fitting with what Daria had said.

“But why does their trail end there, Harm?” my brother demanded, perpetually pessimistic.

“Maybe because her father is Magnus Sinclair, and they’ve been hiding from him this whole time,” I snapped; I’d known Daria for all of a few weeks. I shouldn’t be defending her. No matter how compassionately she’d protected me.

“Or because he’s been hiding them this whole time. Hiding her. Grooming her as legal counsel for his illicit operations—”

“Enough,” I growled loud enough to draw stares from the few people waiting for their drinks at the counter. I cleared my throat and lowered my voice. “If you know who she is, you know why I’m here. For the truth. And justice.” I paused and added, “And I’m not just protecting Rob from Sinclair; I’m putting an end to her debt to Remington.”

We could argue with each other, but if there was one thing we both agreed on, it was that our sister wore her independence like a weapon... and a defense mechanism. After so long, I honestly had no clue how fucking far Rob would go to get revenge on Magnus. At her own expense. And even at Daria’s.

“Speaking of Remington...” Ty mumbled from the background before they put the call on speaker. “Word on the street is that Remington is here.”

I tensed. “What do you mean? In the country?”

The man was a ghost. Sure, there were plenty of criminals who lived protected and under the radar; Sinclair was one of them, lurking near the bases of his operation all over the world. But Remington... the FBI didn’t even have a recent photo of him from the last decade. It was the whole reason Rob’s insane impersonation plan had worked. No one knew what he looked like. Where he was. Or what he did.

“He’s in the city.”

I turned my head, lowering my voice. “How do you know that?”

“Rob let it slip the other night.”

“She’s still there?”

None of this made any fucking sense. I wasn’t sure my sister had spent a combined two weeks at Sherwood since we’d built the place, and now she’d been there for two weeks straight?

“She’s been in and out, but for the most part, yeah,” Dare revealed.

“And no, she hasn’t given much of a reason why,” Ty added.

“I wonder if Remington contacted her like he contacted Kane...”

“If he did, she hasn’t said,” Dare said.

“According to her sources, there’s a contract at stake with Amir Shazad—a partnership to expand his supply chain even farther into North and South America.”

I flinched. The name was familiar—too familiar. Amir Shazad was the head of the Pakistani Mafia, known for their massive drug trafficking operation exporting heroin produced in Afghanistan. Our missions there had been military based, but considering over ninety percent of the world’s illegal heroin was grown in Afghanistan, it was hard not to come across someone in Shazad’s supply chain whether it was opium farmers, insurgents, warlords, or district officials.

“And Remington wants the deal.”

“Supposedly, Shazad is coming to the city in the next few weeks to hear offers and finalize a deal.”

My head tipped. “You think it could draw out Sinclair, too?”

Or had it already? My gaze slid back to Daria. No, she was going to school, that was why she was here. Not because of her father.

Ty hummed in thought. “He’s always stuck to investments. Not supply chain. But it’s possible.”

Was it possible that the city Daria had chosen for school was also the same location where this meeting was going to happen? Yes. Was it pure coincidence, though? I couldn’t be certain.

“Regardless, Rob can’t know about Sinclair. The last thing we need is her barreling into the city searching for him if Remington is in town with the rest of the criminal underworld,” Ty insisted, always the voice of reason.

“Yeah,” I grunted deeply. There were too many in that social circle that would have a bone to pick with my vigilante sister. “I’m handling it—handling Sinclair and his daughter.”

“Are you?” My brother charged.

I breathed out slow, assuring myself that it wasn’t possible for him to know just how badly I’d already fucked things up.

“I said I’m handling it.” My voice was low—the tone one I’d used plenty when we were on assignment, and I was his commanding officer. “So, if you have something to say, then say it.”

“I want to know how you’re handling it,” he dared, and I heard Ty’s exhausted sigh.

“By not letting anger blind me,” I replied. “How many times have we tried to catch Sinclair? How close has Rob come only for him to slip away? I’m not letting that happen again. I’ll handle this as slow as I fucking need to until Sinclair is standing in the damn apartment, so fucking comfortable in his own delusion, that he’ll never see me coming.”

And to do that, neither could she.

I checked on Daria again. She was still at the table, and Collin was taking a bite of her croissant. My hand tightened around my to-go cup, the material instantly caving under my strength. Fucker probably hadn’t even asked; his sense of entitlement was pervasive.

Dammit. I bit back a curse and quickly let up, but the cup remained crippled in my hand. Jealousy was a feeling I couldn't afford. *Along with desire.*

“Fine,” Dare said, his voice taut with fragile acceptance. “You can do things your way, but you’re going to get my advice whether you want it or not.” A few seconds stretched in silence, and I braced myself for whatever insane suggestion he was going to give. But it wasn’t insane. It was rational... and somehow, that was even worse.

“Get close to her.”

I flinched, almost sending a slosh of coffee onto the counter. “Excuse me?”

Anything—I expected anything else. Kidnap her. Ransom her. Threaten her. Anything to make it clear she was going to pay the price for her father’s sins in order to lure him to us. But those would be rash choices with unpredictable outcomes. And in spite of his anger, Dare had recognized that.

“You’re in enemy territory, Harm. You have to get close. Get her to trust you. To befriend you. Don’t sneak and spy and waste time with that bullshit,” he practically snarled. “You want information? Don’t use your strengths. Use her weaknesses.”

My teeth locked together, and I lowered my head. He might be talking about Daria, but he was thinking about himself. About what happened to him.

“Dare...”

“Don’t learn from my mistakes. Use them,” he said bitterly, wanting me to use Daria like he’d been used. *Betray her the way he’d been betrayed.*

My jaw vibrated under the strain. “And if she’s innocent?”

At that moment, Daria’s eyes lifted and connected with mine from across the room as though she knew I was talking about her.

My brother scoffed. “So was Rob. That didn’t stop Magnus from taking every last dime.”

He had no idea what he was suggesting. No idea that I'd already flown too close to the sun, and my lips could still feel the burn.

In the two weeks since the party, Daria had mirrored my distance. As much as I wanted to think I could just wait it out—that eventually she'd give up some detail on her father that would lead me to him or that would bring him to her—I couldn't ignore how increasingly unlikely that was becoming.

As much as I hated to admit it, Dare was right. If I was going to find Magnus and exact justice, I'd have to get close to his daughter. *Fuck.*

Fucking fuck.

I downed the last dregs of my coffee, wondering how the hell I'd ended up in a situation where I was trading intimacy for information, but what choice did I have?

What choice did she leave me with?

This was as close as we'd gotten to Magnus in a decade. And though I hadn't learned much about him from Daria, I had learned he'd go to great lengths for his daughter. That he'd tucked her away, hidden from his own organization, because she was his weakness.

And if I wasn't careful, she'd become mine, too.

When I looked for Daria again, she was already walking in my direction, and it seemed like every set of eyes in the place followed her.

"Gotta go," I said roughly and hung up just as she reached me. "Ready?" I asked and tucked my phone into my pocket, tossing my cup in the trash before she realized I'd partially crushed it.

"Yes." Her chin dipped.

My eyes flicked over her for purely selfish reasons. She had on dark-gray, high-waisted pants, a white blouse, and a black herringbone blazer. Her hair was pinned back in a ponytail, the length gliding down her back.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, her brow creased.

The word *fine* almost fired out, but I stopped it just in time.

Get close.

“Just my brother,” I said and took her bag from her shoulder, my arm absorbing the weight. “He’s worried about my sister. The older one.”

I held the door for her, feeling like this conversation was the equivalent of a landmine.

I waited for her next question, but after several seconds of silence, I realized that two weeks of shutting her out had trained her to not press harder to be let in.

I was about to carefully expose pieces of my sister’s past when she stopped suddenly, pulling out a vibrating phone from her purse—the special cell I’d come to realize was the only way Sinclair contacted her.

“I’m sorry, just one minute. It’s my father, and I haven’t heard from him in... weeks,” she pleaded, giving me a *one-minute* sign with her finger and then answering the call, “*Papa?* Yes, I’m here. Are you coming tonight?”

Daria had a quiz in her afternoon class, and after that was the oath ceremony for the first-year students where they swore their commitment to the ethics and integrity of the profession; it was the legal version of medical school’s white coat ceremony.

Clearly, she was hoping her father would be there, but if the look on her face was any indication, he wasn’t going to make it.

Fucker.

As much as I wanted to be a fly on her shoulder while she spoke to Sinclair, I hung back, giving her the privacy that my position required. Maybe this meant I’d hear from him, too.

I’d received calls from Mr. J here and there over the last two weeks; they were brief and objective and certainly not the place to probe if Sinclair was going to come see his daughter.

Was Shazad a reason to move up a visit? Or was the rumor of Remington’s presence what kept Sinclair away?

Fuck. I ran my hand along my jaw, the stubble a little longer than usual; I spent too much time in the shower having to relieve myself every morning that keeping my beard trimmed fell to second priority. *Better scruffy than risking brain injury from perpetual blue balls.*

Daria turned and caught my gaze. *Get close.* My brother's words made my chest tighten.

I couldn't get close. Not anymore. Not after the party—our kiss.

I'd tasted the apple. The knowledge of what it would be like if she were mine and the temptation to make it so. If I let myself get that close again, I wouldn't be able to walk away. Not from her. Not from the way she made me feel.

I wouldn't be able to sacrifice her the way my brother wanted me to.

There had to be another way to get answers—to find out the truth. Because the only thing that getting close to Daria Sinclair would bring was mutually assured destruction.



Sure enough, not even twenty minutes into Daria's torts class, my phone lit up with an unknown number, how Sinclair's calls always came through.

I turned from my position at the classroom door and took a few steps down the hall, keeping my voice low as I answered, "Hello?"

"My daughter shouldn't be going to frat parties," Sinclair opened the conversation with, his tone prickly with annoyance.

"Is she aware of that limitation?" I countered.

She must've filled him in on everything that had happened over the last two weeks. It was either that, or Sinclair had spies

in places I didn't want to think about. But if that were the case, the frat party wouldn't be his biggest concern, the kiss would be.

“She doesn't need to be. It's the reason you're there—the reason I'm paying you a king's ransom. You're the best at handling any situation, so handle this one and make sure it doesn't happen again.”

I inhaled slowly, trying to quell my anger. I wasn't a fucking fan of the frat party either—or its host—but damn did the loneliness in Daria's eyes some nights kill me. She needed friends. She needed support. She needed to smile and have fun. *And he needed to fucking understand that.*

“She's lonely,” I drawled. “And with how hard she works, she deserves to have some fun.”

“Well there are plenty of other things she can do instead,” he clipped. “I don't want her at frat parties, and I don't want her getting too close to that McAllister boy, understood?”

I never imagined there would be anything Magnus Sinclair and I would agree on, but with that statement, I was proven wrong.

“Of course... Mr. Sinclair.” I didn't know if that was the right play, but it sure as hell felt like it.

I sensed his momentary surprise before he chuckled. “I see the tenets of the law aren't the only thing you've been learning.”

“As you said, I'm the best at what I do.”

“And as the best, you should know what it means for her to be my daughter. How important... how valuable she is to me.”

Bullshit. “So, you're coming to her oath ceremony later tonight?” my voice rumbled, the echo of the hope in her voice from earlier radiating through my mind.

Again, a beat of silence fired into the conversation like a bullet, piercing the thick veneer of formality.

“Unfortunately, I'm dealing with other business that needs to be addressed.”

“Does Daria know that?”

“She more than knows, Keyes. She wants me doing exactly what I’m doing, so don’t question me again,” he said, a snarl hanging at the end of his words.

What the hell did that mean? What did Daria know about her father’s business? My lip twitched, a tremor of unease working through me. She’d made it seem like she hardly knew anything about him... my throat tightened.

You can’t trust her, my brother’s warning echoed. *Don’t be a fool.*

“Yes, sir,” I clipped.

He made a noise of frustration—like he’d gotten caught up and revealed just a little too much.

“Keep her safe and keep her out of trouble. Let her have her friends. Take her to classes. But keep her controlled, Keyes. It’ll be easier for her in the end.”

Unease ate at me like the pull of quicksand. “What will be easier?”

“When I come for her.” There was nothing ominous about his voice, and that was the exact reason my veins iced with dread.

Chapter Eleven

Daria

My hands lingered on the keys long past the time when the final notes of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata had faded from the apartment, leaving only streams of real moonlight behind. I wanted to play more—I willed my fingers to move again. But tonight, the weight in my chest felt too heavy.

For the past week, all my spare time had been spent studying for the torts quiz earlier today. “Quiz” was a fallacy; it was more like an exam, and Professor Knerr wanted to see who he could get to underestimate the assessment by referring to it as a quiz. Thankfully, Collin knew people in older classes who'd warned us about the misnomer.

I'd studied a lot because I wanted to do well. An easy excuse. Studying was also a sanctuary. Force-feeding my brain information kept it from being eaten up with grief, and the closer we got to the oath ceremony, the harder that was.

I'd stood in the auditorium with the rest of my class, raised my right hand, and swore to uphold the ethics and integrity of the law. And when I'd turned around, I'd looked for Maman because she would've been there—*should've been there*. But she wasn't. And neither was my father because he was still searching—getting close to finding Maman's killer.

But the loneliness didn't get a chance to find me because *he* got to me first.

Harm.

His inky-brown eyes collided with mine from the back of the room. It wasn't a party, but it was a room full of people, and he'd stayed in it for me. I didn't know whether to be grateful or sad that he was there. I was glad to have someone... but I didn't really have him.

I managed to avoid a promise to Collin that I'd come to his party tonight. I'd had the excuse of studying for the last two weeks, but now that our massive quiz was over, that excuse was gone.

I felt guilty because I didn't return his feelings. I felt even guiltier because there were times...moments of weakness... when I returned Collin's flirtations because Harm was there. Because I knew I wasn't the only one struck that night. And because if he was going to pretend like he wasn't, then so was I. So, I let some of Collin's advances slide—like when he reached for a bite of the croissant this morning. I thought for sure Harm might say something... do something... *flinch*... instead, he hadn't even noticed, too distracted by the call with his brother.

But Sophie had noticed, and I felt bad. I'd realized over the last weeks that Sophie had a crush on Collin—one he was completely oblivious to because his blinders were up to everyone but me.

So, I invited her over for pizza and a girls' night at my apartment. An apology and an escape for the both of us. She'd readily agreed, and Harm stopped to pick up pizza on the way home.

It was for the best.

It was company when the alternative was to spend another night wishing for Harm to come out of his room... even if it was for nothing more than to sing with me. But no matter how late I studied or even how much later I played, he kept to his space. *Like the beast in his west wing.*

Our conversations throughout the day were mostly contained to class and the topics we were learning. We debated back and forth about cases and how to approach them, hypothetical defenses and scenarios. I tried to ask more about

his family and his motorcycle club, but that was guaranteed to grind the conversation to a halt. And the same when he tried to ask about my father or Maman. I wasn't naive. I wasn't going to open up to a man who was determined to remain as closed off as Fort Knox. That was what turned women into fools—giving more than they got.

And anytime we were in the apartment, those discreet boundaries in public became as obvious as barbed wire. Conversations shortened. Meals were spent in solitude. And never did he come back out of his room after dinner.

There was nothing *wrong* with his behavior. Harm behaved like Mr. H had and Mr. Q had before him: armed guards meant to remain unobtrusively and discreetly in my periphery. The problem was that for a moment—an electric, earth-shaking moment—he'd been openly and desirably in my presence. And now I was stuck reconciling the two.

Something had happened with that kiss. Something that had been brewing from that afternoon in the café, growing stronger the night at the piano when our eyes connected and he sang with me, finally striking the very deepest parts of me with something charged and powerful and hot when we'd kissed.

Un coup de foudre.

Non. Impossible. Not for my bodyguard.

My fingers slid reluctantly from the keys like they were letting go the hands of an old friend—the only friend I seemed to have around here.

So dramatic, Daria, Maman's voice chided in my head. I'd made friends in my classes. Collin. Sophie. Ashley. They made me smile and laugh and forget for a few moments how the last three months had upended my entire life. And that was good. I needed those moments. But I also needed reality. The painful, grieving kind. And I couldn't get that from people who had no idea Maman had died—who could have no idea.

Her death had catapulted me into a different galaxy with all new people orbiting around me and none of them able to

get close. But Harm had. For a brief moment—like flashes of lightning in a sad, dark sky—he'd been closer than anyone.

And then he was gone.

Maybe I shouldn't have teased about the nude beaches. Or been so cavalier about my nudity. *Or kissed him so desperately.*

Non. I slid off the bench and went to the kitchen, taking a fresh sparkling water from the fridge and downing a few sips. *Non, je ne regrette rien.* I regretted nothing about who I was or the life I'd led.

I ran my finger along the edge of the pizza box sitting on the stove, the half of the pie Sophie and I left still inside, uneaten. I took a step toward the stairs and stopped. The play of lights and shadows on the staircase colored them to look like prison bars.

Go back to your tower, princess. Where you belong. Sad and alone.

I swiped a tear from my cheek and instead walked into the living room.

"Mon Dieu, Daria. Grief is making you lose your head," I muttered to myself, swiping away a tear as I tried to conjure what Maman would say. "Never lose your head for a man..." *Because they'll always take your heart, too.*

When I reached the edge of the couch, I lowered to the floor, sitting with my back propped against the side and losing my attention to the glittering skyline out the window like it had been strung with twinkle lights.

It was beautiful. Peaceful. It wasn't Paris, but Maman would've loved it here. The food. The bustle. She would've loved to hear how my classes were going, what friends I was making... she would've loved to be there today. To support and celebrate me following my dream—a dream she'd given everything for.

Tears leaked down my cheeks. And she would've loved to hear about the rugged man who sang *Hallelujah* with me. The broken man who'd shielded me with his own body when he

thought we were under attack. *And the silent man who cared for me in the smallest of ways like making sure I didn't forget to eat.*

My breath caught, and my head cocked, swearing I heard Harm's door rattle.

"No record at all?" The low question burst through the soft silence as Harm's door suddenly opened.

I turned, thinking he was talking to me but immediately noticed his cell wedged between his thick shoulder and his ear. His eyes whipped quickly through the dark room. I froze. *He was looking for me.* Should I stand? Make a noise? Do something to let him know I was here? If I did, there was no doubt in my mind he'd turn around with a glower and stalk right back to his sanctuary.

So I bit my lip and stayed hidden. *The wrong thing to do.* But I couldn't stop myself.

"Jesus."

My eyes greedily drank in the sight of him as he padded out from his room into the kitchen. I rarely saw this version of Harm. The one in the dark-gray sweatpants that hung low on his narrow hips, and tonight... he had no shirt on tonight.

He yanked open the fridge, the light teasing over the ridges and valleys of his body before it was gone.

Moonlight played over the muscles of his arms and chest and back. A symphony of sinew. Thick. Taut. Tempting. I bit into my tongue, feeling my mouth go dry. *Nude beaches had nothing on Harmon Keyes.*

"I'll figure it out. Just keep this away from Dare for now; he knows enough," he continued and flicked on the kitchen lights; my hand tightened around my water bottle, desperate to stay hidden.

Instantly his reflection illuminated in the window in front of me like my own private screening: *Harmon Keyes After Dark.*

I pressed back into the couch, focusing on quieting my breathing, afraid even the heaviness of my heartbeat was enough to give me away. The couch hid me from his view, but I wasn't sure if he'd see my reflection in the glass.

I bit my lip, holding back a sigh of frustration. Why couldn't I wonder like this about Collin? Or... anyone else? *Why did I only have to care about the man who was clearly avoiding me?*

"Yeah, I know," Harm said, and I watched his shoulders lower, memorizing every ripple of muscle the window showed. "Thanks for everything."

He closed the pizza box and then proceeded to fold it so it would fit in the trash. My jaw went slack, watching his muscles work. I wondered if he was a rough or gentle lover. If he was commanding or a pleasure Dom. If he'd spank me, or call me "good girl," or do both until I came... I shivered, heat snaking straight to my core and forcing my sharp inhale of breath.

Harm's movements halted, and his head cocked to the side.

Merde. I held my breath. I didn't realize I'd made a noise, but I must have.

My teeth clamped into the side of my cheek, watching his gaze slowly prowl the perimeter of the apartment. From the stairs to the piano. Heat trickled over my skin, anticipation lifting the fine hairs on my arms. The dining table. The living room...

"Daria," he rumbled low, zeroing in on the window.

I gulped. "Hello."

I didn't know how much he could see of me, but I could see every vein as they pulsed down his forearms and onto his hands, his grip crushing the cardboard unnecessarily small before shoving it in the trash.

"Let me guess, you're going to tell me that eavesdropping is considered commonplace in France..."

“No, it’s not.” My spine straightened, watching his brow arch. “I was sitting here when you came out already on the phone.”

“So, you just let my private *tête-à-tête* continue?” he drawled, surprising me first with the quality of his accent before it was eroded by the intensity of his displeasure.

I pulled my knees to my chest. “I didn’t want to startle you.”

“What did you think I’d do to you?”

Our eyes met in the glass, the electricity crackling. *Not what I want you to*, I was tempted to say, but the words crashed into the barrier of my lips and dissolved on my tongue. *Anything close to that truth was sure to drive him away faster, and I just didn’t want to be alone right now.*

“Nothing,” I murmured and switched topics. “Is everything okay? You sounded upset...”

Harm folded his arms, his jaw pulsing. *Right*. I wasn’t meant to overhear his conversation.

“I’m sorry. I’m just...” I didn’t know what I was. A million things and nothing at the same time. Paper thin. A house of cards. “I should go to bed.”

“Why are you sitting over there?”

My head slid to one side, unsure if he’d be able to make out the reflection of my tears. “I was having a difficult night.”

A low sound rumbled from his direction. “Because of your mother?”

Why was there an edge to his voice? He sounded almost... skeptical. And it felt like a knife through my chest.

“Yeah.” I choked out the answer and looked away, bringing the pad of my thumb to one cheek and then the other to catch my tears. “I’m sorry. I should go—”

“Tell me about her,” he said, his voice like velvet-coated steel, beckoning me to let some of my hurt unfurl.

My jaw went slack as I found his reflection again. He'd walked over to the other couch that was positioned parallel to the windows and rested both his hands on the back of it, tipping forward in anticipation.

I shouldn't answer him, but I couldn't stop myself. I craved this closeness because it gave me comfort. "She loved the city at night," I said softly, a sad smile catching my lips. "Another thing we were opposites on."

"How so?"

"I always preferred the country—my grandparents' home in the recesses of the French countryside over the bustle of Paris. But Maman... she loved the lights and the glitz and the people. Paris. Lisbon. Vienna. We traveled around a lot. She loved to see the city glitter at night while I... I love when everything is so dark, you can see the shyest of stars." I sighed, staring blankly out the window. "We were opposite on a lot of things. She loved spicy food, I didn't. She preferred warm weather, and I loved the cooler months. She loved driving her tiny black coupe, and I preferred riding the Vespa..."

"And whose preference was the nude beaches?" His voice dropped another rung lower, and my gaze snapped up to his in the glass.

I licked over my lips. "We both enjoyed those."

His eyes glittered, and he said nothing for a moment, but when he spoke again, the direction of his question surprised me. "And your mother never talked about your father?"

My brow creased, wondering where his questions were going yet too grateful for the conversation to ask. "No. He was never a part of my life. Not even before we went to France. And she never made it a thing. Maman was so independent... I never felt like I missed anything. Maybe I'm strange, but for the whole of my life, my father was just another *amour* of hers—more her business than mine. Though..."

"Though what?"

“I guess I never thought about it too much until... she was gone, but Maman never had a job, yet we never needed money.” I didn’t really think about money when I was younger. In France, it wasn’t something that was openly talked about, but Maman never worried. It was only after her death—when I was here—that I wondered things like what I would’ve done if my father hadn’t come for me that night. I wondered about the practicalities of living and in turn, realized how conspicuously absent they’d been from my life to this point. “We were always traveling, visiting her friends. I never wanted for anything. I guess I always thought maybe my grandparents provided for us, but now, after being here... I wonder if he was giving her money all this time.”

I didn’t know much about my father, but from the pieces I did gather—how private and protective he was—it was no wonder he and Maman hadn’t lasted. Maman craved her independence and social circles. Like a shooting star too bright to catch.

“You think he would’ve paid for you to visit a nude beach?” Harm grunted.

“The beaches are free, *Monsieur Protecteur*. Just like the views.” A small smile toyed with my lips.

His jaw twitched in the reflection. “I’m not convinced. Your father is the kind of man who keeps things that are... important... to him close.”

I noticed the way he hesitated, carefully choosing his words.

“Well, he has since Maman...” My voice cracked, and I stopped, caution warning me from saying anything more. I trusted Harm. Maybe I shouldn’t after so little time, but I did. Yet, if the people who’d killed Maman were as dangerous as my father insisted, I didn’t want the truth to put Harm in jeopardy. “Is that why you’ve been distant?” I asked instead, unable to help myself.

“Is what why I’ve been—” He broke off, catching himself before admitting to the change in our interactions. “I haven’t

been distant,” he countered staunchly. “I’ve been professional. That’s all.”

“Have you been professional because of my father? Did he say something?” I licked my lips.

“Why would he have said something?” His eyes narrowed, something flashing in them I didn’t recognize.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Maybe you told him about the nude beaches and seeing my boob or our kiss—”

“Jesus—*no*,” he practically boomed and ran a hand roughly along his pulsing jaw. “I didn’t tell anyone about that, and neither should you. In fact, we both should pretend like that never happened.”

I tipped my head and let out a husky laugh, enjoying the way it made him reach forward and death-grip the back of the couch.

“It’s not a big deal, *Monsieur Protecteur*. We’re both adults,” I murmured. “The human body is just that. A body. You could be fully naked right now, and it wouldn’t faze me.”

At least, I could certainly pretend like it wouldn’t. In theory, it wouldn’t. In reality... even just the sight of his forearms that first morning had done me in. But as long as he didn’t test the veracity of my claim by stripping down and then feeling between my thighs, I was safe.

He grunted. “I don’t know about that.”

My breath caught, a rush of heat pooling in my core. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing,” he grumbled and shifted his weight. “Tell me something... how’d your mother die?”

My lips parted, air rushing through them. *‘Trust no one until I find out who did this.’*

“I don’t...” The ball in my throat grew larger. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to talk about it.”

The silence stretched between us. That was probably the end of the conversation for the night, and I only had myself to

blame. I wiped another round of tears on the back of my hand when Harm's deep voice rumbled.

"Don't want to talk about it, or can't because it didn't happen?"

All the air knocked from my lungs, and I jolted forward. "What?" A small cry erupted from my chest. "What are you talking about?"

"There's no record of your mother's death, Daria. Anywhere." He growled, hunched like a lion about to pounce.

What?

My palms smacked onto the hardwood, my body reeling. It didn't matter that I was already on the floor with no place farther to fall. His claim felt like it ripped the entire building out from underneath me.

"You're wrong."

"Why doesn't she have a death certificate?" he demanded, his voice eerily low.

I shook my head wildly, trying to process what he was saying. "I don't... I can't..."

"Don't lie to me, Daria."

"I'm not," I said and stood, emotions churning in my chest like a hurricane. Before I realized I'd even moved, I was in front of him, my fury waving red with no care that he was the bull. "Why are you saying this? Why are you looking into my mother's death?"

He was unmoving. A solid stone statue with fury in his eyes. "Is your mother really dead?"

I gasped. Before I could think, grief unfurled inside me like a hot whip, drawing my hand back and sending it across his cheek, the smack ricocheting through the room.

"How dare you," I choked out. The urge to apologize was as instantaneous as it was unwelcome.

Maman was gone. I grieved daily. *And he thought to question that? Why? Why would I lie?*

I took the stairs to my room, anger blinding me to everything else until I was alone, the door firmly shut behind me.

I gasped in deep breaths, forcing air into my chest that wanted nothing more than to cave in. I didn't doubt that what he said was the truth, but Harm didn't know the whole truth.

Maman had no death certificate because she was murdered—because of the circumstances of her death. *That had to be the reason.* Because it was too dangerous or maybe my father was trying to draw out the person who'd done it. There was a reasonable explanation, but the accusation in his voice...

I shivered and crawled into bed.

Why would he think I'd lie about this? After everything... foolish heart.

Tears soaked my pillow, grieving now for two people: Maman and myself, for everything I'd mistakenly felt for Harmon Keyes.



“No, please. Please, Maman. Please, don't go—”

“Daria!”

I sat up with a gasp, choking down air as a solid fist banged on my door and then jiggled the locked handle.

Merde. I whimpered and threw off the covers. “I'm sorry—I'm fine.”

I cupped my face and then my shoulders, feeling the sheen of sweat over my skin. *Another nightmare.* I shuddered, the cold pebbling my skin.

“Open the door.” The order was followed by another jiggle of the handle.

My feet slid to the floor and felt my way to the chair in front of the vanity, tugging on the sweater I'd left draped over it.

"No, I'm fine, Harm. I'm sorry," I insisted, my voice choking up at the end. I didn't want him to see me like this. I didn't want to see him at all—not after what happened earlier tonight.

"Open it, or I break it," he demanded in a low voice.

I sucked in a breath. *Brute.* But there was no point in arguing because he'd make good on his threat. So, I padded obediently to the door, preparing myself to assure him I was fine... except I wasn't.

The pain in my chest intensified. The brew of tears strengthened. *How long was it going to be like this?* I wanted answers. I wanted justice. *I wanted to know why there was no record of her death.*

I took a deep breath and opened the door. The lights were off; it was just the two of us standing in the murky darkness. Up and down, his gaze traced over me, the heat of it making my skin tingle.

"I'm fine." The word felt like a time bomb on my tongue.

"What happened?"

My chin dropped, and I blinked rapidly. I didn't want to talk about it. Not to him. Not after earlier. I didn't want—I *needed to get out of here.*

"I had a nightmare, and I think I need to go for a walk."

I swore the subtle noise I heard was the grinding of his teeth just before he said, "It's the middle of the night—"

"I don't care," I insisted and turned away from the door, looking for my shoes. Suddenly everything felt too close. Too tight. "I need to walk outside for a few minutes. Get some fresh air. Space."

"You can't go—"

“No, Harm. I can’t stay.” I stepped back in front of him, my anger brewing. “I need to clear my head from memories of my mother’s death—you know, the one you think I’m lying about.”

I wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Harm’s jaw tightened, and he planted his hands on either side of the doorframe, filling the space like he could turn into a wall at will.

His head lowered, and even in the darkness, I saw how his eyes flickered with remorse. “I don’t think you’re lying,” he said low. “What I said—I was wrong. I’m sorry, Daria.”

My throat tightened. “I don’t want your apology. Not right now,” I said quietly, my voice threadbare. It was suffocating in here. The fingers of my nightmare reached from the darkness to pull me back. “I need to go outside.” I pressed my hand to my chest, feeling like it was getting harder and harder to inflate. “Please.”

A deep noise rumbled from his chest, and I was prepared to fight my way through him if necessary, but then he exhaled roughly and said, “Put on jeans and sneakers.”

I glanced down at my sandals. “I don’t need jeans to walk ___”

“We’re not walking, Daria,” he said with a low, tense voice and then checked his watch. “It’s the twenty-third. We’re going for a ride.”

My head snapped up. *An odd day.* Not only had he remembered, but... *No, I couldn’t have heard him right.*

“Harm...”

“Jeans. And sneakers,” he ordered, his eyes locking on my parted lips. Electricity tingled through my skin. Just like earlier with the croissant—*like always*—he knew what I needed. “I’ll meet you downstairs in two minutes.”

Chapter Twelve

Harmon

“Put this on.” I handed Daria my helmet as we stood in the covered garage of the apartment complex, my bike in the spot next to us.

The thing practically swallowed her head as she clipped it under her chin. My fists balled, resisting the purely selfish urge to reach out and check it—*and touch her*—because she was more than capable of securing it on her own.

“Arms up.”

“Harm—” She broke off when I lifted one wrist and passed it through the sleeve of my leather jacket.

That sweater she’d shoved on over her silk pajama top would do jack shit if, god forbid, there was an accident. So, she was wearing my leathers whether she liked it or not.

“Safety first,” I muttered, holding the collar as she complied and slid her other arm through the sleeve. “Better.”

Keeping my gaze averted, I slung my leg over the seat and slid the key into the ignition. The bike growled to life, sounding more like a wild animal than a machine in the depths of the night.

“Get on.”

A mistake, that was what this was. I knew from the moment the thought sparked in my mind—to take her for a ride—that it would be my undoing. But seeing her there, tears tangled in her lashes yet so determined... I couldn’t stop myself.

Get closer.

What was it about her that I couldn't resist? Was it watching her study and argue the most hopeless scenarios, fight even when her classmates were ready to call it quits? Was it the way she embraced every emotion—even the ones that hurt—like varied notes of a symphony, each necessary to create a layered melody? Or was it the way she carried herself from the start—with an ineffable inner compass, undaunted by the world to fight for what she believed in and go after what she wanted?

Whatever it was, it was a dangerous thing to be able to make a man like me weak.

I gripped the handlebars, prepared for the onslaught. The rumble of the bike hid my low groan when her gentle hands rested hesitantly on my shoulder. Without my jacket, there was hardly anything between her fingers and my skin.

But that was nothing. A pin prick compared to the nuclear blast of heat that exploded when she maneuvered onto the seat behind me, the front of her pressing flush to my back.

Fucking hell. What had I done?

I gritted my teeth and revved the engine. “Hold on,” I said loudly over my shoulder.

And then we were flying.

The asphalt glided like a raging river beneath the churn of the wheels. The roar of the engine chanted that I was in charge. In control. The brisk night air felt like frost kissing my face, making the skin sting where she'd slapped me—not because it still hurt, but because those cells still craved her touch.

There was nothing that the open road couldn't cure except the temptation of the lush, warm woman whose arms wrapped around me. Her hands clutched at the fabric of my shirt. The rush of her breath against my back. She was all I felt.

Like the fucking stone that took down Goliath.

I wove through the streets and onto the highway, every bend pushing her body a different way against mine. I couldn't actually be feeling the hard tips of her breasts against my back or the heat cradled at the center of her thighs. I had to be imagining the way she fit with me, settled against me like the back of my bike was where she was meant to be.

I had to be imagining all of it. *Had to*. Because the alternative was that instead of giving her a ride, I was willingly driving myself insane.

I looped around the beltways, crossed over toward the lights of the city, and then beyond, inching closer to the outskirts when the bridge came into sight. Daria's arms squeezed. She probably didn't even realize she'd done it, but I felt it. I felt where she wanted to go.

"Hang on!" I shouted and then dumped gas to the engine, the bike ripping forward as I wove from the left lane all the way to the right to catch the next exit.

Within minutes, the Golden Gate Bridge glowed in front of us. The towering bridge loomed larger and larger, the lights streaming down from the suspension lines as we crossed onto its path.

I felt her breath catch as we crossed the middle of the strait where the dark bay met the even darker sea, the lights of the city disappeared behind us like we were leaving earth rather than a metropolis.

At the end of the bridge, I veered off the right-hand exit to the scenic overlook. At this time of night, it was closed to visitors, but those kinds of rules were easier to disobey with a motorcycle that could fit through the break in the barricade.

I parked on the far side of the lot and shut off the engine so we wouldn't draw any attention. Without the rumble of the road or the speed of the tires, there was nothing but the sharp clarity of her body. Every tempting inch of it.

"Go look," I said, hoping she'd hear my suggestion rather than my plea.

Air flooded to the bottom corners of my lungs as soon as her heat was gone. Once she was a few steps away, I sat back and swallowed a groan as I reached to adjust my rock-solid dick.

Riding a motorcycle with a boner? Negative ten out of ten. Do not fucking attempt.

“Are you coming?” She abruptly turned and caught me with my hand flattened to my groin.

Fuck. “In a minute.” I reached for the bike keys like that was what I’d been doing all along.

A soft breeze caught a strand of her hair, pulling it across her face. Red-rimmed eyes and wind-stained cheeks, grief never looked so damn gorgeous.

She walked to the end of the pull-off, and I took the brief minute to flick open my fly and shove my cock to the side, the metal ring at the tip had snagged on the inside seam.

Years. Fucking years, I’d had my Prince Albert, and it had never been a problem until her.

I put myself back together and followed Daria, stopping a foot or so behind her. The illuminated skyline glowed off the gentle slope of her neck onto her shoulders, their rise and fall marking the steadiness of her breath. Back at the apartment, she’d stood at the door like a ticking time bomb, tense and trembling and about to self-destruct. Here... now... that was gone.

Gravel crunched under my foot as I inched closer, drawing her eyes back to me.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Dammit. My breath went out in a whoosh. She shouldn’t be thanking me, not after earlier. But that was what drew me to her. The way she wasn’t ashamed of her feelings no matter what they were. She embraced her grief and her independence. *Her desire.* She didn’t try to fit into some mold.

“I’m sorry for slapping you,” she added, her shoulders slumping.

I folded my arms, my body sensing that we were entering dangerous territory. “It... must’ve been the mustard up your nose.”

Her head spun, eyes wide for a moment, and then she smiled. “Yes, it was.” Her accent thickened when she was tired.

“It was fair,” I added lowly after a beat.

I would’ve done a helluva lot worse if someone had questioned me about Ryan’s death weeks after it had happened—or about my brother’s loyalties when it was his source who’d double-crossed us.

A whip of wind blew off the bay, and Daria wrapped herself tighter in my jacket. Dark leather against her pale skin. *What would she look like in just my jacket, nothing but her bare skin and naked confidence underneath?*

Fuck.

“Does she really not have a death certificate?” Daria asked, drawing me out of the fantasy, her attention back across the bay.

“No.”

Whether it was the progression of his research or my brother’s insistence, Ty had spent the evening digging deeper into Daria’s story. We’d been so focused on her father, her mother’s death hadn’t required attention. Until now.

“I don’t have an answer—a reason for you to believe me,” she said thickly, her voice clogged with bitter tears. “I don’t know why there’s no record of her death, but I know she’s gone.”

I winced. “Daria...”

“Believe me,” she insisted, wiping her cheek with the sleeve of my jacket. “I wish I were lying about it, too.”

A groan tore from my chest when her voice cracked at the end. I’d never felt like more of an asshole. I was the one who’d told her she wasn’t alone, and then at the first test, I’d accused her of lying. Fuck my brother and his doubts. I didn’t

care who her father was or what he'd done, there was no faking the kind of grief Daria carried.

"I'm sorry, Daria," I croaked. "I shouldn't have said what I did."

She bundled her arms over her chest. "Why were you looking into her death?"

"Because I look into all my clients. Relationships. Details of their lives," I answered carefully. "Your father... didn't give me much to go on. I can't keep someone safe if I don't know their secrets. Weaknesses. Vulnerabilities."

A tremor made her shake, strong enough to ripple the shadows wrapped around her.

"Is her death the reason for your nightmares?" I asked, my voice notching lower as I moved forward.

Tonight was worse than the first time I'd heard her; my heart had slammed against the front of my chest when I heard her cry loud and clear all the way in my room.

"Yes."

Pain creased her beautiful face, and I winced; it made me physically hurt when she hurt. It shouldn't. God knew it shouldn't, but goddamn, it did.

"I'm sorry." Empathy grated my voice, and then I heard myself say, "I had nightmares for years after Ryan died—after we came home. Apparently panic attacks, too."

She tucked her arms to her chest, and even though she was staring at the city, I knew she wasn't really seeing it.

"I didn't wake up that morning prepared for her to be gone," she said softly.

I locked my jaw. I hadn't exactly prepared to lose Ryan that day, but we were at war; loss was always a possibility. But for her...

"What happened to her, Daria?" I probed. "How did she die?"

In my mind, I already knew the answer; it was the same one I'd given her for her project in class: *No body, no crime*. Her mother had been killed. Murdered. And it was being covered up. It was the only explanation.

Daria turned and looked me straight in the eye. "What do you care, *Monsieur Protecteur*? It doesn't affect your assignment." Her head tipped. "I already know you wouldn't make such a deadly mistake again."

My spine straightened, her barb hitting its mark.

There were two different kinds of trust; one based on strength, the other on weakness. For my entire life, my trustworthiness had been grounded in my strengths. My skills. My character. My honor. But Daria didn't want my strength, she demanded my vulnerability. My raw honesty for hers.

And I didn't blame her.

The last time we both were vulnerable, I'd kissed her; I'd let her believe it was safe to let me in. And then I'd turned around and declared that it was more than a mistake, that it was a dangerous error in judgment and then walked away. I'd left her alone when I'd promised her that first night she wasn't alone.

Now I had to earn her trust again if I wanted the truth. And I did. But more than that, I wanted her.

I cleared my throat, pulling the words out slowly. "My sister... Robyn... she lost both her parents pretty suddenly when she was sixteen." I saw her brow furrow with confusion, I explained, "She's not our sister by blood. Our families had always been close—our parents both worked for the same company—and when hers died, she came to live with us."

It was rare to talk about Rob. She was so damn... independent, and in the most fucked-up twist of fate, I thought for a second how well she and Daria would get along. They were both bold. Undaunted. Brave. Isla was brave, too, but in a softer way. Understated. Rob and Daria... they'd take on the world without a second thought.

“Is she the one you’re worried about?” she asked, piecing together what I’d told her earlier at the coffee shop.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “She’s determined to get justice for her parents’ deaths, and I worry—we all worry—what lengths she’d go to make it happen.”

Her head spun around to me; I definitely had her attention now. “What happened to them?”

“They were scientists—chemists. They were on the development team for a new kind of genetically modified pesticide, and during the trial phase, they got really sick and died.”

“From the pesticide?” she gaped.

My hands balled into fists. “Nothing was proven,” I croaked. “Robyn was their only surviving family, and at sixteen, there wasn’t much she could do.”

“What did the company say?”

“They didn’t say anything. They just paid,” I said, hearing the way my voice drew tighter and tighter. “In addition to her parents’ life insurance, the company put ten million dollars in a trust for Rob when she turned eighteen.”

She hummed. “That’s a lot of sympathy money...”

Damn, she didn’t miss a beat. “Yeah.” I let out a quick exhale.

“Did she use it to get answers? To get justice?” She turned, fully facing me now.

My eyes narrowed, but I couldn’t find any trace of deceit in her eyes—any indication that she knew what had happened to Rob or the role her father had played.

“She tried.”

“What happened?”

“When she was eighteen, she hired a lawyer to access the trust. He suggested she invest the funds because while it was a significant amount of money, to procure evidence and then bring a suit against a company that was then contracted by the

government... it wouldn't be enough," I began. "The lawyer gave her the name of an investment banker who was patient and charming, led her on and said he'd double her money in a year."

"And he lost it."

"No, he didn't." Blood pumped loud in my ears, drowning out the sound of the traffic pulsing across the bridge. "He stole it."

She gasped, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. "What?"

"He was a fraud. A criminal." *Your father*, a small voice inside my head whispered, reminding me these were dangerous boundaries I was crossing.

"She must've reported him—sued him. You can't just do that to someone." Her outrage wasn't feigned. This woman might be a lot of things—a lot of inconvenient and hidden things—but she wasn't a party to her father's business or the crimes he'd committed. "You must've been enraged..."

Guilt burned a fresh path through my veins. "We didn't know."

"What do you mean?"

"My brother and I were overseas at the time. Out of contact for months on a mission. We had no idea any of it happened... if we had..."

Her gaze pierced right to my guilt-ridden soul. "You blame yourself."

"We would've vetted him—vetted them all. But Robyn... she was trusting, and we weren't there to caution her." And it was what killed me the most. After all this time, I wasn't sure my sister had learned how to trust again.

Magnus Sinclair hadn't just stolen her money, her parents' legacy, and the only chance at the truth; he'd taken a piece of her trusting heart, too.

The soft arches of her brows creased. Daria reached for my arm, her touch too damn warm and comforting. "It's not your

fault, Harm.”

I shifted my weight. “She went back to the lawyer to try and sue him, but the lawyer...”

Her head swayed, understanding what I was implying. “No...”

“They were working together,” I forged on. “If any of it could’ve been proven, there wasn’t time. The man who stole her money left the country almost immediately, used it to create his criminal empire. There was an investigation, but it didn’t amount to much—and not his apprehension. Obviously.”

“And the lawyer?”

“He’s getting his due. Finally,” I rasped. The McCullough’s legal empire was starting to crumble after almost two decades. Thanks to Kane, the lawyers who’d broken Rob’s trust all those years ago were finally going to prison.

Rob hoped putting Paul McCullough behind bars would lead her to Sinclair. And it had—but not in the way she’d anticipated. Kane impersonated Remington to bring down the criminal lawyers, but it was Remington, not the guilty parties, who led me here.

To Sinclair’s daughter.

My gaze found hers, burrowing in the dark depths. “One day, I’ll find the man who stole her life and make him pay, too.”

A promise and a warning, though she had no idea of either.

“Good,” she declared strongly—her sense of justice fortifying her tone. It was in these moments when I’d swear on my life she had no idea who her father truly was—what he did. There was no way she could know and be the person she was or accept the person he was. “If it’s been so long, why is your brother worried now?”

I gritted my teeth. *Because if Rob knew where I was—who I was with—I had no idea how she’d react.* The longer she

went without justice the more she retreated, the more she became reclusive, and the more I struggled to recognize the trusting, hopeful woman I'd grown up with.

“Because Robyn’s been looking to get justice for the last sixteen years, and it’s...eating away at her.” Her distance. Her relentless pursuit of any lead that would deliver her Sinclair.

My jaw locked tight.

There was no hard rule that Vigilante business had to be agreed on. The code was simple: Justice for all. However, the rest of us were used to working as a unit—or at least communicating our missions, whereas Rob... Rob had her own band of merry minions in the city, and her targets were becoming increasingly more dangerous.

Daria’s tremulous breath startled me. Her eyes squeezed shut, but it was no match for the tears underneath.

“What is it?” I cupped her face, my thumbs swiping away the tears that ran down her cheeks. “What are you afraid of, *Tristesse*?”

Sadness. The name came unbidden from my tongue, a remnant of the little French I’d been taught meshed with the memory of a worn copy of Françoise Sagan’s timeless classic.

Daria’s eyes darkened. Not offended. Endeared. She was sadness. Beautiful. Deep. Expressive.

“The same thing she is,” she murmured, tears ornamenting her long lashes as they dripped onto her cheeks. “Never having answers. Never getting justice.”

Ice crackled through my veins. “Justice?”

She tried to turn away, but I wouldn’t let her. There was no way in hell I was going to continue to let her suffer this alone. Not anymore.

“Why can’t you tell me? Why can’t you trust me with the truth?” Suddenly, it was all I wanted. Not the truth. *Her trust*.

“It’s not...” Her bottom lip quivered. “He said it was too dangerous to tell anyone—not until he found the people responsible.”

A sharp pain speared through my chest. *Magnus*.

“Don’t hold back, Daria. You don’t have to hold back from me,” I promised, the whole of me quaking with sincerity.

Her throat bobbed. “You don’t have to do this. I’m used to handling things on my own,” she insisted, calling on every ounce of that independence I admired about her and absolutely breaking me with how strong it was.

I’d never considered myself a weak man. Reserved. Gruff. Authoritative. But never weak... never until it came to seeing Daria in pain. Then I felt like a man stranded in the middle of enemy territory with no weapons and no shield, no defense for the way her pain broke me.

My head dipped, and I muttered in a low voice, “Let me protect you like you protected me.”

Her lips peeled apart, and I could pinpoint the second the last threads of her restraint broke. The second her eyes flooded with tears, and her shoulders began to shake. And then her tears dripped free.

“She was murdered, Harm,” Daria choked out. “My mother was murdered.”

I jolted. I knew it was coming—knew that was the only answer left—and still it affected me.

“I’m so sorry,” I rasped and hauled her to my chest just before she crumbled. Her hands dug into the fabric of my shirt, holding on like her life depended on it, as soul-reaching sobs racked her body.

She was the daughter of my enemy, but the truth didn’t matter in the face of her trauma. All that mattered was her. The instinct to protect her. To stop her hurt. To ease her pain.

I didn’t keep track of how long I held her at the base of the bridge, rocking us both and spinning soft promises into a web I refused to regret. Time could’ve stopped for all I knew—paused while it waited for me to regain my senses.

“Tell me what happened,” I said quietly once her cries slowed.

“She left to meet a friend—to meet my father—that night and never came back.”

Meet her father... My inhale burned in my lungs as assumptions ricocheted through my mind. There was no chance that her meeting with Magnus and her death weren't related. Not a chance in hell.

“And they don't know who killed her? Or why?” I confirmed, though the things she'd already said indicated as much.

I felt her head shake against my chest, and I should've pushed her back—separated us a little. Instead, I only held her tighter.

“No,” she said thickly. “She said she was going out to meet a friend, and the next thing I knew, there was a knock on the door.”

“The police?”

“My father.”

I gritted my teeth. “What did he say?”

“I didn't know him—never remembered meeting him or knowing what he looked like. Maman never spoke about him...” She clutched me tighter. “He...told me who he was. Showed me a photo of himself with my mother and me at the hospital right after she'd given birth. And then he told me someone had killed Maman—that she was supposed to meet him, and when he got there, she was already...” She whimpered. “He had... photos... proof...”

That what he said was the truth.

Still, to have to see that... my fingers began to trace small circles on her back. Ten traitors marking territory that could never belong to them.

“He didn't want to show them to me, but he said there wasn't time. That I had to believe him and leave with him immediately because I was in danger. Because whoever killed Maman was coming for me next.”

“Why?” My fingers stopped. *And why the fuck hadn't Sinclair told me any of this if he thought Daria was in danger?*

She shuddered, her softness clinging to me in ways I shouldn't crave. “Because of him.”

My fingers stopped. “What do you mean?”

She had no idea of the whole truth. No idea that she'd only met the facade of Dr. Jekyll, when Magnus Sinclair was the epitome of Mr. Hyde.

“You know... who my father is. He has money. Power. It's the reason he wasn't a part of my life—our lives. To protect us.”

Bullshit. Being absent from her life had protected her, but I sincerely doubted it was Magnus's doing. *And I sincerely doubted she knew who her father was.*

“That's what he told you?” I did my best not to let any of my skepticism bleed through.

“He works for very rich men—is in charge of protecting and investing their wealth. Of course, criminals would want to get to him to access that. He sent Maman and I away after the first time he was threatened. Told her to not tell him where we were going...”

So, he couldn't be tortured for the information. I swallowed hard, absorbing the story and trying to filter out the truth. It was so long ago, what she said was possible. Possible that Magnus thought all of that. Of course, the rich men he worked for were never on the right side of the law. It was one thing for criminals to go after law-abiding citizens, but for criminals to go after criminals...there were no rules when it came to that war.

And considering the way Magnus had stolen all of Rob's inheritance to get his foothold in criminal investing, I didn't doubt the string of enemies that trailed him along the way.

“But he had to know something,” I rasped. “To send money... For her to contact him.”

Daria rolled her lips between her teeth. “I guess, yes. I don’t—” She broke off with a huff of frustration. “All I know is Maman reached out to him because she thought we were in danger. She was going to meet him, but he got there late and —” She broke off again with a sob, and my arms instantly tightened.

Christ.

“I’ve got you, *ma Tristesse.*” *My Sadness.* Now, *she was My Sadness.* I rocked us slowly, wondering where the hell along the way I’d lost my mind.

“He’s been hunting her killer this whole time—staying away because he’s afraid...”

“He’ll put you at greater risk,” I said quietly.

God, it was such a fucking good story. So good, there were seconds I bought it. Seconds I bought that even a man as vile as Magnus Sinclair had a softness—a weakness when it came to his daughter.

It explained all the fragments—tied them all together with a nice little bow. But somehow, I knew that bow would turn into a noose if I wasn’t careful. Sinclair didn’t have an altruistic bone in his body. Not when he left Robyn destitute. And not when he kept Daria under lock and key.

Maybe the truth wasn’t that he was protecting them but instead hiding his vulnerability. Personal attachments were always the first weakness a criminal sought to exploit. Maybe it wasn’t selflessness but self-preservation that made Magnus send them away. And now, if Rob’s intel was correct, and there was an auction happening soon to determine a criminal partnership, anyone who wanted to remove Magnus from the playing field to give themselves a better chance...well, there’d be no more sure-fire way to get to him than through Daria.

Just like I was trying to do.

I tensed, the pang in my chest unexpected and unwelcome. “Daria...” I had to stop this. Pull back and figure out better boundaries for myself.

“What if he never finds him?” she whispered, her head tipping higher. The look in her eyes gutted me. Strength and sadness stitched into the chocolate seams of her irises. “What if the man who murdered my mother is never caught?”

“He will be.” I gritted my teeth.

God, I was a weak man. There was no trauma—no stress—clouding my focus this time as I drank in every detail of her face. Her deep, dark eyes. Her full lips. The curve of her cheekbones and the knot of her chin.

“How can you know?”

No, I warned myself. *Pointlessly, it turned out.*

“Because I’m going to find him,” I promised like the fool I was. “I’m going to find who killed your mother.”

The irony that I swore to bring justice to her mother when the sole reason I was here was to deliver justice to her father wasn’t lost on me.

“I don’t want to put you in danger, *Monsieur Protecteur.*” Her whispered voice crackled with lust like kindling catching flame.

I groaned, my head drifting down like an anchor hung from my lips, drawing them to hers.

“Too late, *Tristesse.* Too fucking late.” And then my mouth crushed hers.

Chapter Thirteen

Daria

One of the greatest lies ever told was that lightning doesn't strike the same place twice.

It did. Scientifically. And this kiss was proof.

The salty scars of my tears were wiped away by the demands of his tongue. It swept inside my open lips and conquered all traces of past and present and left only him. *Pure Harm.*

Gone was the desperation from our first kiss. This one held only demands. Only domination. And I ached for it all. I didn't want to think. To be sad. Or lonely. Or worried. I just wanted to feel everything this man's touch did to my body.

I wound my arms around his neck, flushing my body to his front and reveling in the groan of pleasure that passed from his lips through mine.

Harm was all control. Steadiness. Security. But as our tongues tangled, all that melted away into something pure and erotic.

"Hold on." With a rough growl, he grabbed my hips and hauled me up, my legs instantly twining around his waist. He didn't break the kiss for a single second as he carried me back to the bike and maneuvered us effortlessly onto it so I was straddling his front.

"Harm..." I moaned, rocking my hips along his length.

I was no stranger to pleasure, but it had been a while since I'd been with anyone. Moving. School. Everything got in the

way where it was just as satisfying to use my vibrator rather than try to find a partner.

He steadied my hips and ordered, “Lie back.”

I shivered at the possessiveness in his tone and slowly let myself lower until I rested on the prow of his motorcycle, his jacket shielding my back from the cold metal.

One hand splayed over my hip and onto my stomach. A possessive print that made me shiver. The other grabbed the edge of his jacket, finding one of the pockets and pulling something free.

“Trust me?”

“Yes,” I said instantly, squinting to try and see what—I gasped when I heard the unmistakable swish and click of a blade. Light caught on the sharp metal—and the glint in Harm’s eyes.

“What—” I sucked in a breath.

“Don’t move,” he warned, drawing the knife between my thighs.

His hand on my hip was a warm weight—a comforting presence to hold me steady. My teeth grabbed my bottom lip, pinching hard as I felt the bite of the knife sink into the seam at the apex of my jeans. Stitches popped like fallen sentries, leaving the most private part of me exposed.

“Harm...” I whimpered.

“Steady,” he growled and slid his free hand toward the opening.

My stomach quivered when his knuckles grazed my pussy, my swollen clit clinging to the barest stimulation.

“Fuck, you’re drenched for me.” Lust thickened his voice, and I felt his length swell against my ass. *Or was it my thigh? Or both?* I couldn’t tell, he seemed so big, and I wanted him so badly.

I started to pant when his fingers worked under my underwear and then gasped when the cold, hard metal slid

against my delicate folds. I didn't move. Didn't breathe. There was a knife pressed to my core, and because it was him, *mon Protecteur*, it didn't frighten me like it should have; it only turned me on.

"Harm," I choked out, searching for his eyes, and as soon as I met them, he flicked his wrist, slicing my underwear in two.

"You're always telling me how you don't wear clothes in France," he taunted, flipping the knife closed and tucking it in his back pocket. "Figured you didn't need them."

My laugh dissolved into a moan at the first stroke of his fingers along my slit.

"Beautiful and soft and weeping," he rasped, and then brought his fingers to his mouth, sucking them clean with a groan of pleasure. "And so fucking sweet."

I shuddered at his tone, and my heavy eyelids drifted down, bringing with them the image of this man's broad shoulders, his thick muscles and tattooed skin, all of it wedged between my thighs as he devoured me.

"Harm—" I went to reach for him, but his hand flew out so fast, I didn't see it coming until it was latched on my wrist.

Our eyes met. His glittered with wild lust.

"Arms over your head and grab the handlebars," he ordered firmly, his hold tightening for a second before it released.

I wanted to reach for him—hold him. But that look—I held back, wanting whatever he had in store for me more. So, I did as he instructed, my hands finding the bars behind my head. The metal was cold under my fingers, a shock to the heat that burned under my skin.

I was stretched out in front of him to do with as he pleased. A willing sacrifice to his wildness. Only then, when my body started to bow with tension, did his touch return, and I whimpered with relief. His finger stroked possessively along my seam, gliding through my swollen flesh as though marking his territory before circling my clit and staking his claim.

“Are you always this wet for me, *Tristesse*?”

“You’re welcome to find out,” I said breathlessly.

My answer earned me a finger. Long and thick as it pushed through my folds and sank all the way inside me. The sound he made carried straight to my center, earning him another rush of heat as his finger worked in and out in a frenzy.

I tipped my head back, the hum of the traffic on the bridge circling around me. Lights beamed close to the pull-off—close to us. I wondered if anyone could see. Wondered if anyone would look down here, see me stretched prone along Harm’s Harley, and realize what he was doing.

Realize my savage protector had cut open my clothes in order to pleasure me.

“Is this what happens on those nude beaches?” Harm growled, hooking my attention to the rasp of his voice and then adding a second finger to the first and driving them hard inside me.

My hips bucked toward him, my core clenching wildly around the welcome intrusion.

“No,” I choked out. “*Mon Dieu, non.*” Two languages became one as his fingers found that sweet spot along my front wall, stroking over it as though he was marking it for himself. Tattooing his fingerprints to my G-spot.

“It would be if I saw you there,” he grunted.

“That’s not what happens—” I broke off with a gasp when his thumb pressed to my clit at the same time as his fingers curled into my inner wall, pleasure exploding like a firework lit by dynamite.

When my vision cleared from all the white spots, I saw Harm tip over me, his other hand sliding along my thigh, up my side, over my chest, and finally settling along the column of my throat.

“Maybe the French have normalized pleasure, *ma Tristesse*, but it’s at the expense of possession.”

I cried out with pleasure. The way he called me *his Sadness*. Sadness wasn't something to be pitied, sadness was the product of knowing deep love. Of risking hurt for happiness. It was the result of bravery—of feeling with every ounce of your heart. And knowing that was how he saw me... what he called me...

“Because if you were mine, the only way I'd let you go naked in front of someone else was with a part of me inside you.” His thumb stroked over my bottom lip with the same arc and pressure as his other hand rubbed over my clit, drawing a line of current straight through my body like a lightning rod just waiting for the next strike.

A strangled sound fell from my lips. “Yes...”

I didn't even get a chance to picture what that would look like before white hot pleasure seared my mind blank. My jaw dropped as he did that thing with his fingers again, hitting both buttons of pleasure at the same time. My eyes rolled back, my chest heaving air in panicked breaths as my body fought for release. His fingers worked in a concerted frenzy, playing over my most sensitive flesh like I played the keys of my piano.

“*Fuck, Daria,*” he muttered, the sounds of my slick heat soaking his fingers filtered into my ears.

My teeth sank into my bottom lip, and my palms grew slick on the handlebars as I tried to hold on tighter. My hips bucked, hunger driving them to search for more of his touch.

I was losing control. My insides felt like a bomb that should've gone off. The sparking fuse burned all the way to its root, and now I waited, my breath catching over and over and over again, anticipating the explosion at every moment.

“*Mon Dieu,* please, Harm,” I begged, trying to grind onto his cock. “I want you to fuck me.”

Need coiled tighter inside me, barreling toward a release I couldn't stop. But I didn't just want this for me. I wanted his pleasure, too. I wanted the hard length wedged against my ass to be driving inside me instead of his fingers.

I didn't want to be the only one losing control. *The only one vulnerable.*

Harm's strangled groan worked its way to me. "I can't, Daria. Not tonight."

Why? I swore I'd asked the question, but maybe my mouth had only opened, sounds of pleasure escaping instead as he stroked me.

"Tonight, you learn to take, Daria," he ground out, pushing two fingers inside me. "Only take."

The handlebars became my lifeline. An anchor under the onslaught. My back bowed, my hips angling for more of him. For more of his fingers stretching and stroking inside me. For more of his thumb as it pressed and swirled over the bud of my clit.

I knew how to take but only when the other person was taking in return. Fair, equitable pleasure. That was how I'd always kept things with my partners. *Even like the scales of justice.* Then no one expected more—demanded more—and the balance of power remained stable.

But Harm didn't want fair. He wanted me at a disadvantage. Disarmed by desire. Taking from him while he sat there, his cock harder than steel and his body taut with need while his only focus was his hand between my legs. The thrust of his fingers. My response to his touch.

I was powerless to resist him—to resist everything he gave me. *To resist falling apart under his fingertips.*

"*Mon Dieu,*" I choked out as pleasure swirled inside me. A tornado of fire whipping faster and faster, fraying all my tethers of control. Tears streamed down my cheeks, all of me breaking under his touch.

But it was okay because Harm was there. *Because he had me*—"That's it, *ma Tristesse.* Take it," he cooed, his voice somehow soft and rough at the same time. "I won't let you go."

His words broke me. The breath I'd been holding tore free as my body hurdled toward release like a rocket into the night

sky.

“*Harm!*” I screamed, pleasure like lightning struck from the tips of his fingers to the end of every limb over and over again until I was completely consumed.

Months of sadness—of loneliness and hollowness—vanished. Cells starved of connection came back to life and gorged on this electric intimacy. Stars and city lights blurred together as my body tightened and convulsed, gripping his fingers like it meant to make them a permanent part of me.

Minutes later, it was the coarse sounds of his praise that registered through the clouds of my release. That, and the distinct rumble of thunder in the distance.

“Beautiful,” he cooed. “So fucking beautiful.”

My eyes peeled open, looking for him. His big body was as hard as a rock where he sat at the base of my hips. His gaze dark and stormy with unsated lust. And the thickness of his cock felt so big my mind had to be distorting it—my orgasm confusing my senses.

“Harm,” I murmured. One of my arms that had fallen to my side at some point over the last few minutes extended toward him.

He took my hand, closing my fingers completely in his massive grip and carefully drew me upright. Holding my stare, he lifted his other hand to his mouth, letting me watch up close as he sucked the wet of my release from each of his fingers, his eyes an unreadable expression that awoke the butterflies in my stomach from their pleasure-drunk slumber. And then he pressed the back of my hand that was still in his hold to his lips. Warm. Firm. *Harm*.

Thunder boomed even louder like it was directly over us, and I jumped.

“Time to go,” Harm said, instantly jumping into action.

I wanted to argue—wanted to reach for the thickness I felt between my thighs, but the storm threatened no mercy if we didn’t leave now.

Harm dumped the helmet on my head and declared, “Hold on,” and maneuvered me from his front to sit behind him.

I sucked in a breath, feeling the cool leather straight on my sensitive flesh through the hole he’d cut in my jeans. The bike roared to life, and I had to bite my lip, the vibration an almost painful tease on my hypersensitive skin. Seconds later, we were moving, and all I could do was hold on tight.



“Don’t.” Harm’s arm shot in front of me as I went to wipe the seat.

We’d pulled into the covered garage back at the apartment building just as the thunder sounded like it was almost on top of us, the rain threatening to release at any moment.

“But...” With no underwear and a hole in my jeans, there was nothing to stop my slickness from staining the leather underneath me. Now that we were back, I wanted to clean the mess I’d made.

“I want to see the way your sweet pussy marked that seat every time I get on my bike, you understand?” he rasped low, and my lips parted. His free hand cupped my jaw and lifted it until his gaze pinned mine.

I sucked in a breath. *Possession*. He’d said the French didn’t understand possession, and maybe that was true.

“Oui, *Monsieur Protecteur*,” I murmured huskily.

His jaw clenched, something harsh flickering in his eyes. “It’s your seat now, Daria. Until you don’t want it.”

Of course, I wanted it. I wanted more. I wanted everything I could have from Harmon Keyes. But especially his possession.

Thunder shook the garage with one last warning, and Harm held me for another second before letting go and

ushering me to the building, beating the rain by seconds.

Heat filled my cheeks as we walked by the security desk in silence, the space between us respectable. Meanwhile, I felt the cool air on my bare pussy with each step. I didn't dare look at Harm until we were in the elevator, and when I did, my chest panged.

He stood stoic. His expression unreadable.

Did he regret what had happened? How his restraint had broken? Or was it something else?

As soon as the door closed to the apartment, I felt his hands on my shoulders. I started to relax until I realized he was only taking his jacket from my shoulders.

“Harm...” I said and turned.

“Upstairs,” he clipped, his lips drawing into a firm line.

My eyes dropped and then jolted wide when I saw his cock distended against his jeans, the ridge impossibly long and thick all the way to the—I sucked in a breath, unsure what I'd seen for a split second before Harm held his jacket in front of him, obscuring my view.

“You need to sleep.”

At the very mention of the word, I felt the weight of tiredness seep into every limb, and as I climbed the stairs, Harm behind me, exhaustion settled deeper into my bones. It was the middle of the night. I hadn't slept well before waking up, and what happened on the bike had only worn me out further.

It wasn't until I was halfway through my door that I realized I didn't know what was going to happen now. I spun, seeing Harm rest his hands on either side of the doorframe, restraint and regret tangling in his gaze.

“Are you alright?”

My throat tightened. He was going to leave. After all that, he was going to send me to my bed and return to his own.

“No,” I admitted and shook my head. “Will you stay with me?”

“Daria...” His jaw twitched feverishly. “You need sleep.”

“I know,” I confessed, and truthfully, as much as I wanted him, I could hardly keep my eyes open...but I was afraid of what would happen when they finally shut. Tonight was the first time I’d spoken of Maman’s murder to anyone except my father—the first time I’d confessed how scared I was of not getting answers. If that wasn’t enough to set off another nightmare, I didn’t know what was. “But I also need you to protect me from the nightmares.”

Air hissed through his lips, pressure releasing from his chest for a long second before his arms fell to his sides.

“Alright.”

The last wave of relief let exhaustion claim me, and in minutes, I was curled against his chest, the warm embrace of sleep enveloping me where no harm could reach me because Harm already held me.



The buzz was as persistent as an alarm clock, but the arm that reached out didn’t head in the direction of the phone but rather to the space next to me in bed.

Empty space.

My eyes peeled open, and my fingers traced what was nothing more than a fossil of where Harm had been. But it was proof that he had been there. On top of the covers, but still there. Proof that his arms around me, my head on his chest, and anything—*everything*—that came before wasn’t a dream.

I missed the call and instant later, the buzzing started again.

Mon Dieu, my father could be demanding. Out of communication for days, but then when he wanted to talk, it had to happen right then.

In the little time I'd had to get to know my father, I could see what drew Maman to him and what pushed her away. His money. The way he gave so generously with no expense spared. She loved that. But this part of him that bordered on controlling...she would've had no stomach for it. Maybe that was why their relationship never worked out.

I grabbed the cell and swiped to answer his call.

"Hello?"

"Daria." He exhaled loudly. "Are you alright? Why didn't you answer?"

"I'm fine. I was still sleeping," I murmured groggily, sitting up and stretching, cataloging every sensation that registered.

The tightness in my back from laying sprawled on the prow of Harm's bike. The soreness in my arms from holding on tight as we rode through the city. The ache between my thighs, the memories of last night reincarnating his touch. And the flutter in my chest when I thought about it all.

A dangerous flutter.

Desire created hunger. Heat. Ache. But a flutter...only feelings created a flutter. And having feelings for my stoic, older bodyguard wasn't smart.

"It's almost ten in the morning..." My father's disapproving tone didn't go unnoticed.

"It was...a long night." I drifted my eyes to the floor. There lay my jeans with the unmistakable slice in the crotch. On top of them, my shredded underwear.

I didn't even remember getting undressed, I'd been so exhausted.

"Were you out partying with that boy again?"

I laughed easily. “We were only at Collin’s house that one time. And you don’t need to worry, Collin is just a friend.”

“I don’t like it, Daria. I don’t want it to happen again. You’re too precious to me, and it’s too dangerous.” His firm insistence unsettled me.

“I’m careful,” I assured him. “And Harm is with me.”

“Harm?” His voice lowered half a notch.

I felt heat creep into my cheeks. There was no reason for it. I was an adult, and it wasn’t like my father had any say in my life for the last twenty-two years, he shouldn’t start now. But then I remembered why he was here now...and everything he’d done for me.

“Mr. Keyes.” My voice didn’t waver even though it felt like every other part of me did.

There was a brief pause before he spoke again. “I need you to be either at school or in the apartment, Daria, until I get there. I’ve given you everything you could need—access to anything, a piano for you to practice—everything to keep you comfortable until I’m certain you’re—”

“Are you coming here?” I interrupted, unable to stop myself.

“Yes. In another week.” His throat cleared with a grumble. “I shouldn’t have stayed away so long, so close to your mother’s...” He sighed. “I’m coming to the city to see you. So we can spend time together. There’s even a party one of my business partners is hosting that we can go to. A fancy gala. Figured it might be something you’d enjoy.”

I grimaced. A gala was more Maman’s style than mine, but I refrained from saying anything. I knew he was trying—I could hear it in his voice. So, I could pretend to be excited about a party for his sake.

“That sounds wonderful.” *But if he was coming here...*
“Do you have news about Maman?”

I bit into the side of my tongue, holding it back from asking about her body—her death certificate. It didn’t matter.

Or did it? The way Harm thought I'd lied to him—the conviction in his tone—I wanted a better answer than her murder. I wanted to know why my father was almost keeping her death a secret.

“A lead,” he answered gruffly. “Possibly.”

“Who?”

“Until I know for certain, I'm not going to say. I won't risk it.”

Anger burned into my chest. I wanted to know. *I had a right to know if he had a suspect, didn't I?* She was my mother. She was only in this country because of me—because of my dreams. I blinked quickly, but it wasn't fast enough to disperse the tears that fell.

“Please.”

“No, Daria. I need you to stay cautious. To stay in the apartment except when you're in class. I don't think you understand how much danger you could be in—”

“Don't understand?” I scoffed, my nerves frayed into frustration. “Maman was murdered. My best friend. The woman who raised me and was by my side for my entire life—” I broke off with a small cry, annoyed at how quickly my emotions had gotten the best of me. “I'm sorry, I just miss her, and I want to know—want answers. Please—”

“No, Daria. He's too dangerous.”

Pain broke the cage around my tongue. “Is that why you've kept her death hidden?”

His pointed intake of breath was unmistakable. “Excuse me?” His tone crystallized into something hard and sharp.

My mouth was suddenly dry. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about Maman—not her murder—because it wasn't safe. No one was safe.

Except Harm.

Last night, the only safe place was in his arms. *But there was no turning back now.*

“Her death. There’s no record of it,” I said, my fingers curling tighter around the phone. I glanced at the door, afraid for a second Harm could hear me. “No record of a murder in New York City. No death certificate. No—”

“How do you know that?” he growled, his voice so menacing, I reached for the wall to steady myself.

“Mr. Keyes told me,” I answered, at least remembering to use his formal name.

“How does he know she was murdered?”

The word felt like a noose around my neck.

I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand and straightened my spine. I wasn’t going to feel bad for this. I’d just lost Maman. I was alone here with no answers about her death. No one to confide in. No one to hold on to. And nightmares licking at my heels.

“I’ve been having nightmares—night terrors. Crying. Screaming. Even from a different floor, they’re loud enough to hear. I had to explain them. I’m sorry,” I said and braced myself.

Several seconds stretched out the silence, his heavy breathing the only indication that he was still on the call.

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” he said, his breath expelling with a whoosh. “Alright. It’s alright.”

My chest caved with relief. I was expecting his fury for revealing the one thing he’d asked me to keep quiet, but who could Harm tell? What danger could my bodyguard—*the bodyguard my father hired*—create by knowing the truth? I realized my subconscious had stacked dozens of defenses in those moments while I waited for his reaction, the burgeoning lawyer in me prepared to make my argument.

“This is because I’m not there. But I will be. Soon. And then you won’t have anything to worry about,” he continued calmly though there was still a lingering roughness to his voice.

I swallowed and let my arm fall to my side.

“Yes,” was all I could muster, struggling with the way he conflated my needing support with me needing to be taken care of.

“I have to go, sweetheart, but I need you to remember to stay safe. Just for another week. Lie low, and then everything will be different, I promise.”

How could he promise? How could he know he'd find Maman's killer in that time? There was no point in asking because he was probably just trying to comfort me. It was my own fault that it wasn't working.

Or maybe it was Harm's. Somehow, he'd made it okay for me to be both sad and strong at the same time.

And now, I needed to make sure he was okay having broken all the rules and crossed all his invisible boundaries because I refused to go back.

Chapter Fourteen

Harmon

In the last week, sleep had become a friend I no longer knew. Thinking. Wondering. *Wanting*. There were a million reasons that kept me restless, but last night... last night had made sleep an enemy.

The feel of her body pressed against mine. The soft warmth of her breath reached through the fabric of my shirt. It had been like lying behind enemy lines, waiting for one slight move or one brief touch to expose my weakness—*the way I wanted her*—and let it consume me.

My brother had told me to get close. *What fucking bullshit*. To see her stretched over my bike, vulnerable and begging for release as her tight cunt gripped my fingers... yeah, I hadn't gotten close. I'd gotten intimate.

And fuck me for not knowing the difference until it was too late.

The hours ticked away as I tilled through what I'd learned about her mother's death, the skeleton story now saturated with facts. *Murdered*. It was an unexpected development. Of course, my first thought went to Magnus—that he murdered Sandrine, but why? He hadn't been in their lives at all, and if her assumption was correct—that he'd been funneling money to support them—why kill her mother now? Did Sandrine know who he was? What he did? Was she threatening to expose him? Had she been blackmailing him all these years?

No. She never would've lived this long if she'd resorted to blackmail.

But the alternative... that Sandrine was in danger from one of Magnus's enemies? I hated to admit it was equally as likely. Criminals were as equal a target of other criminals as they were of law enforcement, especially the circles Magnus ran in. High-stakes investment in criminal enterprises and operations... underground wars were fought to win those deals by men with no moral compass. Killing Sandrine to get to Magnus was cheap collateral to win a business deal worth billions.

Regardless of the scenario, Daria's outcome was the same. She was a weakness—something his enemies or competition would exploit.

Just like I was attempting to do. No—just like I should've been.

But I wasn't because I was too close.

Fuck. Air hissed through my lips as pain twisted in my chest.

I hadn't... slept... with a woman in so long. Sex was different. Sex could be... exactly what she said. Physical. A simple hunger to be sated. But this... she'd asked me to stay, and God help me, I never wanted to leave.

One night. One bike ride. One woman. And my life was changed.

I felt it just as surely as I felt my bike claw across the length of the bridge. *Powerful.* As surely as I felt her tears water my chest. *Emotional.* And as surely as I felt her body release like I'd touched heaven with my fingertips. *Undeniable.*

I cared about her. I cared about what happened to her. I cared about protecting her. From her father's enemies. From her father. *From me.*

I fucking cared about Daria Sinclair, and there was no amount of training... no amount of preparation... no amount of knowledge that could've prepared me for the unconventional war of caring for your target.

Not even what happened to my brother was enough to keep me from making the same mistake.

“Harm...”

My body stilled. *She was here.* I turned and looked to the staircase, seeing her at the top in black yoga pants and a loose blouse. Casual but elegant. *And entirely arousing.*

“Daria.” My voice cracked.

She descended slowly, teasing me with the length of her legs. Legs that had been wrapped around my waist not even twelve hours ago. Legs that would look even better wrapped around my neck—*Shit.* My hands tightened on the counter, and I shifted my weight, grateful the island hid the response of my lower half.

“Pancakes or yogurt for brunch?” I grunted before she could say anything.

She stopped and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, hesitating just a moment before surprising me. “Eggs.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Are you sure?”

“Scrambled, please.” Her eyes locked with mine, and for a long moment, neither of us moved.

Scrambled eggs were a big fucking deal around here. It was the little things that concealed the biggest vulnerabilities. Last night, she’d trusted me with the truth about Sandrine’s murder. This morning, she wanted to fight another unexpected battle of grief. With me.

My heart thumped hard in my chest. A possessive kind of pulse. *Fuck.*

I turned and opened the fridge, but even the rush of cold air was no match for the ice in my veins.

“Then I need to run to the store,” I said in a low voice. “We haven’t been getting eggs.”

I needed a minute to think—to come up with a new plan. I was too close. Like Icarus to the sun.

“I’ll come with you.”

Say no, dammit. Instead, all I could manage was, “We’re taking the car.”



“You alright?” I wondered as we pulled out of the lot.

She was quiet in the passenger seat—had been quiet since we’d decided to run to the grocery store. Something was on her mind—and after last night, I’d become the man who wanted to know all of her thoughts. Her worries. Her fears. Her grief.

Not to protect her from them. But to sit in them with her. To be with her.

Dammit.

I should be grateful she hadn’t brought up last night. As the morning ticked on, I’d finagled with every possible variation of “last night was a mistake,” and in the end, none of them would stand up to Daria. None of them would hold muster against the twinkle in her honey-brown eyes and the curve of her lip as she teased me for making sex so serious—for giving too much weight to pleasure.

But it was more than just pleasure.

It was grief and truth and connection and trust. It was every goddamn vulnerability I never showed anyone, but I’d shown it to her.

And what should’ve been a relief—to be spared the ‘what happens now’ conversation—instead felt like the most dangerous awakening.

She was silent because it wasn’t simple pleasure. She was silent because it was something deep and meaningful and unfuckingbreakable.

And she was silent because she was just as fucking afraid of what it was as I was.

“Fine.” Daria gave her head a little shake, her focus staring blankly out the window.

I shouldn’t probe, but what the hell, I’d already done so many fucking things I shouldn’t have by now, what was a simple question to add to the list?

“Don’t hold back,” I muttered, an echo of what I’d said last night, and that got her attention to swivel, our eyes connecting for a second. “What is it?”

I tore my gaze away, checking the rearview and noticing a black SUV behind us, the windows completely tinted. I breathed out slowly, feeling adrenaline drip into my veins. It could be nothing. *But it could be danger.* I quickly mapped out three alternate routes we could take to the store, deciding on the one with the most turns, and therefore, the most opportunities to ascertain if we were being followed.

“You can tell me,” I added lowly, fighting to keep my expression devoid of concern as I continued to check the rearview.

Daria sighed. “My father. He’s coming here—to see me.”

What? I hit the blinker so hard I was surprised the damn toggle didn’t snap off. “When?”

“Next week.” Her shoulders relaxed.

As I made the turn, I focused for a second on the tinted-out SUV behind me, breathing a momentary sigh of relief when it continued straight. Relief that dissolved when Daria continued her story.

“He called me this morning. Said he shouldn’t have stayed away for so long and that he was going to make it up to me.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?” I gritted my teeth so hard I felt the tension radiate over my skull.

We came to a red light, and in the middle of my thoughts, I saw that same black SUV cross through the intersection. Or at least, I thought it was the same. There was a car ahead of me, so it was hard to be sure.

“A fancy gala with his friends,” she replied, drawing my attention back to Sinclair.

In a week.

Pieces of my brother’s call streamed into my mind. The parts where he said Rob was avoiding the city—that Remington was in town for a big business deal. And now, Sinclair had told Daria about a gala.

It wasn’t a coincidence.

Bad men did business in the shadows. Evil men did business hidden in plain sight—*usually at very expensive parties*. But all that mattered in this case was that Magnus was going to be here. In San Francisco. Within reach.

And all I had to do to take him down was... sacrifice Daria.

The weight of that thought that had my foot pressing harder on the gas as we approached the next intersection.

“And that doesn’t interest you?” I drawled.

“Seeing him? Yes,” she admitted. “And a gala sounds fun, but I’d rather spend time getting to know him rather than out with his friends.”

I hummed low. Having watched this woman throw herself into fake court cases for weeks now, determined to champion justice, I had a feeling when she learned who her father really was, she wasn’t going to like what she found.

“I think he’s trying to impress me. The money. The apartment and piano. Paying for my education.”

It was difficult for me to humanize Magnus Sinclair and imagine him as a caring father when I’d only ever known him as a selfish narcissist.

“And how would someone impress you?” I asked, slowing again as traffic stuck us at another red light.

She didn’t even pause. “By singing Leonard Cohen and bringing me croissants.”

I sucked in a breath, her off-hand comment hitting me straight in the gut.

My first career in the military had been one of anonymity—one of, if you fail, we'll disavow you, and if you succeed, no one can know. And this career—my vigilante mission—there could be no thanks for men who stepped outside the law to right wrongs. I didn't live for impressing people. Not for recognition or commendation. Didn't want it. Didn't need it.

But to have it from her...

“You're bad at taking compliments, *Monsieur Protecteur*.”

“Because I shouldn't be doing anything to warrant them,” I replied in a low voice, catching her small smile out of the corner of my eye.

“What do you think of my father?”

I flinched. “Excuse me?” *Why would she ask that?* My first thought was that she suspected—that she said something to Sinclair about what I'd told her last night, and he put the pieces together. *Fuck*.

“Well, you work for him—you probably have known him longer than I have.” She looked at me with that stare that made it feel like she could see the marrow sticking to my bones.

The light turned, and I hit the gas, forcing my focus ahead of me and holding it there until we started through the intersection. And then my skin crawled. Cold inched through my veins like my blood was slowly freezing. And the background noise of the cars and traffic and stereo all drowned out.

I'd felt this way once before—in the moments before we'd been ambushed.

My head snapped to the left, catching the black SUV from earlier as it veered around the cars in front of it and headed straight for us. I only had a split second to react, but that was all I needed.

“Daria!” My arm shot out to brace her as the other SUV rammed my side of the car

Fuck!

Daria screamed. The SUV jolted and spun. The seat belt ripped into my chest as we spun out into the intersection. My head swung forward and then slammed back into the seat. But my arm didn't waver. The rest of me could break, but the arm that held her would survive.

Our SUV screeched and skidded to a halt as the other vehicle blasted through us. Cars blared their horns. The intersection wavered into focus. People getting out of their cars. Flashers on.

I looked for the other car, afraid they were going to turn around and hit the other side—Daria's side.

"Fuck," I snarled and whipped the SUV into reverse as soon as I found it.

They weren't going to hit us again. The SUV blocked traffic—protected the two men who'd exited with semi-automatic machine guns in their hands and headed straight for us.

"Harm... what—"

"Hold on," I growled, staring the two men down as I sent us flying backward out of the intersection. "Get low, Daria. Now."

She slunk deep into the seat, holding her arms to her head. "What's happening?"

Locking my jaw, I slammed on the brakes and spun the SUV back around and put it in drive.

Just in time. The first bullets clanged off the back of the SUV, and Daria screamed.

"Car's bulletproof," I clipped. *Of course, Sinclair made sure it was...* and fuck me, I was grateful.

Their shots continued to hail into the car until I veered left onto the next cross street and got us out of their line of fire.

Daria let out a small sound as soon as it stopped.

“Are you hurt?” I demanded roughly, needing to know if we were going to a hospital or home.

“N-no.”

I glanced at her to confirm; No injuries, but holy hell she was shaking like a leaf.

“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath and reached over and took her hand. “It’s alright. You’re alright.”

It was a fucking stupid thing to do. I was speeding away under a hailstorm of bullets from men who were hunting Sinclair’s daughter—I shouldn’t be fucking needing to hold her hand. To comfort her.

“They were shooting at us. At me.” She let out a heavy breath. “They found me. He warned me... and they found me.”

She was in shock. Rambling. Her skin clammy.

“Just hold on.” I clutched her hand tighter. “Hold on.”

By the time we reached the apartment, she’d stopped shaking but she was still as white as a sheet.

I parked right out front and turned to her. “We go inside, and you grab a small bag of clothes and your school stuff. Two minutes. And then we’re leaving.”

Her eyes went round. “Where?”

“Somewhere safe.”

I had to get out the passenger side, the SUV had been hit so hard on the driver’s side that it jammed the door shut. We made it upstairs, and it only took a minute-forty-five before we were back outside.

“Not the SUV,” I clipped, taking her arm and leading her to my bike.

I had no idea how they’d found her—why they’d chosen to attack on the road. Maybe because there was less security and surveillance compared to the apartment, but still, it was a risky move. Either way, they’d been at that intersection at the exact

moment we'd been going through it, which meant there could be a tracking device on the SUV, and I couldn't take that risk.

It could stay here where Sinclair could have his people sweep it and then find a new place for Daria to stay.

I stuffed her bag in the compartment, handed her my jacket and helmet and climbed on.

"Don't let go," I said over my shoulder once she was settled behind me.

Her arms linked around my waist. "I won't."

I'd meant for the ride. But I wanted it to mean more.

I wanted it to mean everything it shouldn't as I sped us south out of the city to the only place I knew she'd be safe. *The garage.*

I was taking my enemy's daughter home.



I didn't call to let anyone know I was coming or what happened; I didn't think about anything except her—getting her out of the city and somewhere I knew she'd be safe. And it wasn't until gravel kicked up at the base of the drive to the garage that the first thought about my siblings occurred. If my brother was here... or Rob...

I'd never seen Sinclair in person. Blurry photographs from when he was younger. News clippings. I had no idea if Daria looked like him. No idea if my sister would take one look at the woman holding onto me for dear life and realize she was related to the man who'd stolen everything from her.

That didn't make Daria guilty by association, my mind argued like it mattered—like there was another way this could end.

There wasn't.

No matter what happened between Daria and me, when Sinclair came to join his daughter, we would finally take him down. And in doing that, Daria would realize I'd been lying to her all along.

But until the day I deserved her hatred, I was determined to keep her trust.

I parked outside the closed garage door. Daria climbed off the bike, and I followed right behind her, removing her helmet and setting it on the seat.

"You okay?" I cupped her face and took longer seconds to examine every inch of it.

She had a bump on the side of her head close to her hairline, but nothing else I could see. Besides fear. And if fear showed the physical damage it did, her whole body would be black and blue.

And so would mine.

Those moments when I knew she was in danger—when I imagined the worst... I'd never felt fear like that before.

"Me?" Her jaw slackened. "Look at your—"

"Just cuts," I brushed her off though it was more than that; I'd compartmentalized the pain in my left arm from when the assailants had rammed my side of the car.

"Where are we?" She turned to the building.

"My garage—Sherwood Garage." My jaw tensed. "You'll be safe here."

Her eyes returned to mine, fear glazed on top. "What happened, Harm? Who were those men?"

I forced out an exhale. "I'm going to find out." I stroked her cheek with my thumb. "I promise."

The man-door to the garage clanged open, and I dropped my hands to my side, turning to see Ty standing outside, his expression indicating that I hadn't moved fast enough.

"Jesus, Harm..." his tone was worried as he scanned my face, cataloging the cuts and scrapes from where shards of

broken glass from the driver's side window had shattered into my face.

"Ty." I folded my arms, keeping myself partially positioned between him and Daria as he approached. My instinct was to protect her. Even here. Even now. *Even with a friend.* "Daria, this is my good friend, Tynan Bates. Ty, this is Daria." *He already knew her last name.*

Of course, Daria stepped forward and extended her hand, completely trusting him because of me.

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, her voice scratchy.

My chest squeezed as I watched them shake hands, my eyes never leaving Ty—a silent warning as he muttered his own greeting.

"What's going on?" His eyes flicked between the two of us.

"Nothing good," I muttered lowly. "We can talk inside, but first I need you to get Rorik over here to take a look and make sure she's okay—"

"I'm fine—"

"Not until a doctor says so." I ignored her protest and grabbed her bag from underneath the seat.

"Go in." Ty motioned to the door. "I'll take care of your bike."

He wasn't thrilled that I'd brought her here, and I didn't blame him. To him, whether she was aware of it or not, Daria was the daughter of our enemy, and I'd just brought her to our compound. One word from her, and our security here would go up in smoke.

I motioned for Daria to lead the way, allowing her to walk in front of me a step or two as I stopped shoulder to shoulder with Ty.

"Is Dare..." I said under my breath.

I had enough shit to handle right now—namely figuring out who the hell had just tried to kill us; I didn't need to have

an argument with my brother about why I'd brought her here instead of the numerous safe houses in and around San Francisco. Friends of friends. Friends of Rob's. Hell, there was even the Armourous Tactical building just outside the city.

"He and Rob went to stay at Jackson and Izzy's for the weekend to watch the kids so they could take a few days away."

I nodded and went to catch up to Daria.

It wasn't until we'd walked the entire length of the garage, and I opened the door into the offices and communal areas of the building that I caught Daria's wide eyes and parted lips.

Right.

"It's a big garage," I grunted, holding the door.

"It's... pristine." She paused, and I watched her scan the room again, over all the motorcycles propped in their respective cubicles. Chests of tools neatly lined along the walls. Only the block marked eleven had a mat down and some socket wrenches sitting out—where Ty had been working when he saw my bike pull up on the screens.

"We like to keep things neat," I said. "Trained that way."

Her attention drifted to the TV monitors and her brow started to furrow. Ty had up all the CCTV footage from around the property instead of the normal slideshows of our work we'd project during the week. Dozens of cameras from inside and around the garage... and then views of the cabins. The perimeter.

The parts of the property that housed all our secrets.

"This way." I reached for her elbow and directed her out of the garage before she started asking questions.

The short hallway dead-ended, and I opted to take her to the left to our lounge room. The other choice would be one of the offices down the hall to the right, but, again, those rooms housed the kinds of equipment that didn't belong in a motorcycle garage.

I held the door for her, watching every glide and sway as Daria walked into the room. My rational brain was certain that no major harm had come to her. But my Neanderthal brain... along with some other uncontrollable parts of me... refused to trust my instinct or my training and wanted to hear it straight from a medical professional's mouth.

"Harm..." she trailed off as she turned in the room, taking in the bar with a tap, the sprawling leather couches in front of a massive stone hearth, and finally, the pool table on the other side of the room, before facing me again.

"You'll be safe here." That was all that mattered.

She pulled her lip between her teeth, and I tensed. Weeks of observing her meant I saw her question before she spoke. I knew the way her mind worked as she processed information for cases, absorbed it, and then distilled it for answers or for the right questions. I knew her attention to detail. The way her brain layered information, not to assume but to uncover.

I wanted to pretend like it wasn't the case, but I knew from the second I walked Daria through the Sherwood Garage, she would realize there was more to our business—more to this property. *And more to my story.*

"What is this place?"

I inhaled slowly, unsure how the hell I was going to thread the needle between truth and secret now. But before I had to walk that line, the door opened again, and Ty joined us.

"Bike's covered up. Rorik will be here in five," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Care to tell me what the hell happened?"

"Yeah," I clipped, leveling him with a hard stare. "Someone tried to kill us."

Chapter Fifteen

Daria

Since I'd met Harm, nothing about him or his life was as I expected. Not his muscles nor his tattoos. Not his kiss nor his tenderness. Not the motorcycle garage his description painted as low-key, and not the doctor he'd called to take a look at me.

I expected tall and lanky with wire-frame glasses and a mustache; Dr. Nilsen was the opposite of those things. He was as big as Harm with the pale complexion of Nordic descent and a severity of his expression that was similar to the other two men in the room; I wondered how long the three of them had been friends.

While the doctor examined me, Harm paced the length of the room that was clearly designed as a man cave—a term I'd only become familiar with since moving to the States. The large leather couch was plush—perfect for watching a game or movie on the massive TV suspended above the hearth. Tynan sat at the bar, drumming his fingers on the dark wood while Harm recounted what happened to us.

Tynan was a quiet sort. Even more so than Harm. Reserved. Pensive. Handsome in his own way, but not... not like Harm.

I watched the interaction between the three men. Harm's restrained anger during his detail-oriented recounting of the attack. Tynan's emotionless but incredibly precise questions. And Dr. Nilsen's quiet attention on me, though I could tell his mind was processing and forming its own opinions of what they were saying.

“They were professionals,” Harm declared. “Coordinated. Military-grade weapons. Stealth attack.”

“If we figure out how they tracked you, we’ll find—”

“The SUV. It’s the only option,” he clipped. “No one else knew we were leaving or where we were going.”

“Unless they had eyes on the building—”

“Then why not attack us there—”

“More security there. More cameras.”

Harm made a low noise of disbelief; he didn’t like that theory. “No. Something’s not right. Too many variables you can’t control in a vehicle attack. You’re practically asking for failure.”

“Maybe they’re dumb criminals,” Tynan replied.

Harm didn’t like that answer either, his frustration oozing off him in deep, forced breaths.

“What do you remember about the men, Daria?” Dr. Nilsen prompted me, his voice low and steady.

“Rorik...” Harm warned with a low tone.

My jaw slackened, and I suppressed the shudder that tried to ripple through me, the memory like an open wound I’d just managed to stop bleeding.

“It’s okay,” I murmured, glancing at Harm. I wanted justice too badly to care if it hurt, so I closed my eyes, and I tried to focus—to answer him—but everything was blurry and rushed. “I don’t...” I clenched my teeth, trying to hold on to a single detail—any detail, but they all kept slipping away.

“What do you smell?” Dr. Nilsen probed.

The memories suddenly slowed, and I inhaled deeply. “Smoke. Oil, maybe, from their engine after they hit us.”

“Good. What do you see?”

I swallowed. Without opening my eyes, I sensed Harm moving toward me. The closer he got, the more the pressure built between us.

“Cars stopped.” My brow creased. “Harm... his scowl.” A low noise—the faintest hint of a laugh filtered in from Tynan’s direction. “The men getting out of the SUV. They had masks on. Holding guns.”

“And what did you hear?”

“Car alarms. Screaming.” I flipped through the sounds like a Rolodex. “Yelling. The men were yelling at each other.”

“What language?”

“English. No accent.” Their voices were clear as day.

“What were they yelling?”

My fists balled at my sides. I tried to concentrate on their voices—drown out the rest of the sounds. “Only the one was yelling. Something about the back—hitting the back. And to stay—” I winced, the sounds of the first bullets firing and hitting the SUV distorting whatever the man was ordering. “To stay away from...”

More bullets. More screams. Screeching tires and horns.

“That’s enough,” Harm uttered, pulling me instantly back to the present.

I gasped and opened my eyes, finding him immediately. He stood beside the couch, staring down at me like a grumpy guardian angel.

“I want to help.”

“You have, but we have enough to go on for today,” he declared and turned to the doctor. “Is she okay?”

“Just bumps and bruises. Nothing serious,” Dr. Nilsen reported, straightening slowly, his astute gaze trained on Harm and the way he watched me.

“Good.” Harm’s shoulders lowered, and I felt the small flutter in my stomach. My safety absorbed him—consumed him.

“Now for you—”

“I’m fine,” Harm gritted out.

“You have glass embedded in your skin—”

“And I’m capable of getting it out,” my stubborn protector insisted and then reached for the notepad Dr. Nilsen had left on the table, scribbling something on the sheet.

“Harm—”

“I need you to take this address back with you to Dex. Have him send over all traffic cam footage—anything in that area to capture the plate on the SUV that hit us or where they went after the attack.”

Dr. Nilsen plucked the sheet of paper and dipped his chin.

“He can send me what he finds,” Tynan chimed in from his perch.

“Call me if you need me,” the doctor said, murmuring a goodbye to me and then giving Harm a scolding stare before he grunted, “Get the glass out of your face.”

“Yeah,” Harm brushed him off.

Once he left, I looked at Harm and asked, “So what do we do now?” I licked my lips. “Do you know... did they go to the apartment?”

My throat tightened like there was an invisible hand wrapped around it. Every time I thought of the attack, I thought about Maman, and then I remembered what my father had said—that the man who killed her was incredibly dangerous. *And now, he’d found me.*

Mon Dieu. I wrapped my arms over my stomach. He was going to be devastated when he learned.

“No, not that I’m aware,” Harm answered. “We’re staying here until I know what happened.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Ty asked low, drawing both our attention.

Harm took a second before he faced his friend and declared, “She’ll stay in the guest cabin.”

Guest cabin? At a motorcycle garage?

“It’s just for a few days.”

There was something Harm hadn’t told me about this place—about the people here or what they did. And I anticipated the moment we were alone again so I could find out the truth.



“Kitchen. Living room. Bathroom. Bedroom.” He pointed to the four areas radiating out from where he stood in the hallway. “The fridge in the rec room is stocked with snacks, but Ty will grill something up for us tonight.”

I stared at him blankly.

“You should shower. Rest.”

I blinked and slowly folded my arms. *Seriously?*

“I’m going to go talk to Ty, and see if he found—”

“Harm,” I interrupted bluntly. “What is this place?”

His eyes flicked around. “The guest cabin.”

“The guest... *mon Dieu*, I don’t have the IQ of an oyster, *je sais ce qu’est une cabane*—I know what a cabin is.” I shook my head and nodded over my shoulder.

“IQ of an oyster?” One corner of his lip ticked upward.

“I’m not an idiot, Harm,” I huffed, exasperated by my inconveniently literal translations. “We just took an elevator down to an underground tunnel that exited into the middle of the woods. This isn’t just a motorcycle garage.” I walked to the front windows and stared out to the lush, green surroundings.

When he said guest cabin, I thought he meant at someone’s house—that we were leaving to go somewhere else. Instead, we’d left the rec room only to continue to the end of the hall and a discreet elevator door that required a key code to call it.

My curiosity peaked. Maybe there was an underground garage, and that was where Ty had pulled Harm's bike.

Wrong.

We descended, and when the door opened, a long hallway stretched in front of us, warmly lit by wall sconces. For the life of me, I tried to envision where we were walking. Was it under the garage? Did it lead off the property? By the time I was convinced I'd oriented myself properly, Harm stopped in front of a door on the right, entering another code to unlock it.

From there, a staircase to another door, and like the wardrobe to Narnia, I'd stepped into the bedroom of a modern wood-framed cabin. The abode was probably small by American standards but felt spacious enough to me.

From the bedroom, the hallway contained the door to the bathroom, and then led into the open kitchen, dining room, and living space. And these windows... gone was the city. Gone were the lights. Trees reached for the sky with gnarled fingertips instead of sleek, slim skyscrapers and enclosed the perimeter in with dense foliage.

I spun slowly to face Harm. He took a slow, deep breath, letting the silence age like a fine wine.

I wasn't the only one who needed a shower and rest.

Harm's clothes were covered in dust. Dirt. *And blood.* Even the hour-long ride into the wind hadn't blown away the traces of the accident.

I approached him, watching his muscles coil tighter.

"Daria..."

"Let me get the glass out of your face," I said softly, bypassing my earlier question for this.

The muscle in his jaw bulged, but he acquiesced with a small nod.

I found a pair of tweezers, a small bottle of rubbing alcohol and some tissues in the small bathroom and then directed us over to the round dining table that could only comfortably seat two.

He took a seat as I arranged my tools.

“Does it hurt?” I asked as I stepped between his spread legs, fighting to keep my breathing steady.

After everything that happened today, all I wanted was to crawl onto this man’s lap and disappear into his embrace. To not fight fair but to succumb to submission.

“No,” he rasped low.

I gently took his chin, savoring the cascade of sparks from my fingertips as I tipped his head to the side. My chest burned. Whatever it felt like, it couldn’t feel good. I took a closer look at the side of his face, bits of glass speared into his skin like gleaming spikes. His face. Onto his neck.

Swallowing hard, I started at the very top, carefully positioning the small tweezers on the first embedded shard and pulling it free. He didn’t even flinch.

For a few minutes, I worked in silence, removing evidence of the attack into a small pile on a tissue on the table.

“Take off your shirt,” I said, my voice husky. His glittering eyes snapped to mine, but I wouldn’t back down. “You refused to be examined by the doctor. I want to make sure there aren’t any pieces in your shoulder.”

He stared at me, as still and as hard as stone for a long moment before he reached behind his head and fisted the neck of his shirt. I moved back just enough so he could remove it, the fabric ending up in a ball on his lap.

I gulped. I should’ve been better prepared for the sight of his chest. Shoulders. Arms. I’d seen them dozens of times over the last few weeks, but not like this. Not up close. Not longer than a stolen second.

“There’s nothing there,” he grunted and started to shift.

Without thinking, I reached out and pressed my hand to his chest. One touch, and the tension crackling between us caught fire.

“Daria...”

I couldn't tell if it was a warning or a plea.

My fingers skated to his left shoulder, the skin already bruised dark. My brow pulled tight.

"This doesn't look good," I murmured.

"It's fine," he grunted. "Just get the glass out."

Without a second thought, I traced the dips and valleys of his skin, the discoloration seeming to worsen by the second. "Harm, it's really bruised, and I think swollen. Why wouldn't you have Dr.—"

"Because it was dislocated during the crash, and I put it back. The bruising and swelling is normal."

My jaw went slack. *Was it normal to be so nonchalant about a dislocated shoulder?*

"You put it back?" I blinked and tried to remember more about those moments in the car, but they were still foggy. All I remembered was clutching my head and hiding from the window with Harm's right arm barred across me.

Except for one second. Right when everything stilled. His arm was gone, and a second later he'd let out a furious groan. I thought it was because of what had happened. Now, I was starting to think that was the moment he'd put his shoulder back into place.

"It's happened before," he uttered like it was no big deal. "Just finish getting the glass out."

I swallowed down my reply and focused on my task. *On my touch.* I traced his collarbone over to his shoulder, now worried what other serious injuries he was ignoring. His skin burned underneath my fingers like there was a current of flame running just beneath the surface.

I checked for sharp shards of glass embedded in his skin, but I was also selfish. Greedy to feel more of the man who'd spent last night driving me wild and this morning keeping me safe.

The hard plane of his chest. The solid knot of his shoulder. Camouflaged under the black and blue was another tattoo on

the back of his shoulder. I tipped closed so I could see it better, and I caught the sharp intake of his breath.

Initials and a series of numbers.

“For Ryan?” I turned and asked.

When he looked at me, our faces were suddenly within inches of each other. The tension so combustible every collision of our breaths threatened to make it explode.

“The glass, Daria,” he said after a moment, his voice rough, and then turned his head completely away.

Stubborn man.

Breathing deep, I returned to my task. There were a few pieces wedged deeper, and this close, I could see his jaw muscle ripple when I dislodged them. There was one particularly deep one buried at the crest of his cheek, and when I pulled it free, blood oozed from the cut. I set the tweezers down, grabbed a clean tissue and the bottle of alcohol.

“This is going to sting a little,” I murmured foolishly, soaking the tissue with the disinfectant. This man had been through war—survived an ambush; he didn’t need to be told that alcohol was going to burn on an open wound.

His eyes closed as I pressed it to his skin and dabbed it along the smattering of small wounds. Air hissed low through his lips.

“Does it burn?”

He snapped his eyes open and connected them with mine. “Yes.” *But he wasn’t talking about the alcohol.*

“Harm...” I set the tissue on the table.

“They could’ve taken you. Killed you,” he muttered in a low voice, and my breath caught.

We hadn’t been that close to that scenario, had we? I was in the car with him. Those men were approaching but at a distance...

“They didn’t.” I cupped the uninjured side of his face. “You kept me safe.” He’d responded to the attack instantly with strategic composure. Assessing. Adapting. Acting.

Nothing I’d noticed in the moment because all I could think about was the bullets ricocheting off the SUV. But afterward... once I was on the back of his bike, I realized I’d been holding onto him the whole time. His strength. His calm.

“I was afraid—” he broke off with a growl, his teeth gnashing together. He reached for my waist, his big hand spanning almost completely around me. I shivered, heat radiating over me. “I should go—need to go.”

I inched my body forward, further beyond his invisible boundaries. “I don’t want you to go,” I said softly, feeling the hot drip of a tear on my cheek. “What were you afraid of?”

To imagine this massive, muscled man afraid of anything was a gut-wrenching thought.

“Daria,” he croaked, his voice carrying the grip of pain for the first time today, and then his breath bled from his lungs like the deepest wound inflicted on him today was this—*him pushing me away*. “I have to go check in with Ty and call your father.”

My throat constricted. I hadn’t even thought of my father. I’d been living in each moment with no thought to the past or future or anyone except the man who was with me. I hadn’t even thought to bring the cell that my father usually called me on.

Harm stood and caught my chin in his fingers, lifting my face, his expression set. “I’m going to find out who did this, I promise.”

And then he was gone, and I was alone. *Again.*

Chapter Sixteen

Daria

“**S** tay away from the tires!”

I sat up with a gasp, the room swallowing up the only sound in the silence. I pressed my hand to my chest, feeling the tremor of my rapid heartbeat underneath. *The tires.* That was what the one attacker yelled. *Or was it only in my dream?*

What time was it? How long had I... My brows lifted, noticing the little analog clock on the side of the bed and how the arms ticked to quarter-past seven. I let out a soft groan and looked down at my naked chest. I'd gone straight from the hot shower to bed, too exhausted to think about anything else but sleep.

But now... Had I remembered more about the attack? Or was my mind just trying to fill in the blanks? Either way, I had to tell Harm.

I stretched out my arms, the muscles tight and sore from the accident and then the ride here. *Whatever this place was.*

Naked, I stood, walked to the front of the cabin, and stared out the windows at the muted colors of dusk painting the sky. I pressed my fingertips to the glass, feeling its chill.

My stomach grumbled loudly; I needed food, and I needed to find Harm.

Had he learned anything while I'd slept? Had he talked to my father? The balloon in my throat inflated. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten the phone my father used to call me. I wanted to tell him I was okay. I remembered the night he'd

come to Maman's—the worry on his face. I could just imagine his expression when he learned I'd been attacked—when he heard his greatest fear had come to pass.

A shudder ran through me as I dug through my duffel bag, finding leggings and a long-sleeve gray tee. I braided my hair over my shoulder, the long waves a little wild since I'd fallen asleep with it still wet. I slipped on my black flats from earlier and let myself out of my cozy cabin in search of my guardian biker.

Earlier, my thoughts roamed like marbles, spilling across my mind in every direction. *Who had attacked us? What was this garage? Why did it seem like there was something else happening here? What was Harm afraid of?* I'd tried to reach for all of them and ended up with answers to none. But now, I'd slept. Rested. And I wanted answers.

I walked down the hall and entered the elevator, everything as quiet as the catacombs underneath the streets of Paris. But when the elevator doors opened, all that changed. Lively music and laughter came from somewhere down the garage's back hallway. I followed the sound, realizing quickly that the jovial tune was leaking from the rec room and the instrument... I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but it sounded almost like...

My eyes snapped wide. *The hurdy-gurdy.* I didn't hesitate when I reached the door, letting myself into the room to find three men, but only one of them was familiar.

“Daria.” Tynan noticed me instantly and set down his pool cue, pausing his game with the other man who looked about his age and similar stature but who had blonde tousled hair.

The music, coming from the third man who stood with his back propped against the hearth, fizzled off. He was tall with dark hair and one of those perfectly proportioned faces that only grew more handsome when a smile spread over it. He had on dark pants, a button-down shirt that wasn't buttoned all the way, the sleeves rolled up, and a gray vest over top. But it was the instrument that hung from his neck that caught my attention.

The hurdy-gurdy. And it looked and sounded exactly as Harm described. *Which would make the man holding it his friend, Rhys.*

“How are you feeling?” Tynan drew my attention.

“Alright—better after a nap,” I admitted. “I’m sorry to interrupt—”

“No interruption at all,” the musician broke in, his smile widening as he strolled over and extended his hand. “I’m Rhys Garrick. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I went to shake his hand and introduced myself. “Daria Sinclair.” It was almost imperceptible the way his hand paused for a fraction of a second before bringing my fingers the rest of the way to his mouth.

For all his good looks, the brush of his lips on my skin felt bland. *Lukewarm.*

“You have the same tattoo as Harmon,” I remarked, noticing the same initials and date on the back of his wrist.

Rhys tipped his head, looked at his wrist, and then back to me... and I realized my mistake.

Harmon did have the same tattoo, but it was etched into the back of his shoulder blade... which meant in order for me to know that, I had to have seen Harm with his shirt off.

“We all have the same tattoo for Ryan,” Tynan jumped in, once again trying to smooth over the conversation by pulling up his sleeve to reveal the same marking on the outside of his bicep. Except in his case, there was another set of initials and numbers underneath—ones that the other guys didn’t have.

“Not the only thing we have for Ryan.” Rhys winked at me. I had no idea what he was talking about, and my blank confusion must’ve revealed that—either that or Tynan’s death glare warned him to keep quiet. “Well, I wish the rest of our crew was here to meet you; this was such an unexpected surprise.”

“That there’s a woman here, or that she’s not here for you?” the third blond man quipped, joining the other two with

a nod of greeting. “Lawson Hale. Pleasure, and I’m sorry to hear what happened earlier.”

“First off, I don’t bring women here,” Rhys replied smoothly.

“Because Harm refuses to install a revolving door,” Tynan muttered under his breath, and I couldn’t stop my small laugh.

“None of us bring women here,” Rhys said more pointedly.

Tynan lifted his hand, stopping their conversation like he was the responsible one around here and explained, “Law works for a security firm outside of San Francisco; he has connections with local PD, so Harm asked him to assist.”

“And Hazard—my boss—is running his beginner tactical course, so the office is crazy,” Law sighed and lifted his beer mug. “The best thing I could do was not be another body taking up space there right now.” He took a long swig of his drink.

“You’re a very special case, Miss Sinclair,” Rhys chimed in.

“Rhys...” Tynan warned low, and I knew I was missing something. The way Rhys looked at me... not with attraction or leering desire but with intrigue. *Was it because Harm brought me here?* I hadn’t missed the weight of his tone when he’d commented that no one brought women here.

Except I wasn’t... well, I wasn’t sure what I was—his assignment... or just his.

“Just call me Daria, please.” I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, wrapping my arms over my front just as my stomach grumbled. “Tynan, is Harm here?”

“Just Ty,” he insisted and shifted his weight. “Harm was on the phone with some of your father’s... security, and then I think he went for a ride.”

My shoulders slumped. “Oh.”

“Why don’t you take a seat? Do you like barbecue?” He ushered me over to the couch. “Let me heat up some of the dinner I made. By then, Harm should be back.”

If he went for a ride, there was no point in searching for him, especially when my stomach was chewing away at my insides. “Barbecue sounds amazing.”

“Great.” He straightened, gave Rhys a look, and then left the room.

“Is that the hurdy-gurdy?” I wondered as soon as the door closed, fascinated by its construction.

Rhys played a few chords, looking at me curiously. “You’ve heard of it?”

“From Harm.” I nodded slowly. “How does it work?”

He pointed to a few of the strings. “It has several drone strings to accompany the melody played on the keys.”

“It’s so... fascinating.”

“Your accent is... French?” He returned with a question of his own.

I nodded. “I grew up mostly in France with my mother.”

He hummed, playing a few more lively chords while I watched, enrapt with how the instrument worked.

“What are you playing for us next, Rhys?” Lawson came over, smiling, and took a sip of his beer.

Rhys stopped playing, looked at the other man, and then brought his attention to me, a devious grin spreading over his face.

“I’m so glad you asked, Law.” That grin widened. “It appears that Harm brought us our very own *Belle* who has wandered out of her room in the middle of the night—”

I laughed and shook my head. “It’s not the middle—”

“In search of food and friends,” Rhys continued bombastically, hopping up onto the base of the hearth. “And a little... entertainment.”

I pressed my hand to my mouth and shook my head. Lawson bent a little closer to me and advised with a laugh, “It’s best to just let him do his thing. Do you want water, beer, seltzer, or something stronger?”

“Water, please.” I shook my head.

“*Ma chère mademoiselle,*” Rhys boomed in exaggerated French as Lawson backed away. “It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to Sherwood for the night.” He tipped his head, his grin growing lopsided like a devilish Lumière.

A laugh bubbled from my chest as I curled my legs underneath me on the couch. It was ridiculous, but after today, I was glad to smile. Glad for a few minutes to forget.

“So, relax.” The drone strings of the hurdy-gurdy started to hum. “Enjoy your drink, and *be...our... guest...*” Rhys drawled, the slow beginning notes of the classic song emanating from his strange instrument.

A bottle of water appeared in front of me several seconds later, but I was too focused on Rhys. While the instrument was different and the melody not one I’d ever played, a musician recognized another musician. I recognized how the song carried him away, his fingers finding their way over the keys like they were pulled by their own invisible strings.

At some point, Lawson joined him on the hearth, using his pool cue as a fake microphone, and not long after that, Ty’s steady presence caught my attention as he handed me a plate heaping with food. I watched him give his head a slow shake in Rhys’s direction, but even he couldn’t resist the pull of something so lively and familiar.

Hopefully, they were too focused on their comical performance—one that now had them roaming around the room—to pay attention to how I shoveled Ty’s barbecue into my mouth, all rules of etiquette going out the window in the face of hunger.

“That was delicious,” I said when Ty extended his hand to take my empty plate.

Rhys and Lawson returned around the other side of the couch, singing and laughing like a band of minstrels.

“Join us!”

I started to shake my head—to insist I was happy to spectate.

“Or maybe the *mademoiselle* would like to try to play...” Rhys lifted the hurdy-gurdy from his chest to offer it to me.

“Oh, no. Maybe if it were a piano...” My words died when the door to the room swung open, bringing in a rush of colder air and...

Harm.

Our eyes met across the room, everything from earlier rushing back with more than full force.

“Daria...” he rumbled low, his gaze snaking along all three men in the room.

“Ahh, Harm. Our very own boss beast,” Rhys teased, slinging his instrument to the side and lifting his beer glass in Harm’s direction.

“Really?” Harm drawled, one eyebrow arching.

“We weren’t going to let her starve... or sit alone while she waited for you after today.” Rhys chuckled and took a quick swig of his drink. “She’s our very own Belle.”

“Rhys...”

“Our guest,” he clarified. “Not the daughter of a criminal.”

I swore something crackled in the connection of their gaze. Coded messages I couldn’t crack. Harm’s nostrils flared for a split second before Ty spoke up. “Who wants a hot toddy?”

Lawson raised his hand. “Make it a double.”

I pushed off the couch, leaving the other men to talk, and headed for Harm just as he came toward me. The hard lines of his face confessed that he hadn’t slept at all today. I wasn’t surprised. He wanted everyone to think he was a machine. A logical, faultless protector. But I knew there was more; he’d

shown me more. And now, all I wanted to know was what he'd been afraid of earlier.

“Are you alright?” He crossed his arms almost as though he had to force them not to reach for me.

“Better now that I slept and ate, thank you.”

“Good.”

“Do you know anything? Did you talk to my father?”

His mouth tightened. “They haven't found the men or any trace of the SUV that hit us. It disappeared from traffic cams a few blocks from the scene of the accident.”

“Harm...”

He sensed something was wrong. “What is it?”

“Maybe nothing, I'm not sure...”

“Daria.”

I licked my lips. “I think I remember what I heard the one man say,” I offered, meeting his eyes. “I'm pretty sure he said *'stay away from the tires.'*”

Harm cocked his head, the ridge of his brow furrowing. “Away from the tires? You're sure?”

“No.” I sighed. “It came to me as I woke up, so maybe I was just dreaming or imagining...” I swallowed hard. “But it doesn't feel like I am.”

He muttered under his breath, and I could practically see the wheels of his mind gaining speed once more.

“Did you talk to my father?” I repeated, needing to know he was told I was okay.

Harm's eyes flicked to his friends for a moment and then back to me. “No. I spoke to Mr. J, but your father was already aware of the accident. Security at the apartment informed him when we got back—”

“But he knows I'm okay—”

“Yeah,” he croaked. “I told Mr. J you were resting and that he could call my phone to talk to you in the morning.”

“Did he say... do they have any idea...”

He took a strained breath.

“What is it?”

“They want me to bring you back to the city—to the apartment.”

My jaw dropped. “Is that safe?”

Even I was under the assumption that the men who’d attacked us had to be following us from the moment we left the apartment, how else would they have found us? It wasn’t like I was headed to class or somewhere I went on a schedule.

“According to them, it is.” His eyes were pitch black.

“And according to you...” I said breathlessly.

One inch was all it took to feel like the rest of the room and the people had disappeared. “According to me, there’s not enough information to be sure, and I’m not willing to take any risks.”

“Harm...” I wanted to continue our conversation somewhere else—wanted to pick up where we’d left off earlier today. But before I could suggest it, a voice boomed from the other side of the room.

“*Chère Mademoiselle,*” Rhys called, and Harm immediately took a full step back, clearing his throat as he wiped away any trace of intimacy from our conversation.

I turned and saw Rhys standing proudly next to a small electric keyboard. “Look what I’ve found for you,” he said and then nodded to Harm. “Forgot all about this, didn’t you?”

Harm made a low noise, and I wondered who the keyboard belonged to.

“Come play with me.” Rhys waved me over, his fingers running over the keys. “Lady’s choice.”

My fingers buzzed, always drawn to any opportunity to play... especially during stressful times.

I felt Harm's stare on the side of my face, hot and possessive as he watched for my decision. I swiveled my head, and that was all the time it took for Harm to turn and walk over to Ty where he stood at the bar.

There were a million truths I should be focused on right now, but the only ones I seemed to care about were the feelings that Harm tried to hide.

Chapter Seventeen

Harmon

“**Y**ou shouldn’t have brought her here.”

I tensed, Ty’s words like a vise around my chest. I swirled the whiskey in my glass and downed the last of it, wishing I would’ve poured two fingers instead of one.

I shouldn’t have done a lot of things, starting with putting her on the back of my bike.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

My hand tightened on the empty glass, images from earlier bombarding me like memory bombs. Realizing the SUV was heading toward us. The panic on her face after we’d been hit. The fear in her eyes when she saw the men with guns.

I’d spent the last two hours out on the roads, riding and riding and riding like I could outride what the hell happened today.

Two hours to learn that I could outride the memories but not the feelings of almost losing her. The fear. The emptiness. The anger.

“Bullshit. There’s always a choice—and any other choice would’ve been better.” He folded his arms. “You’re in too deep.”

I said nothing because *I was*.

Ty turned, putting his back to the rest of the room so there was no chance anyone could hear him.

“Any other case you would’ve hunkered down in the city. A safe house. A familiar hotel. Called for backup. Hell, even going to Armorous for a few hours was a logical option until things settled,” Ty insisted, pinning me with a hard stare. “Instead you brought her here. A lamb to the lion’s den.”

I gritted my teeth. “She’s no lamb.”

Daria Sinclair was a lot of things—the daughter of my enemy being one of them—but she wasn’t a helpless lamb. She was a fighter. Smart. Calculating. Brave. *A lioness.*

“And it wasn’t a mistake because of who she is, Harm. It was a mistake because of the way you look at her.” His ominous words fell like a net over me, tangling me—trapping me in a surge of emotions I shouldn’t be feeling.

“And how do I look at her?” I challenged, meeting his stare.

One of my oldest friends. One of the men I most respected. Out of all of us, Ty was the one who would always adhere to boundaries. Follow the rules. Never overstep a duty. *Always.* He never shied away from the truth even when it was hard—even when it hurt. And he always saw things with such fucking clarity—never clouded by emotion; it was a gift.

“Like she’s no longer a mark.”

I flinched like he’d struck me. My protest was ready to fire from the tip of my tongue like a flamed arrow—*she was never my mark, her father was.* But that was nothing more than a smokescreen to hide the way I burned for her—to hide the way I’d lost my fucking mind when we’d been attacked earlier, and my only thought was to bring her here. To my home. To where I knew I could keep her safe from everything—and keep her for myself.

Fuck.

“Sinclair is the mark, and he’s coming to town next week, the same time as Shazad’s auction. At least, that was his plan before the accident this morning,” I rasped, revealing what Daria had told me like I was bartering for Ty to believe me—

like this was proof my mind was still focused on the mission and not the woman.

“What?” He faced me, his gaze sharpening.

“Sinclair called her this morning and said he was coming to town next week to see her and take her to some big gala to introduce her to his friends.”

“Shazad’s hosting the gala...” Ty trailed off.

“That’s what I’m thinking.” A social event to hide criminal dealings.

“Jesus...” He took a swig of his drink. “And the attack today was to capture Daria to get Sinclair to pull out of the bidding?”

To be the main financier in Shazad’s heroin empire was unlocking a level of wealth most people couldn’t fathom—*the kind worth kidnapping or killing for*.

“I think it was a warning.” I forced out a tight exhale. “Daria remembers our attackers saying to shoot away from the tires.”

“Which doesn’t make sense if you’re trying to kidnap someone,” he replied with my own thoughts.

“Yeah.” If they were trying to take down a moving target, the first thing they should’ve aimed for were the parts that keep us moving. Blow out the tires, and there was no escape.

“So, they wanted her to be able to get away—to send a warning without drawing Magnus’s wrath,” he mused low.

Kidnapping Daria would’ve brought on an all-out war from Magnus, but to frighten her... to show that someone knew she existed and that she could be gotten to... it was both safer and more threatening.

Daria’s low laugh drew my attention to the front of the room. I gritted my teeth, watching her smile brighten her face.

Rhys was good at that—instant connections with people that put them at ease.

I was convinced there were only two ways to come back from war—closed off so no one could get close. Or letting everyone in so no one could get close. *Either way, no one got close.*

It didn't hurt Rhys had the face of a model—not my classification, just fact; he'd modeled in LA for a few years as a teenager. I felt the surge of something hot and powerful as Daria threw back her head and laughed at something he said like they were the oldest of friends.

The man was my brother, and I'd as soon die for him as I would any of my other guys. But right now, the way he smiled back at Daria made me want to kill him.

I reached for the whiskey bottle over the top of the counter and sloshed another few ounces into my glass.

“Do you think he'll change his plans?”

“Sinclair? No,” I said flatly. “Not if he's vying for Shazad's partnership; there's too much at stake.” When it came to money—power—Magnus Sinclair wouldn't balk. Not even if it put his own daughter at risk.

“Will you tell her?” Ty asked low.

I drained a long sip of my whiskey. “Not until I have confirmation. I won't get Rob's hopes up or give her the chance to do something reckless with the information.”

“I meant Daria,” he said firmly.

All my muscles tightened, and my tongue suddenly felt like a thousand pounds in my mouth.

If I told her the truth, it could ruin everything. Our shot at Sinclair. Her trust in me. If I didn't tell her the truth, we'd still have a chance at catching her father... *but it would still ruin everything.*

“Should I?” I finally croaked, willing to admit that I didn't have a good answer.

The choices were two sides of the same fucked-up coin, and I kept flipping it hoping to miraculously uncover a different option.

“At the end of the day, he’s still her father.”

“But he’s still a criminal,” I ground out, staring intently at the woman who wanted to become a lawyer. Who wanted to fight for justice. *Who hated the man who’d hurt my sister.* “Maybe learning about the kind of man Sinclair really is will change how she feels about him.”

Ty’s head bobbed but then turned slowly to me, his blue eyes piercing straight through me. “And what about when she learns the kind of man you are?”

I stilled, his words like alcohol on an open wound. When she learned I’d been lying to her this whole time. That I was using her to get to her father. That I’d kept the truth about him from her because we needed her as bait. *That I worked outside the law to bring evil men to justice.*

I downed the rest of my whiskey, the glass clanking a little too hard on the counter when I set it down.

“She’ll survive.” *Like a lioness.* “I’m just her bodyguard; she’ll survive.”

“But will you?” Ty muttered under his breath just before we were interrupted.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Rhys sauntered over and gripped each of our shoulders with one hand, preventing me from walking away from Ty and all the questions I didn’t want to fucking think about right now. “What’s going on over here? A little pow-wow when we’re about to have a concert?”

“You’ve been giving us a concert for the last hour and a half,” I grumbled.

“Not me, Harmie.” His smile tipped higher. “Daria.”

I didn’t like the way his eyes twinkled. Not one fucking bit. But I did nothing as he led the two of us toward the hearth.

Daria sat on the armrest of the couch, the keyboard in front of her, but her eyes on me, warm and hopeful.

Fuck. I ran my hand along the stubble on my chin. I wasn’t fooling anyone—least of all myself.

I shouldn't have fucking brought her here. I should've taken the accident as a sign—an opportunity to step back under the guise of danger and protection. To reinstate all the boundaries I'd carelessly crossed.

Instead, I ignored logic and embraced instinct. I pulled her close when I should've pushed her away. And now, I was afraid of losing something I never should've held onto.

“Ready, *Mademoiselle*?” Rhys stood in front of the keyboard, smiled down at her and then winked at me.

Ass. She wasn't his *mademoiselle*. She wasn't his anything.

“Gentlemen, *Mademoiselle* Daria's musical debut at Sherwood. Please remember, only assholes don't sing along.”

Beside me, Ty shook his head, and Law chuckled.

Her fingers laid on the keys, pausing an instant before they pressed the sound out, the unmistakable first chords of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* resonating through the room.

Of course, a sad song. My *Tristesse* always waded straight to the deep.

The hum of the hurdy-gurdy joined the melody from the keyboard. It was a good instrument for lively, foot-stomping folk music, but it also could create a haunting harmony, something that droned with longing. Not unlike the man who played it: upbeat in almost every scenario but haunted underneath.

Rhys and Daria sang together, and after the first few lines, Ty's deep bass entered in, a roughness to his voice I wasn't used to. I glanced at my friend from the corner of my eye, seeing a layer of strain on his expression that hadn't been there before. Something about the song had triggered him—something I doubted he'd ever share.

A few beats later, and Rhys strolled over to Law, elbowing him to join, too. And that left only me.

I ignored Rhys. The way he walked around me, trying to get me to join in.

Her eyes fluttered open, and the first thing they did was look for me, her rich brown irises caramelizing with unshed tears... and those troubled waters took me under.

I heard myself singing before I physically realized I was. Like that first night at her piano, the music imprisoned us in its grasp, binding me to her in a way that was melodic and melancholic.

We all had grief. We all had ghosts. We all had troubled waters. But I wanted to be the one to dry all her tears. To comfort her.

I wanted to be her fucking bridge when all I could ever be was her bodyguard.

The final lyric of the song boomed through the room, and as soon as it finished, I stepped back—stumbling slightly in my rush for the door, the haunting final chords chasing my heels. I had to get out of there—had to stop *feeling* for the woman who could never be mine.

What happens when she realizes the kind of man you are? I flattened my hand on the wall and sucked in air, the hall closing in on me just like that night at the party.

Ty was right. I'd brought her here because I wanted to keep her safe. From her father's enemies... and from her father. But to do that would ruin the whole reason I was there in the first place—the entire lie our relationship had been built on.

I punched in the code for the elevator, and then movement caught the corner of my eye.

“Harm.”

My name had never felt like more of a weapon than when it left her lips.

Chapter Eighteen

Harmon

“**H** arm, wait,” Daria said, stepping into the elevator before the door could shut her out.

“It’s been a long day, Daria. We shouldn’t...” It was the best I could do when all I wanted to do was reach for her.

Her lashes fluttered. Underneath them, tears. *God, she was beautiful.* And strong. And smart. And righteous. And—no. *Not mine.*

The trauma was fucking with me.

Seeing those men walking toward the car with guns lifted. The fear on her face. The instinct to protect her was trained from experience not emotion. Emotions were a luxury I couldn’t afford.

“What are you afraid of?” Her soft voice held me hostage. There was no interrogation technique quite like intimacy. The concern in her eyes. The plea on her perfect full lips.

I tensed, each breath dumping into my tightening chest adding insult to injury. I wanted her. I wanted her so fucking badly, it was more than dangerous; it was life and death.

The elevator doors opened, and I barreled into the hall, desperate to escape the tension that bound me to her.

“Please, don’t hold back,” she begged, expertly using my own words against me.

My feet stopped in place. No amount of strength could’ve kept them moving when she said those words—my own words—back to me.

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“I don’t need to be protected from you.”

I grunted, pain radiating through my chest. It would be so easy to prove her wrong. To tell her the truth and break every fragile bond of trust she had in me. She was the daughter of a criminal I was determined to destroy. If she knew the real me, she’d know I was her enemy.

But I couldn’t do it... because it would be a lie.

I would die before I let anyone hurt her, even if—*especially if*—that person was me.

I turned. The low lights in the tunnel seemed to glow differently tonight, oozing around us in an eerie haze.

Daria took a few steps closer and then stopped in front of me, her dark eyes shimmering with unshed tears; her expression was stricken.

“What are you afraid of, Harm?” she repeated softly.

Our eyes collided. Tension tangled like roots around us, digging deep and drawing up heat and ache and lust and—

“*You.*” Air expelled from my lips in a rush as I confessed brokenly, “I’m afraid of you.”

Her sharp inhale gutted me further.

“I’m afraid of who you are. How you make me feel. The things you make me willing to risk.” I paused with a shudder. “The way I’m powerless around you.”

“Don’t push me away. I can’t...” She stopped and pulled her lips between her teeth.

Fuck, I felt my control slipping. My rationality bleeding from my seams. “Can’t what?”

A tear rolled down her cheek. “I can’t lose anyone else.”

The sound of a wall crumbling echoed down the hallway; it wasn’t until my hands framed her face that I realized the wall that had crumbled was inside of me.

I tried to stay away. Tried to find every reason to keep the lines clear. Boundaries firm. But none of it mattered when she looked at me with her lips parted, offering up her vulnerability with the most intimate kind of trust. I was strong enough to handle the consequences. I wasn't strong enough to resist her.

With a hungry growl, I lowered my head and claimed her mouth. Our tongues tangled like whips of wind, igniting a storm of passion. Every touch, every kiss fueled our desire, incinerating any doubt that held me back.

Tonight, beneath the ground in the middle of a forest, hidden from everything between stars and sea, there was no such thing as enemies, only a woman who was destined to be mine.

I angled her mouth, deepening the kiss. I wanted there to be no room for anything between us. Not our pasts. Not her father. Not my sister. Nothing.

“Please, Harm.” She sighed and molded her body to mine, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I slid my hands down her back until I found the curve of her ass and lifted her. Her legs twined around my waist like they were just waiting for me to break their hold to the ground. My shoulder burned in protest, but I didn't care. The world could burn, and all that mattered was keeping her in my arms.

“Look at me,” I instructed, and when she did, gone were the tears, and all that remained was the decadent chocolate velvet of her irises. “You won't lose me.”

I'd lose my mind before I let myself lose her.

I kissed her again without a thought to where my feet were going. They knew. They followed the familiar path to my cabin without pause. Every step along the way brimmed with torture as her hips rocked against me, the heat of her so damn close to my cock it started to weep.

My mouth moved to the angle of her jaw, peppering kisses along the soft skin as I punched in the code to unlock my door.

With one hand under her ass, the other fisted the fabric of her shirt and pulled it over her head, leaving it discarded in the

stairwell. My eyes flicked down, her bare breasts pressed to my chest.

“No bra.” I could tell she wasn’t wearing one earlier—the whole fucking room could. “Did you want everyone to see the outline of your tits? Another French custom?”

And they were lucky they kept their eyes respectable, otherwise I would’ve added to my earlier injuries.

“No. Just you.” She shuddered. “I just went looking for you.”

Fuck. I captured her mouth again, pinning her bottom lip between my teeth and sucking until she gasped.

We were in my bedroom now; the layout the same as the guest cabin. I lowered myself to the edge of the bed and held Daria in my lap, afraid if I let off the pressure on my cock, it would explode.

Every moment of restraint over the last few weeks had collected into a stack of fantasies. Fuel. Last night had been the kindling, and tonight, the final spark.

A hiss bled through my lips when her breasts centered at eye level, the staccato rise and fall of her chest a sign that she was just as desperate as me.

“Beautiful,” I groaned, sliding my hand to cup one of the weights, my thumb grazing over the taut, pink peak, drawing it even tighter.

I’d fantasized countless times about her breasts after that first night—after the glimpse I’d had of her dusky pink nipple under her robe. All I could think about was how the soft flesh would fill my hand. The sounds she would make as I teased her. Licked her. Sucked her.

And now, it was no longer a fantasy.

“Harm,” she pleaded breathlessly.

“Tell me again how this isn’t a big deal,” I dared as I dipped my head forward, pulling her nipple between my lips.

Her strangled gasp was like music to my ears, but the way her hips bucked against me was equal parts pleasure and pain. Need tore through me like wildfire, blazing and destructive. I'd never been so fucking hard in my entire life. Never wanted to bury myself in a woman the way I wanted to lose myself in her.

I licked and sucked just like I'd imagined. Learned how every flick of my tongue made her respond. I tortured her the way she'd tortured me, and it wasn't until she trembled in my arms, hardly able to breathe steadily, that my other hand delved between us to find her center.

Her leggings were hot and drenched at the seam, and I dragged my knuckles over where I knew she ached. Again and again, I stroked her through her clothes until sounds of raw, desperate need were the only thing that came from her lips.

"I want to see how much you want me," I growled, lapping her nipple one last time before I gripped her waist and moved her to stand. "How wet that little pussy of yours is for me."

The other night in the darkness, all I could do was feel her heat coating my fingers, feel the clutch of her tight cunt as it squeezed them hard. But if I was going to take her—if I was going to cross this line—I was going to cross every fucking inch of it.

I hooked my fingers under the waist of her leggings, dragging them down over her slim hips until she was able to kick them off her ankles.

"No underwear?" I choked out, staring at her standing completely bare in front of me.

Fuck. She was a vision. Radiant moonlight and effervescent temptation come to life. My cock throbbed so fucking painfully, it punched black spots in my vision.

"I didn't think I needed them." *Because she'd been coming to find me.*

I blinked twice before my vision could focus again, and when it did, Daria was tugging my shirt up my torso. I lifted my arms, letting her remove the fabric.

“Harm...” She let out a soft gasp as she reached for my shoulder. The bruises from the accident earlier had matured into dark splotches that peppered the whole left side of my arm, shoulder, and even onto my chest, obscuring the ink that normally darkened my skin.

“I’m fine,” I hissed as her fingers glided over the injuries, her concern overpowering her desire for the span of a heartbeat.

“It must hurt.”

I gritted my teeth. “When you touch me, the last thing I feel is pain.”

Her eyes shot to mine, their color deepening as I reached between her thighs and skated my fingers along her seam. My mouth tipped up on one side, seeing—feeling the way her breath caught as I slid my fingers over her clit once, twice, before I pushed two of them inside her silky heat.

“Harm...” She let out a deep moan of pleasure, her body swaying. She reached for my shoulders to steady herself as she tipped forward, but I wouldn’t let her back onto my lap.

“That’s it,” I cooed. “I’m going to make you come like this. Standing in front of me like a goddess to be worshipped, *ma Tristesse*. So fucking beautiful when her cunt weeps.”

Her inner muscles tensed around me, my words bringing her pleasure.

I stroked her, smooth and slow, watching desire play over her face. Feeling the quick rush of her breath warm my cheeks. But it was the magnificent little noises eking from her lips that drove me wild and made my cock stretch and swell and throb to be where my fingers were.

My thumb rolled over her clit, rubbing the swollen knot of nerves while I worked that sweet spot along her front wall until the whole of her trembled in front of me.

“Please.”

A deep growl erupted from my lips. One word was all it took to undo me. One word to crumble my resolve. My

reserve. One word to break any and every rule that kept me from her.

“Look at me,” I ordered, holding steady until her eyes fluttered open.

Damn, those eyes.

“Look at you,” I said, leading her gaze down to my hand between her legs. Her desire ran down my palm and dripped from my wrist as her hips rocked greedily against my hand, searching for more. “How wet are you going to be for my cock?”

Her body cinched around my fingers, pulling them deeper.

“Please, Harm.”

I brought my mouth to her chest, right over the furious beat of her heart. “Please what?”

“Please fuck me.”

“Show me how good you come on my fingers first.” I dragged my mouth to her breast, pulling one straining nipple hard between my lips as I stroked her front wall.

She cried out, one hand sliding up to tangle in my hair and hold me to her as her inner muscles started to spasm.

“Give it to me, Daria, give me your everything.” I released her breast just long enough to say, “Don’t hold back.”

My words and the swirl of my thumb over her clit sent her spiraling into orgasm. I leaned back, watching as she cried out my name as her body convulsed at the mercy of her release.

She was exquisite. Every goddamn inch of her was exquisite. And I was too fucking far gone to care that I didn’t deserve her. That whatever this was couldn’t last.

Instead, I imagined always having her like this.

I imagined things I hadn’t thought of since I’d gone to war. Things like a family of my own. Children. Daughters crammed onto a piano bench while their mother taught them how to play, and their dad tried to sing. Things that I stopped believing were possible for me when I came home.

Things that wouldn't be possible if she knew who I was and what I planned to do.

I pulled her onto my lap, holding her, kissing her shoulder and then her collarbone and finally along her neck, the rapid thrum of her pulse caressing my lips.

I was so hard I couldn't think straight. Sweat sheened over my skin, bruises and tattoos glittering under the strain. All I could do was kiss every inch of her in front of me until her breathing started to steady.

When her gaze lifted to mine, I brought my hand to my mouth, licking the trail of cream she'd left from my palm all the way up to the tips of my fingers. Her eyes widened as I sucked them clean.

"So fucking sweet," I rasped.

"Harm..."

I tipped back on my elbows. "I want you to sit on my face. I want your hips to rock and your eyes to roll shut like they do when you play piano, but I want it to be because my tongue is playing every note of pleasure buried inside your sweet cunt."

The blush in her cheeks spread delectably to her chest, her nipples rosy from what I'd done to them.

She shifted her weight, and I hissed, the slightest brush on my cock making it throb painfully.

"Come here," I ordered, lying back farther, so she could move up my chest.

She tipped forward, leveling her face in front of mine, and then declared, "I have other plans."

And then instead of rising above me, she moved down.

Fuck.

"What are you doing?"

One perfectly formed eyebrow arched, and she brushed a wave of hair back over her shoulder, keeping her breasts beautifully bare.

“What does it look like, *Monsieur Protecteur*?” She pulled open my belt and then reached for the button at my fly.

I pushed back up, my jaw tightening when I saw her lithe form kneeling between my legs, her focus intent on freeing my cock.

I reached for her chin, lifting her face. “Let me make you come again.” My thumb dragged over her bottom lip. “I want to taste it.”

“And this is what I want.” She rose with a small but firm smile and pressed her lips to mine, kissing me as her hands tried to work my pants over my hips.

I breathed out a groan, shifting my weight to give her what she wanted—to remove the last barrier between us.

And then I waited.

Waited for the last lick of her tongue before she pulled back.

Waited for those sparkling eyes to fall lower between my legs.

Waited for the punch of her breath into the room when she saw my cock.

Waited for...

“*Mon Dieu.*” Air stumbled from her lungs as her gaze swung back to mine.

The corner of my lips quirked up. “All those nude beaches and you’ve never seen a pierced cock?”



Her hungry stare brought another drop of precum to my tip, the moisture clinging to the silver hoop and then dripping off it.

I hissed when she caught it with her fingertip and brought it to her mouth, her little moan as she savored it driving me wild.

“No,” she murmured. “I’ve never seen something so beautiful.”

I grunted. *Beautiful* wasn’t exactly the word I’d use, but whatever the right word was escaped me when she ran her finger over my tip and then traced the metal piercing.

“Did it hurt?”

“Fuck yes,” I groaned, but I’d endure the pain a thousand times over if I knew it led to this moment. To her.

“Why?”

One finger. One fucking finger of hers had the power to torture me like nothing I’d ever experienced before. One finger as it ran down my swollen length, tracing the veins along the way before working back to the tip. To my Prince Albert piercing.

“Ryan dared all of us after our first deployment.” An idiotic thing when we were younger. Something about having no fear. Being able to withstand any pain. *And not having any idea what real loss felt like.*

“All of you...” Her eyes bulged, and her hand closed over my girth. “You’re all pierced?”

My hand launched out and wrapped around hers, holding it tight. “I’m the only one who matters.”

She shuddered, her head tipping back down for a heartbeat before her eyes matched mine, and she said, “I know.”

Her hold on my cock tightened, and I let out a hiss, pleasure wrapping its hold around my chest like a constrictor coiling around its prey.

“Jesus, Daria,” I ground out, scrambling to take hold of my thoughts, but not fast enough.

She lowered her head before I could stop her, the flat of her tongue coating the broad head of my cock in a slow lick.

Had the universe made her to torture me? To be my sole weakness? She was my Delilah. My Helen of Troy. *My Juliet.* One look from her made me forget that taking her would start a war.

Her lips closed around my hard, throbbing tip and sucked, exploring the piercing with little flicks of her tongue. A groan ripped from my chest, harsh and raw, every muscle tightening to the brink of pain.

I slid my hand to her head, threading my fingers through her hair and rubbing her scalp as she began to suck. “What are you doing to me, *Tristesse?*”

She knew exactly what she was doing, and she liked it. I could hear it in the little mewl of pleasure as she took me deeper, the loop rubbing on the roof of her mouth. *Fuck*, it felt incredible. Heaven on hot, wet steroids. My head dropped back, and my eyes shut as I lost myself to the sensation.

Deeper. Harder. More. Whether I said those things out loud or not, she heard them. Her mouth moved in a tantric rhythm, but it was her gaze that held me hostage. Chocolate depths that filled with power and pleasure and need as I slowly lost my mind.

And when she relaxed, drawing me all the way to bump the back of her throat—

“Enough,” I growled and pulled her up, her lips popping off my dick as I sucked in air.

Fuck, that was close. Precum leaked from my tip, my cock ready to fucking explode.

“Harm,” she begged, my name nothing more than a breathless plea.

“I’ll let you suck my cock all night, *Tristesse*, but the first time I come inside you, it’s going to be in your pussy.” I manhandled her back into my lap until my length was wedged against the heat of her.

“Careful, your shoulder—”

I framed her face and pulled her mouth to mine. “I could lose the damn arm and still not care about anything except being inside you.”

Inside her body. Inside her mind. Inside her fucking soul.

The thought rioted through me, creating an image of a future that couldn't exist. A lie that I was too damn weak to resist. One day, I'd have to let her go. But not tonight.

I moved my hands to her waist, reveling in her beauty as I lifted her up. I searched her eyes again, not because they made me forget everything but because they made me believe anything was possible. One hand skated up to her breast, kneading the weight and thumbing her nipple, while my other hand moved lower between her thighs.

“Harm.” My name came out on a whimper coated with desperation as my fingers found her soaking heat.

I lazily stroked through her slick center like my own body wasn't about to revolt or simply expire if it didn't find relief soon.

“All this, for me.” I dragged two fingers through her seam, pulling them away soaked.

“For you,” she repeated, the husk in her voice was erotic and perfect.

My teeth locked, and I brought my hand to my cock, smearing her slick cream over my swollen flesh before pressing my tip to her and dragging it through her folds. She shivered, and I felt her grow impossibly wetter.

“Take me,” I growled to her lips, notching myself at her entrance.

“Yes.” She lowered onto me. Just barely. Just the tip. Just enough to make me feel like a thousand volts had been sent straight to my heart.

I caught her chin between my thumb and forefinger hard enough that it made her stop and inhale quickly. Our eyes collided.

“Don't hold back.”

And God help me, she didn't.

Daria sank down on my length, our cries of pleasure shredding through the silences as her hot muscles ate up every inch of my cock until I butted up against her womb. I was big, and she was so fucking tight. Christ, she was so tight.

I dragged in harsh, raw breaths, mustering every last ounce of strength to not just empty myself inside her right then.

Tonight was going to be the death of me. Whether by her father's hands or my siblings...wanting her was wrong from every side. But being with her—being inside her—nothing had ever felt more right.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” *Hot. Tight. Wet.* Her cunt was the equivalent of a French kiss on my cock, and I was losing my fucking mind. “Ride me,” I growled and hauled her lips to mine.

Our tongues tangled as her hips began to move. Up and down. Slow and languid. She rode me like some kind of erotic goddess, heady with power and lust.

“Fuck, Daria,” I cursed low into the darkness. “Fucking fuck.”

She rolled her hips slowly—purposely drawing out the exquisite grip of her hot muscles along my length until I was seated all the way to the root.

“You like that, don't you?” I said, my hand hardening its hold on her waist. “Taking my fat cock inside your little pussy?”

She did. She didn't have to say it, I could feel it. Her muscles rippled around me, milking me with their pleasure.

“Yes,” she readily confessed.

My hips started to meet hers, the joining becoming more fevered.

“Because you do it so good, Tristesse,” I said lowly, cupping my hand around the back of her neck. “You make me lose my mind with wanting you. Needing you.”

The words came unbidden like a train off its tracks, my mind was going off its rails, saying things I knew better than to admit—*making promises it was impossible for me to keep.*

“You won’t lose me, Daria,” I swore. “I’m yours. All yours.”

And I was so fucked for it.

My hands framed her hips, locking her in place as I slammed up into her. Her head tipped back, mewls of pleasure soaking through her lips as the head of my cock coaxed her G-spot.

My focus zoomed in and out on her. The way her breasts bounced with each thrust. The way her throat bobbed as she cried for more.

“Harm...” Her brow pinched. “Please.”

A rough sound grated from my chest as I pushed up, and in one swift movement, lifted and turned her in my lap, seating her back down my red, pulsing length so she faced away from me.

“*Ohh...*” Her head tipped onto my shoulder, her eyes fluttering back.

“Does that feel good?” I growled, thrusting slowly into her and letting her feel how in this position, the metal loop rubbed right over that knot of nerves along her front wall.

“Harm,” she moaned.

I pressed my lips to her shoulder, kissing her flushed skin before baring my teeth and sinking them into her.

My hand snaked up her torso to her throat, caging the vulnerable flesh and holding the column of her neck so I could feel every breath—measure the space between heartbeats. *Make sure every inch of her was mine.*

“I’ve got you,” I rasped next to her ear, driving my cock deeper inside her.

I had her. I would always have her. And I was never going to let go.

“Harm,” she begged, angling her head toward mine. Somehow in the sea of lust, my eyes found hers. “Don’t hold back.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a demand. Full and throaty. It filled my veins with an electric current.

I couldn’t hold back. *I’d tried*. Now, all I wanted was to hold her.

A strangled, ravenous sound barreled from my chest as I slammed into her hot center. Her muscles coiled around me. Tighter and tighter until they strangled the very breath from my lungs.

Black spots invaded my vision. The scent of her infiltrated my nostrils. Knowing she was overtaking me drew a low growl from the pit of my chest. From the part of me, I swore I’d closed off years ago—the part of me that could ever think of wanting someone like her.

With one hand on her throat, I reached the other between her legs, finding the swollen nub of pleasure and teasing it with my fingers.

“Oh, Harm,” she begged, and I swore it was tears that ran over my hand at her neck as I played her body like it was my own instrument, my fingers moving in tight circles as I thrust up into her body.

She chanted my name each time I filled her. Each time my piercing pushed over her G-spot. Each time my fingers plucked at her clit.

“Please. *Mon Dieu, please*. I need it, Harm. I need you.”

And I was lost. Pleasure sinking through me like an anchor to her depths, drowning me in her desire and my own.

“Come for me,” I ordered roughly, feeling the pressure build at the base of my spine about to burst. “Let me feel your beautiful sadness weep all over my cock.”

Her cry of release was even sweeter when I held the whole of her in my arms. When I felt the tumble of her pulse as it

raced over the edge. And when her body pulled me deeper like she was never going to let my cock go.

She convulsed, wanton and wild, and all I could do was keep thrusting—keep pushing myself into her heat like if I imprinted deeply enough, I'd never have to leave. And only then, when I thought about having her like this for always, did my orgasm riot through me, whipping me over the edge.

The windows of my cabin rattled with my roar, my cock jerking wildly inside her pussy, filling the depths of her clenching heat with my cum.

At some point—minutes, hours later?—I realized I had to move. I wasn't ready to give up holding Daria for the night, but we couldn't stay like this.

"I've got you," I repeated, pressing a soft kiss to her temple before I carefully moved her off my cock and stood.

Daria instantly turned in my arms, burrowing into my chest. A pang punched in my gut. When was the last time she'd been this vulnerable? When she opened herself so wholly to another person before me? Not just a lover but anyone. Her independence—her cool bravado—it wasn't a show; it was who she was. But who she was was also this. Wounded. Afraid. Aching for connection.

Just like all of us.

"Harm." Her head tilted up.

Every time she looked at me, every time her eyes swirled with longing and her lips broke over my name, I had to remind myself that she wasn't mine. Not really. Not like she deserved. letting my thoughts tangle in the intimacy of now rather than the impossibility of the future.

I cupped her cheek, a single question glittering in her gaze.

"I'm not leaving you," I promised and dipped my head down, kissing her softly.

For tonight, I would be the villain—the criminal—stealing more of her for just a little longer and pretending like it could be forever.

Chapter Nineteen

Daria

“H arm...” His name was the first thing from my lips as my eyes peeled open, ready to trade dreams of my handsome protector for the real thing. But when I looked beside me, the bed was empty. Depressed from where his weight had been.

Slowly, I pushed up, the covers falling from my bare chest to my waist.

“Harm?” I called again.

He didn’t answer, but the aches in my body did. I was sore in places I didn’t know could be sore—as though my body was an instrument on which Harm had just played the first notes, tuning pleasure from every muscle until he made them all sing. *Three times.*

With his pierced cock.

Sore or not, my core clenched at the memory. Once more, Harmon Keyes had delivered the unexpected in the form of a piercing that ran through the tip of his cock. *A Prince Albert*, I’d learned at some point during the night though the pleasure it brought me should’ve made it a king. I’d never seen—felt—anything like it.

All I could think was back to that first night and our conversation about Europe’s nude beaches. I’d played off the human body as a casual—natural—sight. But there was nothing casual about the way Harm looked when he stood over me. Nothing casual about the way the shadows played off every ridge and valley of muscle or the way the low light

made his tattoos dance along his skin. Nothing casual about the way he looked at me with furious hunger in his stare, his cock throbbing long and thick in front of him, the adorned tip dripping with want.

The muscles. The tattoos. And now, the piercing... I'd never been affected by nudity before. Attracted, sure. Intrigued, probably. But *affected*—heart racing, breath stuck, body aching—I'd never been affected before.

I slid from the bed and walked to the kitchen completely nude. One turn of my head confirmed that he wasn't there either—he wasn't anywhere in the cabin. And then I saw the plate on the counter, the late morning light reaching through the room and glinting off the foil he'd wrapped over it.

He'd left me breakfast.

I went over, plucked the note on top, and opened it: *You need to eat.* My stomach grumbled in agreement, and a second later, a chill went through me. *If Harm wasn't here to warm me, then one of his shirts would have to do.*

I went back to the bedroom and fished through the drawers until I found one of Harm's tees. Heather gray, soft, and smelled like him. The fabric dipped in a deep V on my chest and hung to my knees.

Returning to the kitchen, I slid onto the counter stool and uncovered the plate. *Scrambled eggs.* My stomach tightened even as a smile toyed with my lips.

He couldn't have been gone long, I thought as dug into the food—the eggs were still warm. So why had he left? *Was it to have his shoulder checked? Was there new information on the attack?*

I chewed faster, wondering if he had answers—if he'd talked to my father.

Or had he left because he didn't know how to face me?

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. Just sex. That was what I'd told him all those weeks ago. *No big deal.*

How could I have been more wrong?

It was like I'd tried to describe a hurricane as *just* a rain shower. There was no just sex. Well, there would be if that was what Harm wanted—if that was all he could give me, then I would take it. *Because I didn't want to lose him.*

Somehow, in the span of weeks, Harmon Keyes had gone from my protector to a piece of me.

And it wasn't because of the sex. I'd learned early on that life wasn't either love or nothing—that there were fifty shades of relationships in between. But this... what we had... I could practically hear Maman's sigh of dismay now. She'd worried I'd lose myself over a man. But I wasn't lost with Harm; I felt found.

I finished eating and rinsed the plate in the sink, eager to find Harm. I pulled my leggings back on from last night and then skipped stopping back at my cabin, heading straight for the elevator instead.

The door dinged, but unlike last night, it opened to an eerie silence rather than the lively tunes from last night.

I checked the living room first, but it was empty; the keyboard still sat out from when I'd played yesterday. There were other rooms along the hall—offices, Harm had said—but I chose to check the garage first.

The sound of metal clanging greeted me as I stepped into the massive open space. One of the bay doors was open, sunlight glinting off the light gray floor.

“Well, if it isn't our very own Belle,” a familiar voice teased, making me spin almost instantly to my right.

“Good morning.” I dipped my head as Rhys stood.

He was working on a bike that had been covered and stationed along the wall, unlike the rest of the motorcycles they worked on which were each positioned in the numbered squares. The motorcycle looked so different from Harm's. It was sporty, bright red, and looked like it was made for speed. My eyes caught on the emblem on the body—*Ducati*.

“Want to take her for a spin?”

I laughed and shook my head. “I don’t think you want me driving your bike.”

“She’s not mine.” He gave the seat a solemn pat. “Belonged to a friend of ours.”

Belonged. Instantly, I knew to whom. “Ryan.”

Rhys cocked his head as though he was surprised I knew about their fallen friend. “Harm told you about him?”

I nodded. I couldn’t take it back now.

“Never made it back to buy his dream bike, so we got it for him,” he revealed.

“Looks dangerous.”

“Ryan liked to... live life to the fullest.”

My chest squeezed. “So I’ve heard...” I murmured without thinking about anything except how Harm revealed all the guys had gotten pierced on a dare. I wondered if they all got the same one or if there were different ones...

“Oh, yeah?”

My head snapped up, once more finding myself on the receiving end of Rhys’s penetrating stare. *Merde.* I felt my jaw slacken and my mouth dry.

“The tattoos, I mean.”

“That’s all you saw?” He let out a rumble, the glint in his eyes daring me to tell him the truth.

Rhys was charismatic, I’d give him that. Deceptively so. In many ways, he reminded me of Maman; the way she loved her casual relationships, insisting life was so much better that way. She kept everything light. Exciting. New. It took a long time to realize it was simply easier for her to not be hurt that way.

“Do you know where Harm is?” I changed topics and glanced over my shoulder, not seeing anyone else in the garage; if Harm were in here, he would’ve come over by now.

I looked back when Rhys was silent and found him regarding me like there was some new facet he saw. My gaze

dipped, wondering if my skin glowed where the traces of Harm's electric touch lingered.

“He's in Ty's office. In the back to the right, first door on the right.” There was something about the look in his eye when he gave me directions—it had to be that he realized about Harm and me. About last night.

Which made perfect sense. Rhys was an elite soldier. Trained in counterintelligence and surveillance just like Harm. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that I'd left the rec room last night looking for Harm and hadn't come back.

“Thanks.” I didn't linger in the garage. I went back into the hall and followed his instructions. As soon as I got close, I heard voices on the other side.

I lifted my hand, but my knock never fell, my attention stolen by the conversation on the other side.

“She was right. They definitely avoided the tires.” That was Lawson speaking.

“But why get out of the car?” It was Ty's voice. “If they were good enough to execute this attack, they should know the SUV wasn't damaged enough in the hit, yet they tried to pursue on foot.”

“Like they wanted us to get away...” I shivered, hearing Harm.

“Maybe to follow you?” Lawson again.

“Or send a message, which was already our working theory,” Ty reminded.

“A message would be to take her. Kidnap her. Ransom her. Not this.”

“And they said the apartment is safe?”

“I don't care what they said, I'm not taking her back until we know who did this.” Warmth flooded my veins. There were moments when all I wanted was to sink in Harm's protectiveness and never come up for air.

“*You’re too close to this.*” Ty’s voice sounded different now. Worried.

“Don’t,” Harm warned. “I made a promise. I won’t break it.”

“And when she learns the truth about who you are?”

I bit my lip, my throat tightening in anticipation of what he’d say next, but there was nothing more to say. The door swung open, and I was greeted by three pairs of eyes that weren’t expecting to see me. Tynan, Lawson, and Harm.

“Hi...” My voice fizzled to nothing as my eyes went wide, noticing everything else behind the three massive men.

The room was more than an office. It was... out of a movie. Screens littered the walls with surveillance footage and images. Cords came out of the wall in a rope as thick as my leg, each branching off to one computer or another. The pictures on the screen, though... it was footage from the accident.

“Daria.” Harm stepped in front of me, blocking my view.

I blinked rapidly, feeling my eyes wet. “Was that—what is ___”

“Keep me updated,” Harm ordered over his shoulder, stepping forward into the hall and forcing me to move back so he could close the door behind him

My tongue slid over my lips, preparing them to speak. “What is this place, Harm?” I asked thickly. “What do you do here?” *Who are you?*

His eyes lowered over me, goose bumps chasing the heat of his gaze. “Get dressed. We’re going for a ride.”

A ride only meant one thing: *answers.*



We ran into Ty again as Harm led me through the garage. He nodded to me and then quietly uttered to Harm, “Dare will be back later today.” It sounded less like a fact and more like a caution, and I didn’t understand why. Maybe it was whatever the ‘truth’ was that I’d heard Ty allude to.

Harm’s red Harley was parked near the open bay door at the front, left uncovered after his ride last night. He clipped the helmet under my chin and then swung his leg over the seat, waiting for me to climb on behind him.

I shivered when the bike rumbled to life, the vibration teasing parts of me that were so sensitive.

Two revs, and then we were off.

Yesterday, I hadn’t appreciated the coastline as we rode by it; my mind was still on a spin cycle from the attack. But today, the ocean stretched like blue silk all the way to the horizon, and the salt air filled the depths of my nostrils.

We rode for a little while before Harm slowed and turned into a cedar-shaded pull-off at the top of the bend overlooking the stretch of white beach.

I climbed off first, standing next to the bike as I pulled off my helmet and his jacket, laying it over the seat. My fingers traced the emblem for their motorcycle club and then I finally lifted my eyes to his.

“What was that room?”

Harm took a slow, deep breath, lifting himself off the bike and then walking to the edge of the gravel, his focus firmly affixed to the horizon. He stood steady—like the finest marble sculpture—but I felt his turmoil underneath.

“Ty’s office.”

“That’s more than an office,” I murmured. “What really happens at the garage, Harm? What’s your truth?” I asked, air rushing from my lungs like the flow of the waves against the shore. “And why is Ty afraid of me learning it?”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you sure eavesdropping isn’t a French pastime?”

I met his fire with my own. “Are you sure obscuring the truth isn’t an American one?”

A gust of wind took a strand of hair across my face, and instantly Harm caught it, pinning the strand between his big fingers and tucking it behind my ear.

“No. Not at all,” he answered facetiously and with a shake of his head returned his focus to the shore. I waited. Impatiently, but silently, for him to speak again, and when he did, his voice was raw with emotion. “The truth... when we came back from the war, things weren’t right.”

“With you?” My heart thudded.

“With us. With Robyn. With my family. Everything.” He banded his arms over his chest. “We came home in the wake of Ryan’s death, in the middle of Robyn’s nightmare, and two weeks later, our parents were killed in a car crash.”

My hand covered my mouth. “Harm...”

“It was an accident. Devastating for our younger sister, but we were older and had been away...overseas and out of touch for so long... I stood at their funeral feeling hollow. Like I should’ve felt more grief, but all I felt was guilt. For not being here to save them. Or Robyn. Like I hadn’t been able to save Ryan...”

He trailed off, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob several times as he tried to swallow.

“We were all in it—deep in it. The grief. The survivor’s guilt. The anger.” He shook his head. “We had to do something and one day, Rhys showed up with a bright red Ducati. Said he had to do something for Ryan—to honor him—and the rest of us agreed.”

“So you opened the garage.”

His chin lowered slowly. “It was all Ryan’s dream. Working on motorcycles. Making them fast. But we needed something more—a purpose. Robyn was... spiraling. She was close to her parents. Like you. And all she could focus on were the people who’d covered up her parents’ deaths and then stole

their legacy.” His jaw pulsed. “And they weren’t the only ones.”

Slowly, he turned to look at me, and I’d never seen vulnerability quite like this before.

“It felt like everywhere we looked there were bad fucking people getting away with injustice.

And with our skill set, it felt wrong to pretend like it wasn’t happening. Like there was nothing we could do. So we decided to do something.”

“Like private investigators?”

“No. Like vigilantes,” Harm clipped in no uncertain terms, and suddenly, all the pieces crystalized into something clear and concise. “We track down criminals who’ve evaded the law—or who’ve twisted the law to their advantage. We hunt the ones who skirt justice. Take from them what never belonged to them in the first place. Bring their crimes to light.”

My eyes widened. Now, I understood what Tynan meant. The truth. *And why he’d kept it from me.*

“Because of your sister.” It felt harder to breathe. “You’re still trying to find the man who hurt her.”

“The law did nothing to help her. Law enforcement didn’t have the resources to keep searching for justice.” His jaw pulsed. “So, we swore to get it for her.”

“That’s...” I trailed off, unsure of what word was *enough* to describe how loyal this man was to his family.

“Criminal,” he finished for me, clearly mistaking my silence for something different than it was. “What we do is criminal, Daria. I work outside the law. Everything you’re learning about—everything you want to stand for, to fight for, it means nothing to me,” Harm said, a cold edge to his voice.

My throat tightened. The law was my dream... or was it justice? I didn’t need to be a lawyer or even a law student to know that bad people slipped through the cracks. And the worst people? They lived in them.

“All of you...”

He nodded again. “There are other things—legal things. Bounty hunting. Bodyguard services...but they’re all a cover for something more, including the garage.” He paused. “The property is walled in beyond the garage; that’s why there’s an elevator. The tunnel takes you underneath the wall and into the forest.”

“Sherwood...” My jaw went slack. “Like Robin Hood?”

“Fellow vigilantes.” His head slowly swiveled back to mine, and he lifted the sleeve of his shirt, revealing the club’s crest once more. “De oppresso liber. To free the oppressed,” he said. “It’s the motto for the Special Forces... for us.”

“Is that why they’re upset you brought me here? Because the garage is supposed to be a secret?”

My jaw flexed. “Part of it.”

“What’s the other part?”

He faced me, and maybe the whole of him should’ve been intimidating. His height. His broadness. *His lawlessness*. But none of it was.

“You. You’re the other part of it,” he rasped. “And how I feel about you.”

How he felt... “Harm...”

“We’re on opposite sides, Daria,” he ground out. “You want the truth? That’s it. You want to uphold the law, and all I do is break it. We’re on opposite sides. Enemies.” His head lowered as he uttered the word, the heat of it making me shiver for all the wrong reasons. “Do you really want to be with someone who is your enemy?”

My throat was thick, my lungs clogged with wanting this man.

“You’re not my enemy, Harm.” I placed my hand on his chest, shivering at the heavy thud of his heart under my palm. “But even if we were, it wouldn’t matter. We could be enemies. We could be a bird and a fish. Or the sun and the moon, an entire universe in place to keep us apart, and none of it would change how I feel about you.”

He cupped my face, his big palm engulfing my cheek as he tipped my head higher, his pained eyes searching mine. “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” I promised. “We both want to do the right thing.”

His head lowered. “And what if doing the right thing hurts you?”

His question rippled righteous anger through me. I couldn’t understand what scenario he was envisioning, but it didn’t matter. I was going to show him that doing the right thing didn’t always result in hurt or harm or loss. Just like losing Maman didn’t mean I should be afraid to let anyone else in.

“You would never hurt me.”

His low groan seeped into the marrow of my bones. “How do you know?”

“Because you sang with me,” I said simply, that very first act defining the very depths of his character. I ran my fingers up to his jaw, following the edge until it led to his cheek. “Because you have always given me what I needed even when it put you at risk—even when it broke the rules.”

He’d risked more than himself. He’d risked his friends—*family*. He risked the whole of their operation to show me who he was—*what he believed in*. And I... I wasn’t just affected by this man. I was in love with him.

Not the American ‘falling in love.’ That was too simple. Too fluid. A fall was the kind of thing you could prepare for. Mitigate. Maybe even stop. *Non*. This was the French kind of love: *un coup de foudre*. A lightning strike. Swift. Sudden. *Severe*. There was no chance of escaping it. And when it struck, it was capable of changing the structure—the composition—of its target in an instant without warning.

Just like he had changed me.

“I don’t deserve you,” he growled.

“Worthiness is nothing more than the willingness to keep fighting,” I murmured softly. “So keep fighting for me.”

The growl from his chest reached the marrow of my bones as his mouth swept over mine like a whip of fire, hot and insistent.

I opened under his fervor, my tongue searching out the tangle of his. The kiss was furious. Fevered. Like he was desperate to claim something he thought he was going to lose.

My arms wrapped around his neck as his hands moved to my waist, effortlessly lifting me and crushing me to him.

The world tipped and tilted under the power of his kiss. I would've been unsteady on my feet if he wasn't already carrying me, and I didn't even notice we were moving until he set me on his bike, maneuvering us until I was seated in front of him, our bodies flush from waist to chest.

I shivered, air reaching through the slit in my jeans. I latched my arms tight to his neck, slanting my head so his tongue could ignite every inch of my mouth.

His kiss made me weak, and yet I'd never felt more powerful—one more of his devastating contradictions.

He delved his hand between my legs, searching for the place where I ached for him.

“You brought these jeans?” He growled, making me shiver.

My mind had been a million places as I scrambled to gather some clothes in my room yesterday, and these jeans had been right there on the floor, waiting. I couldn't say bringing them was intentional or a mistake, but whatever it was, I didn't regret it.

“I just grabbed them,” I panted and clutched the sides of his face.

I tasted the end of his curse on my tongue as he kissed me again, rougher this time while his fingers pushed through the split seam. I whimpered when the first brush of his touch on my swollen clit cinched the knot of want in my stomach.

“You're so wet, it makes me lose my mind,” he rumbled, rubbing in the way he'd discovered made me fall apart like a sand castle against a wave.

“I need you.” I grabbed at his shoulders. His neck. My fingers finding hold in the solid muscles while my body frayed against his fingers.

“Here? Where anyone could see?”

His piercing glinted in the sun for a second before the metal disappeared between my legs.

“Harm,” I gasped and then cooed when the thick tip of his cock pushed inside me.

I bit my lip, feeling my sore muscles protest this familiar stretch and then give way, knowing the pleasure that would come.

“God, you feel so fucking good,” he cooed, biting and sucking my neck. “So tight and hot, all I want to do is come.”

“Harm, please,” I begged.

A shudder racked his big frame. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I yanked his head back, my wild gaze finding his. “I want you,” I declared. “I want this hurt. I want this harm. *I want this, Harm.*”

His grip turned to steel on my hips, his fingers like individual bolts sinking into my skin and holding me steady as he drew back and thrust into me.

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. Or maybe it did. I didn’t know—didn’t care. All I knew was the sounds he made as his body claimed mine, his thick cock stretching me—molding me to him until I felt the push of every drive all the way in my throat.

“I can’t... resist you,” he ground out, his rhythm picking up speed. And force. “Your eyes. Your music. Your tears. Your body.”

I gasped, his piercing like a hot brand of pleasure every time he pushed deep. I wanted my body to mold to him. A permanent imprint of his hands... his lips... his cock... like an erotic tattoo only he and I could see.

I fisted the neck of his shirt, afraid the fabric was going to tear but too far gone to loosen my hold.

“Fuck your naked beaches,” he ground out. “See all those cars driving by? They know I’m fucking you.”

Mon Dieu. A soft cry broke from my lips, another convertible flying around the bend as though he’d signaled it.

“They know underneath this jacket, I’m balls deep in your pussy.” The warm rasp of his voice pressed to my neck. With every word, he seemed to swell even thicker inside me. “That you’re so fucking wet, I could fuck you anywhere, and you’d be ready for me because you’re mine.”

I moaned loudly, my chest caving with each desperate attempt I made to breathe.

“They know I’m fucking you on my bike because I couldn’t wait another twenty minutes to be inside you. Because I can’t stay away from you... can’t get enough of you... can’t seem to fucking survive without you.”

Desire poured like molten lava into my veins. The angle of his thrusts pressed his piercing mercilessly on my G-spot with each drive. There was no warm-up, no subtle approach to orgasm. Like trading wine for moonshine, there was only the blinding demand for release that was so intense I wasn’t sure I’d survive.

“Please,” I begged. Begged for the burn—*begged to burn for him.*

The bike started to rock and groan from the force of his thrusts. My head tipped back, cries tumbling from my lips without a care for who saw or heard.

Distantly, I heard a car beep as it drove by. *No mistaking what was happening here.* But I needed to come so badly, I didn’t care.

His lips found my ear, biting and then sucking on my ear lobe.

“Make no mistake, *Tristesse,*” he said between rough breaths. “Fucking you in public isn’t some *laissez-faire*

statement on sex. It's a warning to the world that you're mine."

Pleasure erupted like a million firecrackers over my skin, my vision blurring with dark spots as I felt the crest of my release approach. He felt so good inside me. So thick and deep and right. And I... I'd been so wrong.

There were many lessons in life learned after one instance. To not touch a hot stove. To wear a jacket in the depths of winter. And that sex with Harmon Keyes would never be just sex. Never be just a physical release. Never be a streak of light across the sky. No, it was scorched earth and electrical charge. It was an irrevocable change to the very fabric of my being—the part of me that conflated being alone with being independent.

"Scream for me. Let them know who you belong to."

He bucked deep as my body convulsed, the final push of his cock sending me over the edge.

"*Harm!*" His name echoed all the way to the sea as my orgasm pulled me under.

I felt the bite of his teeth into my neck and the rumble of his groan as he came, his cock jerking deep inside me, filling me with his release. Hot, heavy exhales raced over my skin, and it felt like time stopped for this—for us.

And it took several long minutes—and one obnoxious honk—for it to start ticking again.

Harm carefully lifted me off him and steadied me on my feet. He groaned and admired the smear of my release that streaked his cock for a second before tucking himself back into his jeans.

"In your seat," he said with a low rumble. *My seat*. No mistaking the glint in his eyes knowing the mess I was about to make on the leather. *A mess he wanted to see*.

I settled in behind him, feeling the cool leather against my hot, sensitive skin for only a few seconds before it warmed.

My arms settled into their spot around him, my head resting on his back. *His. I was his.* The thought was warm and strong... and worrisome as we drove back toward the garage.

He was so driven by loyalty to his family—to the club. What if an outsider—a would-be lawyer wasn't welcome? What if he had to give them up in order to hold on to me?

Chapter Twenty

Harmon

I let off the gas when the garage came into view, my brother's bike standing dark and ominous, parked near the bay door. Rob's car was nowhere in sight. Maybe I'd get lucky and wouldn't have to face them together. The thought of it... it tore me in two.

I was always the protector. I'd covered Darius's body with my own during the attack that ended our last mission. I'd held Rob in my arms and swore to her that we'd get justice—and vengeance—on the man who'd taken everything from her. My responsibility was always to them—*family first*. But now... to choose Daria. To prioritize protecting her over catching Magnus. It felt like a betrayal—a knife to my back, one I'd stabbed there myself.

Daria was supposed to be our ticket to Magnus. Collateral damage for a despicable criminal. But somewhere along the way, she'd gone from a pawn to my queen. And the pit in my gut echoed that the price to pay for keeping her was my family.

Unless I could get her to see who her father really was.

But how the hell did I convince her that the man who'd provided as much as he could over the years, who stayed away from his own daughter to keep her safe, and then who saved her the night her mother was killed... was a careless, selfish piece of shit to the rest of the world.

How the hell did I convince her that the man who gave her everything was the same who took everything from Robyn?

And even if I could, what then? Was her sense of justice so strong that she'd want her own father to pay for what he'd done? That she'd want him arrested and tried—or worse—for those crimes?

Or would she want a chance to know the man? To forgive him? Would she find a way to excuse his criminal behavior like she excused mine? *Would she ask me to do the same?*

How the hell was I going to choose between fulfilling the vendetta I'd sworn against her father and being with her...

The dark-gray clouds churned overhead, mirroring the storm inside me. Once again, I faced two sides of the same coin and wondered how long I could live life balancing it on its side.

Fat droplets splattered on us the whole ride back as though the rain was trying to hold out for us to arrive before letting loose.

I parked my bike in an open spot closer to the side of the garage and extended my hand for Daria to hold as she got off the bike, her eyes brimming with emotion.

She was right: we could never be enemies. Our families could hate each other, could want to destroy each other, but I'd burn both their worlds to the ground in order to keep Daria safe—to *keep her in my arms*.

I was no Romeo, but God help me, she'd become my Juliet. My star-crossed *Tristesse*.

"I need to shower and study," she murmured as I unclipped the helmet and pulled it off, her hair falling free down her back. "What do I do about my classes? I can't—"

"I'll talk to the school. Figure it out," I promised, reaching out and threading my hand through her hair, brushing it back from her face before returning my knuckles to the base of her chin.

She was so fucking beautiful, it physically hurt. I hadn't let someone in in so long, it was like I hadn't been breathing for years, and now I had to learn how to let oxygen in.

“Harm.” Darius’s deep voice rolled through the garage.

I tensed, and Daria felt it. I lowered my hand to my side and turned, seeing my brother working his way slowly through the rows of motorcycles, his dark eyes trained on the two of us.

Shit.

When Daria mentioned a shower, I’d hoped I could use that time to find him—talk to him. *Explain.* But it looked like I wasn’t going to have that chance.

Get close. It had been his suggestion, but he had no idea just how deep she’d let me go and how far I would inevitably fall. Daria was in my blood. In my marrow. *We could never be enemies.* And the way my brother looked at me now, *he knew.*

Not because we were related. Not because we’d seen the worst of the world and humankind in the pit of war. And not because he was that perceptive. He knew because like recognized like. He’d fallen for the enemy, and it had cost us everything back then, and now, he saw me doing the same when it could cost us our vengeance for Rob now.

“Ty said we had an unexpected guest,” he drawled as he reached us, assessing Daria with a stony expression.

“Daria, this is my brother, Darius,” I introduced them, keeping my eyes level on him like they were the only thing keeping his anger leashed. But they weren’t. Revenge also kept him reined in. If Daria knew the truth, it compromised our ability to get to Sinclair.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She smiled wide and extended her hand.

He hesitated a second before shaking it with the same enthusiasm as if he were shaking a grenade.

“Where were you?” He focused his attention on me.

“Went for a ride.” *Not that it was any of his business.* “Needed to get out after yesterday.”

He made a low noise. “Rhys was just bringing me up to speed. Crazy what happened.” Daria shifted, and he looked at

her again. “Nice jacket.”

Daria glanced down, her cheeks heating. “I forgot I was still wearing it,” she said with a little laugh, about to shrug it off her shoulders. “It’s—”

“Yours.” I shouldn’t have said anything. And definitely not in the deeply possessive tone topped with a hard glare that dared my brother to say something else. *Worthiness is nothing more than a willingness to fight.* And God help me, I was willing to fight for her. Here and now. Friend or foe or family. *I was willing to go to war if that was what it took to hold onto her.*

Before my brother could say anything, the trees shivered loudly with a large gust of wind. Within seconds, fast, furious streams of water poured from the heavens, creating a curtain of water around the garage.

“Oh, *mon Dieu*, it’s raining ropes,” Daria exclaimed, shuffling just a little closer to me.

I looked at her, forgetting my brother for an instant as a smile coaxed the ends of my lips higher. “Ropes?”

“Pleuvoir des cordes? Raining a lot?”

“Raining cats and dogs,” I corrected and lifted my hand, my thumb swiping off a stray droplet that dropped from her lash to her cheek.

Daria wrinkled her nose. “Ropes make more sense.”

I chuckled, unable to disagree.

“Harm.”

My brother’s strained voice caught me off-guard. His eyes were narrow, looking between us before focusing on my hand—on my finger that had thoughtlessly dried her cheek.

I cleared my throat. “Why don’t you go shower?”

She nodded and then looked at Darius, offering him a smile I knew he wouldn’t return. “It was nice to meet you.”

I didn’t take my eyes off her until she disappeared into the hallway, my mind wondering which cabin she’d go to shower

in. *Hopefully she'd know I meant mine.*

“What have you done?” Dare muttered as soon as she was gone.

“You told me to get close,” I reminded him as though that was all this was.

“I didn't say to fucking fall for her,” he snarled. “And then to bring her here—” he wiped his hand over his mouth and then dragged it through his hair.

“We were attacked. What the hell else was I supposed to do? Where the hell else was supposed to be safe?”

“*Anywhere,*” Dare boomed, echoing Ty's response yesterday. “You could've taken our enemy's daughter *anywhere* except to the haven for his victim.”

“Jesus Christ, Dare, she's not him. She doesn't know him—doesn't know who he is.” I had to make him see that Daria wasn't the enemy. “She doesn't know what he's done.”

“But she will. She has to.” He inched closer. “There's no way this ends without her knowing the truth about her father... and about you. The only question is, when that bomb goes off and the dust settles, will you still be able to take Magnus down like we swore we would?”

“You know I'd never sacrifice that,” I bit out under my breath.

“Wouldn't you?” The tip of his head was like the twist of the knife. “How does this end, Harm?”

I'd disguised the emotion for weeks. Camouflaged it under a million and one powerful sensations. Attraction. Desire. Compassion. Lust. But right here, when all that was stripped away, there was only one emotion left.

My heartbeat rioted against my chest. “I'll figure it out,” I swore. “Whatever happens, I'm not letting Magnus get away with what he's done.”

He let out a low, bitter laugh.

“You don’t believe me?” In all my life, I couldn’t recall a time when Dare had *ever* doubted me and fuck, did that hurt.

“If Magnus was your first priority, then you’d be using this poor choice to your advantage.” He nodded in the direction that Daria had gone. “You have her here. In our territory—under our protection—”

“Dare—”

“You’d tell that fucker that if he wants to see his daughter again, he’ll meet you with some obscene amount of money in tow.” *A hostage.* He wanted me to turn Daria into a hostage. “And then we’ll take him down—”

“Enough.” Reason boomed from across the garage, Ty standing in the doorway.

Rarely did Ty take authority like this. He cautioned and guided and advised, but rarely commanded even though he was two years older than me—the oldest out of all of us.

“My office,” was all he added before disappearing back into the hall.

My brother and I shared a look and then made for the door to follow him.

As we got close, he muttered, “It’s not possible to have your cake and eat it, too, Harm.”

To catch Magnus and keep Daria.

“I’ll find a way. I won’t let our vendetta turn her into a victim just to prove my loyalty to you.” The words came from a feral place inside me. A place that had claws and teeth.

He stopped at the door leading to the hall, his hand on the knob. “If you think that’s possible then you’re a bigger fool than I was.”

I watched as he let himself through and stalked toward Ty’s office. As frustrated as I was, part of me—the older brother part—was crushed to see the extent of his self-loathing. Crushed to see the way that pain and trauma oozed out at the slightest provocation.

Wounds could heal. Loss could ease. But betrayal... betrayal was a cancer there was no way to kill.



“Harm and Dare are here,” Ty said as soon as we were in his office.

“Hey, guys.” Rob’s voice came through the speaker, and instantly I tensed like I was preparing for a bomb to go off.

Did she know? Had Ty told her? Had Dare?

“Hey.”

“What’s going—”

“Uzair Shazad,” Ty said before I could finish and directed our attention to the picture on the screen, a younger man of Middle Eastern descent.

Dare and I stood on opposite sides of the room, arms crossed and barely containing our scowls. Stubbornness was a trait my brother and I shared in spades, and if Rob could see us, she’d smack us both on the back of the head and tell us to get over it. Thankfully, she was just on speaker.

“Related to Amir, I’m assuming?”

“His son,” Rob answered. More photos appeared on the screen of the younger man at the airport and around the city. “When I heard Shazad might be coming to the city for a business deal, I had Ty set alerts for anyone related to Shazad’s empire to see if and when they entered the country.”

“His son is in business with him?”

“No—not yet.” Ty grunted and glanced at his computer. “Uzair has been in and out of the country for years on a student visa before getting citizenship six months ago. From what I can tell, he took his sweet time partying through college and an MBA program.”

“They gave him citizenship with his father being a crime lord?” Dare scoffed.

“Sins of the father...” Rob murmured, and my brother and I clashed stares.

“My sources told me they overheard Uzair at a nightclub last night, bragging about how he was going to own this city. About some party where he was going to be crowned king of San Francisco.”

“Like joining his father? Is he that stupid?”

“I think so. And no, not stupid. Narcissistic,” my sister replied. “From what I’ve gathered, Uzair has a sadistic streak. That’s why it took him so long to finish his degrees. There were...incidents... and he’d leave the country for a few months, let Shazad clean up the mess, and then return.”

My jaw tightened. I shouldn’t be surprised. Rumor had it that Shazad had those who betrayed him caught and brought to him stripped naked and hog-tied to be killed.

“So, Shazad is bringing him into the family business?”

“I believe he’s going to have Uzair run the expansion,” Ty answered this time, adding a world map up on the screen with several overlays and arrows highlighting Shazad’s bases of operation, production, and supposed paths of distribution. “Right now, Mexico supplies most of North America with illicit drugs. Shazad wants that business, but he needs someone to spearhead it.”

“And who better to trust than family?” Dare quipped at me, his expression flat the entire time.

“So, they’re coming to town to look for business partners for Uzair,” I ground out.

“Courting offers from the criminal elite.”

“Do we have any intel on the other players?”

“Remington,” Ty muttered.

“I’m not convinced,” Rob claimed, a steel thread of emotion in her voice. “When Remington does deals, he

doesn't want everyone to know about it. He wants it to be done and be well on his way before anyone even realizes. Plus, he'd never work with Shazad; Shazad is... twisted."

"How do you know?"

Rob was dead silent for a second before she answered. "You're right. I don't. Just my assumption based on what I've... heard about him, but I've been wrong before. Everyone's been wrong about Remington before. That's why he's so good at what he does."

Remington was particular about the kinds of criminals he worked with; it was all part of the mystery of his image. But I didn't believe that he wouldn't work with Shazad. They were two whales in the criminal underworld; partnering would be the equivalent of a monopoly.

"Forget Remington. If we can get to this party—get to Shazad—we could take down so many key players."

Dare let out a rumble and then asked, "And is it possible that Magnus Sinclair would be one of those other players at this party?"

I was off the wall in an instant, heart pounding, fists locked and ready for a fight. I'd sooner knock my own brother out then let him put Daria in Rob's crosshairs right now.

Ty stepped forward, his gaze whipping between us in warning, ready to put himself in the middle of our brawl if it came to it.

Rob was silent for a long moment having no idea that the three of us were about to erupt.

"How did you know that?" she finally asked, her voice deadly low. *And lacking all surprise.*

"Harm has a source—"

My head snapped to the speaker, and I charged, "You already know he's coming, don't you?" I charged to my sister, completely ignoring the way Dare teetered on losing his fucking tongue.

I tried to breathe through my anger. Rob already knew Sinclair was coming to town for this—to vie for partnership with Shazad, and she hadn't told us. *What was she thinking? To go after him alone?*

"I've heard that might be the case," she confessed.

Suddenly, the conversation flipped on a dime. No longer had I been hiding Sinclair's possible presence from my sister—she already knew. Now the only question that remained was if she knew about Daria.

"What else have you heard?" Ty asked before I could.

"All of it, this time," I ground out.

Rob sighed. "Rumors of Remington led me to Shazad and the party. From there, I heard whispers about Sinclair... which makes sense."

"Why?"

"Because he tried to partner with Shazad over a decade ago and failed. It makes sense he wants to reclaim that opportunity." She paused. "And it makes sense why Remington's name came up."

"Robyn..." I growled, anger and disbelief warring over how much she'd kept from us.

"I don't know the details, but the rumor is that Remington is the reason Sinclair lost Shazad's business the first time. That there is bad blood between them."

My jaw tightened. Trying to understand the motives of a man like Damon Remington was like trying to solve a Rubik's cube blindfolded. So, I focused back on motives I could understand—*needed* to understand.

"Why didn't you tell us you suspected Sinclair was coming back here?" I demanded, ignoring Dare's angry scoff and head shake because I hadn't told her either. *But I was trying to protect her.*

"Because—" Rob broke off with a huff. "Because the last time I got close, I got too confident—too desperate to catch

him—that he got away. I won't make that mistake again. I won't count my chickens before they hatch.”

And she wouldn't bank on getting to Sinclair until she could see him with her own two eyes.

“I have to catch him this time, Harm,” she added, her voice cracking. “I have to.”

My deep inhale burned in my chest. The desperation in her voice gutted me.

“And we're going to do *everything* we can—everything we have to—to do that,” Dare swore, his eyes locked on me, his meaning unmistakable. *Everything including sacrificing Sinclair's daughter.*

“We need to find out where this party is,” Ty said, reining in the emotion in the room. “We find the details on the party. That leads us to Shazad, Sinclair, and possibly Remington.”

“My sources know that's the priority,” Rob said.

“Maybe Harm's... source has more info,” my brother added.

“Rob,” I interjected firmly. “You're not doing this alone, you hear me?”

A beat of silence, and then came her reply, “Yeah.”

“We'll stay in touch,” Ty finished and ended the call, immediately pointing a finger at Darius. “What the hell was that?”

“She needed to know about Sinclair, but apparently she already did.”

“So, the ends justify the means?” I charged angrily.

“They better,” Dare clipped right back. “Because if we don't catch Sinclair, you're going to need a damn good excuse for keeping from Rob the fact you're sleeping with the enemy.”

“She's not—”

“She’s his daughter,” Dare growled and moved right in front of me. “And you’re a fucking fool.”

He stormed around me and out of the office, the door bouncing off the jam as he threw it shut.

“We’re going to catch him,” I rasped to Ty, but it was all I could manage before I had to leave the room, too.

I was angry—should be angry. I didn’t respond well to threats. But what Dare said wasn’t a threat; it was trauma. And all I could feel was pity. He couldn’t see Daria for who she was because he couldn’t see beyond what she represented—the possibility of betrayal. And when he thought about that, all he thought about was that last mission. Losing Ryan—almost losing all of us—because of his misplaced beliefs.

But Daria was nothing like the woman who’d betrayed him. And neither was she anything like the man who’d betrayed my sister. And in the greatest irony, Rob would know that—see that.

Our sister dedicated her life to helping victims of powerful men escape their situations. She had this underground railroad of accomplices in the city, all working to help free innocent women trapped by bad men; Rob protected them and filtered information to us, so that we could exact justice. No matter what my brother suggested, no matter how badly she wanted revenge, she’d never use Daria as bait.

Not unless Daria agreed to it willingly, a small voice inside me murmured. And to do that, she’d have to know the truth.

Fuck.

I dragged my hand through my hair. I was back at square one which was less of a square and more like a prison cell. I’d tried to tell her we were enemies. But I was weak. I was a weak man who didn’t want to lose the woman who’d brought him back to life.

I sucked in a deep breath, bottling it in my lungs for a long couple of seconds as I watched the rain fall. Maybe I should just tell Daria the whole truth. Flip that Pandora’s box wide

open and handle whatever happened. But all I could think of was her tear-streaked face last night in the hallway.

“I can’t lose anyone else.”

To tell her the truth would take not only her father away but also me. Because in the end, how different were the two of us—both lying to Daria about who we really were? To tell her the truth would take from her the only two people who cared about her.

Basically, I was fucked.

Damned if I told her the truth. Damned if I didn’t.

Damned all the way around.

But to think about going one more day of my life without her in it... that was worse than damned. That was as good as dead.

Chapter Twenty-One

Harmon

I didn't even think to stop at the guest cabin. I knew in my gut she wouldn't have gone there, and I was right. I opened my door, the swish of the shower water greeting me.

Air filtered into my lungs with a slow breath. My brother was right about one thing—we were going to catch Sinclair this time. I just had to figure out how the hell I wasn't going to hurt Daria in the process.

I reached down and felt for the phone in my pocket. I hadn't even talked to Sinclair yet. I'd talked to his cronies. They knew about the attack—*he knew about the attack*—and still he hadn't called to check on his daughter. *It had been a whole goddamn day.* Meanwhile, when she was out of my sight for five minutes, I started to get antsy.

I wish she could see her father like I did. *Without blinders.* I also wished she never had to see him like I did because it would hurt her. My *Tristesse* might be independent but her heart was also big. And I refused to be the man who broke it.

I found my steps carrying me to the bathroom instead of the bedroom, drawn to her by a force I was tired of fighting.

"I'm back."

Her clouded figure faced me through steam-clogged glass. And then she slid the shower door open, meeting my gaze. "Is everything okay?"

Goddamn.

Her skin was rosy and wet. Her nipples pebbled against the chill, and my tongue ached to warm them.

“Harm?”

I reached over my head and yanked off my shirt. A few seconds later, my shoes and pants were off, too, and I was stepping inside with her.

“What is it?” She searched my face as I reached for her hips. “What’s wrong?”

Everything except her. She was the only thing that felt right.

“Nothing,” I growled and took her mouth roughly, delving my tongue deep and sparring it with hers.

We kissed for long moments under the stream, my hands roaming down the slope of her back and over the curve of her ass. The way I wanted her made sense for someone half my age. I’d fucked her not even an hour ago—*on the side of the road no less*—and here I was, my cock like a steel beam wedged against her stomach.

“Is it your brother?” she murmured when we came up for air.

I pulled back. “What about my brother?”

“I don’t think he likes me.”

“Good.”

“Good?” She gasped as I spun her.

“Bend forward,” I growled, ignoring her question. “I’m hungry.”

“Why is it good if he doesn’t like me?” she demanded even as she complied, bending at the waist and resting her hands on the narrow bench. She turned her head over her shoulder, finding my eyes and expecting an answer.

My lip twitched, and I slowly drew my hand to the seam of her ass, running my finger along the crease until I reached the folds of her pussy.

“Because you’re mine.” And then I pushed two fingers inside her, curling them into her front wall.

God, she was so hot and responsive, her body clenching around me, begging for more.

“But don’t you want—”

“What I want is to not talk about my brother when I’m about to put my cock inside you.” I worked my fingers inside her, fisting my length with my other hand and stroking myself at the same time.

“Harm,” she purred, her muscles tightening around me.

“All that matters is that you like me,” I told, stroking her G-spot with ruthless precision, over and over, harder and harder, but never enough to let her come.

I wanted her desperate for me the way I was desperate for her. Savagely. Carelessly. So fucking desperate she’d be willing to risk the wrath of her family like I was willing to risk the wrath of mine.

“I do like you,” she murmured huskily, her voice catching as I pressed on her knot of nerves.

I groaned. “God, you’re so fucking perfect, *Tristesse*.” I’d fucked her so many times between last night and now that she had to be sore, but it never showed. She panted for more, her body trembling under my touch. Before long, she rocked back on my fingers, hungry for release. “You want this cock again?” I dragged my thumb over my tip, mixing water with the precum that beaded next to my piercing.

“Yes,” she cooed.

“Tell me how much you like it.” I angled myself at her entrance, letting just my metal-studded tip slip inside.

She whimpered. “I like you.”

Fuck. I pushed my cock deeper. “Again.”

“I like you,” she cooed, her body rippling around mine. “I need you. *Please.*”

The shower beat on my back, a distant sensation compared to the clutch of her body as I slammed into her from behind. Her cry of pleasure was everything, and I lost all restraint. I thrust into her hard. Fast. I didn't just want to fuck her. I wanted to dominate her. I wanted to imprint myself on every square inch of her beautiful body so that when she learned the truth about her father, it wouldn't change this truth about me—*that I was completely overthrown by her.*

“Harm, please,” she sobbed. “Oh, please...” Her body began to grenade around mine, pleasure exploding all along the length of my cock as she pulled me deeper.

“Tell me.” I angled my hips and drove deeper. Harder.

She cried out as I rubbed over her G-spot a new way. “I need—” She gasped—choked on air as her release started to drag her under. “I need it—need you. I need you, Harm.” There was something in her voice—something stronger and more powerful than desperation. Something I didn't recognize until it was almost too late. “*Mon Dieu*, I need you. I lov—”

My hand dove around her front and found the swollen knot of her clit, rubbing hard as I buried myself one last time and whipped her over the edge before she said everything I wanted to hear but couldn't have.

Daria screamed and collapsed on my arm as she came so hard her knees gave out. I let out a rough shout and slammed into her. Holding the whole of her weight was nothing compared to the strength of the release that barreled through me.

I drove into her convulsing muscles twice more before the pressure at the base of my spine erupted. With a deep groan, I pinned her to me as my cock pulsed, adding a fresh coat of cum to the wall of her womb.

I made no attempt to move until she quaked against me.

“I don't think I can keep standing,” she murmured with a husky laugh.

I grunted, carefully sliding my body from hers and grabbing a washcloth. “Allow me,” I muttered, soaping it up

and then sinking to one knee.

I took my time washing her, and her eyes drifted shut, trusting me to the task. But all I could think about was what she'd almost said. *Love*. She couldn't love me. Not yet. Not until she knew the last bit of truth I'd been keeping from her. *Including the part where I loved her, too.*



I left Daria in the bedroom, sitting cross-legged on the bed and studying. As much as I wanted to just sit and stare at her—never let her out of my sight—it would only lead to distraction, and I knew how important her classes were to her.

So, I told her I was going to check in with Ty—finish the conversation I'd walked away from earlier—and let myself out of the cabin.

I'd hardly made it two steps down the hall when the phone I'd held in my pocket all day vibrated. The number was blocked just like all the other times, so I didn't get my hopes up that it would be Magnus.

His daughter had been attacked yesterday, and he hadn't even bothered to come to the phone. Sure, Mr. J spouted off one excuse after another. Travel. Meetings. *'He'll call her soon.'* I hated how they were things Daria believed—hated that she wanted justice for her mother so badly she'd excuse her poor excuse for a father. But then again, I only had myself to blame for her not knowing the truth.

“Hello?” My anger was thinly veiled.

“Where is my daughter, Mr. Keyes?”

I stopped. *Magnus.*

“Safe,” I clipped. “Nice of you to check in on her.”

I never would've instigated like this before. He was my boss. She was my assignment. Their relationship was none of

my business. *But that all changed when she became my everything.*

“Your attitude is unwarranted, Mr. Keyes. I suggest you put it away.”

Un—

“We were *attacked* in broad daylight yesterday, and even now, I’m the first call you make? Not Daria?” I should be happy. This was just more proof I could lay at her feet why her father was a terrible man, but goddamn it, I wanted him to be a decent father. For her.

“Where are you?” he demanded, ignoring my barb.

“Safe,” I repeated, determined to be just as difficult as he was.

His frustration bled through the line. “I want her back at the apartment, Mr. Keyes.”

“And I want to know who the fuck was bold enough to attack us in the open before I bring her back to a place that could be compromised,” I replied, shards of anger sharpening my tone.

“I’ve made sure the apartment is safe. Daria has school, and we have plans. I want her back there tomorrow,” he ordered.

Bullshit.

“You can’t know that. I don’t care how many sweeps you’ve done, how many cameras and alarms you’ve installed. I’m not bringing her back until we know who did this,” I swore, and then something seized me—the surety of his words. He gave no evidence or proof, only an unfettered confidence that there was no danger to Daria back in the city. And that sent a coil of dread snaking up my spine. “Unless you already know who did this.”

His pregnant pause was answer enough.

“You do know, don’t you?” I charged, my heart starting to pound. “It’s the same criminal who murdered her mother, isn’t it?”

His breathing grew heavier. “I do know. Just like I know how much danger *my* daughter could be in if she’s not careful.”

“Could be?” I scoffed and wiped a hand over my mouth. “We were rammed and then gunned down in the middle of the fucking street. I think it’s more than a fucking *could be* right now.”

“Mr. Keyes.” His voice swung like a gavel through the line. “As... irritating... as it is, I appreciate your attention to detail and your... concern for my daughter’s safety. However, need I remind you that at the end of the day, you work for me. You live and breathe and act on my instruction and my instruction only, and right now, I’m instructing you to bring my daughter back to her apartment. She has school. And we have plans once I get into town.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Sinclair, I wasn’t acting on your instruction when there were men with guns pointed at your daughter,” I said, my anger seething. “Are you really willing to risk her safety?”

“I’m not risking anything. She’s not in danger at the apartment or from those men again, Mr. Keyes. You have my word.” *Again, that confidence.*

My jaw went slack, an acerbic retort welling on the tip of my tongue when the weight of his words slammed into my chest and toppled every fact about the accident like dominos.

They’d rammed my side of the car.

They’d waited to fire until I’d recovered and saw them approach.

They’d avoided the tires.

“It was you.” Disgust mottled my voice and pitted my gut. “Those men who attacked us... they work for you.”

The only thing more revolting than saying the words was hearing him admit they were true.

“Those men work for money like most men do,” he said smoothly, losing the rest of his façade in an instant. “My

daughter didn't seem to understand the magnitude of danger she could be in if she didn't keep a low profile and do what I said. So, I did what I had to do—as a parent—I taught her a lesson.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“You're a piece of shit.”

“And the fact that you walked away unharmed can always be remedied,” he snapped.

There was a beat of silence, both of us seeming to assess the situation and the power we each had.

“I know the measures I had to resort to were extreme,” he said, his tone softening significantly with a sigh. “However, perhaps when I share with you the name of the man responsible for Sandrine's death, you'll understand.”

Fuck.

My hand balled into a fist. I wanted to refuse. I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself for putting his daughter in danger like he had. I wanted to tell him she was mine now, and he'd never get the chance to see her again.

But more than that, I wanted to give her an answer. I knew the hole in her heart would never fully heal until she knew who was responsible for her mother's death—until she got justice. I knew because I had the same hole left by the man on the other end of this call.

“Tell me.”

I heard the deep inhale he took, weighing one last time what he risked to tell me.

“The man who murdered her mother was Damon Remington.”

The hall was as silent as a catacomb, but in my head, it was as though a bomb had gone off right underneath me. *Remington*. The man who'd sent me to this job in the first place. The man I now knew had a decades-old beef with Sinclair. The kind of bad blood that made him sabotage billion-dollar business deals for the fun of it.

A man who did that wouldn't think twice about killing Daria's mother.

My thoughts spiraled.

His note. The message. *You'll thank me when you realize...* The truth hit me with the full force of a wrecking ball straight to my gut. Sinclair had always been our target, but Daria had always been Remington's.

'Everyone's been wrong about Remington before, that's why he's so good at what he does.'

He'd played us. Used us—used our desire for justice—*used me* to get to her.

“Judging by your silence, I'm sure his reputation precedes him.”

“I know who he is,” I croaked.

“Well, what you don't know is that we've been vying for the same business... partner... for some time now, and if you know anything about Remington, you know that nothing—especially information—is out of his reach.”

I tried to swallow but my throat felt like it was coated in acid. He was confirming everything I already knew, and my fears crystallized into reality.

“I tried to keep them out of my life for this reason, but he found them.” Magnus cleared his throat. “There is no hiding from him—not once you're in his sights.”

I know, I wanted to say, but my tongue was thick. Heavy like a stone.

He'd found Kane. One night in the city and one mention of his name, and Remington tracked him down to Carmel Cove. And if he tracked Kane to Carmel, he would've tracked him here. To Sherwood. To me.

I reached for the wall, everything starting to shift around me.

Remington wasn't trying to infiltrate Sinclair's security to get to Magnus; he was trying to get to Daria—he was using

me to get to Daria. He wanted to take from Sinclair all the things that would hurt most. His business. His daughter.

“That’s why she needs to come back to the apartment—where I have eyes everywhere for him.”

“You know what he looks like?”

Something like a laugh filtered through the line. “Our stories have always been... intertwined.”

“Sinclair—”

“Bring her back to the apartment, Keyes. I’ve given you more information than you need to do your job, don’t make me ask again.”

The call ended, and my arm fell to my side, the whole of me reeling from the information. An instant later, I let out a roar and slammed my fist into the wall, my chest heaving.

“Fuck,” I spat, my vision wavering.

I felt like I was back overseas, unease suffocating me once more. *An ambush. Surrounded by criminals who couldn’t be trusted.*

Sinclair was a lot of things, but he wasn’t wrong in his assessment of Remington. The man was a ghost for a reason. Feared for a reason. He got to people that no one could get to—and that meant he’d come looking for Daria here.

I straightened and raked a hand through my hair.

There was only one choice. I had to take Daria back to the apartment.

It was safer to deal with the devil I knew than the devil I didn’t. *Hell, even the devil himself didn’t know how to deal with Damon Remington.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Daria

“Can we go back?” A sigh followed my question as Harm trailed his lips along the column of my neck.

I pressed my fingers into the keys, oozing a gentle lullaby from the piano into the apartment.

“Back to bed?” he grunted and shifted his hips underneath me.

His hand lingered between my thighs, his cock still buried inside me from when he’d fucked me while I played. Every night this week, we’d ended here. Making love at the piano. Harm liked to be the reason my fingers stopped playing steady and a melody of moans drew from my lips. And I liked that my piano bench was just as marked from the two of us as the seat of his bike.

“No.” I let out a breathy laugh. “I have to shower and study. But I meant back to Sherwood.”

Sunday night, after I’d been studying for about an hour, Harm came back to the cabin, the dark cloud on his face advertising that he’d learned something new. He sat on the edge of the bed, took my hand in his, and told me the name of the man who’d killed my mother.

Damon Remington.

His name meant nothing to me. Nor did his notoriety.

A fresh round of tears coated my cheeks as Harm explained who he was and why my father was hesitant to tell me his name. While I understood my father’s desire to protect

me, especially after what happened, I had to know. And Harm understood.

He also told me that the safest place for us to be was back at the apartment—back where my father would be able to identify Remington if he got close. That was the first moment I realized I didn't want to leave Sherwood, but I understood why we had to.

Then, Harm gave me his phone and shortly after, my father called. He was beside himself with worry on the phone—so much that I knew by Harm's drawn expression that he could hear my father even though the call wasn't on speaker.

We left the garage early the following morning to head back to the city. So early that only Ty was awake to see us off.

Even though the apartment was the safest place for me, there was something about being here that didn't feel free. Harm and I were together, but we were in a cage. Harm reached out to the school, and because of the accident, I was allowed to attend my classes virtually for the next three weeks, so we hardly left the apartment. And no matter how many times Harm promised he'd keep me safe, worry still shrouded the both of us.

“You want to go back?”

He carefully lifted me up off him and tucked himself back into his pants; his tee that I was wearing fell back down, reaching low on my thighs. I'd picked up a new habit at the garage: wearing Harm's clothes. And nothing turned my rugged protector on more than when he saw me playing the piano in his shirt. Well, maybe nothing except seeing me playing the piano in nothing but his leather jacket. That first night when I'd done that, I swore we'd broken some of the precious ivories when they clanged underneath my hips.

He turned me to face him and cupped my cheeks. “Daria...”

“I like your family—your found family,” I said, my lashes fluttering. “The way they'd do anything for you—like letting a

stranger into their midst. And the way you'd do anything for them." I swallowed hard. "I miss her less there."

Maman. At least sleeping in Harm's embrace was guaranteed to keep the nightmares away.

"It's okay to miss her more." His expression shuttered as he stroked my cheek.

"Sometimes, I wonder if she'd think I'm different now." My gaze drifted out the window.

His fingers found my chin and lifted it. "You are." His eyes glinted. "You're stronger. Braver. She'd be proud of you."

My lip quivered, a tear leaking down my cheek. "Would she?"

It still hurt so much to think about her, but it was a different kind of hurt now. Before it was the sharp pain of sudden loss—like a broken bone that had crippled me. But now... now the break had been cast; that first wound stitched back up, and what was left was perfectly functioning but seemed would always hurt with the reminder of the trauma it endured.

"Ahh, *Tristesse.*" I shivered every time he called me that. It was like a warm blanket around my heart. "You moved across the country alone after she was gone. You continued to follow your dream in spite of everything that happened... is happening."

"I don't know how anyone who loves you couldn't be proud of who you've chosen to become."

My lips parted, my inhale snagged partway in my throat before I breathed it out with the boldest of questions. "Are you proud of me?"

The deepest parts of me ached to hear the words just once. *I love you.*

I'd felt them so many times, but especially in the last few days. The accident changed everything. For two people who knew so acutely how life could be altered in an instant—

irrevocably—we'd lived the last week as though the next moment could be it. Every conversation. Every touch. Every precious beat of silence. They were thick with emotion. Every look. Every kiss. Every time he brought me pleasure or lost himself inside me. It was all love.

Bright. Hot. Striking. *Love.*

But while it was seen and felt and known... it was never said. And that cold claw of fear gripped me from time to time, worried that I could lose him.

“I am—” his face lowered—“in awe”—his lips reached mine—“of you.” This kiss was gentle but equally consuming the way he poured the meaning of his words into it.

But why couldn't he say it? Was it because I was still technically his job?

“Have you talked to your father?”

I nodded. “Earlier. He said he'll see me tomorrow, but he gets in right before the party, so he's going to pick us up.” A smile tugged at my lips. “He also sent me a dress for tomorrow night. A white one.” My smile dimmed. I wasn't sure I was ready to wear white.

“Did you know historically white was the color of mourning?”

My chest squeezed. *How he knew what I was thinking...* I looked up at the man I never saw coming and realized just how hopelessly in love I'd fallen.

“Is that so?” I said thickly.

“Yeah, it is,” he assured me. “So, no need to worry about wearing it so close to her death.”

I hummed and wrapped my arms around his waist.

“What is it?”

I tried to swallow but couldn't. “I don't want to lose you.”

“Never.” His lips pressed to the top of my head.

“Then what happens next?”

“What do you mean?”

“After my father gets here.” I tipped my head back. “What happens to you then—your position, I mean? What happens if he never catches Remington? Will I always be in danger like this?”

“No, you won’t,” he promised as though he were single-handedly capable of making that happen. “And it doesn’t matter what happens to my position. Nothing will happen to me.”

His mouth sealed over mine. It was hard to argue when his kisses were so convincing, but it still nagged in the back of my mind that he’d said *me* and not *us*.

“We’ll have to tell him about us,” I murmured. “My father.”

His eyes shadowed. “I’ll tell him the truth.”

Why did that sound like more? Like the two of us were only the tip of the iceberg?

“Go shower. Study,” he rasped. “Let’s get through tomorrow. See your father again. Enjoy the party. The rest of the worries can wait.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Harmon

“Thank you,” she murmured when I unclipped her helmet and set it on my bike. “I needed that.”

“I know.”

She’d been anxious all day. We both had. Sinclair would be here tonight.

Daria deserved answers. She deserved the truth. And she deserved it from the both of us—me and Magnus. Every night for this whole week, I pulled her into my arms and held her, wondering if I should’ve told her everything. About what her father had done. What he continued to do. And especially the role he’d played in the attack. But every morning I woke up torn.

My family... or the woman I loved.

To tell her was to risk a million reactions. It risked our first real chance at apprehending Sinclair in over a decade. And it risked her.

My entire life I’d dedicated to justice. It was everything to me. Until Daria. And now, I wasn’t too proud to admit that I didn’t want to fucking lose her—that when the scales weighed justice and love, there was no comparison; love outweighed righteousness every time.

So, I savored every moment I had with her, knowing that after tonight, the truth could take her from me.

Tonight. *Shazad’s gala.*

While Daria took her classes via Zoom during the week, I'd been back and forth with Ty, tightening up our intel and forming a plan. My vendetta never wavered; I would see Sinclair brought to justice. I just had another goal alongside it: *to not lose Daria in the process.*

The first thing we determined was that we had to go after Sinclair at the gala. It was a party for criminals—a party to disguise business. Security wasn't privy to business, especially with so many criminals around, so guards would be present but at a distance. It would be no one's home turf, and with so many unsavory characters in attendance, there would be plenty of directions to point the finger or to create a distraction if we needed to.

Now, all we had to do was figure out where the venue for the gala was.

I'd hoped that Rob's sources would get details on the location. If they had that, then I could tell Daria the truth before we left the apartment. I could convince her to stand up Sinclair while Rob and the rest of the guys went to the party to bring him down.

But that was a lofty goal. Too lofty for the kind of luck I had.

In spite of all the rumors Rob's network had heard, none of her informants knew the site of the event. I wasn't surprised. Shazad was known for having a vicious streak when it came to anyone who leaked any information about his organization; it was why working with him was such a high-price target.

If that wasn't enough of a setback, yesterday Magnus called Daria and told her he'd be picking us up in person when I'd been previously led to believe that I'd bring Daria to the venue to meet him.

Now, my instructions from Mr. J were simple. *Be ready at seven.*

Gone was my chance of maintaining a separation between Daria and her father so I could tell her the truth and still give my sister her revenge. So, Ty and I came up with a different

plan. A GPS tracker in one of my rings that I'd activate once we reached the gala; I knew better than to bank on having access to the GPS on my phone.

Once Ty received the location, they'd follow to the party. Rhys and Dare would infiltrate to grab Sinclair, I would get Daria out, and Rob would wait in the SUV for her prisoner because going inside risked him seeing and recognizing her and getting away.

When we had Sinclair, I'd tell her the truth. Let her ask him herself about the things he'd done. Let her pass her own judgment.

And then beg her forgiveness for keeping this from her.

It had to work. *It had to.*

The only weak point in the plan was how to explain to Rob how I knew the location of the venue without explaining about Daria. Though I'd never say thank you to him, the shrouded 'source' my brother claimed I had when we'd spoken to Rob was my best shot. Anonymous tip from the same anonymous source.

I hoped my sister's need for vengeance would have her overlook the root of my information because I needed this to work. It was the only way I could see to fulfill my promise to Rob and not lose the woman I loved.

"I'm going to go get ready," Daria murmured once we got inside the apartment. "Probably should do it alone." Her coy smile made my cock twitch. I hadn't let her shower alone since we got back from Sherwood.

"Probably," I grunted and brought her hand to my lips, kissing her knuckles. I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her otherwise. *Especially tonight.* My jaw clenched as she walked away, my feet rooted to the same spot until I couldn't see her anymore, and then I went to my room.

Alone.

I called Ty. Confirmed everything for the hundredth time. Showered. Changed. *Daria wasn't the only one who'd been gifted attire for this evening.* The fitted black tux delivered to

the apartment felt more like a straight jacket than a suit once I was all buttoned up.

I walked into the living room, tugging at the collar of my shirt for the millionth time before I let out a huff and undid the bowtie and felt like I could breathe again. *Fucking ridiculous.* I glanced at my watch—fifteen minutes before we were going to be picked up.

For a second I wondered why I'd brought her back here. I should've kept her at Sherwood. Told her the truth—convinced her far away from here, from her father. Should've said fuck it to everything and stolen her like a savage.

But I couldn't—wouldn't—make this choice for her. She had to see her father's true colors with her own eyes, pass her own judgment, render her own verdict. It wouldn't be justice—or love—to force her to see him the way I did.

I flinched, feeling my phone vibrate in my pocket. I pulled it out and sucked in a breath. No. It was too close to go time. Our plan too nailed down for a last-minute call like this.

And that meant there was only one reason Rob was calling me—and ignoring her would only make it worse.

“Hello?” I rasped, my spine steeling to brace for the onslaught.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Her voice was calm. Impossibly calm. And that was a hundred times worse than if she had been screaming.

“Why do you think?” I didn't bother with pretense; I knew exactly what she was talking about.

“You're making a mistake—”

“A mistake?” I bit out. “We're finally going to get Sinclair. How am I making a mistake?”

“Because you care about her, otherwise you wouldn't have tried to hide her from me.”

“Rob—”

“Tell me I'm wrong—”

Fuck. “It doesn’t—”

“Bullshit. It does matter, Harm. Tell. Me. I’m. Wrong,” she demanded again, the words like a gun pressed straight to my chest. “*Tell me I’m—*”

“You’re wrong, alright?” I growled, driving a hand through my hair, unable to hold back the emotions I’d restrained for days. “You’re fucking wrong. I don’t just care about her, I’m in love with her. That’s why I didn’t tell you the truth. Because I’m in love with her. I’m in love with Daria Sinclair.”

I walked to the window and breathed deeply as though I could pull fresh air through the glass.

“Harm...”

“I know,” I croaked. *I knew how fucked I was.*

“Does she know?” she asked but didn’t wait for an answer. “She has to know.”

“No, I can’t tell her the truth. Not yet.”

“Oh, Harm...” Her voice changed. Soft now. Pained. “You should’ve told her who you were... who she was to you.”

“Seriously?” I gaped in disbelief. Has my sister lost her mind? “She could warn him, and we could lose him again. And I promised you justice—”

“A promise I never asked you to make,” she broke in. “You supported me. Gave me a haven. Gave me a purpose. And you kept me—keep me—from losing myself in revenge.”

“Rob...”

“Let me do the same for you,” she pleaded. “Sinclair took my money—my parents’ legacy and my ability to fight for them. But I didn’t lose you or Dare or Izzy. I didn’t *lose* someone because of him.” She faltered, almost as though what she was saying wasn’t the whole truth. “I won’t let you lose someone for this. For me.”

“It’s too late now. It has to wait until after tonight.”

“You can have knowledge without love, but you can’t have love without knowledge. Trust me,” she said, and I wasn’t sure

I'd ever heard so much vulnerability from my tough-as-nails sister before.

“Rob...”

“I know what it's like to love someone unexpectedly. To think you're only there for a purpose only to realize it's become so much more.” I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *Robyn? In love?* My mind spun a thousand thoughts a minute wondering who and when... *and what happened.* Before I could ask, she continued, “And I also know what it's like to realize the whole relationship was a lie.”

My throat tightened.

For my whole life—from my military training to the deployments to vigilante work—the mission always came first. The goal. The strategy. The success. My focus was never split. Until Daria.

“How I feel about her isn't a lie.”

“And the only way to prove that is with the truth.”

I groaned. “I can't let him get away again. Not after everything...”

“And I can't let you sacrifice your heart, Harm,” Rob said, her voice strengthening. “Family first.” *Exactly.* “I'm the one he injured. The one he took advantage of. I get to decide what the rest of you risk to bring him to justice.”

“And if telling her the truth blows up everything? Our entire plan?”

“I'll have other chances. There's never been a doubt in my mind that Magnus would pay for what he did to me, but I don't want the cost of this vendetta to be your happiness; I won't let it be.”

I gritted my teeth. It was more than my happiness—the price of holding to my vendetta would be my heart.

“Tell her the truth, Harm.” Her plea gutted me. In all these years, I'd never seen her more consumed with her work than when it came to a lead on Sinclair. And now, to risk it all—to risk the chance to right this wrong—all because of me...

“Alright.” I didn’t know when or how I was going to manage it, but I’d figure it out.

“Family first,” Rob murmured, but what I heard was *I love you*.

“Family first,” I returned in the same vein and ended the call.

Fuck. I tucked my phone into my pocket and turned. We needed to leave soon. How the hell was I going to tell her everything before—“Daria.”

My heart lurched against the front of my chest. *Jesus*.

She stood like a goddess poised on the steps. No longer a queen but something ethereal—otherworldly. Her hair was styled in thick waves hanging free down her back. She was a vision in white, the gifted silk gown clinging to curves I’d already claimed as my own. A single gold chain adorned her neck, the thinnest filament hanging low between her breasts. And for a second, with her in that dress and me in my tux, I imagined what our wedding day would look like. Imagined the way she’d walk down the aisle, a small smile on her lips and the slight lilt of her accent when she said *I do*.

“How can you lie to someone you love?” One question was all it took to shatter that fantasy.

“I can explain.” I held up my hand like it could somehow stop her from thinking what she already was.

“You don’t need to. I’m smarter than an oyster.” She moved one step lower, unafraid to face me even with her faulty translations. *Always unafraid*. “The man who hurt your sister... the one you want to bring to justice... it’s my father, isn’t it?”

Even only half the pieces of my conversation with Rob were enough to put together the full picture.

“Yes.” No point in denying or fighting it now. All I had left was the truth. “Magnus Sinclair is the man who stole from her and then disappeared before he could be brought to justice.”

I watched her swallow, watched the pain travel down her throat and into her stomach before it made her shiver. But that was it. There was no rage. No lashing out. No fury or tears. And God help me, I wish there were. Because all I saw now was the wounded woman I'd met on my very first day, now certain she never should've let anyone else in.

"So, this whole time, you've been with me to get to him?"

"No, I didn't even know who he was—who I was working for when I started."

"And when you realized?"

"I had to try to get close. He's been off our radar for years, sheltered by the overseas criminal enterprises he works for. After all this time, I had to try and get justice for Rob," I said, hating myself for every word.

"And now?" Her voice was wounded.

"Now... I love you." The words had felt like so much—so fucking powerful, like a bomb in my chest for the last few weeks, and now they fizzled like a firecracker, not having enough strength to hold her to me.

"You lied to me."

You can't have love without knowledge.

"I couldn't tell you," I insisted. "He might be the villain in Rob's story, but he's still the father in yours." I moved slowly toward the stairs, afraid if I reached for her and hauled her into my arms, I'd lose her for good.

"So, you just hoped to exact justice and what? Hope I didn't notice?"

"No." I shook my head. "Your mother was just killed, what the hell kind of person would tell you that your father is a criminal? That the man who saved you—provided for you—did all this"—my arms motioned to the opulent apartment—"ruined my sister's life—stole everything from her?"

"I don't know who my father is—didn't know he even really existed until three months ago. I know what his money bought. I know what his business—whatever it is—has cost

me. But I don't know him, Harm. Why wouldn't you give me the chance to decide for myself?"

"I do want you to decide for yourself—"

"After you've caught him," she interrupted, slowly descending the rest of the stairs, her long satin dress kissing the floor. "After you've decided his fate."

I balled and released my fist. "I made a promise. I couldn't risk..."

"What? Me not wanting justice for your sister?" Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Do you think I'd just... look past his crimes just because he's my father?"

"You looked past my crimes," I reminded her roughly.

She sucked in a breath like I'd physically wounded her.

"And you think I would look at the two of you the same? That I would exonerate him as easily?" She pressed her hand to her throat, like the mention of it was suffocating. "Do you look at the two of you the same just because you both work outside the law?"

"Fuck no," I spat too easily, clearing my throat to regain composure.

"Then tell me now. Tell me who my father really is."

No amount of training prepared me for this assault—this ambush. Every decision I thought had felt right suddenly appeared so wrong.

"Magnus Sinclair. Financier for various criminal operations around the world. He got his start by stealing money from good people like Robyn. Lots of it. And then worked his way into operations of mobs, mafias, gangs, cartels. Bankrolling their operations for a cut of the profits. He avoids the US because there are so many warrants out for his arrest, but he came back for you." I paused. "To protect you."

Even evil had a silver lining.

She stared at me, her blank mask in place everywhere except those eyes. The ones that glittered with the brightest

sadness.

“And tonight? What is really happening tonight?”

“The party tonight... it’s for Amir Shazad. The head of the largest Pakistani organized crime ring. They traffic heroin and are looking to expand their distribution, and your father wants to finance that expansion.”

“I see...”

I hated that it was like this—that it had come to this. I hated that I couldn’t hold her. That I couldn’t take some of this pain away—*that I was the one causing this pain.*

“Criminals from all over the world are coming to court Shazad and his son, Uzair, and win their business.”

“Is my father going to win?”

I shifted my weight. “There aren’t many who’d be able to top his track record and investment options.”

She folded her arms smoothly, and I could see the goose bumps rising on her skin. “And what exactly was your plan?”

“At first? To tell you once we had him—once we could confront him in front of you. So you could hear the truth from him—”

“Once there was no chance I could say anything to keep him away—”

I closed the space between us. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you.” I started to lift my hand, but as soon as she turned her head away, I lowered it again. “I tried to tell you we were enemies, *Tristesse.*”

Her chin dipped, the slight shake of her head like a swift punch to the gut. When she looked at me again, the pain in her eyes crushed my heart. “We didn’t have to be.”

“I don’t want to lose you.” I was desperate to touch her. Hold her. Anything to keep it from feeling like she was slipping away.

“You didn’t want to trust me either,” she said, the sadness in her voice like a vise constricting around my heart.

“I’ll call everything off. You can warn your father—tell him to leave the country. Anything, Daria, just please, forgive me,” I begged softly, my chest caving in.

Tears glistened in her eyes. Her lips parted, and I wished for her forgiveness more than I had ever wished for anything else in this world.

Three loud bangs drew our attention to the door.

“Daria? It’s me.”

Our eyes connected, hearing Magnus’s voice. *Fuck*. He was here already.

“How are they going to find the party?” she hissed under her breath.

“Daria...”

“Tell me.”

I peeled my fingers out of a fist and lifted my hand, the tracking ring catching the light. Her eyes widened.

“Give it to me.”

I held her gaze, removing it without hesitation.

“How does it work?” She ducked her chin to unhook her necklace and slide the ring onto the chain, the weight of it dropping between her breasts.

“To send the signal, you twist the top and bottom halves,” I muttered in a low voice. Whether she used the ring was her choice.

Our fingers collided when I handed it to her, heat searing through me.

“If my father is the man you say he is, then I’ll learn that for myself,” she declared. “Until then I’ll keep your secret—your mission.”

But you can’t keep me, went unsaid as she lifted her head impossibly high.

“Daria.” I grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Wait. Please.” God, her skin felt like ice but it was nothing

compared to the coldness in her eyes. “I know you don’t want to trust me right now, but you can’t trust him. You don’t know ___”

“Daria?” The banging was louder this time.

“I know I need to trust myself—it’s what I’ve always known,” she said firmly, the pain in her eyes suffocating. “Now, let me go.”

Let her go?

Did she really think I’d ever let her go?

Never.

She pulled out of my hold and rushed to the door. In those seconds, I thought of all the other things I should’ve told her. About the accident. How Magnus was responsible. Forget his past crimes, she should at least know how Sinclair had manipulated her—risked her safety to prove a point. But there was no chance of that now. All I could do was stand there and watch her go.

Daria opened the door and let the man I’d been hunting for what felt like my entire life through the door.

“Papa.”

Magnus Sinclair was everything I imagined him to be. Fitted out in the fanciest tuxedo, he oozed the confident criminal that had lived decades of indulgence. His stomach protruded. His cheeks ruddy. His dark hair slicked back and his eyes as slippery as oil.

“Beautiful. Just beautiful,” he complimented Daria before pulling her in for a hug.

Over her shoulder his eyes met mine, and it took everything I had to not move. To not reach for her and rip her from his arms because she was mine.

“Mr. Keyes.” He pulled back and approached me. “We finally meet.”

“Finally,” I replied, the word loaded as I took his outstretched hand.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for my daughter.” He shook my hand firmly, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Of course.” I nodded. “We should probably get going.”

His smile flickered. “Yes, we should. But I’ll take over from here. The rest of your payment has been deposited. You can collect your things and leave tonight. I no longer need your services.”

A pit opened up in my stomach.

Fuck.

“What do you mean?” I bit out, scrambling to think clearly.

“I mean that your contract is finished.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “No need to worry anymore. I’ll take care of my daughter from here.”

I gritted my teeth, my eyes sliding from his to find Daria’s where she stood by the door.

She had no idea what he was saying. No idea I was being fired. That I wasn’t coming with them tonight. *That if she never wanted to see me again, all she had to do was keep the ring off.*

“Of course.”

Sinclair’s smile was acerbic. Like this was some sort of game to prove his power over me. And I wanted to kill him for it. To take him by his meaty throat and bleed the life from his lungs. But I couldn’t do that and fight off the four massive security guards that filled the doorway, and I didn’t trust that one of them wouldn’t use Daria as a bargaining chip to make sure their boss walked away unharmed.

I was outnumbered.

All I could do was nod and stand there as he returned to her side, put his hand to her back, and led her out the door. A single stolen glance—one laden with confusion and longing—was all I was left with just before two of the guards closed ranks behind her, and she realized that I was being left behind. That she would have to be brave tonight without me.

Unless she activated the ring. Then, I could find her. Protect her. *Keep my promise.*

But only if she wanted me to.



“What’s wrong? How are you calling—”

“We have a problem,” I interrupted Ty, holding my phone with a death grip to my ear. “Sinclair was just here—just left.”

“What do you mean left? Where? Without you?”

“Yeah.” I yanked the damn bow tie off my collar and popped the top button. “He showed up and ended my contract and left with Daria.”

“Fuck. Can you follow them? We won’t know where the party is being held—”

“Daria has the ring.”

His silence hit like the drop of a hammer. “What?”

“I gave her the ring.” I swallowed hard. “I talked to Rob, and Daria overheard—I told her the truth about her father. Rob wanted me to.”

“Harm...” He sighed. “So that’s it then. Our shot at Sinclair—”

“She knows how to activate the ring, Ty. She can still send the signal when she gets there.”

“Will she?”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t... know.”

“So everything—our entire mission—hinges on her choice: her father or you.” Disappointment clouded his tone.

“I made a mistake. I couldn’t make the choice for her, Ty,” I rasped. “I love her.”

He was silent again for long moments before replying, “Then I guess all we can do is wait.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll let the rest of the guys know.”

I clutched my phone hard and strode back to the window, resting my arm on the glass above my head. The cityscape blurred out in front of me, and my heart pounded in my chest. I could’ve followed them. Taken my bike and trailed Sinclair’s SUV. *But he would’ve known—would’ve responded.* And it would’ve disintegrated any chance I had at salvaging any of this.

This was a chess match. Every move needed to be thought out. Calculated. And sometimes, the next move involved a sacrifice. And right now, that sacrifice was my sanity as I stood here waiting—hoping—that Daria would activate the tracker and lead me to her.

Otherwise, all I could do was stay here. Take out the guard on the other side of the door and wait for them to return, *if that was even his plan.* There was a very real chance he could disappear again with Daria tonight. There was no doubt in my mind that a man who’d orchestrated an attack on his own daughter to prove a point, wouldn’t now use that fear to demand she put her law dreams on hold.

Suddenly, shots rang out from the hallway.

“Fuck.” I whipped around, reaching for my gun tucked in the holster under my tuxedo jacket and cautiously approached the door.

Who the fuck was shooting—

The door opened before I reached it. “Good evening, Mr. Keyes.”

I stopped instantly, tightening my grip on my weapon, my finger pressing lightly on the trigger as I assessed the impeccably-dressed man in the entryway. The well-tailored suit and brightly colored purple kerchief sticking out of his jacket pocket were one thing, but the fedora he wore made me

do a double take. He looked... too fashionable to be pointing a fucking gun at me.

A larger, well-tanned man loomed silently behind him, his weapon also drawn, and on the floor in the hall was Mr. H. A single shot oozing dark red from his chest.

“You can put that away, Mr. Keyes. We’re not here to hurt you.”

My head snapped back to the man with the hat, taking in his calm demeanor and easy smile. “Who are you?” I kept my gun aimed, but deep down, an idea started to creep in like a weed of exactly who this man was.

“You don’t know?” he countered and it seemed like confirmation.

“Damon Remington.”

His smile widened and he reached for the brim of his hat, tipping his head down. “Pleasure to meet you.”

What was hard to believe was that he looked to be about my age. Maybe a little older. But I’d always expected the king of the criminal underworld to look more like the godfather rather than James Bond.

“Sorry for the startling arrival.” He nodded to the dead man. “I wasn’t expecting a guard here.”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“No one ever is.” He hummed and slid one hand into his pocket. “I’m here for Daria.” He began to look around—look for her.

“She’s not here.” *And there was no way in hell I was going to tell him where she was.*

His attention snapped back to me. “What?”

Gone was the cavalier conversation. His tone was now sharp and lethal. He looked at his security guard who immediately headed for the stairs to confirm my claim.

“She’s not here. I wouldn’t have let you in if she were.”

He arched his brow as if to say *'is that so?'*

"I am who I am, Mr. Keyes. But in this instance, I'm not your enemy."

"No?" I scoffed.

"Where is she?"

"I'm not letting you hurt her." It was bad enough I had to leave her in her father's protection.

He flinched. The slightest movement, but one a seasoned criminal would never make, not even in the face of the greatest shocks or surprises... unless...

"What did you say?" he asked slowly.

"I know what you did to her mother," I bit out. "I'm not letting you anywhere near Daria."

"Her mother..." Pain shadowed his face.

"I know you killed her mother—that you wanted to use them to get to Sinclair. Take him out so you could get Shazad's business—"

In an instant, he was in front of me. The barrel of my gun pressed right to his chest so that if I wanted, I could kill him in an instant.

"Damon..." His bodyguard rushed down the steps but stayed back when Remington lifted a hand.

"I don't know who you've gotten your information from, Mr. Keyes, but you've been severely misinformed," he muttered low. "Sandrine was one of my oldest friends."

"I don't believe you," I said, though I felt my resolve waver. I wasn't just going to take the world's most elusive criminal on his word.

His jaw twitched. "Sandrine wanted to meet me that night in the city. She said she was in trouble, but when I got there, she was already dead."

"No." I shook my head. "He said you—"

"Who?" His eyes turned to slits.

“Magnus.” Saying his name turned my stomach. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

Suddenly, he grabbed the barrel of my gun and ripped it from my hand, but instead of turning it on me, he held it to his side. “Who the hell do you think I was protecting Sandrine from? Who the hell do you think I wanted you to protect Daria from?”

“Why should I believe you over him? You’re both criminals. You were both there that night. And you had more to gain than he did...”

“Because I was the one who helped Sandrine escape Magnus’s clutches in the first place. I helped her leave the country. Helped her stay under the radar. Gave her funds to live—to take care of her daughter,” he said, each word opening the pit wider in my stomach. “Where. Is. Daria?”

My jaw pulsed. “With Sinclair at Shazad’s party.”

“You let her go with him—” he swore. “We have to go. Now!”

“Oh, hell no.” I grabbed him by the lapel, hauling him in front of me. “Not until you tell me what is going on—”

“What does it matter to you—”

“*She* matters to me,” I said in a low voice. “She’s everything.”

His eyes went wide, understanding dawning in their dark rims.

“You’re in love with her.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Remington?” I demanded. “Why are you here for Daria? Why would Magnus kill the mother of his child?”

He paused, his dark gaze peering straight into my soul. “Because when Sandrine learned what Magnus was doing, she realized it would only be a matter of time before he used her—used Daria—as pawns in his power plays. She came to me for protection. For an escape.”

“She couldn’t say no to Daria, but being in a big city put them at risk. She felt like she was being watched. Followed.” His eyes flicked to the side for a second, a surprising display of emotion for a man of his infamy. “She reached out and wanted to meet. I got there only a minute too late. Sinclair was gone, but one of his men had been left behind to deal with the body. I got... a confession from Mr. K... and then shot him. Left him there so Sinclair would get my message, and I took care of Sandrine’s body myself.”

“You have her body.”

“I have proof.” His eyes glittered with nothing but the truth.

Holy fuck. This was why Sinclair had been MIA for so long. He knew Remington was after him. Knew Remington knew the truth about that night. Knew Remington was the lynchpin that could crumble his entire story. *And that was why he’d told me Remington was the killer—in the off chance that I’d take him out and spare Sinclair the effort.*

“Why did you expect Daria to be here tonight?”

“I didn’t think he’d take her to the party,” he replied. “I left enough crumbs for him to believe I’d be present to bid on Shazad’s business even though I’d never work with that scum. He was supposed to believe I would be there; he’d never risk bringing Daria around me, not when he knows I could tell her the truth.”

“You never planned on going to the party?”

“No.” His lip curled. “I was going to come here for her. To tell her the truth.”

One more truth for her to bear. Not only was her father a criminal. Not only had he orchestrated an attack on her—us—to prove a point. But now she’d have to know that her father was responsible for her mother’s death.

“So then why did he take her?” I said through tight teeth, my mind spinning through reasons. He wouldn’t risk being found out like that. “If he thought you were going to be there,

he wouldn't risk you exposing him while he's there to woo Shazad and Uzair—”

“His son is going to be there?” I swore some of the color left his face.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I know why he brought her,” he said deadly low, jamming his hat on his head and turning for the door.

I grabbed his shirt and whipped him around. “Why?” No way in hell I was being left out of this.

Remington looked at my hand and then glared at me. “You must really love her.” *Otherwise I wouldn't have risked my life by touching him.*

“Yeah, I really fucking do.”

Something flickered in his eyes that was... recognizable. Jealousy. Longing. *Familiarity.* And then it was gone.

“He brought her because she's his bargaining chip. The only thing he has that the others don't.”

“Bargaining chip?” My stomach rolled.

“Countries aren't the only entities that marry to form alliances. Criminals do, too.”

Marry...

“No.” I released him. “I won't let that happen. I'm coming —”

“This is out of your league, Mr. Keyes. You might skirt the law, but you're no criminal.”

“I'm not fucking staying behind—”

“Then I'm sorry we have to part under these circumstances.”

“What circum—”

My mind was spiraling—panicking—and I wasn't prepared for the blow until it was too late. His arm swung toward me, the butt of his gun nailing the side of my head and knocking me out cold.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Daria

The lights blurred into streaks through the tinted windows. My eyelids fluttered, trying to blink back tears that didn't exist. I was losing myself in my feelings. Anger. Despair. Loyalty. Hope. Love.

He's a criminal, Daria.

I tried to tell you we were enemies.

My heart squeezed, thinking of Harm. The pain in his voice. His tortured eyes. Every time I closed mine, he was all I saw. I wanted to be angry, but I couldn't.

My father might be his enemy, but who I was to Harm was more than the daughter of his enemy. I was the woman he took on the back of his bike when she couldn't sleep. The woman he couldn't resist no matter how he tried. The woman he'd protected with his life and then risked his family and their purpose to keep safe.

I was the woman he loved when he should've hated me.

We lie for the people we love. To protect them. To shelter them. To not cause them pain. It hurt, but it made him human. And I could be angry, but it didn't stop my heart from loving him. *Je suis désolée, Maman. I've lost my head and my heart.*

“Is everything okay, sweetheart?”

My body felt like I was driving the wrong way down a one-way street. Anxious. Heart-thumping. No other way. No escape. I let my head lower to nod and then looked at him. “What is this party for again?”

His smile widened. “My dear friend, Amir Shazad is in town with his son, Uzair. He’s just a little older than you. I think you’ll get along well.”

How would he know? He hardly knew me? But I kept those questions to myself. “How do you know them?”

My father cocked his head, assessing me for a moment. I inhaled slowly, refusing to let him see anything but a blank, innocent expression.

“We’ve run in the same... circles for a long time, but we’re going to start doing business together soon.”

“So, you’ll invest in his business? What does he do?” I pretended to adjust my dress over my knee, brushing away an imaginary wrinkle in the white silk.

He blinked. “Pharmaceuticals.”

The massive SUV felt like it was running out of air, but I had to be smart if I wanted answers—the truth. I was tired of being protected. By Maman. By my father. By Harm. I wanted the truth for myself. The decision for myself.

“Why didn’t Mr. Keyes come with us?”

“This is a very private event, Daria. Security is limited to my personal bodyguards,” he cooed and reached over to pat my knee. His hand was ice cold. “Now that I’m here, Mr. Keyes is no longer needed.”

A chill crawled over my arms. *No longer needed.* I reached up, finding the chain at my neck and running my fingers along the delicate links until I reached the ring at the bottom. My lifeline. *I needed him.*

I looked back out the window, realizing we were crossing over the Golden Gate Bridge. My throat tightened, and for an instant, I could feel the wind biting my cheeks as I huddled closer to Harm on his bike. The warmth of him. The heat of his possessiveness. The way he’d brought me back to life.

“Will you be staying in town for good then?” I murmured, watching as we pulled off the main road down a lowly lit, winding drive.

“We’ll see. Let’s just enjoy the night, yes?”

I shivered, feeling like I was being scolded. “It’s still hard to enjoy... things... when I know Maman’s killer is still out there.”

“I told you I would find the man, Daria—”

“Remington.”

His head whipped in my direction, eyes glittering. “I see Mr. Keyes was very... forthcoming with you.”

My throat bobbed. “He trusted me with the truth.”

His eyes flicked around the car, debating whether or not this was the hill he wanted to die on.

“The man who killed your mother is the worst kind of criminal, Daria, who wants access to my client’s information. To steal from them. Blackmail them. Extort them. To hurt them. Because that’s how criminals work; they’ll sacrifice anything and anyone for power.” He sighed. “I was only trying to protect you.”

The SUV started to slow.

I trembled when he reached over and took my hand. “But I will find him. I promise.” He squeezed my fingers, and my throat tightened to the point where I could only nod. “Now, let’s try to enjoy the party, alright? My friends are very excited to meet you. My daughter. Finally.”

My daughter.

I wanted it to feel like it did when Maman said it. I wanted it to feel like an anchor of unconditional love. But it didn’t.

I did my best to find a smile as we stopped in front of an elegant looking mansion, black SUVs like my father’s lining the drive. My father’s security opened the car doors on either side, and my eyes traveled up the ornate facade of the building. The stucco was stretched into columns, the Greco-Roman-style of architecture reminiscent of so many familiar sights in Europe.

“Miss?”

I blinked and looked at the man waiting for me to exit. “Sorry,” I murmured and slid off the seat, making sure my heels found steady purchase on the cobblestone path before I straightened.

The door closed behind me with a distant thud as I inhaled deeply, wishing I was in denim rather than silk.

“Watch the path, sir,” the driver’s voice called to my father.

I spun so quickly I almost lost my balance. *That voice.* Air vacated my lungs as I searched for why.

“Thank you, Mr. A.” My father nodded to his bodyguard who’d driven us here.

I wouldn’t know his face from that of Damon Remington’s, but I knew that voice. Maybe it was from years of picking out notes. Of learning music simply by listening to it. Dissecting the tempo and strength and tenor of it.

But this man’s voice wasn’t music; it was the voice of the man who’d tried to murder me. *‘Watch the tires!’*

Our eyes connected for a brief moment, his completely hollow as though he were nothing more than a shell waiting to be filled with orders. *Had he betrayed my father?*

Or...

No. I gave my head a little shake. *He couldn’t—wouldn’t have. No.* But Harm’s voice nagged in the back of my mind, still wondering why the attack had been the way it was. *It was like they wanted us to get away.*

“This way, sweetheart.” My father placed his hand gently on my back and led me into the mansion, every step making me question more and more the things I believed.



The sounds of the party rolled like a red carpet down the hall to the entry, inviting us to follow the music and laughter. Candlelight and flowers dripped from every sconce and ledge and table inside the house. My heels clicked on the marbled floors as I followed my father to the main stairwell, his other security guard—the one who'd opened the door for me—flanking us in the back.

At the top of the stairwell, the house opened into a massive indoor courtyard lined with exotic plants and Roman-style statues that looked like they belonged in a museum. Above us, a glass ceiling three stories up allowed the twinkling stars to look down and watch the crowd that glittered like stars on the white marble. Men and women pushed the limits of finery. Almost everyone dressed in an elegant shade of black. *Except me.*

“You look so beautiful, Daria.”

I turned to my father, seeing pride oozing from his gaze. I wanted him to be proud of me. To want me in his life. To love me. And I wanted justice for all the people he'd hurt.

Harm's voice echoed in my mind. *He might be the villain in Rob's story, but that doesn't mean he's not the father in yours,* and I'd never felt more conflicted.

“This way.” My father extended his arm, and it seemed like the crowd opened up around us as we made our way to the far side of the room where couples were dancing on the floor.

Ahead, I saw a man who seemed to be at the epicenter of it all. He was tall, lean, his white hair short and thinning at the front, a bright contrast to the deep tan of his skin. His facial features had an angled quality to them that were probably handsome when he was younger, but now they were sunken in with age, giving him a shrewd appearance no matter his expression.

And the men gathered around him... it was as though he was Pavlov, his voice, the bell, and the men, salivating for the attention he would give them. Everyone wanted this man—Shazad's favor—and the way my father approached, the confidence on his face, he was determined to get it.

“Amir.” My father extended his arms, drawing the other man in for a hug. “Good to see you, old friend.”

“Magnus.” His voice carried a thick British accent. “It’s been a long time.”

“Too long.” My father stepped back, turned, and beamed. “I’d like to introduce you to my daughter, Daria,” he presented me. “Daria, this is my dear friend, Amir Shazad.”

And fellow criminal.

I kept my head high and stepped forward as a hush stretched out around us like a rolling fog. The way he regarded me made my skin crawl. Not because he was leering because he wasn’t; it wasn’t a sexual look at all. It was worse. He looked at me like I was... a thing. He looked at me the same way I looked at the toga-wrapped female statues that were tucked into the enclaves around the perimeter of the room.

And in spite of his finery and the finesse of his manners, it was incredibly easy to believe this was the man who ruled over Pakistan’s opium empire.

He extended his hand, and I laid mine in it politely.

“Your father wasn’t exaggerating when he spoke of your beauty, Daria. You are... exquisite.” He placed his other hand over mine, simply holding it captive as he spoke. “Isn’t she exquisite, Uzair?”

A younger man stepped out from the periphery, and I immediately noticed the similarities in their features. The same angled harshness. The same hairline, though Uzair’s carried the color of youth.

“Quite.” He brought his drink to his lips, taking a sip while he looked me over. *Definitely sexual with this one.* “Magnus says you are quite the savant piano player,” Uzair drawled, his head tipping to one side, his expression like one a cat has when toying with a mouse. “I’d love to hear you play.”

“Oh, I don’t know—”

“Please,” Amir cut me off with a tone that was as lethal as it was polite. “My son would love to hear you play.”

Heat crept into my cheeks, and it made his smile draw higher.

“Are you—”

“Daria,” my father broke in this time, his tone distinctly firmer. “Just play a little for everyone so we can discuss some business matters.”

I tensed, feeling like some kind of show pony, but then I remembered why I was here. *What I had to do.*

“Of course.” My chin dipped, and Uzair stepped forward to escort me to the grand piano in the center of the floor.

As soon as I turned, he spread his hand over my lower back—low enough that I felt how his pinkie searched to feel the seam of my underwear under my dress. Bile burned in my throat, and my fingers searched for the chain at my neck—the only thing that made me feel safe.

Harm.

I inhaled deeply. *Find me*, I prayed and twisted the halves of the ring, feeling them slide and click into place. My breath released in a whoosh, unsure what I was expecting would happen. Sirens. Flares. Smoke signals. None of that. An invisible signal I had to hope reached him.

I half-turned, forcing Uzair to remove his hand. “So, this party is for you?” I asked sweetly.

His lips curled. “For my engagement. Yes.”

“Oh.” His admission startled me. *Why hadn't my father mentioned that?* “Congratulations,” I murmured and wondered how his fiancée would feel about the way he insisted on touching me.

Thankfully, we'd reached the piano by then, so he didn't say anything else. The string quartet in the corner of the courtyard kept playing, but if they were as expensive as everything else in this place, I had a feeling they'd accompany whatever piece I chose to play.

“Play until I come back for you,” he ordered, and it took everything in me to not snap back. *Who spoke to someone that*

way?

Sure enough, as soon as my fingers touched the keys, the other music faded, and I felt all eyes in the room on me. I wasn't the kind of person to be nervous about something like this. The piano was home for me. Its keys like a warm blanket and a cup of coffee. But this was different. They looked at me like they knew something I didn't.

My eyes roamed the room, following Beethoven's melody as it wove through the crowd. When I got back to the spot where my father had been talking with Shazad, all of them were gone.

"Beautiful."

My eyes fluttered open, and suddenly I found myself looking at a man I swore looked familiar though I couldn't ever remember meeting him before.

He was about Harm's age—maybe a little older. He was dressed to impress just like the other guests, but there was an edge to him. Or maybe it was just the black fedora he wore. It felt off with his suit... but it also felt like that was done on purpose. As though the rules meant to contain him were nothing more than marionette strings for him to move and dance at will.

"You always played like an angel, even when you were little."

My heart stopped.

"Who are you?"

His eyes glimmered with something between pity and pain. "A friend of your mother's."

"How?" My throat bobbed. "Who?"

He reached inside his jacket, pulling something out from the pocket. His palm opened and from it dangled a familiar chain.

"Maman," I choked out and grabbed Maman's necklace with the music note charm. She'd left the apartment with it the night she died, so for this man to have it, he would've had to...

my head snapped up, and I stood from the bench. “Who are you?”

“You were her music, Daria. Her little note.”

Suddenly, the hat, his features... it all looked more familiar.

I sucked in a breath. *Maman’s old friend*. The one who’d tried to give me this necklace after we’d moved to France.

“You were everything to her, Daria. Everything she loved. Everything she was afraid to lose,” he spoke with emotion.

“You were there.” My tongue felt heavy in my mouth, worn from demanding answers to the same question. “She was wearing this the day she died.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get to her in time—to protect her.”

“From who?”

His brow creased. “Your father.”

“No.” I recoiled, clutching Maman’s necklace in my palm and holding it to my chest. “No, he wouldn’t.”

He’d saved me. Brought me here. Cared for me. He might be a criminal, but he was my father.

“I’m sorry.” His voice cracked, and he reached for my shoulder with a firm grip. “I’ll explain everything, but you have to believe me, and you have to come with me before he notices.”

“Let her go, Remington.”

A warm shiver spilled down my spine. Familiar. Welcoming. *His*.

The worn edges of Harm’s voice reached me just as I turned, my heart pounding in my chest. He stole my breath, approaching in the fitted suit he was wearing earlier. It was a little more wrinkled—disheveled—than before. And the nasty purpling bruise on the lip of his brow was brand new.

“Harm.” I pressed my hand to my lips. “You found me.”

“I’ll always find you.” He stopped on the other side of the piano, the two of them framing me on either side, glaring at each other.

And then the name he uttered sank in. *Remington*. The man they said killed my mother—a man who now claimed the opposite.

“I need to get her out of here.”

“And I can take care of myself,” I interjected. “Let go of me.”

Reluctantly, he released my shoulder. “We don’t have time for this.” Remington’s voice laced with warning.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have knocked me out,” Harm glowered.

“I’ll take care of her. You handle Magnus—”

“I don’t care about Magnus,” Harm swore, gripping the edge of the piano like he was going to throw it to the other side of the room. He found my eyes and repeated, “I don’t care about your father, Daria. All I care about is you.” Harm extended his hand. “Dance with me.”

“Dammit—” Remington broke off suddenly—so suddenly that I was afraid my father had returned. That he was watching the entire exchange. But when I followed the direction of his gaze, all I saw was a flurry of deep purple silk and red hair before whoever it was disappeared in the crowded room.

“No...” Remington muttered so low it was almost impossible to hear and then quickly shook off the distraction, saying, “Daria, we have to go—”

“She’s not fucking leaving with you,” Harm growled, looking like he was ready to lunge across the piano and start brawling with the other man. “Dance with me, *Tristesse*.” His stare was firm, daring Remington to make a scene—*something that would be bad for everyone*.

I looked over my shoulder, seeing that the dance floor was the quickest path to the nearest exit, and then laid my fingers in Harm’s hold. Remington watched in tense silence as Harm

led me onto the floor and pulled me into his arms. The urge to cry overwhelmed me. The warmth—the safety—of his touch. I'd give anything to always have it with me.

“Do you really not care about my father?”

His eyes shadowed. “I can't care about anything except not losing you.” He pulled me into his arms, and even though I knew we were in danger, I'd never felt safer. “You are mine. Under every sky. In front of every crowd. In spite of every obstacle. You. Are. Mine.”

“Harm...”

“I love you, Daria Sinclair, and I will keep fighting for you until my last breath,” he said quietly, our bodies swaying and turning, Harm carefully guiding us toward the exit. “I will do anything to make this right.”

Even as my heart swelled to burst, I heard myself say, “I want the truth. All of it.”

“Your father was behind the attack.”

My jaw went slack. I knew I hadn't heard that voice wrong—I knew I recognized it from that morning. My father's security guard was one of the attackers.

“Why?” I whispered.

“Fear is the easiest way to control someone.”

I met his gaze. “And what is your fear, Harm?”

*Was it losing his family? Reneging on his promise?
Missing the chance to bring justice to my father?*

Or was it me?

His head dipped lower, the rush of his warm breath touching my cheek before his lips traveled over my ear, the sweetest words ushering from them.

“Having you missing from me.”

I let out a small cry, my heart swelling as though it could burst.

I was always the one making too literal translations from French. But this time, it was him, and it was on purpose. To say *I miss you* in French isn't the same as in English; the literal translation being *You are missing from me*.

And for some reason, it just felt like so much *more*. As though to miss someone meant they'd become a part of you. Like an organ or a limb. Something that was both painful and life-threatening to remove. *And I'd become a part of him*.

The way we moved slowed. His arm around my back tightened, crushing him to my front.

"Harm..." For a moment, nothing else mattered but him. *Harm*. And the way he was about to kiss me.

I felt the weight of his mouth on mine, his heat stamped over my skin, and I almost believed that everything was going to be okay.

But then Harm tensed in my arms a split second before I heard my father's voice.

"Let go of my daughter, Mr. Keyes, if you want to walk out of here with your life."

He had to have a weapon; it was the only reason Harm would've let go of me the way he did.

"Papa." My breath rushed out, seeing him and that one bodyguard standing behind Harm. "What are you doing?"

"Enough, Daria. Before you ruin everything," he snarled, turning suddenly from a man I hardly knew to someone I'd never met. "This way. Both of you."

My father led us toward the other side of the courtyard. With the crush of people and the lively mood of the room, no one looked long enough at us to see we were under duress.

"Find Remington," Harm muttered under his breath.

"No," I said back. "I'm not leaving you."

"Daria," he pleaded in a rough whisper.

"You're mine to fight for, too."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Harmon

Fuck. I should've waited. Waited for backup. Waited at least for Ty to get me the house's layout before I barged in to rescue her.

I'd broken every speed limit on my bike to get here. And fuck me, it was a miracle the seams of this damn suit didn't split in the process, especially when I'd scaled a first-floor balcony to get inside to avoid using the main entrance.

I looked like shit stepping into the periphery of the courtyard, dirt and dust-covered and smelling like burned rubber. But none of that mattered when I saw her—when I saw Remington standing at the piano with her.

The man had his own agenda; Remington was on your side when it suited him, and it suited him for us to be on the same side when he thought we'd be interested in taking down Sinclair. When he thought I'd keep Daria safe as a byproduct until he could find a way to get to her. But it no longer suited him to be on my side when he realized how much danger Daria was really in.

And that was how I'd ended up on the floor of the living room with my head split open; he clearly thought he was the best option to protect her.

I disagreed.

My eyes whipped around the crowded courtyard that had been transformed into some kind of modern-day ballroom. A room of fugitives tailored into finery. Rhys and Dare should be here by now, too, but if they were, I hadn't seen them.

There was no one to trust. And no way to know which—if any—of the doors in the room lead to safety or more danger. And Rob... Rob should be providing support from a distance. If Magnus saw her—recognized her—it could ruin any chance we had. Even now. Even with Daria.

“Through those doors. Slowly,” Sinclair ordered from behind me, the butt of his weapon still pressed to my side.

I gritted my teeth. He was old and overweight and predictably slow. I could take him in a heartbeat. Maybe if it were another case—any other case—I would’ve. If my only goal was to take out Sinclair and get out, I could’ve easily disarmed and disposed of him. Seconds to overpower and flip the angle of the gun. Seconds to pull him close and fire a lethal shot into his gut, holding him as though he were a friend who’d had one too many. Seconds to set him in one of the chairs lining the perimeter of the room, his head resting on the table like he was sleeping.

Seconds to finally claim my vendetta against Magnus Sinclair... *if only my heart weren’t tied to his daughter*. And to take down Magnus like that put her at impossible risk, and I could never...

I pushed through the double doors in front of us. They opened to another balcony that mirrored the one I’d climbed up earlier except it was longer and ran the whole length of the house. In the summer, the doors from the courtyard would all open to this. Private, ivy-covered, with a view of the river and the city. But most importantly, it had a direct escape. A staircase down to the grounds. *If I could disarm both Sinclair and his personal guard*.

“Over there.” Sinclair shoved me from behind.

Daria instantly stepped in front of me, barricading me like a human shield. “What are you doing, Papa?”

Sinclair swore. “Christ, Daria. I see that you have an infatuation with your bodyguard, but Mr. Keyes can no longer be a part of your life,” he ordered, motioning his gun to the side. “Get her out of the way, Mr. A,” he ordered his guard.

“Don’t touch me,” she snarled when he stepped toward her, his gun aimed at us.

“Daria, don’t be difficult—”

“He’s the one who attacked me,” she accused, and it was enough to make the other man stop and look at his boss, wondering what he should do.

“*Enough, Daria.* Step away from Mr. Keyes. You don’t understand what is happening tonight—how important it is. Now move before I have to make you.”

“It’s him.” She pointed her finger at Sinclair’s man. “He was in the car that hit us that day. I remember his voice—I recognized it earlier—”

“Yes,” Magnus snapped. “Yes, he was. It was him. Are you done? Now, get out of the way before Mr. A has to teach you another lesson.”

I didn’t have to see her face to feel the way her heart broke.

“Why? Tell me why,” she begged, and I’d never admired her as much as I did in that moment—when she asked for the thing she knew would hurt her because it was the only way she could heal.

“Yes, tell her the truth, Sinclair. There are so many of them,” a voice boomed from farther down the balcony, and just as Mr. A swung his gun in the direction of the darkness, Remington stepped out from the shadows like he’d walked through a damn wall.

Mr. A never got the chance to make Remington his target before Remington fired two bullets, the silencer on his gun keeping the attack quiet, and Sinclair’s bodyguard toppled to the ground.

“Goddammit, Remington. Do you know what Shazad will do to you for this? If you take this from him?” Sinclair snarled so forcefully the light caught on the spit that flung from his lips.

He was furious. And afraid.

Shazad liked appearances. He liked the appearance of old wealth. Old power. He liked to pretend that his empire wasn't built on hundreds, if not thousands, of victims. He liked to do business like he was the King of Sheba holding court. Under a veneer of class and civility. Meanwhile, if any of his rules were broken, the kinds of men working for him took care of you by sparing no ounce of cruelty.

And killing someone—taking care of your own problems—in the middle of one of his business parties was a grievous breach of his rules.

“What makes you think I ever cared about Shazad or his business?” Remington tipped his head. “Now, answer your daughter's question.”

“What did I tell you about this man, Daria?” Magnus spewed instead. “He's dangerous. Killed your mother to get to me—*fuck*.” He jumped back as Remington fired into the stone at his feet.

I reached for Daria's arm, gently pulling her back, but she wouldn't budge from in front of me like she knew that she was the only valuable thing to the two other men—the only thing they wouldn't risk harming. And while I sure as fuck didn't trust Sinclair, neither did I trust Remington. I didn't trust that if I disarmed Sinclair, Remington wouldn't do more than knock me out like he had earlier. That he wouldn't shoot to incapacitate me and whisk Daria somewhere I'd never find her.

“Bullshit,” Remington said and stepped forward. “You killed Sandrine. Now tell her why.”

“I didn't—ahh!” Sinclair dropped to one knee, Remington's fourth bullet tearing through his leg.

Daria let out a cry and swayed back, her head shaking wildly.

Sinclair's eyes squeezed tight and then popped open, pure rage burning in their centers. He wanted to shoot back, but he couldn't because that would take his aim off of me, and I was the one holding his daughter.

“You piece of shit,” Magnus spat. “I knew I should’ve just killed you all those years ago.”

Remington didn’t even flinch. “You did,” he said and then made a show of wiping the end of his gun. Taunting Sinclair to switch his target off of Daria and me. “Now, tell her why you killed Sandrine.”

Sinclair huffed and puffed, his face turning as red as the blood oozing from his leg.

“Would you like me to hit the other leg, too? Even you out?”

God help me, but I wanted to be the one picking off Sinclair limb by limb. For what he did to Rob. For what he did to Daria. *For the sick criminal he was.* And Remington saw it. *Which was why he was the one doing it.*

No matter what Sinclair had done—no matter whether she ended up hating him or not—Daria deserved better than to have a memory of the man she loved killing her father. And for once, I found myself feeling grateful to a career criminal.

Remington aimed at Sinclair again, and that was enough.

“Because she was a fucking cunt,” Sinclair swore quickly. “She had my daughter and hid her like a fucking coward when she was mine.”

Daria’s exhale cut like a knife. “Papa...” Her voice broke, all hope she had of having one parent to hold on to disappearing in the span of seconds.

“No,” Remington said, his voice dangerously soft. “I hid her.”

“What?” Daria gaped, and my eyes narrowed on Remington.

“I was the one who got you and your mother out of the country. She came to me for help when she realized your father was going to sell you to further his business, so I was the one who smuggled you out in the middle of the night. Under his nose.”

“Fuck you,” Sinclair spat. “You’re a piece of shit. I should’ve fucking destroyed you—”

“I sent her money for the both of you so she wouldn’t have to risk being found. I told her when to move from the country to Paris. When to visit Vienna and the beaches of Portugal,” he confessed with a sigh. “And I told her it was dangerous to come back to the States. To that house in New York. To here. But she wouldn’t listen.”

He had to be telling the truth. The way she trembled in front of me left no other option. He knew things only a person who’d helped them hide would know.

“She did it for me,” Daria said softly, and Remington nodded.

“Liar,” Magnus snarled. “It’s all a lie, Daria. That’s what *I* did for you to keep you safe from him—”

A voice sounded from Remington’s phone. *A voicemail.*

“Damon, it’s Sandrine.” My hands tightened on Daria as she quaked, hearing her mother’s voice. *“We leave for California soon, but I think Magnus found me—found us. Please call me back. We have to meet. You’ll know what he’ll do if he finds her.”*

Daria was shaking by the time the voicemail ended. “Maman...”

“I’m sorry, Daria,” Remington said, real remorse in his tone.

“I’ll kill you for this,” Magnus roared like a trapped, cowering beast, his hand on his thigh where blood oozed from the wound. “I’ll kill you—” He broke off when Daria stepped toward him.

Her head slowly lowered, and she demanded, “Why did you kill her?”

“Because you’re mine,” he snarled.

“She wants the real reason, Magnus,” Remington taunted. “Or I can bring Shazad out here if you prefer.”

“Bring him out here. He’ll kill all of us in an instant.”

Daria stared at her father, willing him to answer her. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Because you’re my daughter. That’s all that matters.”

A sound rumbled from Remington’s chest as he shook his head. “He killed Sandrine because he wants Shazad’s business, and the price was what it was all those years ago,” he said slowly. “You.”

“Me?” Her head snapped up.

“A wife for his violent, perverted son.”

Daria stepped back, her hand pressed to her mouth. “No.”

“This party was to present you to Uzair and then announce your engagement,” Remington continued, watching Sinclair start to shake violently. “That’s why he wanted you secluded and afraid. To have no support when he decided to sell you.”

Sinclair let out a roar, the truth was finally enough to push him over the edge. He swung his weapon and aimed at Remington. “You’re dead.”

Remington ignored him and turned his focus to me. “He’s yours, Mr. Keyes.”

“Excuse me?” I drawled.

“I know what he means to you—what giving him the justice he deserves will mean for you. For your family,” he said, his voice catching on the end. “So, he’s yours. In exchange for Daria.”

Sinclair in exchange for Daria. A trade. I gritted my teeth. My vendetta in exchange for my heart.

“Otherwise, he leaves with me, and who knows what I’ll do with him?” he added.

I understood the implication. My sister would never get her chance to question him. Never be the one to bring him to justice.

Daria faced me, her eyes capturing mine.

Worthiness is nothing more than a willingness to keep fighting, her words came back to me.

For so long, I'd fought for everyone around me. The guys. Ryan. Robyn. I'd sacrificed anything that was asked. My time. My safety. My life. But my heart was where I drew the line.

"No," I said clearly even though he could just as easily shoot me for her. "He's all yours."

"Harm—" Daria started to protest because she knew.

"I love you," I told her in a low voice and cupped her cheek. "That's all that matters."

"Then take her and go," Remington ordered, the look in his eye telling me he approved of my decision.

"No, she can't go," Sinclair said furiously. "She's—"

"Mine," I finished for him, taking Daria's hand and tugging her behind me.

Sinclair protested desperately, "No, you can't. I'll kill you first. He'll kill us all—"

"You move that gun from me, Magnus, and it will be your funeral," Remington warned, taking the heat of it all... for Daria. For us. "*Go.*"

I didn't need further instruction. I took Daria's hand, but she wouldn't move. Instead, she stepped forward like a furious, fallen angel with her white gown and tear-streaked face. Remington and I shared an uncertain glance as she approached her father and crouched in front of him.

"How could you..."

He stared at her, his cheeks ruddy, his breath fuming, his rage bleeding from every pore. "Because you're mine. All those years she kept you from me. Kept you from playing your role in the empire I was creating. You were mine to control because I'm your father."

"No, you're not," she interrupted him, a single tear gliding down her cheek as she lifted her chin. "I'm my mother's daughter." *And no part of him* lingered unsaid.

She straightened, and her shoulders rolled back, and I'd never been more awed by anything than this woman's strength in the face of pain. Betrayal. Grief.

She turned her attention to Remington. "Thank you," she said. "For everything."

"Go," he repeated, his focus on Magnus, but the effect her words had on him was enough to break through the cavalier facade he held in place.

I placed my hands on her arms and guided her down the balcony toward the steps, keeping my attention alert. Sinclair was right about one thing—Shazad wasn't to be messed with, but somehow, I knew Remington would take care of it.

Daria kicked off her heels along the way, and when we made it to the ground below, I lifted her in my arms and carried her over the uneven ground to my bike.

She was crying as I fed her arms into my jacket. It wasn't leather, but it was all I had. I kneeled down and grabbed the hem of her dress, ripping along the side seam so she'd be able to climb on the bike behind me.

"Time to go, *Tristesse*."

"Where are we going?" she asked, and I caught the tear that leaked down her cheek.

Tipping her head up, I claimed her mouth in a kiss. A promise. A future.

"Home."

And then I brought my bike to life, and we left the party, her father, my vendetta—*everything*—in the rearview and headed for Sherwood.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Daria

Two days later...

My mother was dead. Murdered by my father. Who then tried to marry me off to a criminal.

I didn't open my eyes, letting the melody carry my body and my troubles away. It was so insane that there were times when I swore I'd wake up at any moment. That reality would come in bold and blaring and shake me out of the nightmare. Instead, reality came in the form of Harm's steady presence and warm embrace. It wrapped me in his arms and somehow made me feel like in spite of the insanity, everything was going to be okay.

My eyelids fluttered open when the piece came to an end, and I slid my hands into my lap.

"Daria." Her voice surprised me. *Robyn.*

I looked to the door, the light catching off her red hair reminding me for an instant of the color I'd seen in the courtyard the other night. *Red hair, purple dress... the vision that had distracted Remington.* Except it hadn't been her; she'd been outside the mansion, waiting, according to Harm.

Robyn DuBois was beautiful in that Celtic way. Her fair skin dusted with freckles, and her red hair stretching the length of her back. I'd only met her once: the night of the party. Harm brought me back to Sherwood, and an hour later, the rest of the

guys arrived along with her. She'd looked like a motorcycle-riding Joan of Arc in her patched leather jacket, loose shirt, and black leather pants, a gun strapped to her waist. Her hair was pulled back in a low knot then, but now, it was down loose. The whole of her dressed down—more approachable.

I rose from the bench. By the time I reached the couch, she was in front of me, her bright green eyes crystal clear as she regarded me.

The words I'd mulled over for two days rolled through my lips. "I'm so sorry, Robyn, for everything my father put you through."

Her expression softened, and she reached for my hand, taking it in a warm hold. "Don't ever apologize for a man's mistakes." She squeezed my fingers. "Fuck the patriarchy."

A small smile teased the ends of my lips, and relief coursed through me. No matter how many times Harm assured me that Robyn didn't hate me—that she'd tried to talk sense into him that night—I still worried. She'd suffered so much at the hands of my father I wouldn't blame her if that contempt spilled onto me.

"I thought it would feel better," I admitted softly, realizing she might be the only person, ironically, who could understand how I felt. "Knowing he got what he deserved."

For killing Maman. And for what he took from Robyn.

"Getting what he deserved cost you things that you cared about," she replied. "Justice comes at a price. Sometimes, you don't even know what you've paid until it's too late."

My eyes shifted over her, simultaneously feeling understood by her words while realizing there was more to understand about her.

"Does it feel better for you? Having revenge?"

"Revenge is for fools who don't realize that you can't look backward and move forward at the same time," she said, a half-smile breezing over her face. "I'm glad Harm found you—fought for you."

My eyes started to burn with tears. “Me, too.”

Sometimes, loss made things murky. It made you feel like you were just barely keeping your head above water. But then sometimes, that same water that threatened to drown you also made everything crystal clear. How quickly things could change. How fast you could lose someone. How, sometimes, love wasn't a choice or decision to be thought over, but an instinct to hold on to what you'd found for as hard and as long as you could.

And when we finally made it back to Harm's cabin that night, that was what we did.

“Me, too,” I said, and all of a sudden, the urge to tell her I wanted to help them—join their crusade sat hot and fresh on my tongue. My life had been turned upside down, but all I could think about was all the other people in that room. The ones who would've watched and celebrated as my father married me to a man who would've abused me.

I wanted justice delivered to them all.

But before I could say anything, the door to the rec room opened, and as though he knew we were talking about him, Harm appeared, his eyes flicking from his sister to me.

Instantly, heat zinged through my veins. We were wild for each other now that there were no secrets holding us back.

“Everything okay?” he rumbled lowly, his focus only on me.

“Yes.” I nodded, squeezing Robyn's hand before releasing it.

She smiled at me and then walked to the door to leave us alone, but Harm caught her arm. “Are you okay?” My heart did a double thump when he checked with her. This man's protectiveness might just be the sexiest thing about him.

“Fine.”

“He's gone, Rob. He has to be,” he said low, clearly not believing her.

We hadn't heard from Remington after that night. At first, Harm thought maybe we would. Confirmation that we wouldn't have to worry about my father again. But there was nothing. No proof. No news. No body. *No crime*. And no message from Remington at all.

"He wasn't the only one responsible, Harm," she replied, her mouth firming for just an instant before she side-stepped him and left us alone in the room.

My stomach fluttered as his stride ate up the space between us, his hands sinking like twin anchors to my waist and pulling me to him, his mouth crashing onto mine.

Within moments, the kiss became a conflagration. Flames licked over every inch of my body, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, begging for more.

"Daria..." he drawled, slowly pulling back, his eyes roaming my face.

"I want to stop men like my father. All I think about is the room full of people who would've been okay with what he was doing."

"You will."

"I want to do it by helping you," I exhaled in a rush. Joining the Vigilantes and their crusade seemed like my only chance at fighting for justice now.

"No," he declared, and when I flinched back, he held me tight, bringing one hand to my cheek, and added, "You need to become a lawyer."

Air expelled from my lungs. "I can't right now. I can't afford the tuition without..." I trailed off. Maman—or I guess Remington—would've been paying it initially. After she died, my father had paid for my first semester. In hindsight, it made sense why he'd only wanted to pay a semester at a time; he never planned on me being enrolled for more than one. "And I won't let you pay for it," I declared, and his face made a slight grimace. "Don't tell me you already did—"

"No," he replied quickly. "But not for lack of trying."

“What do you mean?”

“That’s what I went to check with Ty about, but when he looked at the bursar’s records, your tuition was already paid for. In full. For the remainder of the three years.”

My eyes bugged wide. “What? How—who?”

He reached into his back pocket for his phone, swiping it open and then holding it so I could read the message on the screen; it was from an unknown number.

I promised her I’d look after Daria. I can see you’re better suited to the task, but please allow me to look after her dream. She’d never forgive me if Daria gave up on it.

“Remington,” I murmured, my brow creasing. “Sometimes, it’s hard to believe he’s...”

“One of the most wanted criminals in the world?”

I nodded.

Harm grunted in agreement. “I guess if good guys aren’t always all good, it’s fair that bad guys aren’t always all bad.”

Maybe Remington, like Harm and the rest of the Vigilantes, lived and thrived in the shades of gray.

I gave him back his phone and returned my arms around the thick of his neck. “I think you’re all good,” I murmured.

“Oh yeah?” he cooed, rocking his hips into me, his erection pressing thick into my stomach. “Because I’m pretty sure the things I want to do to you, *Tristesse*, are all bad.”

I shivered, my eyes searching for his. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, letting out a low noise that made my insides clench with want. “Let’s go for a ride.”



Two weeks later...

“I can’t believe it.” I stared at the TV.

Harm stood behind me, and the rest of the guys were positioned on either side, everyone watching the news coverage that Ty had burst in, insisting we turn on.

On the screen was my father. His hands in cuffs as he was taken into FBI custody.

“International fugitive and former investment banker, Magnus Sinclair, was arrested earlier today by the FBI. Agent Jane is with us now to detail what led to the arrest.” The screen cut from the reporter to a younger man with messy blond hair.

“Earlier today, Mr. Sinclair was... left outside our office headquarters here in San Francisco. He was sedated and handcuffed to a briefcase full of information and documentation of all of his crimes along with all of his known associates, aliases, and enterprises,” Agent Jane revealed.

“That’s one helluva present to be hand-delivered to the bureau,” Ty muttered.

“Do you know who the Good Samaritan that brought him in?” the reporter probed.

The younger man started to look uncomfortable.

“It had to be Remington,” Rhys mused.

“I can’t believe he didn’t kill him,” Harm said lowly.

For two weeks, I’d had to live with so many painful truths. The most surprising one though was the pain I felt when I imagined Remington killing my father. Not that he didn’t deserve it after everything he’d done, but for some reason, it didn’t feel like justice.

“Why didn’t he kill him?” I looked at Harm.

“We have an idea who the person was, but we aren’t at liberty to say,” the agent replied and then cleared his throat. *“There was also a note attached to Mr. Sinclair’s shirt.”* He

held up a plastic-covered piece of paper. *“It reads, ‘I’m sorry I hurt you. I will do anything to make it right, R.’”*

The camera cut back to the reporter.

“Remington,” Darius declared.

The door to the rec room closed loudly, and when I looked over my shoulder, Robyn was gone.

Harm looked at his brother who nodded and said, “I’ll check on her.”

When he followed their sister out of the room, I shifted my gaze to Harm.

“She’ll be okay.” He rubbed the side of my arm.

While I was grateful for the criminal’s interference and protection that night—and for my entire life, really—Robyn didn’t feel the same. To her, he was no better than my father. Or any of the men she went after—criminals who abused their power and continually avoided justice. Part of me wondered if she hated Remington because, in the end, he was the one to exact justice on the man who’d robbed her. Something I could understand her wanting to happen at her own hands.

“That’s all we can say for now. Thank you.” The agent abruptly ended the interview, almost as though he’d only given it to read that note.

“I wish I knew how Remington met my mother.” I knew he’d saved us. Shielded us under his own criminal umbrella for years. But I wished I knew how they’d met. How she’d come to trust another criminal.

There were a million questions I had, but they didn’t have the same hold on me as before. Now they were nothing more than dandelion seeds spiraling in the wind.

“I don’t think we’re ever going to know that. Not now,” Harm said, making me look at him curiously until he explained, “If Remington did deliver him to the FBI in person, that was a bold move. The cameras. Security. He stays in the shadows for a reason.”

“But to do this, he risked coming into the light.”

For me, I thought. There was one memory of that night that stuck with me, and it had nothing to do with Harm or Shazad or my father; it was the moment Remington's attention had been stolen. I still wondered what would have enough pull for a man like him to lose his focus on protecting his friend's daughter—the only thing he'd come there to do.

I took the remote from Harm's hand and turned off the TV. I didn't need to watch anymore. My father was in custody, and I felt more settled than I had in weeks.

"You guys ready to go?" Rhys asked.

I was used to things changing quickly anymore, and this was no different. Moving back to the city. Into a new apartment that overlooked the Golden Gate Bridge. *With Harm.*

Over the last two weeks, my professors had maintained their leniency because of the accident. They'd let me view recordings of my classes in lieu of in-person attendance, but I'd still managed to make it to most of my classes anyway.

Harm still enjoyed the privilege of observing the classes from the back of the room, but now it was different. Every time he caught my eye, it was a promise for later. Every time Collin talked to me, he'd find me after and whisper, *"I'd fuck you in front of him to prove you're mine, but I can't bear to share the sight of you."*

And somehow, in the middle of so much grief and loss and hurt, I felt whole.

"Yeah," Harm said and pulled me to him, sealing his lips over mine.

"Alright, alright," Rhys grunted. "This is now a singles-only garage."

"Jealous much?" Ty taunted.

"Please," Rhys scoffed, holding the door for Harm and me. "You know I'm never lonely."

"Never being lonely is different than not being alone," Harm said, earning a flat expression from Rhys for an instant

before he brushed him off with an easy laugh.

Always easy on the surface so no one suspected the storms in the deep. *Maybe one day someone would make Rhys want to not be alone.*

I hoped.

I believed in love like I believed in justice. Sometimes, it wasn't easy. Sometimes, it wasn't fair. Sometimes, rules had to be broken and lines had to be blurred to find it, but once you did... once you did, there was nothing that felt more right.

Harm took my hand and led me through the garage. Within minutes, their Harleys rumbled like a hungry cloud of thunder. I held myself tight to him, and then we took off, the rest of them, aside from Robyn, behind us.

This was where I belonged. Holding my rugged motorcycle man. Wild. Free.

Later, after they'd helped us move all our new furniture into the expansive top-floor apartment, we shared pizza around the kitchen counter, laughed at their shared stories, and finally, Harm insisted I go relax and shower while they moved the last of the big items.

"Harm?" I called from the master suite; there was no second floor in this apartment. The double doors to the bedroom opened directly into the large living room.

"They're gone," he answered, as though he knew what I was thinking.

Smiling, I let my towel fall to the ground, the cool air pebbling my nipples, and walked into the living room completely naked.

I made it three steps before I stopped with a loud gasp, my hands flattening over my mouth as I stared at the baby grand piano in the center of the space.

I'd wanted some kind of piano here, it was no secret. My suggestion had been to bring the keyboard from the garage, but Harm brushed me off, saying we could just get a new one once we were here. I tried not to think too much about it, but it

was hard not to wonder how long I'd have to go without my musical security blanket.

But now I saw what his plan was all along.

“Surprise,” he rumbled, resting his hand on the black frame.

“Harm...” The familiar well of tears formed in the corners of my eyes as I found my way to him.

His warm palms framed my face as though I was the picture of everything he ever wanted.

“I love you.”

I blinked, and the tears fell. “You didn't have to—”

“Don't,” he warned, swiping the wetness away. “I fell in love with you that first night you played for me. I'd sell my bike—I'd sell my soul—to fall in love with you every night forever.”

When my mother was killed, I wasn't sure it was possible to feel such loss. And now, with Harm, I wasn't sure it was possible to feel such love.

“Are you sure it wasn't my naked boob that did you in?” I murmured coyly, wiggling from his hold and making my way to the piano bench.

I slid onto the bench and pressed my hands into the seat, the position jutting my breasts out toward him. His eyes darkened hungrily, and the gray sweatpants he had on started to tent in the front. Like a predator, he approached me and lowered to straddle the bench.

“No,” he said, his voice deep and thick. He placed his hand on my stomach, and it quivered as his palm slid up to cup my breast. “The naked boob was what made me willing to break all the rules to have you.” He plucked my nipple and then began to tease me in a way that made my core start to clench.

My watery laugh turned into a moan. “I love you,” I said, tipping my head toward his.

“I love you, too,” he growled and took my mouth in a soul-searing kiss. “Now play for me, *Tristesse*, and let me make your body sing.”

Epilogue

Harmon

T *hree months later...*

“Woah there, Pops!” I called, jogging to catch up with the little girl sneaking through the hall. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Poppy Pyle. Tomboy. Toddler Terror. And one-hundred-percent trouble.

I snagged her tiny form around her waist and hefted her into my arms.

“Running away from your party so soon? We haven’t even gone for a ride yet.”

My niece loved motorcycles. The colors. The noise. The smell. *The ride*. Much to her mother and father’s dismay, all she wanted for her birthday was to have a party at Sherwood with her uncles (real and otherwise adopted). So, Daria and I came down from the city for the weekend to celebrate. *And because I had something important I wanted to ask her, and I wanted to ask her here. The place where I realized that I’d fight for her forever.*

“I was looking for Uncle Rhys. We need him to sing!” she exclaimed, turning her head in search of the man in question. Her pale blond curls flying in every direction.

“Alright, let’s see where he got off to,” I said and turned right down the hall.

I saw Rhys and Ty disappear from the garage a few minutes ago, talking. As much as Rhys enjoyed playing along with the kids when they came to visit, Ty could only handle so much. For the few who knew him before our deployments, it might seem strange. All the man had ever talked about was a family and kids. But war changed a lot of things. Everything, really.

Sometimes, it was hard to be reminded of what you once wanted when you had no idea what life would put you through.

I heard the low rumbles of conversation grow louder as we got closer to Ty's office. I gave the door a gentle knock before opening it.

"Uncle Rhys!"

Sure enough, he and Ty were standing around his desk, looking at something on his screen.

"Hey there, birthday girl." He beamed. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for the entertainment," I grunted, and he laughed.

"Is it time to sing already?"

"Almost." Her head bobbed wildly on her tiny neck.

"Everything okay?" I asked, looking between them and suddenly feeling like I was being left out of the loop.

"Hey, Pops," Ty interrupted. "You want to take a sneak peek at your birthday cake?"

I couldn't contain my surprise. Whatever Rhys and Ty were talking about was serious enough that he was volunteering to entertain Poppy so Rhys and I could talk.

"Yeah!" she squealed, and I grunted when one of her excited kicks nailed me in the side.

"Don't tell Mom," I wheezed and set her down, moving to the side so Ty could take her to the fridge where her motorcycle-shaped cake was waiting.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Rhys's smile faded, and he said, "Les Wheaton was murdered."

I balked.

Dr. Les Wheaton was a renowned plastic surgeon in the Bay Area, famous for his work on celebrities and rumored to be a favorite among criminals.

A life of violence tended to leave notable scars, ones that could easily identify criminals in court cases. Dr. Wheaton had been on our radar for some time for helping criminals evade capture by altering their appearance, but hadn't made it onto our *person of interest* list until recently.

A little over a month ago, right around Christmas, Rob got word from her network of spies in the city—a guest list to a holiday party hosted by Dr. Les Wheaton. On that list, one name had stuck out a *R. Ivans*.

Dr. Ray Ivans was the company doctor who'd told her parents they were fine. Ivans was the doctor who tested the chemicals in the pesticide and swore up and down that they weren't causing the cancer. *The one who knew the truth and covered it up.* And when her parents died, he could've been called in the case against GrowTech and its CEO, Bernard Belmont, but instead he'd disappeared. Just like all of Rob's money.

Her assumption—our assumption—was that he'd either been paid off or killed. *As most people in his precarious situation would be.*

Part of me wished that Sinclair was the beginning and end of Rob's vendetta, but he wasn't. I couldn't forget asking her about what she'd said to Daria that day after the party: *'Revenge is for fools who don't realize that you can't look backward and move forward at the same time.'*

"So, you've moved on from Sinclair?" I'd asked. "Done looking back?"

"No," she'd replied with a flash of a smile and a bitter laugh. "What I said sounded good though, didn't it? Total bullshit, but believable nonetheless."

I'd reeled for a second, the pang in my chest swift and sharp.

"Maybe it will be the truth for her," she added. "But for me... what happened to me... there is no way forward, Harm."

I'd tried to argue with her, but it was pointless; she was still the same Rob she'd always been. And like so many times before, I still felt I didn't have the whole story of what happened—of everything she'd lost. It went so much deeper than money. Than legacy. Than revenge. Someone, somewhere along her crusade, had hurt the most vulnerable part of her, and she wouldn't rest until that person paid for it.

And the rumor about Ivans was enough to take her from Sinclair to her next target.

Rhys had offered to check it out. If Ivans was alive—and had disappeared for a decade—there had to be a reason he had come back and very powerful people behind that reason. Rhys had gone, but there was no sign of Ivans—at least not before some incident that prevented Rhys from sticking around for the entirety of the evening.

And now, Dr. Les Wheaton was dead. *It couldn't be a coincidence.*

"Are we sure?"

Rhys nodded and hit a button that projected the news from Ty's computer to the main TV screen in the room. Sure enough, it was Dr. Wheaton's face in the news. *Stabbed to death in his home during a party.*

"Does Rob know?" I asked, the news reporter's voice droning low in the background.

"Not sure. I was going to see if she wanted me to poke around—" He broke off suddenly, his whole body going rigid.

I looked back at the screen. Gone was the picture of the man who was killed. In its place, a drawing of the woman wanted in connection with the murder: Merritt Manning.

"Rhys..." I drawled, watching the way his eyes moved over the sketch, almost like he was tracing lines he was

familiar with. “Do you know her?”

His jaw flexed. “No,” he clipped far too quickly. “But she was there the night of the holiday party, and if she knew Wheaton, there’s a chance she knows about Ivans. Where we can find him.”

“Rhys—”

“I’m going to get answers,” he declared and then added as almost an afterthought. “For Rob.”

“Keep me updated—”

“Yeah. Got it,” he brushed off my usual instructions to keep me in the loop, snatched his water bottle off the table and mumbled to me on his way out, “Tell Pops I’m sorry I had to go, and that I know I owe her a song.”

“Will do.” My eyes tracked him down the hall. His angry pace. Rigid shoulders. *He definitely recognized that woman.* Maybe it was my fault asking if he knew her—“know” was a very flexible term for Rhys Garrick.

As soon as he stepped into the elevator at the other end of the hall, Daria appeared in my line of sight, her face smeared with various colors from the face-painting activity she’d set up for the party.

Goddamn, I was still waiting for the day when her beauty wouldn’t knock the air straight from my lungs. I had a feeling that day would never come.

“Everything okay?” She looked at me, worried.

“Yeah.” I reached for her. “He’s just... looking into something for Rob.”

She hummed and wrapped her arms around my waist. “I hope one day it’s enough for her. Bringing them all to justice.”

My teeth clenched, fear scratching at my mind that it wouldn’t be. But I hoped that fear was wrong.

“Me, too.” I lowered my head and kissed her, sinking into the heat of her mouth like it was my favorite form of quicksand.

The kiss deepened quickly, and she made a low noise before pulling her lips away. “We should go back out. They’re going to open presents.”

My chest rumbled with displeasure, my cock aching to be inside her.

“Pops better open them quickly because then we’re going for a ride.”

Her brows lifted. “It’s the middle of February.”

I shot her a wolfish grin. “Never said the ride was on the Harley.”



We were on the floor of my cabin; the space was still mine for us to use when we stayed at Sherwood. My back was on the floor. Her hands were intertwined with mine above my head as though they were her own personal handlebars. And the seat of her ride? My cock.

“That’s it,” I ground out. “Faster, beautiful.”

Her hips shunted up and down on mine. Her perfect tits bounced above me as her tight pussy worked the length of my cock. We’d barely made it through the door before I’d ordered all her clothes off. Barely covered her mouth with mine before we were a tangle of limbs on the floor, hungry and panting.

It was my fault. Being around my nieces... with her... all I wanted was to put a baby in her. *And I told her as much.*

“Harm... please...” she begged, her fingers tightening, her nails scoring the back of my hands.

She was so fucking slick.

“Take me deeper. Right where you need me.” My voice grew clipped, the knot of my orgasm pressurizing at the base of my spine.

She tipped forward, crying out when my pierced tip stroked right over her G-spot.

“That’s it. Show me how much you like my ring.”

She bounced like a needy little nymph on my cock, greedily chasing her climax and leaving a trail of whimpers and moans for me to follow.

As much as I loved what my piercing did for her, I wanted it to be her second favorite piece of jewelry. The first being the ring I wanted to put on her finger—the ring that was currently hidden in my bag in the closet.

I felt her body start to ripple, the quivers of her orgasm squeezing me, begging for release, and suddenly, it wasn’t enough. But I didn’t want to move. Breathe. *Come. Feel her come.* Until I knew she’d be mine forever.

I threw off her hands and reached for her hips, locking them high and preventing her from lowering. She let out a strangled cry, her chest heaving and confusion clouding her pleasure-drunk face.

“Marry me.”

Maybe it was fucked up of me to hold off an orgasm until I had her answer, but I didn’t care. We both knew that life could change in the span of a second. And I wasn’t going to wait to claim the rest of her seconds as mine.

“Marry me, *Tristesse*,” I begged.

Her chest caved, a strangled sob bursting from her mouth. “Yes.”

My restraint broke. I slammed up into her, driving her right back to the peak of her orgasm and over the edge.

“*Yes!*” she screamed and convulsed around me.

I held out as long as I could, loving the way the clench of her muscles felt around my straining cock. I made it two more thrusts into her tight, wet heat before I lost it. Before I roared and buried myself to the root as I came, hot and thick inside her.

Long minutes later, I picked us up off the floor, carried us to bed, and then pulled out the diamond ring I'd had hidden.

"I love you, Daria Sinclair. Will you marry me?" I asked again and opened the ring box, though I had no plans of letting her change her mind.

A wide smile spread across her face, and her head bobbed slowly. "Yes, I will marry you."

I slid the platinum band down her finger, the emerald-cut diamond seizing the last, low slivers of light. Her head tipped up, and I lowered myself over her, searching once more for her heat.

"I love you," she murmured as her mouth found mine.

And from my lips, she drew a "*Hallelujah.*"

The End.

The Vigilantes series continues with THE VERDICT. This is Rhys and Merritt's story. Get your copy [here](#).

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The Verdict

Ex-Special Forces soldier Rhys Garrick was trained to expect the unexpected, but when he rescues a gorgeous woman from dangerous criminals, nothing could've prepared him for the incredible night that followed. Nor the way she disappeared the next morning.

It was for the best. Rhys wasn't about to trade the freedom of the open road and his duty to the Vigilantes for a woman. So, he buries himself in club business until his next assignment takes him by surprise: Merritt Manning. The name on the wanted notice is unfamiliar but the face in the photo has haunted him for months; the woman is none other than the midnight-haired beauty who tempted him that night. *And she's wanted for murder.*

So, Rhys does what he does best. He hunts Merritt down, expecting answers. Instead, he's met with more questions and a desire that won't be denied. When she slips through his grasp once more, he's convinced she's as guilty as she is gorgeous, and he won't be fooled again.

When Rhys finally gets ahold of her for good, the feelings they share aren't the only confession Merritt has. Her unexpected truth changes everything—including the verdict Rhys would've staked his life on.

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About the Author

Rebecca Sharp is a contemporary romance author of over thirty published novels and dentist living in PA with her amazing husband, affectionately referred to as Mr. GQ.

She writes a wide variety of contemporary romance. From new adult to extreme sports romance, forbidden romance to romantic comedies, her books will always give you strong heroines, hot alphas, unique love stories, and always a happily ever after. When she's not writing or seeing patients, she loves to travel with her husband, snowboard, and cook.

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If you want to be emailed with exclusive cover reveals, upcoming book news, etc. you can sign up for her mailing list on her website: www.drrebeccasharp.com

Happy reading!

xx

Rebecca

